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REGIME AND SOCIETY IN TWENTIETH-CENTURY RUSSIA

# Twentieth-Century Russian Literature

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## 23 On the Nature of Russian Post-modernism

Mark Lipovetsky<sup>1</sup>

Is there a writing that  
finds the world and is not the  
Book? ... Rearranging the letters of the Book  
means rearranging the world. There's no  
getting away from it.

— Umberto Eco, *Foucault's Pendulum*<sup>2</sup>

Why should the controversy over what would seem to be such an academic subject as post-modernism be so tempestuous, even scandalous? Russian critics have not engaged in such heated arguments since the time of the Thaw: the gamut runs from hosannas to anathema, from proclaiming post-modernism to be 'progressive and relevant' to warding off the devil with an Orthodox cross. Even Solzhenitsyn found it impossible to resist cursing this new temptation. It would be too facile to dismiss these debates as a thinly-veiled generational conflict between the 'men of the sixties' and their hungry offspring, for the fault-line runs within a single generation: such famous younger critics as, for example, Aleksandr Arkhangelsky, Andrei Nemzer or Pavel Basinsky can in no way be considered apologists for post-modernism. It is quite possible that their indignation is aroused by the arrogance of the post-modernists, a group of hardly-starving artists who have adopted the best habits of the literary avant-garde, from unrestrained bragging to a caste-like intolerance in their evaluation of other people's work.

None the less, one would like to believe that the problem is not merely a matter of conflicting ambitions. The question of Russian post-modernism is clearly more significant than the perfectly normal

historical phenomenon of a literary trend elbowing its predecessors and its more traditional contemporaries aside. It is, first and foremost, a question of Russian culture's identity. The invectives about preaching and apprenticeship in Russian literature, which have become commonplace in criticism, touch upon only the least significant part of this crisis.

In *The Total Art of Stalinism*, Boris Groys asserts that Russian post-modernism arises as a result of two successive culture shocks: first, the discovery that the 'totality of the ideological horizon' has not simply obscured reality, as had previously been thought, but rather has swallowed it whole; second, that 'utopia is immanent to history', and therefore the attempt to return 'homo sovieticus' to world history has collapsed precisely because of the 'end of history' brought on by the collapse of the Soviet (final) utopia. Groys sees the meaning of Russian post-modernism in the achievement of blissful indifference:

The moment we realize that Borges' Library of Babel is not unique, but there also exists, say, a library approved by Stalin, we will no longer care which of them holds what we have written or what place it occupies there. So what if my text is merely a move in the endless play of language; even language, after all, is merely a move in my narration. It is possible to say anything in a given language, but one can also invent a new one. This language need not be comprehensible in order for something to be said in it; but it is not necessarily incomprehensible, either.<sup>3</sup>

Strangely similar to this project are the stubborn assurances of Mikhail Yampolsky, who argues that 'our art differs from post-modernism in that it lacks the aesthetic'.<sup>4</sup> This, perhaps, is that very language in which one can speak 'without agitation': art without an aesthetic (and, after all, as Yampolsky himself surely knows, the hideous also constitutes an aesthetic) is just as much a pseudo-theoretical abstraction as, say, 'scientific communism'.

None the less, all these elegant constructs do little to explain Russian post-modernism in practice. It is telling that these two theoreticians strictly limit Russian post-modernism to conceptualism and Sots Art: all their generalisations come from the works of Prigov, Rubinshtein, Sorokin, Kabakov, Bulatov and – no one else. Sokolov's *Palisandriya* also makes the list, but never his *School for Fools* (*Shkola dlya durakov*) or *Between Dog and Wolf* (*Mezhdub sobakoi i volkom*). Bitov, Venedikt Yerofeev, Tolstaya, P'etsukh, Yevgenii Popov, Vladimir

Sharov and many others apparently do not exist. Why? Because all these models are attempts to translate the logic of Western (European and American) post-modernism into Russian culture. In the West post-modernism arises from the deconstruction of the monolithic, hierarchical culture of modernism and the canonised avant-garde. The only equivalent to such a monolith in Russian culture is Socialist Realism; therefore, post-modernism is restricted to the art of reflection on the ruins of Socialist Realism, that is, conceptualism and Sots Art.

But, even if we approach Socialist Realism as the 'official' avant-garde, it is still impossible to prove that the role and place of Socialist Realism in Russian culture is equal to the role and place of modernism in Western culture. For the sovereignty of the modernist value system in the West was the result of an organic process, whereas in Russia the institution of the Socialist Realist canon came at the price of the destruction of the organic culture. Today it is crystal clear that Soviet culture was never monolithic. Along with the Socialist Realist paradigm (which included not only official art, but also 'Socialist Realism with a human face', in both its published and *samizdat* versions), the tradition of the Silver Age was never broken, despite all the efforts of the authorities; in fact, it is this tradition that is constantly invoked in connection with the Russian geniuses of the twentieth century. The culture of the avant-garde was preserved, passing from Mayakovsky and Kruchenykh to Vladimir Kazakov and Aigi in literature, and from Shostakovich and Prokofiev to Shnittke and Gubaidullina in music. Finally, it is in the Soviet era that one finds a paradoxical relapse of a certain populist, provincial variant of the naturalism of the previous century, in the figures of Seifullina, Neverov, to a large extent Sholokhov, and then in the sketches of *New World* (*Novyi mir*) and, finally, in the Village Prose of the 1960s and 1970s. If there were not such variety, where would we get such fascinating cultural hybrids as Platonov, Ehrenburg, Sholokhov himself, or the later Kataev?

