THE MONSTROUS PLOT IN VLADIMIR SOROKIN'S NOVEL "THE QUEUE"

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Abstract: The article offers an interpretation of the earliest conceptual novel by the famous Russian novelist Vladimir Sorokin "The Queue" (1985). The authors of the article have implemented a new approach to the text of a modern conceptual novelist. If traditionally V. Sorokin's novel was perceived by critics mainly from the side of the originality of its form, with the actualization of the author's appeal to the pictorial art objects of conceptual artists (I. Kabakov, V. Pivovarov, D. Prigov et al.), then in this article a different research perspective is justified — the need to look at the Sorokin text as a creative realization of a capacious speech metaphor, as the embodiment of the image of a "language monster" — the hydro-like essence of a "living" queue.

Keywords: Vladimir Sorokin; novel "The Queue"; figurative-linguistic integrity; symbolic-metaphorical plan; linguistic perspective of "monstrous" perception.

1 Introduction

Conceptualism as a literary trend in Russian literature of the 1970s and 1980s is undoubtedly a bright, original and integral phenomenon, which at a certain stage objectively marked the dynamic trends of literature emerging from the underground and beyond the strict limits of "samizdat" and "tamizdat".

Describing the phenomenon of "Moscow romantic conceptualism", Boris Groys wrote: "The word conceptualism can be understood quite narrowly as the name of a certain artistic direction, limited by the place and time of appearance and the number of participants, and it can be understood more broadly. In a broad sense, conceptualism will mean any attempt to move away from making art objects as material objects intended for contemplation and aesthetic evaluation and move on to identifying and forming those conditions that dictate the perception of works of art by the viewer, the procedure for their generation by the artist, their relationship with environmental elements, their temporary status, etc." (Groys 1993, 138–139).

Meanwhile, deliberately simplifying the content of a heterogeneous and ambiguous phenomenon, it can be stated that the poetical strategies and tactics of Moscow conceptualism were based primarily on the total playing of the techniques of socialist realist art, in fact — on overcoming the pervasive stylistics of socialist realism. Speaking about the institutional trends of the 1970s, L. Rubinstein explicated "the aspiration of that time to overcome the inertia and gravity of a flat sheet", "a distinct desire to transfer the situation <...>, which by that time had hardened and seemed eternal, from a socio-cultural dimension to a purely aesthetic one" (Rubinstein 1996, 6).

A group of artists and writers of Moscow conceptualism deliberately and manifestationally repelled from stable and established concepts (ideas — stamps, ultimately) of Soviet art and fundamentally distanced themselves from the canons of socialist realism, beating them, deconstructing, thereby actualizing the "fatigue" of culture from the dominance of ideological dogmas. Conceptualism (and especially social art) aestheticized and metaphorized the stamps of socialist realism, placed them in a new context, giving rise to axiological rethinking and radical rejection. Overcoming socialist realism in the most general terms was the fundamental and dominant intention of conceptualism, its ideological core.

During the period of the greatest rise in conceptual art practices, the bright Moscow association was joined by the young Vladimir Sorokin, who began among conceptualists as an artist, but soon determined himself as a writer, the first and essentially the only conceptual writer. Among avant-garde artists, Sorokin soon realized that "the Soviet world has its own unique aesthetics, which is very interesting to develop, which lives by its own laws and is absolutely equal in the chain of the cultural process" (Sorokin 1992, 119). It is the aesthetics of socialist realism that becomes the "foundation stone" of his own — Sorokin's — aesthetics and poetics, the material of artistic deconstruction and creative reinterpretation, when "the typical socialist realist consciousness is transferred to new planes" (Novokhatsky 2010). On this path, Sorokin's first and most expressive experience as a prose writer was the novel "The Queue", which to this day is recognized by many researchers as the writer's highest achievement.

2 Literature Review

V. Sorokin's novel "The Queue" was written in 1983. For the first time an excerpt from it was published in the Paris edition of the magazine "A–Ya" (No 1), by the end of 1985 the novel was published in Syntax in a separate edition (Sorokin 1985). In Russia, for the first time, a small fragment from "The Queue" appeared in 1991 in the magazine *Ogonyok* (Sorokin 1991). During the Perestroika period, the novel was published in Russia and abroad repeatedly and in significant editions.

Literary critics and literary scholars, when referring to "The Queue", primarily and invariably qualify it as a "novel of direct speech" (Dobrenko 1990, 175). This is exactly how Sorokin's text is constructed — as a lengthy polylogue of unconstructed and non-personalized voices of characters not displayed in the text space. It is no coincidence that many critics speak of the novel's proximity to the dramatic rather than to the epic — "a play pretending to be a novel..." (see: Bogdanova 2005, Andreeva 2010, Bibergan 2011, Petrochenkov 2021, Uffelmann 2022, Levotina 2023).

