The Blue Lard of Language: Vladimir Sorokin's Metalingual Utopia

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The title for this article clearly demands some explanation, given that it transforms the title of Vladimir Sorokin's novel *Goluboe salo* (*Blue Lard*, 1999) and the eponymous substance, which is produced by clone-writers in the novel, into a conceptual metaphor for the productive forces that Sorokin himself seeks to discover in language. More precisely, I will attempt to focus on certain aspects of his poetics that may be characterized as reflecting a linguistic or even metalinguistic utopia, the construction of which occurs in practically all of his texts, which therefore collectively assume the character of an integral artistic project.[1] In so doing, I aim to question certain rather constant strategies in the critical reception of Sorokin's poetics. For this reason my paper will assume a fairly schematic form, charting out the implications of possible shifts in our analytical optics, rather than proposing a thoroughgoing description of this optics in its own right.

The blue lard of language and its performative power

In the following, I will be concerned with cases in which the problem of an ideal language or ideal communication forms the main theme of Sorokin's texts. This approach allows me to reconstruct certain fundamental conceptions concerning the relationships between language and reality, language and history, language and the space of social communication, language and literature. Let me state at the outset: when dealing

1 About various linguo-utopian projects see: Umberto Eco, 2007, *The Search for the Perfect Language*, London.

with Sorokin, we face a conception of utopia that does not imagine the very possibility of the realization of an ethical or aesthetic ideal, embodied in a social reality. For him, utopia signals not the *achievement of perfection*, but rather of *destruction* (be this the deconstruction of specific discursive or social practices, a general discursive collapse, or a global apocalypse). In some sense, Sorokin's utopia is a realization of the inner form of the concept of "utopia" itself, such literalization or materialization of metaphors being one of the most important devices in his poetics (more about this later). U-topia (from the Ancient Greek word οὐτοπία) is the absent place, and in this sense Sorokin transforms everything that he works on into a space of absence. He u-topianizes reality—whether this is the reality of discourse, the reality of history, or the reality of human existence. However, as I will attempt to demonstrate, this u-topianizing destruction of reality is undertaken in order to bring attention to that remainder which cannot be subjected to destruction, but, on the contrary, comes to feature as the *instrument* or *subject* of this destruction.

A certain *meta-literary*—or even more broadly, *meta-discursive*—quality distinguishes Vladimir Sorokin's œuvre; this feature of his poetics has become a commonplace in *meta-Sorokin* literary criticism. Starting from different types of Soviet discourse in his very first texts—*Norma* (*The Norm*, 1979–83) and *Pervyi subbotnik* (*The First Saturday Workday*, 1979–84)—it extends to entire speech genres of Soviet everyday life in *Ochered'* (*The Queue*, 1983), finally attaining the canonical language of classical Russian literature in *Roman* (*A Novel*, 1985–89) as well as the genre-specific language of mass-literature in *Serdtsa chetyrekh* (*Four Stout Hearts*, 1991).

In the words of Viacheslav Kuritsyn: Его обычный ход: начиная повествование как чистую пропись того или иного дискурса, завершить его […] нарастающими потоками непонятной речи […].[2] Take, for instance, the story "Geologi" ("The Geologists," from the collection of stories *The First Saturday Workday*), which begins with a recreation of Socialist Realist discourse—in Sorokin's own words: […] по канонам официальной советской литературы среднего уровня. Как если бы

2 "His habitual move is to begin a narrative as a straightforward record of some recognizable discursive register, but then to conclude it […] with a rising flood of incomprehensible language […]." Viacheslav Kuritsyn, 2000, *Russkii literaturnyi postmodernizm*, Moscow, p. 96. Unless otherwise stated, translations are mine.

он вышел в каком-нибудь калужском издательстве[3]—and then accomplishes a linguistic shift according to which the solution to a difficult situation is discovered only when the protagonists of the story recall that one must simply помучкарить фонку.[4] A paradigmatic example of his second device of "deconstruction," by means of a straightforward application of discursive violence, may be found in the conclusion of the novel *Roman*, in which the protagonist slaughters the entire population of a village with an axe, rhyming with this gesture the end of this concrete text, the end of the protagonist Roman, the end of the genre (*roman*/the novel) and the end of the mimetic discourse characteristic of the realistic novel:

> Роман дернулся. Роман застонал. Роман пошевелился. Роман вздрогнул. Роман дернулся. Роман пошевелил. Роман дернулся. Роман умер.[5]

One must note that Sorokin himself denies harbouring any intention that might be ascribed to him to the effect that he is creating a shock effect by means of juxtaposition of the elevated symbolic potential of these texts with their naturalism:

> Что же касается взрыва, […], то для меня он не носит шоковый характер. Наоборот, я пытаюсь найти некую гармонию между двумя стилями, пытаюсь соединить высокое и низкое. Попытка соединить противоположности представляет для меня некий диалектический акт и выливается в симбиоз текстовых пластов.[6]

3 "[…] according to the canon of official Soviet literature of the middling sort. As if it was published by some sort of Kaluga publishing house." Vladimir Sorokin, 1992, "Tekst kak narkotik," *Sbornik rasskazov*, Moscow, pp. 119–126; pp. 119–20.

4 "pomuchkarit' fonku" (untranslatable example of *zaum*'). Vladimir Sorokin, 1998, "Geologi," *Sobranie sochinenii v dvukh tomakh*, vol. 1, Moscow, pp. 423–27; p. 425.

