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“NEW SECTARIANISM” AND THE PLEASURE PRINCIPLE IN POST-MODERN RUSSIAN CULTURE

Tolstoy’s *What is Art?* and the post-Soviet “religious feeling”

In his tractat *What is Art?*¹ Tolstoy outlines, among other things, a new aesthetics of culture for the people, or popular culture. The test any work of art must pass in order to conform to Tolstoy’s new aesthetics of authenticity, born out of his repudiation of the bourgeois art of Europe and of his own “class art” deployed in his major novels about the Russian gentry of the nineteenth century, comprises three tenets. First, a work of art must be universally intelligible; secondly, it must be infectious, and thirdly, it must reflect “the religious idea of the age.”

An analysis of Tolstoy’s post-1870s prose reveals that universal intelligibility translates into a quasi-oral style of narration (*skaz*), close to the spoken vernacular. Instead of being “writing,” the mature Tolstoy (of the post-*Anna Karenina* period) wants literature to be “speech” or the spontaneous outpourings of language, as embodied in his *Kreutzer Sonata* and other later writings in the “confessional mode.” The first tenet is connected with the second: art must infect the recipient with the same emotions which the sender (author) intended to convey. While couched in somewhat old-fashioned critical idiom, this tenet translates into the “experience of language” that the reading act or the act of reception of a work of art represents. This “experience of language” is attained through the act of memory, activated by the reader in the process of recovery of the “hidden” or *unconscious* memory trace which the reading act entails. The poetics of Tolstoy’s major novel, *Anna Karenina*, encodes just this kind of bodily “experience” of the “perceived world,” and is enacted specifically in the cameo scenes involving Tolstoy’s Mikhailov, the painter of Anna’s portrait. This poetics of the “experience of language” or “the pleasure of the text”² underpins the

1. L. N. Tolstoy, “Chto takoe iskusstvo?” *Sobranie sochinenii v dvadtsati dvukh tomakh. Tom piatnadsatyi: Stat’i ob iskusstve i literature* (Moscow: “Khudozhesvennaia literature,” 1983), pp. 41-224. Also in English: L. Tolstoy, *What is Art?* Aylmer Maude, trans. (London and Felling-on-Tyne, New York, Melbourne: Walter Scott Publishing Co. Ltd., 1899?) Author’s preface written in 1898; introduction by Aylmer Maude dated 1899.

2. Compare Roland Barthes, “From Work to Text,” *Image, Music, Text: Essays*, Stephen Heath, trans. (London: Flamingo, Fontana Paperback, 1982), pp. 163-64. Barthes defines the

entire novel, and is embodied by the figure of Anna who owes her very existence and *being* to the “gaze” of the “artists” – Mikhailov, Tolstoy and the reader. It is this communicative function of art that Tolstoy describes with his tenet of “infectiousness.” Generating feeling as an experience of the moment, of an immanent present, grounded in the finitude of language, propels Tolstoy’s authentic work of art out of metaphysical aesthetics (the notions of Beauty in an abstract context) and into the domain of popular culture, whose poetics can be summed up in the principle of “consumption on the spot.”³ This mode of consumption is close to ritual and related to sacrifice.⁴ It was theorised in European Modernism (by Georges Bataille and the *Documents* group in the 1920s and early 1930s) as the hallmark of a new aesthetics that simulated an archaic form of exchange based on excess and “the need to destroy and to lose.”⁵ It is possible to transpose Bataille’s model of “consumption” into psychoanalytic theory of the subject and to proclaim it synonymous with the Freudian death drive. The latter then becomes the ground of the aesthetic enjoyment of the text, always at the limit of negativity, which is the groundless ground of the Freudian unconscious. This defines the model of popular culture such as this culture emerged as theory and practice of the first European avant-garde. How this model is applied in the context of mass culture of postmodernism will be defined through the present analysis.

pleasure of reading as a “pleasure of consumption,” while the Text “is bound to *jouissance* that is to a pleasure without separation.” Barthes admits that he does not offer an entire theory of the text. It is possible to speculate, however, that since Barthes must have been familiar with Bataille’s work, and since Barthes was a Marxist critic, that his notion of consumption was close to that of Bataille’s in the sphere of aesthetics.

3. The term “consumption on the spot” is used by Denis Hollier, in his article on Georges Bataille, “The Use-Value of the Impossible,” Leslie Ollman, trans., *October*, 60 (Spring 1992), pp. 3-24, to define a mode of consumption, originating in primitive societies, in which the value of the object is not its exchange value, but its use value understood, paradoxically, in a non-utilitarian sense. Bataille’s rendition of Marx’s terms “exchange value” and “use value” represents an idiosyncratic application to what Bataille calls a “general economy” of expenditure that is unrelated to need. This form of expenditure was described by the anthropologist Marcel Mauss, referenced by Bataille, in the phenomenon of *potlatch* – a custom attributed to the Northwestern American Indians, which “constituted a gift of riches, offered openly and with the goal of humiliating, defying, and *obligating* a rival.” Compare Georges Bataille, “The Notion of Expenditure,” *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings 1927-1939*, Allan Stoekl, ed., Allan Stoekl *et al.*, trans. (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1985), p. 121.

