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**SHOCK THERAPY FOR THE RUSSIAN LANGUAGE:
THE USE OF PROFANITY IN
POST-STALIN RUSSIAN LITERATURE**

[...] нет слова, которое было бы так замашисто, бойко, так вырвалось бы из-под самого сердца, так бы кипело и животрепетало, как метко сказанное русское слово.

- N. Gogol', *Mertvyje dushi*

No register of Russian language arouses such a passionately ambivalent mixture of admiration and disdain as that represented by Gogol's „метко сказанное русское слово.“ Gogol's enthusiastic description of the word may distract the reader from noticing that it is not, in fact, explicitly printed. This significant absence highlights the tension between the existence of words that „everyone knows,“ and the taboo on saying them and, especially, writing them. Linguists and critics have asserted that Russian speakers possess a special linguistic modesty. O.N. Trubachev opined that Russians have a better sense of the „expressiveness“ of the words referring to „anti-culture,“ and therefore are particularly strict in driving them out of literary language and cultural life.¹ Russian *mat* (*mat*, *matershchina*, *maternaia bran'*) can be defined variously on the basis of a set of linguistic roots under the strongest taboo.² The commonly acknow-

¹ O.N. Trubachev, translator of the Soviet edition of Max Vasmer's Russian etymological dictionary (trans. with the name Fasmer 1964-1973) had, ironically, fought against editor B. A. Larin's insistence that indecent lexicon be thrown out, although he later acknowledged the wisdom of Larin's position. His remarks quoted in Uspenskii (1996, 11). Uspenskii pointed out that the taboo on usage of these words extended to philological study of them (1996, 9).

² The corpus of Russian *mat* is built on three core roots referring to sexual organs and copulation (reflected in the words *ebat'* (*sia*)/*et'* (*sia*), *khui*, *pizda*), plus two or three other obscene productive roots (in the words *manda*, *bljad'*, *mudii*). Some include vulgar scatological terms (*govno*, *der'mo*, *srat'*), and other „printable“ obscenities (e.g. *suka*) (see, for example, Levin, 108; Il'iasov). The boundaries between the most taboo and vulgar registers are fluid. „Unprintable“ words were left out of most Russian dictionaries and reference books. The third and fourth editions of Dal's *Tolkovyi slovar'*, edited by Baudouin de Courtenay, included representatives of the most profane terms (1903, 1911-1914, see editor's

ledged unsuitability of these words for print demonstrates their function as the antithesis of the written, literary language – the profane oral counterpoint in Russian to the sacred written word. This article will explore the entrance of Russian profanity into mainstream Russian letters. It will consider how and why profanity became a meaningful literary device in post-Stalin Russian literature, central to the poetic systems of Iuz Aleshkovskii, Venedikt Erofeev and Eduard Limonov. In this era, profanity functioned not merely to erase taboos in Russian letters. Russian *mat* emerged in this context as a temporarily powerful tool in the attempt to revitalize Russian literary language and to construct new images of Russian identity and the Russian author.

The taboo against profanity goes back to its mythological roots, and profanity's ritual power derives from its origin in the sacred (Uspenskii 1996). The linguistic situation created after the christianization of Rus' and obtaining between the Xth and the XVII centuries featured what B.A. Uspenskii called „diglossia,“ a nearly absolute distinction between the language designated for sacred purposes and that for profane ones – a division stricter than that found in Western cultures (Uspenskii 1987, 14, Unbegaun 1973, Zhivov 1996, 190-91). With the emergence of modern Russian literature in the XVII-XVIII centuries, linguistic and cultural norms shifted, although secular authors and the written word continued to exhibit moral and spiritual authority similar to that accorded sacred writers and writings (Zhivov 1996, Lotman 1994). Lomonosov's delineation of three literary styles in the XVIIIth century codified linguistic registers on the basis of Boileau's scheme, with vulgar registers consigned to low comic genres, and the most profane colloquial registers left out entirely. Of course, Russian profanity was not absolutely unprintable, and it found its way into marginal parodic genres, developed by Ivan Barkov and his imitators. The late XVIIIth and early XIXth centuries produced a notably rich „obscene“ literary tradition, which functioned as an internal literary „anti-world.“³

Uspenskii characterized the linguistic situation at the time of the emergence of a written Church Slavonic language as an opposition between a „natural“ or „living“ (*zhivoi*) oral language and an artificial literary language (6-7). The strict identification of the low end of the linguistic register as „oral“ and the high end as „written“ persisting into the era of modern Russian letters allowed for

remarks in the foreword about the inclusion of these words, x-xi). Throughout the pre-revolutionary and Soviet period, the only reference works including this lexicon were typically published abroad (See Uspenskii 1996, 10-11). Beginning in the 1990s, dictionaries of Russian *mat* published in Russia have become available.

