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VILLAGE PROSE IS POSTMODERNIST PROSE
For a New History of Soviet Literature

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I. Introduction

For many years now Slavists have been accustomed to talking about Soviet Russian literature as if it had no history. By "history" I do not mean the simple recapitulation of chronological events or facts, but rather the aesthetic logic or teleology that may be ascribed in hindsight to the development of literary norms and values over a period of time. Whereas few would resist using such historical terms as sentimentalism, romanticism, realism, symbolism, or post-symbolism to describe the progression of literary values and norms in Russian culture, there seems to be an widespread, if unspoken, consensus that the period dating from 1953 to the present should best be left to linger in nominal and conceptual obscurity. Due to the lack of a specifically aesthetic, historical vocabulary it has hence become customary—and, one might also add, unavoidable—to refer to the last 40-odd years using a medley of sociological, political, generic, or simply chronological terms. Thus we find "postwar literature," "post-Stalinist literature," "the Thaw," "Village Prose," "post-Village Prose," the "60's" or "70's," "literature of glasnost," etc., but no concepts suggesting the aesthetic unity or continuity that one associates with a literary period or epoch.

This reticence among Slavists about addressing the question of literary history as aesthetic history is invariably justified by references to the unique socio-political status of the Soviet system. It is assumed that the authoritarian force exerted by the Communist Party over Russian society crippled the free development of Russian literature to such an extent that comparison with Western aesthetic trends or with the Russian avantgarde of the 1920's is no longer feasible. Accordingly, the history of Soviet Russian literature emerges as the story of an ideologically guided deformation of high art and the attempts to resist that deformation. This applies in particular to the literature of socialist realism, which was long thought to act as the transmission belt for a noxious

political doctrine and to have no intrinsic aesthetic value of its own. The limitations of this view have been effectively exposed by Katerina Clark in her *Soviet Novel. History as Ritual* (1985). Using anthropological-structural methodology, Clark is able to demonstrate that the Soviet production novel is not a crude, worthless tool of Communist doctrine but a "master narrative" having certain socio-cultural functions and consisting of a distinct value structure whose development can be traced over time. Yet Clark's approach, which treats the specific character of the Soviet production novel in terms of ritualized, dialectical transactions between ideology and literature, ends by confirming the deformation model of literary development noted above: the Soviet literary system remains informed by ritualistic, pragmatic impulses alien to Western culture.¹ Soviet literary history, it would appear, is a special case that requires special, non-literary (anthropological) concepts to describe it.

In the following pages I wish to talk about Soviet literary history per se, rather than about the social, political, or anthropological conditions of that history. Proceeding on aesthetic and epistemological, rather than socio-cultural assumptions, I will suggest that from the 1950's on, Soviet Russian literature has consistently exhibited all distinguishing features of that epoch which is now rightly or wrongly called postmodern. Russian literature of the last 40 years, in other words, shares a common aesthetic history with its American, English, French and German counterparts. As with these other literatures, the Russian variant of postmodernism necessarily exhibits indigenous traits and peculiarities requiring special explication. To demonstrate how a specifically Soviet Russian postmodernism might function in spite of itself, I have singled out for analysis the genre of village prose, whose rustic themes and parochial outlook would seem to exempt it conclusively from any participation in *la condition postmoderne* as it is known in the West.

Before continuing with this worst-case scenario, I would like to address two fractious problems in an abbreviated way. The first concerns the definition of postmodernism. If postmodernism is equated with the stylistic inventiveness typical of, say, Donald Barthelme's short stories, Umberto Eco's *Name of the Rose*, or Saša Sokolov's *Palisandrija*, postwar Soviet literature, which is almost entirely lacking in stylistic or narrative innovation, must be excluded by definition from any history of that postmodernism. For this reason any definition of Soviet postmodernism must necessarily be *epistemological*. Important here is not the degree of stylistic ostentation, but rather the way this literature takes up and transforms the causal syllogisms, economies, and axiologies of the epochs immediately preceding it. Russian postmodernism, in other words, takes the givens of socialist realism, the historical avantgarde, and other traditions and reorganizes them in specific, innovative ways, without at the same time intervening in the conventional character of their stylistic presentation. Russian

postmodernism demonstrates the possibility of an epoch in which innovation takes place so to speak subterrestrially, as a series of vast tectonic shifts signaled by only faint stylistic tremors.

The second problem concerns the historical relationship between Russian modernism and socialist realism. Here I do not wish to suggest in any way that socialist realist doctrine was not the ideological instrument of a ruthless political caste that maintained itself through mass coercion and terror. At the same time, however, socialist realism does not overcome aesthetic history, as its utopian program avows, or even start a new, anti-aesthetic history of its own making, as the present-day consensus on Soviet literature seems to assume. Following Boris Groys (1992), I will assume that socialist realism represented both the continuation and transformation of the historical avantgarde of the 10's and 20's. Socialist realism can be said to realize certain utopian pretensions of the historical avantgarde, even as it replaces that avantgarde's aesthetic practices with the ordering gestures of neoclassical aesthetics—what Andrej Sinjavskij calls "socialist classicism" (1967) and Vladimir Papernyj "kul'tura 'dva'" (1975). From my vantage point—which is to say that of literary history—socialist realism is more than a political doctrine, more than a master narrative, more than a utopian *Gesamtkunstwerk*, more than a revival of classicism. Socialist realism marks the transition period between the high modernism of the historical avantgarde and what I wish to begin to call Soviet postmodernism.

Socialist realism, in addition to its utopian, modernist tendencies and its retrograde, neoclassical obsession with *telos*, order and constraint, displays traits that are also prototypically postmodernist.² These postmodernist features, however, because they are still rigidly bound up in the Stalinist projection, do not yet function as such. The salient features of this nascent, fettered postmodernism may be outlined as follows:

a) Socialist realism, as the aesthetic *summa* of all previous epochs, is marked by *eclecticism* and *disinterest in innovation*. In this "socialist classicism" (Sinjavskij 1967, 434) the achievements of previous cultures are selected in accordance with ideological prerequisites and projected once again as Stalinist art. Socialist realism takes up and mixes elements of myth and folklore, 18th century classicism, the 19th century novel, and certain techniques of the historical avantgarde, all of which it subsumes under one teleological perspective. Because socialist realism views its sources primarily as functional elements within a binding, totalitarian projection and not in terms of their original value or provenience, little or no incongruity arises between these elements within that projection. Soviet postmodernism will retain this *indifference to innovation* while eschewing unbridled eclecticism, which, because of its peculiar historical experience, it perceives as totalitarian. (Western postmodernism, by contrast, which lacks this experience, is notoriously and extravagantly eclectic.)

b) Socialist realism enacts a *dark parody of enlightenment*. The subject is forced to embark on a process of individuation whose inevitable result is his (or her) own disempowerment. Consciousness is raised in order to better suppress it; the process of finding one's self turns out to be nothing more than the ritual, masochistic fulfilment of an *imitatio Stalini*.³ At the same time, Stalinist Reason, which is evil and cruel, casts its net over a defenseless, passive Nature. The reaction to this will be no less natural: a *skepticism of enlightenment* informs Soviet postmodernism, which rejects linear schemes of individuation and valorizes aleatoric Nature at the expense of predictable Reason.

c) Socialist Realism *pacifies the dialectic*. Since the Stalinist logos is capable of forcing a synthetic resolution of opposites under any conditions, the dialectical process eventually becomes a meaningless, hollow exercise. To expedite the smoothest possible movement from thesis to synthesis the antithesis is left to wither and fade. As Fedor Abramov (1954) shows in his famous essay on kol-khoz literature, conflict—even the massive mayhem caused by the Second World War—virtually disappears from the Stalinist projection. Soviet postmodernism, in general, will restore the antithesis without providing for the possibility of synthesis (which would mean the restitution of a totalitarian standpoint). The decapitated dialectic leads to postmodern states of stand-off, stagnation, or implosion.

d) Socialist realism is a *second-order, virtual realism* founded on *simulacra* (signs severed from their natural referents [for more on this term see Baudrillard 1988, 166-184]). In Stalinism relating the sign to its referent can prove fatal; the ultimate point of reference is not the real world but the Stalinist logos. In postmodernism the simulacra, which in Stalinism are bound up in a hierarchical, punitive structure, are unleashed and acquire a modicum of freedom. Soviet village prose will vainly attempt to reestablish the natural referents of these signs by projecting them once again in a nostalgic search for the authentic, pre-Stalinist past.

These criteria are not exhaustive, but should enable a preliminary description of how village prose took the crumbling edifice of socialist realism and remodelled it a fashion that may be described in hindsight as typically postmodern.

