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Flowers of Evil: The Poetics of Monstrosity in Contemporary Russian Literature (Erofeev, Mamleev, Sokolov, Sorokin)

The destruction of accepted forms and clichés has always been a main feature of literary evolution. In contemporary Russia, the use of this artistic device has reached an astonishing degree, even within the context of a national literature in which it is customary to slap the face of public taste. Looking at the works of certain contemporary authors, one may even speak of an attack on the reader's horizon of expectations through the use of aesthetic shock. The beginning of Jurij Mamleev's novel *Šatuny* is typical of this phenomenon. At the very outset, a murder occurs. The protagonist Fedor Sonnov kills the first man he meets:

– Нет ли закурить? – угрюмо спросил он у парня.
Тот, с веселой оживленной мордочкой, пошарил в карманах, как в собственном члене.
И в этот момент Федор, судорожно крякнув, как будто опрокидывая в себя стакан водки, всадил в живот парня огромный кухонный нож. Таким ножом обычно убивают крупное кровяное животное.
Прижав парня к дереву, Федор пошуровал у него в животе ножом, как будто хотел найти и убить там еще что-то живое, но неизвестное. (1993a, 8 f.)

The device of aesthetic shock is pivotal to the poetics of a whole group of contemporary Russian writers, who are grappling with the legacy of Soviet past. In this paper, I will analyse works by Viktor Erofeev, Jurij Mamleev, Saša Sokolov and Vladimir Sorokin, that employ the poetics of monstrosity. Monstrosity can be defined as a radical (or – to use a medical metaphor – pathological) deviation from culturally established norms. In literature, monstrosity is then artistically realized as aesthetic shock. In this sense, monstrosity will probably be pointed out in future histories of literature as one of the chief characteristics of Russian writing at the end of the 20th century.

There already exists a simple explanation for this phenomenon: Writers are compensating for a long period of officially decreed rectitude by freeing themselves from the narrow role of "engineers of the human soul". However, the widespread use of aesthetic shock is more than an infantile act of defiance in reaction to the collective trauma of totalitarian Soviet culture. The phenomenon of monstrosity in contemporary Russian literature should rather be seen as an explication of the semiotics of Stalinist culture (Lekuch 1992). This connection has been emphasized in recent studies.¹ For example, Georgy Gachev (1995: 119) points out the importance of the "Rustam complex" (the father kills the son) in the Russian context and explains thus the Soviet inclination towards gerontocracy. Mikhail Epstein (1995: 180) interprets the ideological core of Marxism-Leninism as the incestuous wish to rape Mother Nature (in Russian, all the positive values are feminine: "materija", "real'nost'", "priroda", "istina").

One may say that late Stalinist culture lays bare the monstrous dimension of its own premises. For example, the abolition of the immortality of the soul led to attempts to make the human body immortal. Celebrities like M. Gor'kij, K. Zetkin, V. Kujbyšev and M. Šaginjan underwent a treatment called "omoloženie", whereby the body was smeared with the urine of pregnant women in order to renew youthfulness (Zolotonosov 1991). Monstrosity is also evident as an unconscious substratum of the most popular Soviet heroic tales. Indeed monstrous is, for example, Boris Polevoj's "Povest' o nastojaščem čeloveke" – a book that appeared in 1946 and had reached by 1954 a print run of 2.5 million. It describes the story of a pilot who loses both legs,

learns how to dance on his protheses and begins to fly again (Smirnov 1993: 304).

"Flowers of evil" is the title that was given by Viktor Erofeev (b. 1947) to an anthology of Russian contemporary prose (1995). The revival in Russia of Baudelaire's famous formula is significant: Literature in the aftermath of totalitarian culture can uncover the aesthetic possibilities that lurk in the collective psychopathology. However, for both Baudelaire and his Russian successors, the term "evil" does not imply a moral judgement. It rather plays with the reader's traditional perspective which tends to confuse aesthetics with ethics. The naive equation "monstrosity" = "evil" can make the reception of such literature impossible, as occurred for instance when Kharkov typesetters refused to work on a manuscript by Vladimir Sorokin (Vajl'/Genis 1992: 139, Vajl' 1995: 4).

The purpose of this paper is not only to point out the genuine aesthetic value of literature of the monstrous but also to show the variety of artistic uses of monstrosity found in Russian contemporary writing.