The novel is really written exclusively in direct speech, there are no author's remarks or comments. Sorokin, on the one hand, seems to follow M. Bakhtin's position about the dominant presence of the author "in the whole work", "in the very form" (Bakhtin 1978, 362), but, on the other hand, his strategy is no less correlated with R. Barth's postmodern thesis about the "death of the author" (Barth 1994, 384–392) in contemporary art. Be that as it may, only the form of "The Queue" explicates the "non-textual" presence of the author, the very voice of the artist-creator (narrator) in Sorokin's conceptualist text is annihilated.

Sorokin's comments on the novel "The Queue" are, as is customary among conceptualists, of a multidirectional nature. In targeting the foreign reader, who is little familiar with Soviet life, Sorokin emphasizes the "economic" content of the concept of "queue". So, in the afterword "Farewell to the Queue" (Sorokin 2008, 253–304) in the American edition of the novel in 2008, Sorokin offers the Western recipient a discussion about the three stages of the Soviet queue, stating that up to the 1960s Soviet citizens stood in queues for food — "for butter and sugar" (stage I). In the era of Brezhnev's stagnation, the object of Soviet lust was imported industrial goods — American jeans, German shoes, Czech tableware, Polish perfumes, Scandinavian cigarettes, etc. (stage II). During Gorbachev's "perestroika", according to the writer's observations, queues began to form again "for sausage and butter" (stage III). In order to disavow the main novel metaphor in the minds of foreign readers, the novelist deliberately straightforwardly compares the life of Soviet citizens with eternal standing in line, in general, the life of the Soviet state with a deficit life.

Meanwhile, in focusing on the Soviet reader, a living witness and direct participant in the circumstances of the Soviet food and industrial deficit, Sorokin emphasizes a completely different perspective. Sorokin, familiar with the Soviet realities of the domestic perceiving subject, turns to a deeper aspect of reception — according to the writer, in "The Queue" he was primarily interested in the effect of the birth of a "language monster" (Sorokin 1992, 121), that is, not economics and everyday life, but conceptual speech phantasmagoria.

Critics, most of whom are familiar with the Sorokin quote above, nevertheless rarely turn to the "monstrous" perspective of the narrative. As a rule, researchers are interested in the form of the novel "The Queue" — first of all, its connection with the painting practices of conceptualists (Bogdanova 2005, Bibergan 2011, Andreeva 2010), the construction of a text dialogue/polylogue and ways of imitating oral speech (Petrochenkov 2021), less often their linguistic exponents (Levontina 2023).

The question of explication of the monster queue image in Sorokin's text was casually touched upon only by N. Andreeva: "... the main thing <...> in the novel is the process of the birth of the monster image" (Andreeva 2010, 5). But even in her view, the plot of "The Queue" appears in complete isolation from the image of the monster: "A plot is born and develops from the replicas of the dialogue — recognizable voices of the characters — Vadim and Lena begin to sound. The characters get acquainted, stand in line, talk, drink kvass, they spend the night in the park with the whole queue, have breakfast in the dining room, finally Lena leaves, having met another man. Vadim stays in line, drinks vodka with random acquaintances, gets drunk, falls asleep in the yard, wakes up, at this time it starts to rain, Vadim enters the entrance, where he meets a young woman, Luda, who invites him to enter the apartment. Then dinner, wine, dance, intimacy — and in the morning Vadim finds out that Luda works in a department store that sells the very coveted item for which he stood in line for two days. Thus, in the finale, the hero not only acquires what he wants, but also gets access to power, which distributes objects of desire" (Andreeva 2010, 4).

In our opinion, such a perception of the text of "The Queue" has an external, superficial character, partly consciously modeled/imitated by the author. From our point of view, the inner essence of the novel's narrative lies in something else — in the process of generating the "monster" that the writer was talking about. We will be primarily interested in this narrative plan.

3 The semantic essence of the monster queue image

According to N. Andreeva's correct observation, "as we read, the queue appears before our eyes as a kind of body — it gradually acquires its outlines, localizing itself in the space of city streets, just as a line outlines the contour of the surface of an object on a white background of a sheet of paper" (Andreeva 2010, 5).