Leonid Leonov's *Russkij les* and the Transition to Postmodernism

The transition from late Stalinist modernism to postmodernism begins with the neutralization of the Stalinist logos. This process can be observed well before Stalin's physical demise, most notably in Paustovskij's idylls (cf. Eshelman 1993b, 182-184), but also in Leonov's *Russkij les* (1953; henceforth: RL), that redoubtable *opus magnum* of late Stalinist culture. *Russkij les* is of special interest because it upholds the Stalinist projection while at the same time in-

roducing into it the influence of a natural, authentic, alternative value source—a source that itself is so virginal and pure that one of the characters reaching out to strike it is immediately threatened with death (RL, 238). *Russkij les* proposes an economy of relations in which a benign ersatz-Stalin, rather than imposing his will on nature from above, would seek to mediate between artificial and natural order.

Russkij les presents a grand melange of literary and non-fiction genres, among them elements of a war novel, a *Bildungsroman*, scientific biography, scholarly oration, and Gothic romance. Stylistically its register runs from the ponderous locutions of the authorial narrator's high style to the *prostorečie* of the various folk characters. Scraps of the most varied literary traditions, devices, and genres can be identified, including, among others, a vignette recalling Žukovskij's "Svetlana" (RL, 336-337), a Pygmalion-like subplot (RL, 302), elements of a servant-girl novel (RL, 189-196) and a Dostoevskian scandal scene (RL, 207 ff.). Leonov's more learned characters drop names like Savonarolla, Wat Tyler, Rousseau, Hume, and Alexander the Great, and address questions of scientific ethics, aesthetics, and man's relation to nature—questions that one does not normally think of as falling under the purview of "anthropology."

Unmistakably present is however also the "master narrative" described by Clark. The story concerns a naive teenage girl, Polja (Apollonija), and her political coming of age as it takes place against the background of the Great Fatherland War.⁴ Polja's Apollonian ascent and initiation into the Stalinist dream-world of higher, subjugated consciousness is nonetheless not the book's main focus. Her pubescent rites of passage—which are guided and glossed at every turn by a heavy-handed authorial narrator and whose outcome is never in doubt—is repeatedly undercut by long, contrapuntal digressions retelling the scientific and personal biography of Polja's estranged father, the forestry specialist Ivan Matveič Vixrov, who himself undergoes no internal development (see Smirnov 1987, 122) and who is evidently the novel's true hero. Leonov takes Polja's linear story of individuation and initiation and hooks it up with a pseudo-Gothic tale of reconciliation with a distant, powerful Father whom the naive heroine at first perceives only as a "strange" or "mysterious" (the sublime fear which he engenders in her is purely subjective and disappears with her enlightenment). Vixrov, the father, fulfills the dream of a benign, moderate Stalin who is uninvolved in—and will stop—the mindless decimation of what Vixrov repeatedly calls "our green friends" (cf. Vixrov's speech in RL, 249-281). Vixrov's career, in analogy to Stalin's, is accompanied at every step by an implacable, devilish opponent, Aleksandr Gracianskij, who like Trotskij is characterized by a xenophonic "и," pince nez, and a certain oratorical *grazie*.⁵ As a counterpoint Vixrov's name contains not only the "xp" of Χριστος (Christ) but also connotes the natural vitality of a whirlwind and the irresistible, centripetal

attraction of a vortex (both are "вихрь"⁶). Because of his folk roots, impeccable erudition, and classical taste Vixrov appears as the near-perfect synthesis of Nature, scientific Reason, and Culture; because of his status as a specialist and political latecomer (he is admitted to the Party in 1941, on the eve of the Great Fatherland War) his *vita* remains immaculate.⁷

Russkij les faithfully repeats the automatized, synthetic mechanism of socialist realism while at the same time evacuating it: Stalin is obviously the model for Vixrov but Vixrov is also a model for Stalin.⁸ In the end, it is becomes increasingly unclear who is a representation of whom: the hierarchy of relations begins to weaken, the dialectic folds back upon itself. The physical death of Stalin brings this process to its logical end. Without the authentic force of Terror holding them together, the structures created by Stalin begin to float, to enter into a *mis en abîme* of reciprocal relations lacking an ordering center and a synthetic, higher vantage point. The dialectic, as a functional mechanism, collapses; the postmodern reign of simulacra can now begin.

II. The Rise of Postmodernist Village Prose out of Socialist Realism

The neutralization and, eventually, the voiding of the Stalinist logos and its synthetic machinations leads to the release of previously existing, but heretofore inactive postmodern mechanisms.⁹ Soviet postmodernism unbound may be described as follows:

a) The postmodernism of village prose is marked by a *tempered, nostalgic eclecticism*. In village prose (as in postwar Soviet literature in general) the preference for small, non-epic forms precludes the large-scale mixing of styles. In absolute terms there is little innovation. In relative terms there may arise a certain shock effect for the Soviet reader unaccustomed to such time-worn techniques as *erlebte Rede* or the use of folksy diction in characters' speech. What innovation there is is oriented towards incorporating past style into the present (Bunin, Čechov, Dal', etc.) and towards the non-ironical use of substandard language (*prostorečie*, dialect, slang) in narrator's speech. Substandard speech—up to then a sign of social and literary incompetence—is now considered a marker of natural authenticity and is taken up and projected in authorial language. This is why there is virtually no *skaz* in village prose. *Skaz* marks an ungainly upward lunge from substandard to standard language; folksy narrator's speech in village prose is a successful linguistic movement from up to down that does not embarrass either the narrator or his source.¹⁰ In general, style remains the least distinguishing, least prominent feature of Soviet postmodernism.

b) The postmodernist gesture of village prose entails the *reduction of the subject*. In village prose, which has the Stalinist legacy still fresh in mind, every systematic move towards elevating consciousness is regarded as misguided or

wicked. The paradoxical, retrogressive desideratum of postmodernist Soviet prose is to *forego* consciousness, to relapse into states of minimal sensibility. The authenticity that is gained by losing consciousness is necessarily accompanied by a rise in social incompetence and, consequently, the marginalization of the individual within the collective.¹¹ Since life competency is now regarded as negative or suspect, death (the one force stronger than Stalin!) becomes the *ultima ratio* of postmodernist individuation. Within life, senectitude is the privileged state. Since death provides the sole true orientation for life, life and death become increasingly equivalent, often appearing as barely distinguishable stations along a monistic continuum.

c) Soviet postmodernism is characterized especially by the *breakdown of the dialectic* (cf. Eshelman 1994, 70-71). The Stalinist logos, which could always whip up a synthetic third under the most improbable conditions, has been rendered void. The theses of late Stalinism can now be balanced out by anti-Stalinist antitheses, albeit with no hope of a synthetic resolution, which would amount to a restitution of the dialectical tyranny. The dominant operation is now an *entropic law of inverse proportionality*. Each credit is evened out by a debit on the other side of the ledger and vice versa; each transaction, though, results in a loss of value. The goal of literature is to extract value from these reciprocal transactions as long they last; inherently unstable, they may quietly succumb to the laws of entropy or, with violence, implode. Usually, life (the thesis) is swallowed up by death (its antithesis). Death, however, is often fitted out with positive semantic attributes effecting the reversal of the accustomed relations: in its symbolic form death often becomes positive and thetic, life negative and antithetical. In village prose, the arbitrariness and reversibility of this impeded dialectic leads to a pervasive *metaphysics of stagnation* and the representation of death in terms of a symbolic order guaranteeing its equivalence to life.¹²

d) *Mnemonic simulation* is the dominant mode of village prose. Memory in village prose engenders duplicate realities, with the imagined or remembered reality invariably being preferred to the physically existing, real one. This backwardly directed movement is deeply paradoxical, since past authenticity (by definition a primary value) can be experienced only through simulation (an inauthentic, secondary or tertiary operation). As the village prose writers become increasingly aware of this paradox and their involvement in it, the more frustrating it will become to write village prose. In the end, urban duplicity displaces rural authenticity as the preferred theme (Belov's *Vse vpered!*, Astaf'ev's *Pečal'nyj detektiv*, Rasputin's *Požar*): the tone of these works is apoplectic or apocalyptic.

e) The situation in which village prose finds itself after the death of Stalin is characterized by a retrograde, anti-utopian dynamic. For Soviet postmodernism, the active, projecting, Center—the demiurge Stalin—has emerged not only as irrevocably evil, but also as mortal: in the end, the Stalinist Center—once an

immanent, coercive principle projecting its will onto the space around it—is replaced by the empty but irresistible principle of Death. As a result, the Soviet value system begins to implode, to gravitate towards the necrological “black hole” or vortex at its core. The logocentric structure of the Stalinist system is retained, but its drift is reversed: the system begins to fold back into itself, driven by nostalgia for a Center which, though irretrievably absent, is still regarded as the origin of all value.¹³ The problems and possibilities created by this vortical, retrograde movement form the epistemological field of Soviet village prose.

f) Village prose may be described as the attempt to generate strategies which regulate—and occasionally also seek to reverse—this irresistible centripetal contraction. The first of these is to construct *retrograde teleologies* which would provide ethical guidelines for acting in that imploding universe. The second consists in implementing *minimalist economies* that would regulate and perhaps also eventually stem the loss of value within the system as much as possible. The third *idealizes minimal consciousness*, which is structurally closest to the non-consciousness or other consciousness of death. In the following pages I would like to demonstrate how these strategies function based on short analyses of five typical works of village prose.

