

**THE FUNCTION OF RUSSIAN OBSCENE LANGUAGE
IN LATE SOVIET AND POST-SOVIET PROSE**

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Abstract

This thesis is the first book-length study to explore the function of Russian obscene language (*mat*) in late Soviet and post-Soviet prose published between the late 1970s and the late 1990s. This period was characterised by radical socio-ideological transformations that also found expression in major shifts of established literary and linguistic norms. The latter were particularly strongly reflected in the fact that obscene language, which was banned from official Soviet discourse, gradually found its way into literary texts, thereby changing the notion of literary language and literature. The thesis breaks new ground by employing obscene language as a prism through which to demonstrate how its emergence in literature reflected and contributed to the shifts of established literary norms and boundaries. A second aim of the thesis is to trace the diachronic development of Russian literary *mat*. Primary sources include novels by authors pioneering the use of *mat* in fiction in the late 1970s, as well as texts by writers associated with ‘alternative prose’ and postmodernism.

Applying a methodological framework that is based on an approach combining Bakhtinian dialogism with cultural narratology, the study demonstrates what the use of *mat* means and accomplishes in a given literary context. The methodological framework offers a systematic approach that does justice to the dynamic relationship between text and context, allowing for an analysis of the role of obscene language on all narrative levels while also taking the socio-historical context into account. The thesis offers not only new ways of interpreting the novels selected, it also provides new insight into the role of verbal obscenity in the process of ‘norm negotiation’ that has shaped and transformed Russian literary culture since the late 1970s. By accentuating the dialogic nature of obscene language, this study reveals that *mat* is a defining element of Russian (literary) culture, with implications for all facets of Russian identity.

Declaration

No portion of the work referred to in this thesis has been submitted in support of an application for another degree or qualification of this or any other university or other institute of learning. It is all my own work, unless referenced to the contrary in the text.

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To my husband, Vladimir Kovalev.

A note on transliteration and translation

The thesis follows the Library of Congress system for transliterating Russian words and names. Diacritical marks have been removed in order to make the text more reader-friendly. I follow this system throughout, with a few exceptions: (1) I have kept conventional English spellings of Russian names such as ‘Tolstoy’ and ‘Dostoevsky’. (2) The authors and titles of books that have been transliterated in a way that is inconsistent with the Library of Congress system are cited as they are printed. (3) Direct quotations from other sources retain the transliteration of those sources.

Russian names and terms are italicised, with the exception of words that have become common in English such as ‘perestroika’. I have also italicised the word *mat*, which is the Russian term for obscene language, throughout the thesis.

It is also important to mention that the thesis gives preference to Russian names of titles and quotations, with English translations provided in parentheses and/or footnotes. This means Russian quotes appear in the English text. This decision was motivated by the subject matter dealt with in this thesis, which is a study of the literary functions of a Russian linguistic phenomenon. It is therefore of the utmost importance to provide the original Russian examples in the text rather than their English translations, which would fail to render the precise meaning and function of the obscene word in question. The effect of obscene language also often gets lost in translation.

I have relied on published translations wherever possible. However, not all texts under scrutiny here have been translated into English. For example, Vladimir Sorokin’s *Goluboe salo* (*Blue Lard*) is not available in English translation yet. More importantly, the published translations from which I quote in the thesis are often incomplete and imprecise, sometimes with entire chapters missing, as is the case with the published translation of Eduard Limonov’s *Eto ia — Edichka* (*It’s me, Eddie*). In cases where the meaning of an obscene word was lost in translation or not rendered at all, I had to rely on my own translation skills. I have indicated where translations are my own.

Introduction

This thesis is about Russian obscene language, also referred to as *mat*, and its functions in late Soviet and post-Soviet prose. The purpose of the Introduction is to explain why this topic is important and to set out the research objective. I will first describe the significance of this study before discussing how it contributes to the research done in the field by providing an overview of the existing literature on Russian *mat*. I will then present the research questions I intend to address in order to meet the research objective and briefly introduce the methodology that I use. This section also explains the choice of primary sources selected to answer the research questions posed. The fourth and final section outlines the structure of the thesis.

Justification and significance of the research

As is evident from its title, this thesis is positioned at the intersection of linguistic culture and literature. Literary texts have at all times constituted important sites for the negotiation and maintenance of language norms, and this is nowhere truer than in Russian literature. As Helmut Jachnow (1986) and Ingunn Lunde (2008) show, Russian writers have always had considerable influence on discussions and debates on language issues, from Aleksandr Pushkin, the ‘father’ of the Russian literary language as it is known today, to Viktor Erofeev, a well-known contemporary writer and literary critic. Writers’ judgements and opinions have thus had a significant impact on setting aesthetic standards and preserving ideological conformity, thereby contributing to the immense significance ascribed to the written word in Russian culture and the role of the writer.¹ The strong correlation between language and literature is also reflected in the fact that ‘standard Russian’, i.e., the variety of the Russian language that is perceived as the norm to be adhered to in public discourse and that enjoys the highest prestige, is traditionally referred to as *literaturnyi iazyk* (‘literary language’).² For many years, ‘literary Russian’ was, in fact, synonymous

¹ The role of the writer in society has been discussed widely. John and Carol Garrard (1990) provide an in-depth analysis of the status of the official writer in Soviet Russia. Pamela Davidson (2003) explores the prophetic status of Russian writers. For an excellent discussion of the role of the writer in Eastern Europe after communism, see Andrew Wachtel (2006).

² The English translation ‘literary language’ does not capture all the connotations and meanings of the Russian *literaturnyi iazyk*. ‘Literary language’ is, in fact, slightly misleading, as the Russian *literaturnyi iazyk* also refers to the variety used in school instruction, the printed mass media, academia and other official spheres (Vinogradov 1978: 288). *Literaturnyi iazyk* is thus closer to what we understand as standard variety. As Sigrid Freunek points out, the term *standartnyi iazyk*

with the term *iazyk literatury* ('the language of literature'), with the language used in the Russian classics serving as the variety to be adhered to in literary texts. In the language debates of the early 1930s, writer Maxim Gorky was one of the strongest advocates of the language of the Russian classics at the expense of dialects, vulgarisms and other non-standard varieties, arguing for the exclusion of these forms of speech from public discourse because they would reflect 'insufficient ideological literacy' (1953: online, my translation). Russian *mat*, without doubt the lowest and least prestigious linguistic variety of the Russian language, became one of the main targets of Soviet censors, partly because of its direct reference to sexuality and bodily matters, and partly because of its association with Soviet counter-cultures such as the Gulag subculture and hooliganism, as well as with Western 'bourgeois culture'. The incompatibility of *mat* with *literaturnyi iazyk* is also reflected in the fact that *mat* words were typically referred to as *nepechatnye slova*, i.e., 'unprintable words'.³

The ideological significance of the standard variety stood in stark contrast to the extremely wide distribution and popularity of Russian *mat*. A Soviet joke said that 'each Soviet citizen [knew] three languages — his native tongue, Russian and *mat*' (quoted in Timroth 1983: 96). There were not only jokes and anecdotes about verbal obscenity, but also jokes including obscene words, as well as bawdy folklore tales and bawdy songs (*chastushki*). Naturally, these jokes belonged to the private sphere of Soviet society, 'forbidden fruits' tasted in the privacy of one's home. In other words, while verbal obscenity was excluded from 'literary Russian', it was closely tied to Russian oral culture and 'lower' cultural forms such as peasant popular culture and bawdy folklore.⁴ Russian *mat* thus reflects the tension between the written and the oral, the official and the unofficial, the public and the private, the

has not established itself in Russian linguistics because *standartnyi* also means *shablonnyi* ('stereotyped, unoriginal'), and many feel this would not do justice to the significant role the written word has played in Russian society (2006: 132, note 152).

³ Mikhail Bulgakov uses the term *nepechatnye slova* in his novel *Master i Margarita* (1966–7, *The Master and Margarita*). '[...] Ах ты!... — шофер опять вклеил непечатные слова, — а червонца нету. Вчера в этом Варьете (непечатные слова) какая-то гадюка — фокусник сеанс с червонцами сделал (непечатные слова)' (2005: 245). "[...] I'll..." The driver spat out more unprintable words. "And there was no tenner. There was a show on at that (unprintable) Variety yesterday evening and some (unprintable) conjurer did a turn with a lot of (unprintable) ten-roubles notes..." (2004: 214).

⁴ Verbal obscenity was, however, not part of the 'pseudo-folklore' that was promoted and disseminated by the regime during the Stalin era. For a more detailed discussion of the ideological meaning of this sort of folklore, see Frank J. Miller's *Folklore for Stalin* (1990).

high and the low, thereby touching upon all spheres of society and culture. The emergence of *mat* in literature is therefore highly significant, as it points to a redefinition and renegotiation of these boundaries, norms and dichotomies.

Instead of understanding the intrusion of *mat* into literature and literary language as a mere norm violation and hence transgressive act, I argue that it also constitutes a form of norm negotiation. More precisely, the use of *mat* in literary texts can be seen as an implicit norm negotiation (evident in a writer's choice of certain terms), which is then followed by an explicit norm negotiation in the form of critical comments by literary critics, fellow writers and readers.⁵ This thesis is the very first scholarly attempt to discuss and interpret these 'negotiations' as reflected through the functions of verbal obscenity in prose fiction published between the late 1970s and the late 1990s, a period characterised by radical linguistic, cultural and political changes and transformations.⁶ The fact that *mat* appeared in literary texts a decade before the abolition of censorship in 1991 (albeit abroad) and continues to raise tempers (and eyebrows) more than two decades after that also points to the complex and dynamic interrelation between linguistic culture and literature.

Existing research literature on Russian *mat*

Just as writers and literary critics help establish literary standards and norms, so do linguists and scholars. It does not, therefore, come as a surprise that before the abolition of censorship in the early 1990s, the academic attention devoted to verbal obscenity was rather scarce, if not to say non-existent. When, in the 18th century, Mikhail Lomonosov developed his famous hierarchy of literary styles, the most vulgar expressions and words were not even attributed to the lowest category but excluded from the system altogether.⁷ *Mat* expressions and words did not find their

⁵ For a more detailed discussion of explicit and implicit norm negotiations, as well as of the concept of norms, see Henning Andersen (2009) and Martin Paulsen (2009).

⁶ While most changes surfaced only in the perestroika years, the first cracks and normative shifts were already noticeable in the late 1970s, in particular with regard to the widening gap between the private and the public. Mikhail Stern (1980, with August Stern), for example, argues that a 'sexual revolution' started in the late 1970s, with people talking more openly about sexual and private matters. Anna Rotkirch, too, observes a widening of the gap between official ideology and private behaviour (2000: 162), an argument that has also been taken up by Alexei Yurchak (2006).

⁷ Lomonosov introduced his doctrine of three styles in literature in the middle of the 18th century. The 'high' style was to be used for tragedies, odes and elegies and included mainly Slavonicisms. The 'middle' style, consisting of an equal mix of Russian and Slavonic words, was to be used for drama, correspondence and satire. The 'low' style was reserved for comedies, epigrams and everyday speech, giving preference to Russian words. In accordance with this theory, Lomonosov

way into dictionaries either. It was not until the beginning of the 20th century that linguist Baudouin de Courtenay insisted on including obscene words in the third edition of Vladimir Dal's famous *Tolkovyĭ slovar' zhivogo velikorusskogo iazyka* (*Explanatory Dictionary of the Living Great Russian Language*) in order to make it more representative of the 'living' Russian language.⁸ The success of his dictionary was, however, short-lived. As a result of Bolshevik language policy, Dal's dictionary was soon replaced with Dmitrii Ushakov's *Tolkovyĭ slovar' russkogo iazyka*, 'a dictionary of the "real" Russian language, a dictionary of words used now and by the classics, from Pushkin to Gorky' (Gorham 2003: 104).⁹ It was not until the early 1970s that further attempts at recording obscenities were made. Alek Flegon's *Za predelami russkikh slovarei* (1973, *Beyond the Limits of Russian Dictionaries*) was a first attempt at going 'beyond the limits of Russian dictionaries', but for a long time it was only available under the counter, if at all. It was not until after the collapse of the USSR that this neglected field of Russian lexicography started to receive the attention it deserves, with the *Bol'shoi slovar' mata* (2005, *The Great Dictionary of Mat*) compiled by Russian linguist and folklorist Aleksei Plutser-Sarno being one of the most recent examples.¹⁰ Vladimir Elistratov's *Slovar' moskovskogo argo* (1994, *Dictionary of Moscow Slang*) and Valerii Mokienko's *Slovar' russkoi brannoi leksiki* (1995, *Dictionary of Russian Swearwords*) also include Russian *mat*.

English and German lexicographers, by contrast, showed far more interest in the collection of Russian *mat* than their Russian/Soviet colleagues.¹¹ The first glossaries

classified the Russian vocabulary into five groups, excluding, however, 'despicable' words, i.e., vulgar and coarse words, since they were not to be used at all (Zhivov 2009: 233).

⁸ Vladimir Dal' (1801–1872) published the first edition of his dictionary between 1863 and 1866. A second edition came out after his death, in the years 1880–3. Baudouin de Courtenay edited the third (1903–9) and fourth (1912–4) editions of the dictionary. In a page-long introduction, he explained why he considered the inclusion of obscene terms necessary, arguing that no lexicographer had the right to castrate the living language (Zorin 1996: 128–9). The fifth edition was based on the 2nd edition and had all obscene terms removed. Baudouin de Courtenay's edition has never been reprinted. While this first attempt at recording obscene language was noteworthy, we must bear in mind that the dictionary only scratched the surface of the wealth of words deemed unsuitable for print.

⁹ The dictionary comprises four volumes and was published between 1935 and 1940 in the USSR.

¹⁰ The dictionary is planned to encompass 12 volumes in total. The first two volumes have already been published. Considering the latest bans of obscene language imposed by the authorities in April 2013, it seems unlikely that we will see the remaining ten volumes in print. These recent developments are discussed in more detail in Chapter 5 and the Conclusion.

¹¹ Although Russian obscenities were deemed unsuitable for print, the publication of obscene terminologies of other languages, in particular of the English language, was not affected by this

of indecent Russian words collected outside Russia go back to the early 20th century, with Edgar Spinkler's *Großrussische erotische Volksdichtung* (1913, *Russian Erotic Folklore*) being one of the earliest compilations. In particular, in the 1960s — at the height of the Cold War — a number of under-the-counter glossaries and dictionaries on this delicate topic appeared. Examples are Lawrence Carpenter's *A Dictionary of Russian Taboo Words and Expressions* (1963) and David A. Drummond and Gareth Perkins's *A Short Dictionary of Russian Obscenities* (1971). Meyer Galler and Harlan E. Marquess included Russian *mat* in their glossary of *Soviet Prison Camp Speech* (1972) since obscenities were a distinctive feature of Gulag prison culture.

