

**A New Mosaic out of Old Fragments:  
Soviet History Re-Codified in Modern Russian Prose**

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In the past 12 years (from 1986 to 1998), the Soviet Empire and its history were repeatedly subjected to decomposition and reconstruction, particularly in literature. As the search for historical identity continues, new literary versions of Russian history continue to appear.

Stage One was the period of a) de-Stalinization, b) de-Leninization, c) freeing the public consciousness of totalitarianism. The years 1986 to 1991 saw mass-scale publications of previously suppressed literary works from the 1920s to the 1980s. The process of publication had a double historical effect. Those texts were perceived not only as literature, but also as historical evidence refuting (or correcting and adjusting) the official historiography. Works based on historical truth (as opposed to official Soviet lies) appeared alongside the memoirs suggesting writers' own versions of historical events, rehabilitating a number of historical names and doing away with ideological taboos and censorship.

Stage Two, historiosophic, saw the rise of a "different" literature and the marginalization of fictional "histories" written to enlighten the public about the nation's past. Judgment and assessment was replaced not so much by conceptions, as by metaphors of Russia's historical development.

Stage Three, postmodernist, is based on further complication of the metaphor, on juxtaposition of pseudo-historical texts with commentaries, on re-codification of myths, legends and personages from Soviet history. A disillusionment with the efficacy and usefulness of politicized history (Stage One) and its philosophical interpretation (Stage Two) is now aggravated by a disillusionment with the lackluster present and the

problematic future, and a nostalgic longing for Great Style. In the “histories” mass-produced today, simple historical plots and elementary psychological motives are used to divide Russian history into “good” and “evil”.

No subsequent stage has negated the previous ones completely. In a reduced form, all of them coexist on the Russian literary scene today. Neither the professional historians, nor the writers have so far come up with a unifying conception of Russian history. Once the myths of Soviet history were shattered, a multitude of contradictory “histories” took their place. (“A Polka Dot History of Russia” is the name of the book by historians D. Volodikhin, O. Yeliseeva and D. Oleinikov commenting on current pseudo-historical concepts). Being offered several history textbooks and manuals to choose from, Russian secondary school pupils today have a choice of their national history.

At the beginning of 1998, *The Caravan of Histories*, a new thick and glossy magazine, richly illustrated and printed in Europe, hit Moscow news stands. What stories does it tell? None that has anything to do with real history: not a single historical publication or review, no archive finding about persons or personages who have influenced the course of history. The magazine’s interest lies elsewhere, it catalogues the love affairs of “passions’ hostage” Jacqueline Kennedy, writes about the cost of Joan Collins’ success, and traces the seduction of teen-age Tatyana Drubich by the film director Sergei Solovyov. This rich-looking and highly-priced magazine reflects the changes in society’s attitude to the word “history” - from the general (the history of a nation, society, country, the state), to the private (“My 20th Century”, a series of contemporary memoirs from the Vagrius Publishers), and now to the intimately personal (*The Caravan of Histories*).

As the last 12 years became history on August 17, 1998 when Sergei Kiriyenko's cabinet officially defaulted on state debts, it might be useful to look back - before we are drawn into another "history", brand new and yet obviously reminiscent of the times past, for it was no accident when the country's newly appointed chief banker Victor Gerashchenko answered a reporter's question about the direction of his future efforts with a joke: "Head on to Communism". There is a grain of joke in every joke. But there is a grain of truth in every joke, too.

The phrase about literature in Russia, and then in the USSR, being "our all" - by voluntarily taking upon itself uncharacteristic yet socially indispensable functions of the sociologist, philosopher, politologist, psychologist and others, has become hackneyed and banal. An important omission in the above list is the hard work of an historian our literature did, as well as it was possible (or impossible), to expand the nation's historical knowledge. Its role became especially notable during the publishing boom of the late 1980s when a new metaphor, "blank spots in our history", was coined. These "blank spots" were soon mapped with the help of previously suppressed manuscripts. It is enough to recall the reviews and topical articles of the period to understand the key role the publication of literary works played in the formation of the public opinion.

The "perestroika" set in motion by Mikhail Gorbachev was far more difficult to implement in real life than on paper. Therefore it began first and foremost in the publishing business. Over several years following April, 1986 when the popular *Ogonyok* weekly published Nikolai Gumilev's poems with an introduction by the then First

Secretary of the USSR Writers' Union Vladimir Karpov, the journals published a mass of literary works created over previous decades.

The publications of archive materials, commentaries and conceptual works by professional historians were visibly lagging behind literature. It so happened that the reader received historical knowledge primarily from literary works. Because those publications were delayed in time, their content was perceived as historically authentic, as the historic truth about the events and the people of the 1920s, '30s, '40s, '50s and the '60s - in contrast with the pseudo-history and lies abounding in the official books on Soviet history. Notes to newly published literary texts outlined the history of each work, described the ordeals and misery, the tragedies and dramas experienced by the authors, many of them long dead, and so re-codified not only the history of national literature, but also the history of the whole nation which at that moment was living through a historically crucial phase of perestroika. The stories of literary characters, the plot of a novel, the twists and turns of fictional lives were perceived by the readers as positive historic evidence, as documents of the time.

