

“Non-hero” or Deviance as a Distinctive Feature of Venedikt Yerofeyev’s Works

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1. Features of Soviet postmodernism

153

Ilya Ilyin amply studies the period of postmodernism and characterizes the current trend as “a mixture of literature, criticism and philosophy” (Ilyin 1998: 10). He notes that one of the features of the current trend is socio-historical analysis: “What used to hide shamefully on the outskirts of the great literature, today declares itself publicly, and, in its mass and impact on the formation of the tastes of the general public, it is often much greater than the influence of serious problem art” (ibid.: 155).

Leiderman and Lipovetsky (2003) include the aesthetics of chaos and naturalism (that in its turn explains the prevalence of the introduction of an autobiographical hero) in the traditions of postmodernism. Because of the critical analysis of reality that is common in this trend, the researchers name the main features of postmodernism as grotesque realism

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and “criticism of utopian ideology” (ibid.: 159). They note the prevalence of tragicomic sentiments inherent in postmodern literature.

Stanislav Savitsky examines the literature of the underground as a follower of the traditions rooted in the literature of the absurd. Savitsky notes that the comic element in the current trend has been a form of criticism in the Soviet realities: “The Soviet system was a monstrous and comic machine [...]. Spiritual quest with an element of the game, the irrationality of historical dystopia, risky self-assertion in dialogue with the authorities and overcoming archaic modernism – this is how the project of unofficial literature is seen today” (Savitsky 2002: 119).

Literature of absurdity appeared as a response to the era of stagnation of social and cultural life. Writers were subjected to a violation of logic in all those aspects of life that seemed well-established and clear to everyone, thus they create “the absurd world in which it is impossible to live as a thinking person” (Charskaya-Boyko 2009: 216).

2.

Yerofeyev’s literary heritage

Venedikt Yerofey is one of the main representatives of the new literary movement whose work clearly manifests the tradition of the literature of the absurd. He is not only one of the main representatives of Russian postmodernism, but also “the legend of Russian underground” (Leiderman [&] Lipovetsky 2003: 391). Back in the 1950s, Yerofeyev created his first work and made himself the main character – *Notes of a Psychopath* (1956–1958). But the book gained recognition only after the author’s death. Yerofeyev himself described his *Notes* as “the most volumetric and most ridiculous of what had been written” (Shmelkova 1999: 12).

Notes of a Psychopath was published only in the early 2000s, the “Vagrius” publishing house issued it selectively, as it was stated in a footnote on the first page: “The text is a shortened version of a ‘youth’ essay, and has the form of a diary in five notebooks [...] The spelling and punctuation of the original in all their controversy and inconsistencies were preserved at their maximum” (Yerofeyev 2008: 7).

In 1956 Yerofeyev enrolled at Moscow State University, the same year he began to keep records in notebooks. He was 17 years old.

- Venya, can’t you remember the contents of these notes now?
- Only my mother knows them. God kill me, I don’t remember. The first meaningful writing began in 1956 when I finished the 1st year of MSU. That’s when it started, what I would do a little bit better now, a little bit...
- Was it preserved?
- Yes, it was. But I asked – and we’re talking about five thick notebooks – him [here he’s talking about a close friend of V. Muravyov – a note by V. Oleshkevich] not to publish them before my demise (ibid.).

The poem *Moscow-Petushki* brought real fame to Yerofeyev, who wrote it “for two months for a narrow circle of people” (Bavin 1995: 14). Now ‘Venichka in the Soviet train’ is a symbol of Russian postmodernism.

Moscow-Petushki is a poem of postmodernism; it was finished when Yerofeyev graduated in 1970. In the USSR this work was published only in 1988. Today there are many studies devoted to *Moscow-Petushki*. And the question of the comic nature of the poem is still open.

A political observer of ‘RIA Novosti’ news agency, Dmitry Kosyrev, stated in an article dedicated to Yerofeyev’s birthday that “[...] definitely this book is not funny, no matter how the ‘cocktail patriots’ named it ‘bitch’s guts’ ” (Kosyrev).

When Vladimir Novikov, a literary critic, professor of Moscow State University, was asked by a host of the television program “The Glass Bead Game” on “Russia – Culture” Channel the following question: “What do you think is the nature of Yerofeyev’s irony?”, he answered: “The irony is very flat, I don’t see any kind of deep dimension [...] It is still desirable for irony to be combined with some humor. It seems to me that the degree of comic in *Moscow-Petushki* was created exclusively by his environment. You read in the beginning: »The Kremlin, Kremlin.« But it’s not funny. It’s buffoonery, buffoonery without any semantic dimension” (“Game of beads” with Igor Volgin). The host, though, Igor Volgin, spoke differently: “It’s that rare case when I don’t agree with you. I reread it years later, I laughed wildly. I found it hilarious” (“Game of beads” with Igor Volgin).

