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Transfiguration of Kitsch: Timur Kibirov's Sentiments, A Farewell Elegy for Soviet Civilization

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Potemkinland

A mad, mad dream and horror were imposed on an entire people—from the Kuril Islands to the Carpathian Mountains—as a daily regimen of existence.
-Sergei Gandlevskii, *Brain Surgery* (1995)

"Disneyland," Mr. Striedter said dismissively, "a Potemkin façade."
-response to a suggestion to cover the façade of the communist-era Palace of the Republic in East Berlin with the façade of the pre-communist Berlin Palace. *The New York Times*¹

To appreciate Timur Kibirov's poetry, you must consider its conditions of possibility.

Imagine for a moment that you are having a bad dream. You are at home but at the same time in Disneyland. You see Mickey Mouse outside your bedroom window. The sun is shining. You are happy. You want to shake hands with Mickey. Mickey is waiting. He is stretching out his gloved hand. You notice he has a gun in it, and the gun is now pointing at you. You run for help to Donald Duck, but Donald Duck You know Donald Duck. He is now with the gang of the Seven Dwarfs, and you avert your eyes lest you see what they are about to do to Snow White.

You run to the fountain to splash some water in your face and hope that this nightmare would go away. But the fountain is not what it used to be. Gurgling and wheezing, it shoots into the air a solitary rusty jet, irrigating an old mattress that rests limply in the empty fountain pool. Refuse is blowing in the breeze, and you wade through discarded wrappers, watermelon rind, plastic bottles, and burger boxes. Around you ugly beggars do their two-step shuffle. They stretch out their hands. They tap you on the shoulder. They beg. Aggressively.

¹ "The argument that the [communist] Palace of the Republic [in East Berlin] doesn't have architectural quality means to easterners: 'you weren't good enough,'" Mr. Striedter said. 'People resist that.' Some suggest that the façade of the [pre-communist] Berlin Palace should be rebuilt with the modern structure [the communist Palace of the Republic] behind it. 'Disneyland,' Mr. Striedter said dismissively, 'a Potemkin façade'" (Cowell 4).

This could not be real, you say to yourself, just could not be. A silent scream is choking you. At last you scream, and you wake up. Thank God, it was only a dream! You look around. Where are you? Is this Disneyland? No, you are now in the Theme Park of Soviet Civilization! Disneyland is the other way. You look around and see Mickey Mouse. He is pulling a gun on you. You run for help to Donald Duck, but Donald Duck...

* * *

A nightmarish Potemkin village of this sort -a Disneyland from hell or Donald Barthelme-is the return address of Timur Kibirov's message in a bottle, a collection of poetry, *Sentiments* [Sentimenty]. Published in 1994, it tells about, or rather conveys a sense of what life was like in the twilight years of the Soviet Union from the communal apartment experiences to unheated outhouses in wintertime. A twentieth-century Atlantis, the Soviet Union was not destined to sink. As befits the less fabulous times, it became a theme park of its own fallen civilization where the latest Western intellectual fashions blend with the dense and hoary traditions of Russia's anti-modern past.

As civilizations fall, many poets hear the call for the art of memory that would preserve the traces of past life, but in the end few are chosen. Ostensibly a lyric, self-consciously sentimental poet, Kibirov is among the chosen few whose record of Soviet civilization is savoured by the post-Soviet reader. Every poem in his collection may be used as a basis for a reconstruction of that world, as its clamour continues to resonate in the hearts of its former citizens. Like a folk ballad or Homer's catalogue of ships, Kibirov's poems appear telescoped into infinity, with variations piled upon variations, detail upon detail, nostalgically retarding the coda *ad infinitum*:

You [Russia] know how to share the last ruble,
How to confiscate it, or to booze it away,
How to drown the great grandchildren
Of your great writers!

You can dance till you drop,
Compose verses till dawn,
And right there and then, tear
A sheet from the same notebook and-look-

You write a denunciation of your neighbor,
Quarrel over the communal garbage pile,
Send Frenchmen into space in a rocket,
Get stoned in the evening subway.

You strike demonstrators with shovels,²
You deride the stubborn Estonians³

² A reference to the Tbilisi massacre of 1988 when paratroopers attacked with sapper shovels a crowd demonstrating outside the headquarters of the Georgian Communist Party.

³ A reference to the Estonians' stubborn insistence on restoring their independence from the Soviet Union during the last years of perestroika (1989-91).

And imagine that your cowardly soul
Makes for True Spirituality.

Dekulakized through and through, you weep from pity,
Deprived of Christ, you are busy painting Easter eggs,
You toil like a slave building factories and roads
To save up for a coat for the winter

Let the English fleas keep dancing,
We have no time to shoe them,
On Saturdays, we moonlight,
Can't keep anything under control.

Oh your every last dime at the town gate,
Your every last coin clutched in the hand,
Your every last gulp of free booze,
Your Lenin lodged in every last head.

With sadness, you avert your eyes from the gallows
Pushkin had to cover your shame

Умеешь последний целковый
Отдать, и отнять, и пропить,
И правнуков внуков Багрова
В волне черноморской топить!

Ты можешь плясать до упаду,
Стихи сочинять до зари,
И тут же, из той же тетради
Ты вырвишь листок – и смотри

Ты пиешь доно на соседа
Скандалишь с помойным ведром,
Францизов катаешь в ракете,
Кемаришь в вечернем метро.

Дерешься саперной лопаткой,
Строптивых эстонцев коришь,
И душу, ушедшую в пятки,
Высокой Духовностью мнишь!

Дотла раскулачена, плачешь,
Расхристана, красишь яйцо,
На стрйках и трассах ишачишь,
Чтоб справить к зиме пальтецо.

Пусть блохи английские пляшут,
Нам их подковать недосуг,
В субботу мы «черную» пашем,
Отбившись от собственных рук.

Последний кабак у заставы,
Полседний пятак в кулаке,
Последний глоток на халяву,

И Ленин последний в башке.

С тоской отвернувшись о петель,
Сам Пушкин прикрыл тебе срам.
Но что же на все же ответить
Презрительным клеветникам?

This is from Kibirov's "Russian Song" ["Russkaia pesnia"], which, at one hundred and eighty lines long, is by no means the longest poem in the collection. Cast in angry and ironic classical anapests, its rhythm and theme remind one of both the nineteenth-century topical sentimental invective of Nikolai Nekrasov (for example, his "On the Weather" ["O pogode"]) and the unsentimental invective of Osip Mandel'shtam (his "The apartment is as silent as paper" ["Kvartira tikha, kak bumaga"]). The conjuncture of these two poets to which Kibirov alludes suggests not merely the continuity of the Russian-Soviet experience (increasingly a commonplace), but its interminable iteration—the trap of history that Hegel once described as a "bad eternity," *schlechte Unendlichkeit*. Will this bad eternity ever end?

Timur Kibirov: A Bio-Bibliographical Note

Kibirov was born in 1955 as Timur Iur'evich Zapoev to a family, as the Soviet-era cliché goes, of typical Soviet intelligentsia: father, an army officer; mother, a schoolteacher. The father Iurii Zapoev, a descendent of ethnic Ossetians (Zorin, "Legalizatsiia" 144) (a Muslim people of Northern Caucasus) and the Cossacks, saw action in World War II as a trained artillery officer and after the war remained in the Soviet army. Kibirov's mother (of Russian peasant ancestry, according to the poet) was educated in a teachers college and taught high school, specializing in chemistry and biology (Kibirov, "Pravila"; Kibirov, "Timur").