5 "Roman twitched. Roman groaned. Roman moved. Roman winced. Roman stirred. Roman twitched. Roman died." Vladimir Sorokin, 1998, *Roman*, Moscow, p. 356.

6 "As far as shock is concerned […] well, for me there is no shock to speak of here. On the contrary, I seek to find a certain harmony between two styles. I try to unite the high and the low. For me, the attempt to bring together opposing categories constitutes a dialectical act and leads to a symbiosis of textual layers." Vladimir Sorokin, 1996, "Literatura ili kladbishche stilisticheskikh nakhodok," *Postmodernisty o postkul'ture: interv'iu s sovremennymi pisateliami i kritikami*, Moscow, pp. 119–30; p. 125.

The shock effect remains, of course: to deny this would be pointless. The question is: for what purpose is this shock deployed in these texts? In order to lay bare, by means of naturalistic violence, the symbolic violence that stands behind all forms of discourse, and by this means to deconstruct a given discourse? Or does this very deconstruction serve here as an instrument for the discovery of a space beyond any distinction between the physical and symbolic levels? A space in which language and reality appear as identical, but not in the manner of post-modernism, according to which reality is organized as a text (or as speech). Instead, the result here is in accordance with archaic (traditional and even magical) principles, by which the structure of language possesses a certain material reality, isomorphic with the physical world.[7] Sorokin's deconstruction, paradoxically, serves not to reveal a difference that is concealed by discourse (as in typical accounts of deconstructive techniques), but instead to reveal the identity on which language is founded in its fundamental nature (as Sorokin understands it).

In one of the first conceptually sophisticated works dedicated to the writings of Sorokin,[8] Mikhail Ryklin connected the discursive logic of his texts with the function of the collective bodies created by the Soviet regime, which he viewed as forms of terror through and through—from matters of ideology to those of everyday life. The focus of Sorokin's texts on the life of these collective bodies takes the texts beyond the bounds of literature, dissolving the figure of the author in тотальность речевого присутствия.[9] As a result, the rhetorical production of a literary form, anchored to the subjectivity of an author, is replaced by an attempt to achieve the effect of the immediate imprint of collective corporeality—its presence in the text in all possible physiological and linguistic forms. The

7 Plato's dialogue *Kratylos* (*Cratylus*) is considered to be the earliest and most consistent philosophical substantiation of that notion on correlation between language and reality. See: "SOCRATES: And speech is a kind of action? hermogenes: True. […] socrates: And if speaking is a sort of action and has a relation to acts, is not naming also a sort of action? HERMOGENES: True. SOCRATES: And we saw that actions were not relative to ourselves, but had a special nature of their own? HERMOGENES: Precisely. SOCRATES: Then the argument would lead us to infer that names ought to be given according to a natural process, and with a proper instrument, and not at our pleasure: in this and no other way shall we name with success. hermogenes: I agree." (387b–d).

8 Mikhail Ryklin, 1992, "Terrorologiki II," *Terrorologiki*, Moscow, Tartu, pp. 185–221.

9 "total speech presence." Ryklin, 1992, p. 206.

key task in this kind of writing is: практически показать, что неприглаженная, не доведенная до литературной благопристойности, т.е. не идеологизированная речь в такой культуре, как наша массовая культура, уже перформативна, уже является действием, причем действием насильственным. Насильственное речевое действие […] постепенно становится главным героем прозы Сорокина.[10] Ryklin's diagnosis of Sorokin's writing as a mechanism that reveals the performative violence of language remains absolutely precise and convincing. Yet one may object to the analytical frame within which he placed this masterful diagnosis. Motivated ethically and conceptually by non-official art and intellectual underground from the 1970–80s, as well as by the common pathos of the Perestroika movement in the second half of the 1980s, Ryklin's optics made it possible to see a critique of the totalitarian basis of Soviet literature and the terrorist logic of Soviet collective discourse in Sorokin's texts. Furthermore, this same optics made it impossible to perceive non-conformist writing as anything other than an effort to destroy that logic, rendering visible the violence concealed within. The context of the epoch brought to the fore the traces of historical trauma, directing the critical attention in a particular direction—towards the working through and transcendence of those repressive implications that determined Soviet discursive space. The period that followed (both the two post-Soviet decades as such, and Sorokin's texts of the 1990s and 2000s), however, made it possible to discern in this demonstration of linguistic violence, in this focus on language as a form of violence, not only the pathos of anti-totalitarianism, but also a reflection on the nature of language, performativity and violence as such. Furthermore, this reflection may be perceived without the unequivocally negative axiology that was constantly attributed to Sorokin's texts of the 1980s and 1990s and interpreted by means of its relationship to the social context of its time.

As things stand, a scholarly tradition has already taken shape: a tradition of describing the characteristic destructive work that Sorokin's texts carry out with regard both to generic conventions and to the referential

10 "to demonstrate in a practical manner that an unrefined speech—a speech that has not been reduced to literary decency, that is, a non-ideologized speech—in a culture such as our own mass culture, is already in fact a performative one. This is a demonstration that such a speech is already a kind of action, and, in fact, is an act of violence. Violent speech action […] gradually becomes the main protagonist in Sorokin's prose." Ryklin, 1992, p. 206.

pretensions that underlay them. Critics differ solely in their evaluation of the destructive work performed by Sorokin's language. The common classification of this meta-lingual work as a systematic critique of language and discourse in line with the conceptualist tradition seems increasingly untenable, as his latest works from *Blue Lard* to *Metel'* (*The Snowstorm*, 2010) testify. But this categorization, it seems, is not accurate even with respect to his earlier texts. It is quite easy to discover in Sorokin's texts a gap between "signifier" and "signified," but little, in and of itself, follows from this.