III. Postmodernist Village Prose: Five Case Studies

Following convention I will view village prose as consisting of three phases. The first is dominated by the journalistic *očerk* or sketch (typified by the work of V. Ovečkin and E. Doroš). Early *očerk* literature is still obligated in a negative way to the strictures of Stalinist writing. It tinkers with the by now wholly dysfunctional dialectic,¹⁴ compensates for the stylistic excesses of Stalinist prose by reverting to a plain journalistic style lacking ornamentation, and rediscovers subjectivity, which it however treats in a self-conscious, mechanical way.¹⁵ In aesthetic terms the *očerk* phase is of marginal interest. The second stage is the fecund middle period extending from the late 1950's on through the mid 1970's, in which village prose evolves into the dominant Soviet genre, exhibiting a distinct inventory of styles, themes, motifs, and character types. The last, apoplectic or apocalyptic phase (Parthé's “post-Village Prose”), which begins in the late 1970's, is highly self-conscious of the fact that the genre has begun to exhaust its possibilities and immodestly—but perhaps understandably—begins to equate its own demise with the end of everything else. My examples are taken mainly from the efflorescent middle stage. Nagibin's “Poslednjaja oxota” (1957) is typical of the lyrical prose of the late 1950's; Solženitsyn's “Matrenin dvor” (orig. 1959, 1962) is an important, though in some respects anomalous, literary link between the 1950's and 60's. Belov's “Za

tremja volokami" (1965) and Rasputin's "Vasilij i Vasilisa" (1966) represent the village prose of the nineteen sixties; Belov's "Čok-polučok" (1976) is characteristic of the final, apoplectic phase.

1. The Incredible Shrinking Subject: Jurij Nagibin's "Poslednjaja oxota"

In Nagibin's "Poslednjaja oxota" [The last hunt resp. The last wish] ([orig. 1957]; Nagibin 1980, henceforth: PO) the hero is dispatched down the chute of an endless monistic continuum which promises to postpone his death through a process of infinite reduction.

"Poslednjaja oxota" demonstrates two mutually complementary movements that are already announced by the homonym "oxota" in the story's title: the first is the octogenarian hero's desocialization and physical death during an unsuccessful hunting trip; the second, his desire for dissolution in what appears to be anthropomorphic, immortal Nature.

From the very beginning it is evident that the hero, a generic Gramps or Dedok, has a tenuous relation not only to social and group norms, but also to life itself. The head huntsman seems surprised to see him still up and about: "You still alive, Gramps?" he asks ("Дедок, ты живой?" [PO, 212]). Dedok, who has been ailing for most of the year, has obvious trouble reintegrating himself into the group hierarchy, which includes, among other persons, a kolkhoz book-keeper—the epitome of what is now a false, mechanical social order. This makes Dedok's numerous social *faux pas* all the more forgivable: once he introduces an apparently irrelevant linguistic observation into a "semiotic" discussion about whether things precede names or names things (PO, 218);¹⁶ another time he boasts of his obviously nonexistent sexual prowess, only to be bitterly ashamed when his interlocutors react to his remarks with obscenities (PO, 219). Most devastating, though, is the judgement finally levied upon him by a passing game warden: having nabbed Dedok poaching, he does not take him seriously enough to punish his transgression (PO, 222). By this time Dedok has moved beyond the pale of an "obscene" social order with its punitive norms and self-satisfied hubris and begins to enter a diffuse natural realm which promises to postpone death forever.

Characteristic of this retrograde movement from culture to nature is the reversion to childhood (the name "Dedok" is a diminutive to begin with). Dedok cries like a child ("по-детски," PO, 214) so that he may be allowed to go hunting; in a moment of weakness before he dies he wants to drop down on all fours; when he does physically pass away he experiences a rocking motion reminiscent of a cradle ("the earth rocked him" ["земля его укачивала"] PO, 229). As Dedok's self begins to disintegrate, so too do the borders between

nature and culture and, indeed, between borders in general. Almost blind during the day (he sleeps with his eyes open at night [PO, 225]), the old fellow has trouble distinguishing real ducks from decoys. First, he hits his own decoy (PO, 225), then he shoots a teal that has graciously chosen to land beside him: "[the teal] was stronger, quicker, more agile and endowed with more reason than Gramps. It had sacrificed itself of its own free will" ("Он [чирок] был сильнее, быстрее, ловчее и разумнее Дедка и добровольно принес себя в жертву" [PO, 227]).

To a certain extent this gradual rapprochement between the hero and an obliging, anthropomorphic nature is subjective. Dedok adheres to a speculative philosophy of life that allows him to think of death as "not being an end" (PO, 225-6):

It wasn't that he believed, but rather allowed for the possibility that a person, having died, would be born again in some other animal, and that that animal, for its part, would reappear in some smaller creature—and so on and so forth until the whole thing boils down to an invisible tiny being that will endure forever.

Он не то чтобы верил, а допускал, что умерший человек возрождается в каком-либо животном, а тот, в свою очередь, в более мелкой твари, — и так до тех пор, пока дело не сведется к незримо мелкому существу, которое уже останется навсегда. (PO 225)

While keeping his distance at such junctures, Nagibin's narrator plays along with, or at least does not debunk, this eschatological conceit. In the end, the hero's caducity becomes himself, he fuses with the entropic principle which is guiding him and all nature: "his weakness ceased to be something alien, hostile, bothersome, it became one with himself" ("слабость перестала быть чем-то чужим, враждебным, мешающим, стала им самим" [PO, 229]). In the end which is not one Dedok enters into a symbolic order that would seem to guarantee the infinite postponement of real death: "and Dedok went on and on towards his unreachable goal" ("а Дедок шел и шел к своей недостижимой цели" [PO, 229]).

"Poslednjaja oxota" is an example of the positive early village prose which is content to conceive of its own postmodernity in terms of pleasant, consolatory conceits. (Characteristically, Nagibin does not consider the ontology behind this particular conceit binding, since it does not appear in his other hunting stories from this period.) The transition from life to a state that is something less than life takes the form of a gradual downward slide along a monistic continuum; the dialectical struggle between life and death dissolves into the natural entropy which has guided it from the start. The reduction of senescent consciousness ap-

appears as an organic, consolatory process founded on what seems to be a Buddhist notion of reincarnation running in reverse. As the genre of village prose begins to unfold, these basic patterns—the devitalized dialectic, the reduction of consciousness, and the ethics and ontology of passivity—are retained, though they become less easy to enact and justify.

2. No Possum, No Sop, Just Taters: Miminalist and Maximalist Economies in Aleksandr Solženicyn's "Matrenin dvor"

"Matrenin dvor" (Solženicyn 1978; henceforth: MD) presents three contrasting economies and ethical systems leading to a tragic, but nonetheless redemptive resolution. Like the many village writers who return to an empty source, Solženicyn digs himself into a kind of metaphysical hole, but he also demonstrates a way to get out of it—and then uses this escape route himself to depart from village prose for good.

Solženicyn, as noted, takes up the stereotyped device of returning to a rural source. In contrast to genre conventions, however, Solženicyn's point of origin can no longer be authentic—after ten years of imprisonment and exile his autobiographical narrator has no ties to any particular locality.¹⁷ Solženicyn's source is less authentic than aleatoric—it could be anywhere in Russia. And indeed, the narrator has problems establishing where the source should be: "Vysokoe Pole" [Highfield] turns out to be pastoral but unlivable, whereas "Torfoprodukt" [Peat Product] is an economically viable, albeit run-down hamlet. Having pragmatically settled for an operative simulacrum of origin, the narrator is drawn into the prevailing village economies and the ethical problems that accompany them.

