

## Simultaneity of the Non-Simultaneous: On the Diachronic Dimensions of Language in Sorokin

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Только нога билась о ножку стола равномерно,  
будто отсчитывая время.

“Monoklon” (16)<sup>1</sup>

LIKE many contemporary Russian writers, Vladimir Sorokin is preoccupied with the past, both the recent, Soviet past, and Russia’s more distant, pre-Petrine history. At the same time, several of his stories are located in a distant (or not so distant) future, a future which always features a particular linguistic environment. Thus, alongside the frequent combination of elements from quite disparate stylistic and linguistic registers, many of Sorokin’s texts exhibit a peculiar mixture of what are usually called “archaisms” and “neologisms,” that is, elements of language that differ from a diachronic point of view.

The mixture of neologisms (such as the hypertechnological *vestevoi puzyr* ‘news bubble’) and archaisms (such as *ud* “male member”) in Sorokin’s novel *Den’ oprichnika* (*Day of the Oprichnik*, 2006) has been noted by translators, scholars and reviewers alike. But the diachronic amalgam of this and other Sorokin novels is not only a combination of old and new words, but also a juxtaposition of different styles, syntax, and pragmatic and rhetorical structures, that is, a juxtaposition of historically embedded linguistic features that go far beyond the realm of single words. In this article, I wish to identify elements of this “beyond,”

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<sup>1</sup> “Only his leg throbbed evenly against the foot of the table, as if marking time.” Vladimir Sorokin, 2010, “Monoklon,” *Monoklon*, Moscow, pp. 7–19. Numbers in brackets refer to pages in this edition. Translations are my own.

while limiting my analysis to languages of the past and to a single short story, since such identification calls for a close reading. Homing in on the short story “Monoklon” (2010), I explore the role of Sorokin’s “historical linguistics,” with a particular emphasis on the interplay between the text’s aesthetics, on the one hand, and its political and ethical frame of reference, on the other.

Sorokin’s use of the diachronic dimensions of language combines linguistic creativity with recourse to various ideological idioms or styles—the constitutive features of his poetics, according to Dagmar Burkhart:

So wird seine Poetik einerseits von einem ständigen sprachlichen Experimentieren an den Tabugrenzen (Ästhetik des Häßlichen, Turpismus) und andererseits einem imitierenden Zugriff auf totalitäre Weltbilder, konventionelle Rituale und normative Genres, einem tautologischen Nachschreiben von Stilen, Jargons und Prätexten sowie ihrer Zusammenfügung zum Super- oder Megatext (Pastiche) bestimmt.<sup>2</sup>

Stylistic variety, the imitative use of clichés, jargon and the like has been interpreted by Walter Koschmal and others as one of several strategies employed in post-socialist Russian literature in order to deconstruct or at least challenge the traditional Russian aesthetics of responsibility/answerability (*Verantwortungsästhetik*).<sup>3</sup> Distance towards language and its references was famously articulated by Sorokin himself in the early nineties when he described his writings as *лишь буквы на бумаге*.<sup>4</sup> While such characterizations are certainly appropriate with regard to Sorokin’s early works, one can perceive in his more recent writings, in particular in the novel *Day of the Oprichnik* and the subsequent collection of stories *Sakharnyi Kreml’* (*Sugar Kremlin*, 2008), a more strongly expressed political undercurrent and ethical concern, raising questions about power structures, social hierarchies, and human dignity. The frame of refer-

2 Dagmar Burkhart, 1999, “Vorwort,” *Poetik der Metadiskursivität: Zum postmodernen Prosa-, Film- und Dramenwerk von Vladimir Sorokin*, Munich, pp. 5–8; p. 5.

3 Walter Koschmal, 1995, “Ende der Verantwortungsästhetik?,” *Enttabuisierung: Essays zur russischen und polnischen Gegenwartsliteratur* (Slavica Helvetica 50), eds. J.-U. Peters & G. Ritz, Bern, pp. 19–44.

