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EDUARD LIMONOV: MAN WITH A TYPEWRITER, SEWING MACHINE, AND MACHINE GUN

Eduard Limonov, pseudonym of Eduard Savenko (b. 1943), was a controversial literary figure from the beginning, not only because of what he wrote but also because of the public persona he constructed, starting with provincial poet as hooligan and more recently as radical politician. Limonov, a writer that the Russian intelligentsia loves to hate, has staged his persona as an irritant to the intelligentsia's literary, moral, and political values although the contentious relationship changed somewhat after his imprisonment in 2001 (see also Matich 2005b). The moral question that arises in conjunction with his writing concerns the relationship of reprehensible political figure and author of imaginative literature: whether Limonov's politics taint it.

His favorite lines of Mayakovsky's poetry are from 1919: "Tishe, oratory!/ Vashe/ slovo,/ tovarishch mauzer" ("Quiet, orators! You have the floor, comrade Mauser").[1] Limonov's aesthetics cum politics engage "the real" as violence and representation, introduced as an aesthetic concept by the futurists and surrealists. He is an admirer of the French surrealist André Breton, who famously proclaimed in 1930 that "the simplest Surrealist act consists of dashing down into the street, pistol in hand, and firing blindly, as fast as you can pull the trigger, into the crowd" (Breton 1972, 125). The gesture was staged as an irritant to the reader, of the sort that Limonov deploys in his writing starting with his first novel *Eto ia – Edichka* (*It's Me – Eddy*, 1976) whose autobiographical hero has kept a photo of Breton with him for years.

As the title of art critic Hal Foster's book *The Return of the Real* (1996) suggests, "the real" has became an important locus of artistic representation in the second half of the twentieth century. Foster associates the real of postmodernism with Jaques Lacan's concept of the real grounded in trauma and informed by surrealism, and with Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection as the consequence of narcissistic crisis. Limonov's writing engages the real as it relates to shock, provocation, violence, and trauma of abjection, but also to real, i.e. actual, events and to affective authenticity which is not typically postmodern and which Foster would not have included in his definition of it. Limonov deploys an aes-

[1] From Vladimir Mayakovsky's, "Levyj marsh" (1963, 255). A Mauser is an automatic pistol.

thetics of violence, doing so indiscriminately in regard to politics, i.e. both from a leftist and a right-wing perspective. Dmitrii Golynko-Vol'fson (2003, 175) writes that he has formally perfected the "organic fusion of right-wing and leftist anarchist discourses that he shows off by expressing political views of completely different colors and shades."

My essay examines Limonov's life and writing against these questions, emphasizing his self-consciously constructed biographical myth without which we cannot adequately appreciate his writing. It focuses especially on the early *Eto ia – Edichka* and the recent *Kniga vody* (*Book of Water*, 2002) and other work written in and about prison.

The essay's underlying motivation is a desire to portray the complexity of Limonov's authorial persona against the standard view which tends to reduce post-Soviet Limonov to Russian fascist, scandal monger, and immoralist, labels that obscure his importance as writer. I am not suggesting that the labels have no truth value, but they tell only part of the story. My purpose here is to argue that Limonov's writing, virtually unknown by Slavists in the United States, deserves serious consideration despite his politics which are inimical to a liberal mindset. I should add that I have known Limonov for thirty years and wrote about his first novel *Eto ia – Edichka* as an important event in Russian literature many years ago (Matich 1986). Since then we have become friends, and I used to visit him in Paris and now visit him in Moscow. Sometimes we argue bitterly about moral and political questions, at other times we talk warmly about our lives, children, mutual friends, and literature.

I last saw Eduard in October 1910, the day before the bimonthly "Strategy 31" demonstration on Triumfal'naia Square in Moscow, the movement for the right to assembly initiated by Limonov. As usual, I brought wine and he cooked dinner. He fumed against veteran human rights activist Liudmila Alekseeva, with whom he had formed an alliance earlier in 2010, because she had reached a separate agreement with Moscow authorities. Compromise has never been Limonov's strategy, self-assertion has. He spoke proudly of his small children, describing a touching scene at the playground and the incongruity of his bodyguards nearby.[2] The most remarkable aspect of this visit was that between phone calls from his point-men regarding next day's demonstration, he recited from memory Mikhail Kuzmin's *Forel' razbivaet led* (*Trout Breaking Through the Ice*), my favorite twentieth-century Russian *poema*. I offer this striking juxtaposition of contentious, calculating, self-aggrandizing politician, on one hand, and

[2] My intelligentsia friends asked me to invite him to dinner in the fall of 2010. He said that the only way he can accept the invitation is if his bodyguard can sit at the table too, explaining that he treats his bodyguards as equals and doesn't feel right if they have to sit outside or in the kitchen like servants. Whether this was a way to turn down the invitation I cannot say, but it was certainly a provocative response which put the onus on the other, a test of their values and demand that they accept him on his terms.

admirer of Kuzmin's refined tribute to homoerotic love, on the other, as emblematic of Limonov's paradoxical persona.

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A self-made man, Limonov is a writer with a remarkable biography which he has subjected to notorious literary mythmaking, first in the New York, then Kharkiv autobiographical novels that he later described as his *Bildungsroman*,[3] a trilogy so to speak. The label autobiographical novel immediately alerts us to the generic dissonance of autobiography and novel. Even though autobiography is also a fiction, it foregrounds the question of the "real" in a biographical sense. Here is how Richard Borden (1999, 242) addresses it: "Eduard Savenko creates a 'real' Eduard Limonov, who, in turn, creates a literary self-fiction in which he calls himself by his created name and discusses the 'self' he invented in other fictions." It demonstrates that Limonov's self-conscious construction of his persona is part of a grand aesthetic project and that the persona cannot simply be defined in biographical terms. Writing about critics who claim that he is not capable of inventing his heroes, Limonov (2001, 234) agrees with them, adding that he has no desire to invent them, but that he knows how to find them in real life.

A few words about the Kharkiv novels that were published by Sintaksis, the Paris publishing house of Andrei Siniavsky and Maria Rozanova: *Podrostok Savenko* (*Adolescent Savenko*,1983) tells the story of the teenager "Eddy-Baby" as romantic hooligan, petty thief, and poet coming of age in a proletarian suburb of Kharkiv. A response to youth prose of the late fifties and early sixties, which introduced "real" young people into Soviet literature (in comparison with socialist realism), *Podrostok Savenko* recounts the lives of so to speak "more real" (in the mimetic and affective sense) Soviet teenagers from the provinces.[4] *Molodoi Negodiai* (Young Scoundrel, 1986) depicts Ed as an important provincial avant-garde poet, ready to move on to bigger and better things in Moscow. The trilogy portrays his conflicted masculinity, the challenges it poses, which is one of the red threads of Limonov's confessional autobiographical writing characterized by

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[3] See "Begushchie estetiki sovremennosti" (Limonov 2003, 212). *Kontrol'nyi vystrel* also contains a story about me titled "Kul'tura kladbishch"; I had recently published an article about the mafia tombstones of the 1990s – hence the title. When I first heard that Limonov had written about me, I was mortified, knowing that he had written scathingly about people he had known, but the story turned out to be quite touching in the Limonovian sense.