N. Andreeva's observation is true, but it is necessary to clarify that the outline of the queue, its contour and image ("body") are born in Sorokin's text not gradually, but literally from the first lines. In focusing on the objects of fellow conceptual artists (I. Kabakov, V. Pivovarov, A. Sundukov, V. Kolotev, etc.), Sorokin forms the visualized appearance of the queue with the first lines, building the text of the polylogue novel in such a way that it is accessible to visual perception. The prose writer uses short phrases, replicas, which are arranged harmoniously one after another, not growing into long maxims of invisible characters, but by their conciseness and brevity contouring the visible image of the queue, which gradually acquires details, qualities, characteristics, clarifying and "individualizing" the aggregate essence of the monster text (see: Sorokin 2002, 16).

Note that the text opens with a precedent phrase — "... who is the last?", familiar to every Soviet (and Russian) citizen. Thus, the subject of perception immediately plunges into the atmosphere of a social phenomenon — queues, and each subsequent replica-response complements and concretizes familiar realities, not allowing the boundaries of the recognizable visible image to be blurred.

The collective closeness and cohesion within the queue is marked by Sorokin by the ease with which people (characters) enter into communication. The initial address "comrade" does not explicate an ideological subtext (D. Uffelman's point of view: Uffelmann 2022), but generates an idea of camaraderie, as if opening the character's entrance to some future fraternity-community.

The ease of communication very soon outgrows the scope of the external community of characters. Already on the first pages of the text, the self-determination of those standing in line appears — "we" ("us"), which are a priori opposed to a certain "they" ("them").

Semantically, it is expected that some "they" are alien and even hostile to the queue. And in this confrontation, the unity (including psychological) of the people-characters standing in line turns out to be even more pronounced and significant — as a result, the integrity and physicality of the queue is represented more and more thickly and in relief.

Visual examples of building an organized queue at Sorokin are actively accompanied and clarified by details of the psychological warehouse. From the very first lines, a certain mental community of those characters who are already standing in line and who are just getting attached to it is noticeable. Strangers demonstrate empathy and altruism, experience feelings of mutual help and mutual support: "Stand behind me for now. <...> She said that she would return quickly..." (Sorokin 2002, 316). The heroine of "in a blue coat" who has left the queue seems to be under the protection of the male hero remaining in the queue, as obviously unknown to her. As a result, the characters are perceived (and realize themselves) as if they are interchangeable: I = she. There are many similar mini-situations in the Sorokin queue.

The heroes of the queue in the course of communication most often express themselves not in the forms of the 1st person singular (I), but in the plural forms (we) with the appropriate predicative expression (Sorokin 2002, 318–319), in any case, they are all included in the paradigm of impersonality and self-centricity, of the queues.

Personal names flashing in the text (their vocative truncated forms) — Fed', Serzh, Mish, Valer, Pash, Zin — do not change the meaning of formal depersonalization. There is no real zoning of individual voices in the text of the novel. Even when using proper names, the latter are either shortened, "reduced" (as if they are subject to "collective" compression), or dissolved in speech formulas, explicating not so much the personality of the named character, as generating allusions to precedent texts of the Soviet era (for example, to popular songs by V. Vysotsky).

Apparently, only the names of the "love triangle" Vadim, Lena, Luda have a stable fixation, and next to them is Volodya, a little boy who echoes the name of the author, probably once also stood with his mother in long queues. However, the presence of other names flashing in the queue next to Vadim-Lena-Luda removes the halo of their exclusivity and primacy. These three characters can hardly be called "main" characters and even only the hero Vadim, as critics often claim (for example, Andreeva 2010, 5). Sorokin's central character is undoubtedly a queue.

The image of the "thousand-mouthed hydra" (I. Levontina) clearly demonstrates its signs, conditionally "body parts". For example, the homonymous "tail" appears in the text already on the first pages, growing and lengthening from episode to episode. At first, "there is no end to the tail" (Sorokin 2002, 324), later — about him almost admiringly: "Wow... what a tail..." (Sorokin 2002, 338). Formally, the linguistic signs of queue hyperbolization are increasing.

The "body" of a long queue, possessing an expressive "phraseologized" tail (compare: the paremic "head of the queue"), inevitably gives rise to the idea of a serpentine creature, perhaps dragon-like or hydro-like. In any case, this "monster" is so material that its body can be stretched or compressed, it can be aligned or straightened, bent or folded. "And here you can bend... <...> Bend, bend here, comrades..." (Sorokin 2002, 338). Comrades and Sorokin's queue are synonymous. The real and the phantasmagoric, the animate and the inanimate, the subjective and the objective incorporate, diffuse.