The fundamental issues for Western post-modernism are the blurring of the boundaries between centre and periphery, the decentralisation of consciousness (expressed in the concept of the 'death of the author'), and the fragmentation of the modernist model and its pathos of the creative subject's freedom. Yet Russian post-modernism arises from the search for an answer to a diametrically opposed problem: cultural fragmentation and disintegration, together with the literal

(rather than metaphysical) 'death of the author'; even within the bounds of a single text, Russian post-modernism attempts to restore and re-animate organic culture by involving diverse cultural languages in dialogue:

[W]riters have come to the paradoxical conclusion that language is their only reality, although, at the same time, the reality is illusory ... The result is a baroque intermingling of forms of discourse, a literary language that is simultaneously local and cosmopolitan, a reflection of specific times and a stylisation.

The validity of this diagnosis of Russian post-modernism is patently obvious; one need only recall the relevant declarations of Nabokov, Brodsky or Bitov; one might not even bother to put it into words, if only ... If only this quotation were not a description of Latin American post-modernism.<sup>5</sup> And the main reason for this resemblance is that Latin American literature, like Russian literature, has long been infected by a 'longing for world culture' (an expression attributed to Osip Mandelstam:

The fear of incurring these involuntary parodies has always made Latin American writers sensitive to the difference between the cultures in which they live and the 'other' culture, that of the metropolitan centers, real or imagined, of the Western world. In this they are different from their counterparts in the US, at least in the twentieth century, who imagined the Anglo-American tradition to be self-sufficient. Latin American culture constantly reminds itself of its own insufficiency.<sup>6</sup>

As, we might add, does Russian culture, whose 'inferiority complex' is expressed equally in Westernising and in nationalism (*pochvenichestvo*).

The cultural isolation of Latin America provided fertile soil for Borges, Cortazar, García Márquez, Carpentier, and other contemporary classics who have shocked the post-modern cosmos. Cultural insufficiency has coincided with the crisis of cultural identity, resulting in an incredible discharge of artistic energy. But has perhaps the same thing happened in Russian post-modernism?

Both Latin American and Russian post-modernisms can be approached according to the model of 'border writing', which is characterised by its 'emphasis upon the multiplicity of languages within any single language; by choosing a strategy of translation rather than

representation, border writers ultimately undermine the distinction between original and alien culture'.<sup>7</sup> The classic example of border writing is the work of Kafka, a Jew who lived in Prague and wrote in German. If Latin American post-modernism plays with *spatial* isolation, and thus with the spatial boundary between the cultures of old Europe, the new North American civilisation and a completely different, but equally old, pre-Columbian South America, for Russian culture, especially in the twentieth century, and particularly in the past thirty years, isolation is experienced as isolation in time, and the 'border-ness' takes shape within a special mythology of backwardness. In each case a key role is played by the category which Deleuze and Guatarri call 'deterritorialisation'; that is, every cultural phenomenon sees itself as transplanted to alien soil from outside, and rejects the immediate surrounding context, anxiously reaching out to make connections that lead to a different - native - context: to a far-off time (for Russians) or a far-off place (for Latin Americans). Moreover, 'deterritorialisation' is interpreted by the creators of schizo-analysis not as a state but as a productive process, which 'pushes the simulacra to a point where they cease being artificial images to become indices of the new world. That is what the completion of the process is: not a promised and a pre-existing land, but a world created in the process of its tendency, its coming undone, its deterritorialization'.<sup>8</sup> In other words, the return to a lost context still remains a utopian ideal, but the critique of the surrounding, contemporary contexts proves to be productive, because it creates its own cultural space, a post-modern space of language in which simulacra, the imaginary and fictions replacing a lost reality take on a new status of authenticity. Such is the path of both Russian and Latin American post-modernisms.

This model truly does explain a great deal about Russian post-modernism. It explains why the experience of Nabokov proved so valuable: before all others (and practically at the same time as Borges), Nabokov transformed modernism into post-modernism. Indeed, his modernism is inextricably linked with the drama of exile - in other words, with deterritorialisation; his escape from Europe to America, and hence from one language to another, forced him to compensate for his lost context with his own text, with its semi-transparent structure, its riddles and mysteries, its characters who are wholly rooted only in the text (such as Sebastian Knight's brother, or Humbert Humbert, or

Kinbote [*Pale Fire*] or Van [*Ada*]). We can understand why such ambiguous games are played by Russian post-modernists so intensely not only with Socialist Realism, but with the tradition of the Silver Age (at last, the nearest native context!); moreover, the range is much wider than that of Sots Art: from the metafictional 'culturology' of Bitov to the holy-foolish universalism of Venedikt Yerofeev, from Tolstaya with her bitterly ironic aestheticism to the historico-philosophical fairy-tale myths of Sharov.

Why is the apparently modernist mythology of creation and life-creation so anxiously understood in terms of aesthetic logic? This is a theme not only for Nabokov, but for all the works of Sokolov (who solved this problem with alacrity in *Between Dog and Wolf*), and once again for Tolstaya, for Aleksandr Ivanchenko (*Self-Portrait with a Great Dane* [*Avtoportret s dogom*]) and even, as travesty, for Yevgenii Popov; more to the point, this is the theme of all of Russian post-modernism, which, unlike its Western counterpart, does not fight with context, but rather tries to produce context from the text, from the process of writing. It is clear why Russian post-modernism is so enamoured of the archetype of the holy fool: on the one hand, this is a classic variant of the 'border subject' (who floats between two diametrically opposed cultural codes), and on the other – once again, a version of context, a link to the mighty branch of cultural archaism, stretching across Rozanov or Kharm's to today. Why do Russian post-modernists strive so doggedly to reduce any plot – even one that is developed over more than a century (as in the novels of Sharov, for example) – to the present time of the text, and, in its most extreme manifestation, to the surface of the page (as Sorokin often does)? This is how the present, which has collapsed under the burden of utopianism, is restored, how the gap between the present and the future is filled; this is how exile is softened in time.