[4] Like Vasilii Aksenov's youth prose, the Kharkiv novels also have American popular culture references: e.g. a supposedly sexual experienced girl flatters Eddy by telling him that he has the looks of Elvis Presley – a name that Eddy knows just by hearsay, from the boy "in the know", the intelligentsia offshot Kadik (see. Limonov 2005a, 138, 267).

irritating narcissism, shameless self-aggrandizement, and in *Eto ia – Edichka* by pitiful abjection.

It is in Kharkiv's bohemian artistic world that he acquires his penname, from the Russian for lemon (limon),[5] a punk name that turned out to be prophetic: *Limonka*, meaning hand grenade, will be the name of the scandalous newspaper of the post-Soviet National Bolsheviks, suggesting Limonov's identification with the "real" – in the sense of violence – in art.[6] In a photo taken in 1996, after his return to Russia, a leather-jacketed Limonov stands with hand outstretched and a small grenade poised on it above a seated young woman (Liza Bleze). The photo is paired with another one in which she holds a fetishistic lemon – emblem of his old literary identity – in her hand, standing above a seated but tough looking Limonov.[7] The substitution of the old fetish object reifies the new explosive meaning of his pseudonym.

In the autobiographical *Kniga vody*, written in prison, Limonov (2002, 101) writes that Balzac and Baudelaire invented us all. Following the classical trajectory of Balzac's upwardly mobile hero, Limonov goes from the provinces to Moscow in 1967, not to secure wealth, but to raise the stakes of his playing field and to acquire fame. He establishes himself as a new poetic voice of the avant-garde underground, hobnobbing with western diplomats and conquering the heart of the acclaimed beauty Elena Shchapova, with whom he emigrates to the west in 1974. This is the subject of the megalomaniacal, yet ironic emigration fantasy *My natsional'nyi geroi* (*We the National Hero*, 1974), a prose-poem, written before their departure. Curiously, however, he never textualized his Moscow years before emigration. The poem is written against the background of the desire for further conquests that now include the world. A confectionary mock-heroic fantasy of Limonov and Elena conquering the West, it would contrast sharply with the reality of the poet's reception there depicted in *Eto ia – Edichka* (1979) and with the loss of his love object to New York's rich and famous

The fantastic literary journey and subsequent fall from the self-styled pedestal take place to the accompaniment of the hero's clothing, including the jacket of the "national hero" tailored by Limonov himself. The jacket can be said to reify the characterization of young Limonov in Moscow by conceptualist poet Lev Rubinshtein: that his personal property consisted of a typewriter and a sew-

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5 The pseudonym was suggested to Eduard Savenko by the Kharkiv avant-garde artist and conceptual writer Vagrich Bakhchanian, who emigrated to the U.S. and died in New York in 2009.

6 His leftist political leanings at the time of writing *Molodoi negodiai* are expressed in the novel in typically self-aggrandizing terms. He (2005b, 470) compares Ed, who earns money as a tailor, to Trotsky, who according to legend, writes Limonov, worked as a tailor in New York around 1905.

7 See photographs in Matich 2005b, 747-8.

ing machine (see Akopov 2003), meaning that he wrote poetry and sewed pants, which in *My natsional'nyi geroi* and *Eto ia – Edichka*, are literally woven into the fabric of the text. The primary source of Limonov's income in Moscow was sewing pants for Moscow's cultural elite.[8] Here is how Limonov (2001, 83-4) described his Moscow life many years later: "the young poet [...] moved from apartment to apartment with two tools": a sewing machine and a typewriter [shveinaia i pishushchaia mashinki]. In his one-room Paris apartment years later, the sewing machine was located not far from his writing desk.

Critic J. Hillis Miller (1982, 7) suggests an unusual association of sewing machine and writing in *Ariadne's Thread*, asking the question whether "the womb [is] a typewriter or a sewing machine." Miller describes Ariadne's thread, the one she gave to the mythical hero Theseus to find his way out of the labyrinth, as a "line that traces out the corridors of a labyrinth that is already a kind of writing." (Ibid. 10) We could say that one of Limonov's lifelong quests has been an Ariadne who would accompany him on his mythical journey. As to writing and sewing machine, the jacket of the "national hero" seamlessly brings together sewing, writing, erotic love, and the hero.[9]

Limonov writes in *Eto ia – Edichka* that the jacket was made from 114 pieces of fabric and had his and Elena's initials engraved on it, suggesting the kind of attention to detail required in writing. Although tailoring men's clothing is not an emblematic female activity, making patchwork quilts is, of which the jacket is an example. The figure of the seamstress laboring over her work at the sewing machine may be transposed to the writer at the typewriter. The two images are brought together metaphorically by Marcel Proust's narrator in *Time Regained*, who links writing with dress-making:

> [...] at every moment the metaphor uppermost in my mind changed as I began to represent to myself more clearly and in a more material shape the task upon which I was about to embark – I thought that at my big deal table, under the eyes of Françoise, who like all unpretentious people who live at close quarters with us would have a certain insight into the nature of my labours [...] I should work beside her and in a way almost as she worked herself [...] pinning here and there an extra page, I should con-

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[8] When Aksenov came to UCLA as writer in residence in 1974, he proudly demonstrated slacks tailored by Limonov. In fact, that was the first time I heard his name. He sewed pants for Bulat Okudzhava, Ernst Neizvestny, and many others.

[9] One of his best poems – "Ia v mysliakh poderzhu drugogo cheloveka" (I will hold another in my thoughts, 1969) – which displays a cool unexacerbated erotic narcissism, among other things, by focusing on the poet's clothing: "И вещь любую на себе я досконально рассмотрю/ Рубашку/ я до шовчиков излажу." (For a close reading of the poem, see Zholkovsky 1994, 147-63. The image of the seam in the diminutive (shovchik), which he irons out lovingly, references sewing. The link between sewing and writing – creation of narrative – was established ages ago, i.e. if we consider weaving and spinning equivalents of sewing in this regard. Let me just mention the old term 'narrative thread'.