4. Compare Hollier, “The Use-Value of the Impossible,” p. 12.

5. Bataille, “The Notion of Expenditure,” p. 121.

In an aesthetic context, Tolstoy’s concept of “religious feeling” – the third tenet of an authentic work of art⁶ which imparts unity to the work – decodes as “belief” or set of beliefs and values that bind a given cultural epoch into what Foucault has subsequently called an *episteme*. “Belief” in this context is a synonym for “value system.” In Tolstoy’s nomenclature, “belief” is called the “religious feeling” of the age. It is clear from his formulations that this “religious feeling” is not something metaphysical, such as “belief in deity” or in “transcendence,” but that it is the knowledge of “what is right and what is wrong.”⁷ The “religious feeling” of the age is thus Tolstoy’s code for the cultural construction of “value” – or ethics – viewed as a process in time and history. Instead of one value system, set by a “higher” class, on which the power of that class confers universality as a form of transcendence (compare Vronsky and Golenishchev’s conversations on art in *Anna Karenina*), the new “religious feeling of the age” (that is, the new value system), grounded in the transmission and reception of feeling, using the vehicle of vernacular speech, establishes a new universal “popular culture” in a level playing field without hierarchies, in which value is underwritten by individual experience of value. In other words, “value” in the age of popular culture is value without value. Like Nietzsche’s process of “eternal return” of the Same (*die ewige Wiederkehr des Gleichen*), the religious feeling of the age of popular culture, whose poetics is born out of European Modernism, the construction of “value without value” amounts to the perpetual “revaluation” of value (*die Umwertung aller Werte*), but since the value being revaluated is free of value, the end result of this process is: value becomes fashion. This construction of “meaning” without “value” through the process of interpretation of signs or texts is popular culture’s transformation of Nietzsche’s infinite semiosis. Integral to this process of interpretation or the construction

6. The third tenet of Tolstoy’s test for the “authentic work of art” represents the most misunderstood part of *What is Art?* This is because it contains the adjective “religious.” For Tolstoy claims that what confers unity and authenticity on a work of art is the “religious feeling of the age” in which the work was produced. The Russian Formalist, Boris Eikhenbaum, interprets Tolstoy’s “religious crises” of the 1890s as a crisis of creativity. Tolstoy, according to Eikhenbaum, was looking for new forms and in that, we infer, was like any artist of the generation of Russian Symbolists. Compare Boris Eikhenbaum, “O krizisakh Tolstogo,” *Skvoz’ literaturu: sbornik statei* (Leningrad: “Academia,” 1924), pp. 67-73. [JAL reprints. “Journalfrenz” Arnulf Liebing, oHG – Würzburg, 1972].

7. Compare Tolstoy *What is art?* pp. 52-53: “The estimation of the value of art (i.e., of the feelings it transmits) depends on men’s perception of the meaning of life; depends on what they consider to be the good and the evil of life. And what is good and what is evil is defined by what are termed religions.” For Tolstoy, “religion” is the expression of meaning and cultural memory. The expression of “religious feeling” through authentic art is thus for Tolstoy synonymous with the expression of cultural value and cultural memory through art.

of value (with or without value) is pleasure – the pleasure of the text, grounded in the pleasure principle and the death drive.⁸

Tolstoy's test for the authentic work of art is a prescient definition of twentieth century popular culture, born of the Modernist avant-garde which through its poetics of Futurism/Expressionism, modelled the techniques of the new art, such as the mass genre of cinema or the visual arts which could be technically reproduced.⁹ Tolstoy's tests of communicability and infectiousness, which together constitute the experience of the semiotic process

8. The "pleasure principle" (*das Lustprinzip*) is the "main tendency" of the primary process (the unconscious activity of the psyche), which strives towards the attainment of pleasure (*Lust*) and the avoidance, through repression (forgetting), of displeasure (*Unlust*). Compare Sigmund Freud, "Formulierungen über die zwei Prinzipien des psychischen Geschehens (1911)," *Studienausgabe Band III: Psychologie des Unbewussten*. Fischer Wissenschaft. Herausgegeben von Alexander Mitscherlich *et al.* (Frankfurt-am-Main: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 1982), pp. 13-35. This is, according to the editors of the *Studienausgabe*, the first mention of the term "Lustprinzip" in Freud's work. In his new "structural model" of the psyche, which was developed in the papers from 1919 onwards, Freud linked the repetition compulsion to the death drive which he situated "beyond the pleasure principle." Compare Sigmund Freud, "Jenseits des Lustprinzips," *ibid.*, pp. 213-72. What is "beyond" the pleasure principle is the "death drive" – a "conservative" impulse of the psyche towards the restitution of an earlier state of stasis or thingness, which can only be achieved through the death of the "I." The death drive (also called by Freud the sex drive) is not a will to death or to suicide. It is an unconscious drive which is pure negativity and indeterminacy. It is thus possible to claim that the psyche is not in any way determinate, it has no essence ("soul") and is therefore not the "origin" of any "personality," "type," or "identity." What is at stake for the subject is not its "identity" but the subject's relation to the object. This is the object of *desire*, which is the "cause" of wishing but which by definition must remain "open" or "unsatisfied." Thus one could infer that all art is a substitution which allows the subject to project its desire which is "satisfied" temporarily (for the moment, in the consumption on the spot) through the act of reading or reception of a work of art. The *jouissance* of the text is thus a repeated re-enactment of the death drive.

9. In his essay, "The Work of Art in the Age of Technical Reproduction" [*Walter Benjamin: Illuminations, Essays and Reflections*, Hannah Arendt, ed. (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1969) (published 1955 in German)], written in 1928 and first published, in a French translation, in 1936, Walter Benjamin elaborated, without reference to Tolstoy, his own model of popular culture, in which authenticity is no longer a criterion of art, since the "original" cedes its "aura" in the process of mass reproduction through which it loses its uniqueness and its ritual value. It is no longer "consumed on the spot." Instead, the "new" art in the age of mechanical reproduction is defined in terms of "a pure use – of exhibition in service of politics; meaning by "politics" those ways by which power over the machinery of production is acquired or maintained," as explained by Joel Snyder, in his critical commentary on and publication history of Benjamin's essay, in Joel Snyder, "Benjamin on Reproducibility and the Aura," *Benjamin: Philosophy, Aesthetics, History*, Gary Smith, ed. (Chicago and London: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1989), p. 172. The point which Tolstoy's modernist model of the popular work of art and Benjamin's "new" art in the age of mechanical reproduction have in common is the notion that art is the expression of "value" or, as we have called it, with Tolstoy, the "religious feeling" of the age or – *desire*.

in the recipient of the work of art, is commonly known as *seduction* and the *pleasure of the text* in postmodernism.¹⁰ In as much as the works of Russian postmodernism are freely available if not widely disseminated in post-Soviet Russia, and in as much as, after Communism, every man is master of his own reading, it can be claimed that postmodern Russian literature does satisfy Tolstoy’s tests of communicability and infectiousness and that all postmodern Russian literature constitutes a new form of popular culture. On the question of ethics, which subsumes Tolstoy’s third criterion of an authentic work of popular culture, postmodern Russian literature and cinema offer an ambivalent picture of the post-Soviet cultural production which would not have pleased Tolstoy, whose ethics remains normative, at least on the face of it. The question of ethics is the central question in the analysis of Russian Soviet and post-Soviet society as presented in late-Soviet analytic prose and philosophy¹¹ as well as post-Soviet literature and cinema. One of the earliest analyses of Soviet ethics is presented by the literary and culturological critic, Mikhail Epstein.