Throughout Kibirov's childhood and youth, his family, in typical military fashion, migrated from one base to another, never settling in one place for more than three years. The traces of these peregrinations, along with those of the culture and milieu of the late Soviet military base, are plain to see in Kibirov's poetry, as are the surroundings of a Moscow neighborhood Kon'kovo, a Soviet-era residential development and home for the poet's own family, as well as his dacha in the village of Shil'kovo.

Kibirov credits his father with instilling in him a feeling for poetry when he read out loud to his son the Caucasus verses of Mikhail Lermontov. The choice of subject matter, as Kibirov later suspected, had to do with the father's desire to keep alive and to dignify the family's link with the Caucasus, including his own Muslim ancestry, not always an asset in the Russified Soviet milieu.⁴ Kibirov began writing his own poetry at the age of thirteen. While still in high school and in anticipation of the career as a Russian poet, he decided that his family name Zapoev (in Russian "binge drinker") lacked the requisite poetic ring. The first nom de plume he chose, the rather awkward Eduard Dymnyi (Edward Misty), redolent of a middle-brow provincial taste, was a transparent tribute to Aleksandr Blok who infected

⁴ In one of his famous poems from the 1980s, Kibirov identifies himself as a "chuchmek," a pejorative term for a Muslim ethnic from Central Asia or the Caucasus.

Kibirov with a life-long weakness for with the magic of modern, or modernist, Russian poetry.

His second pen name, Kibirov, which he has used since the early 1980s, comes from his paternal grandmother and has a romantic, if familial, pedigree. It is through her that Kibirov traces his genealogy to an officer of the Imperial Russian Army, who became famous for capturing an Ingush separatist, Zelimkhan, during one of Russia's late nineteenth-century attempts at subjugating the Caucasus.

Kibirov's poetry reached its readership both in the Soviet Union and abroad relatively late: the first publication of his verse dates to 1988, curiously, both in the Soviet Union (the almanac *Poeziia* 1988) and the West (in the émigré journals *Kontinent*, *Sintaksis*, and *Vremia i my*). Fame — indeed the fame of the highest sort, known as notoriety — came to Kibirov soon after his debut, when his "Epistle to L. S. Rubinshtein" ["Poslanie L. S. Rubinshteinu"] (1988)-containing some hitherto unprintable Russian expressions, including the obscene shorthand for the Apocalypse⁵-was excerpted in the newspaper of the Latvian Popular Front, *Atmoda*. The authorities-enfeebled but unreformed-were scandalized. A pointed and humorless attack in *Pravda* (2 September 1989; see also Zorin, "Legalizatsiia") was soon to follow. It allowed Kibirov to bask in the waning twilight of the martyrdom tradition of Russian poetry, happily, without ahving himself exposed to the ordeals that other Russian poets had to endure for challenging the jealous party-state. By contrast, the public, which had developed a taste for the Russian underground's blasphemous irony and the parodies of sots-art, loved Kibirov's "Epistle." Since then, Kibirov has published widely both in the new and the old established newspapers and journals, among them, the authoritative *Novyi mir* and the trendy *Znamia*, which has become the main outlet for his verse.

Kibirov's first book of poetry, *Calendar* [Kalendar'], came out in 1991, followed in 1993 by *Verses About Love* [Stikhi o liubvi]. A year later, another collection, his most comprehensive to date, *Sentiments: Eight Books* [Santimenty: Vosem' knig], came out in a press run on 10,000 copies, an unheard-of number for a book of poetry. In 1995, Kibirov published his earlier long narrative poem, *When Lenin Was a Little Boy* [Kogda byl Lenin malen'kim], describing, among other things, Lenin's parents at the moment of their son's conception. Such attention to detail is rare in the vast Lenin literature, and it was gleefully appreciated by Kibirov's readers. Kibirov's new collection, *Periphrasis* [Perifrazis], bringing together his poetry from the years 1992-1996, was published in St. Petersburg in 1997 in a press run of 1000 copies and has received favorable reviews.

Judging by a sampling of the press materials dealing with Kibirov's poetry, his art has elicited a positive, if mixed, response, ranging from a downright dismissive treatment of it (along with the oeuvre of Dmitrii Aleksandrovich Prigov) (Serdiuchenko) to serious appreciation of his poetic project, most notably, by Andrei Zorin ("Al'manakh"), Aleksandr Levin ("O vliianii"), and Tatiana Cherednichenko ("Pesni"; see also Falikov and Goriacheva). In recent years, Kibirov has, without doubt, achieved the stature of a premier Russian poet (he is a recipient of many honors and rewards, among them the International Pushkin Prize and most recently the 1997 Anti-Booker Prize for Poetry from *Nezavisimaia*

⁵ "Dnes' sbyvaiusia Pisan'ia / Priblizhaetsia pizdets." An approximate translation is "Today the [Sacred]] Writ is forgotten / The end is near." Here the choice of word for "end" is a slang derivative of "cunt."

gazeta.⁶ Never shying away from the topical, Kibirov is often called upon to participate in poetry readings before considerable audiences; he has served on juries in a variety of cultural competitions, an important institution in Russia's wild and chaotic culture market; he has been named poetry editor of one of the trendiest new *thin* journals, *Pushkin* (Moscow); and he has the distinction of appearing with enviable frequency in the literary and society pages of the Russian press. He is pointedly modest in his public persona and refreshingly moderate in his pronouncements. And yet (or, perhaps, because of this humility), Kibirov these days is, without doubt, Russia's premier public poet. It is to him, to his poetry, that his fellow-citizens often turn when they feel an urge to take a stroll in the theme park of Soviet civilization where their own former lives, in retrospect increasingly unfamiliar, are paraded and displayed.

Double Exposure: A Found Object

The enormity of the Soviet stylistic legacy and the epoch-making break with communism suggest that contemporary nostalgia for Soviet aesthetics cannot be accounted for by an appeal to either fashion or the subculture models.⁷ The paradoxical return of this aesthetic, indeed, the phenomenon of Soviet nostalgia as a whole, was prefigured by the practitioners of *sots-art* (Grois; Andreeva) in the late Soviet era. Its extension into post-communist Russia may be seen as a continued unfolding or, as Freud might have put it, a working through by the former Soviet citizens of their "Soviet complex." This is a process by means of which the individuals and groups, shaped by Soviet experience, come to terms with and assimilate the break with their Soviet past and the ever-revised revisions of their collective and personal Soviet histories.



Figure 1. Sergei Volkov, *Culture*, 1988. Oil on canvas, 140 x 200 cm. From Tamruchi, p. 67

For the original *sots-artists*, this process began in the early 1970s when the Soviet Union appeared alive and, considering Afghanistan, kicking but, in fact, was beginning to cave in, especially, in the area of the legitimating ideology. By contrast with the earlier generation of the critically-minded artists and intellectuals, who tended to see in socialist realism an aesthetic alien both to "true art" and "the people's" notion of the good and the beautiful, the *sots-artists* were keenly aware not only of the deeply problematic nature of

⁶ Kibirov's "Dvenadtsat' sonetov Sashe Zapoevoi," which first appeared in *Znamia*, received unqualified praise from another panelist of the Anti-Booker Committee of *Nezavisimaaia gazeta*, an editor of the St. Petersburg journal *Solo*. See "Pole bitvy," *Nezavisimaaia gazeta* 10 January 1997.

