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Am Zug – Aufbruch, Aktion und Reaktion in den Literaturen und Kulturen Ost- und Südosteuropas

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Five Limonovs

Ulrich Schmid (St. Gallen)

On December 19, 2017, Eduard Limonov published an entry about me in his blog:

> Shut' up, German professor!
> Today, I checked the INOSMI website and found a quotation from a certain Ulrik Schmid, professor for Russian affairs at St. Gallen University. (What the heck is this? [Šo cė takė?] St. Gallen University? Apparently some kind of hole?)[1] (Limonov 2017)

How could I offend Limonov so deeply? The stumbling block was a statement I made during a radio interview (Schmid 2017). One of the effects resulting from the annexation of Crimea, I said, was that authors from the political opposition suddenly supported the aggressive policies of the Kremlin. Formerly fierce critics of president Putin came to see him as the warrantor of their own imperial dreams. The most prominent case in point was, I added, Eduard Limonov. His harsh reaction to my interpretation is very indicative. It is impossible to insult Limonov by calling him a fascist or a terrorist – this is exactly what he chose to be. Limonov's main goal in his adventurous life consists of shocking the public in Russia and abroad. He welcomes all means to that end.

The worst possible insult one can level against Limonov is to state his proximity to the Russian government, or any state institution for that matter. He constructed his entire biography on the claim of being a radical outsider. And yet, he seeks adulation and recognition from that very public sphere he propounds to despise. During most phases of his life, Limonov simultaneously addressed very different audiences with his creations, be they literary or political.

Another telling element is Limonov's astute tracking about who writes about him, and what. It is not only important to emphasize this phenomenon because of my own clash with him (or rather his clash with me). Limonov apparently googles his own name on a regular basis, and reads reviews about himself in the international press (Glad 1993, 268). He also comments on academic books that mention him, and engages in disputes with fellow writers (Zagrebel'nyj 2010, 150).

In hindsight, Limonov divides his adventurous life into two phases, a literary and a political period. As early as 1998, he was very clear about this change in his self-perception:

1 Ilya Kukulin drew my attention to the possibility that Limonov knows very well that St. Gallen is not a German, but a Swiss city. The reason for his misattribution may be the fact that Limonov needed an enemy – and in the current political situation Germany makes a much better enemy than Switzerland.

> In the years 1988 to 1989 I began to break out from literature into journalism. Already in 1991, I turned war and politics into new forms of existence. (Limonov 1998a, 10)

Limonov later explicitly stated that he stopped to write literature between 1988 and 1990, and turned to observe the world and civilization instead. The first text to fit this new model was the essay *Disciplinary sanatorium* in which he described the Western capitalist civilization as a mental institution that forcefully compels its patients to fulfill its norms (Zagrebel'nyj 2010, 63). In the nineties, Limonov created his own range of action by participating in several wars in the Balkans and the Southern Caucasus. In 1993, together with Aleksandr Dugin, he founded the National-Bolshevik Party. Limonov defined his own political task as a "service". He likened himself and his fellow party members to the First Christians who rose against the Roman Empire and eventually faced death in the arena (Limonov 2014a, 50).

Of course, Limonov's own statement about this principal divide in his biography has to be interpreted carefully. It is impossible to separate Limonov's political and literary convictions from his performances thereof. He never considered his actions as private or self-sufficient endeavors. He tailored all of his life expressions, both literary and political, to achieve the greatest possible effect – and in his case, as a rule, this was the *succès de scandale.*

Limonov deliberately constructed the myth of his own biography. He proudly pointed to the success of Emmanuel Carrère's book *Limonov*, and even recounted the impressive print run (400'000 for the hard cover, 200'000 for the soft cover edition) (Limonov 2016). Already in an interview from 1992, Limonov stated:

> The main hero of my books is Limonov. But in nature, no such person exists. According to my passport, I am Eduard Savenko. And Limonov is both hero and author. (Dodolev 2012, 13)

In an interview with Aleksandr Dugin from 1993, Limonov insisted that he was not only the author of some scandalizing books, but that he delved into a much deeper world: "I am the author of my own biography" (Limonov 1993, 50). Much later, Limonov characterized his own life as a myth, located between the myth of Heracles and the myth of Odysseus (Limonov 2014a, 18).