4 The process of depersonalization inside the queue

Meanwhile, the process of depersonalization inside the queue, in fact its dehumanization, reveals a downside: it does not mortify the essence (body) of the human queue, rather on the contrary — the monster queue comes to life, reincarnates, is filled with tangible physicality. Despite the already mentioned individual Fed', Serzh, Valer, Zin, the turn acquires the characteristics of nameless personal unity and its own fullness, the status of independence and viability, independence from single "compressed" human components. The elimination of multi-subjectivity is compensated by an (almost Kantian) totality.

If the initially incarnating queue demonstrates certain properties and qualities of a being capable of action: "Why, back away again?", "Or maybe it's better to bend <...>?", "Well, let's turn off, right?" (Sorokin 2002, 345), then with the accumulation of maturity, the queue reaches genuine vitality. The queue acquires the outlines and vitality of a visualized monster creature, embodied and independent, endowed with its own essence and already contoured physicality.

Sorokin literally timesheets the process of maturation of the creature of the queue. The author introduces signals into the text-markers of queue maturation. The human components of the queue are first called the morning ("I'm standing in the morning"), then they mention the lunch break (in the USSR, strictly from 14 to 15 o'clock), later it comes to five in the evening (in Russia 17 o'clock), then it's called 8 pm ("Wow, the eighth hour is already..."), it is expected the extension of trading until 11 pm (23 o'clock), etc. The queue is growing and gaining strength "by leaps and bounds", the image is saturated with additional connotations.

Having gained cohesion and power, the queue reaches the ability not only to self-regulate, but also to self-awareness. The queue develops and formulates its own — collective — desires and discovers the ability to implement them. Her behavioral impulses vary.

At first, the queue "bends" to reach the barrel of kvass, and thus quenches its monstrous thirst. "Let's move over and get drunk on kvass" (Sorokin 2002, 337).

Next, the queue decides to settle down in the shade of the trees of the city courtyards: "How nice it is here. I love such alleys <...> Move into the alley..." (Sorokin 2002, 346-348). "Yes, we bend into the yard, we bend!" (Sorokin 2002, 375).

Next, there is a need to rest, sit down on the benches: "Yes, there are plenty of shops nearby, why suffer?" (Sorokin 2002, 353). "Comrades, are we taking turns sitting?" (Sorokin 2002, 357). As evening falls and night approaches, the queue monster has the idea of spending the night on the street: "What's there, just think — to spend the night. But in the morning we'll get one or two" (Sorokin 2002, 353).

The queue implements its own monstrous (biological) instincts, needs. It behaves like a living organism endowed with consciousness, needs, desires. This living and full-fledged subject wants to eat, drink, defecate, wash, relax, hide from the rain, get the desired and coveted product. The queue formed and took shape, became stronger and gained its own shape, and therefore existence ("We live!"). The amphiboly of the text, its ambiguity and ambiguity are increasing.

5 The plot twist of the narrative

Gradually, it seems that the result of the writer's aspirations (the effect of the birth of a language monster) has been achieved. Regardless of what the product is, "how much" it is given, who gets it, the finale of the novel narrative has matured: the metamorphoses have happened, the queue has been nurtured, it is endowed with an independent and full-fledged life. But this is where the counterpoint turn of events takes place.

The final episode of the novel, when Vadim gets into Lyudmila's apartment and where it turns out that the heroine works in the very store "Moscow", near which street trading is carried out, on the one hand, can qualify as a climax, on the other hand, generates the need for a special comment.

If we appeal to the superficial plot layer of the novel, then the plot line seems to be really resolved by ridding the hero of all the next hardships that fell to his lot. Thanks to Lyudmila, Vadim can now get what he wanted himself and what Luda's house is already filled with without waiting in line (out of turn). All the coveted products and things can now become his property, since Lyudmila, a commodity expert, will easily provide her lover with everything necessary and desirable.

However, within the framework of the monstrous internal plot, the final episodes with Lyudmila seem to us, firstly, ironically and anecdotally lightened, and secondly, superfluous and conceptually insignificant. The hero left the queue, but at the same time acquired all the coveted goods. Meanwhile, the plot of the monster queue in a similar happy-end context "freezes", appears incomplete, torn off, not brought to a logical end.

The further fate of the revived monster queue remains unknown, and readers' "fears" arise for its continued existence and survival. The plot of the monster was stated and partially embodied by the novelist, but in the end it turned out to be incomplete. If at the surface level the plot received a dynamic conclusion, then at the internal level the finale turned out to be "open", and not in a scientific sense, but in a literal sense. The gifted novelist, as if carried away by the idea of a monster, simplified and missed the moment of completion of the phantasmagoric narrative, leaving an already formed, vital being outside the plot perspective. Vadim's plot turned out to be simpler and more accessible to pragmatic perception, whereas the monster's plot hung in space, got lost on one of the Moscow streets.