In the words of Mark Lipovetsky, Sorokin натурализирует символическое.[11] But what does that mean? It may mean that he tries to deconstruct language as a whole. But it may also signify not the disruption of language itself, but rather the disruption of the use of language as a symbolic order, divided between various forms of discourse and serving various ideologies and mythologies. "Naturalizing the symbolic" may be interpreted as a mechanism of deconstruction when the violence inherent in the symbolic order (in the "power of discourse" in the Foucauldian sense) is revealed through its naturalization. But "naturalizing the symbolic" may also refer to the transcending of the very opposition between "natural" and "symbolic," when violence is maintained as an inviolable aspect of the nature of language. Following through with the first idea, we would see a critique of violence, we see violence which is annihilated thanks to the deconstruction of the inner claim of any type of literary discourse to represent reality. Following through with the second idea, we can see a demonstration of violence rather than its deconstruction. Then one may say that Sorokin's works not only "re-enact" this violence of Soviet language that "[…] gets abused, becoming an instrument of control and denial instead of a means of communication,"[12] but also produce this violence, defining it as a non-alienating part of language's nature and a non-alienating part of speech production (of *speech as a kind of action* in Socrates/Plato's words).

11 "naturalizes the symbolic." Mark Lipovetskii, 2008, *Paralogii: transformatsii (post)-modernistskogo diskursa v russkoi kul'ture 1920–2000 godov*, Moscow, p. 412.

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

It seems to me that what is interesting in Sorokin's case is not only the meta-lingual work involved in a parodist and critical conceptualization of various literary and everyday styles as well as in the transformation of the author into a media space, which includes different discourses and exposes their internally contradictory and ideologically motivated nature. No less important is the main constitutive element in Sorokin's poetics, or at least, its "pathological" fixation: the mechanism of releasing language's organic energy (as in a nuclear reaction), its productive biological basis, as if realizing Derrida's phallogocentric construction with the aggressiveness of a rapist. In this sense, "the blue lard" of language stands for the linguistic substance released during the clashes to which Sorokin subjects various discursive practices (including literature). I will further describe these mechanisms of purifying the "linguistic lard" (the *lard of language*)—the materialization of Sorokin's linguistic utopia.

I will not make any conceptual distinctions between different periods of Sorokin's work or between different tendencies overlapping and crossing the borders of these periods. I do not deny the presence of such distinctions but believe that there is a more fundamental level of relationship between language and discourse which can be extracted from Sorokin's work as a whole. Dirk Uffelmann has proposed a periodization "which takes into account the changing forms of his [Sorokin's] treatment of language, of narration and storyline *and* the ontological presuppositions behind them."[13] The specificity of this treatment allows him to define three tendencies in Sorokin's œuvre: *materialization of metaphors*, *positivism of emotions* and *fantastic substantialism.* The arguments and justifications surrounding these distinctions are also the most relevant to my analytical optics. But, at the same time, we can see that all of them are transgressed by the main tendency in Sorokin's discursive logic—by the very power of transgression. The first one transgresses the border between literal and tropological levels of meaning and signifying; the second one transgresses the border between the mental (or sensible) and physical (or physiological) levels of human action and perception; the

13 Dirk Uffelmann, 2006, "*Lëd tronulsia*: The Overlapping Periods in Vladimir Sorokin's Work from the Materialization of Metaphors to Fantastic Substantialism," *Landslide of the Norm: Language Culture in Post-Soviet Russia* (Slavica Bergensia 6), eds. I. Lunde & T. Roesen, Bergen, pp. 100–25; p. 109.

third one transgresses the border between physics and metaphysics (or, in other words, between phantasm and empirical reality).

While Sorokin subjects various practices in the reigning discursive regime (from everyday speech to the classical literary canon) to radical deformation, he never exhibits the kind of scepticism towards language as such that defines card-carrying conceptualists. Breaking up the formal wholeness of discourses, defamiliarizing generic sets, laying bare the ideological implications concealed behind any "writing degree zero," disrupting the linguistic tissue through extreme juxtapositions of different stylistic, cultural, national, and chronological layers of language, Sorokin's language demonstrates generative power beyond its aesthetic and communicative/referential functions. Though fatal for speech, the hyper-naturalistic materialization of linguistic metaphors (from *The Norm* and *Roman/A Novel* to *Blue Lard* and *Pir* (*The Feast*, 2000)) affirms the productive, almost biologically procreative power of language. Mercilessly critiquing the anthropological ability of the subject to discover his own humanity in his own speech act, Sorokin seeks an ontological grounding of his project in the u-topos of language, which manifests itself not in speech, but in its destruction—in a destruction that effects a liberation of language from the domination of discourse in order to restore its metaphysical foundation.

Let me present a few examples of this translation of the common places of a discourse (of its topography) into the u-topia of language—into a space in which there is no distinction between the literal and the figural, between the signified and the signifier, that is, into a space in which language ceases to function as a semiotic system.