In his 1985 tractat, *Novoe sektantstvo: tipy religiozno-filosofskikh umonastroenii v Rossii* [New Sectarianism: Varieties of Religious-Philosophical Sentiment in Russia],¹² Mikhail Epstein adopts an approach to the issue of religious sentiment which is reminiscent of Tolstoy’s use of the concept of “religious feeling.” Epstein uses the term “sektantstvo” as a code word for a system of “value” or “belief.” Epstein’s “new sectarianism” is a metaphor and umbrella term, encompassing a whole range of shades of beliefs, from atheism to mysticism, allegedly manifested in Russia of the 1970s and 1980s. While Tolstoy’s critique of value sets off from the revaluation of the value system (“religious feeling”) of his own gentry

10. For an explanation of the concept of “the pleasure of the text,” see Barthes, “From Work to Text,” pp. 163-64. For the concept of seduction, compare the writing of Jean Baudrillard, in particular “On Seduction,” *Jean Baudrillard: Selected Writings*, Mark Poster, ed. (Cambridge: Polity Press in association with Blackwell Publishers, 1992), pp. 149-65. Here seduction is defined as a relation, “quite different from communication and exchange,” a relation “removed from exchange” and based on a “challenge” which suspends all laws, including “the law of nature and the law of value,” substituting these with a “highly conventional and ritualized *pact*” (p. 161). Thus Baudrillard’s “seduction” shares with Tolstoy’s tenet of “infectiousness” of a work of art the idea of an absence of value (substance or essence).

11. The question of ethics preoccupied the late-Soviet Russian-Georgian philosopher and critical theorist, Merab Mamardashvili. Compare, for example, “Soznanie i tsivilizatsia” [“Consciousness and Civilization”], *Kak ia ponimaiu filosofiui* (Moscow: Izdatel’stvo “Progress,” 1990), pp. 107-21.

12. Mikhail Epstein, *Novoe sektantstvo: tipy religiozno-filosofskikh umonastroenii v Rossii (70 – 80 gody XX veka)*. Pod redaktsiei Romana Levina. (Holyoak: New Publishing House, 1993). All quotations are my translations. The pages given are those of the original Russian edition.

class, Epstein's *Novoe sektantstvo* is a survey of the beliefs or "ideologies" of the Russian intelligentsia, notably its Moscow circles ("ottenki religioznykh umonastroenii, kotorye byli rasprostraneny v srede intelligentsia," ["shades of religious sentiments, which were widespread amongst the intelligentsia of the capital"])¹³ in the 1970s and 1980s. This is how Epstein defines "new sectarianism": "To, chto ia nazyvaiu novym sektantstvom – eto, po suti, vyrazhennaia v religioznykh poniatiiakh ideologiii nashei intelligentsii, tochnee, summa takikh ideologii, raskhodiashchikhsia po radiusam vo vse storony ot 'centra' gosudarstvennoi ideologii."¹⁴ Epstein's book is a futuristic composition, in the sense of the Russian Futurists and the tradition of the literature of the absurd, which maps, in carnivalesque and parodic style, the proliferation of ideologies existing side by side with the central state ideology of scientific communism and the aesthetics of socialist realism. This mapping is allegedly based on questionnaires, administered during "three expeditions or field work stints, undertaken in 1975, 1979 and 1983."¹⁵ During this "field work," the most varied evidence and testimonies were gathered, which the author claims to be analysing in his book on "new sectarianism."

The author's own explanation of these "testimonies" is given in the postscript of the book. Here the author explains "why abstract conceptions have made such a decisive imprint on the history of the twentieth century. One possible aftermath of totalitarian ideology is the proliferation of multiple ideologies, which nevertheless remain totalitarian in their particular fields. Such is the situation in the former Soviet Union now [the book was written in the USA in 1992]: dozens of totalitarianisms cannot make up for a single pluralism."¹⁶

As can be seen from this "baring of the device" (as the Russian Formalists called the technique of disclosure of the principles of form in a work of art), Epstein's book is a culturological diagnosis of what Epstein calls the *Comedy of Ideas* (alluding to Dante's *Divine Comedy* and Balzac's *Human Comedy*) which "plagued" Russian culture in the twentieth century. Thus Epstein discusses, under quasi-comical names, which are his own neologisms,¹⁷ a series of sects which try to invest daily life with re-

13. *Ibid.*, p. 6. ["That which I call 'new sectarianism' – is, in essence, the ideology of our intelligentsia expressed in religious concepts, more specifically, the sum of such ideologies, spreading out in a radius from the 'center' of state ideology."]

14. *Ibid.*, p. 8.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 15.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 177.