³ See Zorin (1992) and Zhivov (1996). Zhivov described the Arzamasian culture as notably „carnavalesque.“ The obscene lyrics and epigrams of his intimate literary group, like Pushkin's „Ten' Barkova,“ set a precedent for the production of parodic and vulgar „anti-literature“ by the serious Russian writer.

exploitation of the tension between the two and contributed to the rich tradition of stylized oral narration in literature, *skaz*. It also fostered a sense of the vitality and authenticity of oral language, which seemed a particularly vivid counterpoint to written language when writing and formal rhetoric was perceived as too ossified or artificial. Thus, „low“ oral speech could be invoked in writing to convey a sense of vitality, authenticity and identity. Already in the XVIIIth century, Archpriest Avvakum used crude oral speech to help express national character. In his idiosyncratic style, Avvakum drew on vivid oral registers and mixed it with high-style Church Slavonic to create a national „eloquence“ he opposed to the „false“ ornamental rhetoric associated with the Greeks.⁴ Avvakum’s writing demonstrates that language was key to the developing sense of national identity. He also provided an early example of a rebel writer fighting through his foolish „anti-behavior“ (and „anti-language“) for the „true faith,“ a model that would inspire a variety of modern Russian authors.

Following the public denunciation of Stalin in 1956, language proved to be an important venue for the attempt to reestablish authenticity and identity. As it had been in Avvakum’s day, in Pushkin’s epoch and during the period of the Russian revolution, language in literature after Stalin’s death constituted a central field on which general cultural struggles were played out. Many perceived the Russian language to be in „critical condition,“ threatened by acronyms, bureaucratic formulas and neologisms. Having witnessed the exposure of Stalin’s crimes, the reading public found that the elevated tones and rhetorical formulas of official discourse smacked of the hypocrisy and compromised ideals associated with the cult of Stalin. Andrei Siniavskii’s prefatory article to the 1965 *Biblioteka poeta* edition of Boris Pasternak’s verse included a reference to Pasternak’s 1936 declaration that „all that is high-flown and elevated, all that is rhetorical, seems unfounded, useless, and sometimes even morally suspicious.“ The words of this poet, whose public persecution was a defining event of post-Stalin cultural politics, seemed particularly apt in the mid-1960s, at a time when enthusiastic intelligentsia were seeking renewed ideals amidst the ambiguity of official policy. Attempts to render living language in a new way were characteristic of writing of this time. Vasilii Aksenov and other „Young Prose“ writers

⁴ Avvakum’s style seems remarkably crude in places, as when he wonders at people’s changeability: „Чюдно! давеча был блядин сынъ, а теперва – батюшко!“ (358) Avvakum wanted to assert Russian national identity in the face of encroachment by South and Southwest Slavic ornamental rhetorical influences, which Avvakum associated with the Greeks: In the foreword to his life, Avvakum says, „[...] не позарите просторъчню нашему, понеже люблю свой русской природной язык...“ (454). And in a letter to Tsar’ Aleksei Mikhailovich, „Господи, помилуй мя грешнаго! А кирье-ленсон – отъ оставь; так елления говорить; плюнь на нихъ! Ты ведь, Михайлович, русакъ, а не грекъ“ (quoted in Uspenskii 1987, 251).

associated with the journal *Iunosť* in the 1960s attempted to enliven the language of their stories by incorporating the slang of Muscovite youth. In response to a survey of writers in 1967 on literature and language, Aksenov mentioned the deliberate conflation of the author's speech with the hero's colloquial speech (*kosvenno-priamaia rech'*) as a characteristic of contemporary prose. Vasilli Belov commented on the democratization of speech in contemporary writing and the attempt to do away with false romantic pathos in literature.⁵

Meanwhile, the non-normative language of prison camps, which included profanity, was finding its way into semi-official and unofficial writing. The return of millions of people from the prison camps challenged Soviet urban society. Linguistic representation of this impact became a common way to evoke the moral, political, and social issues provoked by the return. Criminals' songs (*blatnye pesni*) and camp speech became popular.⁶ Songs like Aleksandr Galich's introduced the intelligentsia to crude slang, perceived to be a symbol of the perceived cultural rift and of a refreshing new frankness. At the beginning of Iuli Daniel's short story „Iskupenie“ („Atonement“) the narrator recalls intelligentsia singing *blatnye pesni* in the early 1960s, relishing the contrasts created: „[...] была какая-то особая пикантность в том, что уютная беседа о ‚Комедии Франсез‘ прерывалась меланхолическим матом лагерного дохляки [...]“ (Arzhak 1964, 11). The incorporation of camp jargon into mainstream intelligentsia culture through these songs is significant – along with new themes, the songs of Okudzhava, Galich, Vysotskii and others provoked questions about the boundaries between oral and written culture and between folklore and poetry, as well as questions about what constitutes „literature.“

Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's landmark *Odin Den' Ivana Denisovicha* (*One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*) (*Novyi mir*, 1962) conveyed the unpleasant reality of camp life through the „unvarnished“ speech of the camps.⁷ The crude language disturbed editors and readers – one Leningrad schoolteacher reportedly objected to it, saying, „It's pure profanity, not literature, and to read such a thing is disgusting [...]“ For many readers, however, the story derived its impact from its revelation of a previously unknown reality, and thus ordinary literary judgments were suspended (Al'tshuller and Dryzhakova 1985, 170, 172). In this

⁵ See „Literatura i iazyk“ in *Voprosy literatury* (1967) 6, 88-156, 90, 98.

⁶ Abram Terts wrote that the *blatnaia pesnia*, more than others contemporary songs, affirms Russian identity. This need for national affirmation comprises a peculiar national characteristic, he maintained, expressed by the drunk on the street who not only wants a buck (*rup'*), but demands to know, „Ia – russkii?!.. Ia russkim iazykom tebe govoriu?!..“ (161).