4 “just letters on a piece of paper.” Vladimir Sorokin, 1992, “Tekst kak narkotik,” *Sbornik rasskazov*, Moscow, pp. 119–26; p. 121.

ence has become more time-bound than in the writer's earlier works and includes clear pointers to contemporary Russian society. Obviously, Sorokin is not the kind of writer who would express his views on the state of affairs in Russia straightforwardly in his fiction; rather, his concern is conveyed in and by his poetics, through recourse to the grotesque, the absurd, and, as I will argue in this article, through the linguistic setup of his text. As I will attempt to show, Sorokin's strategies of employing jargon, particular styles, clichés and other linguistic elements from the past serve to raise the reader's awareness of such concern.

The diachronic dimension of language in Sorokin is more than the juxtaposition of neologisms and archaisms in one and the same text, however interesting such a juxtaposition might be in itself. This becomes clear when we shift our focus from the linguistic level proper to the *historical memory* invoked by certain words, phrases, slogans and other linguistic elements. I believe that Sorokin's exploration of the historical dimensions of language should be seen in this context and in close connection with other features of the author's poetics and style, for example, his use of the grotesque. I focus on the diachronic dimensions of Sorokin's language by analysing the historical layers contained in specific words and styles and on their possible meaning and meaning-generating function in "Monoklon." More specifically, I show how the "linguistic memory"<sup>5</sup> triggered by certain words, quotations or styles combines with other linguistic and poetic features in this text to create perceptions and

5 For research on different aspects of "linguistic memory" in totalitarian and post-totalitarian societies, cf., for the Soviet case, Gasan Guseinov, 2003, *D.S.P. Materialy k russkomu slovariu obshchestvenno-politicheskogo iazyka XX veka*, Moscow; Gasan Guseinov, 2004, *D.S.P.: sovetskie ideologemy v russkom diskurse 1990-kh*, Moscow; Benedikt Sarnov, 2005, *Nash sovetskii novoiaz: malen'kaia entsiklopediia real'nogo sotsializma*, Moscow; Valerii Mokienko & Tat'iana Nikitina, 2005, *Tol'kovyi slovari iazyka Sovdepii*, Moscow. Work on National Socialist language is less centred on post-totalitarian linguistic heritage, but see the classic Victor Klemperer, 1947, *L.T.D. Die unbewältigte Sprache: Aus dem Notizbuch eines Philologen*, Darmstadt; also Christoph Sauer, 1995, "Sprachwissenschaft und NS-Faschismus: Lehren aus der sprachwissenschaftlichen Erforschung des Sprachgebrauchs deutscher Nationalsozialisten und Propagandisten für den mittel- und osteuropäischen Umbruch?," *Die Sprache der Diktaturen und Diktatoren*, Heidelberg, pp. 9–96. For a comparative view of post-Soviet literature on the Soviet linguistic heritage and German research on the National Socialist linguistic experience, see Ingunn Lunde, 2008, "LIS (Lingua imperii sovietici): filologiens håndtering av den nære språklige fortid i Russland," *Terminal Øst: Totalitære og posttotalitære diskurser*, eds. I. Lunde & S. Witt, Oslo, pp. 169–83.

representations of time, memory and history that spur the reader to reflect on these issues in ethical and political terms. In doing so, I am less eager to lay bare any particular political tendency or ideology in Sorokin's work than to explore contemporary aesthetic and poetic representations and transformations of today's burning political and ethical issues. In "Monoklon," these have to do with the handling of conflicting perceptions of a totalitarian past. My reading is structured according to three lines of enquiry, 1) languages of the past; 2) the discourse of memory; 3) representations of time.

### *Languages of the past*

"Monoklon" describes one day in the life of an old man, Viktor Nikolaevich, living in an apartment block on Leninskii Avenue. Having got up and gone through the ritual of his personal hygiene he is attracted by a noise coming from the street. When he looks out of the window, he sees a white shining crowd of young people in spacesuits and helmets with the inscription СССР, a celebration of 12 April, Cosmonauts' Day. He is entirely absorbed in this wonderful spectacle and equally annoyed when his enjoyment of it is interrupted, first by a phone call from his son, and then by the doorbell. He expects to see Valia, who takes care of his laundry, but the visitors are three men, a man called Monoklon and his two assistants.<sup>6</sup> They come inside, Viktor Nikolaevich recognizes Monoklon and is petrified. Monoklon takes out a pickaxe, Viktor Nikolaevich is laid face downwards on the table, and Monoklon, using a heavy sledge-hammer, forces the pickaxe into Viktor Nikolaevich's anal opening, penetrating his body. Before leaving the apartment, Monoklon looks closely at some photographs on the wall above Viktor Nikolaevich's desk. The guests leave. Viktor Nikolaevich, hardly able to move, drags himself down onto the floor and moves towards the window, manages to rise and lean out, wants to shout, but only blood comes out of his mouth. One drop of blood is picked up by the wind and falls onto a young man's helmet. From explicit temporal references in the story we can infer that this is taking place in 2010.