Consider, for instance, the final section of *The Norm*, which "literalizes citations" from popular Soviet songs and poetry:

> Золотые руки у парнишки, что живет в квартире номер пять, товарищ полковник,—докладывал, листая дело N 2541/128, загорелый лейтенант,—К мастеру приходят понаслышке сделать ключ, кофейник запаять.—Золотые руки все в мозолях?—спросил полковник закуривая.—Так точно. В ссадинах и пятнах от чернил. Глобус он вчера подклеил в школе, радио соседке починил. […] Мать руками этими гордится, товарищ полковник, хоть всего парнишке десять лет… Полковник усмехнулся: Как

> же ей, гниде бухаринской не гордиться. Такого последыша себе выкормила…[14]

Up to this point we are truly dealing with the deconstruction of mass Soviet discourse: the clash of a children's poem (by Zinaida Aleksandrova) with the repressive rhetoric of the *NKVD*. Subsequently, however, a different mechanism comes to the fore, in which violence is not only laid bare as an implicit fundamental element of Soviet discourse, but is also revealed as an attribute of language itself, the power of which lies in its ability to contain both literal and figural meanings within a single sign. Meanwhile, the transfer of the metaphorical register from the figural level into the real one not only produces a rhetorical effect, but exerts an immediate effect on reality:

> Через четыре дня переплавленные руки парнишки из квартиры N 5, пошли на покупку поворотного устройства, изготовленного на филиале фордовского завода в Голландии и предназначенного для регулировки часовых положений ленинской головы у восьмидесятиметровой скульптуры Дворца Советов.[15]

Mark Lipovetsky interprets such transitions from one form of discourse to another (as a result of which both discursive regimes are disavowed) as a transformation of the power of discourse into the power of the absurd.[16] It appears, however, that maximum impact is achieved not as a result of

14 "'The young feller in apartment number five has hands of gold, comrade colonel,' reported the weather-beaten lieutenant, leafing through case number 2541/128. 'People hear about the guy through the grapevine; bring him a key or a coffee-pot to solder back together'. 'Hands of gold all in calluses?' asked the colonel, lighting up a cigarette. 'Yessir. All in cuts and inkstains. Yesterday he glued a globe back together at the school. He fixed a neighbour's radio […] His mother's proud, so proud of those hands, even though the feller's only ten years old…' The colonel snorted, 'Of course she's proud, the Bukharinite gnat. She's raised herself quite a little runt…'" Vladimir Sorokin, 1998, *Norma*, Moscow, p. 224.

15 "Four days later the hands of the young feller from apartment number five, melted down into ingots, were dispatched for the purchase of a pivot mechanism, constructed at the Ford factory in Holland and intended to regulate the timed movement of Lenin's head in the 80–metre sculpture on top of the Palace of Soviets." Sorokin, 1998, *Norma*, p. 224.

16 Mark Lipovetskii, 1997, *Russkii postmodernism: ocherki istoricheskoi poetiki*, Ekaterinburg, pp. 256–74.

the conflict between various forms of discourse, but rather as a result of the materialization of the metaphor ("hands of gold"). For this reason, one may discuss not only the disclosure of the absurdity and violence hidden beneath the surface of discourse, but also the discovery of more fundamental foundations, lying beneath any form of discourse. In other words, this is more than a simple ideological critique of this or that discourse, consisting of a deconstruction of its rhetoric (of its rhetorical topography and common places). Indeed, in the case of the example above, the shock of reception derives not from the literalization of a specific metaphor, characteristic of a given form of discourse. Instead, we have here the materialization of an automatized common linguistic metaphor, which undermines the order of a discourse regime predicated on the control of the semiotic potential of language. We therefore face the disruption of discourse, but this takes place not by means of a conflict of various forms of discourse, but rather by means of a conflict of a given discourse with language as such—language that asserts itself according to the "u–topia" (the absent place of language), in my terms, in which "hands of gold" means "hands made of gold." Any number of examples of this kind can be provided, beginning with the early works by Sorokin (such as *The Norm*) and continuing right up to his later ones. His collection of stories *The Feast*, for instance, is founded on the same device of literalization of rhetorical figures. Thus, for example, in the first story, "Nastya," the motivation for the action develops only as a result of the materialization of metaphors (*novoispechennaia* (literally "fresh-baked," metaphorically "newly-fledged")), *proshu ruki vashei docheri* ("I ask for your daughter's hand")): the baking in an oven of a daughter who has achieved maturity; the sawing off of another girl's hands, after which her parents accept a match in marriage, etc.[17]

Petr Vail', while analysing Sorokin's obsessive fascination with clichés and figures of speech, explains this aspect of his writing as a search for "certainty and peace": Они обновляются, разнообразно возрождаясь под сорокинским пером, не в ерническом наряде соц-арта, а как знаки стабильности, едва ли не фольклорной устойчивости без времени и границ.[18] One may concur with much in this statement: with