Theoretically, the Russian version of post-modern aesthetics creates a field where the value contexts of various cultural systems can meet, including those which, it would seem, have long ago been irrevocably lost, killed, forgotten, and those that were never successfully established on Russian soil (such as the Renaissance, surrealism or existentialism). But the particularity of this encounter is that, in the resulting polylogue, the artist does not have his 'own' word: everything is quotation. Some contexts act as the accursed space-time of cultural

isolation, others as objects of nostalgia. But in each case, there is no contact without alienation. Epstein connects this situation with the hope for the birth of a 'transculture' that would release man from the dictates of a single culture and would place him at the point of Bakhtinian 'outsideness' (*vnenakhadimost'*), where that which unites all cultures at their heart is opened to him:

The transcultural world lies not apart from, but within all existing cultures, like a multidimensional space that appears gradually over the course of historical time. It is a continuous space in which unrealized, potential elements are no less meaningful than 'real' ones. As the site of interaction among all existing and potential cultures, transculture is even richer than the totality of all known cultural traditions and practices.<sup>9</sup>

As a graphic model of 'transculture', Epstein cites Borges's famous story, 'The Aleph', which describes 'one of the points in space that contains all other points':

In that single gigantic instant I saw millions of acts both delightful and awful; not one of them amazed me more than the fact that all of them occupied the same point in space, without overlapping or transparency. What my eyes beheld was simultaneous...<sup>10</sup>

This, in all likelihood, is the intra-cultural myth of Russian and Latin American post-modernisms; this is their utopian vision of inner wholeness attained upon leaving behind the state of exile or 'de-territorialisation'. Moreover, we must note that this myth is clearly opposed to the myth of the 'end of ends', 'the impossibility of the Apocalypse' (Derrida), 'the end of history' (Fukuyama), which are at the heart of Western European and North American post-modernism. What Epstein calls 'transculture' signifies a new level of fullness and historical universality, a new scale of history's dramas and potential; by no means is it history's annihilation, by no means is it the bad infinity of self-repetition.

Yet the artistic practice of Russian post-modernism offers a substantial corrective to this utopian myth. As an analysis of many works of the 'new wave' shows, the culturological poetics of Russian post-modernism, which draws upon the metafiction of the 1920s and 1930s (from Osip Mandelstam's 'The Egyptian Stamp' [*'Yegipetskaya marka'*], Viktor Shklovsky's *Zoo* and Daniil Kharm's 'cases' [*sluchai*])

to *The Gift* and *Lolita* by Vladimir Nabokov), allowed various cultural systems to meet and intermingle, not so much on the ideological level as through the collision of various types of artistic wholeness, generic traditions, plot structures, styles, and the most minute stylistic elements. But of all the most significant phenomena of Russian post-modernism, the common denominator (itself born in this dialogue), the point of 'outsideness' in which the author, protagonist and reader are found, has invariably turned out to be death.

Bitov, writing in *Pushkin House* (*Pushkinskii dom*), understands the everyday, unnoticed afterlife of culture as a necessary condition for the encounter between the preserved classical tradition, the simulated existence of the contemporary hero and the author's failed attempts to create a 'present of the novel', 'so that his own present, being tiresome and unsuccessful, will disappear'.<sup>11</sup> After suffering a martyr's death, Venichka Yerofeev, the author and the central character of *Moscow – Petushki* (*Moskva – Petushki*) narrates his life, a life that is other-worldly from the start.<sup>12</sup> Death becomes a space for metamorphoses, uniting the chaos of poetic consciousness with the chaos of totalitarian madness in Sokolov's *School for Fools*, although it is also true that subsequently in *Palisandriya* it becomes the main condition ('post-mortem') for blurring all possible boundaries of meaning and, hence, of meanings themselves.<sup>13</sup> After the death of the dream, of all the heroes' hopes for life, one hears a conciliatory authorial voice in the prose of Tolstaya. In the best stories of Viktor Yerofeev and Vyacheslav P'etsukh, the self-destruction of the human, the absurd deconstruction of all possible meanings, serves as the harsh precondition for a continuous and indestructible history. In the novels of Vladimir Sharov (especially *Before and During* [*Do i vo vremya*]),<sup>14</sup> it is specifically death, the flood, the cataclysm, the revolutionary epidemic of mass insanity that are sketched as the points where a world that has fallen to pieces is put back together again; these are the points of intersection of human efforts to explain the world through myths, utopias, fantasies – and divine providence. In the stories of Yevgenii Popov sardonic 'paraliterary' mumblings and parodic style embody the devalorisation of the very process of writing. This devalorisation corresponds to the concept of timelessness, the universal neglect of being, which is so characteristic of Popov. But it also gives rise to the carnivalesque freedom expressed by Popov's narrator, and provides a clue to his poetics

as a whole. And in Sorokin's Sots Art stories, the naturalisation of the mechanisms of the Socialist Realist text (indeed, any text) leads to bloody death rituals, structurally and semantically 'approaching pre-historic culture.