Linguistic elements from the past in this text include, above all, words, phrases and concepts connected with the Soviet era, as well as phrases

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6 A monoklon is a one-horned pangolin.

and fragments of songs that are either Soviet themselves or were included in the Soviet repertoire or school programme:<sup>7</sup>

—В сто концов убегают рельсы...—проговорил он, вспомнив песню Пугачевой.—По рельсам... и по шпалам, по шпалам, по шпалам... (10)<sup>8</sup>

—Заправлены в планшеты космические карты...

—И штурман уточняет в последний раз маршрут!—тут же подхватила толпа.

—Давайте-ка, ребята, покурим перед стартом, у нас еще в запасе четырнадцать мину-у-у-ут!—подпел толпе Виктор Николаевич с шестого этажа. (12)<sup>9</sup>

За окном пела блестящая толпа:

На пыльных тропинках

Далеких планет

Останутся наши следы! (13)<sup>10</sup>

За окном пели блестящие:

Я Земля, я своих провожаю питомцев —

Сыновей, дочерей.

Долетайте до самого солнца

И домой возвращайтесь скорей. (18)<sup>11</sup>

Particularly noteworthy are the words *kosmonavt* (“cosmonaut”) and *Den’ kosmonavtiki* (“Cosmonauts’ Day”), which in themselves function

7 An example of the latter is a quote from Goethe’s poem “Über allen Gipfeln ist Ruh” (Горные вершины спят во тьме ночной).

8 “‘The rails run in a hundred directions’, he said, recalling Pugacheva’s song, ‘Along the rails..., and over the sleepers, the sleepers, the sleepers...’”

9 “‘The space maps have been tucked into their cases...’—‘And the navigator is checking the route for the last time!’ the crowd joined in immediately. ‘Come on, guys, let’s have a smoke before take-off, there’s a whole fourteen minutes to go!’ Viktor Nikolaevich joined the crowd from the sixth floor.”

10 “The shining crowd was singing outside the window: ‘On the dusty paths of distant planets, our tracks will remain!’”

11 “The shining people were singing outside the window: ‘I’m the Earth, I’m seeing off my children, my sons, my daughters. Fly as far as the sun, and come back home soon.’”

as signal words for the Soviet celebration of space-related events, evoking images of Iurii Gagarin in his helmet beside his spacecraft.

День космонавтики. (10, 11, 12)<sup>12</sup>

—Космонавты!—удивленно пробормотал Виктор Николаевич.  
(10)<sup>13</sup>

—Ничего себе! Космонавты! Космонавтики! (11)<sup>14</sup>

Виктор Николаевич сжал жилистый кулак, выкинул в окно и крикнул:

—Слава героям космоса! (13)<sup>15</sup>

—Ух-ты, ах-ты!—разнесли динамики голос бровастого парня.

—Все мы космонавты!—заревела толпа.

—Ух-ты, ах-ты!

—Все мы космонавты!!

—Ух-ты! Ах-ты!

—Все мы ко-смо-нав-ты!!! (18)<sup>16</sup>

The Soviet-era linguistic elements, together with the general description of the scene, combine to create an audio-visual impression of the radiant crowd of 30,000 young people, where Gagarin's heroic deed is celebrated *today*. This celebratory "now" is emphasized in the young cosmonaut's address to the crowd, which recalls the anaphoric use of "today's" characteristic of hymnographical texts used in church:—*Сегодня двенадцатое апреля. День космонавтики. В этот день Юрий Гагарин покорил космос, совершив свой героический полет.* (11, my italics).<sup>17</sup>

12 "Cosmonauts' Day."