The main caesura in Limonov's life coincided with the demise of the Soviet Union. The constructed parallel of Russian history with the writer's biography echoes similar efforts found in the biographical self-conceptions of Herzen or Solzhenitsyn. It is entirely clear that Limonov considers his own life to be exceptional. Privacy is not a category in his literary self-presentation, he rather conceives of his individual existence as an arena for historical events of public importance.

Narcissism and vanity are, of course, the main drivers of Limonov's stunts. Over the years, he had to test various modes of existence that would satisfy his thirst for fame. He had to overcome several obstacles and transmogrify tragic necessities into heroic opportunities in order to create an acceptable self-image. Apart from the main

fault line around 1990 when Limonov changed from the literary to the political stage, there are roughly five periods in Limonov's adult life. In each of these periods, Limonov had to invent himself anew and to find new forms and genres of public self-presentation. Today, Limonov's main artistic problem consists in finding a narrative synthesis that encompasses and sums up all phases of his spectacular life.

Limonov one: Coping with the rejection of the Soviet cultural establishment (1967-1974)

As a young man, Limonov tried to establish himself as an avantgarde poet in Kharkiv. However, he soon understood that all his plans to become a famous writer were doomed to fail in this provincial Soviet city. In 1967, he moved to Moscow and tried his luck in two spheres at the same time: the official Soviet culture and the independent "Kingdom of Lianozovo", as Oskar Rabin put it in a famous painting of 1962. Limonov imitated the very private strategies of the artists at the Lianozovo colony, and produced samizdat booklets.

In the beginning of the 1970s, Limonov sent his poems to the literary journal *Junost'*. After three years without response he sent a letter of reclamation to the editors:

> My literary style makes a pariah out of me. [...] I knock on the locked door of literature, but I am not allowed to enter. (Mey 2004, 293).

By 1974, Limonov had reached a dead end. His role model was obviously Joseph Brodsky. Brodsky, an already acclaimed writer, was firmly established within the Soviet counter culture and received the highest consecration: The Soviet authorities considered him to be dangerous. As a consequence, Brodsky was later expelled from the Soviet Union.

In this situation, Limonov's last option was to resort to a literary self-interpretation along patterns that go back to the 19th and early 20th century. Together with other writers from the Lianozovo group, he pretended to represent the most influential literary group in the 1970s. He posed with Genrikh Sapgir, Igor Kholin and others in a highly symbolical way:



The arrangement of the persons and the gestures are clearly reminiscent of the iconic photograph from 1859 with the leading writers of the journal *Sovremennik*. Ivan Gon-

charov, Ivan Turgenev and Lev Tolstoi obviously enjoy their eminent status in the autonomous field of Russian literature. The literary canon was indeed one of the few realms of public life that was not regulated by the state or the court, for that matter. All professions were possible for an acclaimed writer: Goncharov was state censor; Turgenev was a liberal privateer, and Tolstoi an army officer. For their literary position, however, only their writings, not their occupations were decisive.



This iconographic tradition was continued by the Russian futurists. In a photography from 1912, Vladimir Maiakovskii, Aleksei Kruchonykh and Velimir Khlebnikov alluded to the famous photograph of the *Sovremmenik*-writers. At the same time, there are elements of parody and misbehavior in this scene that prove the iconoclastic claims of the futurists.