The first economy is the *subsistence economy* represented by Matrena. This economy, which is directly linked with her ethical goodness, is based on extreme thriftiness and self-sacrifice. When Matrena comes into money she doesn't buy new clothes, she repairs them; when she sews money into her coat it is not to use in life, but to pay for her own burial (MD, 135). Typically, Matrena performs work for others without compensation; she helps the other women for nothing, and also works on the kolkhoz for "hatch marks [...] in a grubby ledger" instead of money (MD, 127). Matrena's economy also permits the temporary accumulation of basic, consumable goods (peat, potatoes). This economy, however, is not necessarily based on conventional ethical norms, since Matrena, like everyone else, steals peat from the kolkhoz when she must. By its nature, a subsistence economy is almost always in the red; in the case of Matrena, it ends in disaster when she is sacrificed on the altar of patriarchal greed.

The second economy is a *fetishist economy* represented by the "insatiable" patriarch Faddej (MD, 157) as well as by most of Matrena's relatives. This economy is associated with ethical badness and leads indirectly to Matrena's

death. It is marked, among other things, by the accumulation of durable goods (most notably the living room of Matrena's home), ostentation (Matrena's dead husband disliked her homespun looks and took a mistress in the city), and excess (there is an orgiastic celebration before the building is carted away). Like Matrena's economy, it does not produce anything of great value—production apparently being a Stalinist imperative not relevant to the village microcosm.¹⁸

The third economy is a *fixed-wage economy* which is represented by the narrator and, interestingly enough, by the Soviet state, inasmuch as it pays the narrator and honors Matrena's entitlements (the latter is not always the case).¹⁹ This economy is ethically ambivalent, since it involves a dependency relationship between the distributor of the wages or entitlements and their recipients. Inasmuch as it is predictable, however, it is compatible with rational behavior. It is this economy that eventually allows Matrena a modicum of financial stability: the narrator gets a special ration of peat, which accrues indirectly to her, and he pays her a regular rent, based on his salary as a teacher. It is the narrator, along with the rational economy he represents, that ensures Matrena's material well-being. Taken alone, her survival is always tenuous—it is no accident that her health and spirits pick up considerably after the narrator arrives.

The narrator, for his part, mixes elements of the subsistence economy with its fetishist counterpart. He tells us that he doesn't mind the spartan regimen of Matrena's kitchen, which consists of two portions of heartburn-inducing "tater soup" (картонный суп) per day and which reminds him of life in the trenches (MD, 130). However, the narrator—as he himself recognizes—is guilty of fetishizing subsistence itself when he admonishes Matrena for soiling the old padded jacket that is his treasured keepsake from the camps: "That jacket was my legacy, it warmed me during hard times" ("Телогрейка эта была мне память, она грела меня в тяжелые годы" [MD, 147]²⁰). In general, all three economies are based on the same mechanism. They differ not in what they produce—none of them create material goods on a grand scale—but in what value they ascribe to goods already circulating. Fetishism turns out to have two sides: it is associated with greed and self-gratification, but is also a necessary element of memory, the driving impulse behind the narrator's soon-to-be-revealed mission.

The narrator embodies a non-natural rationality that is not altogether uncommon in village prose. In *Matrenin dvor*, however, organic, primary relations are invariably negative; non-natural or secondary ones positive. This has much to do with the outsider status of the narrator, an ex-prisoner who exhibits a faculty rare in the village prose of this time—that of irony (he laconically remarks of his incarceration and exile: "I had to put off my return [to Russia] for ten years or so" ["я задержался с возвратом годиков на десять"] [MD, 123]). Solženitsyn's skepticism towards idealized organicity can already been

seen in his rejection of the idyllic, but economically non-functional "Vysokoe Pole"; it is also evident in the relations between Matrena and her immediate family. The only positive character among Matrena's kin is her "adoptive daughter" Kira (actually Matrena's niece and not a blood relation). Kira is the only one at the wake whose ululations are authentic, she is the only one who transgresses against the institutionalized "politics of keening" (MD, 153-4). Kira is a prime candidate to become a "second Matrena"—a morally principled outsider on the margins of the village patriarchy. The non-natural relationship between mother and ward is however based on *education*, not on organic blood relations; it is also no accident that the narrator is a *teacher*, and that his laziest pupil is one of Faddej's sons—a minor beneficiary of patriarchal indulgence.

Given this lack of intrinsic authenticity among the villagers it is not entirely surprising that the narrator has his ear tuned to the world outside—he has a *rozетка* or electrical outlet installed so that he can listen to the radio. To describe this, he adopts Matrena's quaint malapropism "razvedka," which means "re-connaissance" and which outlines precisely what the narrator—and Solženicyn—are going to do: to re-familiarize themselves with the realm of high-level politics. The next step is messianistic: it will be to carry the word of Matrena's unintended, "senseless" sacrifice to the world at large. It does not diminish Matrena to say that the other hero of her story is the messianistic narrator, who is obligated to a rationality that will ensure the survival and dissemination of her selfless, loss-creating economy. Solženicyn's rationalistic attempt to proselytize an ethics of subsistence (to maximalize the minimal) is evidently what makes him so fascinating to both Western and Eastern audiences. The transparent, detached rationalism of the narrator (the "cold eye" of his camera [MD, 130]) appeals to the West, his fervent messianism—he comes from the "burning desert" (MD, 123)—to the East. This logocentric rationality²¹ is presumably the reason why Solženicyn so quickly discarded the genre of village prose. Apart from Matrena, whose authentic goodness is above all doubt, he has little patience with the false mythopoia of village life—Faddej's "replacing" Matrena with an eponymous woman to uphold his honor, the sisters' "political" wailing over the dead Matrena, the religious hypocrisy of the mourners. Solženicyn gets out of the Russian village while the going is good.

Unlike Nagibin with his one-way, retrograde teleology, Solženicyn has built into his story aleatory, binary figures that keep the plot open and on the move. The narrator doesn't find his "kondovaja Rossiija" ("old-fashioned Russia" [MD, 125]) on the first try but succeeds on his second; Matrena is betrothed first to one brother, then the other; Faddej returns from the First World War, Efim falls in the Second; Faddej marries an "fill-in-Matrena" ("подставная Матрена" [MD, 153-4]); Matrena dies because the tractor driver is too lazy to make a second run; Matrena's mutilation is a reenactment of Faddej's unfulfilled threat

uttered forty years earlier. Plot development is based on the possibility of two chances, with the outcome being completely unpredictable in each case.²² Nowhere is there a hint of a third, synthetic chance, nor is there any attempt on the part of the narrator to intervene rationally in the one-sided conflict between Faddej and Matrena. (In fact, the narrator's fetishistic thinking inadvertently causes him to side with Faddej; because he associates the railroad inspectors in their greatcoats with the NKVD [MD, 148] he helps cover up the details of the drunken debauch that led to the accident.) In spite of its "twoness," the ontology of Solženicyn's world remains monistic: the three economies are all located within a single frame of being that allows for limited (binary) variations.

Like many works of village prose, "Matrenin dvor" idealizes minimal, senescent consciousness and subsistence economies using logocentric consciousness as a foil. However, because Matrena's minimal history is caught up in the camera objective of a detached, unsentimental narrator, she remains a more finely delineated figure than the legions of aged heroines who will follow her in village prose. Unusual for village prose of the early 1960's is also the messianistic element which is characteristic of Solženicyn's life and work: in order to function, the minimal, irrational principle will have to be maximalized and rationalized until it is adopted by everyone. The goal is not a "manufactured" utopia (which would be Stalinist and modernist), but the voluntary acceptance of a subsistence economy in which everyone will be indifferent to freely circulating material value. The narrator, as the bearer of logocentric rationality, possesses the skills needed to disseminate this ideal as a messianistic message; his task can however no longer be carried out in the subhistorical space of the Soviet village.

3. Journey to the the Center of the Logos: Vasilij Belov's "Za tremja volokami"

In "Za tremja volokami" ([Beyond the three portages]; cited according to Belov 1983; henceforth: ZTV) the hero's journey back to an authentic, but empty source produces a doubled, posthistorical world in which memory supersedes reality and in which no further development is possible.

Belov's hero, a generic Soviet major (first name: Ivan) undertakes an arduous, three-day journey back to the now overgrown, uninhabited hillside on which once stood his village home. On the way he encounters an assortment of village-prose characters no less stereotypical than himself: the village idiot, the raw youth, the newlywed, the brigadier, the hospitable peasant couple, the old girlfriend. These represent virtues, vices, opportunities, and dead-ends within the rural, originary sphere and evoke experiences that compensate for and enrich the bathetic emptiness of the major's pilgrimage.