Viktor Erofeev's "Žizn' s idiotom" is rife with aesthetic shocks (Porter 1994: 138-162). This story features a whole series of monstrosities: A married couple adopts a mentally handicapped person. The *menage à trois* turns slowly into hell as the idiot tyrannizes his foster-parents. He defecates and masturbates in front of them, rapes wife and husband successively, and finally decapitates the wife with hedge-shears, – a scene that triggers an orgasm in the husband. Contrary to the impression that this short summary might give, Erofeev's story is not merely pulp fiction – in fact, the composer Alfred Schnittke chose this work as the libretto for an opera. The artistic dignity of "Žizn' s idiotom" lies in the myth-making power of the text – the story uncovers the mythical substratum of Soviet everyday life.² It addresses a fundamental aspect of Russian experience in the 20th century – namely, the failed domestication of a crazy tyrant and the monstrosity of life with an unscrupulous ruler. In his horrifying parable, Erofeev depicts two ways in which a person who lives with an idiot becomes an idiot himself: First, through the sexualization of power and second – as the flipside of the same phenomenon – through self-infantilization. Both reactions parallel the behavior of a large part of the Soviet population towards the regime: The desexualization of private life directs a considerable amount of libido towards the political leader.³ The self-esteem of the individual decreases in the degree to which the power of the father figure increases. "Life with the idiot" turns into a tyranny of unquestioned harmony. The narrator describes the relationship with his feeble-minded and cruel oppressor Vova in terms of an infantile pastoral:

Мы жили с Вовой в согласии, нежности и неге, даря друг другу скромные подарки: конфеты, разноцветные шары, цветы и апельсины, и лобзания, – как сын живет с отцом, когда они - поэты божьей милостью и волей, и в мире не было людей счастливей нас. (1991: 23)

The conjunction of the brutality of the oppressor and the self-disenfranchisement of the oppressed proves to be fatal: Erofeev's illusory paradise ends for all figures in madness.

Unlike Erofeev, Jurij Mamleev (b. 1931) does not aim at a symbolic reproduction of a certain political or social situation. The dismemberment of the human body as an exciting spectacle is a key theme in his work. Here, heads are cut off, corpses are sawed into pieces, limbs are torn off. Monstrous motifs provide a point of departure for the development of a highly idiosyncratic philosophy in the metaphysical tradition of Dostoevskij.⁴ Mamleev expands the Soviet experience to a universal model of the world. The story "Golos iz ničto" has pivotal significance for Mamleev's system. Human existence is presented as the intersection of two contrary cosmic movements: On the one hand God, tired of his self-sufficiency, has decided to commit suicide and is descending precipitously towards nothingness. On the other hand all creatures are striving towards a higher level of being. There is no place for harmony in this conception; that which is pathological is normal. In an article entitled "Meždu bezumiem i magiej" Mamleev explains this paradox:

Еще подпольный человек Достоевского говорил, а не послать ли нам всю эту гармонию ... куда-нибудь подальше (имея, вероятно, в виду мировую гармонию вообще, а не только социальную). Парадокс, однако, заключается в том, что мир (и все его утопические варианты) далеко не так гармоничен, как кажется, так что, собственно, нет причин что-либо посылать подальше (не оттого ли так ограничены, не доведены до конца все теодицеи). Тайна зла, тайна "дизгармонии" абсолютно неразрешима, на мой взгляд, на уровне религиозной конвенциональности, на уровне морали и человеческого ума вообще. (1987: 181)

Mamleev nevertheless tried to provide a philosophical solution for the problem of human existence. In his essay "Sud'ba bytija," which was mainly written in the 1960's, Mamleev sketches out a metaphysics of the "I" ("Metafizika Ja"). Drawing from Indian philosophy, Mamleev does not recognize the reality of the world. The "I" contains within itself the only true reality. However, since the "I," as a human being, is part of the world, the "I" cannot be real. Mamleev sees the fundamental task of every human being as the "realization of God" ("Bogorealizacija"). Man has to transform himself into what he really is: God. Since a human being is actually not a human being, but God in a human cloak, the realization of God means the destruction of every human aspect of man's existence:

Процесс уничтожения этой оболочки (включая тело, психику, ум, etc) и отождествления себя с Богом (путем знаний и метафизической практики), т.е. со своим собственным истинным (а не ложным) Я называется Богореализацией или Освобождением (т.е. освобождением от всех ограничений, связанных с любым феноменальным миром). Понятно, что этот опыт не имеет ничего общего с религиозным, который основан на доктрине дуализма между Богом и "сотворенным миром" и который касается лишь так называемого "спасения души". (1993b: 72, see also Ogurcov 1992: 79)

Since the true meaning of human existence lies in self-realization as God, Mamleev has to invert Descartes' famous sentence "I think, therefore I am". Thinking belongs to the human sphere of existence and hinders the realization of God. Mamleev puts his formula in a provocative negation:

"Я не мыслю, следовательно, я существую". [...] "Не думать" и в то же время "быть" – значит проявить высшую активность трансцендентного Безмолвия, значит "переживать" не цепь мыслей, а чистую основу мыслительной реальности, освобожденной от дифференцированных мыслей. В конечном итоге – это значит реализовать Вечный

Источник самого мышления и проникнуть в Божественное Ничто, которое равносильно полной потенциальности Всего Сущестующего. (1993b: 81)

Up to this point, Mamleev's philosophical system is still not very original. Although Mamleev never mentions Schopenhauer, the similarity of their concepts is obvious.⁵ The uniqueness of Mamleev's philosophy lies in the construction of a "Final Doctrine". He delineates a non-entity that lies beyond God:

Итак, Последняя доктрина – это "учение" о том, чего нет, о том, что лежит по ту сторону Бога, Абсолюта, о том, что трансцендентно по отношению к Богу, к Реальности и к высшему Я. Это "учение" о том, что Бог является всего лишь "телом" истинно трансцендентного (говоря методом аналогии), а не сущностью Трансцендентного; последнее является как бы истинной Тьмой, истинным Океаном, который "окружает" Реальность ... (1993b: 92)

The conception of a Final Doctrine provides a clue to the absurdity of Mamleev's fictional world, which is deprived of any inherent sense. Darkness overwhelms human existence and becomes the motive force of a postmodern anti-hermeneutics:

Здесь же ничего не скрывается за миром, за "вещами" – ибо реальное, даже относительно реальное, не может быть символом того, чего нет, но наоборот, невыразимая мощь Транс-Тьмы, Транс-Бездны бросает свою "тень" на воплощенный мир, "превращая" его в свой антианалог, анти-символ, вступая с ним в абсурдистски-парадоксальные отношения. (1993b: 95)

One of Mamleev's protagonists, the serial murderer Fedor Sonnov from the novel *Šatuny*, wanders around helplessly in this world of ubiquitous "anti-sense". By following his instincts, he does the right thing, in terms of Mamleev's framework: He kills people in order to speak with their true personalities. Sonnov is thus not the monster he appears to be, but the prototype of a metaphysically seeking human being. Mamleev explained his device in a recent interview:

Мои герои выходят в неизвестное, в иные, запредельные сферы, и, как я уже говорил однажды, они просто люди, задавшие себе вопросы, на которые разум не в состоянии ответить. Я всегда подчеркивал, что многие мои герои кажутся монстрами только потому, что они перешли границу возможного, они носители тайных, неизвестных сил, которые хранятся – непознанные – в глубине каждого из нас. (Lavrova 1994: 3)

Mamleev's obsession with death now acquires a specific metaphysical sense. Death marks exactly the border of the possible. Someone who crosses this border takes a step towards the realization of his own Godness, but on the other hand moves away from the ultimate entity of non-being, the Abyss. The fatal mechanics of Mamleev's cosmic model do not provide a deliverance in death. Spirit and body flee from one another, while at the same time experiencing a mutual attraction. Mamleev describes the perversity of this situation in a series of grotesque fantasies: A dead man copulates in desperate lust with his own corpse ("Nebo nad adom"), a girl who hanged herself longs for the drowning of her own head ("Utopi moju golovu"), a dead father haunts his family as a vampire ("Iznanka Gogena"). In Mamleev's model, death can be repeated endlessly (Smirnov 1991: 206). The "black abyss" exerts an eery fascination on the artist more than on anyone else. In the article cited above, Mamleev defines the role of the artist:

Есть "Маг", то есть тот, кто владеет невидимой реальностью, и есть "Безумец", то есть тот, кем невидимая реальность владеет. Поэт занимает среднее положение между магом и сумасшедшим (как видно, это европейское определение значительно отличается от индуистского). Есть и другая возможность определить ситуацию поэта путем вопроса: кто он - "маг", надевший маску сумасшедшего, или "безумец", надевший маску "мага"? Иным казался более истинным второй вариант: маска "Господина" может быть сорвана, и поэт втайне хочет этого, чтобы великие темные волны Неизвестного навсегда затопили его сознание. Так было с Гельдерлином. Так почти случилось с Блоком. Говорят, что поэту ближе "черный ветер" Неизвестного, Черный Ветер Бездны, чем поза победителя над невидимой реальностью. (1987: 179)⁶

Thus, it is the unstable position of the artist at the edge of the abyss that makes him sensitive to the truth of the "invisible reality". His task lies not in resolving cosmic disharmony but in its symbolic description. In the preface to one of the first volumes of his stories to appear in Russia (1991), Mamleev writes:

Моей сверхзадачей в творчестве было раскрытие тех внутренних бездн, которые таятся в душе человека. Человек (в так называемой "обыденной" жизни) может не замечать их, но они рано или поздно проявляются – и в его поведении, и в его духовной жизни, и в его "подсознательных" страхах и надеждах. (1991: 3)

The different layers of Mamleev's cosmological model are like pieces of a puzzle which do not fit together. Absurdities occur on every level: Human beings exist, but they are not real. God is the highest reality, but he is not a happy God. The Trans-Abyss is the final goal of the cosmologic process, but it cannot be reached because it allows for neither reality nor sense. Mankind strives towards a God, who at the same time seeks his own destruction. It is not, therefore, the absence or death of God that is the reason for Mamleev's metaphysical pessimism, but the fact that God's self-annihilation can never be completed, since his own creation moves in the opposite direction.

Viktor Erofeev and Jurij Mamleev continue – at least stylistically – the tradition of Russian realism. The provocative element of their texts lies in the bold depiction of taboo themes. Contemporary Russian literature also features texts that are provocative not only in their subject matter but also in their radically new form. Saša Sokolov (b. 1943)⁷ and Vladimir Sorokin (b. 1955) are the most important among the Russian avant-garde writers who shock the reader by combining monstrous fabulae with extraordinary textual practices. With his novel *Palisandrija* (1985) Sokolov tried to write a universal parody (Glad 1993: 182) – not only of Nabokov's scandalous *Lolita* (1955), and its numerous imitations, but also of the unofficial culture of writing in Soviet Russia (Johnson 1986: 399). Sokolov's protagonist Palisandr Dal'berg travels through a loosely coherent plot which is but the setting for various grotesque situations. Sokolov's novel is saturated with sexual imagery at odds with its prudish language. Incest, rape and necrophilia are themes that occur throughout the text, although the sexual references are never made explicit. Sokolov's circumspect euphemisms are the exact opposite of the naming of sexual taboos that is so often the subject of adolescent pleasure. The female genitalia are, for example, referred to as "lap, her circumstances, underwater grotto, labyrinth [lono, ee obstožatel'stva, podvodnyj grot, labirint]". (Matich 1986: 422). Sokolov combines in his novel the depiction of sexual violence with the theme of political oppression. This kind of brutality is also formulated linguistically in a circumspect way: The official terror machinery is called the "secret organization of guards", Brežnev fulfills the role of a "watchman of order", Andropov is given his due as "general protector". However, one should not look for a political statement in Sokolov's use of historical figures. In an interview conducted by Viktor Erofeev, Sokolov maintained that literature is an autonomous field:

Литература - для меня – игра, не в обыденном смысле, а в высоком и серьезном – Игра. [...] Литература – вообще не о жизни, следовательно, разговор о моральности или аморальности неуместен. (Erofeev 1989: 198)

The extensive use of euphemism can be understood as a structural imitation of the ubiquitous perversions of Soviet everyday life. The absolute discrepancy between signifier and signified is perhaps the only appropriate linguistic form for the pathological. The perverse union of opposites runs like a leitmotif through Sokolov's novel: Palisandr who remains forever youthful looks in a mirror and sees his old face furrowed with wrinkles; he loves the soiling purification of mud baths; the discovery of Palisandr's androgyny inaugurates the use of the neuter verbal form in the description of his actions. Sokolov's novel can be read as a playful elaboration on aesthetic shock. Monstrosity is not shown directly on the textual level; rather it exists in the reader's mind and is invoked through certain key motifs.