⁷ While readers objected to the vulgar language, strongly taboo obscenities were rendered elliptically or euphemistically. Examples include: *padlo, gad, svoloch', der'mo, paskuda, nasha rybka govornaiia, bl...*, „*podnimetsia-fuimetsia*“ (about temperature), „*maslitse-fuiaslitse*“, „*fuemnik*“ (*pod' emnik*), „*mat' tvoiu za nogu*“, „*v lob tebe drat'!*“, etc.

context, the crude speech seemed „documentary“ and „authentic“ in its depiction of a degraded world. Indeed, Solzhenitsyn's representation of the language of the camps in his stories and novels was judged to be such a reliable documentary source it served as the basis of Galler and Marquess' 1978 *Dictionary of Soviet Camp Speech*.⁸

The publication of M. Bakhtin's *Tvorchestvo Fransua Rable* in 1965 introduced the concepts of „carnival“ and its „public square word“ (*ploshchadnoe slovo*) to a Soviet generation already inspired, as „Youth Prose“ demonstrated, by the linguistic and cultural freedoms of contemporary Western culture. Soviet tanks in Prague in 1968 finally crushed liberal hopes for official reform, and an alternative cultural movement gathered steam, one frequently marked by „carnivalesque“ behavior and language. Unlike the dissidents associated with the movements for human rights and democracy, many of the alternative intelligentsia wanted nothing to do with the regime, either for or against it. They were interested in many instances not simply in overturning the established moral hierarchy (and thus in several ways did not correspond to the carnival revelers described by Bakhtin), but in questioning the very existence of a moral hierarchy. Members of this *pokolenie dvornikov i storozhei* („generation of caretakers and guards“) in the 1970s were frequently noted for their drinking, blue-collar jobs and/or transience. Author Venichka Erofeev, as represented in the novel *Moskva-Petushki* (1969), was on the vanguard of their ranks. This book, and Iuz Aleshkovskii's novella *Nikolai Nikolaevich* (1970), both circulated in samizdat, broke new ground in the use of profanity and vulgar registers in relatively mainstream genres of Russian literature, opening the way for further development of its use in the 1970s-1980s.⁹

The use of *mat* helped demonstrate the alternative writers' and artists' identity as a group distinct from official culture both ideologically and esthetically.¹⁰ As a form of argot, *mat* served to unify the subgroup among intelligentsia that used it or appreciated it in literature.¹¹ On one level, profanity was

⁸ Elsewhere, in *Arhipelag GULag*, Solzhenitsyn left no doubt about his censorious attitude toward vulgar language. His own attempts to revive a purely Russian language in his 1995 dictionary did not include *mat* (*Russkii slovar' iazykovogo rasshireniia*, Moscow: Golos).

⁹ Zorin cited *Moskva-Petushki* as a linguistic watershed, noting that with this novel, *mat* and its attendant linguistic layers emerged from the reserves of parody and low erotica to which they had been consigned formerly and became usable material for practically any genre and any emotional register (1996, 132).

¹⁰ By contrast, Solzhenitsyn, with his relatively conservative esthetics and traditional morality would properly be considered a „dissident,“ not „alternative“ writer.

¹¹ Elistratov (1994) considered profanity a type of argot, which exhibits a primarily „hermetic“ function in defining a specialized group within a larger linguistic community (599-626). Zorin referred to the group defined by appreciation of *mat* in letters as an „elite.“ He quoted

an „anti-language“ that reflected the Soviet „anti-world.“ In his foreword to the Parisian almanac of alternative Russian literature and art *Apollon-77* (1977), Vladimir Petrov imagined the indignant objections to language in several of the pieces („СКОЛЬКО ХУЁВ И ГОВНА! И ЭТО – ИСКУССТВО?!“). He defended it as part of „uncompromising“ art reflecting the reality from which the authors came, the „broken, cast-iron slang of courtyards and streets.“¹² On another level, this „anti-language“ corresponded to the authors' own „anti-behavior.“ Profanity helped define the poet-rebel, a defiant spirit tearing down outmoded taboos to construct a new, authentic language and a true national identity.¹³ In the essay addressing the question, „Is Profanity Necessary for Russian Literature?“, Vadim Linetskii (1992) identified Aleshkovskii's, Brofееv's and Limonov's use of profanity as part of a foolish authorial pose designed to subvert the excessive authority traditionally ascribed to Russian writer-prophets (228). The „holy foolish“ author with the holy fool's „anti-behavior“ and „anti-language“ became a new hypostasis of the Russian author. Unlike in Pushkin's day, this jester did not appear only to the intimate Arzamasian group, but presented himself as the principle, public face of the author.

These iconoclastic authors wielded profanity against ossified forms of discourse. The holy foolish Venichka, alter ego of the author of *Moskva-Petushki*, demonstrates the carnivalesque re-appropriation of language by the workers on his cable-laying crew. Venichka describes how he educated the men on his crew concerning current events in Israel. They were in „complete ecstasy“ over the new information, he says:

E. Toddes on the resistance of the average member of intelligentsia and the less educated reader to the use of profanity in writing (1996, 130-131). Lev Pirogov (2000) described the tendency of traditionally-minded „Slavophilic“ intelligentsia to separate use of profanity in speech from the taboo on it in writing. More „Westernizing-cosmopolitan“ types used it in literature, he said, but at their peril: one acquaintance declaiming „alternative“ poetry on the street got a punch in the face from a working man offended by profanity in the poem.