Thus death becomes the integral symbol of Russian post-modernism. If this is 'transculture', then it is one in which death acts as the universal strategy for translating from one cultural language to another, for connecting the archaic and the contemporary, the avant-garde and the traditional, the classical and the paraliterary, Socialist Realism and high modernism, in their mutual weakness in the face of ontological chaos, in the powerlessness of their attempts to bring order to life and overcome death. 'Trans-culture' itself in such an interpretation takes on the features of a rhizome, that is, of a system of regular ruptures and breaks of all kinds of structural links.<sup>15</sup> None the less, this is not the fragments of something smashed to bits, but rather a special, particularly post-modern type of wholeness, one that can be found on the level of the artistic work's interior organisation.

From time immemorial, from rites of passage and their attendant myths, one general semiotic model has been rooted in various cultures, and repeats itself again and again in artistic texts, religious rituals and calendar holidays: a temporary death which one must undergo in order to be born again or to obtain a new quality. Temporary death is connected with liminal states, with the incursion of the forces of chaos, which can no longer be held back by any social restrictions.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, isolation, exile, the removal from one's normal surroundings – these are the essential conditions of a rite of passage.

All of this bears a strong resemblance to the function of post-modernism in the history of world culture. Born of an extremely profound recognition of cultural crisis (and, in Russia, of the constant awareness of the dead-end of Soviet civilisation), post-modernism, as it were, consciously brings about the temporary death of culture; through its 'chaotic' de(con)structive strategies during the process of this global rite of passage, post-modernism models a liminal liberation from all versions of structural order. According to chaos theorists, in an unbalanced (that is, chaotic) dynamic, a self-organising system is not subject to disintegration into the sum of its component parts: every element is inseparable from the whole, and every element influences the entire system.<sup>17</sup> An analogous effect is noted by

investigators of the boundary states of culture, who emphasise that in these situations a special type of holographic effect is possible, in which a fragment torn from its context is capable of re-creating the entire volume of the whole. But does not a similar effect arise in post-modernism as well? After all, this transitory, boundary cultural state acts as the intersection of an organic, unsegmented, anti-structural unity of all previous cultural experience (potential as well as actual) and all impulses and promises of the future. It is that unity which is born within 'boundary writing' and which most closely corresponds to the internal drama of Russian culture's isolation in time. In other words, post-modernism translates the alienation from world culture, common to Russian, Soviet and post-Soviet culture, on to a global scale, but in doing so achieves the opposite effect: the complete synchronisation of Russian culture with world culture. This synchronisation is accomplished through temporary death, which is possible only on the scale of what Bakhtin calls culture's 'great time',<sup>18</sup> in turn understood as an organic, living, dying wholeness that has the potential for rebirth.

In one of his last works, Yuri Lotman wrote that a phenomenon can 'become a language ... only at the expense of immediate reality and of translation into a purely formal, "empty" sphere that is therefore ready for any content'.<sup>19</sup> Does this not mean that post-modernism, which enacts the temporary death of culture with obsessive reflexivity, thereby empties and formalises death itself, renders it obsolete, a process that inevitably consigns post-modernism itself to obsolescence at the same time?

Other questions inevitably arise: what is born from post-modern chaos? Does temporary death become a new characteristic of cultural reality? Can the post-modern rite of passage ever be completed? Only from a great historical distance can these questions be answered with any certainty. None the less, we will hazard some hypotheses.

At the beginning of the 1990s, Russian literary post-modernism began to show signs of crisis. Two main symptoms are readily apparent, the first of which is external: the leading authors of Russian post-modernism (such as Tolstaya, Viktor Yerofeev, Yevgenii Popov, P'etsukh) either begin to repeat themselves or fall silent.<sup>20</sup> Most likely, a unique 'automatisation of the device' is at work. But why has this happened so quickly? It seems that a special role has been played by the particular harshness and inflexibility of post-modern poetics. A

particular given image of chaos gives rise to (and assumes) a particular form of dialogue with it. And since the conception of chaos is too wide as an artistic-philosophical category to change from one work to another (it is instead more likely to be rooted in the organic world-view of the artist), the problem of repeating oneself takes on special significance; in any case, this is a common feature of any transitional system (as was the case with Hellenism and sentimentalism).

Another symptom is more deeply rooted in the instability shaping the very core of the post-modernist artistic strategy. The author's involvement in the dissonance of cultural languages allows him to enter into a dialogue with ontological chaos. But the discrediting of all cultural languages as a mask for chaos in turn cannot help but undercut the position of the author as the subject of this dialogue. For no matter how many narrative masks he may don, the author-creator is none the less connected to one or several cultural languages. The logical development of post-modern semantics includes all cultural languages without exception in the macro-image of chaos, which in turn leads to the replacement of the dialogue with chaos with the dissolution of the dialogue's subject within cultural and ontological chaos.

Yet American and Russian post-modernisms, which developed in opposite directions from the 1960s on (the former from a monolith to diversity, the latter from disintegration to paradoxical versions of wholeness), come together at the end of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s; moreover, it is telling that the processes of post-modernism's poetic and aesthetic self-destruction are symmetrical. Thus, in recent years a wide range of studies has appeared in the West, such as, for example, Alan Wilde's *Middle Grounds*, Robert Begiebing's *Towards a New Synthesis*, John Keuhl's *Alternate Worlds*, and, especially, Susan Strehle's *Fiction in the Quantum Universe*,<sup>21</sup> which argue that the anglophone post-modernism of such writers as Norman Mailer and John Fowles (in their later works), Robert Coover, Donald Barthelme, Margaret Attwood, Toni Morrison, Don DeLillo and Max Apple leads to a peculiar rebirth of the realistic impulse, or, more precisely, to a sort of compromise between post-modernism and realism. To these names should be added Milan Kundera and the South African author J.M. Coetzee; the most recent novels of García Márquez (especially *Love in the Time of Cholera*) should be mentioned as well.