> struct my book, I dare not say ambitiously like a cathedral, but quite simply like a dress. (Proust 1993, 508-9)

Limonov is a self-styled dandy. Feminized clothing characterized his image of those years, as it did many men in the west in search of a new masculinity, although the persona's feminization in *Eto ia – Edichka* also marks his abjection. In an autobiographical prison essay in which he describes his shifting identities, he refers to them as "radical clothing changes" (Limonov 2003, 212). But what I am suggesting more fundamentally is that the mythologized jacket and sewing serve as metaphor – not to say narrative thread – of the construction of Limonov's literary identity in *My – natsional'nyi geroi* and as memory of that constructed identity in *Eto ia – Edichka*. Sewing, moreover, contrasts with the conventional hero myth – in Homer's *Odyssey*, it is Penelope that is staged as the figure who wields the needle – and certainly with the aesthetics of violence, reflecting one of the many paradoxes of Limonov's persona.

The novel, which remains one of his most important works, is the story of a profound narcissistic crisis that produces invisibility, a condition the narcissistic persona cannot tolerate. Igor Smirnov (1994, 338-41) considers Limonov's trilogy "the most unadulterated and provocative" representation of narcissism in Russian post-Soviet literature, which he traces back to what he calls the "sado-avantgarde," an avant-garde that inscribes a sadistic sensibility that Smirnov associates especially with Mayakovsky. *Eto ia – Edichka* certainly contains sadistic fantasies, but the key to its sensibility and affect, I would contend, is a masochistic real as the expression of abjection. The abject Edichka exists on New York's social margins – outside the socially defined symbolic order, "a jettisoned object," in the words of Julia Kristeva, theorist of abjection. She writes that this object "does not seem to agree to [society's] rules of the game [and] from its place of banishment, the abject does not cease challenging its master" (Kristeva 1982, 2).

Limonov's upward mobility, premised not only on his literary accomplishments but also on mastery of a glamorous love object, comes to an abrupt halt in New York, but as he will write in prison, humiliation is a powerful stimulus (ibid. 214). Foster describes humiliation as disruptive as well as restorative, writing that it is an important ingredient of abject trauma discourse which both degrades and elevates the subject. Setting himself a literary challenge as a way of mastering the crisis, Limonov writes a novel, marking a radical shift in literary genre – from poetry to prose. He represents the crisis that includes loss of language, the instrument of his profession, by creating a first-person novelistic voice that is heart-rending, shocking, and shameless, characterized by a poetics

of irritation.[10] Loss of language is a fundamental ingredient of abjection and the consequent return of the real: language is the primary constitutive component of the symbolic order from which the abject subject is banished.

The search for a new identity – a radical clothing change – in *Eto ia – Edichka* engages the author's penchant for literary experiment, reflected earlier in his remarkable poetry, which some readers consider superior to his prose. The novel produces an abject immigrant-speak, characterized by the superposition of broken English on his native Russian language with the purpose of writing a real – in the abject and mimetic sense – immigrant, *not* high-minded émigré, novel.[11] In regard to Edichka's identity, the most striking, emblematic instance of the real as existence outside language and as jettisoned object is the famed nocturnal sexual encounter with a chance black man in an empty New York lot. This encounter is the novel's most transgressive violation of literary taboos. Needless to say, it shocked and offended émigré readers as did the novel's obscenities; Russian literature had never represented homosexual sex so directly and so affirmatively or deployed *mat*, for that matter. The homoerotic episode is simultaneously the expression of Edichka's abject degradation and, paradoxically, a stepping stone to the creation of a new 'real' identity, one that transcends literary stereotypes and serves as a turning point in his recuperation. Abjection, in other words, is a powerful tool for Limonov in literary terms.[12]

Certain aspects of the real as abjection could be said to resemble the kind of self-serving politics of contemporary "reality TV" of the sort that stages the abject subject and confessional bad taste, available to Limonov in 1970s New York in trash magazines. Inscribing a trashy sensibility, *Eto ia – Edichka* deploys an irritating, resentful, and self-pitying shrill voice whose precedents in high literature are Dostoevsky's Underground Man, the lyrical persona of Mayakovsky's *Oblako v shtanakh* (*Cloud in Pants*) and Kavalerov of Olesha's *Zavist'* (*Envy*). Edichka's conflicted voice is multidimensional: childlike yet ironic; resentful yet caring, self-centered in its self-pity yet coldly observant; romantic yet hardnosed and scathingly honest; obsessive, yet terse. Limonov's unique voice, which he crafted for his first novel, continues to inhabit his best

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[10] Even though I am suggesting an existential reason for the shift, Limonov's decision to turn to prose also had practical considerations. A practical man, despite his romanticism, he understood that in the west prose fiction pays and poetry doesn't. Exemplary of his pragmatism was the unofficial commerce of his poetry in Moscow: he would sell typescript collections for five rubles apiece after reading poetry at private apartments.

[11] For a discussion of the superimposition of Russian on English in *Eto ia – Edichka*, see Matich 1996, 169-70.

[12] When asked about this episode – whether it was real in the sense of true – Limonov invariably answers that he is a confirmed heterosexual, that *Eto ia – Edichka* is a novel, not real life, distinguishing the real from fiction. Yet the use of the first person, coincidence of the author's and hero's name, and compellingly real and moving encounter beg the question.

writing, though its juvenile decibels have been contained. Limonov, after all, is 68 years old.

Russian émigrés everywhere read the novel. It became a *succes de scandale* and was translated into multiple languages, in France as *Le poète russe préfère les grands nègres* (1980), in Germany as *Fuck Off, Amerika* (1982), titles that reflect his, and the publisher's no doubt, undisguised love of publicity. It is precisely such trash aspects of Limonov's writing and persona, including exhibitionism, which intelligentsia critics have reviled and many continue to do so. More importantly, *Eto ia – Edichka's* obsession with a narcissistic subject seemed out of place in a Russian literature then dominated by a very different trauma, the Soviet trauma of Stalinist history and Brezhnev stagnation. Had Foster read the novel, he would have no doubt called it "anarchic," "regressive," "infantile," even "autistic," representing the voice of a loser, Foster's qualifiers of post-surrealist abject art that fit Limonov's novel to a tee (cp. Foster 1996, 159-60). The figure of a loser as streetwise modern punk breaking taboos is one of Limonov's contributions to Russian literature. *Dnevnik neudachnika* (Diary of a Loser), a Rozanovian text, written right after *Edichka*, is considered by some Russian critics his best work.[13] At the beginning of the twentieth century, it was Vasilii Rozanov who played the role of controversial paradoxicalist: politically, morally, and stylistically.