The whole notion of traveling to the major's village is associated with diminished consciousness as well as with the physical hardship suggested by "volok" (a "drag," or portage). As the driver says, "you have to be nuts to drive on roads like that" ("по таким дорогам только чокнутые ездят" [ZTV, 390]). There is also the disconcerting example of Mitja, the village idiot, who sleeps in the train station and travels endlessly back and forth on the branch-line local (ZTV, 387). The closer the major gets to his home village, the more difficult becomes the journey (he moves from plane to train to truck to foot). As a counterpoint to his imperturbable major Belov supplies us with a passenger who is returning to obtain a proof of his own authenticity—a birth certificate—but who can no longer bear the uncomfortable ride and turns back (ZTV, 398). The major overcomes the physical *buksovanie* (the helpless spinning of wheels on ice or in mud) that is also a Soviet metaphor for inertia and stagnation, but his travels take him precisely to that point where no more movement is possible.

Shortly before reaching his goal the major has two encounters which highlight the nostalgic nature of his sojourn. The first is with a convivial peasant couple who are the parents of the newlywed youth—a hopeful sign of fertility in the otherwise isolated Soviet backwoods, into which yeast must literally be imported (see ZTV, 398, where it spoils along the way). Sitting in the couple's parlor, the major, who was earlier already overcome by a "homy feeling uncharacteristic of a seasoned military man" (ZTV, 397) now experiences a sensation of well-being "just like in his childhood" (ZTV, 399). His host relates an anecdote about the "first German war" and, by tea and vodka, "plows through [the major's] soul" with a sentimental song from the Russo-Japanese War which mentions in one breath God and the Tsar. Completely intoxicated, the old man then intones a peasant song that he says is from Kerenskij's time but might just as well be anti-Bolshevik.²³ By this time the major has loosened the tie of his military uniform and Belov does not record his reaction.

Nostalgia of a sexual sort is experienced by the major in his meeting with his old love Katja, a fading peasant beauty who has nonetheless "retained her girl-like movements" (ZTV, 405). Through the moist veil of Belov's erotic nature symbolism—pitch-black night, dripping rain and nocturnal storm—it is evident that the major entertains intimate relations with her. Propitious external conditions allow for this: her "hot-headed" (горячий) husband has disappeared for good in the camps (for accidentally shooting an icon of Stalin) and her son has conveniently gone off to the movies in a neighboring village. This sensual interlude is however not enough to hold the major back from continuing his journey, presumably because his longing is directed more at his memory of Katja than at her real person: he experiences "happiness and sorrow for Katja as she had been then" ("счастья и скорби по тогдашней Кате" [ZTV, 405]). Similarly, the memory of his tryst is more important than the act itself: "in his

memory there arose [...] the sensation of Katja's bitter late-night kisses" ("в памяти появлялось [...] ощущение поздних горьких Катиных поцелуев" [ZTV, 407]).

The basic syllogism guiding "Za tremja volokami" is stated clearly in the story itself: "The closer they came to the village, the more animated became [the major's] recollections and the more intense became his tenderness towards that land ("чем ближе была деревня, тем больше ройлось воспоминаний и тем острее была нежность к этой земле" [ZTV, 397]). As a corollary one might add that as the major nears his real, but barren place of origin the outside world becomes more and more a simulacrum: "everything that came before [his journey] seemed so far off, almost unreal" ("все то, что было до этого, [...] казалось таким дальним, почти нереальным" [ZTV, 407]). The result is a cooling and doubling of the world that is directly etched into the imagery of the story's lacrimose ending:

The corncrake cried out once more, and a small flat stratus cloud cut the moon in half. No one heard how, relinquishing their leaden weight, there padded upon the resonant, broad leaf of a burdock two frigid tears.

Опять покрывал дергач, а луну пополам разрезало плоское слоистое облачко. Никто не услышал, как на гулкий широкий лист лопуха, теряя свинцовую свою тяжесть, бухнулись две холодных слезы. (ZTV, 409)

The major inhabits a "cool universe" (Baudrillard's term, 1983, 75) in which the Logos, the sun, is represented and replaced by its stellar reflector and in which there are no more "hot," authentic emotions. The result is a *mis en abîme* consisting of the emptied logos on one side and the passive, stoic major on the other; the mnemonic simulacra bounce, in a process of infinite reduction and entropic loss, between the extinguished source and its lusterless recipient. Belov's "catastrophic"²⁴ strategy of bringing the two poles of this entropic scheme together finalizes the schizoid nature of the major's existence: the world splits into a real and a remembered one, with the mnemonic mode proving itself to be infinitely more functional and attractive than its expended source.

In "Za tremja volokami" Belov pushes the notion of return to an origin to its absolute, unbearable limit. He paints his hero, as it were, into the middle of a metaphysical space from which there is no return. Although the story deals with a mature, functional consciousness, this consciousness, which must chose between the barren insufficiency of origin-made-present and the richness and iterability of mnemonic simulation, in the end appears schizoid and cold when confronted with the emptiness of its guiding conceit. Belov apprehends a typical

postmodern aporia without, for the time being, trying to resist it or to spell out its further consequences.

4. Abortive Lives: Valentin Rasputin's "Vasilij i Vasilisa"

In Rasputin's "Vasilij i Vasilisa" (Rasputin 1984; henceforth: VV) the two main characters (etymologically King and Queen) personify a hubris that recedes only after the protagonists are humbled by the inevitability of death.

"Vasilij i Vasilisa" may be viewed as a postmodern extension of Andrej Platonov's "Starik i staruxa" (orig. 1937, 1984; henceforth: SS).²⁵ Platonov's morose tale, which elaborates a typically Fedorovian tradeoff between childbearing and death,²⁶ describes the hubris of an aging couple who seek to realize the dream of conceiving a child and renewing their own lives—a venture with utopian pretensions and Old Testamentary antecedents. The plan succeeds for a time, but when the child is born the mother dies, leaving the old man to sorrow and nourish the child at the same time. In accordance with Platonov's odd fusion of modernist and socialist realist poetics (cf. Seifrid 159-160), the dialectic is fractured but still functional: the antithesis (the wife) is sacrificed so that the child (the synthesis) may live.

"Vasilij i Vasilisa" is about hubris of a different kind. Having suffered a miscarriage that was induced by Vasilij ("случился выкидыш" [VV, 397]), Vasilisa retaliates by throwing him out of the house for twenty years. Although Vasilij does not leave the homestead, marital relations are reduced to ritualized, silent contacts, broken only by the Second World War and the appearance, for a time, of a second "wife." The couple reconciles only after Vasilij seems about to die: instead of a synthesis the *status quo ante* is reaffirmed.

The original split occurs because both characters are possessed by the fear of death and because they recall that fear at inopportune moments. During a row, Vasilisa engenders mortal terror in Vasilij by pinning him to the floor "like a rooster on a chopping block before they cut off his head" (VV, 397); the memory of this in turn causes Vasilij to threaten Vasilisa with an axe and bring about the miscarriage: Vasilisa is "frightened to death" ("до смерти перепугалась") and cries out "in a voice not her own" (не своим голосом" [VV, 397]). Upon Vasilij's return from the war, which would appear to offer a chance for reconciliation, Vasilisa inadvertently "relives" the miscarriage. While carrying potatoes to the cellar in a sack she is told that Vasilij has returned and that her son Saša has been killed: she throws the unopened sack into the cellar and "trembles as it hits the hard ground" ("вздрагнула, когда он ударился о твердое" [VV, 399]). The estrangement sets in for good when Vasilisa declares that "I'm a once-made woman, Vasilij, and I'm not going to be made again." ("Я, Василий, один раз сделанная, меня не переделать" [VV, 400]). This

denies the utopian desire expressed by Platonov's old woman, who wants to repeat her marriage to the old man in order to apprehend the happiness that she forgot to notice the first time around—an act of epistemological hubris that she pays for with her life.²⁷

In "Vasilij i Vasilisa" Platonov's onerous ontological conflicts—unborn vs. living, mind vs. matter, sex vs. death—are pacified, put on hold. There is no evidence of any rivalry or animosity between parents and children. Vasilisa indulgently scolds the son Petr as "sluggard" ("otik" [VV, 392])—a word reminiscent of *otec*, "father," but not an insult to be taken seriously. Vasilij begrudges his children nothing ("he is not parsimonious" [VV, 393]) and wants to bequeath his hunting rifle to a disinterested Petr—disciples of Fedorov and Freud may search in vain here for signs of symbolic strife between father and son. Whereas Platonov's characters are weighed down by an immutable, leaden state of alienation between mind and body, Rasputin's are given a chance at transfiguration. The soldiers returning from the war are described as having acquired "unknown voices" that they are trying to exhaust through song (пропеть) so that their own may begin to speak again (VV, 399).²⁸ Even the appearance of Vasilij's second "wife," Aleksandra, leads to a diminution, rather than an intensification of, the root conflict. Aleksandra not only bears the same name as the dead son Saša (Aleksandr) but is also consumed by the desire to find her own, long missing child. Unlike Vasilisa, Aleksandra views death as symbolic presence: she says that the son appears to her periodically in dreams and asks her to find him.²⁹ Because of this, Aleksandra (alone among all the characters) engages in linear, dynamic activity; it is this necrological motivation that causes her to leave Vasilij and move on, and it is the openness of her sorrow that allows Vasilisa to accept her presence and eventually bless her.