⁷ The authoritative and highly professional weekly *Itogi* has a permanent rubric for articles dealing with this subject matter, entitled, not surprisingly "Nostalgia."

such terms as "true art" and "the people," but also of the deep affinity between the official aesthetics and the average Soviet citizen's taste (see Fig 1, with the word "culture" silk screened onto a folksy pattern of a mass produced Soviet rug). In the eyes of the more traditional intelligentsia, the area where the affinity between the socialist realist aesthetic and popular taste reigned supreme was the other side of the moon of Soviet culture. By contrast, members of the sots-art movement found it staring in their face, and they set out to map it with great humor and relish.

Since the early 1970s, much has been done by these artists and their fellow-poets to demystify the convergence of the political-aesthetic agenda of the party-state and the cultural horizons of the semi-urbanized masses of Soviet citizens (Clark; Dobrenko; Bonnell). Part of the international Conceptualist⁸ movement (cf. pop-art, sots-art⁹), the sots-artists employed modernism's time-honored device of foregrounding the hidden springs of aesthetic experience—in this case, what might be called the Soviet "political unconscious" (Jameson)—that included the folkloric, literal conception of communist utopianism, and the dependence of propaganda art on middle-brow urban taste with its mass-produced, artless displacement of desire (Dunham; Boym). What distinguishes this art from its modernist parentage is not only its focus on the mass-produced, the popular, the ubiquitous and the quotidian, but, more important, the implicit crossing of the line between the auratic high art, which includes modernism, and the world of aesthetic objects without aura that reach their public only by means of mechanical reproduction (Benjamin).

This taste for objects evocative of Soviet civilization had been made evermore popular by art exhibitions, both retrospective¹⁰ and sots-art,¹¹ and a whole variety of museum and gallery installations.¹² One of them, The Lenin Museum Exhibition (Summer 1992) was even held in one of the most sacred shrines of Soviet civilization, Moscow's Lenin Museum. However brief, this promiscuous propinquity of Lenin memorabilia and sots-art works demystifying the cult forever transformed the museum into an involuntary sots-art parody. Indeed, it would not be an exaggeration to say that the immediate influence of sots-art in contemporary Russia consists of the implicit parodic frame that imposes itself anachronistically on all and every object associated with the Soviet grand style. This is so not only in the eyes of the educated public, familiar with the sots-artist legacy, but among media consumers at large, so much has the parodic voice, pioneered by the sots-artists (known as *stiob*, стёб), has penetrated television, the press, and colloquial speech.

It is in the imperfect fit between, on the one hand, the meaningful sentimental nostalgia experienced by an average post-Soviet citizen and, on the other, the sots-art

⁸ See Grois's seminal essay ("Moskovskii"). Among the most recent works on the period and the genre, see especially Rosenfield and Dodge, which contains a collection of authoritative essays, including Margarita Tupitsyn's "On Some Sources of Soviet Conceptualism" (303-05), along with over 300 illustrations. See also Bobrinskaia; Tupitsyn, *After Perestroika*.

⁹ The term was coined by the artists Komar and Melamid in 1972 as a hybrid of socialist realism and pop-art. See Andreeva 14.

¹⁰ Perhaps the most famous and comprehensive exhibition of Stalinist art, "Agitation for Happiness: Soviet Art of the Stalin Epoch" ["Agitatsiia za schast'e: Sovetskoe iskusstvo stalinskoi epokhi"] was held in 1993-94 in the Russian Museum (St. Petersburg) and Cassel (Germany). See Gassner. Most recently, during the celebration of the 850th anniversary of Moscow, an "art action" [khudozhestvennaia aktsiia] "Red Moscow," including among its participants Timur Kibirov, was held at the Manezh Exhibition Center. Among other things, it included an exposition "Crimea: Muscovites' Favorite Vacation Spot (Paintings from the 1930s and 1940s)," organized by the Foundation "Novaia Gallereia," known for its collection of "lyrical socialist realist art."

¹¹ The history of these sots-art or conceptualist exhibitions, originally held "underground," goes back to the 1970s, if not the 1960s. See Andreeva; Tupitsyn, *Sots Art*.

¹² E.g. Il'ia Kabakov. See Barre.

aesthetic game that Kibirov's poetry has found its unique niche in modern Russian culture. But perhaps, the game of life-imitating-art has been played all too successfully in Russia, with the consequences all too lethal even for the players engaged in what Stephane Mallarmé called the supreme game.

Indeed, the very thought that the pendulum of today's taste may get stuck in Soviet-era retro and somehow bring back the bad old days has caused even some of the keenest ironic manipulators of this legacy to strike a note of caution. Timur Kibirov was among them. What makes his position particularly piquant is that he has come to enjoy a considerable following and public visibility precisely because he himself has greatly contributed to and capitalized on this demand for the aestheticized Soviet kitsch of both the sentimental and sots-artist variety. No other contemporary Russian poet-not even Dmitrii Aleksandrovich Prigov, whose poetry is more a verbal calque of sots-art visual conceptualism-has been more successful at weaving from the shards of Soviet monumental sculpture and pitiful family heirlooms his own nest on the tree of modern Russian poetry. But now, confronted with the tidal wave of Soviet nostalgia, Kibirov has grown alarmed. "The majority has recalled with great sympathy and nostalgia the Soviet times," he told an interviewer in April 1997, "and the authorities are doing all they can, in my opinion, to encourage such feelings and make possible the victory of the communists" (Kibirov, "Vozrast"). The lyric chronicler who has mastered the art of double exposure, superimposing sots-art irony on a nostalgic snap shot of Soviet times, has begun to lose confidence in his own sense of balance.

The Big Picture



Figure Figure 2. Erik Bulatov, *You Are Welcome* (1973-74), Oil on Canvas, 80 x 230 cm¹

No matter how fantastic it may appear in retrospect, the late Soviet universe-what has now clinically referred to as "post-Soviet space"-existed for generations of Soviet citizens as the sole proverbial "common place" [obshchee mesto]; a space of common, public use; the communal, communicating place such as the communal bathroom; or kitchen in a communal flat (as in many Il'ia Kabakov's installations); or the place of communion with the state and its spirit of communism, such as the ultimate Soviet common place, the All-Union Exhibition



of the Achievements of the People's Economy, a bright picture of which shimmers behind the propaganda-red Welcome! [Dobro pozhalovat'!] in Erik Bulatov's eponymous masterpiece.

Kibirov refers to these over-inscribed places with a haunting tautological succinctness:

Это — общие места,
Наши общие места

These are commonplaces,
Our common places

Indeed, to borrow a term from psychoanalysis, the Soviet Union-presently merely a post-Soviet space-was one socially over-defined, or overdetermined space, a place to the highest possible socially defined power that, in toto, may only be compared to a theme park, with the multiple articulations of its environment. In the Soviet Union, this most extensive Disneyland of them all, people led their commonplace existence, at the same time living their everyday biological, social, symbolic lives and performing their roles as citizen of the great communist party-state even as the sun was setting on the Communist Empire. This was a veritable forest of symbols before which Baudelaire's forest of symbols should, by comparison, pale. Not just the senses or confused words (*des parfumes frais, des confuses paroles*), as in Baudelaire, but whole libraries and museums of Soviet political myths issue from every living pillar in the Soviet symbolic forest. Kibirov has a blood hound's sense for this mythology.

<...> Возле самой границы, ты видишь, овраг!
Там скрывается бешеный враг –
Либо я, либо ты, либо сам Пентагон!
О зеленые крылья погон!

<...> By the border, you see, there lies a ravine!
There the foe is lurking, crazy and mean-
Could be me, could be you, and the Pentagon, too!
Oh, the wings of the epaulets green!