Yerofeyev himself called his work “tragic sheets” (Yerofeyev 2008: 132). It is known that the author of the comments, Venichka, is the hero of the poem; he appears, according to the traits of a martyr and a joker. He’s funny and serious, peaceful and panicked. Sergey Bavin writes about Venichka: “[...] the accused is also the prosecutor; the witness – an indispensable participant; judge – but also the object of social injustice and the greatest reckoning; the victim and his own executioner” (Bavin 1995: 17).

Many researchers consider the poem *Moscow-Petushki* as a ‘carnivalized’ text, whose main themes are travesty and parody of the surrounding Soviet reality (Vlasov, Bavin, Komaromi, Kozitskaya, Leiderman and Lipovetsky). The world turns inside out. The hero is surrounded by drunkards, and sick people. They are talking about Turgenev, Gorky and Herzen. Venichka is, in fact, a drunken intellectual. A small meeting in the train is shown as an example of the entire country ruining itself by drinking. The whole poem is permeated with the theme of alcohol intoxication. It has a significant impact on the characters’ personality and behavior, as well as their speech.

Walpurgis Night, or Steps of the Commander is Yerofeyev’s last literary work – a play whose hero is a lone alcoholic. This is the only play in the author’s literary oeuvre. It was written after Yerofeyev had undergone treatment in a psychiatric hospital for the second time (Website dedicated to the work of Venedikt Yerofeyev).

It is known that *Walpurgis Night* is the author’s last work. Yerofeyev began it in the 1980s but due to health problems (throat cancer) he often had to interrupt writing. Up until now almost nothing is known about his work on *Walpurgis Night*. Some information can be found in Natalia Shmelkova’s memoirs: “I asked Yerofeyev once: »What are you working on now?« He said that he completes the *Walpurgis Night*, that the play takes place in a madhouse. [...] He also said that not so long ago he visited »Kashchenko« psychiatric hospital, he watched as there was arranged a dance evening for the sick male and female

departments on May 1st – the first thing that prompted it »the plot of the play – a note by V. V. Oleshkevich«” (Shmelkova 1999: 32–33).

3.

Deviant hero as the main representative of underground literature

In the second half of the 20th century unofficial literature showed “[...] writers with disgraced reputation, their texts were rejected by censorship, they appeared in the samizdat or were printed abroad” (Savitsky 2002: 45). It included authors whose work brought a new look at the possibilities and functions of literature.

They created works with a new type of hero who does not preach anything, does not promote, who is far from idealism. A new type of rogue hero is born, represented by alcoholics, marginalized people, mentally disabled, drug addicts, leading a rampant life.

Svetlana Russova in her book states that one of the the author’s choice of a position in the literature depends on the audience. Mikhail Bakhtin also points out that any work is an act of communication. That means that each creation is made for a certain audience that will understand it. In other words, the author chooses for whom he will create.

Russova introduces a precise definition of the author as an opposition figure – “an outcast”. This is an author who “feels »alien« in his own country, ignores the ideological codes of society” (Russova 2005: 192). Among this type of authors, she distinguishes: Vladimir Vysotsky, Vladimir Nabokov, Nikolai Zabolotsky. Since the 1960s in the world literature (including Soviet literature) there can be found a whole galaxy of authors-outcasts: Hunter Thompson, Charles Bukowski, Sergei Dovlatov, Venedikt Yerofeyev, Leonid Gubanov and others.

Nina Orlova in her dissertation *The poetics of the comic in Sergey Dovlatov’s prose: semi-otic mechanisms and folklore paradigm* (Orlova 2010), while considering the comic in Dovlatov’s work, writes about the “non-heroic hero” who became popular in the era of postmodernism. This is a hero who opposes the Soviet ideals. This type of hero can be otherwise designated as a deviant type.

Yerofeyev becomes one of the main representatives of oppositional literature. The traditions of the underground correspond not only to the work of the author, but also his way of life. Shmelkova remembers: “Once Oleg Ossetinsky, a famous screenwriter, [...] asked: »Why haven’t you, an author of such a book as *Moscow-Petushki*, never visited Siberia?« Yerofeyev answered: »[...] Apparently, I have never been called in the KGB because there was not a place I could be called from. I didn’t have a permanent ‘meta-residence’«” (Shmelkova 1999: 18).