An equally important reason for the negative Russian reception of the New York novel were its non-intelligentsia and anti-intelligentsia politics: that instead of allying himself with the anti-Soviet émigré establishment, Edichka seeks a new political identity among New York's marginal Trotskyites and down-and-out black men living on the margins of American society. This brings up a dimension of Limonov's persona that intelligentsia critics tend to dismiss: that the novel, despite its narcissism, expresses compassion for the abject victims of New York's social world. It is this empathy with society's *other* marginalized victims, not those designated by the liberal intelligentsia – the real "real" according to Limonov – that will figure in much of Limonov's writing, a 'real' that lies outside Foster's view of abjection as artifice. In this radical clothing change, moreover, he claimed his break with Russian literature at a conference of émigré writers in Los Angeles in 1981, declaring that he regrets having been born into Russian literature and that American literature was a more appropriate place to hang his hero's jacket.[14] This provocative claim, or literary

[13] Among them are Gleb Morev, Aleksandr Goldshtein, and Sasha Sokolov, Limonov's contemporary who wrote three of the very best post-Soviet Russian novels and then virtually disappeared from the literary scene. The significance of Sokolov as writer is shared by most critics and serious readers of recent Russian literature.

[14] See "Limonov o sebe" (Matich/Heim 1984, 200). Limonov said this at a conference of Russian writers in emigration in 1981, and proclaimed that he and Sasha Sokolov, unlike the other writers present, were free of politics and couldn't be used by either the Soviet or

mask, conflicts jarringly with his later Russian nationalism, but then consistency has never been his strong suit or goal.

What seems glaringly at odds with Limonov's radicalism, however, is the choice of female love object, the most palpable and immediate source of *Eto ia – Edichka's* narcissistic abjection. While his politics and literary production are invariably nonconformist, the female love object is strikingly conventional: a long-legged fashion plate from a glossy capitalist magazine, a fetishized commodity object, certainly not an exemplar of the new real. Elena supposedly worked as a model in New York and ended up marrying an Italian aristocrat, Count Gianfranco de Carli; his second wife Natal'ia Medvedeva (Natasha), who also jettisoned Limonov and with whom his Parisian period is affiliated, was a model too, a night club singer, and later, a minor rock star in Russia. Limonov's current wife Ekaterina Volkova, mother of his two children and from whom he is separated, is a glamorous Russian film actress. Despite his leftist radicalism, he had been seduced by the world of glamour from the beginning, priding himself on his women who belonged to this world. So possession of society's female commodity fetish that is linked to misogyny are part of Limonov's self-made hero myth, but can we say the same about the compulsion to repeat the conquest of the fetishized female?

The compulsion to repeat the traumatic past, which according to Lacan is essential to the real, characterizes the abject subject psychoanalytically; Limonov repeatedly seeks to recapture the glamorous love object, the source of his abjection. The loss of the love object stimulates Limonov's literary creativity; her possession, which is always ephemeral, so to speak liberates the author from writing. Kristeva calls abjection "a border" that impels the abject subject to start afresh, tirelessly build, and take risks, a psychoanalytic interpretation that may be applied to Limonov's life practice. The other as love object jettisons him "into an abominable real" which Kristeva associates with violent and passionate existence (Kristeva 1982, 8-9). Offering a telling comment about his childhood and early youth, he told me once that his parents were a self-contained unit, that they really didn't need him to mediate and complete their partnership.

What is new in Limonov's post-Soviet writing in this regard is the expansion of the erotic battlefield to include war, political revolution, and prison. He links them to a "new aestheticism" that produces a new response to abjection which redefines the real in decidedly political and violent terms although risk-taking and fantasies of violence were part of Limonov's persona from the beginning. As he writes in *Kniga vody*, his prison autobiography: "I understood instinctively, with the nostrils of a dog, that of all plots in the world the most important are war and women," suggesting that eros is the impetus to war (see Limonov

American side to further their political interests. Little did he know that some ten years later he would be consumed by politics.

2002, 128-9). This new aestheticism was accompanied by a clothing change quite literally, one that I witnessed in the late eighties when I last visited Limonov in Paris. He was dressed in a Soviet military uniform – a far cry from the jacket of the national hero – that had belonged to his father. He showed it off proudly like a little boy playing war. It never entered my mind then that he was trying on Limonov as warrior, marking a radical shift of abjection and a new stage in his biographical myth.

With the changes in Russia in the early nineties and loss of Natasha, which he describes poignantly in *Kniga vody*, Limonov began looking for new challenges and geographies where to stage them, revealing, as he writes, a lifelong nostalgia for space as well as worship of weapons: "a bullet is good, vengeful, and hot," proclaims the authorial persona already in *Dnevnik neudachnika*, which contains numerous paeans to knives and guns.[15] Instead of the pen, he picked up a real gun and assumed the role of a man of action in response to his personal crisis of the early 1990s and chose a battleground that directly engaged real life and real death in the national wars in Serbia, then Trans-Dniestr and Abkhazia. They became his new battleground of the real and of a new masculine identity – certainly a radical clothing change – and of shocking reprehensible behavior: in the case of Serbia he provocatively staged the Serbs as the "real" abject subjects, not as victimizers of other national and ethnic groups. He joined the ranks of Serbian war criminals (Radovan Karadzić and Ratko Mladić), wearing a soldier's uniform and carrying a gun instead of penning stylized fantasies of gunning down the rich and powerful. A video of Limonov shooting a round of machine gun fire into Sarajevo in 1992 that was broadcast by the BBC is available on You-Tube, although instead of fierce warrior, he looks awkward and childish next to Karadzić.[16]

Shooting blindly into Sarajevo is palpably immoral. The video shows him literally substituting a gun for the sedentary pen or typewriter – certainly an instance of the return of the real as real, not discursive violence. We may consider the event as staging his favorite Mayakovsky lines ("Vashe slovo, tovarishch Mauzer") which, as he writes, he would like to have authored himself. If we consider the act against the surrealist aesthetics of violence and the gesture advocated by André Breton – of firing into a crowd – the image may be said to reify it, although in the surrealist context it was an act of aesthetic provocation, as it was in Mayakovsky's. Politically, it was a call to violence from the left whose realness remained ambiguous. As Boris Groys writes in *Art Power*

[15] "Хороша ты, пуля. Отомстительна ты, пуля. Пуля ты горяча..." The last fragment of *Dnevnik Neudachnika* begins with these words, revealing the persona's *ressentiment* and desire to avenge all losers, including himself. (Limonov 1982, 249).

[16] The film titled *Serbian Epics* (1992) was directed and produced by Paweł Pawlikowski and was aired by BBC.

(2008), Breton's "famously proclaimed terrorist act of shooting into a peaceful crowd" cannot be considered an authentic artistic gesture, especially not since 9/11, and that in the media driven image production of our time, "art is obviously on the losing side" (Groys 2008, 124).