17. As Epstein says, none of the named sects, such as "duriki," "kovchezhniki," "pustovertsi," can be found in Russian dictionaries. That is why these neologisms are also difficult to render into English.

ligious content. One such sect is called *pishchesviatsy* – “food saints” or “food gurus.” All eating activities are linked by this sect to religious ritual and religious concepts. The very posture in which one eats is likened to humility (*smirenje*). The host of a dinner is said to represent a figure of respect since he is the likeness of the Father, “whose flesh created you.” The dinner guest should also be respected as he is the image of the Son, “who nourishes himself on your flesh.”¹⁸ This view arises, one infers, as a reaction to the materialist view of history. A veiled swipe at the Marxist view of history as a process of production of food is rendered in sarcastic terms but from a new sectarian point of view which can also not be taken without a grain of salt by the reader. Thus one sectarian (Marxist) view is replaced by an equally (“fundamentalist”) sectarian view, as can be seen from the following passage:

Vsia istoriia stala rassmatryvatsia kak istoriia dobyvaniia pishchi, kak smena orudii i sposobov ee proizvodstva. Bylo skazano, chto prezhdje chem myslit' i verit', chelovek dozhen est' i pit', vosprozi-vodit' svoe telo. Eta teoriia vyshla iz pishchesviatskikh krugov, no postepenno priobrela kharakter iazycheskogo pishchepoklonstva. . . . Nam nuzhna filosofiia, kotoraiia nachinala by s goloda, no prikhodila by ne k zrechekomu pokloneniiu materii, a k zhertvennosti i shchedrosti samogo vselennogo materinstva, ot Otsa zachinaiushchego i kormiashchego grud'iu zemli chelovecheskoe ditia.¹⁹

[History is regarded as a process of food manufacture, and of the evolution of tools and methods for its production. It was said that before thinking and believing, man had to eat and drink, manufacturing his own body. This theory emerged from the circles of “food saints” or “food gurus” but gradually acquired the dimensions of a pagan worship of food. . . . We need a philosophy which would start off from hunger, which would lead not to a pagan worship of matter but to sacrifice and generosity of the oecumenical Motherhood, from a Father who sires and feeds the human child with the sod of the earth.]

Another intellectual sect catalogued in Epstein’s genealogy bears the name of the Ark People (*kovchezhniki*), alluding to Noah’s Ark as a symbol of survival after an apocalyptic event. This sect belongs, according to Epstein, to an escatological religious stream in Russian and Western thought, whose followers believed in the salvation of a select few and who spent the

18. Epstein, *Novoe sektantstvo: tipy religiozno-filosofskikh umonastroenii v Rossii*, p. 31.

19. *Ibid.*, p. 32.

best part of their lives building houses of shelter against the coming apocalypse. They were saved, according to Epstein, not because of their foresight but because humanity at large was wise enough to avert a nuclear holocaust.²⁰

Epstein's witty, carnivalesque representation of ideologies circulating in the last two decades of the former Soviet Union is, as he says, a diagnosis of various forms of "fundamentalisms" which had multiplied along the lines of the original totalitarian ideology of Marxism-Leninism. The inference which can be drawn from Epstein's huge catalogue of ideologies – but which Epstein himself does not draw – is that in the face of so many competing value systems, none can be taken as the master narrative. In other words, "value" as a cultural construct in the Soviet Union of the 1970s and 1980s was already without essence and true obligation. Value was already, towards the end of the history of the Soviet system of value, value-free, on a par with a fad or a fashion. This society, in which ideologies proliferated, was in fact emptied of ideological content. The very description given to the period of the 1970s and pre-perestroika 1980s as that of stagnation (*zastoi*) indicates that it was a "static" or empty time. Epstein draws the inference that the proliferation of ideologies, which we would call fads, did not constitute a "single pluralism." While dependent on one's definition of "pluralism," it is still not logical to posit "one pluralism" as a kind of receptacle or "block" which houses a mix of diverse values in free relations to one another. If pluralism is anything, it is the absence of "one" value or the "One." Without realising or spelling out the implications of his cultural-ological survey, Epstein has uncovered the true "religious feeling" of the age of late-Soviet culture, which prepared the coming of post-Soviet culture and served as its groundless ground. This new post-Soviet "religious feeling" was precisely the proliferation of individual sentiment as the ground of "private" value – a value that was as capricious and as free of essential value as the individual unconscious originating in the Freudian death drive.

The fact that such an inference may be drawn from Epstein's cultural-ological "survey" is underlined by the fact that this "survey" fails to promote any one of the ideologies represented as the "right" or desirable one. All ideologies are treated as comical, all are parodies of beliefs which are recognisable as existing fads, not only in late-Soviet culture, but in the mass culture of Western societies.

As the 1990s passed and Russian culture turned to postmodern forms of expression, Epstein's tractat on "new sectarianism" has acquired a new prophetic force. It has also become a fitting model for the analysis of the

20. *Ibid.*, p. 104.

representation of post-Soviet ideologies in the Russian cultural space of the late 1990s and early twenty-first century. It is to Epstein’s credit to have created a “genealogy of morals” which still has theoretical force in the twenty-first century. Representing a plethora of beliefs and ideologies in the style of a freak show at a country fare, Epstein’s book serves to underline the trends in post-Soviet aesthetics, as manifested in the poetics of some recent works of postmodern Russian culture – both literary and popular (in particular, cinema) – in which belief systems of the late-Soviet period linger on in various permutations. The cross-pollination of aesthetics and ethics is nothing new: the good and the beautiful have been closely associated since Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*. In Tolstoy’s *What is Art?* it is ethics which determines good form – aesthetics – of the authentic work of art in the modern age. In postmodern Russian literature, it is the representation of post-Soviet ethics which constructs a new post-Soviet literature of the absurd, serving as a tool of critique of postmodern Russian culture.

Several recent post-Soviet works have particular resonance with Epstein’s theses on “new sectarianism”: one is Vladimir Sorokin’s novel *Led* [Ice] (2002);²¹ a second is Sorokin’s film scenario *Chetyre* [Four] (2004); a third is Aleksei Varlamov’s novella *Zatonuvshii kovcheg* [The Sunken Treasure] (2002). All three works represent aberrant belief systems which are portrayed as the result or as coming in the wake of cataclysmic events: the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union in the case of *Led*; the implosion of the Soviet social order and the onset of “late capitalism” in postmodern Russia in the case of *Chetyre*; and the event of Russian “modernity,” seen as a telescoping of Russian history from Peter the Great’s times to the Soviet 1950s and beyond that, into an indeterminate static “present,” in the case of Varlamov’s *Zatonuvshii kovcheg*. All three works deal with the theme of “izbrannichestvo” – the phenomenon of the select, the chosen people. All three works represent messianism as a type of exclusionary belief system. The construction of identity through the self-perception of exclusivity or apartness is common to all types of religious communities. One such community is represented by Marina’s village and Marina’s sisters in Sorokin’s *Chetyre*; another is constituted by the “blond children” in Sorokin’s *Led*, who are randomly segregated by the retreating Nazi army for membership of an exclusive sect whose initiates communicate directly with their hearts – a parody on the Nazi myth of a superior Arian race and on all forms of sentimentality bred by totalitarian ideologies or utopias. Finally, the theme of *izbrannichestvo* is portrayed through Masha, the village *yurodivaya* in Aleksei Varlamov’s novel, who is a different symbol to different