Vasilij, *otec* and *otik*, lives according to an economy of *otium*. Vasilij scorns work on the kolkhoz and prefers to live off the taiga; because he likes things in their "original appearance" ("в первозданном виде" [VV, 391]) he has little interest in changing his situation or accumulating wealth (his foray for gold ends indifferently). His change of heart and his apology comes because death is the only thing he can't get used to (VV, 412); for this he requires and receives consolation from Vasilisa, who ultimately shows no more initiative than himself.

"Vasilij i Vasilisa" is an exercise in the poetics of iterativity and in the metaphysics of entropy. About half the story is told in the present tense. However, this device, rather than conveying vivid, colloquial immediacy, mainly serves to reproduce the ontological bind in which the characters find themselves. In a story told mainly in the present tense—a mode approaching a lyric, rather than an epic, state—change is best represented as gradation. Change occurs not because of individual initiative, but because of the entropic logic informing the

system of relations as a whole: fear of sudden death causes the split or fall, the realization of death's inevitability brings about a reconciliation.

Rasputin's main figures are literally possessed by the fear of death and seem to lose the ability to determine their own fates. In the end, however, they are able to face up to this fear and mitigate it. Rasputin's plea for *Trauerarbeit* in life even hints that death may be the redemptive non-end already familiar to us from Nagibin's "Poslednjaja oxota": the story concludes with the dying Vasilij gazing out the window onto a street connoting the kind of linear purposefulness that was alien to him in life.³⁰ The ubiquity of the present tense in the story makes us *feel* that an extension of life might be possible: death, when we get to it, will be a kind of presence too. Although Rasputin's characters are caught up in an iterative, static universe, they have time to adjust themselves to it before it is too late—a pacific outcome not accorded to Platonov's modernist figures, who are generally ground up in the dialectical violence of their own utopian heroics. Rasputin's story, by contrast, displays two typically postmodern traits: it renders utopian striving void by quieting the dialectic, and it shows that redemption can be achieved through recourse to a symbolic order that accepts death as an equivalent to life.

5. The Naked Gun: Vasilij Belov's "Čok-Polučok"

"Čok-polučok" (Choke/half-choke³¹; cited according to Belov 1983; henceforth: ČP) is the self-portrait of a retrograde hero trapped in a postmodern world which is by now hopelessly false—so false that it prevents him from dying a real death that would prove his uniqueness and manhood.

The apoplectic narrator of "Čok-polučok," Kostja Zorin, who figures in a cycle of short stories by Belov,³² is immured in a stagnant, strife-ridden relationship with his "emancipated" wife Tonja, whose sole discernible function is to quash every attempt of the hero to exercise his own free will.³³ The result is a marital stalemate which Zorin experiences as humiliating and emasculating (the synthetic product of this relationship, the daughter Ljalka, accrues to the mother after Kostja and Tonja's divorce in the story "Svidanija po utram"). In "Čok-polučok," the hero seeks to reassert his own dominance—his oneness and firstness—by returning with his wife to what is presumably his natural element. The catastrophic anticlimax of this camping trip however only serves to cement Zorin's entrapment in the aleatoric, duplicitous world of postmodernism.

"Čok-polučok" revolves around the most obvious symbol of masculinity and oneness—the phallus. In this case it is a substitute phallus—a double-barrelled German shotgun³⁴ that for the narrator conjures up specifically foreign images of "depravity and decadence" (ČP, 347). The gun is not only symbolic of, it even *looks like* an exposed male organ: "in themselves, the rounded forms of the

gun's stock and fore-end looked somehow exposed and indecent" ("округлые формы цевья и ложа сами по себе выглядели как-то обнаженно и неприлично" [ČP, 347]). If that were not enough, the gun was bought by Zorin's friend Saša Golubev specifically as a reaction to his wife's third abortion, which is to say as compensation for his social, rather than sexual impotence. (According to the logic of Belov's misogyny, women literally and symbolically kill everything that men produce.) Zorin, the narrator, explicitly says that he shares Golubev's experience with abortions (ČP, 347); unlike Golubev, however, Zorin's pressure-cooker personality finds no outlet in ersatz pursuits. He is simply seething all the time.³⁵

"Čok-polučok" demonstrates the impossibility of authentic behavior through procedures of catastrophic doubling and duplicity. Immediately after setting up camp, the original trio of Saša, Kostja, and Tonja are themselves doubled: they meet up with three members of the urban intelligentsija, Vadim, Boris, and Alka, the mere presence of whom is enough to bring out the animal in Kostja (ČP, 354). Alka, above all, is the living embodiment of the aleatoric amorality that Zorin hates: she sleeps in a tent with two men (but with which one?) and typifies the postwar girl who "doesn't know what's good and what's bad" or "what she's going to do the next minute"; for "bimbos like that morality either doesn't exist at all or is an old-fashioned concept" ("мораль для таких дурочек либо не существует совсем, либо понятие старомодное" [ČP, 357]). Things get worse. Vadim charms Tonja with a postmodern parlor trick—he fabricates a Möbius strip simulating endless one-dimensionality,³⁶ Tonja humiliates Kostja in a fireside discussion on Joyce and Kafka, Saša insults prim Kostja by suggesting that he might like to bed down with Alka, and in a shooting competition Kostja must witness how Tonja is masculinized by firing out of the phallic shotgun, "like Ivan Fedorovič Šponka's aunt in Gogol'" (ČP, 362). The tension culminates in a game of Russian roulette instigated by Vadim, who is egged on by Alka.

The Russian roulette is however played out under inauspicious conditions. Instead of a Browning there is only Saša's ominous shotgun; to simulate the single bullet in the revolving gun barrel Vadim disarms five of six shotgun shells. None of the participants is a White Russian officer, as tradition would have it (as an excuse not to participate Boris refers to the fact that he is "not a Russian," i.e., Jewish [ČP, 363]), and of the six potential players two are women, who are traditionally excluded: their shells are however still included in the ante to raise the odds of someone surviving (the women's lots manipulate fate). Of the remaining three men none is willing to take part, and Zorin is subjected to a final humiliation: his wife stalks off to the tent without him after he declines to play.

Zorin's wounded pride—caused by his failure to act in an authentic, manly way before his wife and Fate—apparently contributes to his decision to replay the game alone. The high pathos of a Hemingwayesque suicide-by-shotgun and a masturbatory death (Zorin experiences a kind of *petit mort* while pulling the trigger) is however vitiated by the fraudulent character of the game itself: none of the cartridges were loaded to begin with, and Zorin experiences his own death as simulation. As Zorin learns, in a postmodern universe even the aleatoric workings of Fate can be falsified: death turns out to be a series of duds, and Zorin remains entwined in the endlessly looping patterns of the postmodern matrix.³⁷ The story ends with the hero inadvertently confirming the *status quo ante* that he was trying to escape: while leaving in the last scene he helps his wife tighten up her backpack—the symbolic reversal and denial of a pregnant condition.