Groys writes that the contemporary "real" of terrorism and the war on terror has problematized the old relationship of avant-garde artist (as "iconoclast") and warrior (as "iconophile") because of the media's superior power to instantaneously reproduce the terrorist's radical images (ibid. 121-9). Many have responded to them as the ultimate representation of the unspeakable real. The avant-garde German composer Karlheinz Stockhausen purportedly stated it much more shockingly: that 9/11 was "the greatest piece of art there has ever been" (quoted in Redfield 2009, 33), with which Limonov predictably identified. Groys counters such responses by claiming that instead of "the return of the real," these images represent a "political sublime:" "we are in need of criticism that analyzes the use of these images as the new icons of the political sublime," writes Groys, adding that "the context of art is especially appropriate for this [...] criticism" (ibid. 126-128).[17]

Aestheticizing the unspeakable trauma of 9/11 is morally outrageous, which Limonov does in one of his prison books (2002a). He learned about the terrorist attack in Lefortovo prison, which he watched on TV, and wrote an impassioned essay in praise of the terrorists who had avenged the humiliation of the bombing of Baghdad (1991) and Belgrade (1999). Needless to say, Limonov firing a machine gun from a hill overlooking Sarajevo pales by comparison to 9/11, but not so the horrific images of the Srebrenica massacre in Bosnia a few years after the filmed Sarajevo episode. Srebrenica has become an iconic representation of abjection and return of the real real during the 1990s in former Yugoslavia. I am, of course, not implicating Limonov in Srebrenica, but I am suggesting that he was complicit in the Serbian war of terror and that of the Kosovar Albanians and Croats, that his turn to war and violence may be read against the morally heinous link of the return of the real in war and new avant-garde art.

Limonov's retort to my outrage at the time (I phoned him in Paris after his return from Serbia to express outrage) was to call Paris a necropolis and to say that a "real" person needs blood and heightened experience: he had taken the next step in constructing his biographical myth by crossing the border from discursive to real violence. When I responded that he may have been shooting at innocent people, he told me that I am like the liberal intelligentsia which pro-

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[17] Groys also writes that "art institutions are places of historical comparison between the past and present," that "they possess the means and ability to be sites of critical discourse [...] Art institutions serve as a place where we are reminded of the entire history of the critique of representation and of the critique of the sublime – so that we can measure our own time against this historical background" (129).

tects itself against the real with predictable humanistic sentiment, assuming a stance that suggests an aesthetic ethos regardless of its human consequences. His response, which also included defense of the Serbs, reflected the new relationship between aesthetics and politics in his views. In fairness to Limonov, however, we must also consider his description of the Sarajevo episode in *Smrt* ("Death" in Serbian) in which he expresses outrage at the editing of the video which, as he writes, ruined his reputation in the west. He claims in the book about his sojourn in former Yugoslavia that he was firing at a target range, not at peaceful Sarajevo, images of which were spliced into the video (see Limonov 2008, 32-3). We have no way of judging the truth value of this later statement.

After his return to Russia, Limonov, together with Eurasianist Alexander Dugin, became the leader of the National-Bolshevik Party (NBP), founded in 1993, whose very name staged provocation. It evokes the two most bankrupt ideologies and iconographies for the liberal Russian intelligentsia and humanistic values in general: fascist, or Nazi, and Bolshevik, or communist, although it also referred to the émigré Nikolai Ustrialov's National Bolshevism of the early 1920s which could be described as proto-fascist but not proto-Nazi.[18] Dugin, who was especially concerned with the break-up of the Soviet Union, promoted a Eurasian Russian imperialism that would include Europe! Limonov was more concerned with the rights of Russian nationals in former Soviet republics and the abject state of those dispossessed in Yeltsin's Russia, especially Russians, rather than Eurasian utopias. After they parted ways in 1999, the NBP made a decided populist turn and after Limonov's release from prison, a liberal one: during the Yeltsin period, Limonov's preoccupation was the impoverishment of Russia; under Putin and after prison, his focus became the police state.[19] Returning to Russia, Limonov transformed Edichka's abject shout into one resembling a futurist, or surrealist, shout (what Limonov called "krichalka") deployed by a bullhorn on Moscow streets during political demonstrations of the Natsboly; some critics, resembling the response to dadaists and futurists many years before, called them irritatingly juvenile; others considered them criminal.

The stakes of Limonov's new identity changed the playing field: the writer turned politician clearly was playing in the arena of an ever more real real in which it has become difficult to distinguish his writerly persona from the one of political leader. Instead of mock-heroic fantasies, like *My – natsional'nyi geroi*, the new image revealed the hero's desire to become a real, not phantasmal, con-

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[18] For a careful analysis of Limonov's fascism, see Schenfield 2001, 190-220.

[19] The story of Limonov's political activity on his return to Russia is complex; it started with his joining the National Salvation Front in 1992, which included such different figures as Alexander Prokhanov, Alexander Dugin, etc. They called for the overthrow of the new Russian government because of the economic tactics of shock therapy it used. During this period, his politics aligned him with other unsavory political figures, for instance Zhirinovsky. All this outraged the Russian liberal intelligentsia.

queror, and some of his writing from this period suffered accordingly, not to speak of his statements and actions. My purpose here, however, is not the party of National Bolsheviks and its politics, but Limonov as writer whose right-wing populist politics and engagement in war had a decidedly deleterious effect on the reception of his writing.[20]

Limonov was arrested on the charge of illegal possession of weapons, terrorism, and planned armed invasion of Northern Kazakhstan in April 2001, adding prison to his colorful biography. The last two charges were dropped, yet he received a four-year sentence, but was released after a little more than two years. Imprisonment, which marked the defeat of his political ambitions, represented a new crisis of abjection, with the difference that this one was not precipitated by the loss of a love object or loss of language and homeland. It challenged him to pick up the pen once again as a way of mastering the crisis, perhaps also to confront his having picked up a real rather than metaphoric gun after the crisis of the early 1990s, although the latter may be wishful thinking on my part.. Kristeva suggests that "the writer is a phobic who succeeds in metaphorizing in order to keep from being frightened to death; instead he comes to life again in signs" (Kristeva 1982, 38). During the incarceration of more than two years, Limonov penned eight books, including some of his best, certainly an impressive number. We could call him a Stakhanovite if we apply to him retroactively the Stalinist labor paradigm, but then he has always been a disciplined hard worker.[21]

Since his imprisonment, we can claim that Limonov may be declared successful in establishing himself as media celebrity and well-known opposition political figure who continually redefines his upwardly mobile trajectory. From radical nationalist before prison, he has become more concerned with civic society since his release, collaborating with Garry Kasparov in forming the opposition movement "Drugaia Rossiia" (*The Other Russia*, the title of a 2003 book by

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[20] It is noteworthy in this regard that during the 1980s (after *Eto ia – Edichka*), Edward Brown, the canonic historian of post-revolutionary Russian literature in the U.S., viewed Limonov as an important new voice in contrast to today's authoritative historian of recent imaginative writing, Mark Lipovetsky, who simply excludes Limonov from consideration. Something similar may be said about Mikhail Epstein. True, both of these critics have a postmodern bias, but they cast their postmodern net widely. My hunch is that the reason is political rather than literary, having to do with Limonov's turn to the right during the 1990s. An exception is Alexander Zholkovsky. Although not primarily a specialist on contemporary literature, he has written about it too. He gives clear preference to Limonov's poetry, especially that written before emigration. Considering Limonov and Joseph Brodsky very different poets, which of course they are, Zholkovsky treats them as equals, e.g. in *Text Counter Text* (1994).