21. Vladimir Sorokin, *Led* (Moscow: Ad Marginero, 2002).

believers – the rational utopians (represented by the teacher, Ilya Petrovich), the genuine Old Believers and the apostate power-hungry imposers. However, the messianism of these various groups does not construct a future utopia. Their concern is strictly with a present in which the dominant force in the lives of the characters represented in all the named works is not thought (rational belief) but feeling and pleasure. In Sorokin's *Led*, the exclusivity of the select group is based on the ability of the heart to withstand the test of a blow with a mallet made of ice. The group of the select is united in rituals of communion in which direct communication of feeling is possible. While these aberrant rituals resemble sexual orgies, it is an ambivalent sexuality, if any, which comes to light in these practices. It is as if the "new religious" feeling of the "sentimental sect" (which resonates with several sects described in Epstein's catalogue) in Sorokin's *Led* were grounded in a sexuality without content, or a sexless sexuality. The emptiness which characterises the ideologies of the 1980s in Epstein's catalogue is here replicated on the psychic level: the psyche of the heroine, Varka Samsikova (alias Khram), is dreamy (as was the psyche of the Modernist *femme fatale*, such as Alexander Blok's Stranger and other Modernist heroines), but this is a dreaminess without full-blooded sensuality, without contact with the libido. It is sensuality at one remove from the person whose experience it is meant to be, and it somehow resembles alienation. This is underlined by the dramatic monologue of the heroine who narrates her experiences in a reduced post-war Germany and back in Russian as a member of the sect of the heart. The substitution of sect names for the proper names of the characters involved determines the nature of experience which is constructed through their narrative: substitution is there as an end in itself, constructing a process of signification which is without substance or content. It is infinite semiosis without substance or value. It is pure metonymy which, according to Lacan, *is* desire.²² Thus sensuality as a source of pleasure or desire is a force, emptied of content, a pure drive without value.

The confrontation of so-called rational belief and fanatical belief is represented in some detail in Varlamov's *Zatomuvshii kovcheg* (an allusion to the *Hort of the Nibelungen* saga and the role it played in the construction of German identity in the recent past – namely the Modernist 1930s and 1940s). However, the divide between the atheistic physics teacher and

22. Compare Jacques Lacan, "The Agency of the Letter in the Unconscious," *Écrits: A Selection*, Alan Sheridan, trans. (New York, London: W W Norton, 1977), pp. 146-78. Lacan connects the two mechanisms of language, metaphor and metonymy, to the unconscious structure of meaning as it is constituted by means of the symptom (as a proto-sign or a trace) in combination with the agency of desire. "For the symptom is a metaphor whether one likes it or not, as desire is metonymy, however funny people may find the idea" (p. 175).

school director, Ilya Petrovich, and the villagers of a quasi-mythological Bukhara, whose closed community of Old Believers has its roots in Peter the Great’s time, is fluid. Ilya Petrovich’s rationalism is undermined by his “desire” for Masha Tsiganova – one of his pupils. Masha is destined for sainthood by her Old Believers’ community when she survives a direct hit by lightning and the village of Bukhara celebrates the “miracle” by a mass “moral conversion”: everyone starts to behave in a more loving way, drunken orgies and violence recede in the community. Masha, as Ilya Petrovich’s repressed desire, is a symbol of the people – *narod*. The idealisation of the peasants has been a hallmark of the Russian intelligentsia since the beginning of the nineteenth century – reaching its apotheosis in Pushkin’s revolutionising of the Russian poetic language by turning to the Russian vernacular in High Culture (giving rise to the myth of the influence of his peasant nanny - his *nyanya*). *Narodnichestvo* [populism] characterised the poetics of the Russian major writers, notably Tolstoy and Dostoevsky, who found the Russian people to be carriers of a national and universal ethical and moral principle. While Aleksei Varlamov displays great tenderness towards and deep sympathetic knowledge of a backward, rural Russia, he does not fall into the trap of romanticising the Russian village. His postmodern gaze is a clinical gaze that dissects the membrane of Russian village culture, in contact with Russian/Soviet atheistic civilisation, and yet apart. What emerges from his forensic analysis (like that of a forensic pathologist) is the closeness of the rational-atheistic Soviet Russia and the Old Believers’ sectarian Russia. Both have roots in myth. One is the naïve and pure historical myth of salvation based on the idea of divine intercession, manifested in signs and miracles, such as the *moshchi Evstolii* – the remains or relics of Evstolia, a village woman who was killed by the village butcher, symbolising sacrifice at the inception of a community and forming a Russian version of the Oedipal myth. The other is the myth of rational, scientific knowledge, which masks a repressed desire for an elusive primordial national identity (embodied in Ilya Petrovich’s repressed transgressive desire for the under-aged Masha (*otrokovitsa*). What Varlamov’s drama, set in a breugelesque fictional taiga village called Bukhara, illuminates is that the Soviet rational belief and the Old Believers’ fundamentalist belief are indistinguishable in strength or force. Both are drivers of human action and both are grounded in unconscious drives. The Old Believers’ age-old isolation and ritual secrecy adds the dimension of the uncanny to the ground of belief. The Enlightenment project, pursued by Ilya Petrovich during his “scientific communism” period, has the appearance of transparent rationalism. However, this transparency is shattered by the revelation of his “secret” and transgressive passion for his pupil,

Masha. Thus both the old and the new beliefs are grounded in secret desire, whose ultimate ground is pleasure.