¹² The perception that this language helped render a „true“ account was generational. Note the uncensored representation of crude language in the Moscow and Magadan portions of Aksenov's semi-autobiographical *samizdat* novel *The Burn* (1969-1975) as compared to his mother's, Evgeniia Ginzburg's, depiction of the Magadan experience in *Krutoi marshrut*. While she was surely exposed to plenty of profanity in the camps, she apparently did not perceive it as a significant style that could be recorded in her written account. In addition to the generational difference, the taboo on the use of profanity by women is much stronger than that for men (see Uspenskii 1996, 12-13).

¹³ Zorin discussed the widespread fascination with the image of the poet-rebel in the 1960s, with salty-penned Barkov an exemplary figure in this regard. Andrei Voznesenskii called Barkov one of Pushkin's „teachers.“ Oleg Chukhtontsev in his poem „Barkov“ (1968) portrayed a Romantic figure hiding his lyrical gift from bourgeois philistines under rude language and behavior. Zorin argued that this Barkov became practically a direct forebear of Brofееv's Venichka (1992, 11).

А Абба Эбан и Моше Даян с языка у них не сходили. Приходят они утром с блядок, например, и один у другого спрашивает: «Ну, как? Нинка из 13-й комнаты даян эбан?» А тот отвечает с самодовольной усмешкою: «Куда ж она, падла, денется? Конечно даян!» (155)

The obscene suggestion in the names of these Soviet press villains inspires the men to exploit them for their own discursive purposes, with no concern for political or ideological implications. The suggestion, rather than the explicit rendering, of profanity heightens the sense of comedic invention.

Elsewhere Venichka uses more explicitly vulgar language and themes to expose the dead wood of ideological discourse, as in his article for the *Revue de Paris*. He comments on the rejection of his article, „Stervoznost' kak vysshaia i posledniaia stadiia bliadovitosti“:

– Разумеется, вернули. Язык мой признали блестящим, а основную идею – ложной. К русским условиям, – сказали, – возможно, это и применимо, но к французским – нет; стервозность, сказали, у нас еще не высшая ступень и уж далеко не последняя; у вас, у русских, ваша блядовитость, достигнув предела стервозности, будет насильственно упразднена и заменена онанизмом по обязательной программе; у нас же, у французов, хотя не исключено в будущем органическое вращение некоторых элементов русского онанизма, с программой более произвольной, в нашу отечественную содомию, в которую – через кровосмешительство – трансформируется наша стервозность, но вращение это будет протекать в русле нашей традиционной блядовитости и совершенно перманентно!..
Короче, они совсем засрали мне мозги. (205)

The passage parodies the discourse of Marxism-Leninism and offers a humorous contrast to the lexicon and the elevated elegance and romance typically associated with France. As Venichka describes it, Notre Dame is surrounded by whorehouses (*bardaki*), and El'sa Triolet (or Simone de Beauvoir – Venichka mixes them up) is an old whore (*staraia bliad'*) (203-204).

Profanity in literature in the post-Stalin era shocked the language out of its critical state and demonstrated the reserves of strength and vitality possessed by the Russian tongue. These alternative writers' idealistic belief in their language matched that of their classic predecessors in spirit, although the form in which they expressed it differed. Ivan Turgenev's poem in prose about the Russian language provided a special subtext for the era. Aksenov, for example, used Turgenev's „great, powerful, just, free“ („velikii-moguchii-pravdivyi-svobod-

nyi“) Russian language as an ironic touchstone, „VMPS,“ as he calls it.¹⁴ Akse-
nov’s narrator in the novel *V poiskakh grustnogo bebi* (In Search of Melancholy
Baby) describes an unexpected encounter with this language in America, when
the taxi driver: „вдруг высунулся в окно и заорал на чистейшем ВМПС [...] –
Ёб твою мать! Распиздяй сраный! Взял мой зелёный!“ (25). The comic
encounter surprises and delights the narrator and his companion. The exclama-
tions suggest the strength and vitality of oral „folk“ speech.

Language is central to the definition of national identity, as Avvakum’s
example attests. The complement to the myth of the Russian language’s espe-
cially chaste nature can be found in the myth of the Russian language’s unique
richness of profane possibility.¹⁵ Russian possesses the ability to synthesize a
practically unlimited number of profane expressions, which can be used to build
„three-story profanity,“¹⁶ and strung together in profane tirades or „digressions“
(*zagiby*).¹⁷ Aleshkovskii attempted to evoke the energy and creative inspiration
of this oral Russian „folk art“ in his writing, where such tirades serve as an
antidote to deadened official language. The narrator of *Ruka* (1977-78) says:

Бывало сижу я на партсобраниях [...] Сижу я, значит, слушаю оче-
редную мёртвую чушь, а сам думаю, аплодируя Ягодам, Бериям, Ежо-

¹⁴ Erofeev’s *Venichka* also refers to Turgenev’s poem in prose, „Russkii iazyk“ (1882), citing
parodically the line, „Во дни сомнений, во дни тягостных раздумий [...]“ Turgenev’s
idealism, his delicate sensibility and fine feeling as canonized in Soviet discourse (also
targeted for parody by *Venichka*, whose companions attempt to reproduce the atmosphere of
„First Love“) make his formulation a convenient object of parody. Sasha Sokolov more
straightforwardly described the Russian language in its current state, no longer „great,
mighty, truthful and free,“ but „disheartened“ (*izverivshis’ia*), a language that has lost confi-
dence in itself („Ne razmykaia ust“ *Troe*, 1).