This quatrain from Kibirov's "Forest School" ["Lesnaia shkola"] (1986), a long poem set in the endless Siberian taiga with a rail line cutting through it, offers an illustration. A ravine by the border-both because the border is ipso facto the most dangerous zone in Soviet culture and because it easily rhymes with the Russian word for "enemy" [ovrag / vrag]-calls forth a "lurking foe," a stock image from the Soviet political-paranoia vocabulary. The speaker's own proximity to the "enemy zone" now suggests that the speaker himself may be one, or his interlocutor, or indeed, the entire Pentagon (sounding more like a "dragon") might be hiding itself in the infernal border ravine. Stock images and reflections ricochet from mirrors, every object, to continue with Baudelaire's metaphor, releases confused words from the Soviet lexicon-whether from the political propaganda vocabulary, as in the example above, or, as in the three quatrains below, a dissident mockery of the Communist Manifesto

and an allusion to Osip Mandel'shtam (*italics*),¹³ the patron saint of the intelligentsia culture in the late Soviet period:

<...> Призрак бродит по дебрям родным
разъярен,
европейский покинув газон.
Он рубаху последнюю ставит на кон,
спит и видит сивушный свой сон.

Our deep native forests the enraged Specter haunts
after quitting Europe's lawn.
It is gambling away its own last shirt,
It's asleep, dreaming its moonshine stupor dream.

<...> Нам кровавой соплей перешибли хребет.
Отползай, корешек, за Тайшет.
И, как шапку в рукав, как в колодец плевок,
нас умчит тепловозный гудок

Bloody snot broke our back.
Crawl, buddy, crawl away beyond the Taishet.¹⁴
And, like *the hat stuffed in the sleeve*, like the spit in the
well,
we'll be rushed away by a locomotive whistle.

<...> И сияют всю ночь голубые песцы,
и на вышках кемарят бойцы. <...>

And all night long the *blue minks keep glowing*,
And in the watchtowers, the soldiers keep nodding off

...

The confusion of these various tongues—the official propaganda rhetoric, the heavy irony of the disgruntled intelligentsia, and what was for the intelligentsia, the redemptive language of the great martyr poets of the century, especially, Mandel'shtam—is a common device of Kibirov's poetry. But the confusion of tongues was also symptomatic of the erosion of the Soviet system and of the breakdown in the compartmentalization of the orders of life in the post-Stalin period. This thinning of the walls that supported the system accounts for the ease with which various discourses, hitherto hierarchically arranged, could begin to co-mingle. By the end of the Brezhnev era, one could encounter Mickey Mouse of the American Disneyland interlacing his goofy speech with psychoanalytic lexicon and the Marxist discourse on the commodification of culture.

Тут Фрейду вмешаться бы впору,
Тут бром прописать бы ему!
Получше нашла ухажера
Россия, и лисхь одному

Here, it's high time to call in Dr. Freud,
Call him in and give him saltpeter!
A better suitor has been chosen by
Russia, him and him alone

Верна наша родная мама,
Нам всем Джугашвили отец.
Эдипова комплекса драму
Пора доиграть наконец....

Our dear mother shall be faithful to -
Dzhugashvili¹⁵ is father to us all.
It's high time to finish off the drama
Of the Oedipus complex
("Russian Song," 1990)

¹³ In "The Forest School," Kibirov's most transparent allusion is to Mandel'shtam's 1931 "wolf poem" ("Za gremuchuiu doblest' griadushchikh vekov"). The rather unusual metrical scheme (alternating anapestic tetrameter and trimeter) and the consistently masculine rhyme, which together produce the effect of a guillotine knife first slowly ascending and then falling with a heavy thud, also have their provenance in Mandel'shtam's poetry of the early 1930s, the so-called "partially extant verses." See Mandel'shtam 170.

¹⁴ A settlement in Western Siberia, which served as one of the main GULag centers from which convict labor was sent to the construction of the Baikal-Amur railroad.

¹⁵ Stalin's family name; "Stalin" [in Russian, "Steel"] was one of several revolutionary pseudonyms.

Could It Be That That One Was I?

In retrospect, from the vantage point of the late 1990s, the actual collapse of the Communist party-state seems practically as an afterthought, so rotten and corrupt did the Soviet Union reveal itself during the years of perestroika. But Soviet citizens living through this transition that has forever estranged them from their earlier lives, experienced it as a deep and long-lasting shock, as a split in their identity. Timur Kibirov is their poet.

Even his most ironic, most hilarious poetry of the period-with the sole exception, perhaps, of his mock-classical tributes to the life and achievements of Konstantin Ustinovich Chernenko-he remained an intensely lyric poet. In a 1987 poem, "Let's begin, my merry Shainskii"["Chto zh, davai, moi Shainskii veselyi"],¹⁶ actually Chapter Five of his cycle Through Farewell Tears [Skvoz' proshchal'nye slezy], he offers a verse snapshot of the epoch of disintegration, seen through the eyes of the "parents" generation:

Мама Сталина просит не трогать,
Бедный папа рукою махнул.
Дорогие мои, ради Бога!
Ненарошно я вас обманул!
Все ведь кончено. Выкрась да выбрось.
Перестрой, разотри и забудь!
Изо всех своих славных калибров
Дай, Комунна, прощальный салют!

Mother pleads: please, leave Stalin alone.
Poor father has given all up
Oh my dears, for God's sake!
It wasn't on purpose that I have deceived you.
Believe me: it's over. Even repainted, this is junk to be tossed.
Give it a perestroika makeover, crush it to powder, and forget it!
Fire all of your glorious calibers,
Oh Commune, stage your last, farewell fireworks!

In the manner of the convict's body in Franz Kafka's "The Penal Colony," or the Sistine Chapel in the Vatican, or, indeed, Disneyland, every surface of this common space bore an ideological inscription of Soviet civilization, functioning as an erogenous zone for the desire of the ideological communist party-state. Exploration of this cerebral space has been undertaken by many of Kibirov's contemporaries, who saw the collapse of communism as the objectifying ideology for years, if not decades, before the party-state actually passed away.¹⁷

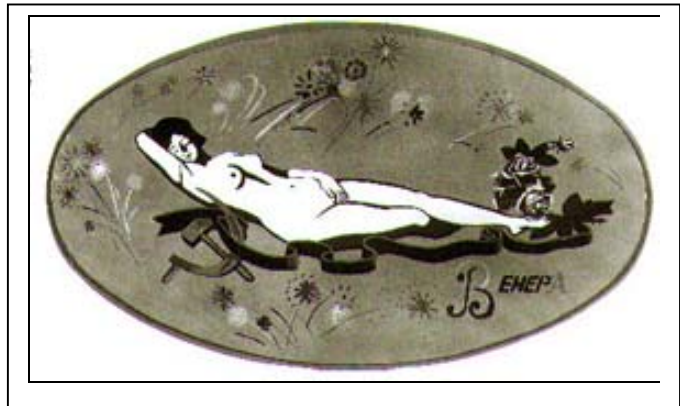


Figure 3 Rostislav Lebedev, *Soviet Venus*, 1982 (from *Kitsch Art* series), Enamel on Board, 74 x 44 cm¹

¹⁶ Vladimir Shainskii is a popular composer of vocal music for children and for such pop stars as Alla Pugacheva. See his *Pesni*.