The content of the ideologies becomes immaterial in Varlamov's novella. The Old Believers' faith is subject to manipulation by false gurus, while the rational scientific belief can flip over into its opposite – fanaticism and fundamentalism. This is precisely the path traced by the life of the teacher, Ilya Petrovich. From “physicist and lyricist” (he is a science teacher in the Soviet 1950s who is also writing a novel), Ilya Petrovich degenerates into a convict, a drunk and then a hardened fanatic driven by the desire to rescue his beloved Masha – and the world – from the abuses of History. His utopian vision is to rescue humanity by “correcting the mistake of the Enlightenment,” by creating a new civilization based on the amalgamation of the moral purity of the Bukhara Old Believers community and the highest achievements of human intellectual thought. Thus in Ilya Petrovich's utopian vision, progress is to be reconciled with religious belief or faith (*vera*).²³

This is not something that is achieved at the end of Varlamov's novella. In fact, all progress in Bukhara – a metaphor for Russia itself – stops with the reincarnation of Ilya Petrovich as the new and ultimate *startets* and leader of the Bukhara commune, now reduced to seven women. In this diminished and aberrant community, in which there is now only one male, the values of progress and Enlightenment, have passed out of living memory. The Bukhara values, based on exclusivity and *izbrannichestvo*, on the other hand, persist but are now revealed in their true origins: individual desire and pleasure. For the whole task of the old *skit* (monastery) is now reduced to procreation: the latest Bukhara *startets* (a reincarnation of the village teacher, Ivan Petrovich), impregnates all the women of the monastery, who flock to him of their own free will and whose ecstatic cries behind the monastery walls are the envy of the villagers at large. Thus the “religious feeling” of the “new” Bukhara (aka “new” Russia) is the feeling of pleasure, grounded in the freedom and indeterminacy of the sex drive.

The pleasure principle instead of the myth of the people

Sorokin's film scenario *Chetyre* paints a picture of contemporary “new Russia” of “late capitalism” as a sphere from which belief is absent. All the characters of the film represent remnants of the late-Soviet society and its defunct belief system. There is, first of all, a pianist turned piano-tuner, who is what remains of the Soviet artistic intelligentsia. Next, there is a young would-be Kremlin *appratchik* who is a black marketeer, dealing in

23. Aleksei Varlamov, *Zatonuvshyi kovcheg* [The Sunken Treasure] (Moscow: “Molodaia gvardiia,” 2002). My paraphrase and translation of passages around pp. 385-86.

the sale of frozen meat and cloned pigs. Finally, there is the heroine Marina, a young prostitute, the “new Russian” woman, who is the reincarnation of a simple Russian girl of the people, the kind of girl portrayed by Andrei Bitov in Lyubasha or Faina in his 1960s novel *Pushkin House*. Marina is of the same age as a “komsomol” or “Metropol” girl of the late-Soviet system. However, unlike her Soviet counterparts of the 1950s-1980s, Marina’s professional activity is not ideologically motivated. She is not a prostitute in the services of the Soviet State (the Metropol girls having been used by the KGB to monitor foreigners staying at the Metropol Hotel in Moscow and other hotels for international visitors). Marina’s prostitution is strictly business – it is part of the new post-Soviet economy of the open market and individual enterprise, where everything is for sale. Unlike Bitov’s Soviet heroines, Faina and Lyubasha, Marina is not opaque. She acts resolutely and makes bold individual choices (like calling off all clients in order to attend her sister’s funeral). Marina is individualistic, self-reflexive and ethical: she acts as she thinks and feels. She lives in a heterogeneous society in which individual and consumer desire is everywhere on display. This is reflected in her city habitat: she occupies a flat in a new development on the outskirts of the city and while the infrastructure is primitive, everywhere there are signs of a developing economy. The entire city periphery appears to be a construction site. Marina’s profession is thus a metaphor, at the root of which is the unconscious desire of the “new Russia”: to partake in free enterprise as a means to individual freedom. This unconscious desire is revealed in Marina’s self-conscious misrepresentation about what she does for a living when she meets the two male characters in the bar sequence at the beginning of the film. Marina claims to be in advertising and to be promoting a new device which regulates desire or moods. Lying is always, according to Freud, evidence of the unconscious at work. The creation of a truly happy worker was on the agenda of the Soviet state but this had nothing to do with the promotion of individual desire. It was to be achieved through collective means and collective labour. Marina’s fictitious invention is a device which is at the command of the individual and has the function of promoting the individual’s pleasure as defined by the Freudian pleasure principle. Thus individual pleasure, which can be turned on through chemical means (like drugs), and freedom which comes from free economic activity, constitute the belief system or “religious feeling” of the “new Russia” portrayed in Sorokin’s film.

However, Marina’s roots, like those of the majority of post-revolutionary Russia, are in the Russian village. Marina’s journey into the past, back to her native village, near the provincial city of Saratov, for the funeral of one of her sisters, makes up the film’s plot. What is apparent as the camera follows Marina’s progress through the Russian countryside, in the train and

on foot, is that the Russian village culture of the past is in a state of decay while the village populace (the people or *narod*) present a grotesque picture of gross hedonistic pleasure seeking – mainly in coarse eating and drinking. This is captured in the little cameo scene in Marina’s train compartment, where she is constantly badgered – almost in a sexually aggressive manner – by the *prostonarodnyi* couple (a couple from the “people”) to partake of their lavish snacking which never ceases throughout the long trip. A more extended version of this hedonism is displayed by the inhabitants of Marina’s village.

Marina’s village community is somewhat reminiscent of Old Bukhara at the end of Varlamov’s novella in that it is self-contained, apart and almost exclusively female. The one exception is the presence of the lover of Marina’s deceased sister. This lone male living in the community of peasant women as the widowed boyfriend of Marina’s sister is the symbolic remnant of the progressive Russian intelligentsia, who went “to the people” at the end of the nineteenth century, in order to bring education and enlightenment to them. However, Sorokin’s belated *narodnik* does not know how to lead what remains of the village population and commits suicide after his girlfriend’s funeral.