17 Vladimir Sorokin, 2002, *Pir*, Moscow, pp. 303–49.

18 "They are renewed—they are reborn in various ways in Sorokin's hands—but not in the mocking manner of Sots-Art, but rather as signs of stability, of an almost folklor-

the observation of Sorokin's fascination with clichés, and with the claim that he employs them differently than was the case in Sots-Art (and in Conceptualism in general), and even with the folkloric element, making it possible to exceed the limits of modern conceptions concerning the continuous motion of history and the conventional, contingent character of language, according to which meaning results from the inscription of limits and distinctions. In this connection, however, we should discuss not so much the search for "certainty and peace," but rather the discovery in linguistic formulas, clichés, automatized metaphors and idiomatic expressions of a certain substance, deposited in language, in possession of an unbelievably potent energy, which is capable of exploding the mimetic illusions of discourse, founded on its instrumental pretensions to describe reality, to express the inner nature of humanity, or to realize our creative capacities (that is to say, we are also discussing here the discursive pretensions that underlie literary production itself). And here we are dealing not so much with the "folkloric permanence" discussed by Vail', but rather with the discovery of archaic principles within language, consisting of the magical coincidence of the signified and signifier, of signs and things, of word and action. Note, too, that for Sorokin this discovery of the archaic, magical-ritual principle of language does not take on the historical-anthropological character of an archaeological reconstruction of linguistic points of origin. Rather, it expresses Sorokin's own positive conceptions concerning the performative nature of language, his unique ideas about the ontology of language, concealed within his poetics, which paradoxically combines deconstructive methods and magic messages.

Let me provide a few more examples of how this utopian principle works on various levels in his poetics.

The clone of Chekhov in *Blue Lard* writes драматический этюд в одном действии,[19] titled "The Burial of Attis" and ending with the unmotivated murder of Dr Shtange, committed by the play's main protagonist, the landowner Polozov. The unmotivated murder is explained in the monologue that Polozov addresses to the dead Shtange:

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ic constancy beyond time and place." Petr Vail', 1995, "Konservator Sorokin v kontse veka," *Literaturnaia gazeta,* 1 February, p. 5.

19 "A dramatic etude in one act."

> Ты называл *имена* вещей. И все вещи соответствовали своим именам. И это потрясло меня, как гром. Да! Все вещи соответствуют своим именам. Китайская ваза была, есть и будет китайской вазой. Хрусталь навсегда останется хрусталем и будет им, когда Луна упадет на Землю. Ты стоял посреди мертвых вещей—живой, теплокровный человек,—и ты один не соответствовал своему имени. И дело вовсе не в свойствах твоей души, не в твоей порядочности или безнравственности, честности или лживости, не в добре или зле, наполняющих тебя. Просто у тебя не было *имени*.[20]

Death returns metaphysical stability to the object, making it possible to determine its name. Death, in this way, appears as the guarantee of referential stability, of a correspondence between the name and the (dead) object. In its turn, language acquires its permanence in the very moment it is emancipated from the power of becoming, of continuous transformation, connected with the voluntary linguistic activity of the subject. And here we face again a conservative ontological theory of language deriving from platonic idealism: naming is an action related not to the conditionality of human desire (or social contract) but to the nature of things themselves.[21]

And vice versa, the lack of semantic stability connected with the loss of its existential conditions, such as death (or fear as its substitute), makes language performatively weak, communication illusive and interpretation helpless. Thus, in Sorokin's screenplay *Moskva* (*Moscow*, 1997), the psychotherapist Mark articulates a diagnosis concerning the contemporary collective unconscious, comparing it to Siberian ravioli (*pel'meni*), which in the Soviet era were frozen with fear, and which have now melted

20 "You called things by their *names*. And all things corresponded to their names. And this struck me like lightning. Yes! All things correspond to their names. A Chinese vase was, is and will be a Chinese vase. Crystal will always be crystal, and will remain so up to the moment the moon collides with the earth. You stood in the midst of dead things—a living, warm-blooded person—and you alone did not correspond to your name. And the crux of the matter lies not in the qualities of your soul, nor in your integrity or amorality, honesty or falsity, nor in the good or evil that fills you. Simply, you had no *name*." Vladimir Sorokin, 1999, *Goluboe salo*, Moscow, pp. 79–80, emphasis in the original.

21 Plato's dialog *Cratylus*: "SOCRATES: And we saw that actions were not relative to ourselves, but had a special nature of their own?" (387c).

into a sticky, amorphous mass, in relation to which not only diagnosis, but any structurally stable act of naming, becomes impossible.

> Десять лет назад все дети были парализованы страхом, который, кстати, и сформировал симптоматику. Была хотя бы ясная клиническая картина. Теперь же, когда нет больше страха, я, как никогда, понял, насколько психоанализ беспомощен в этой инфантильной стране. Когда общество представляет из себя сгусток непроваренных пельменей, психиатр беспомощен.[22]

The blue lard of ice and the end of literature

Now let us turn to the main topos of *blue lard* and its utopia implications. The most common interpretation of this image (of a substance, whose entropy is equal to zero) comprehends it as эссенция святого и чистого русского слова, as русская духовность, or more broadly as the literaturocentrism characteristic of Russian culture.[23] As a result, the great majority of critics rejected this work, objecting to its "immorality" or to its failure, as a lame attempt at deconstructing this same literaturocentrism. From the point of view of such critiques, the novel's description of "blue lard" as a narcotic that Hitler and Stalin attempt to control, in an alternative future in which they are allied, merely demonstrates Sorokin's own dependence on this self-same "blue lard" of literaturocentrism. By this logic, instead of heightening the conflict between various structural levels in the novel, Sorokin fuses them together, achieving an unreflective homogeneity (more typical of mass culture).[24]

Therefore, the much criticized discursive and thematic homogeneity of *Blue Lard*, where the transition from one narrative, thematic or conceptual level to another takes place only thanks to the mediating mecha-

22 "Ten years ago all children were paralyzed with fear, which, by the way, was the basis for their symptomology. At least there was a clear clinical conception. Now, when there is no more fear, I have understood as never before the degree to which psychoanalysis is helpless in our infantile country. When society consists of a mass of partially cooked pelmeni, the psychologist is useless." Vladimir Sorokin, 2001, *Moskva*, Moscow, p. 383.