13 "Cosmonauts!' Viktor Nikolaevich muttered with surprise."

14 "Wow! Cosmonauts! Little cosmonauts!"

15 "Viktor Nikolaevich clenched his sinewy fist, thrust it out of the window and shouted: 'Glory to the heroes of space!'"

16 "'Heave-ho, heigh-ho!' the loudspeakers spread the voice of the guy with the thick eyebrows. 'We're all cosmonauts!' the crowd roared. 'Heave-ho, heigh-ho!' 'We're all cosmonauts!!' 'Heave-ho! Heigh-ho!' 'We're all cos-mo-nauts!!!'"

17 "'Today is the 12 of April. Cosmonauts' Day. On this day Iurii Gagarin conquered space with his heroic flight'"

The celebration, full of linguistic fragments reminiscent of another time, brings a glorious past into the present. In some instances we can see how linguistic elements from the past are combined with those pointing to the present, as in this amalgam of Soviet-speak with present-day patriotism, which also includes contemporary terms referring to the country's tandem leadership:

—Каждый патриот России—космонавт в душе! Наш президент—космонавт №1!

Толпа заплодировала.

—А уж наш премьер—космонавт из космонавтов!

Толпа радостно заревела. (12)<sup>18</sup>

During Viktor Nikolaevich's phone call with his son, the identity of the young cosmonauts becomes clear as he paraphrases their name, searching for the right designation: Это эти... как их... ну, идут которые? «Мы вместе»? Как их? Да! Да! (12).<sup>19</sup> It is Viktor Nikolaevich's son who obviously suggests their correct name in between this flow of short phrases: *Idushchie vmeste* (*Walking Together*), i.e. the pro-Putin youth organization founded by Vasilii Iakemenko in 2000 and renamed *Nashi* (*Ours*) in 2005.

To Viktor Nikolaevich, the spectacle represents a hilarious remembrance of the Soviet past. In recognition of the reason for the celebration, he bursts out into a combination of Soviet-speak and spontaneous, heartfelt mat:—Сегодня ж 12 апреля! День космонавтики, сволочи дорогие! Мать честная! (10).<sup>20</sup>

Then he tries to join in, by humming along to the Soviet space song and shouting out a heroic Soviet space-related slogan. He also tries to share his experience with his neighbours, with his son who phones him (shouting slogan-like phrases down the telephone: Готовность—номер один!

18 “Every Russian patriot is a cosmonaut in his soul! Our president is cosmonaut number one!’ The crowd applauded. ‘And as for our Prime Minister, he’s the cosmonaut of cosmonauts!’ The crowd roared with joy.”

19 “It’s those... what are they called... you know, those who walk? ‘We’re together?’ What? Yes! Yes!”

20 “But today is the 12th of April! The Day of the Cosmonauts, dear bastards! Holy Mother!”

Выхожу на орбиту! (13)<sup>21</sup> and finally with the arriving guests, in the belief that it is Valia coming to pick up his laundry: Недовольно бормоча и напевая, щелкнул замком, размахисто распахнул дверь:—Валя, быстрей! Я вам щас такое покажу! (13).<sup>22</sup>

Viktor Nikolaevich, however, is struck by the past from two directions: not only by the celebration in front of his windows, but also by the visit and revenge of Monoklon. The deep contrast between these two aspects of the past is emphasized by a complex pattern of parallels on the lexical-semantic level. First, we observe a juxtaposition of the collective and the individual: what is going on outside the window is a celebration of the Soviet collective spirit, expressed, for example, in the formulaic “actions” of the crowd:

Толпа радостно зашумела. (11)

Толпа стихла. (11)

Толпа зашумела. (11)

Толпа заплодировала. (12)

Толпа радостно заревела. (12)

За окном шумела и смеялась толпа. (15–16)

За окном толпа запела песню про Землю, [...] (16)

Толпа перестала петь и просто шумела. (18)<sup>23</sup>

The melting of the individual into a collective “self” is made even more explicit in the young leader’s address to the crowd, where he urges them to become “Iuriis” all together.

21 “On immediate standby! I’m going into orbit!”