The village community of women is held together by a communal activity involving the chewing of bread, used as raw material for the making of giant carnival dolls. This cross between a Soviet *kolkhoz* and a traditional Russian community or *mir* is thus not engaged in peasant labour or in the manufacture of traditional artefacts but in an aberrant form of capitalist production, since the giant bread dolls appear to sustain the “new Russian” village economically. The village displays obvious signs of prosperity even if this prosperity is expressed in crude and basic material values: one of the peasant women has a new fur coat, all eat well and drink vodka in great quantities, all are housed well in the communal hut with adequate heating. The bread dolls are thus a metaphor of “new Russian” capitalism on the village level. As metaphor, the bread dolls are reminiscent of “dead souls” – an intertextual allusion that would escape very few Russian viewers. It was Gogol’s vision of the nineteenth century Russia as a land whose economy ran on the speculating spirit of a pseudo-gentry class of unproductive landowners. Gogol captured this pseudo-economy in the metaphor of buying and selling “dead souls” – deceased serfs whose existence on paper conferred status and power on the purchaser. Sorokin’s “new Russia” is similarly a phantom economy which runs on its own version of “dead souls” – an invisible, grotesque system of exchange, powered by a “degenerate” populace reduced to the basic instinct of pleasure by an almost total black-out of cultural memory. The women in Marina’s village can barely remember the traditional keening chants which custom obliges

them to trot out at Marina’s sister’s funeral. Their “folksy” attributes are reduced to crude carousing (the drinking and revealing of tits by women who are long past their prime) while their traditional sense of community easily flips into a dog-fight over a pig. The traditional Russian village turned capitalist is devoid of value and can no longer serve as the source of ethics for the postmodern Russian intelligentsia. Indeed, this intelligentsia is itself a defunct class: it exits the scene of capitalism like Marina’s sister’s boyfriend or it goes abroad to make its fortune in the West, like the saxophonist in Pavel Lungin’s 1990 film, *Taxi Blues*. While Alexander Sokurov’s film *Russian Ark* (2003) paints a positive picture of Russian culture as a museum – one that is lovingly preserved through war and Revolution by a caring intelligentsia – Sorokin’s *Chetyre* paints a picture of a “new Russia” beyond the cultural museum, in a denuded landscape that resembles the surface of the moon or of a rubbish dump. This is made visible in the shots of industrial debris and building slosh on Marina’s walk from the rural Saratov train station to the village funeral. This ugly post-industrial landscape alternates with images of neatly ploughed fields, sown with lush green grass – indicating the potential of the vast Russian lands for growth and proper development. However, while the natural potential is there, the Russian “folk” or *narod* is represented as a race of degenerates, whose memory of their own national heritage – of an ancient *Rus*’ glimpsed in fading memory of songs and funeral wails – has been erased.²⁴ The half-remembered, haphazardly performed funeral ritual and traditional funeral banquet degenerate into virtual cannibalism and lewd carousing by an unsightly group of older Russian peasant women. The unbridled release of the pleasure principle amongst the *narod* does not lead to cultural freedom but to another form of totalitarianism: that of formlessness and ethical ambivalence.

This ethical ambivalence of capitalism in the Russian countryside is mirrored by the absence of value in various forms of capitalist activity in the “new Russian” city.

What “new Russia” has to offer its younger generation by way of educational and economic opportunities are various forms of prostitution or bondage in a lawless environment, despite its outward structure of a free

24. The erasure of the memory of local customs, manifested in songs and rituals, was documented in a recent academic study by the American Slavist, Laura J. Olson (University of Colorado, Boulder). Her monograph, entitled *Performing Russia: Folk Revival and Russian Identity* (New York and London: Routledge Curzon, 2004) finds repeated evidence of the absence of knowledge of folk customs and ritual songs, such as Christmas carols, among Russian village people in the late-Soviet and recent post-Soviet times. This lends support to Sorokin’s representation of the Russian postmodern, post-*kolkhoz* village as a wasteland with a degree zero cultural heritage.

pluralist society. Thus the army seeks recruits amongst the prison population to run Russia's post-colonial wars, including the war with Chechnya. The pianist-turned-piano-tuner is arrested on a trumped up charge and press-ganged into the army. The arbitrary arrest of the piano tuner demonstrates the degree of violence that underpins the "new Russian" economy, while the selling of old frozen meat, dating back to Soviet times, testifies to the aberrations of a market which is underpinned by a black economy run from the "underground" by a mafia network. The ultimate ground for the economy of exchange of the "new Russia" is consumerism, whose ultimate aim is the creation and satisfaction of perverse desire. This is illustrated by the production of a new species of round pig, offered at great cost only to a select clientele. The principle of *izbrannichestvo* here sinks to a new depth: instead of messianic fervour, all that remains of its value as the "religious feeling" of the age is hedonism.

Paradoxically, Marina, who also represents this "new" Russian economy of exchange, where money, goods and bodies circulate freely, is not unethical. Her ethical potential stems from her youth, physical beauty and sexual freedom, and above all, her connection with her "dead" sister. It is the news of her sister's death that brings Marina's city life to a halt and moves her to undertake the journey to the village, into the community of her female relatives. As a member of this community, Marina is not portrayed as a pleasure seeker but instead reveals a new constellation of desire grounded in the notion of the multiple and the anti-Oedipal.²⁵

The symbolism of the "four" sisters, as opposed to three or a pair of siblings, points to the concept of the multiple as an organising structure, as distinct from a ternary or binary principle. In postmodern cultural theory, the multiple²⁶ is identified as the organising principle of the new post-

25. Compare the article by Slobodanka Vladiv-Glover, "The Russian Anti-Oedipus: Petrushevskaya's *Three Girls in Blue*," *Australian Slavonic and East European Studies*, 12, no. 2 (1998), pp. 31-56. The community of women and mothers in Petrushevskaya's drama is analysed through Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's concept of the multiple which grounds a new model of perception and relation to the object, which is non-hierarchical and metonymic, consisting of endless connections and disconnections along a horizontal plane, proliferating in the manner of a rhizome.