4.

Features of Yerofeyev's heroes

The storyline of Yerofeyev's works is weakened, the situations underlying them are primitive, the heroes and characters are modelled on the personal circle of the author's friends. As Andrey Zorin writes, "The era of kitchens, basements and boiler rooms was coming and Yerofeyev with his literary gift sharply raised the status of this method of communication, existence and survival" (Zorin). Bogdanova notes that Yerofeyev "has discovered a new type of hero that does not coincide with the appearance of the 'official' Hero of Soviet literature of the late 1950s-early 1960s" (Bogdanova 2003: 10).

There is a similarity between the characters of Yerofeyev's three main works: his debut prose *Notes of a Psychopath* (1956–1958), the poem in prose *Moscow-Petushki* (1969) and the five-act tragedy *Walpurgis Night, or Steps of the Commander* (1985). A small difference lies only in the heroes' names as in the *Notes of a Psychopath* it is Venedikt Yerofeyev, Venichka Yerofeyev and Yerofeyev, in *Moscow-Petushki* – Venichka and in *Walpurgis Night* it is Lev Isakovich Gurevich.

Yerofeyev's hero is a deviant person, and so are his surroundings. This is another common feature of the characters in the author's three works. This type of hero becomes popular in the 20th century, especially in the underground culture. "[...] a widespread type of a deviant character is mentally disabled person" (Savitsky 2002: 66). Indeed, Yerofeyev gives his characters signs of madness. The title of his first work, *Notes of a Psychopath*, puts the stigma of abnormality on his subsequent heroes.

In the postmodernist era the centre of the works occupy shocking personalities. It becomes important for them to "search for freedom, independence, to defend their right to be separate, to be called a person, although the cultural and social situation knocked out from under the feet of any person all the former bases, positions, worldviews, goals, etc." (Bogdanova 2015: 18). Their shocking nature, as a kind of deviance, is manifested even in speech, or rather, in the speech act itself. It is not just what the hero says that matters, but the way he speaks that is important. Savitsky calls violation of language norms a manifestation of deviance in stylistics.

The dialogue in *Notes of a Psychopath* between the hero and Granka is connected with the discussion of genitals and it comes with the excessive use of pejorative vocabulary. In the *Moscow-Petushki* it is easy to remember the dialogue between Venichka and the Director of the British Museum, whose speech is reduced to a vulgar utterance, interspersed with insults and mockery. *Walpurgis Night* begins with a conversation between the hero and a doctor. Their dialogue is more like banter than questioning the patient.

The image of the brawler and troublemaker is widely spread in the underground literature. In *Notes of a Psychopath* the classic example is the clash of the hero and the Lady in white. The author inserts remarks "laugh", "loud laughter" after the words of his hero in order to show how much pressure the hero's sparkling words put on the Lady and thereby humiliate her. In *Moscow-Petushki* Venichka orders sherry in the station restaurant. Being perfectly sensible in his appeals, he still annoys the employees, and in the end his behavior

forces them to push him out the door. In *Walpurgis Night* there is the same scene with the doctor. As a response to the issues that are important for filling in the personal card of the patient, Gurevich clowns about, shunts on another topic, quotes literary works. Such behavior obviously leads to comments and criticism.

Another feature connecting all three characters of the works is their love of drinking, but their drunkenness is not a manifestation of weakness or a consequence of “social vices”, but “spontaneous martyrdom” (Bogdanova 2003: 9). Depending on the state in which the hero is (drunk, sober, in a state of hangover), his behavior changes, and as a result situations change. Alexander Genis writes in his article dedicated to the second anniversary of Yerofeyev’s death: “Alcohol is a compositional core that organizes Yerofeyev’s plot [...] Vodka opens Venichka’s mouth, pulls out a ‘sinful tongue’ to replace it with »sting of the wise serpent«, and it burns our hearts in some unearthly word” (Genis, Vayl).

In Yerofeyev’s works it is difficult to define the degree of the hero’s sobriety. For example, Gurevich is talking to the doctor and it is unknown how he appeared in the clinic and it is impossible to state for sure if he is sober or drunk. Gurevich clearly appears to be drunk at the end of the book, a few moments before his death. In this case, it is difficult to use the word “intoxicated”, because the hero drinks methyl alcohol, that means he is poisoned and that’s why he gradually weakens physically and dies in the final act. But it is possible to see how the hero’s speech changes before and after drinking alcohol. Drunk Gurevich is relaxed, he no longer mentions his main goal – to burn down the hospital. His speech becomes rough, he is engaged in a slanging match with Prokhorov.