Fiction addressed the double task and brought about the double result of a) destroying the well-established historical myths, stereotypes and legends (in particular, about Stalin, Trotsky, Bukharin, the old Bolsheviks, the "enemies of the people"); then destroying a more recent myth of the "positive role" the old Bolsheviks Bukharin and Zinoviev had played, and later still, doing away with the myth of the wise Lenin, "who wished well but ran out of time" (to use F. Iskander's phrase); and b) suggesting a true picture of history according to the given author, to fill in the space cleared of the myths.

In performing both tasks, Platonov differed radically from Grossman, Grossman from Yampolsky, Dudintsev from Trifonov, Lipkin from Pasternak, Bulgakov from Zamyatin, Solzhenitsyn from Shalamov, Berberova from Akhmatova, Nabokov from Gazdanov. The writers did not merely testify, like witnesses in a court of law, each with a dramatic or tragic story of his or her own. They (or their texts) argued with one another. But this was not so evident at the beginning, as it appeared later on, after the lyrical mist cleared up and the publishing euphoria (hysterically defined as “necrophilia” by the Soviet writer Pyotr Proskurin, who kept clinging to the fast-diminishing territory of Soviet civilization) was over. As a person directly involved in the processes described here, I had the impression they were all lifting, link by link, the same chain of historical truth from the same deep well. Another effort, one more pull - and the chain would come to light in its entirety. Taking part in the publications boom was like contributing to the Restoration of Historic Truth, and the term “rehabilitation” began to be referred not only to concrete individuals, but also to literary texts.

Any criticism of the rehabilitated works’ literary quality, an ambiguous assessment or a dispute about their style was seen by the euphoric public as blasphemous and detracting from the main thing, the truth. What does style matter, when it goes about the victims and executioners of the 1930? Who cares about the language when we are denouncing Stalin and doing away with the totalitarian era? “Stylistic niceties” were regarded as nonsensical, and Akhmatova’s “Requiem” was discussed alongside (and on a par with) “The Dismantling”, an anti-Stalinist novel by Anatoly Zlobin. Telling an anti-Stalinist author that his text could not be published because it lacked literary merit was

impossible, you would not be (and were not) understood. That early period of our literary life focused on the search for historical truth and could well be called The Enlightenment.

Authors outpaced historians, who were accused by the public of procrastination and incompetence. Authors were seen as full-fledged historians of the Soviet period, especially in the absence of historical studies and against the background of official lies. Letters to the Editor the *Ogonyok* weekly published in every issue showed that society was avidly perusing and discussing not so much the literary texts, as the newly discovered historical reality. Historical research would not (and could not) keep in step with literature. The newly acquired historical knowledge seemed instrumental in resolving the problem of exiting from Soviet history, of breaking away from the vicious circle of Russian history propelled by “revolutions from the above” instigated by reformers (this concept was proposed by the historian Nathan Eidelman, for whom Mikhail Gorbachev was just another example of such a reformer).

The chronotope of Soviet nations' existence was changing. A reunion with true history (which came about gradually, through Gumilev to Solzhenitsyn, in 1986 to 1990) brought about the end of history marked by the fall of the Soviet Empire (the Russian Empire's successor). Following the split of the Soviet Union in Belovezhskaya Pushcha, the single history split into several histories the same way the USSR territory split, de facto and de jure, into the territories of sovereign CIS countries, the “near abroad”. A historical period came to an end, and with it ended the period of historical and literary enlightenment. The nation's desire to “exit” from its history and to begin a new one coincided with the desire to carefully revise the old history. It was at that particular moment that Francis Fukuyama's article, “The End of History” was translated into

Russian and produced a very special effect by unexpectedly hitting on the sore spot, just because it was published in Russia at such a crucial, really critical moment.

Each of the writers I mentioned earlier, by claiming to know the historical truth, created his own version of it and so privatized history. Privatization of history preceded Chubais' version of privatization.

Literary texts published after a long ban and therefore perceived as historical, did not only provide new facts, but also suggested their own historical concepts which, because of the time gap between their creation and publication, likewise acquired the status of historical. More often than not the critics simplified the work they interpreted by singling out its topical message that served the time and rejecting all ambivalent or controversial details. Both topical fiction and the 20th-century classics were subject to such time-serving interpretation. Literature was presented to the public as ideologically engaged, regardless of whether or not it actually wanted to be involved in topical discussions. Literary texts were used as arguments in the debate about the fate of the nation, the society and the national character. Literature itself was of little consequence in that debate. The main interest was in what went beyond the literary domain. A critic might begin his review of Mikhail Kurayev's short novels "Captain Dickstein" and "The Night Guard" with an aesthetic premise, "...reading Kurayev one can't help admiring his text. The mastery of his writing. His irony. The inner space' of his prose", but very soon he would inevitably dwindle into historically and socially engaged journalese: "On what basis did it all grow? Of what primordial element? What moral catastrophe had brought about the situation in which a citizen Polubolotov got the chance to convoy other citizens? Where did he come from?"... "But an hour passed and the heroes of the assault



Tukhachevsky, Putna, Dybenko, Rukhimovich, Bubnov were put to the wall, and their names were scratched away from history. Has anyone on that merry-go-round got a name? Has anyone got a face? How does one save face in this faceless torrent of masses, replacing and repressing one another?” The reviewer thus formulates the most important, ultimate question: Where have the millions of executioners come from? <sup>1</sup> There is no doubt that history and its complex moral problems are more important to the reviewer than his admiration of the author’s “mastery” which in the given case is just a formal pretext for discussing the issues that are far more significant for both the critic and, presumably, the reader.