22 “Muttering and humming with discontent, he flicked the lock and flung open the door: ‘Valia, quick! I’m going to show you something marvellous!’”

23 “The crowd stirred cheerfully.//The crowd fell silent.//The crowd stirred.//The crowd applauded.//The crowd roared with joy.//Outside the window the crowd stirred and laughed.//Outside the window, the crowd began to sing a song about the Earth [...]//The crowd stopped singing and just stirred.”



Потому что в душе каждого из вас живет любовь к своей родине, желание сделать ее еще более могущественной, еще более свободной! И мне, из этой ракеты сейчас кажется, друзья, что сегодня каждого из вас зовут Юрий! (11)<sup>24</sup>

By contrast, what goes on inside Viktor Nikolaevich's apartment is a gruesome but solemn act of revenge carried out by one man, Monoklon.

Furthermore, the contrasting parallel between the two realms of the past is powerfully reinforced in the abundance of words referring to light, gleam and radiance based on the verbs *blestat'* ("shine") and *sverkat'* ("gleam"). Outside, they refer to the radiant, celebrating crowd, inside to a very concrete artefact, the pickaxe, the object with which the act of revenge is performed:

В центре, в мешанине *блестящих* на солнце тел стала приподниматься ракета с гербом России на корпусе. (11)

За окном пела *блестящая* толпа: [...] (13)

Но он был идеально отполирован и *сверкал* в солнечном свете, как дорогой японский меч. Валек взял этот *блестящий*, плавно изогнутый кусок железа, [...] (15)

Виктор Николаевич уставился на *блестящий* металл. (15)

Моноклон глянул на *блестящий*, прошедший сквозь старческое тело металл, опустил кувалду: [...] (16–17)

За окном пели *блестящие*: [...] (18)

Лишь одна капля, отскочив, минуя зеленый откос водоотлива, сорвалась вниз, *сверкнула* рубином на солнце, полетела, подхваченная влажным воздухом.

Ветер отнес каплю крови от дома и уронил на толпу *блестящих*. (19, my italics)<sup>25</sup>

24 "Because in the soul of every one of you lives a love for your country, a desire to make it even more powerful, even more free! And from this rocket I have the impression, my friends, that today each of you bears the name of Iurii!"

25 "In the centre, in the jumble of bodies *shining* in the sun, a rocket with the Russian coat-of-arms on the hull began to lift off.//Outside the window the *shining* crowd was singing:[...]//But it was perfectly polished and *gleaming* in the sunlight, like an

*The discourse of memory*

The linguistic memory triggered by certain words, fragments and phrases is reinforced by what we may call an implicit and explicit *discourse of memory* in the text. We have seen one example in the young cosmonaut's projection of the historical name and person of Iurii Gagarin onto every individual living person in the crowd's here and now. If this is a straightforward example of collective memory, then we see a more indirect expression of the discourse of memory in Monoklon's string of short utterances in the "dialogue" between Monoklon and Viktor Nikolaevich. Here are Monoklon's words:

- Хороший день,—[...] (14)
- Моноклон. (14)
- Узнал,—[...] (14)
- Я же обещал тебе. (14)
- А обещанного ждут не три года,—[...] (14)
- Помнит. (15)
- Время, [...]—(16)<sup>26</sup>

Here what we have is a personal memory. In the short explanatory phrases from Monoklon, we see how personal recollection goes through the various stages of *recognition*, *promise*, *expectance*, *remembering*, and *actualization*.

Finally, the most explicit expression of the discourse of memory is the second of the two inscriptions on the pickaxe:

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expensive Japanese sword.//Valek took this *shiny*, gently curved piece of iron, [...]// Viktor Nikolaevich stared at the *shiny* metal.//Monoklon looked at the *shiny* metal that had passed through the old man's body, and dropped the sledge-hammer: [...]// Outside the window, the *shining* people were singing: [...]//Only one drop, bouncing off and passing over the green slope of the drainpipe, fell down, *flashed* like a ruby in the sun, and flew away, caught by the moist air.//The wind carried the drop of blood away from the house and let it fall on the crowd of *shining* people."

26 "How do you do,' [...]/'Monoklon.'/'You've recognized me,' [...]/'After all I promised you.'/'And promises are not made to be broken [literally: promises are waited for more than three years],' [...]/'He remembers.'/'It's time,' [...]."