¹⁷ Among them, most notably Il'ia Kabakov, in his famous communal apartment installation; Liudmila Petrushevskaya and Evgenii Popov, in their prose; Joseph Brodsky, in his poetry and essays; and Vera Dunham in scholarship (followed more recently by Svetlana Boym).

A quick look at Rostislav Lebedev's Sots-Art "Venus" (Fig. 3) should suffice as an illustration. What initially catches one's eye is not so much the classically posed, soft-porn stylized reclining Venus, but, snuggling close to her, the famous emblem of the Soviet state signifying the union of industrial and agricultural labor. The eye follows the Rococo ribbon, a *sine qua non* of every greeting card and holiday display, as it weaves itself sensuously, not



Figure 4. Vladislav Mamyshev. Documentation of performance "Marilyn Monroe in Moscow," 1990. From Tupitsyn, *Kitchenmaids*

to say snakes, into the opening between the hammer and the sickle, tracing the movement of the left hand of the Roman goddess of love as it comes to rest in her genital crevasse. To complete this composition, circumscribed by the kitschiest oval frame, the background's stylized meadow *cum* lawn blend seamlessly into a cloudless sky, ablaze in exploding fireworks.

In the holiday cycle of the Soviet empire, bursting Roman candles mark the moment of the greatest civic *frisson* and account easily for the choice of the subject proper – Venus – the *Roman*, i.e., Imperial goddess. Her function as the deity dedicated to love points to

the appropriation of mass culture eroticism – the nude, the meadow, the fireworks – by the imperial party-state for its not so gentle or erotic

purpose.¹¹ The result is an uproariously demystifying Sots-Art allegory: a *Venus in repose* representing the Soviet imperial party-state presided over by – according to the painting's date, 1982 – the geriatric Leonid Il'ich Brezhnev.



Figure 5. Sergei Ivanov, "May Day" (1921).



Figure 6. Jeff Koons, *Steel Bunny*

The conceptualist coordinates of the painting can further be deduced from a juxtaposition with the Moscow "performansy" of the 1980s and 1990s (Fig 4); contemporary American art (Jeff Koons's stainless steel bunny, Fig. 5, or any number of others); and, of course, with Soviet revolutionary posters, specifically, those among them that promised the masses of working stiffs, as in Fig. 6, a more fulfilling erotic life under socialism.

Kibirov's poetic cycles comprising Sentiments stand out as perhaps the most comprehensive of them all-aesthetically and, rarer still, ethically, most complete. Arrayed methodically in a chronological-thematic order, they are intended to leave nothing untouched, not even the

notorious phenomenon of the Soviet outhouse: the last cycle of *Sentiments*, entitled *Toilets* [Sortiry], presents a Child Harold of bathroom experiences, terminating Kibirov's elegiac epic of late Soviet culture—very much in the manner of Dante, who takes the reader of the *Inferno* on a tour of Satan's lower bowels—in the rectum of the Soviet common place.

Openers: Cramped But Not Offended?

Before the Soviet Union burst open in the late 1980s and especially for those whose imagination soared, the country felt like a densely cramped habitat indeed, one in which people lived, if one is to trust the official Russian communal apartment mantra "cramped but not offended" [v tesnote da ne v obide]. Kibirov adopted this saying as the opening chord and a leitmotif of *Sentiments*, in the opening poem "Preface to a Cycle Common Places"—a meditation issued, it would seem, from a cranial model of the Soviet communal cave.

What the adage "cramped but not offended" implies if unpacked is that physical privation, when it is apportioned equally among all, spells merely a physical discomfort and is tolerable. But if the hardship of living in cramped quarters (a metonymy of poverty) is not distributed fairly—that is, if it is an unjust hardship, in light of the allegedly deep-seated Russian tradition of primitive egalitarianism (Freidin)—then such privation deals a deep wound to one's soul and may indeed be fatal.¹⁸ Applied to the Soviet context, where egalitarianism (practiced proudly in the wake of the revolution) was officially abandoned among the higher state and party ranks in the early 1930s, the oft-repeated "cramped but not offended" becomes a glaring example of what Marx called false consciousness, or Freud, mental repression of an obvious, lived fact: extreme stratification and proliferation of privilege. After all, in the stratified Soviet Union, privation was not apportioned equally and those that were cramped had every reason to feel morally offended. The energy of what has been in this manner repressed is seething barely below the surface in the sign-song trochees of the poem, outfitted with the predominantly masculine, thumping, doggerel rhyme-illusion enough of a political indoctrination drill in Soviet Army:

В тесноте, да не в обиде.
В простоте, да в Госкомсбыте
В честоте, да в паразитах
(паразитам — никогда!),¹⁹
В чесноке, да в замполитах
(замполитам — навсегда).
Не в обиде, не беда

Cramped, and not offended.
In simplicity, and in State Communal Retail
In honesty, and in parasites
(in support of the parasites - never!),
In garlic, and in political instructors
(for political instructors - always!).
We ain't offended; it's just fine.

Льется синяя вода
Жжется красная звезда
Это — общие места,

Blue waters are flowing
Red Star burns, glowing.

¹⁸ A more complete version of the saying goes as follows: "People can live in tight quarters [if they have justice], but if offended [by injustice], they die" ["V tesnote liudi zhivut; v obide-umiraiut"]. Dal's dictionary cites a similar saying: "It is not tight quarters that kill; it is evil" ["Ne tesnota gubit, a likhota"] (809).

¹⁹ The line comes from "The International," translated by A. Ia. Kots: "Lish' my, rabotniki vsemirnnoi / Velikoj armii truda, / Vladet' zemlei imeem pravo, / No parazity — nikogda!" *Pesni russkikh rabochikh (Biblioteka poeta. Bol'shaia seriia)*, Moscow, 1962, p. 197.

Наши общие места.

....

Мы — работники Труда!
Мы — крестьяне Земледелья!
Мы — ученые Науки!
Мы — хозяева Хозяйства!
Мы — учащиеся Школы,
Высшей школы ВПШ!

These are commonplaces
Our common places.

We are the laborers of Labor!
We are the peasants of Agriculture!
We are the scientists of Science!
We are the masters of the Economy!
We are the students of School,
The higher school of the Higher Party School!

Kibirov paints this packed, closed space, shot through with the egalitarianism of a cattle barn, as a crucible in which individual objects, thoughts, books and people themselves are impressed-as men used to be impressed into the Royal Navy-into the common place there to lose their singularity and indeterminacy and to become commonplace-valueless and indifferent. The son of a career military officer, Kibirov grew up on or in the vicinity of military bases. The "barracks socialism," as Soviet socialist history came to be defined in the years of perestroika, was therefore for Kibirov not just a metaphor but a lived space.

The entire Sentiments is redolent of the army barracks, as is the opening poem, with its army political instructors [zampolity], Red Star, and the soldier's commonplace and indifferent lust.

.....

Это — общие места,
Наши общие места

Для детей и инвалидов.
В тошноте да не в обиде.
Нет в обиде, да не в быдле,
Нет и в быdle, да не важно —
я читаю Фукидида.
Я уже прочел Майн Рида.
Слава Богу, волки сыты.
Ты-то что такой сердитый?
Ваня, Ваня, перестань.

.....

These are commonplaces,
Our common places <reserved>

For children and the disabled.
We're queasy, but not sorry.
Yes, sorry, but not like cattle,
Yes, like cattle, too, but no matter—
I am reading Thucydices.
I've already read Mayne Reid.
Thank God, the wolves are sated.
But why are you so angry, why?
Vanya, Vanya, get your hands off me.