Once again, literature was used as handy material for “real” criticism that put forward and discussed various conceptions of this country’s historical development and the evolution of its system (which a reviewer of Alexandr Bek’s novel “The New Appointment” called “the administrative command system”).<sup>2</sup> That definition was further refined after the publication in 1988 of Vasily Grossman’s novel “Life and Fate” which gave rise to the talk of the “totalitarian system”. It is quite symptomatic that the journal publication of the novel was introduced by an historian (G. Vodolazov).<sup>3</sup>

Writers’ memoirs played a very special role, too. Diaries and notes by Konstantin Simonov (“Through the Eyes of My Generation”), Alexandr Avdeyenko (“Excommunication”), Kamil Ikramov’s book “My Father’s Case” (all those texts were published in 1989) analyzed historical figures and discussed facts which prompted conclusions as to what had caused the formation of the system and how it worked. The preoccupation of the public with history was so overwhelming that a flood of historical

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<sup>1</sup> L. Anninsky. How Does One Save Face? – Znamya, 1989, # 12.

<sup>2</sup> G. Popov – Nauka I zhizn, 1987, #

publications swept contemporary literature aside and took precedence in publishers' plans. Journals were competing for publication rights: *Novy Mir* and *Znamya* published A. Tvardovsky's poem "By Right of Memory"<sup>4</sup> almost simultaneously, and the publication of Akhmatova's "Requiem"<sup>5</sup> in *Neva* and *Oktyabr* was spaced by a very short interval. In the busy atmosphere that followed decades of omissions and bans, with journals hastily publishing texts and historians (historians of literature in particular) failing to offer "a historical perspective", specifically, of the Russian literature from the Soviet period, both official and unofficial, "it is a scholarly mission unfulfilled, and also, one of the most painful expectations in the public mind today. ...A glitter here, a light there, but no sight of a complete mosaic. In the many years that have passed, no time period ever occurred that would favour an historical assessment of our first decades".<sup>6</sup>

Apart from putting the problem in a nutshell - the time's challenge to historians - the scholar very accurately (for the time of writing, 1988) uses the word "our" to describe what in the next sentence is clarified as the postrevolutionary years. Those (Soviet) years were indeed seen as ours as opposed to what was before us, i.e. before the revolution. It is our own condition (in the '60s to the '80s), born of the '20s and '30s epoch, that was described in 1988 as follows: "A weakened creative will, and a spiritual cowardice bordering on hysterics".<sup>7</sup> Such is the 1988 characteristic of the present-day situation whose roots lie in the past.

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<sup>3</sup> G. Vodolazov

<sup>4</sup> *Znamya*, 1988, # 2; *Novy Mir*, 1988, # 3

<sup>5</sup> *Neva*, 1988, # ; *Oktyabr*, 1988, #

<sup>6</sup> M. Chudakova. Without Anger and Bias. Forms and Deformations in the '20s and '30s literary process. – *Novy Mir*, 1988, # 9, p.240

<sup>7</sup> ditto, p.260

If one compiled a frequency vocabulary of topical and critical writing from the perestroika years, the word “history” would certainly make it to the “top ten”. The giving up of the “Communist ideology” destroyed the familiar frame of reference, in which human society evolved gradually from the dark past of feudalism and capitalism towards the “bright future”. Suddenly the past loomed ahead of us and was to be striven for. Instead of being history, the past turned into an unexplored territory full of riddles and contradictions. The perspective changed, the world crumbled. The crisis (seen as a retribution for lies) was registered by historians themselves: “As long as our historians adhered to the officially enforced ideology with components like the “bright future” inevitably lying in wait for us just around the corner, as the logical result of the entire world history (which in this light became “prehistory”); the “motor” of historical progress - the class struggle, which in the long run must lead to a change in production practices and the appropriate radical changes in the “superstructure”; the general crisis of the world capitalist system and its peaceful coexistence with the system of “mature socialism”... - until those dogmas were discredited by life and cast aside, our historians, naturally, stuck to the old methodology of positivism parading as Marxism. A belief in the “laws of history”, in the kinship, or unity of the natural and social laws, constituted the Soviet historians’ “ideological armour”. They were unshakably convinced that learning history presented no problem whatsoever.<sup>8</sup>

The official USSR history and the Marxist-Leninist “laws of history” were refuted not only by life, but also by literature. Literature proved to be closer to real history than the historical science which regarded society as abstract masses strictly adhering to definite laws. “Acknowledging the banality: that people finding themselves in this or that

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<sup>8</sup> A. Gurevich. On the Crisis of Modern Historical Science.—Voprosy istorii, 1991, Nos 2-3, p.p. 24-25

economic and political situation will not behave according to the laws of production, nor in keeping with the political expediency, but primarily in keeping with their culture-conditioned picture of the world and their emotional state, ... that their religious, national and cultural traditions, their behavioral stereotypes, their often irrational fears and hopes, their symbolic cognition... leave an indelible mark on their every action and reaction..." - all this proved beyond professional historians, but well within literature's power.