*PROCUL DUBIO* [Без сомнения (лат.)] [...] *AD MEMORANDUM* [На память (лат.)] (15)<sup>27</sup>

This reflects neither a historical nor a collective memory, nor a personal memory per se. Inscribed on the artefact with which the brutal execution is performed, this is a more distant and seemingly objective expression of the memory discourse, that adds to the solemnity of Monoklon's act of revenge by creating an impression of inevitability and historical necessity.

### *Representations of time*

Moving on from languages of the past and discourse of memory to concrete representations of time in the story, one is struck by the number of time-bound references, pointing, above all, to circumstances and events in Viktor Nikolaevich's life. We are told that he is currently 82, a piece of information conveyed by a glimpse of his image in a mirror: Из зеркала на него уставился восьмидесятидвухлетний Виктор Николаевич. (9).<sup>28</sup> Scars and tattoos on his body are meticulously described and dated:

На теле было два старых шрама: на левом бедре, когда в 58-м на охоте его задел клыками раненый кабан и на правом локте, когда в 91-м он сломал руку, поскользнувшись возле своего подъезда. Еще на теле виднелись две татуировки: посередине груди орел, когтящий змею, а на левом плече сердце, проткнутое двумя кинжалами, и еле различимая надпись «Нина». Обе татуировки были старыми, пятидесятих годов. (9)<sup>29</sup>

When he sees the crowd of cosmonauts in front of his windows, he recalls earlier events, similar to, but not in any way matching today's celebration:

27 "Without doubt" and "In memory."

28 "Staring at him in the mirror was the eighty-two-year old Viktor Nikolaevich."

29 "There were two old scars on his body: one on the left hip, from 58 when he was struck on a hunting expedition by the tusks of a wounded wild boar, and one on his right elbow from 91 when he broke his arm, slipping outside his door. Furthermore two tattoos could be seen on his body: on the middle of the chest an eagle with a snake in its claws, and on the left shoulder a heart pierced by two daggers and the barely discernible words 'Nina'. Both tattoos were old, from the fifties."

За свою сорокалетнюю жизнь на Ленинском проспекте он не видел ничего подобного. Случались здесь демонстрации коммунистов в ельцинские времена, было и знаменитое побоище на площади Гагарина в 1993 году, в трехстах метрах от его дома, когда патриоты из «Трудовой Москвы» схватились с ельцинским ОМОНОм. Но такого не было никогда. (10)<sup>30</sup>

We also find other, more indirect “historical,” as it were, references, for example through the naming of artefacts that carry a concrete reference to a specific time and place:

Потом он долго лежал, глядя в потолок с чешской хрустальной люстрой, купленной покойной женой в середине семидесятых в магазине «Свет» на Ленинском проспекте. (7–8)<sup>31</sup>

The shop name “Svet” (Light), an emblematic example of Soviet language culture, reminds us of typical Soviet shop names such as “Khleb” (Bread), “Moloko” (Milk), “Miaso” (Meat), etc.

The most detailed historical references, however, are found in the description of the two photographs which Monoklon examines closely towards the end of the story. These photographs shed light on the pre-history of the last meeting between Viktor Nikolaevich and Monoklon, depicted in the story: a picture from 1949 of graduates at the law faculty of the University of Kazan, with Viktor Nikolaevich standing next to Monoklon, and a picture of Viktor Nikolaevich as senior lieutenant in the KGB with the inscription “Norilsk 1952.” Norilsk was famous for its concentration camps, the Norillag and the Gorlag, where tens of thousands of prisoners were incarcerated. We may infer that Viktor Nikolaevich was a camp guard and Monoklon a prisoner, and that Viktor Nikolaevich showed no mercy towards his former fellow student.

30 “During his forty years on Leninskii Avenue, he had not seen anything like this. There had been demonstrations by the Communists here under Yeltsin, there was the famous battle on Gagarin Square in 1993, three hundred metres from his house when the patriots of ‘Labouring Moscow’ clashed with Yeltsin’s OMON forces. But this had never happened before.”