A similar picture can be drawn with regard to the linguistic research on Russian verbal obscenity. The earliest and most fruitful attempts at analysing Russian *mat* were undertaken by linguists affiliated with Western academia. German Slavist Wilhelm von Timroth (1983) provided one of the first comprehensive studies devoted to the socio-linguistic aspects of Russian taboo varieties such as argot, jargon, slang and *mat*. Another significant contribution to this field is Ilse Ermen's monograph on Russian verbal obscenity (1993a), which offers valuable insights into the etymology, word formation, semantics, functionality and distribution of *mat*. Further important and often-quoted English-language sources include Victor Raskin's *On Some Peculiarities of Russian Lexicon* (1978), Boris Razvratnikov's *Elementary Russian Obscenity* (1979), Charles A. Kauffman's *A Survey of Russian Obscenities and Invective Usage* (1981) and Felix Dreizin and Tom Priestly's *A Systematic Approach to Russian Obscene Language* (1982).

Boris Uspenskii was the first to analyse *mat* from a diachronic perspective (1981), tracing *mat* back to its pagan origins, but his essay also had to be published abroad. It was only after perestroika that Russian researchers developed a stronger interest in this subject since they were now able to publish on this topic in their home country. Valerii Mokienko, for example, has published widely on Russian verbal obscenity, including articles and lexicographical compilations (1994, 1995). Another name that deserves to be mentioned is Iurii Levin, a Russian linguist, who provides a semantic and pragmatic analysis of *mat* expressions, including a classification according to

rule. English profanities were thus included in English-Russian dictionaries, but not in Russian-English dictionaries (Flegon 1973: 10). This shows that, like their Western colleagues, Soviet publishers and lexicographers were well aware of the power of obscene vocabulary and the importance of its knowledge.

their functions in speech acts (1998). The subject of verbal obscenity has also been discussed with regard to humour and folklore (Draitser 1999: 36–42; Belousov 1996; Raskin 1981), gender (Wurm 2002; Doleschal and Schmid 2001; Ermen 1993b), sexuality (Kon 1995), pornography (Borenstein 2008: 58–9) and male identity (Mikhailin 2004). Steve Smith (1998) provides an in-depth analysis of the social meaning of (obscene) swearing in late Imperial and early Soviet Russia. Daniel Weiss explores the legal consequences a public ban on the use of *mat* would entail (2008). Birgit Beumers and Mark Lipovetsky (2009) briefly discuss *mat* in the context of new Russian drama, highlighting its performative functions.

The number of scholarly publications on *mat* has increased significantly since the collapse of the Communist regime, but as is so often the case, here, too, quantity does not equate to quality. As gender scholar Barbara Wurm remarks, when it comes to scholarly discussions of Russian verbal obscenity, vague assumptions, stereotypical generalisations and emotional judgments are often presented as hard-core facts (2002: 260). Articles published on *mat* are often quite polemic in nature, giving rise to rather emotional and subjective conclusions. Russian linguist Aleksandr Dulichenko, for example, sees a strong correlation between the increase in ‘shameful words’, as he dubs *mat* words, and the alleged cultural and moral decline in post-Soviet Russia, blaming the former for the emergence of the latter (1994: 221). Russian writer Viktor Erofeev has gone the opposite direction by declaring *mat* to be unique (2003). The doubtful quality of publications on verbal obscenity was also pointed out by Andrei Zorin, who stated that any analysis of Russian *mat* is in fact a highly biased judgement of the very same, either for or against the use of *mat* (1996: 122).¹²

It is also Zorin who makes one of the first attempts to discuss *mat* in the context of literature, in particular with regard to the censorship of verbal obscenity. Zorin identifies the main functions of *mat* in contemporary literature as mimetic, expressive and conceptualist (1996: 132–3).¹³ While his article is a first step in the

¹² Curiously, Zorin himself fell into the very trap he had identified by concluding his article with a rather gloomy outlook on the future of *mat*, predicting its gradual disappearance from the streets and its conversion into an artificial element of style mainly employed by writers (1996: 139).

¹³ According to Zorin, the conceptualist function adds stylistic emphasis to a text (1996: 133). It is, however, unclear how the conceptualist function differs from the expressive one. Clearly, Zorin mainly seems to have had conceptualist poetry in mind when drawing up his list of functions. This

discussion of *mat* as a language of literature, he does not provide any explanations for this seemingly random determination of functions. He also only considers the textual level and does not take the socio-historical context into account. The only other scholar who has attempted a discussion of *mat* with regard to its functions in literary texts is Ann Komaromi (2002). In contrast to Zorin, Komaromi is well aware of the role of the socio-historical context, a point she makes by illustrating how writers in the post-Stalin era used *mat* as a reaction against official culture. Yet since her analysis only discusses how *mat* was employed to revitalise the Russian language of literature, it is far from being comprehensive. Moreover, Komaromi focuses exclusively on a very distinctive period of time, the late 1970s, with texts by émigré and *samizdat* writers Iuz Aleshkovskii, Venedikt Erofeev and Eduard Limonov serving as the only examples. It is also curious to note that Komaromi chooses these texts to illustrate how Russian *mat* entered mainstream literature. All the texts analysed in her article were published abroad and can thus not be considered ‘mainstream’, though it is not quite clear what exactly Komaromi understands by ‘mainstream’ literature.

While Komaromi attempts to show how *mat* became part of mainstream literature, Russian researchers have attempted to demonstrate the marginal position of *mat* in Russian literature. In the early 1990s, for example, the Moscow-based publishing house Ladomir started releasing a whole series on obscenities, pornography and erotic literature. The series includes hardly any articles devoted to the phenomenon of verbal obscenity in contemporary prose, with most articles examining material of the 18th and 19th centuries.¹⁴ It is also quite revealing that the series is published under the name *Russkaia potaennaia literatura* (*Russian Secret Literature*), thus immediately dismissing all the phenomena discussed therein as marginalised and, to some extent, demonised. A particularly curious choice of title is *Anti-mir russkoi kul'tury* (1996, *The Anti-World of Russian Culture*), which implies

is also reflected in the examples he chooses to illustrate the three functions, which are all taken from works by sots-art poet Timur Kibirov.

¹⁴ The series has released 34 volumes, the majority of which deal with aspects related to erotic folklore (for example, *Russkii eroticheskii fol'klor* and *Seks i erotika v russkoi traditsionnoi kul'ture* by Andrei Toporkov) and erotic poetry (for example, Andrei Ranchin and Nikita Sapov's *Stikhi ne dlia dam: russkaia netsenzurnaia poeziia vtoroi poloviny XIX veka*). The only volumes that include articles on *mat* are *Anti-mir russkoi kul'tury* (Bogomolov 1996), *Zlaia laia maternaia* (Zhel'vis 2005) and *Pole brani* (Zhel'vis 1997). The latter explores the socio-linguistic aspects of *mat*.

that (verbal) obscenity is not part of Russian culture. While *mat* was excluded from official culture until the collapse of the Soviet Union, it was, however, not excluded from culture per se. The series also illustrates that the lack of scholarly attention devoted to *mat* particularly affects contemporary fiction, which also holds true for the texts analysed in this thesis. As will be shown later on, secondary literature on the novels selected does not discuss the use of *mat* at all or mentions it in passing.

In short, despite the increasing number of serious and not so serious publications on *mat*, this significant linguistic phenomenon of Russian culture has never before been examined thoroughly with regard to its function in literature, a surprising fact when considering the significant role literature played in Soviet Russia and has continued to play since 1991. As the literature review on Russian *mat* has shown, apart from Komaromi and Zorin, no noteworthy attempts have been made to examine the functions of Russian *mat* in the context of literature, in particular with regard to the late and post-Soviet periods. In an attempt to fill this large gap, this PhD thesis provides a comprehensive and interdisciplinary analysis of Russian *mat* as a narrative element in prose texts written and published between the late 1970s and late 1990s, taking both texts and socio-historical contexts into close consideration. By analysing the function of obscene language in the literary discourses of the novels selected and studying critical reactions, I hope to show how the use of *mat* in these texts reflects, and contributed to, the radical literary and linguistic changes characterising this period. I also attempt to re-evaluate the position of these novels on the late Soviet and post-Soviet literary landscapes and to show to what extent *mat* has evolved from an ‘unprintable’ to a ‘printable’ language of literature.

Research questions and methodology

To meet the above objective, the research is guided by the following questions:

- (1) Since Russian *mat* refers to sexuality and bodily matters, it is reasonable to assume that verbal obscenity has occurred in literary discourses on sexuality and bodily matters. My first question therefore asks what role *mat* has played in literary discourses on sexuality and bodily matters.

- (2) In Soviet Russia, verbal obscenity was not only excluded from official discourse for its association with sexuality and bodily matters, but also for its association with unofficial cultures. Its strong anti-official stance gives rise to the assumption that dissident writers employed obscene language as a linguistic weapon to fight the regime. My second research question asks in what way and to what effect *mat* played a role as an expression of political protest in unofficial writing. It also addresses the function of *mat* as an element of protest after 1991.
- (3) While verbal obscenity was excluded from Soviet official culture, it has always been a feature of 'lower' cultural forms such as folklore and bawdy humour. Following the abolition of censorship in the early 1990s, *mat* entered the literary realm in post-Soviet Russia. The third research question explores the correlation between *mat* and post-Soviet literature. More specifically, the question asks in what way the rhetoric of the 'lower bodily stratum', formerly banned from the sphere of literature, challenged and changed the notion of literature as 'high art' after the collapse of the Communist regime.
- (4) The abolition of censorship led to a change of the function and nature of literature. Since literature has always been an important site of norm negotiation, the question arises as to what post-Soviet literature tells us about the general status of verbal obscenity in post-Soviet Russia, in particular when compared to its status in Soviet Russia.
- (5) The fifth research question addresses the diachronic development of *mat*, asking how the function of verbal obscenity has developed and changed over the course of time. It also asks how *mat* reflects the interrelation between émigré, Soviet and post-Soviet literary cultures.

By answering the five research questions posed, I attempt to show what the use of *mat* means and what it accomplishes in a given literary context, as well as to examine its diachronic development. As was pointed out earlier, the research takes as its point of departure the notion that the intrusion of verbal obscenity into the domain of literature constitutes a form of norm negotiation, rather than a mere norm violation or form of transgression, since it is a process of action (writers breach aesthetic and ideological norms), followed by a reaction (critical readers comment

upon these changes), which ultimately leads to a normative shift (verbal obscenity enters the territory of literature). This process of norm negotiation takes the form of a dialogue, an observation that holds true for literature in general since it has been identified as a form of communication between a sender and a recipient.¹⁵ Moreover, verbal obscenity itself is highly dialogical in nature, with its main function being the establishment and maintenance of contact between speakers (Zhelvis 1997: 155). Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of dialogism (1981, 1986), which is based on the notion that all utterances are embedded in a chain of speech communication and a socio-ideological context, serves as a useful theoretical tool to discuss this process of norm negotiation. In order to translate the notion of Bakhtinian dialogism into a useful and suitable tool of analysis, it will be combined with cultural narratology (the methodological framework will be described at length in Chapter 3), thereby allowing for an analysis of the role of *mat* on the various narrative levels while also taking the dialogic and dynamic relationship between text and context into account.

In order to answer the research questions posed, I will analyse both primary and secondary sources. Primary sources include texts by writers pioneering the use of *mat* in fiction (Eduard Limonov's *Eto ia — Edichka* and Iuz Aleshkovskii's *Ruka* and *Kenguru*), as well as texts by writers associated with 'alternative prose' (Viktor Erofeev's *Russkaia krasavitsa*) and postmodernism (Vladimir Sorokin's *Goluboe salo*). For reasons of comparability, the selection of texts is limited to prose fiction. I chose these five texts for various reasons. Firstly, verbal obscenity is central to the poetics of all these texts, which is not necessarily reflected in the number of *mat* words encountered therein. A close reading will show that *mat* is a key feature of each novel, supporting and reflecting the main themes. Secondly, all these writers have a strong reputation for using *mat* in their writing and have repeatedly commented on how and why they use obscene language. This will provide valuable insights into the motivations behind their linguistic choices. Thirdly, all these texts have, to a lesser or greater extent, been the subject of critical readings, which will enable me to gauge these texts' impact on the literary landscapes in late Soviet and post-Soviet Russia. Fourthly, since the texts chosen were produced and received in different socio-historical contexts, I will be able to analyse the diachronic

¹⁵ The idea of literature as a form of communication was developed by linguists affiliated with the Prague School. The most influential models are those by Karl Bühler (1934) and Roman Jakobson (1960).

development of *mat* from its first emergence in émigré literature to its role in post-Soviet literature, tracing this linguistic phenomenon across one of the most dramatic periods of change in Russian culture.

In this regard, it is necessary to point out that the term ‘late Soviet prose’ is understood in a temporal meaning, as this study includes texts by émigré writers. Both Limonov and Aleshkovskii had to publish their novels outside Soviet Russia. These authors’ texts were included not only because they were the first to contain obscene language, but also because of the way they challenged and changed the concepts of ‘literary language’ and ‘language of literature’. Besides, these writers’ novels had an impact that clearly exceeded the context of émigré writing. This is truer for Limonov than for Aleshkovskii, whose work is less known in the West. In Russia, however, Aleshkovskii’s name is, to this day, inextricably linked to Russian *mat*. Moreover, these novels played a significant role in the renegotiation of the Russian literary canon after the collapse of communism. We must also not forget that Viktor Erofeev and Vladimir Sorokin also started out as ‘underground’ writers, publishing in émigré and *samizdat* journals abroad before they distanced themselves from the émigré community (in particular Erofeev). The novels by Erofeev and Sorokin were chosen to shed light on how the drastic changes brought about by perestroika influenced the function of verbal obscenity in post-Soviet literature. Sorokin’s novel was also the subject of the first obscenity trial in post-Soviet Russia.

Secondary sources include, but are not limited to, all forms of literary criticism published as a response to the selected texts, such as literary reviews in newspapers and journals, interviews with the writers in question, letters to the publishers and scholarly articles. The extent to which the individual texts have been discussed, as well as the point in time at which critical comments were made (immediate reaction or delayed reaction), gives valuable insight into the impact of Russian *mat* as a norm negotiator.

Structure of the thesis

The structure of the thesis is informed by the research questions posed and the texts selected. The first chapter provides background information on the nature of obscene language in general and on the peculiarities of Russian obscene language in particular, including an attempt at defining *mat* for the purpose of this thesis. The

main focus of this chapter is to discuss the complex role of *mat* in Soviet culture. In doing so, the chapter not only examines how *mat* was perceived in Soviet society, but it also discusses its performative functions, thereby allowing conclusions to be drawn about its role as an indicator of class, gender and identity.

Moving to literature itself, the second chapter begins with a brief general discussion of the role of obscene language in literary texts, drawing particular attention to the highly complex correlation between obscene language, (literary) obscenity and (literary) pornography, which is particularly relevant for Russian verbal obscenity as the linguistic representation of sexuality and bodily matters. This section is followed by an outline of the literary history of *mat* up to the late Soviet period, which will show that *mat* has always been an integral part of Russian literature.