“Čok-polučok” is the virulent expression of an anti-postmodern consciousness³⁸ that is nonetheless unable (or unwilling) to free itself of the postmodernist ironies that it so deeply detests. This is because Belov and the other writers of post-village prose cultivate a conservative, but passive attitude that seethes, smolders, or boils at the sight of postmodern syndromes but does not have any artistic incentive to eliminate them: being parasitical upon post-modernism, post-village prose has little practical interest in inducing the death of its host. The next logical step that might be expected here—the carnivalistic, obscene exteriorization of all this pent-up masculine rage—is undertaken not by any acknowledged village prose writer but by the “postutopian” author Vladimir Sorokin,³⁹ who needs to do little more than fill in scenarios already sketched out by Belov and others. In “Čok-polučok,” for example, the hero comes to the conclusion the two *intelligently* “go out on a ‘hunt’ every year for idiots like me” (ČP, 368); in Sorokin’s “Otkrytie sezona” (1992, 40-48) the situation is reversed and, as it were, revenged: two folksy hunters bag a city slicker using a Vysockij tape as a lure. And, where in “Čok-polučok” the phallus is a mechanical, symbolic device, in “Proščanie” Sorokin (1992, 76-79) replaces it with the real thing—smelly, erect, and ornamented with a violet chancre sore. Sorokin takes the phallocentrism and naturalism of the post-village-prose writers to its logical conclusion; he makes explicit their affinities with the postmodern obscenity that their righteous moralizing forbids them to indulge in directly.⁴⁰

Concluding Remarks

In its historical development as outlined above village prose moves from the simple reduction of late Stalinist models (*očerk* prose) to more subtle strategies that take up and transform structural elements of the Stalinist (late modernist, proto-postmodernist) projection. The salient features of this transformation in-

clude the pacification of the dialectic (stalemate, implosion), the creation of non-binding ontologies (heterocosms), and the idealization of retrograde teleologies and consciousness (minimalism). Whereas in his early lyrical story Nagibin is content to let unfold a pleasant, minimalist conceit, later village prose becomes increasingly concerned with the catastrophic character of its own retrograde devices. Solženitsyn creates a detached subject who observes the catastrophe of minimalism and then seeks to rationalize and maximalize (or fetishize) its message; Belov leads a logocentric subject back to his emptied origin ("Za tremja volokami") and then abandons him to his frigid, schizoid fate. Rasputin conceives a necrological, iterative universe which however holds out the promise of redemption through repetition, through the promise of never-ending presence. Finally, post-village prose, as exemplified by Belov's "Čok-polučok," vituperates against the ironies of a postmodern condition that it nonetheless depends on to fuel its own misogyny and chauvinism.

I have tried to show that village prose is not a parochial category eluding conventional modes of aesthetic and historical description. It is my wish that the studies set forth here will lead to the full reintegration of village prose and other typically Soviet genres into the epoch that in the West has generally come to be called postmodern.

Notes

- ¹ Cf. the following statement by Clark (1985, 252): "instead of doing what we have come to think of as the work of literature, Socialist Realism performs an essentially mythological task. [...] The master plot is the thread that stitches together several significant layers of culture, including its theory of history, its philosophical anthropology, and its literary presuppositions." Similar sentiments are expressed in Kathleen Parthé's "parametric" approach to village prose (cf. Parthé 1992, 3-12), in which aesthetic considerations form just one of the many conditions of this genre.
- ² See Groys 1992, 108: "[...] beginning with the Stalin years, at least, official Soviet culture, Soviet art, and Soviet ideology become eclectic, citational, 'postmodern.' Official Soviet art has already claimed the right to dispose freely of the heritage of the past regardless of its internal logic, so that the only essential difference between it and contemporary Western postmodern art is that the latter 'appropriates' the artistic heritage individually, whereas in the Soviet Union this is done according to a centrally directed plan." Generally speaking, the arguments I will present below support this line of thought. Groys however also goes on to suggest that contemporary Russian "post-utopian" art (i.e., conceptualism) is endowed with an ironic awareness of its own artistic "will to power" that separates it from Western postmodernism. Here, I believe, he underestimates the tradition of postmodern irony in the West, as, for example, can be found in the work of Donald Barthelme, Kurt Vonnegut, and others (cf. in this regard Wilde 1976 and 1980).

- 3 For more on the masochistic character of socialist realism see Smirnov 1987.
- 4 Polja has a male double, Sereža, who goes through the same procedure, though on a less epic scale. Leonov's practice of mechanically doubling characters, which can be found throughout *Russkij les*, is a typical proto-postmodern device that expedites the emancipation of signs from their original referents and relativizes the subject in his or her autonomy. Postmodernism carries this a step by allowing the uncontrolled proliferation of signs and subjectivity (cf. Baudrillard 1983, 36).
- 5 The name presumably also plays on Balthasar Gracián, the 17th century Spanish rhetorician and mystic.
- 6 The proper root is actually *вихор*, forelock. However, since Leonov (RL, 336) allows Polja's mother to muse on how only two letters separate her name (*Vixrova*) from that of Mark *Vetrov* (*ветер*, wind), it seems justified to widen the range of associations. In general, Leonov is well aware of the religious symbolism of the names he uses. *Mark Vetrovskij*, a rural double of *Ivan Matveič Vixrov*, is described as a simple carpenter and a Soviet evangelist (RL, 334); both characters combine Christhood and discipleship in one.
- 7 Ivan Matveič has several notable flaws: he has a serious marital problem (as did Stalin), he lacks political acumen, and he limps. The latter trait is in keeping with the masochist desire for subjugation typical of Stalinist culture (for more on this see Smirnov 1987, 126-7). Vixrov's personality—to the extent that he and all the other characters may be said to have one—is moreover bound up with a group of student chums (the "Three Musketeers") who exemplify the political savvy that Vixrov lacks. The one "musketeer," Valerij, becomes a Soviet diplomat and represents an infallible source of political wisdom (he is so reliable that he is allowed to work abroad and to surround himself, grudgingly, with the luxurious trappings of his profession [RL, 313]). The other, Čeredilov, becomes an arrogant, fat-cat member of the *nomenklatura* and breaks with Vixrov (RL, 365-372).
- 8 Whereas in socialist realism the "Leader" is always depicted as having typically human traits—he is always "just like you and me"—he nonetheless occupies the uppermost position in a fixed hierarchy which prevents the relations between ruler and subject from being reversed. For a more extensive discussion of the "Leader's Image" in Stalinist culture see Macura 1992, 46-53.
- 9 Groys (1992, 78-80) argues that village prose writers continue the tradition of Stalinist utopianism by trying to "return to the past and resurrect what they imagine to be the 'Russian' humanity and recast contemporary *homo sovieticus* in its image." I believe this view to be generally incorrect and also to contradict other statements made by Groys identifying official Soviet culture as "postmodernist."

- 10 Presumably because this authentic language itself is an artificial, authorial construct rather than part of a natural idiom. Cf. Rasputin's interview with Tat'jana Zilkinaja (Rasputin 1987, 17) in which he says that there is nothing wrong with using obsolete words and lower Angaran dialect in authorial language. "It's best to let the reader take a look in a dictionary," he continues, "he won't lose anything in doing so." ("Пусть лучше читатель заглянет в словарь, от этого он ничего не потеряет.")
- 11 For a study of the dialectics of minimal consciousness see Eshelman 1993a. Witte 1983 offers an extensive treatment of desocialization and marginalization as a structural feature of village prose.
- 12 Cf. Baudrillard's notion of symbolic exchange and death (1988, 124): "Death should never be interpreted as an actual occurrence in a subject or a body, but rather as a *form*, possibly a form of social relation, where the determination of the subject and value disappears." Death, in other words, becomes a radical presence. Similar views can be found implicitly in the way most village prose writers portray death (cf. the analysis of Rasputin's "Vasilij i Vasilisa" below). The idea of a radical equivalency between life and death (between the transcendent and the immanent) is a notion crucial to postmodernism in general (see Smirnov 1990, 9-11).
- 13 This is why there is no exuberant, Bakhtinian carnival in post-Stalinist Soviet literature, as one might expect of a literature "liberated" from authoritarian tyranny. In this regard see also Groys (1992, 76), who suggests that because in the Soviet Union the end of Stalinism was intuitively associated with the collapse of that utopian project begun by the avantgarde, no one was interested in reviving that utopianism again.
- 14 As best exemplified by the endless arguments between Ovečkin's Borozov and Martynov, who, depending on one's point of view, are respectively thesis or antithesis. The positive hero Martynov, as Patricia Carden (1976, 418) has observed, suffers "one of the strangest fates in literature": unable to effect a synthetic resolution of his own fictional conflict, Ovečkin summarily replaces Martynov with an even *more* positive figure, Dolgušin.
- 15 The rediscovery of subjectivity in the *očerk* is highly reminiscent of sentimentalism's stereotyped way of evoking certain feelings by exposing the subject to set natural situations (*locus amoenus*, *locus horribilis*, sublime nature, etc.). Doroš, for example, begins each sketch in *Derevenskij dnevnik* with a short nature description.
- 16 The argument revolves around why a crane (журавль) is called a crane. The answer supplied by the head hunter, Anatolij Ivanovič, suggests that the name determines referential reality—a neo-Stalinist thesis. Журавль, in his view, is called so because of the long pump lever on a well (колодезь-журавль). When someone else points out that the bird came before the pump, Anatolij Ivanovič replies that this doesn't matter, since at that time the

bird *didn't* have a name. Decisive is the human act of naming, and not the sequential relations between referents. Dedok's "irrelevant" interjection that in Rjazan' they say "cirok" instead of "čirok" (teal) and that in Rjazan' they call *all* ducks "čirok" has a distinctly postmodern cast to it: meaning derives from differences within the language system, and the relation of the sign to its referent is arbitrary. Dedok's argument is also a Freudian slip ("[he] burst out with something entirely different than what he wanted to say" [PO, 218]) that marks the old man's slide from a semiotic, social order back into a natural, nameless one.