31 “Then he lay for a long time, staring at the ceiling, with its Czech crystal chandelier, purchased by his late wife in the mid-seventies in the store called ‘Light’ on Leninskii Avenue.”

These circumstances are not spelt out in the story. But they are hinted at, partly through these temporal references, but also through meticulous references to concrete traces of brutality on Monoklon's body:

Левую бровь пересекал глубокий старый шрам, отчего левый глаз смотрел совсем сквозь щелочку. (14)<sup>32</sup>

Обе руки его были покалечены: на правой не хватало мизинца, на левой четвертый палец и мизинец не сгибались. (17)<sup>33</sup>

*Simultaneity of the non-simultaneous*

In the time-frame of this story, the figure of Viktor Nikolaevich represents the *synchronic point zero*. Throughout the narrative, the two realms of “now” and “before” are juxtaposed, with Viktor Nikolaevich's perception of them being the link between the two. In the one case, the celebration of Gagarin, he is moved and enthused; in the other, the “revenge,” he is petrified, as indicated by his static, death-like responses to Monoklon's act of revenge:

Виктор Николаевич замер. (14)<sup>34</sup>

Но лицо Виктора Николаевича словно окостенело. (15)<sup>35</sup>

Тело Виктора Николаевича словно окаменело. (16)<sup>36</sup>

The most extreme representation of the synchronic point zero follows immediately after this last phrase, when Viktor Nikolaevich, almost dead, lies on the table awaiting the final blow from Monoklon's sledge-hammer: Только нога билась о ножку стола равномерно, будто отсчитывая время. (16).<sup>37</sup>

32 “The left eyebrow was traversed by a deep old scar, causing his left eye to see as if through a crack.”

33 “Both of his hands had injuries: on the right, the little finger was missing, and on the left, the fourth and the little finger did not bend.”

34 “Viktor Nikolaevich stood stock still.”

35 “Viktor Nikolaevich's face was as if ossified.”

36 “Viktor Nikolaevich's body was as though petrified.”

37 “Only his leg throbbed evenly against the foot of the table, as if marking time.”

The three main aspects of the diachronic dimension to language that we have observed in this reading—languages of the past, the discourse of memory, and representations of time—all serve the story's main purpose, which is to bring the past, or rather, two disparate pasts, into the present, in other words, to create a *synchronicity of asynchronous historical pasts*. One is the glorious, celebratory Soviet world of spacecrafts and cosmonauts, the other the violent, brutal world of the camps. Formally, the two pasts are divided by strict chronological limits, confining the Norillag and Gorlag to the Stalin period (the camps closed soon after Stalin's death in 1953—the Norillag in 1956 and the Gorlag in 1954) and the celebration of space events to the years following Gagarin's famous space flight in 1961 (the holiday was established in 1961 and is celebrated to this day). As the story brings the two pasts together, however, highlighting, through contrasting parallels, the connection between them, it emphasizes their being part of one common past, the Soviet era, a fact contemporary Russia has to tackle.

A link between the two worlds is subtly established in the story's conclusion. The closing scene describes an almost symbolic encounter, as a drop of blood from the victim's mouth drips out of the window, is taken up by the air and then falls onto the helmet of a young boy, also called Viktor. The boy is insensitive to the blood. Note, again, the words *sverk-nut'* ("flash") and *blestat'* ("shine"), underlining the parallel between Monoklon's act of revenge and the celebratory crowd:

Лишь одна капля, отскочив, минуя зеленый откос водоотлива, сорвалась вниз, сверкнула рубином на солнце, полетела, подхваченная влажным воздухом. Ветер отнес каплю крови от домов и уронил на толпу блестящих.