Literature did the work by presenting facts, and also by invoking the genres which rejected the positivist picture of the world. By activating the form of anti-Utopia, literature met the challenge of the times. It proposed Doomsday as an alternative to the "right future" The list of anti-Utopias included titles by authors representing different generations and different trends, tending towards the former Soviet official literature and towards the literary "underground".

It was no accident that the genre of modern Russian anti-Utopia came into vogue at the same time the classic European and early Russian anti-Utopias, previously inaccessible to the Russian public, were published en masse. As I.Rodnyanskaya and R. Galtseva rightly remarked, "only the demon of history could bring together and interweave in the minds of the 'generation of grandchildren' Shalamov's "The Kolyma Stories" and "1984", Platonov's "Chevengur" and "The Brave New World", Dombrovsky's "The Faculty of Unnecessary Things" and the novel "We", Grossman's "Life and Fate" and "The Invitation to an Execution", Yampolsky's "Moscow Street" and "The Castle". What seemed to be brought together by little more than chance in the form of suddenly granted glasnost, proved to actually belong in the same picture of the

world”.<sup>9</sup> That unity of panorama, as the critics proceed to call the phenomenon, combined with the documentary and historical evidence, challenged the reader to reflect and ponder. The demon of history caught in the mirror of anti-Utopias, memoirs, historical novels, stories, verse and poems demanded to be interpreted - in order to be exorcised. Otherwise it threatened to remain what it was, a demon. Historians failed to offer an interpretation. And so literature came to their rescue, once again.

The next stage of literary and historical reflection in Russia came with the rejection of causality (the cause-and-effect logic) as an explanation of historical actions and movements. It was not a rejection of just the positivist, but of any rational interpretation of historical collisions. Having dismissed the Hegelian (and Marxist-Leninist) scheme as inadequate, the new, post-perestroika period accomplished little more than a mere accumulation of factual material and diverse conceptions. Scholarly thinking revolved around two poles: the liberal-democratic and the national-patriotic ones. For a few formative years the representatives of those two “schools” argued fiercely and crossed swords with one another making sparks fly, but eventually both settled into an autonomous and independent existence. To this day Nash Sovremennik continues to explain historic calamities by a preponderance of Jews, the secret and destructive power of Freemasons, and the US intrigues.<sup>10</sup> The liberals and the democrats have turned to a weapon of an entirely different type, namely, the metaphor. “Hysterics” (to use M. Chudakova’s terminology) gave way to a metaphoric world view. As it was no use looking for a rational explanation, they undertook to look for a metaphor, for an artistic

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<sup>9</sup> I. Rodnyanskaya, R. Galtseva. *Man as an Obstacle. A Century of Experience in the Mirror of Anti-Utopias.* – quoted from I. Rodnyanskaya. *A Literary Seven Years*, Moskow, 1995, p.18

<sup>10</sup> See Nash sovremennik, 1998, # 9

equivalent of the inexplicably incomplete mosaic picture of history (it was not for nothing that the critics wrote about the “demon of history”!).

The writers who refused to explain the growing absurdity of historical panorama but accepted the existence of the “demon of history” came up with a new response to the newly uncovered evidence which indicated that the more you learn, the more baffled you get (absurdity increases as knowledge accumulates). They built their books around metaphors of history materialized in the plots: Vladimir Makanin wrote “The Hatch”, “Long Is Your Journey” and “The Table Under Green Cloth with a Water Jar in the Middle”; Victor Pelevin – “Yellow Arrow” and “Insect Life”; Vladimir Sorokin – “The Hearts of Four”; Vyacheslav Pietsukh – “The Bewitched Country”; Andrei Bitov – “Waiting for Monkeys”; Vladimir Sharov – “Before and During”, “Why Should I Regret...” and “The Old Girl”.

They gave up searching for meaning. Or, more precisely, they refused to search for the meaning of history. Alexandr Genis writes about the modern world which “has learnt and mastered the tragic lessons of absurdity by adapting itself to a life deprived of meaning”: “By introducing a meaning into the world, we frivolously simplify it”.<sup>11</sup> History as an evolution, as progress, is abolished, and in the long run the critic predicts a “transformation of history into biology”. I. Rodnyanskaya, commenting upon Genis’ pronouncements, explains that according to Genis, “history will busy itself not so much with the arrangement of life, as with life itself: with birth, procreation, and death”.<sup>12</sup> Existentialism has brought an individual face to face with the absurd. Russian

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<sup>11</sup> Alexandr Genis. A View from the Window. – Novy Mir, 1992, # 8

<sup>12</sup> I. Rodnyanskaya. NB on the Margins of Beneficial Absurdity-quoted from I.Rodnyanskaya. A Literary Seven Years, p.305

metaphorism of the '90s makes Russian history confront the absurd, by transposing the plane of "social relations" into the three-dimensional world of history.