In *Notes of a Psychopath* the hero’s condition is more difficult to define than Gurevich’s, as the narration is in the first person and the writing represents fragments of phrases. Therefore, it is difficult to say when the hero is sober and drunk.

A drunken hero, as well as a sober one, is difficult to find in the *Notes of a Psychopath*. That is because the pages of the book have no descriptions of the process of drinking or any stories of this kind. The evidence that the hero is suffering from alcoholism is the statement: “Don’t give him money, he’s just a drunkard!” (Yerofeyev 2008: 58).

In *Moscow-Petushki* all three stages of the hero’s feelings can be traced. He is sober at the beginning, cools coppers, and it all ends with the hero being in a state between sleep and reality, more similar to the state of delirium tremens. The hero’s road is not just a way from Moscow to Petushki; it’s the process of intoxication.

Another similar feature that was clearly manifested in *Walpurgis Night* and *Moscow-Petushki* is the environment of the characters. The heroes are educated men of wide reading, easily start philosophical conversations. There is a feeling that the environment is necessary for them. Yerofeyev brings his characters with marginalized personalities: workers, drunkards, the crazy (e.g., in *Moscow-Petushki* it’s a “young Mitrich”, in *Walpurgis Night* it is all patients in the chamber).

Heroes suffer from loneliness, misunderstanding, and rejection of the world around them. 17-year-old Yerofeyev from *Notes of a Psychopath* already has problems with the law, drinks a lot, is not accepted by the society: “We don’t have a lot of conversation with people like you, who only get on our way!” (Yerofeyev 2008: 77). Venichka from *Moscow-Petushki* “works everywhere he can as his son is sick: »When you are not here, boy, I am absolutely lonely...you understand?«” (ibid.: 159). Gurevich is an alcoholic who ends up in a psychiatric hospital: “[...] and without this inside us, there are a lot of ‘flowers’: cysts in the

kidneys, cirrhosis in the liver, always on edge of the flu and reumatismi, myocardium in the heart, abstinence from head to toe [...]” (ibid.: 153).

Intelligence is an integral feature of the characters with all their marginality and addiction to alcohol. Not only Venichka, but also Yerofeyev and Gurevich are not getting into a fight, no one arrange robberies. No matter what spiritual torments the heroes face, outwardly they remain unshakable. Their power is in the word. In this way, the dispute between Benedict and Anychka (*Notes of a Psychopath*) starts with the girls’ moral lecture. Throughout the dispute Benedict does not change the manner of his communication, uses the polite “madam”, “Anychka”, while the girl gets mad and becomes angry because of her intellectual impotence. The hero skillfully leads the dialogue and never loses. He agrees with what really seems true to him and denies what seems to him a lie.

In *Moscow-Petushki* there is a similar situation with Venichka. Neither in the current conflict in the restaurant, nor in the conversation with the Director of the British Museum, nor even in the final scene of the attack, does Venichka ever enter an aggressive confrontation; his prerogative is verbal dispute.

In *Walpurgis Night* there is a scene where the hero is being beaten by hospital nurses, but he is not fighting back, he is the victim, he is not capable of physical resistance. Our hero expresses the protest later, when his rage transforms into an idea to set the hospital on fire.

In the bibliographic essay Bavin writes that in *Moscow-Petushki* “everything turns inside out, the entire fund of culture decreases and passes through the perception of the drunkard that is owned by a modern Soviet intellectual” (Bavin 1995: 7–8). He calls the hero a drunkard and notes that this image has been introduced deliberately.

Yerofeyev’s hero is smart, well-read, he philosophizes, has a high level of erudition and irony. He not only possesses a great amount of ridiculous information (for example, recipes of alcoholic cocktails in *Moscow-Petushki* (Yerofeyev 2008: 172–174)), but he also raises many serious topics. His image of a drunkard is superficial: “Fools and drunkards see the world in a distorted way, they make incorrect conclusions, but this is exactly what Yerofeyev needs: to deconstruct the well-established system of values, to abandon the usual schemes, to doubt the loyalty of ideology” (Genis, Vayl).

The image introduced by the author was not accidental since his hero is a working class man, he comes from ordinary people, and he alone is a reflection of the whole life of average people of the Soviet era: “the entire culture passes through the drunkard’s perception” (Bavin 1995: 9).