The third chapter introduces the concept of Bakhtinian dialogism as a theoretical tool with which to analyse the function of *mat* and outlines the methodological framework that will be applied to the texts selected. This chapter explains how Bakhtinian dialogism can function as a lens through which to understand the function of *mat* in the five prose texts and its correlation with the field of cultural narratology.

The methodological approach is then put to the test in the fourth chapter, which is devoted to Eduard Limonov's *Eto ia — Edichka*. Since the novel is the very first to discuss sexuality and bodily matters in a (as some have found) shockingly frank manner, the chapter explores the role Russian *mat* plays in this sexually explicit discourse, in particular with regard to male sexuality. In view of the fact that the novel was published in the context of émigré writing, I will show how Limonov negotiates the issues of identity construction and re-formation through the use of verbal obscenity.

Like Limonov, Iuz Aleshkovskii is associated with émigré writing. Yet in contrast to Limonov, Aleshkovskii is well known for his strong dissident views. Based on his novels *Ruka* and *Kenguru*, the fifth chapter analyses the various mechanisms Aleshkovskii employs to use *mat* as an element of political protest. The chapter shows how power relations are subverted and constituted through obscene language

and how the use of *mat* strengthens, rather than challenges, the ideological coherence of the official system. The chapter also explores the question of how the changes brought about by the collapse of the Soviet Union have affected the function of *mat* as an element of political protest since 1991.

Mikhail Gorbachev's perestroika not only heralded the beginning of a new political era but also resulted in drastic linguistic and cultural transformations. Former 'low varieties of speech' started to emerge and mingle with 'high forms' of art, thereby bringing about a new understanding of the concept and function of (popular) literature and literary language. Taking Viktor Erofeev's novel *Russkaia krasavitsa* as a case in point, the sixth chapter explores the question of how these normative shifts are negotiated through *mat* as a language of literature, in particular with regard to popular fiction. The chapter also sheds light on how *mat* was perceived in an era characterised by freedom of speech, discussing to what extent the newly acquired freedom is reflected in the way *mat* is used in the novel.

The seventh chapter is devoted to a novel that has also enjoyed popularity with readers, not least because of the obscenity scandal it was involved in. A decade after the abolition of censorship, the newly acquired freedom of speech was put to the test in the form of Vladimir Sorokin's *Goluboe salo*, a postmodernist novel that appears to have little in common with pornography. Looking into the question of how the work of a former avant-garde writer came to be the subject of the first obscenity trial in post-Soviet Russia, this chapter brings us back to the beginning of the thesis, namely to the question of linguistic norm maintenance and norm negotiation. The chapter also allows general conclusions to be drawn with regard to the role of (verbal) obscenity in contemporary Russian culture.

The Conclusion revisits the thesis objective and the research questions, stating the overarching argument developed in the thesis and thereby highlighting the significance of the thesis for the field of Slavonic studies and the originality of its contribution to knowledge. It also includes a discussion of the implications of this thesis for further research in this field.

Chapter 1: Obscene language in context

The purpose of the first chapter is to discuss the nature of obscene language in general and of Russian obscene language in particular. Obscene language fulfils important and necessary communicative and interpersonal functions, not least because of its vital role in identity formation. This chapter will show that the use of taboo language is, like language use in general, regulated by certain context-bound forms and functions. This means that there are speech situations and contexts where non-standard varieties are appropriate and hence ‘the norm’.

The chapter begins with a discussion of the concept of obscenity and its correlation with obscene language. This first section closes with a discussion of the functions of obscene language, shedding light on both its referential and non-referential functions. The chapter then moves on to discuss the peculiarities of Russian obscene language, which is also referred to as *mat*. The second section starts with an attempt at a definition of Russian *mat* for the purpose of this thesis, followed by a discussion of its semantics and its alleged ‘uniqueness’. The largest part of this section is devoted to an in-depth discussion of the performative functions of Russian obscene language, focusing on its correlation with class, gender and identity in Soviet Russia.

1.1. The nature of obscenity and obscene language

1.1.1. Defining obscenity

If there is one thing for certain about the nature of obscenity, it is its conceptual elusiveness. US Supreme Court Associate Justice Potter Stewart memorably expressed the difficulty of describing obscenity when he stated that the obscene was hard to define but ‘I know it when I see it’.¹⁶ In other words, it is considerably easier to recognise the obscene than to say what it is, which is a view also shared by others. Writer Henry Miller, for example, once wrote that ‘to discuss the nature and meaning of obscenity is almost as difficult as to talk about God’ (1964: 172), and D. H. Lawrence remarked that ‘nobody knows what [the word obscene] means’ (1998: 236).

¹⁶ The widely quoted phrase ‘I know it when I see it’ refers to *Jacobellis v. Ohio*, a 1964 obscenity case that concerned a French movie called ‘The Lovers’. For a thorough discussion of this popular phrase and its legal impact, see Paul Gewirtz’s essay ‘On “I Know It When I See It”’ (1996).

In spite of, or rather because of, the elusiveness of the term, many attempts have been made to define the meaning and nature of obscenity. Social philosopher Joel Feinberg describes obscenity as ‘an extreme form of offensiveness producing repugnance, shock or disgust’ (1985: 123), a definition that comes close to the first meaning of obscenity as provided in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, ‘offensive to the senses or to taste or refinement: disgusting, filthy, foul, abominable, loathsome’. In its second meaning, ‘obscene’ means ‘offensive to modesty or decency: expressing or suggesting unchaste or lustful ideas, impure, indecent, lewd’, a definition that stresses its norm-violating nature and its correlation with sexuality. In recent years, the semantics of obscenity has shifted to connote excess and moral repugnance. This meaning of obscenity is encapsulated in phrases such as ‘the obscenity of war’, ‘obscene profits’ and ‘an obscene amount of money’.¹⁷

What distinguishes obscenity from other offensive forms is that it protrudes; it is obtrusive, blunt and highly off-putting. As Feinberg argues, a subtle offensive remark is not obscene and neither is a dancer who is moving lasciviously and seductively (1985: 124). Obscenity has a strong ability to unmask, but it does so in a deliberately crude, degrading and shocking way. This is the reason why, etymologically, obscenity is linked to the Greek term *ob skene* (‘off scene’), referring to those aspects that were to remain hidden from the audience (Mey 2007: 7). Yet the obscene is not only able to expose and unmask. Harry Clor notes that ‘first, it *exposes* intimate, private, physical processes, and second, it *degrades* them to a purely animal or physical level’ (1969: 225). Obscenity is therefore closely related to the concept of vulgarity. Yet while the latter is usually understood as an aesthetic violation, obscenity often includes a moral transgression as well (ibid: 30).¹⁸ Nevertheless, and this is what makes it such a fascinating concept, obscenity, in particular sexual obscenity, can be alluring and repulsive at the same time — even to the same person (Feinberg 1985: 123).

The above makes it clear why a discussion of the obscene is so difficult: Obscenity is first and foremost a value category. In fact, as Kerstin Mey notes,

¹⁷ Obscenity acquired the connotation of excess not too long ago. As Joan DeJean notes, ‘the earliest denunciation of obscene excess noted by the [Oxford English Dictionary] is from 1974 and refers to oil profits’ (2002: 181, note 17).

¹⁸ As Stuart Charmé notes, to a certain extent, the two categories overlap since extreme cases of vulgarity can certainly be deemed obscene (1991: 30).

‘nothing is obscene per se’ (2007: 5). Renatus Hartogs and Hans Fantel go so far as to describe obscenity as ‘the language of anti-value [...] which is the obverse of the acknowledged good’ (1967: 20). Values vary over time, from culture to culture and even between individuals, which is why the concept of obscenity is not a fixed category, but subject to change. As D. H. Lawrence once pointed out, obscenity is highly subjective: ‘What is obscene to Tom is not obscene to Lucy or Joe, and really, the meaning of the word has to wait for majorities to decide it’ (1998: 294). In other words, what is deemed obscene in one situation may be perfectly acceptable in another. Obscenity is, to a large extent, context- and culture-bound, as well as subject to the prevailing social rules and norms of a particular time and situation. In this respect, the notion of obscenity corresponds to Mary Douglas’s concept of dirt as ‘matter out of place’. As Douglas notes, ‘dirt [...] is never a unique, isolated event’ (2003: 36), but always points to the existence of a classification system. This implies that ‘dirt’ is a cultural construct, lying in the eye of the beholder. Similarly, obscenity is not inherently intrinsic to an object, but always refers to the response of the subject judging the object. A good example to illustrate this point is incest.¹⁹ While sexual intercourse between brother and sister or between parents and children is deemed highly obscene in our modern culture, incestuous marriages were frequent in the Habsburg family until 1700 (Wolf and Durham 2004: 25). Similarly, in a South African tribe, the taboo of incest is temporarily lifted in times of crisis because the tribal fathers believe that the powers behind the taboo could also cure the tribe’s troubles (Hartogs and Fantel 1967: 97).

These examples illustrate that there is a strong interrelation between taboo and obscenity.²⁰ Almost all societies have certain areas of human practice and modes of conduct that they mark as forbidden and in particular need of control and regulation. In our modern society, these cultural prohibitions mainly apply to the spheres of sexuality and religion. The violation of a taboo is usually deemed obscene in the sense of abhorrent, which makes taboo and obscenity two sides of the same coin. While taboos reflect the need to control and regulate social behaviour, obscenity as the antithesis to what is considered decent, tasteful and polite can be seen as an indirect regulation of social conduct and norms.

¹⁹ Sigmund Freud discusses the taboo of incest at length in *Totem and Taboo* (1913).

²⁰ For a more detailed discussion of the correlation between obscenity and taboo, see Mey (2007: 5).

This is all the more so as it is usually those in power who determine what is deemed obscene. As Deana Heath argues, the idea of obscenity emerged as a regulatory mechanism in response to the broadening of access to cultural consumption in the late 17th century, when authorities began to view a regulation of obscenity as instrumental in maintaining social power and control (2010: 35). Sir Alexander Cockburn, the British Lord Chief Justice, stated in 1868 that ‘the test of obscenity is this, whether the tendency of the matter charged as obscenity is to deprave and corrupt those whose minds are open to such immoral influences’ (quoted in Feinberg 1985: 171). Obscenity thus became a major issue in authorities’ attempts to monitor and control cultural practices deemed deviant and therefore morally corrupting and potentially socially dangerous or destabilising.

In many cultures, such attempts at social control have taken the form of obscenity laws, the first of which emerged in the middle of the 19th century in Europe and the United States. US obscenity laws treat the obscene interchangeably with what is commonly referred to as ‘pornography’. Legal obscenity means pornography, which, in turn, refers to ‘sexually explicit writings and pictures designed entirely and plausibly to induce sexual excitement in the reader or observer’ (Feinberg 1985: 127). Definitions of legal obscenity have changed slightly over the course of time, thereby reflecting the difficulty in providing a clear and unambiguous definition. What these definitions do have in common, though, is that they mainly target pornographic forms of expression such as films, pictures, oral utterances and publications, dismissing the fact that obscenity often occurs in non-sexual contexts and that pornography can, under certain circumstances, be artful as well.²¹

In the same way that pornography is not synonymous with obscenity, obscenity must be distinguished from obscene language. Although often used as a synonym, obscene language is only one particular form in which obscenity can occur.²² A literary text, for example, can be deemed obscene without including any obscene words. For example, Vladimir Nabokov’s notorious novel *Lolita* (1955) does not contain a single obscene term, but its subject, an affair between a middle-aged man

²¹ There are numerous studies examining the relationship between art, obscenity and pornography. Joseph Slade’s reference guide to pornography and sexual representation provides a comprehensive list of scholarly publications on this topic (2001: 547–64).

²² Hartogs and Fantel (1967), for example, do not distinguish between obscenity and obscene language, treating the two concepts synonymously.

and a 12-year-old girl, made it a candidate for obscenity charges when it was published in 1955. In short, obscene language does not necessarily overlap with obscenity, as the following section will demonstrate in more detail.

1.1.2. What makes obscene words obscene?

Obscene language comprises ‘those words in a language that are defined by the existing sociolinguistic codes as belonging to a class not to be uttered in “polite society”, that is to say, within the respectable functioning of the official culture’ (Ames 1990: 194). Put differently, obscene words are stigmatised words, words that must not be spoken in particular contexts because they violate certain social conventions of respect and morality, thereby causing distress and offence. Obscene words are also known as four-letter words, dirty words and taboo words, and language containing these words is referred to as obscene language, taboo language, off-colour language, bad language or foul language, to give a few examples.

In modern Western society, the epithet ‘obscene’ is usually attached to words referring to sexual organs, bodily effluvia and activities involving sexual organs. Examples in English are ‘shit’, ‘piss’, ‘crap’, ‘fuck’ and ‘cock’. Over the course of time, obscene words may lose their obscene connotations. For example, the word ‘leg’ was considered unmentionable in the 19th century, with the taboo being so strong that it even affected the term ‘piano leg’ (Read 1934: 265). Nowadays, nobody would blush when hearing this word. This means that the group of obscene words is in constant flux, continually redrawing its boundaries and changing its members.

What is remarkable about obscene utterances is that ‘they shock the listener entirely because of the particular words they employ’ (Feinberg 1985: 190). Or, to use a more semiotic explanation, it is the signifier of a particular sign that is deemed improper and indecent, not the signified. Obscene words are therefore easily recognisable and protrude even when not applied in their literal meanings. Obscenities have a power to titillate and can even provoke physical reactions in people (Allan and Burrige 2006: 42). For this reason, it is much easier to remember sentences including obscene words, regardless of their role in conversation. In other words, it is not the semantic content of an obscene word (its referential meaning) that makes us flinch, but its representational functions and connotations. This

accords with Timothy Jay's argument that 'dirty words are unique because connotative meaning is dominant over denotative meaning' (1981: 30).

The above-listed characteristics indicate that obscene words are not identical to swearwords or curse words, but only partly correlating categories. Swearwords, as Jay also points out, do not have to include obscene expressions. Animal names ('pig') and ethnic/racial/gender slurs ('nigger') can function as swearwords as well (2009: 154). Obscene words do not necessarily overlap with vulgar, blasphemous and profane words either.²³ What is important to point out here is that 'the difference between obscene words in a strict and narrow sense, and other impolite words, is one of degree' (Feinberg 1985: 191).

At first glance, there seems to be no logical explanation for this 'magic power' of obscene words. This is all the more so since Ferdinand de Saussure's theory on the arbitrariness of the sign has been widely accepted.²⁴ Edward Sagarin, for instance, states that 'it would not be expected that a society might look upon a word, in and of itself, as evil, and order its members to refrain from pronouncing it' (1969: 17). Thus, there seems to be no logical explanation why the word 'faeces' is deemed acceptable in public speech whereas 'shit' evokes feelings of disgust and repugnance. In addition, excretory functions are undeniably a part of human life, and defaecation per se is not obscene. The tendency to avoid certain words because they are deemed improper and 'dirty' is therefore not the result of the 'refinements of civilization', as Allen Walker Read puts it (1934: 266). On the contrary, linguistic taboos are ancient, going back at least as far as Biblical times. Primitive tribes also had words that were banned from language. The Scottish anthropologist Sir James Frazer wrote that it was forbidden for a Caffre man to utter the name of his mother-in-law (1922: 249). And in many tribes, the names of the dead were not uttered for fear of the ghost of the dead (Sagarin 1969: 19). Thus, the prohibition to pronounce certain words was both out of fear and respect with regard to a certain subject or

²³ For a more detailed discussion of terminological differences, see *Language Most Foul* by Ruth Wajnryb (2005: 11–6) and *Offense to Others* by Feinberg (1985: 190–208).