Limonov two: Challenging the émigré milieu (1975-1989)

The situation changed considerably after Limonov's departure to Western Europe and the United States. In an interview from December 20, 1989, Limonov said in hindsight:

> I established myself outside the émigré community. Nine of my books have been translated into French. I was first published at the end of 1980, and since then my books have been translated into eight languages. [...]
> I never tried to write for other émigrés. I wrote my first book for publication in English. Naturally, I couldn't write it in English, so I wrote it in Russian. But I never had Russian publishers in mind. (Glad 1993, 259).

Limonov started off as a writer who fell out of all categories. He first had to make contact with émigré editors and publishers in order to attract attention to his book. In 1979, the Russian version of his autobiographical novel *It's me, Eddie* appeared in a small publishing house in New York. In 1980 the French edition came out. The American edition followed three years later. Paradoxically enough, Limonov used two cultural spheres, which he utterly despised, as vehicles for his own success: The émigré milieu and the capitalist book market.

After the big rupture around 1990, Limonov had to look out for a new position in the field of literature. In his ironic foreword to his three volumes of *Collected Works*, he explained his departure from the role of the enfant terrible of Russian émigré literature:

> Around 1987, after I published a dozen of books in France and around fifty in the rest of Europe, on the peak of my popularity and fame, I understood that literature leads me in the best case into the company of the archival old men of the French academy. (Limonov 1998a, 8)

Towards the end of the eighties, Limonov had to compete against two rivals. The first rival could easily be disqualified: Henri Troyat (1911-2007). Born as Lev Tarasov in Moscow, Troyat became a prolific, if not graphomanic French writer and was elected to the French Academy in 1959. His œuvre consists largely of long-winded biographies of famous Russians and represents, from Limonov's perspective, the apogee of bourgeois writing. The second rival was, again, Joseph Brodsky. Brodsky had just received the Nobel Prize and was therefore a much more serious threat for Limonov. Brodsky's literary success was probably also one of the main reasons that pushed Limonov out of the field of literature and towards his political conceptual art.

In his autobiographical novel *We had a Great Epoch*, written in Paris in 1987, Limonov tells the story of a certain Levitin who snatched an important position from his father. Limonov continues:

> Every one of us, comrades, has in his life his own Levitin. Sometimes the author thinks that his Levitin – is the poet Brodsky. (Limonov 1998b, 42.)

This unexpected digression reveals Limonov's shock about Brodsky's receiving the Nobel Prize. Later on, Brodsky continued to haunt Limonov. In one of his most recent newspaper articles, Limonov returned to Brodsky and described him as a penguin during the ceremony in Stockholm (Limonov 2013, 165-169).

Limonov chose the most convenient reason to exclude himself from the group of possible laureates: He stressed the fact that his literary style was not compatible with the taste and preferences of the Swedish Academy. In an interview from 1992, he stated that he was a writer of the anti-establishment who was by no means acceptable for the Nobel Prize (Dodolev 2012, 17). Limonov went so far as to invert the causal relation between fame and literary production in Brodsky's case:

> In his own view, the fame confirmed his vocation, the fame kept Joseph in the limelight, it endowed him with talent. His more significant poetical things are written after the process and already in exile. [...]
> He handled his career and his editions well, and aptly undercut his Russian competitors. When his epoch ended, and this is undoubtedly the soft epoch of the Cold War, his puritan, dry poems, written in the style of an accountant, became superfluous. Soon, only one single, though no less remarkable reader will remain – me. (Limonov 2013, 66)

Limonov perceived the traditional arena of international literary fame as closed to him following Brodsky's success in 1987. Limonov now looked for new opportunities. He wrote for the French communist newspaper *La révolution*. However, in 1988 Limonov fell out with the Communist Party, because he wanted to publish a provocative article with the title *Masochism as state policy under Gorbachev*. Eventually, Limonov changed sides and switched from the far left to the far right press. He began to write for Le Pens *Le choc du mois*. A more neutral venue for Limonov was the satirical newspaper *L'Idiot international,* which, at that time, also employed Michel Houellebecq (Zagrebel'nyj 2010, 58). Additionally, in 1990, Limonov began to publish articles in the mainstream newspapers *Izvestija* and *Sovetskaja Rossija*.