Капля крови упала на шлем хохочущего шестнадцатилетнего парня по имени Виктор. Но он ее не почувствовал. (19)<sup>38</sup>

If we look back at the opening paragraph of the story, we see that the theme of *synchronicity* is present from the very start: Viktor Nikolaevich

38 "Only one drop, bouncing off and passing over the green slope of the drainpipe, plummeted down, flashed like a ruby in the sun, and flew away, caught by the moist air.// The wind carried the drop of blood away from the house and let it fall on the crowd of shining people./The drop of blood fell on the helmet of a laughing sixteen-year-old lad named Viktor. But he did not feel it."

wakes up from a dream where he sees himself back in 1938, when he is ten years old, but appears in his present form and age (*nyneshnim starikom*), and his own father calls him *dedom Vitei* (“grandfather Vitia”, 7):

Виктор Николаевич проснулся от странного, нелепого сна. Ему приснился покойный отец, довоенный Весъегоньск, свадьба дяди Семена и Анны, на которой он побывал десятилетним мальчиком. Во сне все было почти как тогда, в далеком 1938-м, но он сам почему-то был уже нынешним стариком и отец звал его дедом Витей. Его посадили во главу стола, отец сидел рядом и все время подливал ему вкусного, легкого, как березовый сок, самогона, от которого дед Витя, будучи по сути мальчиком, сильно захмелел и уже не мог сидеть, а упал под стол и, хохоча, стал хватать всех за ноги, отчего собравшиеся разозлились и принялись сильно пихать и бить его сапогами, галдя, что дед Витя опозорился. Потом его подхватили и поволокли вон из дома, а он от опьянения не мог пошевелить ни рукой, ни ногой, и ему стало так смешно, так весело, что он хохотал, хохотал дико до тех пор, пока не разрыдался. (7)<sup>39</sup>

Setting the tone for the whole story, and indeed for the whole collection of stories in *Monoklon*, this dream may be read as a metapoetic comment on the problem of depicting the “synchronicity” of contemporary Russia, incorporating, or ignoring, her past. Its main constituents are the absurd (*strannyi* “strange”, *nelepyi* “odd”) and, above all, the grotesque: the heavy drinking, falling under the table, the threefold repeti-

39 “Viktor Nikolaevich woke up from a strange, odd dream. He saw his deceased father, pre-war Ves’egon’sk, and the wedding of Uncle Semen and Aunt Anna, where he’d been as a 10-year-old. In the dream everything was almost as then, way back in 1938, but for some reason he himself was already the old man of today, and his father called him grandfather Vitia. He was seated at the head of the table, his father sat next to him and constantly poured him a delicious home-made vodka, light as birch juice, from which grandfather Vitia, in fact a boy, got heavily drunk and became unable to sit, fell under the table and, laughing, started to grab everyone’s feet, as a result of which the assembled guests grew angry and began to shove and beat him heavily with their boots, clamouring that grandfather Vitia had disgraced himself. Afterwards they picked him up and dragged him out of the house, and in his drunkenness he couldn’t move his arm or leg, and he was so amused, so cheerful, that he laughed, laughed wildly, until he burst into tears.”

tion of the verb *khokhotat* (“laugh loudly”), echoed, as we saw above, in the story’s final passage (Капля крови упала на шлем хохочущего шестнадцатилетнего парня по имени Виктор. (19)).

In an interview following the publication of the *Monoklon* collection, Sorokin spoke of “the growing concentration of the absurd and grotesque in society,” describing the book as “an attempt to capture this concentration of the grotesque”:

И этот сборник как раз попытка нащупать эту самую концентрацию гротеска. Надо сказать, что с каждым годом она увеличивается. [...] Здесь плохо приживается человеческое. Громадное место для гротеска, абсурда и все меньше и меньше для обыкновенной человеческой жизни. У нас присутствует тотальное равнодушие к человеческой личности. Человек воспринимается как средство, а не как цель.<sup>40</sup>

Sorokin’s fictional world is less clear-cut in ethical terms. My reading suggests a few of the poetic means that Sorokin employs in order to draw the reader’s attention to the grotesque aspects of contemporary Russian society, where reminiscences of an unsettled and unsettling past are inexorably present.

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<sup>40</sup> “The volume is actually an attempt to capture this concentration of the grotesque. I have to say that it increases with every year. [...] The human element has problems holding its own here. There’s enormous space for the grotesque, for the absurd, and less and less for normal human life. There’s a total neglect of the human personality here. Man is seen as a means rather than a goal.” Vladimir Sorokin, 2010, “Dlia pisatel'ia zdes' — El' dorado,” interview with Nina Ivanova, *TimeOut Moskva* 36, 13–19 September, <http://www.timeout.ru/journal/feature/14452/>, accessed 31 July 2012.