²⁴ Saussure insisted that there is no causal relationship between the form of a word and its meaning, arguing that 'the bond between the signifier and the signified is arbitrary' (Saussure 1922: 67), in contrast to the symbol, which is never arbitrary (ibid: 68). His theory has, however, not been universally accepted. Emile Benveniste, one of his students, was one of his strongest critics, arguing that 'the signifier and the signified, the mental representation and the sound image are [...] in reality the two aspects of a single notion and together make up the ensemble as the embodiment and the embodiment' (1971: 45).

person. It was rooted in the belief that as long as the taboo word remained unheard, no harm was to be expected. If, however, the taboo was broken and the forbidden word was pronounced, the person who uttered the word in question was believed to face consequences, which could even include illness and death.

If certain words are deemed ‘bad’, it seems only logical to replace them with other terms. In the Mitakoodi language of the Australian aborigines, for example, there are two terms denoting ‘vulva’. While *koon-ja* belongs to the most indecent words in this language and must not be said under any circumstances, *me-ne* can be uttered freely and without restriction (Read 1931: 266). The practice of replacing ‘indecent’ words with words that are socially acceptable is also commonplace in our modern society. Euphemisms serve as an important tool for taking the offensive sting out of obscene expressions, making the words in question more socially acceptable or allowing the speaker to insult their interlocutor without losing face.

Obscene words are, however, not absolute prohibitions. Feinberg writes that obscene words ‘defiantly violate norms, but the norms they violate are contextual’ (1985: 250). This is a significant observation since it implies that there are certain contexts in which the use of verbal obscenity is deemed acceptable.

1.1.3. The functions of obscene words

Verbal obscenity constitutes an essential ingredient of language. The communicative significance of obscene words can be seen in the fact that, despite their bad reputation, obscene words are constantly heard and spoken. As Edward Sagarin states, obscene words ‘are the most common, the harshest, the easiest to say and, until recently, the hardest to print’ (1969: 31). Feinberg expresses a similar opinion by stating that ‘they are known and understood by all native speakers; even those who would never dare use them’ (1985: 208).

When it comes to their functions in language, obscene terms are, of course, used to make reference to the objects they denote, ‘albeit in a vulgar way’ (ibid). For example, in the phrase ‘clean up that pile of dog shit’, the term ‘shit’ is used to make direct reference to the object it denotes. The main difference between ‘shit’ and ‘faeces’ lies in their connotative meanings: ‘Shit’ carries strong obscene connotations. These connotations are part of the function of obscene terms. In many

cases, they are used *because of* their obscene connotations, allowing the speaker to convey their irreverence towards the denoted object and the addressee. Or, to use a linguistic explanation, obscene terms are dysphemistic in their usage. Other examples are ‘shithouse’ for ‘toilet’, ‘to fuck’ for ‘to make love’, ‘to piss’ for ‘to urinate’. Feinberg describes obscene words as ‘the undershirts and bare feet’ (ibid: 209) of our vocabulary, and sometimes, he says, people wish to go around wearing undershirts and no shoes.

Most often, however, obscene words are not used in a referential but in a non-referential manner. In many instances, their primary purpose is to add spice and flavour to a particular phrase and to emphasise the speaker’s stance in the most powerful way. As a result of their ability to shock, obscene expressions immediately draw attention to themselves, thereby underlining and reinforcing the message in question. Obscenities play an important role in colourful speech and are indispensable elements of expressivity. For instance, the phrase ‘terribly frightened’ is much less expressive than ‘scared shitless’. Or, as Robert Adams puts it, ‘who ever stubbed his toe in the dark and cried out, “Oh, faeces!”?’ (1985: 45). People thus often resort to obscene words in order to express strong feelings such as anger, fear, surprise, frustration, joy and pain. Interjections like ‘oh shit’ or ‘I am so fucking happy’ are frequently used in such situations.

Obscenities also play an important role in invective vituperation and verbal violence. For example, if a man is called a ‘prick’, he feels insulted because he is depersonalised. The same mechanism can be observed in animal insults such as ‘pig’ or ‘dog’. In the language of invective, obscenities are often employed as intensifiers, as in ‘you fucking idiot’. What is important to point out here is that obscene insults, like insults in general, are used not only to vent one’s anger or frustration but also to provoke certain reactions. Feinberg uses the expression ‘fighting words’ to refer to those utterances that ‘automatically bring into existence a state of violent hostility between two persons’ (1985: 235). He regards ‘fighting words’ as the ‘verbal equivalents of the first shoves and pushes of a fight’ (ibid). These expressions are not necessarily obscene, but when they are, they leave no doubt about the seriousness of the insult. This means that in Feinberg’s view, obscene words often provoke physical violence, rather than replace it, which stands in contradiction to

Jeffrey Henderson's argument that verbal obscenity replaces physical aggression because 'it is impossible in civilized societies to act out one's hostilities whenever and however one wishes' (1975: 10).

Regardless of whether or not obscene words replace physical action, what follows from the above is that the use of verbal obscenity initiates contact between speaker and addressee and makes them engage in a dialogue, which is an indication of the highly dialogic nature of obscene language. In further consequence, verbal obscenity negotiates and establishes power relations between two speakers or within a group of speakers. For example, within certain groups, obscene language is often used against those members who are considered inferior or weaker, as is the case of prisons or the armed forces. Prison guards direct obscenities at inmates in order to dehumanise and insult them and to signal their power over them. In the same situation, however, obscene language may also be used by the inferior group to express their contempt for the superior group. In this case, obscene language is used as a bond among those who are marginal in relation to the dominant group. Obscene terms are also often part of slang and adolescent talk. Here, too, the main function is to create a sense of solidarity among its members and to 'keep outsiders outside' (Andersson and Trudgill 1992: 79).

Among friends or people feeling very close to one another, obscenity can also function as 'persiflage' or 'banter'. In these situations, obscenities are not used to insult the addressee or to express anger and disrespect, but they are employed in a playful manner to express affection, intimacy and closeness. James Robson points out that 'in our society, one of the common circumstances in which we find obscene language used is amongst good friends' (2006: 81). This indicates that obscene language can also express intimacy and closeness.

Obscene language not only establishes power relations within groups, it also reflects power relations with regard to gender, even though this correlation needs to be considered with some care. While researchers used to see a strong correlation between obscene language and manliness,²⁵ this attitude has changed in recent

²⁵ Robin Lakoff, who was among the first scholars to analyse speech differences between men and women, ascribes verbal obscenity to masculinity and claims that women tend to use euphemisms and weaker expletives. '[...] women don't use off-color or indelicate expressions; women are the

decades, largely as a result of the changing role of women in society. As Penelope Eckert and Sally McConnell-Ginet argue, ‘women’s increased use of obscene language in expressing anger can represent a repositioning that challenges male dominance and that claims authority’ (2003: 182). Jennifer Coates expresses a similar opinion. She sees the main reason for researchers to attribute a more polite use of language to women in the fact that ‘avoidance of swearing and of “coarse” words is held up to female speakers as the ideal to be aimed at’ (2004: 15).

Obscene language also constitutes an important element in obscene humour, even though the appearance of obscene words is by no means essential to dirty jokes and off-colour stories. There are many indecent jokes that do not operate on the basis of off-colour language, but they are considered ‘dirty’ because of their ‘improper’ reference to tabooed things and events. Sometimes, the comic effect is built upon the fact that the obscene word, which is deliberately omitted, is known to both the listener and the teller. But there are, of course, jokes involving the utterance of obscene words. Here, obscenities are used to achieve comic effect or to give jokes a comic boost. Obscene language also features prominently in most societies’ folk tales, which primarily aim to produce laughter.

Entertainment is, according to Feinberg, the primary goal of obscene wit (1985: 238). Although there are other very special uses of obscene humour, dirty humour is, first and foremost, good fun. Feinberg sees anxiety as the driving force behind dirty humour, echoing a theory put forward by Sigmund Freud.²⁶ Folklorist Richard Waterman also points out that ‘using obscenity is a way of flirting with forbidden things; hence, any contact with obscenity engenders psychic tensions based upon anxiety’ (1949: 162). The release of anxieties is then achieved by laughing. Tension is also often created as a result of the expectations of the reader or listener and released by laughter as a comic response to the unexpected.

The above has shown that obscene words serve many different functions in language, functions that clearly exceed mere offensiveness. As a matter of fact, the functions of obscene language correspond to the six communicative functions identified by Russian-American scholar Roman Jakobson: referential, emotive,

experts at euphemism’ (2004: 55). Peter Schwenger argues that obscenity is tolerated more with regard to boys than girls (1984: 22).

²⁶ See Freud’s *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious* (1905).

phatic, conative, metalingual and poetic (1960: 356). Obscene language is referential in that it denotes objects, emotive in that it expresses the speaker's attitude, phatic in that it establishes contact, conative in that it aims to create a certain response in the addressee, poetic in that it draws attention to itself while at the same time referring beyond itself, and metalingual in that it identifies itself as the code of certain groups. We can thus add that obscene language is highly performative since it not only denotes certain objects but also 'performs' certain actions.²⁷

This means that verbal obscenity is an inherent part of any cultural system. And since culture comprises different patterns and ideas, obscenity, and hence obscene language, is subject to variation. As Hartogs and Fantel remark, 'each culture has its own patterns of obscenity reflecting its own conflicts and preoccupations' (1967: 29). The following section will analyse the nature of Russian obscene language, describing what makes it stand apart from other obscene languages.

1.2. The nature of Russian obscene language

1.2.1. In the beginning was the (obscene) word: An attempt at definition

One of the most striking features of Russian verbal obscenity is that there is a specific term for it, namely *mat*.²⁸ While its etymological origins are not quite clear,²⁹ it is widely believed that the word *mat* is closely related to the Proto-Indo-European word for 'mother', a correlation that is preserved in the Russian term for 'mother' (*mat'*) and the infamous mother curse (*eb tvoiu mat'*; 'fuck your mother'), which is one of the core expressions of Russian verbal obscenity. Scholar Boris Uspenskii (1981) traces the origins of the Russian mother curse to the pagan fertility cults revolving around the Slavic earth goddess Moist Mother Earth (*mat'-syra-zemlia*), arguing that the infamous *mat* formula is, in fact, of mythological origin.³⁰

²⁷ The term 'performative' was coined by John L. Austin, who introduced it in order to describe utterances that are, or are part of, the doing of a certain kind of action (1962: 6).

²⁸ Russian *mat* is also referred to as *skvernoslovie* and *maternaia bran'* (both meaning 'foul language'). Other expressions are *neprilichnye slova* ('indecent words'), *nepristoinye slova* ('improper words'), *ploshchadnye slova* ('vulgar words') and *pokhabshchina* ('bawdy words') (Dulichenko 1994: 221–2). The word *matershchina* is also often used for obscene language, although strictly speaking, it only refers to the Russian mother curse (Ermen 1994: 65).

²⁹ The word *mat* is not included in Max Vasmer's etymological dictionary.

³⁰ Uspenskii's theory has not been universally accepted. German scholar Ilse Ermen, for example, argues (1994) that Uspenskii's hypothesis lacks substantial evidence and is, in fact, just another attempt to explain the phenomenon of *mat* as something foreign that has entered the Russian language from the outside. Other myths related to the origins of *mat* include the popular belief that Russian verbal obscenity is rooted in Tatar cursing, adopted during the Tatar-Mongol yoke between 1237 and 1480 (Kauffman 1981: 271). In Soviet Russia, *mat* was regarded as a 'remnant

Linguist Lev Skvortsov comes up with a different explanation. In his opinion, the literal meaning of *mat* is ‘loud voice, shouting’, referring to the noises of animals during mating season (1993: 5–6). Whatever its origins, over time, *mat* has come to function as a Russian umbrella term for everything deemed indecent, dirty, vulgar and obscene. Nowadays, for most Russian native speakers, *mat* is synonymous with obscene language, encompassing words and expressions related to bodily functions and sexuality (Ermen 1993a: 9).

Russian lexicographer Aleksei Plutser-Sarno illustrates the vagueness of the term by presenting a list of *mat* words collected in a public opinion survey (2005a: 77). According to the results of the survey, *mat* includes the following terms: *ebat'* (‘to fuck’), *bliad'* (‘whore’), *khui* (‘cock’), *pizda* (‘cunt’), *mude* (‘balls’), *manda* (‘pussy’), *elda* (‘penis’), *sipovka* (‘pussy’), *sekel'* (‘clitoris’), *pots* (‘creep’), *malof'ia* (‘semen’), *drochit'* (‘masturbate’), *zalupa* (‘dickhead’), *minzha* (‘cunt’), *pidor* (‘fag’), *kurva* (‘whore’), *sperma* (‘sperm’), *gondon* (‘condom’), *menstra* (‘menstruation’), *kher* (‘penis’), *kuna* (‘pussy’), *srat'* (‘to shit’), *ssat'* (‘to piss’), *bzdet'* (‘to fart without making noise, to break wind’), *perdet'* (‘to fart loudly’), *dristat'* (‘to have diarrhea’), *govno* (‘shit’), *zhopa* (‘ass’), *tselka* (‘intact hymen’, ‘virgin’), *korolevka* (‘vagina’), *trakhat'* (‘to have sex’, lit. ‘to smash sth.’), *kharit'* (‘to have sex with a woman’), *minet* (‘blowjob’), *zhrat'* (‘to drink/eat a lot’), *blevat'* (‘to vomit’).

The list contains both sexual (e.g. *ebat'*) and scatological terms (e.g. *govno*), as well as words that are not sexual in origin but carry sexual connotations (e.g. *trakhat'*), and words that are sexual in origin but are used in non-sexual contexts (e.g. *pizdit'*; ‘to steal’, derived from the word *pizda*, meaning ‘cunt’). It is interesting to note that the term *zhrat'* (‘to drink/eat a lot’) has also been attributed to *mat*. This indicates that *mat* is also closely linked to behaviour regarded as uncultured, a correlation that stems from the Soviet concept of *kulturnost'* (see 1.2.3.1.). Another observation is that, for some, even the medical term *sperma* (‘sperm’) and the colloquial *gondon* (‘condom’) belong to obscene language.

of capitalism’, thus linking it to Western cultures (see 1.2.3.1.). What all these hypotheses have in common is the wish to dissociate the Russian language from the crudeness of *mat*, ascribing its appearance to foreign, non-Russian sources.