Commonality and communality of life, where honor and humiliation, Thucydices and Mayne Reid, wolves and sheep are interchangeable-ultimately evolves into a tautology very much in the manner of Brezhnev's ill-famed aphorism: "Economy must be economical." And this gem of the senile heir to Stalin functions here as a kind of a counterpoint to "cramped but not offended." It is as if the tautological construction of the maxim is infectious, and it reproduces itself like a parasite-a tapeworm in a soldier's stomach:

Спит в желудке аскарида.
Наша молодежь юна!
Наша юность молодежна!
Атеизм у нас безбожен!

The tape worm is asleep in the gut.
Our young are youthful!
Our youth is young!
Our atheism is godless!

И страна у нас странна!

И народ у нас народен!
Иноходец — инороден!
И печать у нас печатна!
Партия у нас партийна!
Лженаука — лженаучна!
Дети — детские у нас!
Родина у нас родная!..

Экономика у нас
экономная, Ванюша!..

And our country is strange country!

And our people are a people!
Our minorities are minor!
Our press goes to press!
Our party is party-minded!
Our quasi-science is quasi-scientific!
Our children are child-like!
Our motherland is motherland!..
<...>
Our economy, mind you,
Vaniusha, is economical!...

This is the satirical crescendo of the poem, where the poet's voice breaks, shifting into the elegiac and lyrical register. The poet, as it were, disclosed his conceit: the outlandish tautologies that are strung like so many beads are traced to their Brezhnev "archetype," a veritable credo of the Soviet religion of sameness. Which brings us back to Disneyland and its Soviet Other.

Kitsch, Naive and Sentimental

As embodiments of major twentieth-century mythologies, Disneyland and the Soviet Union have been able to realize, perhaps most effectively, modernity's popular utopian impulse. Both originated in and have been sustained by the popular desire to live in a perfect, fairy-tale world-in part, born out of childhood memories, in part, of the magic and comforts of organized religion, in part, modern social utopias. The technologies of this century promised to bring all of this to life, if not for all of the people all of the time, then for most at one time or another. And-in the case of the Soviet Union-for all of its citizens for a very long time. In the famous Marxian idiom, both of these constructs have turned out to be economic in the final instance: the successful Disneyland has always charged for admission into its space of enchantment; the doomed Soviet Union charged only those who grew disenchanted with its magic and wished to leave.

This is not to underrate the difference between Disneyland and the Soviet Union or to make light of the Soviet Union's bloody and torturous history. Nevertheless, especially after Stalin's death, when the communist party-state gave up on mass terror and loosened some of the screws that kept society tightly aligned with the state, the comparison between the two "theme parks" should sound less far-fetched. Just consider the Soviet's penchant for spectacular military parades and organized rallies, sports olympiads, feats of outer space exploration, the gala atmosphere of party congresses, not to speak of the All-Union Exhibition of the Achievements of People's Economy-that most Potemkin of all Potemkin villages (a Disneyland prototype and another Russian first). Especially during the last decade of its existence, the more the party-state decayed, the more the Soviet aspect of the country came to resemble an old-fashioned theme park. Although extravagant in its sweep, drenched in the socialist-realist rococo style, the Soviet "theme park" was built characteristically slap-

dash, on a shoe-string budget, and in the late 1970s and 1980s, it fell victim to deferred maintenance.

As communist ideology, which had once made this "theme park" seem real, lost its legitimacy and the economy decayed, the originally naive Soviet cultural kitsch acquired a misty patina of nostalgia and sentimentality, as a once fashionable object transformed overnight into a garage-sale antique. It is this sentimentalized Soviet kitsch, the kitsch, touched by death and decay-indeed, transfigured by death into something qualitatively different-that holds the key to Kibirov's poetry. Hence the long lists of things in practically every poem in *Sentiments*, from the opening to the finals catalogue of toilets Soviet style..

Take the opening poem of the 1987 cycle, *Through Farewell Tears*. As elsewhere in Kibirov's poetry, this poem presents a meditative elaboration of a common saying, an overused popular metaphor that is no longer perceived as such. The saying here-"My business is beginning to smell of kerosene" [pakhnet delo moe kerosinom]-is an expression of apprehension by the speaker, an anticipation of a fire or a business failure (the Russian for "to burn down" [pogoret'] is a common metaphor for bankruptcy), originating, most likely, in the 1920, in the culture of petty businessmen trying to keep afloat in the ambiguous world of Soviet mixed economy, the NEP. In the expression, the kerosene redolent of an insurance scam or protection racket, occupations that employ fire bombs as a tool of the trade, associations that carry a noticeable transgressive, perhaps, even criminal, underworld connotation.

The associations that follow the first line belong wholly to the realm of private life: a kerosene stove at the dacha, the hearth of every Russian summer home; childhood summers; the artless standard cosmetics of the post-war meager existence; and other common smells of the unofficial and therefore vaguely illicit, shadowy realm in Soviet existence, with its private memories, including inevitably the memories of the family members or acquaintances who perished in the GULag (the regions of Suchan and Viliui, below).

Пахнет дело мое керосином,
Керосинкой, сторонкой родной,
Пахнет "Шипром," как бритый мужчина,
И как женщина, — "Красной Москвой"
(Той, на крышочке с кисточкой), мылом,
Банным мылом, да банным листом
Общепитской подливой, гарниром.
Пахнет булочкой там, за углом
Чуешь, чуешь, чем пахнет — Я чую,
Чую, Господи, нос не зажму —
"Беломором," Сучаном, Вилюем,
Домом отдуха в синем Крыму

There is a kerosene odor about my business,
The kerosene stove, the old familiar country,
The "Zest" aftershave smell of men,
The "Red Moscow" perfume on women
(That one, with a tussle on the box), soap,
Bath soap, the birch leaf of the sauna,
The common diner's garnish and sauce,
It smells of the bakery round the corner.
Do you sense it — the smell? Yes, I sense it,
Sense it, o Lord, I won't cover my nose —
"Belomor" cigarettes, Suchan and Vilui,
And the vacation pansion in the blue Crimea!

Rubbish Redeemed

"Kitsch," goes one of Milan Kundera's pithy pronouncements, "is the absolute denial of shit" (Kundera 248). This aphorism—with emphasis on "absolute" and "denial"—cuts to the heart of post-Stalinist Soviet culture, mostly its "straight," party-sanctioned aspect, but also its shadow (as in the "shadow economy"), oppositional cast. The first could not exist without the firewall of censorship, this ultimate defense for the practitioners of absolute denial. The other (the culture of samizdat and published meaningful winks and equivocations) tended to lean on the same structure, if to a lesser extent and from the other side. In Kibirov, this Götterdämmerung of Soviet civilization—a reliquary so fresh and yet already so distant—found its most loving, ironic, lyrical, and scrupulously meticulous poet-archeologist (even paleontologist), poet-curator, poet-undertaker, and poet-mourner. What had been buried, suppressed, denied, what had become worn from overuse and lost its luster from constant clutching and pawing—namely, all those things that remind the communist party-state of its decay (and the intelligentsia of its dependency on that party-state), all those objects disfigured by, as Osip Mandel'shtam once put it, "the teeth marks of time" ("He Who Found a Horseshoe" ["Nashedshii podkovu"]); all this junk²⁰ that activated in the guardians of the party-state and the practitioners of intelligentsia culture the instinct for denial—all of these objects became the material, the theme, the stuff of Kibirov's verse.