¹⁵ Some Russian speakers believe *mat* to be imported from another (usually more „barbaric“)
language. See, for example, L. Zakharova’s discussion of these myths in her essay in Il’iasov
(1994) (285). Both of these myths exist in other cultures with traditionally strong linguistic
taboos. Reaction to the publication of Timur Kibirov’s „L.S. Rubinshtein“ in the official
newspaper *Chas pik* (No.30, 17.9.1990) was telling. A number of readers saw in it „anti-
Russian diversion,“ organized by Jews. One reader called his language „russko-tatarsko-
evreiskii zhargon.“ See discussion and quotes from readers’ letters in Zorin (1996, 135).

¹⁶ See Dreizin and Priestly (1982) on the rules of derivation and syntax that provide a structure
for a „poetics of *mat*.“ These authors consider the system of *mat* a shadow-image of Russian
language as a whole.

¹⁷ The traditionally exclusively oral nature of this „folk art“ is reflected in the account given by
Iu. P. Annenkov (1990) of Sergei Esenin’s recitation of the „*malen’kii maternyi zagib*“ of
Peter the Great, 37 words (with its wild „ёж косматый против шерсти волосатый“), and
the „*bol’shoi zagib*,“ of 260 words. Annenkov claimed he could still recreate the small tirade,
although he does not do so in written form. Besides Esenin, he supposed, only Aleksei
Tolstoj could reproduce the great digression (167-68).

вым, и прочей шобле: «Сосали бы вы тухлый хуй у дохлого Троцкого, ебали бы вы своё говно в присадку и шли бы вы со своей здравницей в честь вождя и учителя обратно в мамину пизду по самые уши... Ура-а-а!» Вот поэтому я матюкаюсь и чувство языка таким наилучшим образом сам для себя спасаю. (1, 279-280)

The narrator finds a creative outlet and liberating energy in *mat*, a vitality that helps him retain the sense of the Russian language itself, a language that might be hard to revive otherwise, he implies.

Varlam Shalamov, like Solzhenitsyn, portrayed *mat* as a symptom of the extreme poverty of human life and consciousness in the camps. The narrator of his story „Sententsiia“ („Sententious“) said he learned the full range of Russian abusive language (*rugan'*) in the camps, although he had intimations of its rich expressiveness already as a child. He recalled a joke from his youth about a Russian who manages to tell a story of his travels in other countries using only one word in various intonational combinations (889-90). Venichka in *Moskva-Petushki* offers a comically exuberant take on Russian national identity using a variation of this device. He wonders about the possibility of national borders „there,“ in Europe where they all „drink less and speak non-Russian.“ He conveys a self-ironic image of his own Russian figure abroad by projecting his own crude language onto others: the Italians say of him, „Опять ходит Ерофеев как поёбаный.“ The English call him a „pylnyi mudak“ from „snowy Russia“ but „not very drunk.“ In contrast to these elegant foreigners, Venichka is crude, sad and drunk, although his humorous self-irony and verbal invention make his narrative a *tour de force*.

Venichka also invokes profanity to debunk the discourse of those who usurped Russian language and identity. He takes aim at the romantic mythology of the Bolshevik revolution. His fantastic Petushki Revolution started, he says, when his buddy Tikhonov nailed his fourteen theses to the gates – actually, Venichka confesses, he did not nail them to the gates, but wrote them on the fence in chalk, and they were not theses, but „clear and lapidary“ words, and there were only two, not fourteen of them. Venichka refers to the common practice of writing profane words on public surfaces. This popular scribbling is not accorded the status of official writing. The rise of unofficial and uncensored publishing in *samizdat* blurred the boundaries between culturally significant and insignificant writing in this era, however, and the value of words like „*khui*“ and „*bliad*“ (213) (again, the two words are not explicitly spelled out in the text) rivals that of terms of official discourse. These parodic theses form a leitmotif of the revolution: Venichka tells Tikhonov later, „Ты блестящий теоретик, Вадим, твои тезисы мы прибили к нашим сердцам, - но как доходит до дела, ты говно-говном“ (214).

The use of *mat* in Russian literature of this period represents the antics of a jester, but its purpose was serious, and readers of the day took it seriously. Aleshkovskii's obscene and comic *skaz* narrative expresses a serious commitment to the Russian language. The narrator of *Ruka*, for example, describes *mat* as an expression of spirit, a means to salvation, and a defiant refusal to be put down:

Матюкаюсь же я потому, что мат, русский мат, спасителен для меня лично в той зловонной камере, в которую попал наш могучий, великий, и прочая, и прочая язык. Загоняют его, беднягу, под нары кто попало: и пропагандисты из ЦК, и вонючие газетчики, и поганые литераторы, и графоманы, и цензоры, и технократы гордые. Загоняют его в передовые статьи, в постановления, в протоколы допросов, в мертвые доклады на собраниях, съездах, митингах и конференциях, где он постепенно превращается в доходягу, потерявшего достоинство и здоровье, вышибают из него Дух! Но чувствую: не вышибут. Не вышибут! (1, 279)