The author does not try to treat the characters’ words seriously. This effect is created by the introduction of the motif of alcohol in the text, which in its turn generates carnivalization: “Vodka pulls the hero from the official structures – and throws him into an almost surreal, deformed by his drunken consciousness »grotesque« world of the suburban train” (ibid.: 7–8).

Olga Bogdanova distinguishes a certain type of hero as a “non-hero”, in which Yerofeyev’s heroes are included: “[...] Venichka was the first literary representative of the non-hero belonging to a generation of watchmen and janitors, stokers and nightmen, future postmodern writers” (Bogdanova 2003).

Drunkenness is an act of self-destruction that can also be attributed to voluntary martyrdom that is one of the features of the holy fool. Alcohol leads the heroes to ordinary people; it helps to become welcomed among strangers: “There are some features of the »sacred

madness« of the holy fool, the madness that lets you directly and familiarly converse with angels, and even to turn to God with an invitation for drinks – all of them are in Venichka's drunkenness" (Leiderman [&] Lipovetsky 2003: 395). The characters expose themselves to suffering through alcohol: expulsion from the University, death, treatment in the clinic.

For example, in the abstract *Moscow-Petushki* alcohol consumption is depicted as a ritual, and it is shown as bad manners not to drink in the morning. Thus, the author turns the spiritual values of a person upside down; the values he determines as important are those that are considered low:

– Let me ask: why is there so much sadness in your eyes? ... Is it possible to be sad while having such knowledge! You'd think you hadn't had a drink in the morning!
I was offended:
– How, I mean, nothing! Is it sadness? Just the blurred eyes ... And I had a few drinks actually... (Yerofeyev 2008: 185).

Through the words of an alcoholic who is in treatment in the detoxification centre, Yerofeyev describes the entire Soviet reality. His disagreement with the whole social structure is expressed in Venichka Yerofeyev's words from *Moscow-Petushki*: "I stay at the bottom and from there I spit on your entire public ladder. Yes. A spit on each step of the ladder" (ibid.: 152).

5. Conclusions

Like the stream of consciousness, Yerofeyev's works give the impression that the author writes down everything that comes to his mind without paying attention to whether such a statement is understandable to the reader or not. This is a peculiar feature of postmodern literature – the text that creates the impression of chaos, fragmentation, lack of logic.

The events of all three books by Yerofeyev unfold in the era of the Soviet Union, which, according to Savitsky, seemed to be a "monstrous and comic machine" (Savitsky 2002: 119) to literature. That is why the central place in Yerofeyev's literature is given to irony and deliberate mocking of the Soviet system. Nina Korzina refers (2001) to the poem by Yerofeyev *Moscow-Petushki* as *menippea* (a kind of a 'serious-humorous' genre). The term was introduced for the first time by Bakhtin, who referred to the concept of *menippea* scandals, pretentious behavior, violation of accepted norms. Different kinds of conflict built on the traditions of *menippea* do not have a tragic mood and solutions, i.e. do not lead to any particular outcome. We believe that with the point of view proposed by Korzina Yerofeyev's other works can be considered in that way.

In his works Yerofeyev depicts the remonstrant loner. "A drunkard in Yerofeyev's novel is a modern embodiment of the fool similar to one in Russian folk literature. Fools and drunks see the world distorted, make wrong conclusions, but it is exactly what Yerofeyev needs: to deconstruct the known system of values, to abandon the usual schemes, to doubt the loyalty of ideology" (Bogdanova 2003: 9).

While in *Notes of a Psychopath* the author sporadically introduces stupid and arrogant characters, and then in *Moscow-Petushki* he adds people with a complex fate, at the same time he uses higher beings (angels, God) and middle-class people (the waitress at the restaurant, a security guard, the hero's lovers, his son), in *Walpurgis Night* characters are just madmen/alcoholics (patients) and tyrants (the hospital staff).

Dialogues allow the author to reveal the characters' images; a grotesque technique helps to build the spectrum of their mental deviations: "Verbal organization of the text – not a hero's monologue, but a debate about reality, the agon" (Rybalchenko 2009: 5). In that way, from Prokhorov's speech, we know that Vitya eats checkers and dominoes, Alekha tells about the death of Serega Kleinmichel's mother, and nurse Tamarochka only offends patients and the integral feature of her speech is the abundance of harsh words.

Through the consciousness of several alcoholics the author reveals the eternal themes of love and art and illustrates the absurdity of the usual way of things, ridicules conditions of life and denounces human vices.

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