Strehle calls this phenomenon 'actualism', explaining that all these authors

affirm *both* art (self-consciously aware of its processes and of aesthetic traditions) *and* the real world (specifically, the postmodern world, with a detailed awareness of its nature and history). Their fiction admits both the garden and the glass ... Breaking off the false and restrictive duality between realism and antirealism, these postmodern authors manage an original fusion that transforms both strands of their literary heritage.<sup>22</sup>

For his part, Wilde, who is known for his work on post-modern theory, connects the future of American post-modern literature with the movement which he defines as the literature of interrogation or 'mid-fiction'. Mid-fiction is

the kind of fiction that rejects equally the oppositional extremes of realism on the one hand and a world-denying reflexivity on the other, and that invites to perceive the moral, as well as epistemological, perplexities of inhabiting and coming to terms with a world that is itself ontologically contingent and problematic.<sup>23</sup>

This type of fiction shares a number of features with post-modernism, such as parody, an impulse towards playfulness, an emphasis on the relativity of time and space, and a hypertrophied dialogism that brings into conflict various versions of events and their interpretations, all the while juxtaposing genres, styles and the voices of the characters as well as the equally-empowered voice of the author. But this new fiction returns to a humanistic conception of reality, making common human fate the centre of attention, thereby undercutting the post-modernist axiom that reality is merely the sum total of simulacra. According to these Anglo-American critics, it is the palpable lack of humanism and the disappearance of a reality that is 'shared' with the reader that lies at the heart of the crisis of post-modernist metafiction, a kind of writing which will never reach a wide audience.

It is important to emphasise that this is not simply a return to realism; the drama of human fate is played out in the chaotically multi-layered and polyvalent world of post-modernism. Strehle says that many works of 'actualism' are modelled on the 'novel of education', the novel of individual fate, but the 'education' of the hero, which unfolds in the 'quantum universe' of the post-modern conception of the world, inevitably acquires the traits of an absurd quest: none of the

heroes comes to 'self-identical harmony, nor does their education suggest the proper order in the world. None of these protagonists is truly "educable", nor does their environment provide the series of clear "lessons" that would lead to "illumination" and alignment with "truth"'.<sup>24</sup> However, the very context of the 'novel of education' deprives these failures of any sense of inevitability: meaning, including the meaning of human life, is not given in a ready-made form; rather, it is continually being born in the dialogue of individual quests, each of which is only a single move in the game of the world.

A survey of Russian literature of the late 1980s and early 1990s reveals an analogous phenomenon: just as the crisis of post-modernism intensifies, another kind of fiction is gaining ground, a movement which is clearly rooted in the realistic tradition, but which just as clearly has learned from the experience of post-modern art. In works by Vladimir Makanin (*Escape Hatch, Quasi, Surrealism in a Proletarian Neighbourhood, Prisoner of the Caucasus* [*Laz, Kvazi, Sur v proletarskom rayone, Kavkazskii plennyi*]), Lyudmila Petrushevskaya (her novellas, *The Time: Night* [*Vremya noch'*]), Mark Kharitonov (*Lines of Fate* [*Linii sud'by*]), and Sergei Dovlatov, and equally in the fiction of such young authors as Mikhail Shishkin (*One Night Awaits All* [*Vsekh ozhidaet odna noch'*]), Aleksandr Vernikov (the short-story collection *House on the Wind* [*Dom na vetru*]), Petr Aleshkovskii (*The Life of a Ferret* [*Zhizneopisanie khor'ka*]), Marina Palei (*Kabiriya from Obvodny Canal* [*Kabiriya s Obvodnogo kanala*]), Andrei Dmitriev ('Voskoboev and Elizabeth' [*Voskoboev i Yelizaveta*]), Aleksandr Ivanchenko (*Monogram* [*Monogramma*]), Andrei Slapovskii (*The First Second Coming* [*Pervoe vtoroe prishestvie*]), and Oleg Yermakov (*The Number of the Beast* [*Chislo zverya*]), the dialogue with chaos is also at centre-stage, but everyday chaos is presented here not as cultural multi-voicedness, but as the weaving together of social, everyday, historical, psychological and also cultural circumstances. The subject of the dialogue is not the all-powerful author, but the private person with limited options, who searches within the surrounding workaday madness for an existential apology for his life.<sup>25</sup> It becomes readily apparent, for example, that practically all Russian 'post-realists', along with American 'actualists', give new life to the generic archetype of the novel of education, from straightforward versions of the genre, such as Ivanchenko's *Monogram*, Aleshkovskii's *The Life of a Ferret* or