[21] Mar'ia Vasilievna Rozanova (the wife of Andrei Siniavsky), who published *Podrostok Savenko* and *Molodoi negodiai* (Sintaksis), described Limonov as the only reliable helper in émigré Paris of the 1980s. Once she asked him to clean up her cellar which he did quickly and well unlike other young visitors to their house in the Parisian suburb Fontenay-aux-Roses whom she asked for help (personal communication).

Limonov). In recent years in fact, he has been one of the few visible opposition figures, even though some of his political activities, or antics, seem phantasmal, not to say outrageous. We can also claim that he succeeded in redefining the reception of the Natsboly, an illegal party of young nationalist rogues. According to a 2003 article in the *New York Times*, Putin's youth movement Nashi (Ours) was formed in response to the Natsboly (see Meier 2008), who have been called tomato terrorists and velvet terrorists. Many of their public actions (actionism) indeed have a playful dimension: throwing tomatoes or rotten eggs at opponents, or hanging a forty-foot placard saying "Putin uidi sam" (Putin leave on your own) on the old Rossiia Hotel on Red Square.

Kniga vody deservedly received the prestigious Andrei Bely Prize for prose fiction in 2003, a clear sign of literary success with the critical establishment that had rejected Limonov's earlier literary production. The hallowed position of political prisoner had its effect. A member of the jury, the well-known critic Gleb Morev, who has written about Kuzmin, describes the book as:

> [...] a lyrical confession of someone who has been defeated, that in spirit it resembles Limonov's best work – *Dnevnik neudachnika*. But a loser cannot be a politician. *Kniga vody* is valuable precisely because it contains only language, which comes to one's aid when there is no one and nothing left to trust. It would be against the jury's principles to pass over this verbal experiment even if it comes from an outcast and a man spurned. (Osminskaja 2003, 434).

Limonov calls *Kniga vody* his "geographic memoir" that represents "the waters of life," ranging from oceans, seas, rivers, and lakes to fountains and saunas, which serve as section headings, with individual chapters in each section devoted to an autobiographically significant body of water. The structure resembles the kind of geographic categorization he liked to perform in childhood, creating lists of all the seas, he could find on the globe for instance.[22]

"Eti moi vospominaniia mozhno chitat' s liuboi stranitsy i v liubom napravlenii. Oni plavaiut v vechnosti, im ne nuzhna protiazhennost'" ("this memoir of mine may be read starting with any page and in any order. They swim in eternity, they don't need temporal extension"), writes Limonov (2002, 74) regarding the self-conscious erasure of chronology, as if prison makes it irrelevant. Instead water spatializes time and creates a chronotope of sorts. It is reinforced by the representation of the same body of water more than once, in different periods of his life, revealing the changes in Limonov's persona but not in chronological order: in the case of the Adriatic, for instance, he first writes about the Adriatic on

[22] *Kniga vody*, written in Lefortovo prison, begins with the largest bodies of water and ends with the smallest, suggesting the process of the persona's deflation, or abjection, while awaiting trial.

the Croatian side, where he became a soldier in the rogue Serbian army in 1993, and later about Venice, on the other side, in 1982, depicting the dissolute life of his Paris period.

Another way that the text spatializes his autobiography is by framing all the bodies of water that Limonov stepped into or sat next to in chapters that resemble travel snapshots, images that he inscribes literally in *Kniga vody* many times, suggesting the structure of a photo album, which he describes as a spatialized narrative of life. For that matter, he published a textualized personal photo album several years before prison, in which the captions are handwritten, with mistakes crossed out and corrected (Gusev 1996). The photograph was already an important image in *Eto ia – Edichka*, but mostly as a pained reference to Elena, who became a model and had been stolen from him.

The snapshot in a photo album is always about memory, as is *Kniga vody*, which is also about what it means to remember: water is like memory, writes Limonov (2002, 5): "it flows, blending what passes through it and washes everything away." In *Camera Lucida*, Roland Barthes suggests that the photograph stops time and inscribes death while also deferring it. Susan Sontag writes something similar: "All photographs are *memento mori*. To take a photograph is to participate in another person's (or thing's) mortality, vulnerability, mutability." (Sontag 1977, 15) The paradoxical meaning of the photo, I would suggest, informs Limonov's autobiographical literary photo albums, whose subject invariably are life and death.

One of the leitmotifs of the memoir is taking a swim in all of the bodies of water that the author visits, reifying the desire for new experiences and leaving his trace everywhere. This and the reference to Heraclitus's supposed maxim that "you can't enter the same water twice"[23] mirror his obsession with movement – moving on, which *Kniga vody* reifies by imaginatively colonizing as many waters as possible – and, so to speak, narcissistically fixing his reflection in them. This narcissistic mirror ultimately proves more reliable than the women in whose reflections Edichka sought to fix his identity. In the sense of the real the text does this by means of the snapshot, without the irritating excesses and self-aggrandizement of Edichka (tellingly, the New York novel already deploys unusual images of water). And as in *Eto ia – Edichka*, the imprisoned author once again explores erotic masochism, but does so much more self-consciously.

The first section of *Kniga vody* titled "Moria" (Seas) opens with Natasha, the heroine of the memoir, swimming in the Mediterranean in Nice and ends with her on the Pacific in California (where the two met), but in contrast to the New York novel, the representation of Limonov's relationship with the woman he had loved is quietly sad, not dejected, and is viewed from narrative distance. The text, moreover, ends on a very different note: the appearance in his life of

[23] These words are quoted by Socrates in Plato's *Cratylus*.

"*kroshka* [little] Nastia" who lacks the attributes of the female commodity fetish and who remains faithful to him. In the parting words of *Kniga vody*, he declares his love to her, as if to suggest mastery of erotic masochism, although soon after returning from prison he will leave Nastia to turn once again to the pursuit of a glamorous love object.[24]

Kniga vody was written before his trial when he was facing the possibility of a long prison sentence – the prosecutor would request eighteen years. In it Limonov takes stock of his life, lyrically, yet tersely, with the purpose of writing it into literary history. Among the authors he references are Herodotus, Heraclitus, and Avvakum, on one hand, and Baudelaire, Wilde, Rimbaud, and the Pier Paolo Pasolini on the other, a list dominated by non-Russian authors despite his Russian nationalist politics. The stakes in this autobiographical work are very different from *Edichka's*: it is not a book of an abject infantile persona expelled from society, but of someone who firmly exists inside the symbolic order of language and wields its metaphoric power. *Kniga vody* deploys Limonovian provocation only in small doses, exploring instead existential truths and the space of intimacy characterized by a sense of profound solitude. Dmitry Bykov, the well-known contemporary critic, poet, novelist, and admirer of Limonov's writing, describes this truth as "the struggle of the human with the inhuman, the encounter of power and weakness, the intimate and the titanic" (Bykov 2008, 32)[25] Bykov's assessment of *Kniga vody* may also be applied to *Edichka*, but in the earlier text these struggles and encounters were rendered as the *cri de coeur* of a narcissistic persona filled with ressentiment and incapable of seeing himself from a distance.