6 Results and prospects

The question remains: why did Sorokin build the image of a monster queue, which was his author's intention? Did Sorokin intend to discover a negative attitude towards the peculiarities of social life in the USSR, or was the artist's task different?

It is hardly possible to assume that the face trend was led by the conceptualist Sorokin. The founders and theorists of conceptualism demonstrated the absence of the idea and purpose of the created literary text. Russian conceptualism, in contrast to Western conceptualism, played with concepts, built new structures from Soviet Socialist-realistic cubes-stamps, offered unexpected and, as a rule, far from reality (and from realism) objects. In this sense, Sorokin's statements about economic content "The Queues" addressed to a foreign reader are just a tribute to a Western Research view (for example, the works of H. Gunther (Gunther 2000), K. Clark (Clark 2000), L. Geller (Geller 2014), D. Uffelmann (Uffelmann 2022), E. Dobrenko (Dobrenko 2000, 2007) and others).

Who learned the laws of the special poetics of Soviet literature (and more broadly, the Soviet reality, into which he inevitably remained immersed) Sorokin created "The Queue" not as an accusatory hyperbole of Soviet reality, but as an experiment in language play, which was preached and represented in his painting practices by his fellow conceptualists (see verbal experiments inside the visual art of I. Kabakov or V. Pivovarov

and, conversely, visual practices inside the verbal art of D. A. Prigov, L. Rubinstein, etc.). Fascinated by conceptual strategies, Sorokin played with language, like conceptual painters, and the material (not the object) of this game became the realities of the life of a Soviet person, a Soviet country, familiar and understandable to a prose writer. The most important thing for the writer was the game experiment, and not a marked socio-ideological evaluation. The ironic mode of narrative did not include a pronounced axiology.

It is noteworthy that in the body of the Sorokin queue, a special place is occupied by the image of the boy Volodya, who found himself in a monstrous chain of people with his mother. Like Vadim, the voice of the boy character is recognizable, the replicas of the characters addressed to him are specifically targeted and accurate. The author's namesake — Volodya/Vladimir — lives organically inside the queue, without experiencing serious discomfort, excluding the childish desire to jump, make noise, play on the nearest playground or drink three glasses of sparkling water, eat ice cream. The child Volodya is an organic and far from tragic figure of the queue ("The Queue"). Sorokin's young hero lives in a natural environment that does not injure his childish consciousness. The monster queue kindly accepts the boy's mischief, providing him with an atmosphere of comfort and happiness. The social motive of exposing and overthrowing the Soviet order was neutralized in Sorokin's text. His novel is a language game, a speech experiment, a gesture of an avant-garde conceptualist.

Let us repeat, however, that this is why, from our point of view, the novel about the monster turned out to be unfinished to the end, left by the writer without a final accent and a non-textual perspective. Note at the same time that, probably, for Sorokin himself, as time passed, it became obvious that the fate of the queue in "The Queue" was not spelled out and was not completed. Maybe that's why a fragment from the novel "The Queue" a quarter of a century later was transferred by the already mature Sorokin to the text of the novel "Sugar Kremlin" (2008), as if realizing the previously unfulfilled fate of the queue-hero and ensuring the continuation of the life of the monster phenomenon (see more details: Bibergan 2011). The existential present of the monster queue seems to be "prolonged" in the "Sugar Kremlin".

Anyway, concluding the discussion about the "monstrous" subtext of the novel, we can say that the then young and talented Vladimir Sorokin in "The Queue" carried out the first literary experience of implementing conceptual strategies and tactics previously exploited and represented only at the level of painting practices. Sorokin's first conceptualist novel became a serious achievement of both the prose writer himself and the entire conceptual art in general, especially during the heyday of postmodern trends at the turn of XX and XXI centuries (see: Bogdanova 2004, Bibergan 2011).

It cannot be said that Moscow conceptualism and Vladimir Sorokin's texts themselves really "overcame socialist realism" and "cleared the way" for new Russian literature. Upon closer examination, it is obvious that the artists and writers of Moscow conceptualism in practice tried at a new stage to revive the traditions of avant-garde trends artificially interrupted in the 30s of the last century. However, by the beginning of XXI century, this role of Moscow conceptualism had been played out, the conceptual experiment had exhausted itself, remaining a special page in the history of Russian literature.

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