Vladimir Makanin's metaphor of historical calamities is a gloomy city on the verge of its parent civilization's collapse, with a well-lit underground that can be reached from the surface via a hatch. Giving preference to the spatial metaphor of a hatchway over any time metaphor, Makanin's sees the hatch as a borderline between the upper and the nether worlds (which in the given case paradoxically switch their usual attributes: the upper world is dark, dangerous and deserted; the lower world is habitable, friendly and well-lit). The hatch also separates light from darkness, hate from friendship, but having switched the stereotyped meaning of top and bottom, Makanin complicates his metaphor further: the light and friendly underground is stifling, it lacks fresh air - which abounds on the surface where all life-supporting systems have failed. "The Hatch" is full of details drawn from real life. Combined with the popular fears of the turn of the decade (the 1990s), they paint a surreal yet concrete picture of broken time. In this, Makanin's metaphor differs from similar ones, like the historical metaphors of "lava" or "landslide" in Yury Trifonov's prose, which are auxiliary (with regard to the main body of narrative), whereas Makanin's metaphor is the pivot of the plot. Also, his is an active metaphor working throughout the narrative. For the sake of comparison, imagine that the characters of Trifonov's "Exchange" or "The Old Man" were literally swept over by scorching lava or caught in a landslide.

Critics have tried to decipher Makanin's metaphor as the juxtaposition of emigration and metropolis, the underground and official arts, the past and the future. All these interpretations are applicable to 'The Hatch', but by no means exhaust it. Facts

from history and culture inlaid in the prose of that particular type have their meaning deliberately “shifted” - in order to alienate not only our perception, but history itself.

For a stern critic, such prose is full of “the incredible, if not incongruous”<sup>13</sup>, always noticed and noted by the opponents. But the “incongruities” are so easy to notice they are obviously meant by the author as provocation. Nevertheless I feel that Makanin, as if scared by his own audacity, somewhat spoils his surreal provocation at the last moment, first, by adding the allegory of walking sticks for the blind, provided by the underground for those roaming the surface, and secondly, by creating an artificially realistic finale in which the absurd and the incongruous turns out to be a dream.

In his story “The Table Under Green Cloth with a Water Jar in the Middle”, the metaphor of Soviet history is used as the title (the same as in “The Hatch”). Generations of Soviet people represented by easily recognizable types are brought together behind an official table to try and pass judgment on an individual - with the individual taking part in the trial voluntarily and yet under coercion.

In his novel “The Underground, or the Hero of Our Time” Makanin places his characters in two interconnected surreal environments: a “hostel” with endless corridors and a “lunatic asylum” (incidentally, a mental hospital is the most frequent and commonly used scene in Makanin’s, Pelevin’s and Sharov’s prose). Different “floors” of Makanin’s structure are peopled by representatives of various social and historical groups, namely: the Soviet functionaries, the “new Russians”, “persons of Caucasian nationality” (running a kiosk), homeless tramps (in the street). The protagonist, a homeless writer Petrovich, embraces them all - not in his art, but in his biography. Makanin braces his surreal metaphor with some Biblical allusions: his leading character



earns a living as a watchman (keeper) which means that a) he belongs to the generation of “watchmen and janitors”, and b) he is (or isn’t) “his brother’s keeper” - Abel and Cain, a murderer and a nurse rolled in one. He hates and kills an informer and a Caucasian, and he loves, pities and cares for a Soviet functionary and a democratically-minded prostitute.

Victor Pelevin, in his “Omon Ra”, chooses to describe the absurdity of Soviet history in terms of a metaphoric story about a cosmonaut, the son of a militiaman, who performs his grotesque “space flight” inside the Moscow metro.

“There must be some strange correlation between the general scheme of life and the petty events happening to a person all the time, without him paying any attention”<sup>14</sup>, between the general history of the nation and the personal history of an individual.

“Omon”, a Russian abbreviation for a militia task force, is the name of the protagonist. His brother’s name is Ovir, short for a visa registration department. Their father’s name is Krivomazov (a parody of Karamazov), and he is a veteran militiaman. Omon began dreaming of space travel on a children’s playground, while sitting inside a wooden mock rocket. Pelevin makes the child’s “toy dream” come true in his character’s fantasies: “... if I could, just now, by looking at the screen, sort of see the world from the cabin where two pilots in fur jackets sat, nothing can prevent me from getting into that or any other cabin without the telly, because the flight is reduced to a complex of sensations”.<sup>15</sup>

In “Yellow Arrow” by the same author the history of Russia (its past, present and the problematic future) is presented as a journey on an endless train endlessly travelling across an endless country. The space is thus exaggerated at the expense of time: the

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<sup>13</sup> I. Rodnyanskaya. A Literary Seven Years, p.309

<sup>14</sup> Victor Plevin. Omon Ra, a novel. In the book V.Plevin, Collected writings in Two volumes, Moskow, 1996, v1, P.12

<sup>15</sup> ditto, p. 10

protagonist looks at his reflection in the mirror and sees layers of history showing through his face: "... and he thought that in the past five years it (his face) did not mature or age, but rather went out of fashion, the way wide trousers, transcendental meditation or Fleetwood Mac had done. In recent years, faces of quite a different type were 'in', the prewar '30s type".<sup>16</sup> It is a double game Pelevin is playing with space and time: the space of the country is limitless, and yet claustrophobic for a person travelling in a compartment; the time of a ghetto is partitioned ("You see, Andryusha, I never used to snore before those damned reforms") and yet amorphous, uncontrollable, its vector lost, so the past lies ahead, not behind: "The past is a locomotive pulling the future behind it. Sometimes, the past happens to be somebody else's past, too. You travel back to front, and see only what has already disappeared", or, as the postscript to the same letter the main character is reading, puts it: "The problem is we always set out on the journey that has ended just a second before we are about to depart".<sup>17</sup>