A similar struggle informs Limonov's prison book, *Po tiur'mam* (*In Prisons*, 2004), his *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, written after prison. It is devoted to his experience of its profoundly abject space and the relationship of human and inhuman, power and weakness defined in Limonov's terms.[26] Like *Kniga vody*, the Russian reception of *Po tiur'mam* has been positive. Even the well-known liberal author Liudmila Ulitskaia praised it, writing the introduction

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[24] Nastia (Anastasiia Lisogor), whom I met, indeed was different – shy, unworldly, lacking any of the femme fatale qualities of Elena and Natasha. Limonov was different in her presence too. If with Natasha, he often seemed intimidated, with Nastia he was more a father figure and teacher proud of his precocious student and lover. When he and Nastia met she was only sixteen years old. She came to join NBP and so to speak stayed.

[25] "All his life, he loved the solar male principle, he has been condemned to hate the female, inconstant, lunar one, and because of that, the eternal dependence on the female has been so difficult for him, though sweet. To sever all ties – home, parents, wife, homeland, even comrades-in-arms that had exhibited weakness, to shake off all earthly dust, to temper himself to the hardness of steel – is Limonov's path," continues Bykov.

[26] Here is what Limonov wrote in the copy of the book he gave me: "Prodolzhaia traditsiiu russkogo tiuremnogo zhanra, vot tebe Ol'ga – zapiski. Dokumental'nye" (continuing the tradition of the Russian prison genre, here, Olga, are my notes. Documentary [notes])

to its French edition. What differentiates *Po tiur'mam* from *Kniga vody* is that although it chronicles Limonov's prison experience, it focuses equally on the other prisoners. Like Solzhenitsyn, the author identifies with them, although they are not political prisoners but ordinary criminals. Limonov (2004a, 82) repeatedly refers to his own persona as "muzhichok v tulupchike" (a little muzhik in a diminutive sheepskin coat) who is their brother that doesn't judge them, and together with them is carried along by the wind; the sincere and ironic figure of the "muzhichok" is that of a simple peasant who is associated with Emel'ian Pugachev, the eighteenth century leader of a major peasant and Cossack rebellion, underscoring the narrator's populist sentiments.

Yet Limonov also distances himself from the other prisoners, the more real abject objects, as a way of managing his own abjection, overcoming it once again by reading and writing. He reads voraciously (reading has always been part of his upward mobility), texts like Freud's *Totem and Taboo*, which is about ritual collective violence against the father, Limonov's perennial opponent. It is against the father in the guise of the state and society that he and the National Bolsheviks have pitched their battle. Limonov expresses empathy for the fate of his prison mates that live in a degraded society, which instead of exploiting the vital energy of its youth pushes them into crime, drugs, alcohol, or emigration. In keeping with his attraction to violence – pleasure in trauma and excess – , he is fascinated by those prisoners who committed horrific crimes, which he describes coldly, almost like a physiologist that reveal his characteristic power of observation. An author he names more than once in *Po tiur'mam* is the Marquis de Sade, one of his literary models early on. Yet there are also chapters that express his personal emotional attachments, for instance, to Natal'ia Medvedeva. He learns of her untimely death in prison, which he commemorates by writing a touchingly heartfelt poem and by citing the opening of Kuzmin's *Forel' razbivaet led*. He writes that he declaimed the *poema* under his breath while riding to the courthouse: "Stoiali kholoda, i shel 'Tristan'. /V orkestre pelo ranenoe more." Although he doesn't say so, I think he would have liked to have written the image of "ranenoe more" (wounded sea).

In contrast to *Kniga vody*, which is about imaginary travel and escape from the constricted space of prison, *Po tiur'mam*, though it chronicles the inmates' physical movement through the prison system, is about the constriction of space and what it means in existential and aesthetic terms. He repeats more than once that "prison is the empire of the close-up. Here everything is close and necessarily exaggerated," deploying, as in *Kniga vody*, a conceptual visual lens to represent the spatialization of experience, although it is that of a magnifying glass, or cinematic close-up, not a snapshot taken from a distance. Following this claim, the text offers a surreal close-up of the prisoners as abject subjects:

На тыквах и щетинистых яйцах голов в зэках прорезаны рваные отверстия глаз. Они мохнаты и, как пруды – камышом, обросли ресницами и бровями. Это мутные, склизкие пруды и дохлый камыш. Отверстия глаз окружены ущельями морщин на лбу и рытвинами морщин под глазами. Нос с пещерами ноздрей, мокрая дыра рта, корешки зубов или молодых и свежих, или гнилых пополам с золотыми. [...] Таким зэковское личико предстает таракану, ползающему по нему во сне, но можно увидеть его и такому специальному зэку, как я. (Limonov 2004a. 7)

Torn eye slits were cut in the pumpkins and stubble-covered eggs of heads. They are shaggy and overgrown with eyebrows and eyelashes like ponds with reeds. These are dulled slimy ponds and lifeless reeds. The eye orifices are surrounded by caverns of wrinkles on the forehead and potholes under the eyes. The nose with caves of nostrils, the mouth – a wet hole, stubs of teeth, young and fresh or half rotten, half golden. [...] This is how the face [lichiko] of the zek appears to the cockroach crawling on it while he sleeps, but also to such a special zek like me.

Constriction offers another kind of aesthetic possibility. The close-up allows the author to explore the world around him as if from the perspective of the abject object, a cockroach, with which he identifies in the prison cell. The face of the prisoner is figured as a primordial landscape: cavernous, grand, yet disgusting, on the verge of death. It represents another body of water – a stagnant slimy pond – and even more so than *Kniga vody*, *Po tiur'mam* is a text about solitude and death, a condition that the author explores and savors. Here is how Limonov described death in *Dnevnik neudachnika* (1982, 243): "Death must be met firmly and artistically – by means of a pose, a challenge, showing off, festively, best of all with a smile. [...] Death is the most important task. One must prepare for it. One can ruin the most valiant life with a bad death. Birth does not depend on us, death does". Death can be described as Limonov's romantic ideal.