Vladimir Sorokin (b. 1955), the "leading monster of Russian contemporary literature" (Viktor Erofeev), is much more explicit.⁸ Already in his first novel *Norma*, written between the years 1979 - 1984 and first published in 1994, Sorokin set out to describe the pathology of Soviet society. The eight-part novel treats the theme of "normality" under conditions of omnipresent perversity. "Norma" in Sorokin's novel refers to a daily ration which all Soviet citizens are forced to eat. The piquant detail: Norma is preserved human excrement. The eight parts of "Norma" are variations on one theme: Sorokin investigates in several "micro-novels" the reactions of different people to a situation that is officially declared to be "normal" but in fact is anything but "normal" (Vajl' 1995: 4).

Sorokin became famous after the publication of his novel *Očered'* (1985, written 1983). The theme is very familiar to the Soviet reader: A throng of people are queuing up without knowing what for. Sorokin's technique consists in the complete excision of the narrator. He presents bits and pieces of conversation without any narrative commentary. His documentary effort goes to the extreme of having silence marked by white pages.⁹

Tridcataja ljubov' Mariny (written 1984) follows the fate of a young woman from Moscow who finds happiness in the affirmation of communist life after 29 strange lesbian relationships. To be sure: Sorokin is not presenting a parody of socialist realist literature but rather is turning socialist realism into pop art. This procedure does not allow for irony. A familiar cliché is placed into a new cultural context without any comment on the new situation. Pop art – or Soc art, as the Moscow Conceptualists put it – needs no aesthetic explanation. It is the context which provides the work of art with meaning.

The most elaborate expression of Sorokin's metaphysical system can be found in the novel *Serdca četyrech* (written 1991).¹⁰ Life is interpreted as an unstable state of tension which eventually disintegrates into its organic

components. The general process which is repeated again and again in this novel is best labeled the "liquification" of the human being. The four protagonists not only turn most of the people they meet into bloody pulp, but also find redemption in their transformation from human beings into cubes of biological material.

Sorokin's most outstanding work is not only the size of a Russian classical novel, but also plays with this genre. The very title of the novel, *Roman* (written 1985-1989), indicates at the same time title, genre and the protagonist's name. The plot is simple: Roman, a sensitive young artist, retires from his job as a lawyer in the capital and moves to the idyllic Russian countryside. He breaks up with his fiancée and instead becomes the husband of a poor but decent girl from the neighborhood. The wedding party is the prelude to the typically Sorokinian ending of the novel: Roman goes berserk and butchers all the wedding guests and his bride with an axe. Subsequently, he gathers parts of all the corpses in the church of the village, produces a pulp, mixes it with all of his own bodily fluids, smears himself with it, eats it and finally perishes.

The radical thematic change that takes place in the novel also has a stylistic dimension. The first 300 pages are written in a perfect mimicry of a Russian novel in the style of Turgenev, Dostoevskij or Tolstoj. The literary allusions in this first part of Sorokin's *Roman* are innumerable: The hunting imagery closely imitates Turgenev's *Zapiski ochotnika*, Roman's separation from the beloved girl is modeled after the key scene in *Rudin*. Nature is depicted in the manner of Tolstoj ("Chadži Murat"), a discussion on the rationale of human procreation echoes "Krejcerova sonata". Dostoevskij is not only present in the motif of the axe (*Prestuplenie i nakazanie*), but also in the apotheosis of Russia as the exclusive home of morality (*Idiot*). In a recent interview Sorokin described his novel as follows:

[...] for me it is not a wedge that I tried to drive into the soft body of Russian literature. It is a closed structure, reminding me of a sand-glass from which the sand won't pour out. Perhaps, this is the most hermetically sealed work of all I have written. (Shapoval 1994: 10)

In fact, the narrator in *Roman* does not provide any explanation for the bewildering combination of the provincial Russian pastoral and the cruel outburst of violence. Nevertheless, Sorokin's *Roman* is not merely a textual game. It is useful to differentiate between the fictional and the metafictional sense of the novel.