In the novel "Chapayev and the Void", Pelevin's metaphor is more elaborate, it embraces many culturological levels in space and time: the 20th-century history of Russia is compressed into one moment in the life of a lunatic asylum. (I could note in passing that Chapayev, the hero of the Civil War and the protagonist of an early Soviet movie directed by the brothers Vasilyev, continues to be played with on increasingly simple levels. According to a recent newspaper item, director Gennady Yershov of Yaroslavl has finished filming an "erotic movie about the legendary commander and his ardent passion for Anka the machine-gunner"<sup>18</sup>).

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<sup>16</sup> ditto, p. 245

<sup>17</sup> ditto, p. 284

<sup>18</sup> Komsomolskaia pravda daily of 2 October 1998, p. 7

The authors of metaphor-based texts begin by decomposing Soviet history, Soviet (and Russian) literature and cinematography into simple parts in order to assemble them into a new mosaic, set into carefully delineated frames. Large-scale compositions are drawn by Vladimir Sharov whose novels have shocked the critics (see the biting afterword to the Novy Mir publication of his novel “Before and During”, with a condemnation of the author’s games with history). A historian by education, Vladimir Sharov deliberately plays with facts and dates, so the critics’ complaints about incongruity are beyond the point. History as a catalogue of real facts, of causes and effects, does not work; the historical clockwork has broken down and history is out of joint. Therefore the author has the right to presume that history worked differently, not the way it was recorded in secondary school and university textbooks and in Soviet historians’ research papers.

In Sharov’s novel “Before and During”, Stalin appears to be the son (and lover) of Mme de Stael and the Russian philosopher Nikolai Fyodorov; the body of crucified Christ is laid to rest in a grave, not in a sepulcher (a niche cut into the rock); Dostoevsky dies the same year as Fyodorov, Trotsky is killed after the Second World War and not in 1940, and composer Skryabin turns out to be Lenin’s forerunner. That historical chaos is artistically and conceptually justified as part of the author’s metaphor of Russian history. Similarly, in Sharov’s new novel “The Old Girl”, the metaphor present in the oxymoron title materializes in the heroine’s attempted escape from real time, the year 1937, back to her childhood. She unwinds her life backwards from maturity through youth, using her own diaries as a map for time travel in reverse. The heroine’s journey (her escape, her stealing away) is only possible through time (which accords with the theories, or at least

the hypotheses of modern physics). Sharov combines exact dates and places (e.g. “On the 12th of May, 1937, the husband of Vera Andreevna Radostina, Josef Berg, was recalled from his post as Chief of Grozneft, to Moscow”<sup>19</sup>, as the opening sentence of the novel goes) - with dates sign posting the history rewound backwards, to effectively create the novel’s special space-time continuum. This is further complicated by the fact that the main character imitates the author’s method, if only partially, by fantasizing about real historical personages.

With her gift of farsightedness she can see the past in sharp historical focus. Having accepted the revolution enthusiastically, she nevertheless realizes that “the revolution as a whole was built on contrast. All that was old was rejected totally, but Vera knew it was just young age, and for things to go on well, people ought to come round, look back and include the revolution into the context of Russian history”. And so the “glorious leaders of the revolution” became characters in her fantasies, which she believed the revolution needed as its mythology. In her fantasies, Yemelyan Yaroslavsky became the Yemelya of Russian folklore, a brave warrior saved from imminent death at the hands of evil clergy by a beautiful and loving girl. Lenin turned out to be the son of Alexander III, and a legitimate royal heir, secretly exchanged for another baby. “So when in October 1917, Lenin stood at the head of the proletarian revolution and won, he did not steal what wasn’t his, but at long last took his own”. Vera kept adding “new romantic and heart-rending details to her story so that the fate of Lenin, whom the mean czar with his damned German wife robbed of the throne, would leave no one indifferent”.

Fantasizing like this, Vera nevertheless finds herself confronted by cruel reality, and after her husband is arrested in 1937, her escape into the written word of her diaries is

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<sup>19</sup> Vladimir Sharov. *The Old Girl*, a novel. – Znamya, 1998, # 8, p.6

likewise an escape into mythology. That new myth of escape is dangerous to the authorities. Unable to stop a particular individual, they want to prevent the rest of the masses from following in Vera's steps and going to the past in search of a better lot. Personages like Stalin, Yenukidze, Alliluyeva and Dzerzhinsky appear in the novel equipped with both real and fictitious biographies, both true and fictional qualities. For instance, Nikolai Fyodorov's idea, slightly corrupted, appears to belong to Yezhov who "... from early morning kept enthusiastically explaining to his NKVD colleagues that very soon science would be able to resurrect human beings, to revive them for a new life". Sharov turns the idea inside out, though, like Time itself, in order to match it to reality: "It is all done for the sake of building the eternal life, a paradise on earth - as soon as possible....., so whoever may, in one way or another, interfere with it now, ought to be isolated, removed, shot down without mercy or pardon. With or without evidence, even if it is known for sure that the suspect has so far done nothing wrong, but if he may develop into an enemy, he must be liquidated immediately and without hesitation, without appeal or forgiveness. Forgiveness for all and everyone will come later, when they are resurrected to see the heaven on earth, the happiness, the love and harmony which are sure to convince even the most confirmed bourgeois".