As Plutser-Sarno points out, the first seven words and their derivations are most often attributed to the field of *mat* (2005a: 77). This leads to the conclusion that in Russian obscene language, sexual obscenities are considered much ‘dirtier’ than scatological expressions.³¹ Linguists therefore regard terms referring to sexual organs and copulation as the core elements of *mat*, sometimes excluding scatological terms altogether. German sociolinguist Wilhelm von Timroth, one of the pioneers in the research of Russian verbal obscenity, restricts *mat* to the three terms *ebat*, *pizda* and *khui* and their derivations (1983: 85). He does not, however, provide an explanation for this restriction: ‘Scatological expressions — no matter whether their meanings are scatological or not — do not belong to *mat*’ (1983: 87). Soia Koester-Thoma expresses a similar view. Although listing *blia-* as a fourth core root, she does not attribute scatological terms to *mat* (1995: 147).³²

Describing *mat* as ‘mother language’, Charles Kauffman provides an even more restricted view of *mat*. He argues that *mat* only comprises abusive forms containing the Russian word for ‘mother’, while ‘simple cursing [is] without using the term ‘mother’’ (1981: 275). He distinguishes between three basic categories of obscene language in Russian, of which *matershchina* is the third, and most severe, level (1981: 275). An approach that limits Russian *mat* to expressions containing the Russian word for ‘mother’ is also supported by Alek Flegon, who describes verbal obscenity as ‘indecent language containing the word *mat*’ (1973: 184). In accordance with these definitions, *mat* covers only words and phrases including the word *mat*’ such as *eb tvoiu mat*’ (‘fuck your mother’) or *ebena mat*’ (‘fucked mother’).

Another group of words that is somewhat problematic are sexual and vulgar expressions that neither include the word *mat*’ nor are derived from the three roots *eb-/eba-*, *pizd-* and *khui-*. Examples are *suka*, *shliukha*, *kanava* and *blatnaia koshka* (which can all mean ‘prostitute’). The same applies to non-obscene words

³¹ This is not the case in all obscene terminologies. In German, for example, scatological elements are considered much stronger in effect than sexual obscenities.

³² Ilse Ermen puts forward a plausible argument for the exclusion of scatological terms from the field of *mat*: they do not fall under that strong a taboo as the group of *mat* words derived from the core roots *eb-/eba-*, *pizd-* and *khui-* (1993a: 9). Scatological expressions also lack the expressivity and semantic ambiguity of sexual *mat* words. In other words, their meaning is less dependent on the context, and they show a much lower degree of semantic variety. As Ermen shows, the figurative meaning of scatological expressions is usually close to the original meaning of ‘to make something dirty’ or ‘to be afraid of sth.’ (ibid: 49ff.).

designating sexual organs such as *banan* ('banana'), *kolbasa* ('sausage'), *morkov'* ('carrot'), and *khvost* ('tail'), which can all mean 'penis'.³³ In Ermen's view, these terms do not belong to the group of *mat* expressions, but rather to Russian sexual vocabulary, of which *mat* merely forms a subcategory (1993b: 286–7).

This brings us to another question arising in connection with the provision of a definition of Russian *mat*, namely the mapping of *mat* onto the Russian linguistic landscape. As stated above, Ermen treats *mat* as a subcategory of Russian sexual vocabulary. The approach that Russian obscene language forms part of another linguistic category has also been supported by other lexicographers and linguists. Vladimir Elistratov, for example, regards *mat* as part of Russian argot (1994), Valerii Mokienko treats *mat* as a subgroup of swearwords (1994) and Vladimir Shliakhov and Eve Adler include *mat* expressions in their bilingual dictionary of Russian slang (1999). Timroth, on the other hand, puts *mat* in one row with other social varieties, considering *mat* a separate linguistic category equal to argot, slang and jargon (1983).

There also exists a broad range of *mat* euphemisms. In these euphemistic forms, the three core roots are replaced with other, less stigmatised word stems. Examples are *khren* and *kher* for *khui* ('cock'), *elki-palki* and *elki zelenye* for the mother curse, and *blin* for *bliad'* ('whore'). Although these words are not taboo, they are stigmatised to a certain degree. Yet since there is only a limited number of euphemisms and since euphemisms exist only in place of established *mat* forms, they are not particularly productive and are therefore not viewed as *mat* terminology.

These examples illustrate that, although *mat* expressions are typically viewed as 'vulgarisms of the worst kind' (e.g. Dulichenko 1994: 221; Kauffman 1981: 275), there are diverging views on the question of which lexemes to include and which to exclude. For the purpose of this thesis, *mat* is understood as a non-codified linguistic variety of Russian non-standard language, whose major characteristic is its obscene nature resulting from its reference to sexual organs, copulation and bodily functions. Applying a definition of *mat* based on a criterion of exclusion with regard to particular lexemes would prove to be too restrictive an approach and unsuitable for

³³ The use of non-obscene words denoting sexual organs was particularly popular in *chastushki*, Russian humorous folk songs (Kulagina 1999: 115).

the purpose of this thesis. As will be shown, the choice of a certain obscene term or euphemism over another is quite revealing with regard to its function and effect in a literary text and must therefore be taken into consideration.

1.2.2. A unique language? On the linguistic properties of *mat*

While there are diverging views on how to define *mat*, there is more consensus on the idea that verbal obscenity plays a very special role in Russian culture. Authors, linguists and even politicians have repeatedly described Russian obscene language as an extraordinary linguistic phenomenon, hailing its incomparable expressive power and its semantic richness. Even those who argue against the use of *mat* have emphasised its specific status. Leon Trotsky, for instance, put forward in his 1923 article on the struggle for cultured speech that ‘as far as I know there is nothing, or nearly nothing, of the kind outside Russia’ (1923: 230).

Russian writer Viktor Erofeev even goes so far as to describe Russian *mat* as ‘unique’ (2003). Russia’s underground language, as he calls *mat*, not only possesses ‘unique power’, but also stands apart from obscene terminologies of other languages for its multileveled and multifunctional nature. Erofeev argues that *mat* ‘has a unique ability to break free of its erotic context and to characterize universal human feelings and conditions, to express admiration and contempt, ecstasy and catastrophe’ (ibid: 43). For example, the well-known phrase *polnyi pizdets* can take on a range of meanings, from ‘I’m fucked’ to ‘everything is fucked up’ or anything in between.

That a whole range of feelings can be expressed by using a single lexeme was also pointed out by Fyodor Dostoevsky, who devoted a short entry in *A Writer’s Diary* to the semantic richness of Russian *mat*. On a Sunday in 1873, the writer accidentally overheard a conversation between six factory workers, who communicated by using only one word articulated in different intonations. Dostoevsky actually refrains from spelling out the word in question, but it is quite clear that he is referring to the term *khui* and a few of its derivations.³⁴ While

³⁴ Timroth notes (1983: 84) that Dostoevsky slightly exaggerated when asserting that the entire conversation had consisted of a single *mat* word. In fact, the factory workers must have used slight derivations of the core root *khui*. I agree with Timroth but would ‘decipher’ Dostoevsky’s description of the conversation slightly differently. I assume that the first worker said *Khuinia!* (‘Bullshit!’), to which the second replied *Ni khuia!* (‘Nonsense!’), the third then said to the first *Na khui!* (‘This is beside the point!’), the fourth said to the first *Ni khuia sebe!* (‘Unbelievable.’),

rebuking the six men for their coarse language, he is, at the same time, impressed with the wide semantic scope of *mat*: '[...] suddenly I realized that it was possible to express all thoughts, sensations and even entire profound propositions using only this one noun, which besides, has very few syllables' (1997: 257).

Dostoevsky made another observation regarding the use of *mat*: Despite their penchant for using strong swearwords, Russians were not vulgar people since more often than not, they would not have in mind anything obscene or indecent. Dostoevsky went even so far as to praise the chastity of his people: 'The People use profanity to no purpose, and often when talking about things that are not at all indecent. Our People are not corrupt and are *even very pure*, despite the fact that they are unquestionably the greatest users of profanity in the whole world' (ibid: 267). American linguists Felix Dreizin and Tom Priestly also point out this 'peculiarity', claiming that *mat* is 'not simply an accumulation of obscenities, but a set of refined, complex structures' that exceeds the realm of insult and sex (1982: 233). They even go so far as to regard *mat* as a language in its own right, one that covers 'nearly all of reality' (ibid: 246).

Although Dreizin and Priestly try to illustrate this point by 'translating' a short text written in standard Russian into *mat*, their argument that any idea can be expressed by *mat* words is only partly valid. As Daniel Weiss observes, several sentences in the story are highly ambiguous in their meaning, and the text itself does not seem to be the result of spontaneous production (2008: 216). This also confirms Ermen's argument (1993a: 43) that the possibilities of semantic interpretation are, by no means, endless. *Mat* verbs, in particular, express either negative actions or some kind of motion, and they are mainly used for stressing the intensity of an action. It is, for example, almost impossible to express feelings and abstract ideas by means of *mat*, as well as actions that are explicitly positive. The verbs 'to praise' and 'to love' cannot be 'translated' into *mat*, to give but two examples.

Moreover, what Erofeev describes as the 'unique power' of *mat* is, in fact, the result of the word-formation processes inherent to the Russian language. Since Russian works according to the principles of a 'Lego-kit language' (words are

and the sixth said to the fourth *Kakogo khuia!* ('What's that supposed to be?'). The fifth did not participate in the conversation.

formed by adding prefixes, suffixes or affixes to root lexemes or by assembling two or more nouns), these mechanisms apply to obscenities as well. Thus, it is possible to construct a vast number of derivations based on obscene word roots. For instance, the word root *khui-* can serve as a core element in adjectives, adverbs, participles, interjections and nouns. The *mat* words *okhuevat'/okhuet'* ('to be worn out by sth.'), *khuevyi* ('very bad'), *okhuitel'nyi* ('wonderful'), *khuinia* ('nonsense'), *do khuia* ('a lot') and *nakhuiachit'sia* ('to drink a lot') are all derived from the root *khui*.³⁵ Boris Razvratnikov identifies this feature as the main difference from English obscene language. 'Russian obscenity is primarily derivational while English [...] obscenity is analytical' (1979: 197). English native speakers wishing to express themselves in an obscene manner would insert an obscene particle while Russians would derive vulgarisms from obscene word stems. For instance, the Russian expression *on ego spizdil* could translate as 'he fucking stole it'.

The exact meaning of a *mat* verb can often only be derived from its concurrence with morphological, syntactical and lexical components.³⁶ A good example to illustrate this point is provided by Timroth. He states that the verb *khuiachit'* generally means 'to do' (1983: 119). However, only the general context can help determine the precise meaning of the verb. Thus, the phrase *oni ves' den' khuiachili* could mean 'they worked all day', while in the phrase *on za nim khuiachil* the verb takes on the meaning of 'to walk behind'. Things become even more complicated when suffixes or prefixes are added to the verb root. For instance, the prefix *za-* generally denotes the beginning of an action, which indicates that the verb *zakhuiachit'* suggests a change in position. *On zakhuiachil knigu v chemodan* means 'he threw (stuffed) the book into the suitcase', with the obscene verb replacing the neutral verb *broshit'* ('to throw'). In the sentence *oni zakhuiachili zhalobu k nachal'niku*, the obscene verb acquires the meaning of 'to see to it that the boss got the complaint'. In short, the precise meaning of a *mat* verb can only be determined by taking its syntactical and morphological surroundings into consideration.

The argument of uniqueness loses even more force when comparing Russian *mat* to languages based on similar patterns. For instance, German obscenities, which

³⁵ Plutser-Sarno's first dictionary volume on the term *khui* includes 523 expressions (2005a: cover).

³⁶ According to Dreizin and Priestly, there are four pieces of information that help determine the meaning of a *mat* verb: the pattern of verbal complements, lexical material occurring in complements, the morphological pattern and the general context (1982: 239–42).

draw particularly strongly on the scatological, also work according to the principles of a ‘Lego-kit language’, using scatological word stems to form expressions that go beyond the referential meanings. *Scheiße* (‘shit’) ranks first on the list of German ‘bad words’, and there are numerous idioms and derivations based on the core root *scheiß-* such as *bescheißen* (‘to cheat on sb.’), *sich anscheißen* (‘to be afraid of sth.’), *zusammenscheißen* (‘to tell sb. off’) and *verscheißen* (‘to make fun of sb.’), to give a few examples. In all these expressions, *scheiß-* functions as a root that has lost its original meaning, preserving only the obscene character of these verbs. This also shows that the ‘peculiarity’ of expressing ideas that go beyond the realm of sexuality is by no means unique to Russian *mat*, but a general feature of obscene language.

In other words, what Erofeev regards as ‘the unique power’ of Russian obscene language can be attributed to the word-formation patterns inherent to the Russian language and the general nature of obscene words. These mechanisms are by no means unique to Russian *mat*. Similarly, there is no proof of the claim that the semantic scope of *mat* is richer and broader than that of other obscene languages. In short, the argument that Russian *mat* is a linguistic phenomenon unparalleled in the human universe stands on shaky ground. As Helmut Jachnow illustrates in his article, similar arguments have been put forward with regard to the Russian language itself (1986).³⁷ This shows that the claim to uniqueness is part of a larger pattern of attitudes towards language in Russian culture. In other words, while the claim to uniqueness is, from a linguistic point of view, completely unfounded, this speaks of something else, namely of the significant role of *mat* in Russian culture.

1.2.3. The cultural meanings of *mat*

1.2.3.1. The dirty word: *Mat* as a sign of cultural and moral decline?

It is precisely due to the above-mentioned ‘mightiness’ and ‘uniqueness’ why Russian *mat* has, at all times, played an important role in language politics. While

³⁷ The most common epithets to describe the Russian language are *velikii* (‘great’), *moguchii* (‘powerful’), *prekrasnyi* (‘wonderful’), *bogatyi* (‘rich’), *gibkii* (‘flexible’) and *iarkii* (‘expressive’), to give but a few examples (Jachnow 1986: 226). Ivan Turgenev, for example, declared his love for the Russian language in the poem *Russkii iazyk* (1882, *The Russian Language*), in which he praises the ‘great, powerful, righteous and free Russian language’ (*velikii, moguchii, pravdivyi i svobodnyi russkii iazyk*). Even linguists have hailed the Russian language as being one of particular richness. Thus, it says in the 1982 *Akademicheskaja russkaja grammatika* (*Comprehensive Russian Grammar*) that modern Russian is one of the richest languages in the world (quoted in Jachnow 1986: 211). According to Jachnow, this was an attempt to create a sense of identity among the Soviet people, as well as to increase the acceptance for Russian as the lingua franca of the Soviet Union (ibid: 227–8).

verbal obscenity has always been viewed as an idiom that needs to be put under control, posing a threat to the Russian language from within, calls for more refined speech have usually been the loudest in times of political instability and chaos, as was, for example, the case in the early 1920s.

The political and economic turmoil that followed the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917 gave rise to drastic linguistic transformations,³⁸ in the course of which a new vocabulary and speech style were introduced to public discourse. The rise of the working classes to power was also accompanied by the appearance of vulgarisms and dialect in public speech, which soon led to debates of how to ‘cleanse’ the Russian language of ‘dirty elements’. The crudity of language was seen as the result of ‘Bolshevik bad manners’ (Gorham 2000: 141), and was linked to an alleged decline in morality and a barbarisation of the Russian national character.