Aleshkovskii's narrator enthusiastically anthropomorphizes Russian language as an entity like a camp prisoner. His presentation is grotesquely ironic – not only is *mat* offered as salvation, the speaker in the passage is an interrogator with the official organs. Yet the passage makes explicit an idealism *à rebours*, a passionate belief in the survival of the Russian language and spirit. Andrei Bitov, discussing profanity in Aleshkovskii's works, called *mat* the most authentic element of Russian language left, „the single natural and native part of our language that is still alive“ (3, 547). No less an authority than Joseph Brodsky opined that the crude voice of Aleshkovskii's narrator is the voice of Russian language itself, the „voice of Russian consciousness – humiliated, brutalized, criminalized by the national experience [...] mocking itself and its own realizations, and therefore not entirely destroyed [...]“ (Aleshkovskii 1, 10).¹⁸

Likewise, Erofeev's drunk Venichka in *Moskva-Petushki* evinces concern with the highest spiritual spheres. His use (or suggested use) of the most profane language reminds the reader of profanity's paradoxical connection to the highest spheres.¹⁹ He speaks with the angels (who object to his language: „Фффу, Веня, как ты ругаешься!“ [159]) and with God. Biblical references in the text

¹⁸ Brodskii himself mixed stylistic registers in his poetry, and appreciated the expressive power of profanity in his own oral speech, according to those who knew him. Translator William Tjalsma (Chalsma), for example, wrote in a letter to Iurii Ivask, „Как любил говорит Бродский – хуй с ним!“ Tjalsma also referred to „blud“ as Brodskii's second favorite expression. Amherst Center for Russian Culture, Ivask Collection, 22 November 1974, Box 1, Folder 56.

¹⁹ On the deep connection between the taboo profane and the sacred, see Uspenskii (1996, 12).

lend credence to Venichka's contention that drinks are his stigmata, and they give his end the flavor of an obscurely apocalyptic martyrdom. Profane language, as the inverse of the sacred, serves it, like a linguistic version of Faust's Mephistopheles.²⁰

Erofeev has received broad acknowledgment as a „serious“ Russian writer. Limonov has found much less approval among a broad range of Russian readers, who regularly dismiss his prose as „substandard, crude, and pornographic.“²¹ Erofeev's Venichka plays the lead role in a drama larger than himself, one that can be read as a (surprising) version of familiar tropes. Limonov's Edichka, by contrast, affects an egotistical pose that discourages idealistic readings. In part, Limonov's aggressive language and shocking behavior are the flip side of his extreme sensitivity. If profanity can serve to distinguish a character or author from the official Soviet world, in Limonov's work profanity also sharply marks his non-identity with the American or Western European society in which he finds himself. In his novel *Eto ia – Edichka* (1979), the author's alter-ego narrator envies the „bestly laughter“ of Americans, their „gross laughter in movie theaters,“ and considers himself a „sniveling *intelligent*.“ In aggressive conformity, he sticks his hand into his pants to rearrange his genitals in public, determined not to be abashed in this land of „bold cretins“: „I'm ashamed even of my own table manners – well, fuck it! (ну её на хуй!)“ (202) Edichka's use

²⁰ Dmitrii Prigov (1984) demonstrated the degree to which this idealistic reading of *mat* became established convention by parodying it in his poem „Makhrot' vseia Rusi“:

[...] Мой друг, смотри какая тишь
Какая тишь и благодать
А глядь – из них одна махроть
Лезет
Блядь [...]

Крысиным личиком, как Лилит
Прильнула к мне и говорит:
Что, б..., сука
П... гнойный
Г... недокушанное
Вьнь х... изо рта
А то картавишь что-то

Тут необходимо авторское пояснение, что весь мат, объявляющийся на пределах текста не житейско-повседневного, представляет собой как бы язык сакральный, ныне исчезнувший, изношенный в своей сакральности и обнаруживающийся как всплески неких чувств [...]“ (91-92).

²¹ V. Gershuni praised Aleshkovskii's „ideal“ command of *mat* and contrasted it to Limonov's writing, in which the *mat* seems as out of place as in a callow teenager's speech (See Gershuni's article in Il'iasov 1994, 274). Ol'ga Matich (1986) surveyed outraged reactions to Limonov's prose (526, 528).

of *mat* underscores the alienation he feels, the sense that his poetry and sensitivity have no place in his host society.

Limonov does not, however, glorify his Russian identity or the values associated with it, and this rejection of the Russian community seems to render his profanity meaningless or offensive for many readers. Like Aksenov's prose, Limonov's writing features liberal use of anglicisms as well as abundant use of profanity. Unlike Aksenov, Limonov professes not to care – even to dislike – the Russian community: he said after emigration that he wishes he were not associated with Russian literature and the „gloomy literary ghetto“ of emigration. He would much rather belong to American literature (Limonov 1984, 220). The perception of the importance of language and, especially, argot, for defining the community identity has made Limonov's apparently „anti-Russian“ stance particularly offensive. Felix Dreizin described the negative reaction to Limonov's „deliberate littering“ (*zasorenie*) of his prose with „barbaric“ anglicisms (1988, 55).²² Critics have read his use of profanity as an aggressive attack on norms and values. Match described the use of obscene language and transgression of taboos on sex in *Eto ia – Edichka* as part of a „strident attack on the Russian reading-public's sexual taboos and on the intelligentsia's „dissident“ political values“ (530). Limonov's *apparent* selling-out of his Russian identity (a device that does not change the fact that he is defined primarily within and by his relationship to Russian letters) makes it harder to justify his „anti-behavior“ according to traditional Russian cultural models.