23 "the essence of the holy and pure Russian word," "Russian spirituality." Mikhail Berg, 2000, *Literaturokratiia: problema prisvoeniia i pereraspredeleniia vlasti v literature*, Moscow, p. 113; see also: Lipovetskii, 2008, p. 424.

24 Lipovetskii, 2008, pp. 422–26.

nism of the "blue lard," may be interpreted as the conscious elimination of any form of distinction or contradiction. Whereas we have hitherto been describing the literalization (i.e. the overcoming) of the metaphor, here we encounter a narrative literalization of the metonymy (the spatial overlap becomes the basis not for the production of difference, but for the affirmation of identity).

It seems to me, however, that the negative assessment of the novel—that revealed its lack of post-modern reflexivity—originates in the firmly established habit of interpreting Sorokin's poetics and politics through the prism of the device described above—of deconstructive, estranging clashes of various discourses. But what if he had a different intention? Not to multiply distinctions, not to criticize the metaphysics of identity (as he ought to do, being a classic of post-modernism), but on the contrary, to renovate that metaphysics? Not, however, as an identity of language (*langue*) and speech (*parole*) (instrumentally realizing the structural, symbolic potential of language), but instead as a victory of language, destroying speech as well as the subject of speech. This is a victory of language in a non-representational mode, in an absolute mimetic identity with the material, physical nature of bodies and things. Thus, at the conclusion of "Part Five" of *The Norm*, speech loses its semiotic meaning, but acquires an absolute structure. The speech of the narrator (Martin Alekseevich) transforms into a meaningless, but absolutely crystal (like ice) articulated series, consisting of the repetition of the phoneme—"a a a a a a a" (and continuing in this way for the last four pages of the text).[25] And the movement of this pure language structure does not express but mimetically reproduces an emotional spasm in the narrator's body. Mimetic coincidence and contiguity between voice and body undermine representation as a conditional mode of doing things with words. For its part the subject dissolves in the process of uttering (we face a similar case of a subject dissolved in discourse in *Tridtsataia liubov' Mariny* (*Marina's Thirtieth Love,* 1982–84), where the subjectivity of the heroine is completely absorbed by the newspaper speech on the final pages of the story).

And, in turn, the apocalyptic conclusion, in which Stalin injects the blue lard into his own brain, which then begins to grow without limits—Мозг Иосифа Сталина постепенно заполнял Вселенную, погло-

25 Sorokin, 1998, pp. 212–15.

щая звезды и планеты[26]—may be read as an allegorical figure for the coincidence of being and consciousness, the final coincidence of the sign and reality, the end of semiosis, as it is described in scriptural texts concerning the Apocalypse.

I will now turn to *Trilogiia* (*Ice Trilogy*, 2002–2005).[27] In this work, Sorokin steps decisively beyond the critique of the implicit ideology of discourse that has traditionally been ascribed to him. In fact, the irritation of critical commentators has been related in one way or another to the impossibility of determining with any certainty what Sorokin's intentions actually are: a critique of traditionalist ideology or an apology for it; the continuation of the tradition of conceptualism or its parody; the disruption of myth or its renovation.[28] From my point of view, we are dealing here with a straightforward affirmation of the victory of the grammar of *langue* over the rhetoric of *parole*. What is more, in this case the construction of a linguistic utopia is thematized on the level of the work's subject matter.

The "fraternity of the awakened" that provides the central focus of the narrative is extraordinarily concerned with questions of language: they study the "language of the heart" and "23 words of the heart" that are present within them (that is, coincide with their bodies). Communication by means of external speech is transcended by means of direct bodily, but not sexual, contact, during which the awakened attain spiritual enlightenment. The main mediator, both at the level of the action and at the level of the rituals that are carried out in the three novels, is the ice itself, a crystalline structure that combines all categorical oppositions, from heat and cold, to the body and the spiritual.

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26 "The brain of Joseph Stalin gradually filled the Universe, swallowing up stars and planets." Sorokin, 1999, p. 338.

27 *Lëd* (*Ice*, 2002), *Put' Bro* (*Bro*, 2004) and *23,000* (2006).

28 Dmitrii Golynko-Vol'fson believes that Sorokin follows a neo-traditionalist fashion (Dmitrii Golynko-Vol'fson, 2003, "'Kopeika' i iznanka ideologii," *Isskustvo kino* 1, p. 95), whereas Marina Aptekman states that he parodies this fashion for national-patriotic mythology (Marina Aptekman, 2006, "Kabbalah, Judeo-Masonic Myth and Post-Soviet Literary Discourse: From Political Tool to Virtual Parody," Russian Review 65 (4), pp. 657–81; pp. 670–80). See also Igor' Smirnov's book review (Igor' P. Smirnov, 2004, "Vladimir Sorokin: *Put' Bro*," *Kriticheskaia massa* 4, pp. 41–44) and Sorokin's response (Vladimir Sorokin, 2005, "Mea culpa? 'Ia nedostatochno izvrashchen dlia podobnykh eksperimentov'," *Nezavisimaia gazeta ex libris*, *http://exlibris.ng.ru/tendenc/2005-04-14/5_culpa.html*, accessed 19 November 2012).