Upon closer examination, however, it becomes evident that the concern about language purity was strongly linked to the construction of Soviet identity and ideology. Since the language of the new Bolshevik state was to be ‘a mighty force that unites all tribes of Russian roots’ (Gorham 2003: 107), all influences contrary to the formation of a homogeneous, pure language were seen as an indirect threat to the state itself. The calls for more refined speech thus reflected the desire of the Soviet leaders for control and stability, and advocates for a ‘pure’ language considered their fight a matter of national identity. In other words, while a ‘pure’ national language was equated with strength and health, non-standard varieties and foreignisms were regarded as harmful and obstructive to the construction of a powerful state.

This was all the more so since the use of strong obscenities was closely associated with bourgeois values and seen as a ‘remnant of capitalism’ (*perezhitok kapitalizma*), as Gasan Guseinov points out (2003: 150). According to Soviet propaganda, ‘foul language injures the dignity of those who belong to that class which is the bearer of the new proletarian culture that is due to replace the rotten culture of the bourgeoisie’ (Smith 1998: 190). Trotsky even went so far as to proclaim that foul language was the ‘legacy of slavery’, reflecting a lack of respect for human dignity (1923: 230). Bourgeois culture was seen as a relic of the past, of

³⁸ Roman Jakobson referred to the developments in the early Soviet years as a ‘landslide of the norm’ (quoted in Lunde and Roesen 2006: 7).

the ‘old system’, and all elements associated therewith needed to be rooted out and eliminated.

The fight against these seemingly corrupt and immoral influences figured prominently in the authorities’ attempts to redefine the new environment. The ‘struggle for cultured speech’, to borrow Trotsky’s term, became even more important when, as a result of collectivisation and industrialisation, millions of peasants began to flock to the cities, living in poor hygienic conditions and in overcrowded places. Since the state, ‘for obvious ideological and pragmatic reasons’ (Volkov 2000: 215), was not in a position to apply full-scale punitive measures to the masses, the Soviets encouraged orderly behaviour as part of their campaign for *kulturnost* (‘culturedness’ or ‘being cultured’). By introducing uniform social norms with regard to outward appearance, ways of behaviour, education and taste in food and consumer goods, the Soviets attempted to turn the uprooted masses of peasants and workers into valuable members of the new Socialist society.³⁹ However, while cultural in form, these measurements were highly political and ideological in motivation. The campaign of ‘bringing culture to the masses’ was based on the belief that changing people’s behaviour and speech would eventually have an impact on their ways of (socialist) thinking, or, as Svetlana Boym puts it, ‘culturalization [was] a way of translating ideology into the everyday’ (1994: 105). Although the concept of *kulturnost* was never clearly defined and subject to slight variations in its focus over the course of time, the message conveyed to the broad masses remained the same — ‘being cultured’ was mandatory for a healthy and stable Socialist environment. A crucial element in the concept of *kulturnost* was refined and proper speech. ‘Learning to regulate speech (and emotion) was seen as vital to achieving the intellectual and moral self-activity that was at the heart of *kulturnost*’ (Smith 1998: 178).

This was all the more important, as *mat* is so closely tied to sexuality. And sex and all matters connected therewith were completely unmentionable in Soviet Russia. Igor Kon uses the term ‘sexophobia’ to describe the state of sexuality in the

³⁹ The Soviet concept of *kulturnost* embraced a wide range of features, from personal hygiene, having a certain common knowledge, speaking in a refined and proper manner, punctuality and being dressed properly to engaging in trade-union activities. For a more detailed discussion of the concept of *kulturnost* and its role in shaping Soviet society, see Volkov (2000) and Fitzpatrick (1999).

USSR (1995: 67). He sees the reason for the extremely negative attitude to sexuality in the fact that sexuality usually involves passionate emotions, irrationality and a loss of control. And the latter meant a particular threat to a state characterised by a totalitarian social structure. Sexuality is also central to a person's individual identity, thereby opposing the concept of collectivism, which defined Soviet society.⁴⁰ As George Orwell puts it, 'to ensure absolute control over the personality, a totalitarian regime endeavours to deindividualize it, to destroy its independence and emotional world' (quoted in Kon 1995: 76). The correlation between 'sexophobia' and de-individualisation was also recognised by such Soviet writers as Andrei Platonov and Evgenii Zamiatyn. In Zamiatyn's novel *My* (1921, *We*), citizens have the right to lower the curtains round their glass apartments during the 'sex hour', the only time they are able to escape the watchful eye of 'Big Brother'. Platonov's *Antisexsus* (1926, *Antisexus*) suggests an economic regulation of human sexuality since 'unregulated sex is an unregulated soul [...] which cannot be tolerated in the age of universal scientific reorganisation and labour' (1998: 311, my translation). Controlling speech was therefore equated with controlling the libidinal desires of the body, which in turn was equated with controlling the body politic.

1.2.3.2. The subversive word: *Mat* as anti-language?

Soviet authorities' attempts to ban obscene language from public discourse must be seen in relation to their endeavours to exercise control and power rather than a fight against immorality and corruption. Anything hindering the creation of a uniform, stable and strong political structure was viewed as something to be eradicated, or, to speak in Bolshevik rhetoric, to be 'cleansed'. The areas that, in the eyes of the Soviet leaders, needed to be 'cleansed from dirt' included more or less all layers of Soviet life. At the lowest level, the discourse of cleansing referred to personal hygiene; at the highest level, cleansing was exercised in the form of purges. Obscene language was seen as a manifestation of (verbal) dirt and associated with undesirable behaviour, disorder, chaos and filthy capitalism.

By resorting to 'binaries of pure/polluted and healthy/diseased' (Starks 2008: 22), the Soviet authorities were also able to make visible and target the unclean. As Michael Gorham points out, 'if a language is "spoiled", "impure", "defiled",

⁴⁰ Oleg Kharkhordin (1999) provides an in-depth study of the concepts of individualism and collectivism in Soviet society.

“marginal”, and “outdated”, someone, or some group, is most likely perceived as the source of the spoiling, contamination, marginalization, and thereby the target of “cleansing” or “purification” (2003: 105). Once identified, ‘contaminated individuals’ could be re-educated. In Soviet Russia, one target of purification was the *antisotsial’nyi element* (‘antisocial element’),⁴¹ i.e., drug addicts, prostitutes, criminals, homeless waifs — and hooligans.

The latter group is particularly strongly related to Russian *mat*. As Joan Neuberger (1993) shows in her comprehensive study of hooliganism in pre-revolutionary Russia, the figure of the hooligan began to appear on the urban scene at the beginning of the 20th century, when large Russian cities such as Moscow and St. Petersburg saw a massive influx of population from provincial areas. The sudden rise in population was accompanied by a significant rise in crime rates, with hooliganism named as the most frequently committed offence.⁴² *Khuliganstvo*, as this category of street crime is called in Russian, involved anything from stealing to rape to street fighting to petty crime. ‘Their crimes ranged from [...] whistling and shouting or careening about in a drunken stupor, to more aggressive acts such as bumping into passersby and yelling obscenities into ladies’ ears, to genuinely dangerous, even life-threatening crimes such as back-alley stabbings and muggings [...]’ (Neuberger 1993: 188). Accordingly, the typical hooligan was a young male, usually poor, whose major characteristics were foul language, drinking and vulgar behaviour, as well as an antagonistic attitude to traditional values.⁴³

The reason why, in the eyes of the authorities, *khuliganstvo* posed such a threat to society was that hooligans were visible through their behaviour, speech and appearance. While in former times, the poor had behaved ‘properly’, that is, they had behaved in such a way as to remain ‘invisible’ to the ruling classes, hooligans now started to attract (negative) attention — by singing bawdy songs, shouting, using

⁴¹ Another target was the ‘anti-Soviet element’ (‘enemy of the people’), that is, people whose political view differed from the official one and who were accused of being involved in ‘anti-Soviet activities’.

⁴² Smith quotes that ‘in 1906, 104 out of every 1,000 convictions were for “hooliganism”’ (1998: 175).

⁴³ The Russian *khuliganstvo* does not carry the same connotations as the English ‘hooliganism’. For a definition of the term *khuliganstvo* and its meaning in a Soviet context, see Brian LaPierre (2006: 349, note 1).

strong language, blocking streets, drinking in public, etc. For members of the upper classes, hooliganism meant an invasion into their territory, a rising of 'the low'.

For the newly founded Soviet state, hooliganism not only posed a threat to public order and to 'everyday power relations on the streets of the city' (Neuberger 1993: 14), it also became a manifestation of poor politics. While in late Imperial Russia, the blame for the rise in hooliganism could be laid on the oppressive conditions under which people were living, this argument could no longer be made in Soviet Russia because, officially, oppressive conditions had been abolished. Thus, another cause had to serve as an explanation for this pervasive problem: Hooligans deliberately intended to harm the Soviet state. Consequently, hooliganism was included as a crime in the Criminal Code of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (Art. 206), where it was defined as 'intentional actions which grossly violate public order and express an obvious disrespect towards society' (Feldbrugge *et al.* 1985: 359). Petty hooliganism (*melkoe khuliganstvo*), a milder form of hooliganism, also encompassed swearing in public, which is why Russian *mat* became such a strong marker of politically subversive and anti-social behaviour. In fact, as Brian LaPierre states, obscene speech was the most common form of petty hooliganism (2006: 355).⁴⁴

Despite the many punitive measures implemented to ban *mat* from the streets and public places,⁴⁵ the Soviet authorities were fighting a losing battle. The problem of foul language did not diminish. On the contrary, *mat* started to intermingle with the language of 'ordinary' citizens and was even spreading in Soviet classrooms. In a 1929 report, for instance, the use of dialect and vulgar words was listed as one of the three main problems Soviet schoolchildren had to deal with in language acquisition (Gorham 2003: 27). The popularity of vulgar speech was also on the rise in Komsomol organisations, alarming pedagogues and state leaders alike. Smith quotes from an article in the Komsomol newspaper *Molodoi Bol'shevik*, which says that 'unfortunately, there are among us many Komsomol members who have not yet

⁴⁴ People were arrested not only for using obscene speech in public places, but also for using it at home. LaPierre gives the example of a 42-year-old man who was arrested for cursing in front of his wife and children (2006: 355).

⁴⁵ For instance, a first campaign against swearing was launched in 1923, directed at young people. Another short-lived campaign was initiated in 1936 (Smith 1998: 189).

acquired cultured speech' (1998: 192–3). The article warns that 'the Komsomol cannot be cultured (and he ought to be) if he does not know his native tongue' (ibid).

After the Second World War, hooliganism began to explode (Kozlov 2002: 138), reaching gigantic proportions in the mid-1950s when former Gulag prisoners were released on a massive scale. And it was not only former prisoners who returned and tried to re-enter Soviet society. Miriam Dobson observes that 'the Gulag — the Soviet regime's own creation — had produced its own subculture with a unique set of ideas and beliefs' (2009: 119). These ideas and beliefs were manifestations of the Gulag subculture, which soon began to penetrate into Soviet society. Camp speech (which comprised *mat*) constituted a large part of this subculture, and when the first wave of *zeks* (Gulag inmates) returned from the camps, Soviet youth soon started to incorporate camp songs (*blatnye pesny*) and poems as part of their own identity. Even members of the *intelligentsiia* were infected by the subversive spirit of the Gulag subculture (ibid: 122).⁴⁶

Russian *mat* was not only a part of Gulag subculture. As a matter of fact, verbal obscenity constituted a key element of unofficial humour, with 'dirty jokes' enjoying particular popularity. As Smith points out, Soviet factory workers often told obscene jokes to one another out of amusement or boredom (1998: 187). A highly popular series of jokes revolved around a naughty schoolboy called Vovochka, who made heavy use of obscene language (Belousov 1996). It goes without saying that these obscene jokes, puns and riddles had to remain hidden from the official world and were to be told behind closed doors. Yet because this unofficial culture of laughter was forbidden, it became all the more attractive. As Sheila Fitzpatrick notes, 'jokes, outbursts, and the rest were a way that citizens could thumb their noses at Soviet power — an action whose appeal was all the greater because of the pious right-mindedness that was normally required of public utterances' (1999: 184). Sometimes, even news editors could not resist the temptation to twist around certain syllables and letters, changing a neutral *grad* ('city') into a vulgar *gad* ('scoundrel') (ibid).

⁴⁶ While the Gulag subculture had a certain allure for young people, many citizens were also seized with panic about the mass releases of Gulag prisoners and the idea of Gulag subculture penetrating into 'official culture' (Dobson 2009: 109ff.).

The power of these ‘salty little words’ was thus a direct result of their marginalisation by official culture. The campaigns against *mat* had only fuelled its power and popularity among the Soviet people, lending it a rebellious and disobedient touch. As shown above, it was by far not only ‘anti-social elements’ who used *mat* in order to express their discontent or their affiliation with a certain group, but ‘ordinary’ citizens, too, enjoyed telling obscene jokes and *anekdoty*.

1.2.3.3. Our word: *Mat* as a marker of Russianness?

Another reason why the Soviet authorities were bound to fail in their attempts to eradicate *mat* for good is that *mat* was (and still is) perceived as a strong marker of ‘Russianness’. In *V poiskakh grustnogo bebi* (1987, *In Search of Melancholy Baby*), for example, Vasilii Aksenov recalls how he is unexpectedly confronted with *mat* in America when a taxi driver starts yelling obscenities, an incident that is delightful to him, as it reminds him of his home country, the USSR (2000: 25). At first glance, this reaction might appear as somewhat paradoxical. After all, *mat* was forbidden in the Soviet Union and did not form an element of Soviet identity. Yet the man’s reaction reflects the conflict of identities that marked Soviet reality. Soviet identity was deeply entrenched in Russian culture, in particular with regard to literature, as veneration of the Russian classics, in particular Aleksandr Pushkin, shows. Moreover, Soviet identity was primarily defined ideologically and politically. This explains the paradox why in Soviet Russia *mat* was frowned upon and disregarded as ‘uncultured’ while at the same time hailed as an intrinsic element of national identity.

Verbal obscenity has also always been a constituent element of Russian folklore (Kon 1995: 23). In pre-revolutionary Russia, for example, *mat* was an essential ingredient of bawdy *chastushki*, short, four-line folk rhymes, sung at informal gatherings in Russian villages and small towns. Many of these songs address sexuality in a straightforward manner by making use of obscene language. This is due to the fact that in the world of folklore, everything is first and foremost sexual. Humans are a part of nature and nature is closely linked to fertility. Like obscene jokes, *chastushki* were often chanted to relieve boredom and to entertain. There is also a vast collection of folk tales and folk songs that include obscenities, such as Aleksandr Afanas’ev’s collection of bawdy tales and stories. In Soviet Russia, the

genre of the *chastushka* was appropriated for a political end and used for propaganda purposes. Naturally, these *chastushki* lacked obscene wit and only remotely resembled the original models, which did not disappear entirely, but were still sung at private and informal gatherings.