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Limonov has certainly achieved fame. He has become a bestseller in Russia. Although his literary reputation there remains controversial, many consider him an important voice in contemporary Russian literature despite the taint of National Bolshevism. The Sarajevo episode, much more troubling for Western than Russian readers, if true remains morally reprehensible, as do most of his politics, but in my mind they do not taint his best writing unless we judge literary value in the terms of the author's moral behavior. Limonov's prose fiction is an exemplar of the return of "the real," not only because it gives voice to the abject social margins and introduces new subjects, or because of its fascination with violence. Limonov is also a writer who represents authentic feelings which include

compassion – an anti-Foster iteration of the real – that range widely along the emotional and moral spectrum, and at his best he does so economically. A contemporary literary text that explores authenticity and authorial affect is refreshing against the backdrop of the kind of postmodern play, fantasy, and irony, ranging on cynicism, that dominate contemporary Russian literature. It may be the reason why Andrei Zorin (2003, 69) claims – despite his criticism of Limonov – that he will definitely read his next book, but isn't sure whether he will do the same in the case of Vladimir Sorokin.

Limonov has created a paradoxical identity that calls to mind Vasilii Rozanov, reigning paradoxalist of early Russian modernism and brilliant stylist, whom early Limonov acknowledged as mentor. Like Limonov's, Rozanov's persona, which many among his intelligentsia contemporaries found unpalatable (some still do), deployed provocation in writing the erotic, religious, and political. He penned erotic scenes that shocked many readers. He wrote vicious antisemitic articles for the reactionary press during the famed Mendel Beilis trial – a fabricated case of blood libel in Kiev – while at the same time publishing *Liudi lunnogo sveta* (People of the Moonlight), a book on religion and homosexuality, in which he gives clear preference to Judaism over Christianity. Members of his circle condemned Rozanov after his shockingly anti-Semitic and shrill nationalist *Oboniatel'noe i osiazatel'noe otnoshenie evreev k krovi* (The Jews' Olfactory and Tactile Relationship to Blood, 1914) without, however, dismissing his other writing as a result.

At stake in regard to Limonov's views are not only his actions of the 1990s, when he took part in national wars and adopted a rightist cum leftist political ideology in Russia, but also his "monstrous" (his term) political heroes. The list consists of such unspeakable names as Hitler, Mussolini, Stalin, as well as the more recent Slobodan Milošević and Radovan Karadžić. Limonov writes about Hitler, Mussolini, and Milošević in *Sviashchennye monstry* (Sacred Monsters, 2004), a prison book that consists of twenty-four short chapters dedicated to well-known Russian and foreign historical figures. In the instance of Hitler and Mussolini, failure, claims Limonov, explains their turn to politics – in the case of Hitler, failure as painter and architect (!), as if to justify their monstrosity and by extension his own.

Limonov's identification with losers – of a very different sort – was originally explored in the early *Diary of a Loser*, which he recently called his best work (Limonov 2001, 211).[27] Startlingly, his political monsters exist in *Sviashchennye monstry* alongside Baudelaire and Velemir Khlebnikov, his favorite poets, Nietzsche and Konstantin Leont'ev, Yukio Mishima and Luis-Ferdinand Celine to whom he offers laudations. One of the chapters is devoted to the rather

[27] He also names *U nas byla prekrasnaia epokha*, as his other best book, written shortly before his return to Russia.

obscure nineteenth century poet Conte de Lautréamont, especially to *Les Chantes de Maldoror* (*Songs of Maldoror*), whose praises he sings. Although Limonov doesn't refer to the text's famed image of the chance meeting of a sewing machine and an umbrella on the dissecting table, celebrated by the surrealists, I mention it because of the paradoxical sewing machine, Limonov's longtime companion. Perhaps Hillis Miller had Lautréamont in mind too when juxtaposing the typewriter and sewing machine. What Limonov celebrates in *Les Chantes de Maldoror* are the haunting proto-surrealist images of violence.[28] And what we can conclude is that the volume's strange bedfellows shed light on Limonov's paradoxical, conflicted persona.

The contemporary Russian poet and admirer of Limonov's writing Alexander Skidan writes that the most penetrating representation in *Sviashchennye monstry* is of Van Gogh, quoting the following passage:

> По корявой дороге под волосатыми звездами топает пара пешеходов в корявых башмаках. Небо сделано все из червяков, загнутых нервными креветками – ощущение нервной силы от неба, от всей сияющей ночи в картине. Ночное кафе в Арле – красное и желто-ядовитое, какая-то прямо засохшая кремовая кровь города. И гарсон в таком белом фартуке стоит служащим из морга. (Skidan 2005)[29]

> Along the gnarled road under the hairy stars walks a couple of pedestrians in gnarled shoes. The sky is made of worms creased by nervous shrimp – a feeling of the sky's nervous energy and of the radiant night in the painting. A nighttime café in Arles – red and poisonously yellow like some kind of dried cream-colored blood of the city. And the garçon in such a white apron stands like an employee of the morgue.

Limonov calls Van Gogh's paintings a miracle and his person saintly, a characterization that stands in sharp contrast to Mussolini as model of a fascist male sensibility. The contrast evokes once again his admiration for Kuzmin's homoerotic *Trout Breaking Through the Ice*, whose masculinity is refined, not brutal, and which as Limonov writes in *Kniga mertvykh* (The Book of the Dead, 2001, 186), he always recites to himself at crucial moments in his life. *Trout* is a very dense narrative poem about love defined by barriers metaphorized by the fish

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[28] In another prison book, *Russkoe psikho* (2003), Limonov writes about his favorite films – Pier Paolo Passolini's *Salo, or 120 Days of Sodom*, Liliana Cavani's *Night Porter*, and Bernardo Bertoluchi's *Last Tango in Paris*, which explore erotic masochism and sadism and certainly don't fit Limonov's stance as hardnosed, sometimes cynical political leader. His fascination with these films may be explained psychoanalytically by using Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection against which Limonov has struggled personally and in his writing, not to speak of the their unconventional representation and aesthetic power.

[29] The passage comes from Limonov 2003a, 58-9.

struggling to break through the ice to reconstitute the memory of love lost. Limonov turning to Kuzmin reveals his lyrical side that remembers those he loved and wounds of love as well as struggles against the barriers posed by romantic love. In other words, to understand his persona, we must recognize the peculiar coexistence in his aesthetic ethos of Kuzmin's Wagnerian metaphor of the wounded sea of *Tristan and Isolde* with Mayakovsky's "You have/ the floor/ Comrade Mauser!." Both are part of his sensibility, just as National Bolshevism defines his politics, which are also hard to pinpoint because of their slippery, shifting, at times incoherent program and political maneuvering. All of these and more, including a deep narcissistic wound and consequent abjection as well as its mastery, make up the complex persona of Eduard Limonov.

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