Limonov three: Fighting the establishment not with words, but weapons (1990-2001)

For Limonov, the early 90s were a "Great Epoch", just as Stalinism was before. In an interview from 1990, Limonov called the turmoil after the demise of the Soviet Union a "dream for all rebels". Calling this period the "real life", he longed for actions that offered a broad range of possibilities for the marginalized and outraged enemies of the bourgeoisie (Mey 2004, 343).

Weapons seemed to him more attractive than words. During the Serbian siege of Sarajevo, he shot at the city with a machine gun. At the same time, he engaged in domestic Russian politics and defended the White House in Moscow during the constitutional crisis in 1993. Occasionally, he returned to war theatres. However, he became

more and more disillusioned with the political situation in Russia. In Limonov's view, Gorbachev incarnated the powerless Soviet bourgeoisie that had capitulated in the face of the Western life style. Gorbachev and his predecessors were "political impotents" – Limonov despised them as "Dachniki". For Yeltsin, Limonov did not find more amicable words. He called him a party bigwig, "Akaki Akakievich", or even a "Judas" (Suchanek 2001, 167).

Limonov's political program was not very consistent at the time. He considered coming from the extremes the most important feature of politics – be it from the right or the left. In 1994, he established his own scandalous newspaper *Limonka*. In 1996, he was accused of arousing public hatred when he wrote about "bad peoples" such as the Czechs, the Slovaks or the Croats. Limonov provocatively maintained that Russia's enemies should either be occupied or destroyed (Dodolev 2012, 231-239).

In 1998, Limonov fell out with Aleksandr Dugin who had quite different ideas about the National Bolshevik movement than Limonov himself. Limonov's own assessment was idiosyncratic enough:

> Dugin had advanced bookish demands to the Natsbols, demands that he himself did not meet. For him, bluntly spoken, a Natsbol had to be two-meters tall, able to write in runes, to be fluent in four languages and handle the sword like Siegfried. (Limonov 2002, 241)

Instead of creating a community of supermen, Limonov wanted to turn the National Bolshevists into imperial citizens who would follow his own leadership. In a way, the leader of the Bolshevik revolution Lenin became a role model for Limonov himself. In the nineties, Limonov was offered to write a biography of Lenin for the renowned series *Lives of Exceptional People*. Limonov turned the offer down, allegedly because he was too busy with his political activities (Limonov 2014b, 157). This may have been a pretext, tough. Perhaps Limonov considered himself as an appropriate subject for the biographical series, as opposed to serving as the author of another person's biography.

Limonov four: Suffering for his ideals (2002-2013)

In 2002, a new caesura transpired. Limonov was arrested and charged with illegal possession of arms, the formation of illegal armed units, an attack against the territorial integrity of Kazakhstan, and terrorism (Balkanskij 2017, 360).

In the 2000s, Limonov hovered somewhere between extremist and liberal positions. He organized several actions that liberal politicians like Mikhail Kasianov or Garri Kasparov considered acceptable. Limonov came to be seen as a defender of Russian civil society. However, Limonov soon fell out with the liberals. In one of his recent novels, he called Ilya Yashin a "child from a rich family". Moreover, he likened Yavlinski to the passive landowner Manilov from Gogol's *Dead Souls*. He reserved most of his despise for Boris Nemtsov who served a short term in prison in 2011 – together with

Limonov. Nemtsov appears only under the nickname of "Décolleté", Limonov calls him the "hero of the bourgeoisie" and mocks his leisure activities like surfing off the beaches of Venezuela. At the same time, Limonov ironically ponders the question why the cops seemed to be emotionally closer to Nemtsov than his fellow oppositionists from the liberal parties (Limonov 2014a, 5, 90, 95, 105, 109).