Yermakov's *The Number of the Beast*, to the dialogisation of the Master-Disciple relationship in Sharov's 'Rehearsals' ('Repetitsii'), Kharitonov's *Lines of Fate*, Slapovskii's *First Second Coming*, or the paradoxical didacticism of the parables of Dovlatov, Petrushevskaya and Makanin. Here, too, the novel of education becomes so entangled with the absurd quest that the hero rarely discovers the truth in the end; his failures are what turn out to be significant, and not only for the author or reader, but, first and foremost, for the hero himself, for it is his failures that fill his life with personal and inalienable meaning. This meaning is acquired not in spite of, but within, the surrounding ontological chaos that attempts to engulf the individual, a chaos that is perceived and portrayed with the help of the artistic optics of post-modernism. Scientific chaos theory places great importance on the idea of the accidental irritant, the grain of sand around which a chaotic system will suddenly begin to form a funnel, giving birth to a new organic order within itself. In art, thanks to the power of the anthropocentric nature of the aesthetic, such an irritant, such a grain of sand could only be the human character, only human fate, but a fate that is understood in turn as both ineluctable destiny and a cascade of absurd accidents that are not subject to any order. The individual and subjective experience of the meaning of life (which is also accidental, momentary, local, extremely fragile, and conscious of its fragility, sometimes even absurd from an outside point of view) acquires the designation *chaosmos*.<sup>26</sup> The co-evolution of Russian post-modernism and American 'actualism' demonstrates to a certain extent that, first, the particular character of Russian post-modernism simultaneously not only broke, but also expressed, the general trajectory of post-modernism as a whole, and second, that, as a state of world culture, post-modernism has by and large entered into a period of crisis and semi-collapse.

In post-modernism (in this instance, Russian post-modernism is no exception), the cultural-philosophical paradigm that covers the entire literary evolution of the period of modernity undergoes a rupture. To put it schematically, at the basis of this paradigm lies a dialectical struggle between the ideals of Order and World Harmony, on the one hand, and the notion of freedom of expression, on the other. If neo-classicism, the Enlightenment and realism subordinate individual freedom to a higher order of government, nature or society, the

Renaissance, romanticism and modernism find world harmony in the attainment of total freedom. Modernist culture sees a token of harmony with the world in the maximum freedom of the individual consciousness that creates its world in spite of an alogical, senseless reality. 'My staff is my freedom, the heartbeat of being...' 'exclaimed the young Mandelstam in 1914.<sup>27</sup> And here is the aesthetic credo of the contemporary writer Fazil' Iskander:

When I consider what lies at the heart of creative talent and what lies at the heart of the pleasure we get from it, I come to the simple conclusion that art has no other content but freedom. Whatever a writer writes about, it seems to me that the result is art when the final goal within his writing is freedom.<sup>28</sup>

In the modernism of the Silver Age, in the avant-garde of the 1920s, in the literature of moral resistance, in the masterpieces of Mikhail Bulgakov, Anna Akhmatova, Marina Tsvetaeva, Boris Pasternak and Varlam Shalamov, in the entire spectrum of unofficial literature from Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn and Andrei Sinyavsky to the young underground of the 1980s, and even in that part of the officially-sanctioned literature of the 1960s and 1970s that was penned by war veterans and the Sixties Generation – freedom has everywhere been understood as the highest spiritual value. Post-modernism continues this tendency, turning the very process of the construction of the text into the formation of an undogmatic consciousness, imparting the significance of spiritually-liberating art to the very poetics of verbal artistry.

Unlike Western post-modernism, which considers the modernist myth of the freedom of the creative consciousness to be one of the 'totalities' that is subject to stratification and atomisation, Russian post-modernism, which continues rather than rejects modernist tradition, understands the search for an alienated 'native context' as the search for a cultural space of freedom. The paradoxical discovery of such a context in death has, on the one hand, truly liberated post-modern writers from the pressure of all discourses. We can see the most radical version of such liberation in the fiction of Sorokin: having developed a technique for subverting any authoritative discourse, beginning with Socialist Realism, he then uses the same means to expose repressiveness in any tradition, from Turgenev back to Shakespeare. As already noted, this freedom belongs to no one. It cannot be used by the author,

who recognises the threat of totalitarianism in all cultural languages without exception; the author is thus left without a language, dooming himself to aesthetic muteness. Nor can the hero avail himself of this freedom; led into a state of temporary death, he turns into a shadow: the shadow of the sign. His being is simulative from the very start, and as a result his freedom can be only a fictional self-parody (as, say, the freedom of Sokolov's Palisandr Dal'berg). Hence, even the most confirmed partisans of post-modernism today now admit to an increasing sense of this freedom's dehumanisation and emptiness. Yampolsky's acknowledgement of the limits of conceptualism (a thoroughly radical variant of Russian post-modernism) is extremely revealing:

When the talk is constantly about emptiness and senselessness, it's difficult to make this truly interesting ... For me culture and art are a disinterested, perhaps even absurd subject to which I dedicate my time, receiving nothing from it but the sense that I am human; the disappearance of the human dimension is, for me, fatal.<sup>29</sup>

On the other hand, consider how often Russian fiction corresponding to 'actualism' features scenes of departure from the underworld, of existence on the edge of the 'other world'. This motif is, of course, most distinctly embodied in Makanin's *Escape Hatch*, where the very chronotope of the escape hatch, the transitional space that unites the underground world with the world above, becomes the knot of the tale's artistic philosophy. But this same motif completes Viktor Pelevin's *Omon Ra* and Palei's *Kabiriya from Obvodny Canal*, as well as providing the metaphysical map of Petr Aleshkovskii's *Life of a Ferret*. In addition, Kharitonov's most recent novel has the title *Return from Nowhere (Vozvrashchenie iz niotkuda)*.<sup>30</sup> It is also crucial that the modernist conception of the meaning of life as a direct result of freedom is transformed into a conception of meaning as an essential condition of freedom, a condition without which freedom itself becomes a trifle, a toy, the 'unbearable lightness of being', as Kundera would have it. In the works of Petrushevskaya, Kharitonov and Dovlatov, human self-awareness always presupposes not only unfreedom, but even the quest for dependence. In their works, the problem of freedom and meaning comes to a paradoxical solution: only by attaining an existential understanding of unfreedom can man endure the burden of freedom of choice and elevate himself to moral

responsibility for that solitary point of being in time and space that is occupied by his unique human personality and fate.