The claim that *mat* belongs to Russian cultural heritage is also indirectly made by the widespread assumption that the world of Russian obscenities is not accessible to non-natives of the Russian language. To quote Viktor Erofeev, ‘the world of *mat* is virtually inaccessible to foreigners studying Russian [because] *mat* is too situational and semantically capricious, too dependent on ludic intonational subtleties’ (2003: 43). While the Russian ear is perceptive to these semantic variations, foreigners would fail to catch the subtle distinction between the individual phrases. Besides, the Russian people are said to be generally more sensitive to obscene words than other people. This was, for instance, the purported reason why Russian translator Oleg Trubachev decided to exclude obscenities from Max Vasmer’s four-volume *Etimologicheskii slovar’ russkogo iazyka* (1953–8, *Etymological Dictionary of the Russian Language*), which originally included obscene terms. In his defence, Trubachev argued that ‘Russians have a better sense of the “expressiveness” of the words referring to “anti-culture”, and they are therefore particularly strict in driving them out of the literary language and cultural life’ (quoted in Uspenskii 1996: 11, my translation). Foreigners are therefore well advised to avoid these words altogether, as is recommended in the Russian course book *The Russian’s World*: ‘If you manage to find out what these words are, under no circumstances should you use them’ (Gerhart 1974: 163).

Yet *mat* is first and foremost a marker of male Russianness.⁴⁷ As Ilse Ermen states, ‘Russian obscene language [...] is part of male territory; it is an example for a male speech code: it is spoken by men and reflects a male reality and a male view on sexuality and gender positioning’ (1993b: 285, my translation). That *mat* belongs to male territory has also been acknowledged by Vadim Mikhailin, who sees *mat* as ‘a prerogative of the male part of [the] Russian (and Russian-speaking) population of the former Soviet Union’ and an ‘indispensable attribute’ (2004: online) of any

⁴⁷ The fact that other markers of Russianness, such as the capacity for heavy drinking, also belong to the male world emphasises that patriarchy has always remained a feature of traditional Russian society.

male-only group. He defends the heavy usage of *mat* in the army by pointing to its significance as a tool for creating male identity. In all-male societies, Mikhailin argues, *mat* often loses its expressiveness and is used almost neutrally, thereby functioning as an element of bonding.

This does not mean that women never use *mat*. Although there is only little data available on the extent of obscene swearing by women, it is safe to assume that women use obscene language when they are among themselves or on special occasions.⁴⁸ *Mat* is spoken by women working in typically male occupations, which shows that the use of *mat* is strongly contingent upon a speaker's hierarchical status and educational background. As Kauffman also points out, 'as for sex, profanity is used predominately by the male, although women who perform heavy labour are just as proficient as men in expectorating those four-letter *kaka*-phonous words' (1981: 271). Yet in Soviet Russia, in particular, women using *mat* were often viewed as intruders into this male domain, and vulgarisms coming out of a woman's mouth were significantly less tolerated by society than when uttered by a man, in particular in academic circles.⁴⁹

Moreover, from a gender perspective, Russian *mat* is extremely sexist in its nature and offensive to women. 'The gender asymmetry is all too obvious', Emil Draister concludes, strengthening his argument with a short discussion of the root *pizd-* and its derivations (1999: 41). In general, these terms may be used to degrade men and women alike. However, while for a man *pizda* ('cunt') is a serious insult (he is equated with a vagina), a woman cannot be referred to as *khui* ('cock'). The gender asymmetry inherent in Russian *mat* becomes particularly evident when looking at grammatical variants. Russian native speakers only deem idiomatic phrases denoting an action with a male subject and a female object, thus rendering the female position one of passivity and subjugation. For example, while the phrase

⁴⁸ For instance, when the Russian painter Il'ia Repin painted some children, their mothers were furious with him, as he had not asked their permission and called him the worst names. Repin commented: 'They do not curse anywhere as they do on the Volga. Many have heard and know about this. But that women can curse in this way, this is not recognized. I could not have imagined and would not have believed that a mother could curse her ten-year-old little girl in this way, in front of everyone' (quoted in Smith 1998: 176–7).

⁴⁹ Ermen's description of how Russians reacted to the topic of her master's thesis is quite telling in this respect (1993a: Introduction). Timroth also mentions the difficulties a Soviet female researcher encountered when trying to publish her dissertation on Russian obscene language (1983: 93, note 12).

on ee ebet ('he is fucking her') sounds natural, *ona ego ebet* ('she is fucking him') is not considered acceptable by Russian native speakers (ibid: 274–5).⁵⁰

1.3. Conclusion

The survey above has shown that from a linguistic point of view, there is nothing particularly special about Russian obscene language. Like other indecent terminologies, Russian *mat* involves words and expressions relating to bodily functions and sexuality, of which the latter are considered much 'dirtier' than the former. As with all indecent terminologies, there are various levels of expressivity, which also depend on the individual speaker's attitude to a certain term. There is also no evidence that Russians swear more than speakers of other languages do.

Ursula Doleschal and Sonja Schmid state that 'the uniqueness of Russian obscene vocabulary lies in its degree of interdiction as compared to Western European languages' (2001: 274). There is, in fact, no doubt of the existence of a very strong taboo concerning the use of Russian *mat*, as in Soviet times, obscene language was completely erased from public discourse. While this fact makes Russian obscene language stand apart from other obscene languages, it does not justify the claim to uniqueness since language purism — which is often characterised by a very conservative and prudish attitude to obscene language — tends to occur frequently in totalitarian and authoritarian societies. I argue that the uniqueness of Russian obscene language lies in the claim that it is unique. This belief, as well as the strong prohibition to use it, earned it a very special place in Soviet society, which is reflected in the contradictory connotations attached to it. On the one hand, *mat* was viewed as an anti-pole to *kulturnost*' and Soviet ideology; on the other hand, it was hailed as an icon of Russianness and seen as an intrinsic part of Russian identity.

In other words, *mat* was by no means excluded from Soviet culture. On the contrary, while confined to those socio-cultural spheres that were invisible to the public eye, it played a significant role as a performative marker of power relations and as an indicator of Soviet 'anti'-culture. It was, therefore, only a matter of time before writers started to exploit *mat* for literary purposes, as a result of which *mat*

⁵⁰ For a detailed discussion of gender aspects in Russian obscene language, see Ermen (1993b) and Wurm (2002).

became visible. The next chapter discusses the correlation between the written word and the obscene word, shedding light on its long history of exclusion and repression.

Chapter 2: Obscene language in literary contexts

The first chapter showed that obscene language is as old as humankind itself and an inherent part of any language, fulfilling a broad range of performative functions. Moving from the spoken to the written word now, the second chapter examines the correlation between obscene language and literary obscenity, as well as its interrelation with the notion of pornography. In doing so, the chapter provides a brief historic overview of obscene language in global literatures before taking a closer look at verbal obscenity in Russian literature. This historic overview will provide a useful point of departure for the narrative analyses conducted in Chapters 4 to 7, illustrating what role *mat* played in the formation of Russian literary culture and why it started to surface in the late 1970s.

The chapter starts with a few general observations about the role of verbal obscenity in the context of global literatures, touching upon major milestones in the history of literary obscenity. This section also sheds light on the interrelation between obscenity, mass culture and censorship. It then moves on to discuss verbal obscenity in a Russian context, tracing the status of *mat* in Russian literature from the beginning of modern literary tradition up to the moment of its surfacing in the late 1970s. Since the literary history of *mat* is mainly defined by its repression and exclusion, this section also explores *mat* with regard to its role in the negotiation and maintenance of literary and linguistic norms.

2.1. Obscene language in global literatures

Not only is obscene language as old as humankind itself, it also has as ancient a pedigree as literature does. The earliest traces of verbal obscenity can be found in the genre of folklore, which is regarded as the foundation of our modern literary tradition. As Walter Ong states, all literatures are rooted in oral traditions, in the riddles, songs, puns, jokes and tales that were passed from generation to generation (2002: 8). Any study of literary obscenity must therefore begin with a close look into its role in folklore.⁵¹ As both folklore and obscenity are strongly dependent on sound

⁵¹ The study of obscene language in folklore has increased since the mid-20th century. The *Journal of American Folklore* devoted an entire issue to the proceedings of the Symposium on Obscenity in Folklore held in 1962. Frank Hoffmann, one of the organisers, later also published the monograph *Analytical Survey of Anglo-American Traditional Erotica* (1973). Another important contribution is Ed Cray's *The Erotic Muse: American Bawdy Songs* (1992).

and context, it does not come as a surprise that verbal obscenity had a firm place in folk traditions.⁵² In oral cultures, words gained their power from being spoken aloud (Ong 2008: 31–2). This is also the case with obscene words. Oral traditions were also bound by a strong sense of shared experience, as stories were usually told in the presence of others, therefore establishing a strong feeling of group identity. Similarly, a major function of verbal obscenity is to serve as an identity marker.

Linked to the earthy and the bodily, traditional folklore employs obscene language mainly in order to provoke laughter and to release emotional tensions (Waterman 1949: 162). In this regard, verbal obscenity assumes a function similar to obscene jokes in that it helps solidify bonding.⁵³ Jeffrey Henderson remarks that ‘the pleasure afforded by obscenities lies in our enjoyment at exposing someone else or seeing someone else exposed without having to effect the exposure physically’ (1991: 7). This form of ‘exposure’ was also at work in Attic Comedy. The Greek audience took great pleasure in watching plays by Aristophanes, since they were rich in obscenities and crude jokes, intended to debunk and expose all that was considered ridiculous in Greek society. The ‘victims’ of these obscenities were, as Henderson points out, the characters on stage or targets outside the play, allowing the audience to enjoy these forms of ‘exposure’ without restraint. In Greek culture, obscenity was therefore not employed to stimulate sexual fantasies, but ‘to shock, anger or amuse’ (ibid: 9).⁵⁴

Elements of obscene humour were later also used in medieval comedy to unmask and expose the hypocritical conventions of the Church. Geoffrey Chaucer (1343–1400), for example, used a whole range of four-letter words and scatological obscenities in *The Canterbury Tales* (1475), in particular in the profane ‘The Miller’s Tale’. Other famous examples are *Divina Commedia* (1555, *The Divine Comedy*) by Dante Alighieri (1265–1321) and William Shakespeare’s comedies,

⁵² Richard A. Waterman observes in an early article on obscenity in folklore that American academics tended to classify a story as ‘folklore’ rather than as ‘literature’ (1949: 162) if it contained obscene elements.

⁵³ The mechanisms of obscene humour have been studied in depth. See, for example, Gershon Legman’s classic *Rationale of the Dirty Joke: An Analysis of Sexual Humor* (1968), which was followed by *No Laughing Matter: Rationale of the Dirty Joke* (1975). All these studies are based on Sigmund Freud’s *The Joke and Its Relation to the Unconscious* (1905).

⁵⁴ For a detailed description of the function of obscene language in Greek literature, see Jeffrey Henderson’s *The Maculate Muse* (1975) and James Robson’s *Humour, Obscenity and Aristophanes* (2006). Amy Richlin’s *The Garden of Priapus* (1983) discusses sexuality in Roman humour.

which all made wide use of scatological obscenities to evoke laughter and to ridicule the authorities.

One of the great scatologists in literature was the French writer François Rabelais (1494–1553). Scholar Mikhail Bakhtin (1984) linked the scatological and obscene nature in Rabelais's satirical series *La vie de Gargantua et de Pantagruel* (c. 1532–64, *The Life of Gargantua and of Pantagruel*) to the traditions of folk humour and carnival celebrations, with obscenities and scatological images representing the joys and gaiety of life. Yet Rabelais also used the 'low' as a device to mock and attack the Medieval Church and to expose their vices and follies. Therefore, the first three books of the series were included in the catalogue of censored books published by the Sorbonne, the Faculty of Theology at the University of Paris, and the Parliament of Paris (Kinser 1990: 5).

Rabelais's works were not the only ones that attracted the attention of censors. All across Europe, mechanisms of censorship began to be implemented from the 16th century. The introduction of punitive measures went hand in hand with the development of modern printing technology, which had an enormous impact on the availability and distribution of written materials. Books soon became affordable to an unprecedentedly large number of people. As a result, by the end of the 19th century, literacy rates had increased significantly in the Western world (Lyons 1999: 313). Now no longer a habit reserved for an upper-class male readership, reading became accessible to a growing number of people, including women and the lower classes. Printers and booksellers were quick to react to the demands and taste of these 'new "classes" of readers' (DeJean 2002: 57), as well as to the changing market requirements. The habit of reading also strengthened the notion of individualism and encouraged self-reflection. As Ong observes, '[print] produced books smaller and more portable than those common in a manuscript culture, setting the stage psychologically for solo reading in a quiet corner, and eventually for completely silent reading' (2002: 131).

The shift in reading from a public to a more private activity also resulted in the emergence of books of a more 'private nature'. Obscene fiction written in the vernacular, much of it coming initially from the Continent, began to enjoy increasing popularity among readers. *La puttana errante* (1650–60), translated as *The*

Wandering Whore in 1660, *L'Ecole des filles* (1655), translated as *A School for Girls* in 1688, Nicolas Chorier's *Satyra sotadica* (1660), translated as *A Dialogue between a Married Lady and a Maid* in 1688, and *Venus dans le cloître* (1683), translated as *Venus in the Cloister* in 1683, were distributed widely in England in the second half of the 17th century. A home-grown obscene print industry did not emerge until a century later, with John Cleland's *Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure* (1748–9), which became one of the most popular novels of that time.⁵⁵ It was, however, not only obscene novels that started to circulate in Victorian England. Obscene magazines, booklets and postcards addressing primarily a working-class audience enjoyed enormous popularity and were produced on a mass scale (Pease 2000: 52). The phenomenon of literary obscenity is thus closely linked to the emergence of mass culture, which in turn can be related to the evolution of printing. Joan DeJean concludes that 'it was surely no accident that, at the origin of mass culture, obscenity first invaded the modern literary scene' (2002: 68).⁵⁶

Works of a sexually explicit nature were now mostly written with the specific purpose of arousing sexual desires and fantasies. The female prostitute-narrator became a staple in the emerging tradition of obscene writing, created by male authors for an all-male audience, reflecting male sexuality and lust. In fact, as Kathryn Norberg writes, 'no other character [...] can dispute her dominance in the world of the obscene' (1986: 225). It was in this period that the term 'pornography' came into use in Western Europe, which was soon used as a synonym for obscenity. This shift towards sexuality is also reflected in the introduction of the new laws that were to regulate the circulation and production of obscene material. The 1857 Obscene Publications Act set the tone for literary obscenity in the decades to come, making the sale of obscene publications a statutory offence and giving the courts power to seize offending material. The legal definition of obscenity was established later, in the famous Hicklin Rule, which was based on the case of *Regina v. Hicklin* in 1868. In his judgement, Justice Alexander Cockburn applied the term obscenity to those printed materials published 'to deprave and corrupt those whose minds are

⁵⁵ Since the novel had to be sold under the counter, the exact number of copies sold cannot be determined. It was not until 1964 that British readers could buy the novel openly in bookstores. For details on the publishing history of the novel, see Ralph Thompson's 'Deathless Lady' (1935).