The key to the fictional sense lies in the moment that triggers Roman's spell of violence. The slaughter starts precisely at the moment when Roman is left alone with his bride after the wedding ceremony. What follows is

nothing but the frightening realization of the spiritual metaphors that form the ideological center of classical Russian literature. The murder is actually Roman's substitute for the consummation of his marriage – in fact he makes his wife bleed. The conjugal union is only possible in a very radical form: Roman puts on the skin of his slaughtered wife. The same holds true for the Russian theme of the novel: The "choždenie v narod" which was called for by the šestidesjatniki and which was described in Turgenev's novel *Nov'* (1877) is realized in Sorokin's novel in a most bloody way. Roman literally immerses himself into the Russian people, plunging into the pap of its blood and its crushed limbs. The intellectual outsider succeeds in the desired integration into the "narod" only by mixing his own bodily fluids with that of the peasants.

The materialization of all spiritual values is the basis for the metafictional significance of *Roman*.¹¹ The pun with the word "Roman" which means at once title, genre and protagonist, indicates that Sorokin's novel applies its own content to itself. Roman's obsessive destruction of his own physical and spiritual homeland becomes a poetological statement: The reproduction of the Russian novel of the 19th century entails under the conditions of the declining 20th century the implosion of the genre (Vail 1994: 255). Sorokin reinforces the general theme of self-destruction on the stylistic level: The Turgenev-like diction which dominates the description of the provincial pastoral fades subsequently into a kind of inarticulate staccato. The novel ends in minimal syntactic style which consists only of subject and verb:

Роман дернулся. Роман застонал. Роман пошевелил. Роман вздрогнул. Роман дернулся. Роман пошевелил. Роман дернулся. Роман умер. (1994a: 398)

Sorokin is obsessed by three things: bodily fluids, power and language. Sorokin himself gives no interpretation of his works, but he tried to explain the genealogy of his triple trauma in an autobiographical sketch entitled "Zabintovannyj štyr'". Sorokin justifies his aim as follows:

Тысячи литературоведческих монографий были бы короче, если б их авторы знали, *что* увидел четырехлетний Левушка Толстой через замочную скважину, *чем* замахивались на пятилетнего Кафку, *куда* провалился трехлетний Джойс, гуляя в саду. Так не пора ли прервать многовековое ложноклассическое молчание и добровольным признанием способствовать торжеству истины и рассеиванию мифов и миражей, облегчая сложнейшую, напряженнейшую работу

филологов, биографов, аналитиков текста? Пора. (1992: 565)

It is typical for Sorokin that his psychoanalytical confession contains ironically not only "truth", but also the "spreading of myths and mirages". However, the description of his infantile traumas may still provide insights into his threefold obsession.

At the age of five – as Sorokin reports – he was fascinated by the cleaning of the sewage system. A truck carried a huge pump, a voluminous hose was introduced into the shaft. "Everything bewitched me: the noise of the pump, the disappearance of the waste, the smell, the strange man [Меня все завораживало: рев машины, оседающая жижа, запах, странный мужик]" (566). To keep young Sorokin away from this spectacle his great-grandmother told him a horrible story: The whole earth is covered only by a thin layer of ground, and beneath it the filth of the sewer stagnates.

At the age of six Sorokin's nanny catches him unconsciously attempting masturbation. The nanny threatens to cut off his penis with scissors. Sorokin begins to stutter.

Sorokin's childhood traumas serve as archetypes for the three realms of his psychopathology: Virtually the whole world is flooded with bodily fluids; thus, everything that contains a liquid calls for pouring out. Also, human bodies appear as mere containers, their "liquification" is just an aspect of the natural process of increasing entropy. Sorokin's liquid trauma is caused in both cases by powerful grown-ups, by stand-ins for the totalitarian ruler. Sorokin reacts to the fragility of the world and the totalitarian attack on his sexual integrity by partially losing his ability to speak. He mutilates language, – a process which ends eventually in the repetition of a limited set of sentences.