- 17 The same thing can be observed in the prison world of *Odin den' Ivana Denisoviča*, in which the concept of the outside world begins to disappear entirely. The only authentic activity is transcendental and Sisyphean—it is the work required to build the brick wall that keeps the prisoners prisoners.
- 18 The patriarchal, fetishist economy with its lack of ethical self-control may be traced back to Epicurean philosophy, which Solzhenitsyn also associates with Stalinism. For a detailed discussion of the relations between Epicureanism and Stalinism in Solzhenitsyn see Halperin 1981; for more on Solzhenitsyn's views on technology—which of course encompass a great deal more than the comparatively simple mechanisms of "Matrenin dvor"—see Casillo 1987.
- 19 This supports Robert Louis Jackson's paradoxical remark (1967, 69) that Matrena is the only true Christian and at the same time, "in the language of her own times," the only true communist. Solzhenitsyn appears to project the virtue of Christian humility onto the scarcity economics endemic to Socialist production (the true Christian is presumably best equipped to live in such an economy). Some thirty years later Solzhenitsyn's political manifesto *Kak nam obustroit' Rossiju* (1990) will repeat these ethical assumptions again. The best possible ethics is one of "self-limitation" [самоограничение]. Though Solzhenitsyn now supports a decentralized type of capitalism, he still speaks out against "modish" innovation and for the "healthy notion" that things should be repaired and not discarded (1990, 18).
- 20 Note Solzhenitsyn's use of the word "pamjat'" (memory) in its objectivized meaning as a stimulus for doing something or acting (cf. the entry in *Dal'*, *Tolkovyj slovar'*: "Это мне будет память, буду поминать." An archaic meaning is also *завещание*, legacy). The reader may recall how Šukov's jacket in *Odin den' Ivana Denisoviča* served literally as a kind of second skin, a private space in which items of meagre, but life-sustaining value could be secreted and then excreted again.
- 21 For more on Solzhenitsyn's logocentrism see Casillo 1987.
- 22 Solzhenitsyn associates "oneness" (in the Epicurean sense that "you only live once") with moral turpitude of the worst sort (see Halperin 1981, 481); it is precisely the fear that things will be lost after one time that leads to their

- fetishization. The notion of "twoness" is obviously also associated in Solženicyn's mind with Christian notions of rebirth and redemption: on her deathbed Matrena's face is described as being "more living than dead." (MD, 152)
- 23 If, as the song says, "The Miljukovs and Gučkovs are long gone / And everything has been brought into Russia in a new way" ("Милюковых и Гучковых нет давно, / Все по-новому в России введено" [ZTV, 402]) then only the Bolsheviks can be meant.
- 24 Baudrillard is convinced that "the only strategy is *catastrophic* and not the least bit dialectical. Things have to be pushed to the limit where everything is naturally inverted and collapses." (Baudrillard 1988, 123, his emphasis). Rather than postulating a utopian alternative, postmodernism pushes things to their limits in order to expedite a ritual destruction of value—according to Baudrillard, the only thing left to do in a posthistorical world. In Western postmodernism this catastrophe may be experienced as sublime, obscene, or schizoid; in Soviet postmodernism it seems to be mostly bathetic.
- 25 In an interview, Rasputin has said that during his early years as a writer he read a great deal of Platonov (cited in Semenova 1987, 23). "Starik i staruxa" was published in *Znamja* in 1937 and was presumably still accessible to Rasputin in the nineteen sixties.
- 26 Fedorov's messianistic scheme would have man overcome death so as to forego the need to bear new children. Fedorov's influence on Platonov is well documented (for a recent overview see Seifrid 1992, 20-24).
- 27 Cf. the old woman's reasoning: "I would see my happiness two times: the first time I was in a hurry and didn't notice it, but the second time it would suddenly come to me..." ("Я уже два раза видела бы свое счастье: первый раз я поспешила и не упомянула, а во второй раз спохватилась бы..." [SS, 177]). The old man, on the other hand, adheres to the view that the mind must nourish itself on things that "it does not yet know" (SS, 179).
- 28 This is reminiscent of a scene in Platonov's "Reka Potudan'" where the demobilized soldiers are described as having been transformed into "completely different people" only vaguely remembering themselves as they were before ("смутно помня себя, какими они были три-четыре года тому назад, потому что они превратились совсем в других людей" [Platonov 1988, 354]). "Vasilij i Vasilisa" seems in general to be a kind of *homage* to Platonov, as one constantly encounters typical themes and motifs, among them the swallows and sack (мешок) from *Kotlovan* and the theme of overcoming death by getting used to it ("Železnaja staruxa").
- 29 In Platonov's story, by contrast, the fact that the son in Leningrad never visits the old couple apparently contributes to their desire to have a new child to replace him.

- ³⁰ This end scene recalls the beginning of "Starik i staruxa" where the old man likes to look out the window at the weather and at passers-by. The only "event," though, is the cyclical, entirely predictable visit of the mailman with a monthly letter from the always absent son in Leningrad (cf. SS, 176).
- ³¹ The title refers to two types of shotgun bore. *Čok* also suggests *čoknutyj*, "cracked" or "nuts."
- ³² These include "Vospitanie po doktoru Spoku" (1974), "Moja žizn'" (1974), "Svidanija po utram" (1977); all in Belov 1983.
- ³³ As Kuznecova (1977, 57) has pointed out, Tonja is a deliberately exaggerated figure lacking any ability whatsoever to empathize with others. An example of this can be seen in the story "Vospitanie po doktoru Spoku," in which Tonja insists on taking their obviously feverish daughter on a long nighttime walk because she is raising her "according to Dr. Spock." It is hard to conceive of any sane parent doing such a thing, unless, as Belov apparently means to suggest, they are under the insidious influence of a foreign pediatrician. (It goes without saying that Dr. Benjamin Spock's well-known handbook *Baby and Child Care* does not prescribe the bizarre regimen employed by Tonja.)
- ³⁴ Called a "Bjuxard" in the story. Belov, who is otherwise careful with technical details, apparently means the East German "Bühag," an acronym for *Büchsenhandels-gesellschaft*. "Bjuxard" presumably sounded more decadent.
- ³⁵ Surganov (1977, 55), for example, describes Zorin's constant fuming as an infantile reaction to having things not always go his way. Surganov tries to justify this in psychological terms by saying that Zorin grew up in "fatherless times" (безотцовщина) during the war. One might also say that Zorin's problem is caused by his "postmodern" lack of an Oedipal conflict.
- ³⁶ In his article "Simulacra and Simulations" Baudrillard (1988, 166-184) also uses this metaphor and points out that when the Moebius strip is cut in two (lengthwise) it results in "an additional spiral without there being any possibility of resolving its surfaces." (1988, 176)
- ³⁷ That even chance is artificial and conventional (and thus capable of iteration and falsification) can be seen in the shooting competition that the characters hold earlier on. Kostja explains that when kolkhozniks divide up the mowing work they draw lots to see who is going to draw the first lot. When Boris objects that this could be continued on ad infinitum, Kostja ironically suggests that this is precisely the state they are in anyway: "Of course. In my opinion, that's all we're doing all the time, drawing a lot to see who is going to draw the lot before." ("Конечно. По-моему, все мы только и делаем, что тянем жребий, кому первому тянуть предыдущий" [CP, 362]). This

is a very neat, quintessentially Russian summation of the postmodern condition.

- ³⁸ This awareness of and resistance to postmodernism is already quite explicit in certain Soviet circles. The Soviet critic Seleznev (1983, 31), an admirer of Belov, approvingly cites the programmatic anti-postmodernism of John Gardner and speaks of the trend in America and elsewhere towards rejecting the "idols of postmodernism" for "true artists" like Belov.
- ³⁹ For more on Sorokin see also Groys 1992, 99-102.
- ⁴⁰ This double standard can be seen most notably in the sanctimonious voyeurism of Kostja Zorin, who is incensed at Alka's "shameless" glance but who nonetheless manages to take in her "none-too-fresh brassiere" ("несвежий лифчик" [CP, 353]) when she bends over to light up a cigarette. A similar incident is recorded by Mal'gin (1987, 141) in *Vse vpered!*, where the hero accidentally walks into a bathroom and again manages to catch the "shameless" hostess naked under her bathrobe. On the way out he trips over an even more revealing Freudian homonym that has been left behind by the author: the hero is said to hastily leave the "bathtub" (поспешно ушел из ванны) instead of the bathroom (ванной)!

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