The archeologist digs up cast-away objects without regard for their place in the culture's hierarchy. The curator catalogues them and displays them in a museum as telling artifacts of an ancient culture. The undertaker prepares them for a proper burial. The mourner laments and performs the funeral rites over the departed culture, emancipating the living from the grip of the dead by encapsulating the dead into a mythology. This is how Kibirov practices the art of poetry in the age of post-Soviet disenchantment. In such an age, re-enchantment of poetry must begin not naively – this is not an option, as Schiller demonstrated in his essay, "On Naïve and Sentimental Poetry" two hundred years ago — but sentimentally, with the sense of an irrecoverable loss of the freshness of a naïve comprehension.. Kibirov understands that what was lost was a system, an entire culture, and its sentimental reprise must evoke not this or that object or event but the sense of the totality of the departed epoch, the way a recovered nick-knack may evoke an ancient civilization to an archeologist.

Take an example chosen practically at random from the opening poet of *Sentiments*:

Я читаю Мандельштама.
Я уже прочел программу.
Мама снова моет раму.
Пахнет хвоей пилорама.
Мертвые не имут сраму.

I am reading Mandelstam.
I have read the <party> Program.
Mother again washing the window pane.
From the sawmill, wafts the pine.
The dead know no shame.

²⁰ In a March 1996 American interview with Katya Karpovich and Filip Nikolaev, Kibirov described his evolution as a poet in the following way: even in Blok, I find the most precious—to indulge in a lofty style for a moment—those eternal truths that, as it were, grew out of the everyday life of his epoch. What I find most precious now is exactly that proverbial "rubbish" from which poetry emerges. By the way, I have always loved this poem by Akhmatova, "If only you knew from what rubbish Poetry grows, knowing no shame." At one point this was, for me, the absolute truth about poetry, but now I think that there is no such thing as "rubbish." On the contrary, the key task is to present this very "rubbish" in your poetry. The way I imagine my purpose now is to save all and sundry. The interview is available on the Internet site <http://www.math.harvard.edu/~verbit/Stihi/kibirov-interview.KOI>.

Где мне место отыскать?
Где ж отдельное занять?

Where is my own place?
Can I get a bunk of my own?

("Afterword to the book, *Common Places*")

Each line presents a verbal relic, richly suggestive to an archeologist whose mind's eye can see in a piece of junk the luminous detail of an entire culture. The piquancy of this sort of archeology resides in the fact that the extinct civilization has not had the time to fossilize; those who were born to it still walk this earth, doomed to inhabit a new cultural universe, one they will not be able to call their own. Kibirov—who is one of them, yet straining to distance himself from the lost generations—pauses over his "dig," examines his objects, dusts them off, savors their luminosity, and catalogues them lovingly, methodically, entry by entry. All the while, he is intoning under his breath a purposefully artless lamentation. Its standard-issue Russian trochaic, traditionally meant to strike a folk note, here acquires practically a disco beat — *ta-da-ta-da-ta-da-ta-da* — because of the density of accented syllables, uncharacteristic in the Russian tradition. The poem is brought still lower, to the very basement of cultural values, by the dominant, almost tautological feminine rhymes (*ama-amu-amu-ama-ama*). By the end of the stanza, all the objects are neatly lined up and arranged in pattern calculated to evoke a comprehensive mythology of—or an attitude toward—the "lost" civilization.

Line by line, what corner of the world does Kibirov's poetry conjure up?

Line 1. The fossil "Mandel'shtam" — this *déjà-lus* --brings up the cult of the Russian poet's martyrdom; philosophical lyricism; poetry of oppositional civic courage; authoritative intelligentsia erudition capable of suggesting an entire culture with a few carefully chosen references; a supreme school for poetry for the Kibirov generation; the core of the intelligentsia's self-legitimizing canon (in Russian, the internal rhyme is "Mandel'shtama"- "mama") and therefore a little stale, in other words, an artifact, not unlike

Line 2. The communist party "program," which was as much the official catechism of the age as Mandel'shtam's legacy was the oppositional one. The rhyming (in Russian "*Mandel'shtama*" - "*Programmu*" - "*ramu*" - "*pilorama*") reinforces the intended symmetry and the possibility of a perspective in which the two diametrical opposites are equivalent, from the point of view of a curator who has decided to display these two different, but characteristic historical objects side-by-side in a museum showcase, next to the contemporary

Line 3. Russian version of a Norman Rockwell visual cliché of *Gemütlichkeit* — "mother is again washing the windowpane"—which happens to function here both as homage to Lev Rubinshtein's collection, *Mother Washed the Windowpane*²¹ and as a verbal replica of a socialist-realist painting of the post-Stalin Thaw, by some Iu. Pimenov, or A. Levitin, or A.

²¹ The well-known avant-garde masterpiece by the Conceptualist fellow-poet, Lev Rubinshtein — like Kibirov, the consummate collector and cataloguer of the late Soviet everyday verbal gesture — has taken cataloguing, as a metaphor for poetry, to its extreme, presenting his poetry as a stack of 2 x 3 cards (earlier he used computer punch cards), each containing a complete "line." This particular form of presentation aside, Rubinshtein's catalogues bear a striking resemblance to Pound's *Cantos*, both in the open-endedness and in the acute ear for the poetic in the colloquial. See Rubinshtein.

Laktionov.²² All the "good life" thus evoked is identified with the "absolute denial of shit" and serves as a reminder of mortality (death being the ultimate horizon in the kitsch universe), which leads into the next line where Kibirov almost off-handedly sounds the first distinct funerary note in the mention of

Line 4. The "sawmill," redolent of the evergreen pine needles, that classic funereal attribute (burial wreaths), pointing to the key paradox for the Kibirov generation: how to be at the same time a mourner-undertaker and a deceased, an archeologist and a relic. The every-day, industrial aspect of the image-the sawmill- links this paradox to the key attribute of the late Soviet era, its over-industrialization (on which it ultimately gagged, viz., Chernobyl).

Line 5. "The dead," those who were responsible for this mess, "know no shame," Kibirov plays with the saying from The Primary Chronicle used as an exhortation to soldiers to die in battle rather than retreat and live in the shame of defeat. The reinforcement that the funerary motif receives from this saying resonates with the war novels, movies, and TV serials of the late Brezhnev years and perhaps even with Vasil Bykov's famous novel, *The Dead Feel No Pain* [Mertvym ne bol'no], the whole late Soviet ritualized invocations of the dead, both from the official and the dissident canon (the war dead and the GULag victims, like Osip Mandel'shtam). The theme is immortality, legitimation through death, and therefore its denial-the option closed to Kibirov's poet living in the utterly disenchanting Russia. As the antithesis of poetry, disenchantment adds to the poet's anxiety of influence. Hence,

Lines 6. and 7., devoted to the problem finding a "place" in the literary pantheon. The theme is conveyed in a patently colloquial idiom of Soviet-speak, born out of shortages of every convenience and creature comfort. The implied metaphor for the poet is a passenger looking for a place-a bunk, really-in a crowded train, a bunk of one's own.

By the end of the stanza, poetry has normalized: the beaded lines (each anchored around a quotidian, reprocessed object or activity), which ought to have added up to a cynical stance, begin to vibrate with the good old-fashioned elegiac lyricism. With everything said and done, that Soviet civilization was the only one its inhabitants had. Unlike their American counterparts, they could not (with few exceptions) leave their Disneyland, and they made their life in it interlarding hunting and gathering-a way of life in an economy of shortages-with vestiges of utopian expectations that prompted the creation of the communists' theme park. "That life, whatever it may have been," Kibirov said recently, "was, after all, life, and [as such] it must find its expression in an aesthetic structure and understanding" (Karpovich and Nikolaev).