All of this can be interpreted as signs of the culmination of the temporary death of culture, experienced by and reflected in post-modernism.

The relativist map of the world created by physics at the turn of the century made common cause with the culture of modernism and the avant-garde, which drastically changed conceptions of man, history and being. Historians of science and specialists in cultural studies come together in their common understanding of the fact that contemporary scientific chaos theories and the post-modern cultural consciousness are related, in that they both lead humanity towards a new paradigm with which to view the world: the paradigm of chaos. Russian literary post-modernism, with its bitter scepticism regarding any attempts by culture to bring order to the world, with its attempts to unfetter the chaos within which it distinguished the multi-voicedness of culture, has fashioned a rite of passage: at the expense of temporary death, Russian post-modernism has shifted culture from a paradigm based on freedom's constant struggle with order and harmony to a paradigm of chaos. What is happening today in Russian and world culture can be viewed as an attempt to reconstruct the edifice of humanism in the space of chaos. Not because the testing of culture by death has proved the infallibility of humanism; on the contrary, the weakness and even absurdity of any belief in man is taken as an axiom. Rather, the attempt at reconstruction is made because any alternative to humanism reeks of potential bloodshed. And everything begins once again with the most elementary ideas: pity, sentimentality, tenderness towards humanity, the search for a sincere tone. Let us not argue about the terminology – call it the 'new autobiography' (Vera Chaikovskaya, Dmitrii Bykov), 'neo-sentimentalism' (Natal'ya Ivanova), the 'new sincerity' (Mikhail Epstein), actualism, or post-realism.<sup>31</sup> Let us only understand that against the backdrop of chaos and in the context of chaos all these simple feelings and states truly cannot fail to be reinterpreted, for the experience of death has deprived them of their right to monological imperatives. They have been saturated with explosive dialogic energy, rooted not only in age-old ties and traditions, but in their ruptures, breaks, voids. And the ideal of the new humanism will probably not be man's harmony with the universe for a very long time to come, but

rather *chaosmos*, 'dissipative structures', born within the chaos of being and culture.

## Notes

- 1 A grant from the Kennan Institute for Advanced Russian Studies at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars made the research for this article possible.
- 2 Umberto Eco, *Foucault's Pendulum*, translated by William Weaver (New York: Ballantine, 1988), p. 466.
- 3 Boris Groys, *The Total Art of Stalinism: Avant-Garde, Aesthetic Dictatorship, and Beyond*, translated by Charles Rougle (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), pp. 110-11.
- 4 Mikhail Yampolskii and Alena Solntseva, 'Postmodernizm po-sovetski', *Teatr*, 1991, no. 8, p. 50.
- 5 Alfred J. McAdam and Flora H. Shimanovich, 'Latin American Literature in the Postmodern Era', in Stanley Trachtenberg (ed.), *The Postmodern Moment: A Handbook of Contemporary Innovation in the Arts* (London: Greenwood Press, 1985), p. 258.
- 6 *Ibid.*, p. 254.
- 7 D. Emily Hicks, 'Deterritorialization and Border Writing', in Robert Merrill (ed.), *Ethics/Aesthetics: Post-Modern Positions* (Washington, DC: Mouton de Gruyter, 1988), p. 51.
- 8 Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, translated by R. Hurley, M. Seem and H.R. Lane (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992), p. 322.
- 9 Mikhail Epstein, *After the Future: The Paradoxes of Postmodernism in Contemporary Russian Culture*, translated by Anesa Miller-Pogacar (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1995), p. 299.
- 10 Jorge Luis Borges, *The Aleph and Other Stories, 1933-69*, translated by Norman Thomas di Giovanni in collaboration with the author (New York: Dutton, 1978), pp. 23, 26.
- 11 Andrei Bitov, *Pushkin House*, translated by Susan Brownsberger (Ann Arbor, MI: Ardis, 1987), p. 341.
- 12 Venedikt Yerofeev, *Moskva - Petushki* (Moscow: Interbuk, 1990).
- 13 Sasha Sokolov, *Shkola dlya durakov* (Ann Arbor, MI: Ardis, 1976); Sasha Sokolov, *Palisandriya* (Moscow: Glagol, 1992).
- 14 Vladimir Sharov, 'Do i vo vremya', *Novyi mir*, 1993, no. 3, pp. 6-76; no. 4, pp. 11-77.
- 15 A rhizome is a 'somewhat elongated usually horizontal subterranean plant stem that is often thickened by deposits of reserve food material, produces shoots above and roots below, and is distinguished from a true root in possessing buds, nodes, and usually scalelike leaves': *Merriam Webster Dictionary*, tenth edition. My use of the term is indebted to Gilles Deleuze's 'Rhizome versus Trees', in Constantin