It is worth comparing, for instance, the Yezhov and Stalin as portrayed in Solzhenitsyn's, Dombrovsky's, Rybakov's and Sharov's prose in order to see the transformation of their literary-historical incarnations - from the usurper and tyrant, a villain of demonic proportions - to a charismatic leader who is uncannily attractive and repulsive at the same time, who does evil under the influence of his family situation (Stalin); from the bloody monster, an obsessive and dimwitted dwarf - to an idealistic

dreamer akin to Fyodorov and Tsiolkovsky (Yezhov). It is up to history to ascertain what Lenin, Yezhov or Stalin were really like. Literature seeks explanations in a different sphere, and an intellectual Yezhov who nurtures global projects to save humanity and carries them out, seems more scary than the real, historical Yezhov.

The experience of earlier prose has not been wasted on Sharov, he has taken into account both the Yezhov singing love songs (in Rybakov's "The Children of the Arbat") and the tyrant enjoying himself on holiday ("Belshazzar's Feasts" by Fazil Iskander). But he has his own way of developing the "leader's" features into a multilayered metaphor which he then uses in deliberately realistic situations, avoiding direct assessment or judgment and preferring an emotionally monotonous, rhetoric-free narrative. The course of history is thus re-codified again.

Why and wherefore? For many reasons. First, because the potential of realistic description has been exhausted in competition with recently uncovered documents. Secondly, due to a disenchantment with the conceptions suggested by historical science. Science, too, has tried on some new ideas since the crisis so accurately registered by A. Gurevich. Some stunningly paradoxical conceptions of history were suggested, in particular, by A. Fomenko, a mathematician and academic. In a "new chronology" he cancelled several centuries of national history to aggressively promote his pseudo-scientific fantasies, for instance: Veliky Novgorod was Yaroslavl, Kulikovo Field was Kulishki in Moscow, Ivan the Terrible was a "sum total" of several Russian czars, the name of the Tartar military leader Batyi means "bat'ka" (father), the word "horde" means "order" and the Tartar hordes were in fact a regular Russian army, so there was no Tartar

invasion at all<sup>20</sup>, Mongolia is a corruption of the Greek “megalion” meaning “great”<sup>21</sup>. “What happens if we cross non-linear physics with mathematics and history? We get a new science chronotronics,” write the founding fathers of the Chronotronics Laboratory operating within the framework of Moscow-based Research Institute of Biotechnology. Chronotronics is a “science forecasting both the future and the past”. History proper is regarded by its apologists as a “stagnating discipline” whose salvation is in the hands of “volunteers from adjacent academic fields”, for instance, the mathematician S. Valyansky and the economist D.Kalyuzhny.

What these authors call in their Preface <sup>22</sup>the “wild and unusual“ (to me, rather a marginal and non-scientific) view of history leads them to aggressive, maverick hypotheses, according to which Chenghizkhan was Pope John III, and the Tartar yoke never existed. A distrust of social sciences, history in particular, has given rise to other pseudo-scientific versions of history dismissing historical chronology. In recent years, a version of regional history was proposed in the Urals by the so-called Bazhov group who deduced Russian history from the text of Bazhov’s tales collected in “The Malachite Casket”. In the nearby city of Chelyabinsk another group of enthusiasts claims to have found the spot where all Russian history started. Similar groups operate in the Volga regions.

Finally, in view of liberal ideology’s obvious failure, the society in general and literature in particular has developed an aversion to comparatively recent but well-established stereotypes. A period of gloomy acceptance of the “funeral of Soviet culture” was followed by a quiet revival (like including eight bars from the GDR national anthem

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<sup>20</sup> G. V. Nosovsky, A. T. Fomenko, A New Chronology of Rus. Moskow, 1998, p.11

<sup>21</sup> ditto, p.17

into the musical piece commissioned for the celebration of the reunification of Germany), and later, by an unashamed rehabilitation of Soviet past. Very soon after it was “dethroned”, the Soviet past became the source of aesthetic inspiration, a model of Great Style the independent and liberal artistic thought had failed to offer.

It all ended in a sort of necrophilia: with Soviet literature declared dead and buried and the history of the USSR finished, the post-modernists appeared either as vampires or cannibals. Last year’s “happening” in Moscow’s Dar Gallery where the stars of postmodernist movement Dmitry Prigov, Vladimir Sorokin, Evgeny Popov, Genrikh Sapgir and a few lesser figures feasted on a huge cake made in the shape of Lenin’s mummy, was a sign of postmodernist necrophilia. Not only Soviet literature, but Russian classics were travestied, as in Evgeny Popov’s novel “On the Eve of the Eve” where Turgenev’s classical text was rewritten and inlaid with personages from recent Soviet history, like Mikhail Sergeevich and Inasakharov. Vladimir Sorokin and Alexandr Zeldovich included into their film script “Moscow” reflections of Chekhovian characters from “The Three Sisters”. Evgeny Popov’s novel “The Adventures of Green Musicians” is a veritable postmodernist encyclopedia of recent Russian history composed of a comparatively short text with 888 vocabulary notes designed to decipher it.