26. Compare Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, Brian Massumi, trans. (Minneapolis, London: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1987). Multiplicity underlies a sense formation which is distinct from metaphor. Deleuze and Guattari call this formation "the rhizome." "Unlike trees or their roots," they write, "the rhizome connects any point to any other point. . . . It constitutes linear multiplicities with *n* dimensions having neither subject nor object, which can be laid out on a plane of consistency. . . . The rhizome is an a-centred, non-hierarchical, non-signifying system . . . defined solely by a circulation of states" (*ibid.*, p. 21). Multiplicity which engenders this atypical trope (the rhizome) underlies a free and multidimensional circulation of meanings. It provides an ideal model of the free market as a space of self-regulated exchange.

hierarchic social formations. Thus the multiple, with its endless permutations and repetitions, grounds the heterogeneous structures of capitalist societies. As symbols of the multiple, Marina and her sisters carry the seed of a new community to come. This new community finds its ultimate bonding and ethical expression through the commemoration of a “dead” sister. This indicates a radical change in the ethics of new Russian society. Instead of observing the traditional values of a social hierarchy headed by a father (for example a leader like Stalin, who was popularly called “Batiushka” or “Father”), Russia’s new civil society – at present still struggling against a rampant black economy and accompanying crude social mores – is prepared to honour “new gods” who are not gods at all. Marina’s “dead” sister represents this new approach to value as an act of personal engagement and enterprise. Marina’s dead sister remains the prime driver behind the village’s bread doll industry. Even in death, she directs the community’s productive labour as an absent presence. As an entrepreneur with mythical proportions, the dead sister also elicits ethical action on the part of Marina, who cancels a lucrative appointment with a client in order to attend her sister’s funeral. Thus the new myth of private entrepreneurship constitutes, according to Sorokin’s analysis, the ethics of postmodern Russian society. While aware of its value as myth, the film does not evaluate this myth in black and white, as either positive or negative. While leaving room for ambivalence in the judgement of this postmodern Russian ethics of capitalism, Sorokin’s representation of the construction of value in the present is also testimony to a new approach to value which is unlike the traditional system of evaluation according to criteria external to the moment, say, from the perspective of a utopian future or a nostalgia for the past. The “new sectarianism” represented in Russian postmodern literature and film provides a picture of the revaluation of value or dissolution of value in the current moment of Russian cultural history. The representation of value under the code name of “religious feeling” or “sektantstvo” – sectarianism – is tantamount to a new methodology of cultural analysis. This methodology was initiated by Nietzsche in his *Genealogy of Morals*, from which the concepts of “genealogy” of history and archaeology of knowledge have been appropriated by Michel Foucault and widely adopted in post-structural critical theory. Russian postmodern literature and film operate as genealogies of Russian history and construct a new way for Russians to look at themselves and their cultural identity, from a point of view in the present and without the mystifications of metaphysics.²⁷

27. In re-reading the works of Russian postmodernism cited in this article, I was assisted by the work of the young Russian political scientist, Dr Sergei Prozorov, Helsinki Collegium for Advanced Studies, University of Helsinki, whose article on “Russian Postcommunism and the End of History” (to appear in *Studies in European Thought*, 2008) I was privileged to

But what of the question about the work of art in Russian postmodern culture? Do the works analysed here pass Tolstoy's test of authenticity? Do they represent popular culture in the sense of seduction and consumption on the spot?

The answer is yes! While Sorokin's and Varlamov's analysis of post-Soviet "new sectarianism" conjures up the spectre of rank consumerism and hedonism as the dominant forces in contemporary Russian society, the emptying of value also has a constructive social function. It wipes the slate clean of traditionalism and clears the space of discourse for the construction of new meaning. This new meaning is constituted, in the first instance, by the genealogical critique of "new" Russia which is embodied by the work of these authors and many other contemporary writers who constitute the postmodern Russian cultural canon. The genealogical critique is not merely a cerebral activity but taps into the unconscious roots of modern, "new" Russian desire, which it models or mimics through form and content. The form is "popular" in that it relies on a modern, "new" Russian vernacular for the narrator's and characters' language (the first person narrators in *Led* and *Zatonuvshii kovcheg* are constructed in *skaz* mode which is direct speech in the former and stream of consciousness or "experienced speech" in the latter). The content is relevant and reflects the form of knowledge "new" Russian society is able to construct through a close self-examination attained by means of the destruction of value bound to traditionalism, history and metaphysics. The *potlatch* embodied by this process of destroying old gods and revaluating all value means that the work of art

read in manuscript form. What resonates in particular with my analysis of the absence of value in postmodern Russian ethics is Prozorov's finding about the nature of Russian politics in the Putin era:

Thus, from October 1993 onwards the Russian political elite has, almost without exception, functioned in the inoperative mode exemplified by Ruskoi's vice-presidency, "relieved of all assignments." While in the 1990s this inoperative condition was partly concealed by the inconsequential politics of the diffuse spectacle, the Putin presidency makes this *inoperosity* its foundational principle precisely by suspending the very scene of messianic suspension, reducing Russian politics to the sphere of pure ritual.

The term "inoperosity" is a borrowing from Giorgio Agamben's work, *Means without End: Notes on Politics* (Minneapolis, Univ. of Minnesota Press, 2000). Messianism is also theorised in terms of Agamben's theses in *The Time that Remains: A Commentary on the Letter to the Romans* (Stanford, CA: Stanford Univ. Press, 2005). Mirroring this ritual politics is the ritualisation of pleasure as the "new sectarianism" ("religious feeling" of the age) in post-Soviet Russian culture. An early version of the article I read in manuscript form is published as "Russian Postcommunism and the Politics of Pure Praxis," "Russia Forever: Towards Working Pragmatism in Finnish-Russian Relations," H. Rytovuori-Apunen, ed. (Helsinki: Gummerus, forthcoming, 2008).

in the “new” Russia is still performing its ritual function and that the “new” Russian avant-garde is still true to the ideals of art conjured up by the traditional avant-garde in the early twentieth century.

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