The taboos and myths surrounding the use of profanity in literature shape its function and reception. However, they should not obscure the fact that its use is a literary device. Studies of Louis-Ferdinand Céline's literary innovation, which is in many ways analogous to that of the writers discussed here, demonstrate the way in which the profane word functions as part of the artificial representation of oral speech in literature (La Quérière 1973, Rouayrenc 1994). The mechanism of this representation can be analyzed lexically and syntactically. The first line of Céline's *Voyage au bout de la nuit* (1932) is famous for its non-normative contraction and colloquial repetition: „Ça a débuté comme ça.“ Erofeev's narrator deforms colloquial comparison, saying „я мотался как говно в прорубн“ (211), and describing the short length of an autumn day, „с гулькин хуй“ (224).²³ He mimics folksy aphorism: „не трогай дерьмо, так оно и пахнуть не

²² The anglicisms in Limonov's prose sometimes appear justified by semantic needs, and sometimes are gratuitous: e.g. „*velfer*,” „*boi-igerlfrend*.” Dreizin offers a detailed analysis of Limonov's use of anglicisms (1988).

²³ The „deformation“ of the expected expression makes the language seem more individual and realistic. The last expression derives its impact from the insertion of a profane word into a neutral idiom („*s gul'kin khvost/nos*”, i.e. the size of a bird's beak/nose, or, very short) suggests an innovation based on a realistic device described by Roman Jakobson. Jakobson cited

будет..." (216). Venichka also uses abusive lexicon in contexts with positive or neutral emotional coloring, as when he contemplates a „пидор в коричневой куртке“ sweeping the sidewalk (140) or exults over his „*pyshnotelaia bliad'*“ (168). This type of use mimics the common oral use of Russian profanity described by folklorists and linguists who note that it is by no means confined to abusive or negative contexts (Uspenskii 1996, 12, Il'iasov 1994, 10).

The profane word is fundamentally oral, and it introduces „vitality“ and „authenticity“ into formal letters.²⁴ Erofeev claimed, „literature needs a new language – with the old language one can't do anything“ (1989, 34). Similarly, Céline conceived of his project as the invention of a new language for literature: „The language that we have is impossible, isn't it? While one finds a language still living in spoken speech“ (188). While the *skaz*-type narrative in Russian literature traditionally maintained an implicit or explicit distinction between the voice of the educated author and that of the stylistically lower *skaz* speaker, writers of the post-Stalin underground broke down this traditional distinction by subsuming profane oral features into their own authorial voice. These authors present the *skaz* mask as their own face. In this, their innovation was like that of Céline in French letters, whose representation of oral speech in the landmark *Voyage au bout de la nuit* was not confined to that of a distinct and subordinate character within the narration. Céline's influences were not literary, he claimed, disavowing the influence of Zola or Rabelais; instead, he picked up his style from people in „real life“ – Americans, soldiers and people in the street (88).

Writers demonstrated the „authentic“ nature of the oral speech they used in their writing by insisting that they themselves „really“ spoke this way. When asked by a journalist to explain his „deliberately *faubourienne*“ language, Céline exclaimed in exasperation, „Deliberately! You, too? That's wrong, I wrote the way I speak“ (22). Similarly, Aleshkovskii, Erofeev, and Limonov all took pains to show that their crude oral style comes from life experience, and that they themselves speak that way.²⁵ Aleshkovskii claimed in his autobiographical sketch that he became acquainted with the profanity of the streets much earlier than with the tales of the Brothers Grimm. He called himself a hooligan and a rogue, and said he spent some time in the camps.²⁶ Erofeev collapsed the distin-

the common combination of the attributes „Dutch“ (*gollandskii*) or „walrus“ (*morzhovyi*) with the noun having nothing semantically to do with them (the noun is *khui* – AK) (25).

²⁴ Russian literary evolution has featured periodic calls to make literary language more like oral speech, as in Karamzin's injunction to „write like they speak,“ Pushkin's innovations in literary language, the use by Revolutionary writers of oral forms, etc.

²⁵ On the progressive shortening of the distance between the authorial voice and that of the *skaz* pose, see Orlova (1996).

²⁶ Alongside time in the camps, Aleshkovskii mentions time spent reading Pushkin and Proust. Overall, his authorial pose is the most conservative of the three Russian authors discussed

ction between himself and his crudely inventive narrator „Venichka.“ Erofeev claimed that his work laying cable was useful for his writing: „on the cable-laying crews I got excellent folkloric practice,“ he said (1989, 34). In interviews, Erofeev, like his hero, swore casually (e.g. with Prudovskii). Eduard Limonov took his cue from Erofeev’s Venichka with his own lyrical hero Edichka, who also was perceived to speak like his creator does in „real life“: Matich said, „Edichka’s ‚émigré Russian‘ reflects an anti-elitist deflation of the literary language. There is no apparent distinction between Edichka’s language and that of Limonov, as if the writer has been supplanted by a hero speaking his own substandard language“ (536).

Extra-textual norms and expectations change over time, and the enduring impact of low oral registers in writing relies on contrasts set up within the text. Thus, Céline’s writing features „popular“ lexicon and syntax side by side with use of strictly literary subjunctive forms. The contrasting registers may even be superimposed, as in the use of a crude verb in the imperfective subjunctive (e.g. „engueulât“ „bottât le derrière“).²⁷ Other devices include the conjunction of a high-style noun and a low modifier, or vice versa, the repetition of a high style clause in a low style paraphrase, contrasting apposition, etc. (La Quérière 1973, Rouayrenc 1994). Understanding of the use of profanity in Russian literary works of this era would benefit from its systematic analysis as a literary device, where the type and significance of thematic and stylistic contrasts would be determined.