One must say that conceptualizing body language (close to the "language of the heart") as an immediate language overcoming the communicative gaps seen in usual speech communication was characteristic of Sorokin's early prose as well. In *Marina's Thirtieth Love*, a particular scene turns out to be a crucial point, both for the main heroine's fate and for the discursive regime of the text:

> Руки, крепкие мужские руки… Как все получалось у них! Как свободно обращались они с грозной машиной, легко и уверено направляя ее мощь.
>
> Лоб его покрылся испариной, губы сосредоточено сжались, глаза неотрывно следили за станком.
>
> Марина смотрела, забыв про все на свете.
>
> *Ее сердце радостно билось*, кровь прилила к щекам, губы раскрылись.
>
> Перед ней происходило что-то очень важное, она чувствовала это всем существом.
>
> Эти мускулистые решительные руки подробно и обстоятельно рассказывали ей то, что не успел или не сумел рассказать сам Сергей Николаевич. Монолог их был прост, ясен и поразителен. Марина поняла суть *своим сердцем*, подалась вперед, чтобы не пропустить ни мгновения из чудесного танца созидания.[29]

Symptomatically, apart from the construction of a proper language utopia we face a critique of literature: "literature is evoked, but as something that has to be overcome."[30] In *Put' Bro* (*Bro*, 2004) the main protagonist

29 "Hands, strong masculine hands… How well everything worked out for them! How easily they manipulated the terrible machine, freely and confidently directing its power. His forehead became covered in a cold sweat. His lips were pursed with concentration. His eyes were set fixedly on the tool bench. Marina watched, having forgotten about everything else in the world. *Her heart beat joyously.* Blood suffused her cheeks. Her lips parted. Something very important was taking place before her—she sensed it with all her being. Those decisive, muscular hands were fully and precisely explaining to her something that Sergei Nikolaevich himself had not managed or had not been able to express. Their monologue was simple, clear and striking. Marina understood the essence with her heart and inched forward in order not to miss a moment in the miraculous dance of creation." Vladimir Sorokin, 2001, *Tridtsataia liubov' Mariny*, pp. 257–58, italics are mine.

30 Uffelmann, 2006, p. 120.

of the novel has forgotten who Dostoevsky was. Dostoevsky's works appear to him as всего лишь бумага, покрытая комбинациями из букв.[31]

> Подняв голову, я открыл глаза: я находился в читальном зале. […] Я поднял глаза. Четыре больших портрета висели на своих местах. Но вместо писателей в рамках находились *странные* машины. Они были созданы для написания книг, то есть для покрытия тысячи листов бумаги комбинациями из букв. […] Машины в рамках производили бумагу, покрытую буквами. Это была их работа. Сидящие за столами совершали другую работу: они *изо всех сил* верили этой бумаге, сверяли по ней свою жизнь, учились жить по этой бумаге—чувствовать, любить, переживать, вычислять, проектировать, строить, чтобы в дальнейшем учить жизни по бумаге других.[32]

But are we dealing with a text "[…] that could still be interpreted in metaliterary terms,"[33] as Dirk Uffelmann writes and as we are used to suppose when we face cases of literary reflection about literature? To recognize in Sorokin's *Ice Trilogy* разрушительную пародию на самое литературность[34] is tempting and even true. But it seems to miss the pretensions of the Sorokin text itself, the pretension not only not to be *meta-fictional* but in a certain sense not to be *fictional at all*. It is a fiction that in its pretension to overcome all literary demands aims at being nonfiction or more precisely *no-fiction* (*just paper, covered with a combination of letters*).

31 "[…] only paper covered with combinations of letters: […]" Vladimir Sorokin, 2006, "Put' Bro," *Trilogiia*, Moscow, p. 178; Vladimir Sorokin, 2011, *Ice Trilogy*, transl. J. Gambrell, New York, p. 174.

32 "Lifting my head, I opened my eyes: I was in the reading room […] I raised my eyes. Four large portraits hung in their places. But instead of the writers in frames, here were strange machines. They were created for writing books, that is, for covering thousands of pages of paper with combinations of letters. […] The machines in the frames produced paper covered with letters, that was their work. The people sitting at these tables were engaged in another kind of work: they believed in this paper *with all their might, they measured their life* and learned how to live from this paper—learned how to feel, love, worry, calculate, create, solve problems, and build, in order to teach others later how to live according to this paper." Sorokin, 2006, p.178; Eng. Sorokin, 2011, p. 175, italics are mine.

33 Uffelmann, 2006, p. 120.

34 "Put' Bro destructively parodies literariness itself." I.P. Smirnov, 2004, p. 43.

Through the estranging view of his protagonist (*Bro*), Sorokin denies all the rhetorical devices in literature, depicting it as a purely mechanical (machine) production of letters. Moreover, he demystifies the traditional and compulsory semiotic contract between author and reader. But the very paradox is that Sorokin himself creates his *Ice Trilogy* (and especially the last novel *23,000*) as just such a purely mechanical combination of letters or combination of "ready-made" plot units; in exactly the same way he breaks the contract already formed between him and his literary sophisticated readers (his stable reputation as a post-modern author obsessed by meta-fictional critique). And even if there is a thematization of the ideal language of the heart at the level of plot, at the level of texture Sorokin in fact strives to create "some new Adamic world where language would no longer be alienated."[35] Sorokin's text works as if it follows the Adamic "language of the heart" explored by the "fraternity of the awakened," and tries to operate within the limits of 23 words (and even scores major successes in these attempts). *Blue lard* as an essence of the performative power of language meets here with *blue ice* as an absolute crystal structure of the ideal language.