The psychoanalytical mechanism of Sorokin's aesthetics of monstrosity works in a simple but effective way: The total decomposition of the spiritual and physical universe brings everything back to its point of origin. Sorokin uses a language which goes back to roots of minimal expressivity. The sense of his literary non-sense lies precisely in the digestive reduction of both world and language to primordial units. This nexus can be put paradoxically as follows: One has to understand Sorokin's "catastrophes" as happy endings, because they resolve all painful tensions.¹²

Thus, the poetics of monstrosity are much more than an adolescent provocation. Modern authors scrutinize the collective trauma of Soviet society: In the semiotics of Soviet culture, where there was no normality, euphemism became a metaphor of being. Aesthetic shock as a literary device is not an attack primarily on morality or beauty but on aesthetics itself – in

the etymological sense of the word (perception). The artistic transformation of everyday life into what it really was – a monstrous disaster – presents things that previously seemed to be known in a new light. The artistic approaches differ: Erofeev presents a symbolic interpretation of Soviet everyday life; Mamleev couches his monstrous fantasies in a philosophical system; Sokolov writes a parody of the use of language in Soviet culture; Sorokin uncovers the material core of signifying processes. But the functions of these literary elaborations on Soviet culture are similar: The poetics of monstrosity serve the purpose of "deautomatizing" human perception, as defined by formalist theory. Herein lies the artistic legitimacy of the literary scandal.

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NOTES

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- ¹ The official ideology itself refers back to older national mythologies. (Groys 1992)
- ² The same holds true for Erofeev's novel *Russkaja krasavica* (1990). See Shneidman 1995, 180 f.
- ³ Evgenij Fedorov provides in his novel *Žarenyj petuch* a striking example for this mechanism, when he describes the feelings of his protagonist during the May Parade in orgasmic terms: "Stalin! Stalin! We were shaken by the intoxicating bacchanalian feeling of ecstasy. ... Our feeling of happiness was growing, enveloping the soul, piercing it. ... At this moment I felt as if a long, sharp, and sweet arrow pierced my quivering heart – an amazing feeling of freedom and integrity; all the borders and barriers disappeared. ... And then I experienced indescribable supernatural joy. ... I was not walking, I was floating over the earth, bathing in inexpressible supernatural happiness, which was growing and growing, strengthening and blazing. ... I cannot tell how long this amazing state of mine lasted, but it ended suddenly, painfully and disgustingly. ... My shirt was soaking wet. I dragged myself home. ... I forced myself to take a shower, hoping that I would feel better. It did not help. I didn't know how I managed to get to bed; I collapsed as if dead. I felt fever, depression, weakness." Cited in Kustanovich 1993: 137.
- ⁴ N. Mazur (1992) mentions explicitly Dostoevskij's story "Bobok". For a discussion of Mamleev's novel *Poslednjaja komedija* (written 1970-71, published only in German) and Dostoevskij see Schmid 1994b.
- ⁵ In an interview, Mamleev stresses his familiarity with German philosophy: "[...] интерес к немецкой философии был моим первым философским интересом еще в юности [...]." (Ogurcov 1992: 76)
- ⁶ See also Mamleev 1993b: 99: "Писатель [...] может и не пытаться "разгадать" это существо, пусть его тайна останется неразгаданной, но она есть, она видна, она действует, - и это уже большое открытие."

- ⁷ Volume 21 (1987) of *Canadian American Slavic Studies* is dedicated to the work of Saša Sokolov. For a detailed biography of Sokolov see Johnson 1992.
- ⁸ For a discussion of Sorokin's short stories see Shneidman 1995: 184-188 and Roll 1996.
- ⁹ This novel is thus far the only one published in English, under the title *The Queue* (1988). For an interpretation see Witte 1989: 145-168.
- ¹⁰ The English translation of an extract has been published in *Glas 2* (1991). For a discussion see Genis 1992 and Schmid 1994a.
- ¹¹ Sorokin speaks explicitly about his aim to materialize the spiritual characters of classical Russian literature: "When I read Russian classical authors the question of the corporeal nature of characters always occurred to me. I felt the movements of the soul, say, of Pierre Bezukhov or Alyosha Karamazov, but I did not feel their bodies. These are clots of psychic energy, which can expand to abysses or shrink to a needle's eye. The Russian literary body, though, absorbs the characters and deprives them of their corporeality. We shall never know how Natasha Rostova's armpits smelled and what pimples Alyosha Karamazov had. In the novel [*Roman*, U.S.] I wanted to compensate for the absence of corporeality in Russian literature." (Shapoval 1994: 10)
- ¹² From this perspective, *Roman* has a happy ending. Roman, for whom sexuality is dirty (like the hose of the cleaning pump), "cleans" himself with human pap. For a psychoanalytic explanation of coprophilia see Bornemann 1990: 206.

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