- V. Boundas (ed.), *The Deleuze Reader* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), p. 32.
- 16 Arnold van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*, translated by Monika B. Vizedom and Gabrielle L. Caffé (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1960); Ye. M. Meletinskii, *Poetika mifa* (Moscow: Nauka, 1976), pp. 225-30.
  - 17 See Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, pp. 43-3; Katherine Hayles (ed.), *Chaos and Order: Complex Dynamics in Literature and Science* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), pp. 72-4.
  - 18 M.M. Bakhtin, *Estetika slovesnogo tvorchestva* (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1979), p. 378.
  - 19 A.D. Koshelev (compiler), *Yu.M. Lotman i tartusko-moskovskaya semioticheskaya shkola* (Moscow: Gnosis, 1994), p. 22.
  - 20 For more on this phenomenon, see my 'A za prazdnik - spasibo! Strarost' novoi volny', *Literaturnaya gazeta*, 14 October 1992, p. 4; in translation, 'Thanks for the Holiday! The Old Age of the "New Wave"', *Russian Studies in Literature XXX* (Spring 1994), pp. 75-82.
  - 21 Susan Strehle, *Fiction in the Quantum Universe* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992), pp. 5-6; emphasis in the original.
  - 22 Alan Wilde, *Middle Grounds: Studies in Contemporary American Fiction* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1987); Robert Begiebing, *Toward a New Synthesis: John Fowles, John Gardner, Norman Mailer* (Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Research Press, 1989); John Keuhl, *Alternate Worlds: A Study of Postmodern Antirealist American Fiction* (New York: New York University Press, 1989).
  - 23 Wilde, *op. cit.*, p. 4.
  - 24 Strehle, *op. cit.*, p. 231.
  - 25 For more on the contemporary transformations of realism, see Naum Leiderman and Mark Lipovetsky, 'Zhizn' posle smerti, ili Novye svedeniya o realizme', *Novyi mir*, 1993, no. 7, pp. 233-52. For a working definition of this new type of realism, we have proposed the term 'post-realism', by analogy with 'post-modernism'. The typological character of the relationship between post-modernism and what we call post-realism is suggested by the observations made by Yurii Lotman in his article 'Asymmetry and Dialogue'. In this work, Lotman describes two main types of cultures that replace each other. One is a culture that he calls 'left-brained', which is noteworthy for its elevated 'semiotic-ness', its tendency to shut itself off within an isolated semiotic world; this culture gives freedom for textual games and develops comparatively subtler instruments of extra-semiotic analysis. It is inevitably replaced by a culture of a different sort ('right-brained'), in which semiosis is directed towards a content-oriented interpretation of the semiotic models received from the culture of the first type in the context of an extra-textual reality, which fills these models with the 'blood of real interests' and lends them a real existence alongside other objects: see Yurii M. Lotman, 'Assimetriya i dialog', *Trudy po znakovym sistemam: Tekst i kul'tura*, vol. 16 (Tartu: Izdatel'stvo Tartuskogo gosudarstvennogo universiteta, 1983), pp. 14-30.
  - 26 In her autobiographical sketch, 'The Children of Utopia', Dora Shturman, having sensed within the aesthetic experience of 'post-realism' something that resonated with her own life experience, said:

We didn't know the terms used then or especially now. But we felt (and I re-read the accounts of this), that neither avantgardism (of any sort), nor a certain *hyper-realism* (in our time either 'impressionistic' or 'subjective', or simply 'new'; according to today's critics, 'post-realism') gives art the chance to survive. Both by itself and among people. And it is this very realism, however it is called, that fumbles in the chaos for life-saving *spiritual-everyday coordinates*, which the capitulation to chaos attempts to dissolve in its fear and masochism. Our 'subjective realists', first of all, feel the enormity of the world as a consolation (apparently, of an appropriate size), and not as a source of self-destruction or oppression. Second, through the absurdity of life they feel the *harmony* of this enormity. Third, they do not identify the horror of history with the horror of being. Fourth, it has not only convinced them of the senselessness of higher imperatives, but on the contrary, has proved to them that one can escape the horror and not dissolve in chaos only by keeping their eyes on these landmarks. Or they may not escape; but they will still follow their law... And it is no accident that the most colourful of those who are called 'post-modernists' have chosen the path of 'post-realists': talent feels out the true proportions of meaning and chaos in being; sharp vision detects the flickering of eternal landmarks; the hand, led by a healthy instinct, unconsciously searches for the guide-rails of compassion (not only for 'oneself alone') and of the search.

Dora Shturman, 'Deti utopii. Fragmenty ideologicheskoi avtobiografii', *Novyi mir*, 1994, no. 10, p. 192; all emphasis in the original.

- 27 O.M. Mandel'shtam, *Kamen'* (Leningrad: Nauka, 1990), p. 66.  
 28 F. Iskander, *Lousiana Conference on Literature and Perestroika, 2-4 March 1988* (South Jutland University Press, 1989), p. 78.  
 29 Yampolsii and Solntseva, op. cit., p. 52.  
 30 Mark Kharitonov, *Vozvrashchenie iz niotkuda, Znamyia*, 1995, no. 1, pp. 56-91, and no. 2, pp. 65-117. In the realist literature of the previous era, the motif of the immersion in death appeared just as frequently: 'exhuming graves' in Trifonov, the return to the ruined cemetery in Village Prose, Aitmatov and even Makanin (*The Tale of the Old Village, The Loss [Povest' o starom poselke, Utrata]*), and Shalamov's metaphorical comparison of the writer and bearer of camp knowledge not to Orpheus but to Pluto.  
 31 Vera Chaikovskaya, 'Linii sud'by v sovremennoi proze: Mif o novoi proze', *Voprosy literatury*, 1993, no. 4, pp. 3-26; Dmitrii Bykov, 'Vot pridet Buker', *Oktyabr'*, 1995, no. 1, pp. 177-82; Natal'ya Ivanova, 'Neopalimyi golubok', *Znamyia*, 1992, no. 7, pp. 196-207; Epstein, *After the Future*, pp. 370-71.

TRANSLATED BY ELIOT BORENSTEIN

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