In the final novel, *23,000*, during the final ritual brothers and sisters die and become sacrifices of atonement that, in this way, save the world of the awakened "machines of flesh" (people). From among these, two chosen ones achieve a final comprehension of the meaning of existence:

> Все это создано для нас,—твержe произнес Бьорн. […]
>
> —И все это создано Богом,—произнес Бьорн и перестал смеяться.
>
> —Богом…—осторожно произнесла Ольга.
>
> —Богом,—произнес он.
>
> —Богом,—отозвалась Ольга.

35 Roland Barthes, 1968, "Writing Degree Zero," *Writing Degree Zero, Elements of Semiology*, transl. A. Lavers & C. Smith, Boston, Mass., p. 88. Cf. "The Utopia of Language." This obsession with the literary tradition which is fundamental for high literature makes it an eternal debtor of a past. And "thus is born a tragic element in writing, since the conscious writer must henceforth fight against ancestor and all-powerful signs which, from the depths of a past foreign to him, impose literature on him like some ritual, not like reconciliation." Barthes, 1968, p. 86. Barthes writes that this depth of a past turns literature into ritual. But when he uses the notion *ritual* he means routine, social rituals, while Sorokin's goal is to turn literature into ritual in the archaic sense of the term and to give it back its performative function.

Богом!—уверенно сказал он.
—Богом?—дрожа, вздохнула Ольга.
—Богом!—громко выдохнул он.
—Богом,—кивнула Ольга.
—Богом!—громче произнес он.
—Богом!—закивала головой Ольга.
—Богом!—выкрикнул он.
—Богом…—прошептала она.
Они замерли, глядя в глаза друг друга.
—Я хочу молиться Богу,—сказал Бьорн.
—Я тоже!—произнесла Ольга.
—Давай вместе помолимся Богу.
—Давай.[36]

What are we facing here? Something terribly poorly written, and at the same time intended to be taken absolutely seriously? My thesis is: we are facing the ultimate end of literature, of the "literariness" of literature.[37] At the same time, it is an affirmation of language in its structural grammar with itself—the end of the topology of rhetoric and the affirmation of the absent, empty u-topos of language, which therefore has achieved absolute power.

I partly agree with Igor' Smirnov when, in interpreting the novels of *Ice Trilogy*, he writes of a parodic destroying of literature. Sorokin does critique the literariness of literature. The problem, however, is that a dis-

36 "'This was all… done"—he took a deep breath—'for us'. […] 'And this was all done by God,' he declared./ 'By God?' Olga asked cautiously./ 'By God,' he declared./ 'By God,' Olga answered./ 'By God!' he said with certainty./ 'By God'. Olga exhaled, shaking./ 'By God!' he said in a loud voice./ 'By God!' Olga gave a nod./ 'By God!' he said even louder./ 'By God!' Olga nodded again./ 'By god!' he shouted out./ 'By God,' she wispered./ They stopped still, looking into each other's eyes./ 'I want to talk to God,' Bjorn said./ 'So do I,' Olga declared./" Vladimir Sorokin, 2006, "23,000," *Trilogiia*, Moscow, p. 684; Eng. Sorokin, 2011, p. 693.

37 In his *Psikhodiakhronologika* Igor' Smirnov mentions Sorokin's post-modernist prose as the end of literature because of post-modernism conceives all temporal projection of history (including future) as already been. I.P. Smirnov, 1994, *Psikhodiakhronologika: psikhoistoriia russkoi literatury ot romantizma do nashikh dnei*, Moscow, p. 317–48. I agree with this diagnosis but do not with its reasons. My focus is on the overcoming of the literatary tradition not in the post-modern terms (an alleged end of history) but in linguistic terms (the dramatic negotiations between grammar of language and rhetoric of discourse).

cussion of this critique in terms of parody or meta-fiction renders the critique itself even more literary than the object of its renunciation. And in this sense, one fully understands Sorokin's blunt reaction, when he insists on the absence in his new texts of the entire complex of dizzying literary meta-reflections attributed to them by Smirnov.[38] It appears that Sorokin's goal is not to transport literature to a more self-reflective plane, but rather to cancel it out—to cancel it as a special form of signification, as a specific discursive type, as a special form of intertextual interaction with a preceding literary tradition, as a collection of literary devices, continually renewed and estranging one another. The paradox of Sorokin's writing is that all of these elements are undoubtedly present, but they are just as undoubtedly demoted and deemphasized, failing to perform their function as constitutive of literature per se.[39] This is an attempt to bring literature to its conclusion, or to reinvent it from scratch (which amounts to the same thing), freeing it of the rhetorical conventionality of poetic language, and granting it the structural stability of metaphysics, the symbolic literality of myth and the performative force of ritual.

38 Sorokin, 2005.

39 Remember Sorokin's image of literature as кладбище стилистических находок (a cemetery of stylistic inventions). Sorokin, 1996, p. 120.