The postmodernist context gradually evolved in the direction of stylistic rehabilitation of Soviet arts. The Soviet revival grew like a tidal wave on all major TV channels, with prime time showings of old Soviet movies and top-notch new programs playing up to Soviet nostalgia (“Old Songs About the Important”, “An Old Telly”, “An Old Flat”, “In Search of the Lost”, “The Other Day: Our Era, 1961-1991”, “I Love and Remember..” etc.). Towards the end of the 1990s, postmodernism finally embraced the

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<sup>22</sup> Sergei Valyansky, Dmitry Kalyuzhny. *Bittter Truths...Rus*, Moskow, 1998



Soviet past. After repeated showings of the Soviet cult series, “Seventeen Moments of Spring” by all major channels, the NTV channel celebrated the Silver Jubilee of “the best series of all times and nations” with its prime time showing crowned by a two-hour Afterword by Leonid Parfyonov, a star of postmodernist television, who enthusiastically interviewed the film crew and commented on the series, sitting in its ideological sponsor Yury Andropov’s armchair.

The words “old”, “our” and “Soviet” have been fully rehabilitated and given their original positive meaning - not by politicians like Zyuganov, but by postmodernist aesthetes.

Instead of rationalizing Russian history or metaphorizing it, postmodernism has proposed to carnivalize history. Embellished and stripped of pain, it is perceived as a costume show. All “horror” characters have become funny and sympathetic, anesthetized historical facts and “defused” historical figures are set in cleverly stage-managed scenes and given zany lines. Everybody’s dancing and singing.

After the period of literary “enlightenment” when fiction was used for a search of historical truth; after massive publications of archival and documentary materials; after being disillusioned with the possibility of finding the general “historical truth” and doubting its very existence; after trying to metaphorize history and to play postmodernist games with it, let us now turn to one more significant problem, that of relations between history and popular fiction. As far back as the latter years of the Soviet regime, history writer Valentin Pikul was pronounced the absolute best-selling author in his category (according to sociological surveys conducted by the All-Union Library of Foreign Literature). History in his interpretation acquired market value, and the circulation of his

national-romantic “novels” left Bulat Okudzhava’s and Yury Davydov’s books far behind. Pikul owed his popularity not only to a method depending on adventure and simplification. His national-patriotic ideology, hostile to the official and liberal internationalism of the day, drew the readers indifferent to schematic representations of history by Soviet scholars like a magnet. Pikul developed and consistently used the propaganda mechanism successfully exploited by mass culture to captivate the minds of unprepared audiences.

In the post-Soviet period, Edvard Radzinsky followed in his steps with his own pseudo-historical narratives. A demand was growing for some reading material about the national history outside the limits of the Soviet period with its deportations, labor camps, prisons and genocide. The reader had got tired of and turned away from the evil infinity of “yellow arrows”, to the history of an empire with its glamorous court and noble families. The reading public wanted a beautiful shelter instead of an evil infinity of the absurd, and Radzinsky offered it, for example, in his story of the last czar’s family. He sensed the recoil of historical consciousness and the society’s need for a firm support in the form of a well-ordered history, no matter how distant.

And so the relationship of literature with history has come full circle: - from not knowing to learning; - from learning to realizing the impossibility of rationalizing; - from the impossibility of rationalization to metaphorizing; - from trying to capture the gist of history in a metaphor to decomposing and re-codifying history in carnival terms.

We are now back to almost where we’ve started: not knowing. Since the beginning of the new historical period (1985-1986), history has been and still remains the most appealing and most frequently exploited ready-made material for modern fiction. History

proper and history-related myths, legends, stereotypes and cliches have become a testing ground and a launching pad for various versions and variants. As society lost hope of finding a rational explanation for its evolutions and turned from propagandists and agitators to fortune-tellers and palmists, from slogans to horoscopes, so did literature turn away from a positivist “realism” and escaped into metaphors, then gave up trying to propose a historical system or scheme, and sank into absurdity.

History has disappointed us, its new participants, but neither have we justified history’s hopes.

In conclusion I would like to comment on Andrei Zorin’s opinion expressed upon announcing the 1998 Booker Prize finalists. He spoke of the preponderance of avant-garde texts in modern Russian prose (more precisely, in the list of texts nominated for the prize). In my opinion, the share of avant-garde writing in Russian prose (as well as in poetry) is microscopic because of literature’s long-drawn-out dialogue with Soviet and Russian history. Literature – “the old girl” - fastidiously avoids the present and is afraid of the future, while moving precariously on with her face turned back. The present time is an arena for hefty makers of crime fiction, thrillers and romances. Mass literature is close to the present-day reality and the present-day reader. The so-called serious literature is losing him fast and has so far failed to suggest a strategy for restoring lost contact. Serious literature feels offended because the present time has sharply diminished its status. And it looks to the future with fear, reluctant to see its arrival. A new millennium? It’s just a gimmick for fashionable gallery owners.