An analysis of this aspect of Erofeev’s poetic system might begin with the marked contrast between suggested carnival and actual restraint in his narrative. The author creates the expectation of shocking language in the foreword to *Moskva-Petushki*, in which he explains that he conscientiously warned readers (especially young women) of the first edition that the chapter „Serp i Molot – Karacharovo“ was, after the first sentence, composed entirely of uncensored language. As a result, all readers, especially the young women, went straight to the chapter and were offended. He has now excised the chapter, he says. This fiction (there was no such „first edition“) sets up a comically significant absence echoed in later elisions of profane words, as noted above. Elsewhere, the rejection of crude lexicon highlights Venichka’s modesty. His companions in the Rabelaisian commune at Orekhovo-Zuevo want him to get up and go to the bathroom like them. Venichka objects: „He могу же я так, как вы: встать с

here. Aleshkovskii avows sincere love for family, friends, Pushkin and Freedom. He does not use profanity, and his authorial voice remains relatively distinct from his *skaz* narrative masks (vol. I).

²⁷ Rouayrenc (1994) argues that Céline progressed from use of isolated instances of „popular“ speech in *Voyage* to a more radical infusion of the entire narrative with this style in *Mort à crédit* (1936) (83-84).

постели, сказать во всеулышание: «Ну, ребята, я ..ать пошел!» или «Ну, ребята, я ..ать пошел!» Не могу же я так...» (152). We know the implied words are two different verbs relating to excretion („*srat*“ and „*ssat*“) only because of the contrastive conjunction (*ili*). Unlike some other profane expressions in Erofeev's text, these verbs were rendered with ellipses in the authorized manuscripts.²⁸ The text reflects carnivalesque lowering and a delicate rejection of the carnival at the same time.

The use of the most profane and low oral register packs a *literary* punch that is probably short-lived. Again, Erofeev's 1969 text presciently suggests this. As the predominant narrative tone turns from comically carnivalesque to fearsomely alienating late in the narrative, Venichka realizes he has lost his way. He tries to determine the direction of the train he is on by orienting himself according to the window on which he saw the word „...“ (implied: *khui*). However, now the word appears not on one, but on both windows – and Venichka has no way to tell where he is headed (228-30). Having parodied such a wide variety of discourses, and having drunk so much, Venichka no longer can be sure of his direction. The proliferation of profane words in Venichka's text signifies a broader loss of meaning and orientation. Venichka turns to his audience in a rare moment of apparently absolute seriousness: „вновь ли загорается звезда Вифлеема или вновь начинает мёркнуть, а это самое главное. Потому что все остальные катятся к закапу, а если я не катятся, то едва мерцают, а если даже и сияют, то не стоят двух плевков“ (239). Meaningful hierarchies have in general collapsed, the text suggests, but carnivalesque debauchery cannot replace them for the long term. The carnival always has an end. In the post-Soviet 1990s writers like the poet Kibirov abandoned use of profane language for other innovations.

New studies suggest that the rich system of Russian profanity seems finally to be receiving the more serious culturological and philological study it merits.

²⁸ Erofeev's friend Vladimir Murav'ev edited the text for the edition in *Zapiski psikhopata* and the edition of *Moskva-Petushki* with Eduard Vlasov's commentaries (Moscow: Vagrius 2000). In these editions, all *mat* is printed in full except the word „...“ (*khui*) on the window and the infinitives in the phrases „*Ja ..at' poshell*“ In the slim edition from Vagrius 2000 not under Murav'ev's editorship, simply everything is printed. The 1971 *samizdat* typescript at the Sakharov center in Moscow, like the Vagrius editions, includes all words printed in full (including „*khui*“) and only censors the infinitives in the phrases „*Ja ..at' poshell*“ Censorship was inconsistent in the official editions before the late 1990s, including those from YMCA-Press (1981), *Trezvost' i kul'tura* (1988-89), *Vest'* (1989), Prometei (1990), and Kareko (1995) editions, which showed evidence of more censorship than later H.G.S. and Vagrius editions. Expressions like „*bliad'*“, „*bliadki*“, „*pobliaduiu*“, „*mudila*“, „*ebalo*“, are usually cut in the more modest editions. The censored version in *Trezvost' i kul'tura*, for example, cut phrases such as „*po ebalu*“ from „Её не лапать и не бить по ебалу – её дышать надо.“ used by Venichka in reference to his girlfriend in *Petushki*.

The difference between these types of study should be recognized: the structure and usage of truly oral Russian profanity should be distinguished from the artificial construction of profanity as a literary device. At the same time, the literary use of *mat* must be understood within its socio-historical context, and the post-Stalin era, prior to perestroika, provided a special environment fostering the use of profanity as a literary fact in mainstream genres for the first time. The differences between this linguistic shift and that of other major periods of innovation, like that in the revolutionary and early Soviet epoch, deserve consideration. Profanity as a literary device does not function alone, but as part of an oral *skaz* pose aimed in this instance at reviving the expressive power of the Russian literary language and reconstructing the image of the Russian author. However, insofar as the expressive power of literary profanity rests on its extreme status as the lowest of low oral registers, it appears to be a highly unstable „final frontier.“

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