During this time, Limonov clearly considered Putin as enemy number one. On December 14, 2009, Limonov participated in a public discussion on the topic of "The Poet and the Tsar". Limonov claimed that the problem was not new and established the following series: Catherine the Great and Radishchev, Stalin and Bulgakov, Putin and Limonov.

In 2009, Limonov discovered a new sphere in which he could spread his views: the World Wide Web. Limonov has a very ambivalent relation with the Internet. On the one hand, the speed by which information travels in the Internet impresses him. On the other hand, he criticizes its ideological instability: "Just like every monster gets some girlfriend, every ugly thought finds a reader or even a follower" (Balkanskij 2017, 335). Nevertheless, Limonov is an avid user of social media, especially of *Live journal*.

Limonov five: Engaging in the neo-imperial propaganda (2014-)

The last epoch in Limonov's constructed biography starts in spring 2014. The annexation of Crimea led to his abdicating oppositional politics. By now, Limonov had turned into a de facto supporter of the official culture in Putin's system.

However, in an *Live journal* entry dated October 11, 2015, Limonov insisted on his independence from Putin: "Putin does not need me, and neither do I need him." Limonov continued with school marks: On the Russian scale from one to five, he gave Putin a ten for Crimea, and a three for the uprising in Donbas. The reason is simple: According to Limonov, Putin did not finish the Donbas scenario ("ne dodelal"). The Russian president receives the most negative criticism from Limonov for his backing of the "oligarchic capitalism" in Russia (Limonov 2015a).

In Limonov's eyes, Putin turned from an usurper into a savior of Russia. Moscow's aggressive behavior towards Kyiv seemed to corroborate Limonov's boldest dreams from the nineties. Already back then, Limonov had foretold the breakup of Ukraine when, he had traveled to Crimea as an agitator in 1994. In 1999, he conducted a political stunt with the title "Sevastopol is a Russian city" (Balkanskij 2017, 288). During the hot phase of the annexation of Crimea, Limonov was even ready to enroll as a private soldier to the army "to liberate the Russian soil" (Limonov 2015b, 81).

In 2014 and 2015, Limonov again published some strong-opinion pieces in the loyalist newspaper *Izvestija*. In these articles, he called to censor the radio station *Echo Moskvy*, and demanded the rock star Makarevich be punished.

Limonov now even gives interviews on the state channel *Rossiia*, and appears as a guest in Vladimir Soloviov's show *Večer*. Soloviov is a hardliner and backs the official propaganda of the Kremlin.

Apart from his political appearances, Limonov recently ventured into metaphysical speculation. In a series of essays and books, he engaged in a discussion about the *last things* and the essence of man. In his quasi-religious treatise *Illuminationes*, Limonov directly calls human beings "bio-robots" (Limonov 2012, 86). Limonov understands the human body to be nothing more but a bio-incubator that hosts a soul (Limonov 2014b, 100). This soul needs to be fed with ideological content. Of course, one of the main producers of spiritual guidance for this bio-incubator is Limonov himself. Accordingly, Limonov chose the social position of a wise hermit who is haunted by nightmares (Limonov 2013, 344).

Conclusion

Limonov is a skilled entrepreneur of his fame. He uses politics for his literary goals, and literature for his political goals. Ultimately, all his masks stick so closely to his real face that it has become impossible to distinguish his real self from his staged self. This may not be a disadvantage. In fact, Limonov never distinguished between his true self and the various roles he played in the public. Rather, he embraced the biographical result he had become either by his own will or as a result of circumstances.

Limonov never actually accepted reality. Reality was not a given, but something that had to be modeled after fictional models. One of his earliest role models came from cinema – Alain Delon, the incarnation of the coolness of the outlaw in the French film *The Adventurers*.

Recently, Limonov redirected his biographical flow into cinema again – for an Italian film project about his own life, Limonov suggested Johnny Depp as the protagonist – and Johnny Depp is of course nothing but Alain Delon reloaded in the 21st century.

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