Parody and Sentimentality

In the history of modern Russia, the perestroika period was not the first time that contemporaries felt like discarding (and indeed did discard) their recent past. The standard

²² Iu. I. Pimenov, "Ordinary Morning" ["Obyknovennoe utro"] (1957); A. P. Levitan, "Warm Day" ["Teplyi den"] (1957). See Gassner.

operating procedure was developed early in the century: one proceeded from a serious questioning of underlying cultural values, to parody, to destruction, and finally to an ambiguously sentimental and parodic aesthetization of the discarded past. Leon Trotsky was wrong when he said that the nightingale of poetry sings only after the cannons of the war and revolution have quieted down. In Russia, at least, the apocalyptic nihilism had preceded history's heavy artillery, serving as the overture and an accompaniment to the field guns as the battle commenced, and kept on going after the battle's end. Part of this radical history, Russia's modernist and avant-garde nightingales have always trodden a fine line between high pathos and rank parody. For many years, *The Satyricon*, a popular Russian pre-revolutionary magazine served as an outlet for the humor of many great Russian poets who tried to respect this fine boundary. Often enough, though, the line was erased altogether, as in Alexander Blok's play *The Little Puppet Theater* [Balaganchik], which cruelly lampooned the most sacred doctrines and values of Russian symbolists, including Blok himself.

The key principle of Mandel'shtam's poetry was based on his belief in the arrival of the second cycle of history, the Revolution of Time (with the *revolution* understood in the literal sense — as a full turn of the wheel of history that, for Mandelstam, commenced with the Mediterranean antiquity). The spatialization of history, so typical of the twentieth-century sensibility (Frank) and so often compared to a palimpsest, has evolved in the late Soviet period into the communal apartment trope, with all the voices — be it books, radio or TV broadcasts — bouncing off the walls of a darkly-lit communal hallway. This is a version of the famous Bakhtinian heteroglossia but one that has lost its dialogical spine. Hence Kibirov's reliance on the Acmeist attention to detail à la Mandelstam, the luminous metonymies, and the ever-present multiple allusions—they provide him with a multiplicity of voices. At the same time -and this is Kibirov's postmodernism-these voices do not add up to what for Mandel'shtam was an ever-present "dream of a world culture" [mechta o mirovoi kul'ture], but a cacophony evocative of the Soviet communal world, voices trapped in a failed utopia..

If the poets of the post-symbolist generation had a weakness for large-scale historical paradigms, whether utopian communism as in the case of the Futurists, or a super-charged, meaningful cultural space-time freed of all economic considerations as in the case of the Acmeists, then the poets of Kibirov's generation have a soft spot for modern social theory. Kibirov stakes the survival of poetry on the long-delayed emergence of a bourgeois culture in Russia. His latest book of poetry, *Periphrasis*, is a virtual paean to the embourgeoisement of Russian culture or, rather, given further delays in the burgeoning of a successful Russian middle class, a prayer that the ultimate embourgeoisement may come true in the foreseeable future. But this theme, too, was evident in *Sentiments*, where Kibirov both offered a critique of the anti-bourgeois bent of the Russian intelligentsia tradition and declared himself (perhaps, with a slight nod in the direction of Pushkin's ironic "I am a burger" ["ia meshchanin"]), a bourgeois in training. This is from his epistle to his wife [Poslanie Lenke]:

Lenochka, let us be burgers! I understand, it is hard,
it is practically impossible. But we must persevere.
Let us not succumb... Having wrung the necks of the canaries,
a developed romanticism has been reigning *chez nous*, it seems, for eternity.
We've got eagles, stormy petrels galore, or, at best, all are seagulls.

Let you and I be lovey-doveys on a brooch. Amidst angry cries,
 Let us coo; surrounded, as we are, by the baying of hungry wolves,
 Let us purr like two kittens in a warm and cuddly sewing basket.
 No, this is not an attempt to *épater*--just my wish to survive.

Леночка, будем мещанами! Я понимаю, что трудно
 Что невозможно практически это. Но надо стараться.
 Не поддаться давай... Канарейкам свернувши головки,
 Здесь развитой романтизм воцарился, быть может, навеки.
 Соколы здесь, буревестники все, в лучшем случае – чайки.
 Будем с тобой голубками с виньетки. Средь клекота злого
 Будем с тобой ворковать, средь голодного волчьего воя
 Будем мурлыкать котятами в теплом лукошке.
 Не эпатаж это – просто желание выжить.

Written in the leisurely pastoral unrhymed dactylic hexameters, reminiscent of the gentry pastorals produced in imitation of imitating Virgil's eclogues (or Derzhavin's "Life at Zvanka" ["Zhizn' zvenskaia"]),²³ this poem is an indictment of the history of the Russian intelligentsia's bourgeois-bashing. The verses end on a hope that some day the poet's wife would whisper to him that she had been "knocked up."

"The Twelve Sonnets to Sasha Zapoeva" (the poet's baby daughter), the centerpiece of *Periphrasis* (1997), suggest that, if not the country as a whole, one individual poet can lay a claim to success — just by having a baby daughter.

It all commenced that January night!
 I, who from childhood pined for the Absolute
 (no, not the kind I bought
 for foreign currency in Stockholm

and which today glitters aggressively in
 every
 suburban railroad kiosk),
 Still half-awake, all of a sudden I understood
 that there it was, that I have found

this something impervious to the sneer of
 relativism, to passionate incursions of the
 crazed Dionysian muses!

Only later, while sterilizing bottles and
 pacifiers nipples to the tunes of Europe Plus,

И с той январской ночи началось!
 С младых ногтей лакавший А бсолют
 (нен не того, который за валюту
 мне покупать в Стокгольме довелось,

который ныне у платформы Лось
 в любом ларьке поблескивает люто),
 я, полусонный, поняв с ту минуту.
 Что вот оно, что все-таки нашлось

Хоть что-то неподвластное ухмылкам
 Релятивизма, ни наскокам лылким
 Дионисийских оголтелых муз!

Потом уж, кипятя твои ббутылки
 И соски под напев «Европы-плюс»,
 Я поня, что еще сильней боюсь.

²³ On Derzhavin and Kibirov, see Platt 171-82.

I realized how I feared for your safety

Russian postmodern kitsch, Kibirov might say, paraphrasing Kundera's famous dictum, is the acceptance of dirty diapers. Those who read *War and Peace* to the end will recall the scene when Natasha shows Pierre incontrovertible proof of their son's recovery from an intestinal indisposition. Tolstoy wished us to believe that the high drama of history and world politics paled before a baby's healthy shit. Almost a century and a half later, with a mountain of sacrifices to the god of world history between them, Kibirov echoes Tolstoy, as he is walking away from the exit gate of Soviet civilization and onto the new Manezh Square, a tribute to the post-Soviet kitsch.



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ⁱ Collection of A. Sidorov. From: Ekaterina Andreeva, *Sots Art: Soviet Artists of the 1970s and 1980s* (Craftsman House, 1995).

ⁱⁱ Vladislavlev's "Venus" may also be seen as a parody of the famous 1921 poster by Sergei Ivanov, "!-oe Maia. Da zdravstvuet prazdnik trudiashchikhsia vsekhn stran" (reproduced in Victoria E. Bonnell, *Iconography of Power: Soviet Political Posters under Lenin and Stalin* (University of California Press: Berkeley, 1996), Fig. 2.8.