⁵⁶ Lynn Hunt (1996: 30) and Steven Marcus (2008: 247) also see a link between the rise of the novel and the notion of literary obscenity, arguing that the latter was a by-product of the former.

open to such immoral influences, and into whose hands a publication of this sort may fall' (quoted in Feinberg 1985: 171).

With literary obscenity now emphasising sexuality, the language used in obscene literature started to change as well. As Allison Pease points out, modern pornography is predominantly concerned with the sensual dimension of the body, trying to evoke a physical response in the reader by mimicking the body in all its minute details (2000: 6). Yet as the history of this genre illustrates, pornography has traditionally evoked the materiality and palpability of the body by avoiding all too explicit and direct language, resorting to extended metaphors and euphemisms. Steven Marcus goes so far as to contend that pornography tries to escape language, since its function 'is to set going a series of non-verbal images, of fantasies' (2008: 279). John Cleland's novel *Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure* (1748–9), also known as *Fanny Hill*, is a case in point, since it does not contain a single obscene word. Cleland allegedly wrote the novel as a response to the French *L'Ecole des filles* (1655, *A School for Girls*). His intention was to show that it was possible to write about sexual pleasures without resorting to the linguistic coarseness characterising the French novel (Gladfelder 2012: 19), an aim he achieved. As Elisabeth Ladenson remarks, '[the novel's] vocabulary is purely metaphoric, even if its narrative leaves nothing to the imagination' (2007: 90).

In fact, as the long list of books banned on grounds of obscenity shows, verbal obscenity has played a remarkably subordinate role in the history of literary censorship. Many novels described as 'filth' were suppressed and prosecuted on the basis of their subject matter and their conflicts with prevailing morality standards rather than the language employed. Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* (1856)⁵⁷ came to trial in 1857 because the heroine's adultery was not punished accordingly in the novel. The authorities argued that it might encourage young women to follow Emma Bovary's immoral example.⁵⁸ In the same year, Charles Baudelaire faced obscenity charges on grounds of his collection of poems *Les Fleurs du Mal* (1857, *The Flowers of Evil*), which were regarded as offensive to public morality. Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness* (1928) and Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* (1955) were

⁵⁷ The novel was published in six instalments in the French *La Revue de Paris* between 1 October 1856 and 15 December 1856 (Ladenson 2007: 18).

⁵⁸ For a detailed discussion of the trial on *Madame Bovary*, see Walter Kendrick's *The Secret Museum* (1987: 106–15) and Elisabeth Ladenson's *Books on Trial* (2007, Chapter 1).

also prosecuted solely for their subject matter, even though both novels were completely free of graphic depictions of sexuality and explicit language.⁵⁹

One of the first books to address sexuality in more explicit terms was *Lady Chatterley's Lover* by D. H. Lawrence, which was first published in 1928. To quote Stephen Kern, '*Lady Chatterley's Lover* is about how the word became deed and the deed became word' (1994: 136). Lawrence not only included explicit descriptions in the novel, but he also put obscene words into the mouths of his characters, regardless of their sex and class. This made Lawrence's novel problematic in the eyes of critical readers. 'It was not sexual intercourse that had begun — nor adultery — but fucking' (Ladenson 2007: 140). Lawrence was also the first to defend the writer's right to use verbal obscenity as an artistic means for describing human sexuality. In his essay 'A Propos of *Lady Chatterley's Lover*', he asserts that 'if I use the taboo words, there is a reason. We shall never free the phallic reality from the uplift taint till we give it its own phallic language, and use the obscene words' (2002: 334).

James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922) was also banned for its use of obscene language,⁶⁰ but in contrast to *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, Joyce mainly employs sexual language towards non-sexual ends, mingling it with scatological elements. While the novel cannot be described as aphrodisiacal in its nature (which, in accordance with the Hicklin Rule, was one of the determining factors of whether or not a work of art was to be deemed obscene), it was immediately denounced as 'the most infamously obscene book in ancient or modern literature' (quoted in Green and Karolides 2009: 154; entry on J. Douglas). Moreover, the novel was considered 'a hard read' and therefore unappealing to the broad masses, an argument that was also brought forward in its defence to show its lack of potential to 'deprave and corrupt' (Sir Alexander Cockburn quoted in Feinberg 1985: 171) easily influenced minds.

⁵⁹ Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness* (1928) featured a sexual relationship between two women. For a detailed analysis of the trial, see Diana Souhami's *The Trials of Radclyffe Hall* (1999: 192–241). Vladimir Nabokov's novel was banned because it featured a sexual relationship between a middle-aged man and a 12-year-old girl. The trial is discussed at length in Ladenson's *Books on Trial* (2007, Chapter 5).

⁶⁰ Joyce's *Ulysses* was published as a serial between 1918 and 1920 when the publication of the *Nausicaa* episode led to prosecution for obscenity. The novel was banned in the United States for 13 years. Following its ban in the States, the novel was, while never banned officially, deemed unprintable in the United Kingdom (Herbert 2009: 3ff.).

Still, it took over ten years for the ban on *Ulysses* to be finally lifted in 1933 in a landmark decision by Judge John M. Woolsey, who ruled that the question of whether a work of art is to be judged as obscene is to be determined by looking at the book as a whole rather than at individual passages.⁶¹ The obscene was, for the first time, elevated to the status of high-brow art. The defence against the obscene on the grounds of its literary merit has been adopted by most obscenity regulations and is still in force today.⁶² This prompted Charles Rembar, who fought and won some of the most important censorship cases in American law, to speak of *The End of Obscenity* (1968). While the ‘end of obscenity’ has not been reached (obscenity has merely changed its form),⁶³ as a result of the amended obscenity laws, many books formerly banned on grounds of obscenity are now acclaimed classics and form a solid part of the Western literary canon.

2.2. Obscene language in Russian literary tradition

While in Western literary cultures, the appearance of obscene language in literary texts had lost much of its shock factor by the late 20th century, *mat* was only about to enter the literary arena in Russia.⁶⁴ Although *mat* words had seldom been ‘out of earshot’ (Smith 1998: 167) in Soviet Russia, readers reacted to the sudden ‘surge’ of obscene language in printed texts with disbelief and bewilderment, reactions that sometimes took somewhat grotesque forms. When, for example, Viktor Erofeev’s novel *Russkaia krasavitsa* (*Russian Beauty*) was about to be released in 1990, the workers at the printing press initially refused to do their job because of the many obscenities they encountered in the text (Poliakov 2008: online).

⁶¹ John M. Woolsey’s ‘Decision of the United States District Court Rendered December 6, 1933’ was included in the 1961 edition of *Ulysses*, published by Vintage.

⁶² The Miller standard, developed in the 1973 case *Miller v. California*, is still used by the US Supreme Court to determine whether a work is to be deemed obscene. The notion of obscenity depends on ‘a) whether the average person [...] would find that the work, taken as a whole, appeals to the prurient interest; b) whether the work depicts or describes, in a patently offensive way, sexual conduct [...]; and c) whether the work, taken as a whole, lacks serious literary, artistic, political or scientific value’ (Green and Karolides 2009: 351, entry on the Miller standard). In Britain, literary obscenity is regulated through the 1959 *Obscene Publications Act*, according to which obscenity is permissible if it is ‘in the interests of science, literature, art or learning’ (section 4 (1A)).

⁶³ Kevin W. Sanders argues that ‘hate speech is the today’s equivalent of obscenity’ (2011: 6), with hate speech including racist, sexist and homophobic speech. Joan DeJean argues that obscenity is nowadays more related to excess (2002: 181, note 17). The correlation between obscenity and excess is also discussed at length in Chapter 7.

⁶⁴ The process of linguistic liberation did not occur in one single step. As Herman Ermolaev points out, ‘a great deal hinged on [the] editorial discretion of individual journals and publishing houses’ (1997: 253).

What shocked readers even more than the mere sight of obscene words spelled out in full was the revelation that obscene language had entered the realm of Russian letters long before the late 20th century. As Erofeev remarks, ‘the curious reader was astonished to learn that Pushkin, Lermontov, Turgenev, Chekhov and Maiakovskii all had used *mat* in their poems as much as in their private letters’ (2008: 39, my translation). Aleksandr Pushkin not only had a strong penchant for obscene language, he even appears to have been a defender of its place in the Russian language.⁶⁵ In one of his letters he wrote that he would like ‘to preserve in the Russian language a certain biblical obscenity’ rather than see ‘traces of European affection and French refinement in our primitive language’ (quoted in Wolff 1986: 75). Pushkin was also a deep admirer of the poet Ivan Barkov (1732–68), dedicating the ballad *Ten’ Barkova* (1814–5, *The Shade of Barkov*) to the ‘godfather of literary obscenity’ (Erofeev 2008: 39).

While Barkov’s literary legacy nowadays rests primarily on his use of Russian *mat*, Pushkin’s bawdy works have, at best, been dismissed as ‘youthful pranks’ and excused by the author’s immaturity. Distinguishing between Pushkin’s ‘mature’ works (*zrelye proizvedeniia*) and his ‘immature’ ones (*nezreloe iunosheskoe tvorchestvo*), literary critic Boris Tarasov argues that the latter would not belong to the literary legacy of the ‘real Pushkin’. If a literary giant like Pushkin used *mat*, Tarasov asserts, this must clearly be dismissed as the first immature steps of a young poet writing for private entertainment rather than be treated as serious art (Poliakov 2008: online). Others have refused to accept Pushkin’s ‘libertine’ side altogether, arguing that these poems do not reflect Pushkin’s style.⁶⁶

Readers’ reluctance to associate Russia’s national poet with obscene language is, without doubt, a reflection of the extraordinary status and deep adoration Pushkin has enjoyed in Russian culture at all times.⁶⁷ It is, however, also a reflection of the fact that standard Russian — and Pushkin is traditionally regarded as the ‘founder’ of modern standard Russian — is deemed incompatible with obscene language.

⁶⁵ Pushkin’s penchant for obscene language is well documented. Marina Tsvetaeva, for example, wrote in one of her *Poems to Pushkin* that ‘I shake Pushkin’s hand, I do not lick it’ (both the original text and the English translation are cited in Sandler 2004: 259–60).

⁶⁶ In particular, Pushkin’s authorship of *Ten’ Barkova* has been the subject of heated debates. For a detailed analysis of this discourse, see Igor Pilshchikov (2012).

⁶⁷ ‘But Pushkin is our all’ declared critic and poet Apollon Grigor’ev as early as 1859, cementing the poet’s fame for his generation and for the generations to come (quoted in Sandler 2005: 403).

Standard Russian, that is, the variety of the Russian language that is perceived as the norm to be adhered to in public discourse and that enjoys the highest prestige, is known as *literaturnyi iazyk* ('literary language'), a term that emphasises the strong correlation between literature and the written word. *Mat* words, by contrast, are also known as *nepechatnye slova* ('unprintable words'), which indicates their incompatibility with the printed, and hence literary, word, as well as its strong ties with orality.

2.2.1. Articulating norms: Writers' attitudes to *mat*

While Pushkin's impact on the formation of modern Russian cannot be denied, it must not be forgotten that the process of normalising the new language had already begun much earlier, as a result of the cultural reforms introduced by Peter the Great. Influenced by the literary traditions in European countries, in particular in France, Peter the Great felt the necessity to replace Old Church Slavonic with a new literary language, one that would have the potential to measure up to European standards and be characterised by its multifunctionality. The establishment of linguistic and aesthetic norms became the main process in forming the new Russian literary language, and since French Classicism was the ruling doctrine at that time, it also had an impact on the formation of the Russian literary language.⁶⁸

In line with the linguistic and stylistic norms of Classicist purism, the new Russian literary language viewed all forms of dialect and vulgarisms as an indication of provincialism and 'bad taste'. As a result, even syllables evoking improper meanings were to be avoided in writing (Zhivov 2009: 240). As philosopher and linguist Vasilii Trediakovskii wrote in his 1750 *Letter from a Friend to a Friend* [to Aleksandr Sumarokov], '[these words] signify something vile when used or combined like writing *bludia* instead of *zabluzhdaia*, or using *kakoeb* instead of *kakoe*' (quoted in *ibid*: 242, note 16), alluding to the fact that the two words in question were phonetically similar to the obscene words *bliad* ('whore') and *eb* ('fuck'). This shows that when the various literary traditions existing at that time were being unified, vulgarisms, including *mat*, had already acquired a fairly low

⁶⁸ As Peter Burke points out, by the 18th century, French had established itself as a European lingua franca. The dominance of the French language led to resistance in the form of campaigns against foreignisms in countries outside France, for example, in Germany. In Russia, by contrast, there were only a few signs of purist tendencies despite the flood of French foreign words entering the Russian language (2004: 85–8; 150–4).

aesthetic status and were deemed incompatible with the evolving standard variety. This is also reflected in the fact that *mat* words were excluded from Mikhail Lomonosov's doctrine of three literary styles (see Introduction, note 7).

The status of *mat* was only to decrease over the course of time, with even realist writers refraining from obscene words in their works. This contradicts the findings of Soviet linguist G. O. Vinokur, who maintained that 'since the basic material of the great Russian realist literature of the 19th and 20th centuries was provided by the authentic realities of Russian life, realist writers could not but include among their tasks the reproduction of living Russian speech in its multifarious forms reflecting occupational, social and dialect differences' (1971: 127). At that time, obscene language was very much part of the 'authentic realities of Russian life'. Dostoevsky, for example, was clearly aware of the proliferation of *mat* in Russian society, as an entry devoted to the semantic richness of Russian *mat* in his 1873 *Dnevnik pisatel'ia* (*A Writer's Diary*) shows, but he did not resort to verbal obscenity in his works. On the contrary, as was discussed in Chapter 1, he opposed the use of *mat* even in its spoken form.

Not only was the avoidance of verbal obscenity a result of the aesthetic norms that had been introduced, it also reflected the increasing significance ascribed to the printed word. When literacy started to grow and a more advanced printing technology appeared in the 19th century, the cultural elites began to realise the impact literature might have on the process of shaping a national consciousness. Taking upon itself the 'heavy burden of education and moralisation' (Kustanovich 1993: 137), literature was believed to contribute significantly to the distribution of values and ideas, shaping public opinion and helping construct a unified national identity. Iurii Lotman observes that 'examples of how people of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries constructed their personal behaviour, their everyday speech, and in the last analysis their destiny in life, according to literary and theatrical models are very numerous' (1984: 145). For this reason, educated readers opposed literary diversity, supporting instead the idea of cultural unity as expressed through a literary tradition that would reach all strata of society. Nikolai Gogol, for instance, who was convinced of the primary function of Russian literature to create a sense of unity among Russians, stated that '[literature] will evoke our Russia for us

— our Russian Russia [...] and will display us in such a way that everyone [...] will say with one voice: “This is our Russia: it is a warm refuge for us, and now we are really at home in it, under our native roof and not in a foreign land” (2009: xxiii).

The creation of a unified culture felt particularly important in light of the emergence of a thriving popular commercial literature, which had a growing appeal to the lower masses. Penny dreadfuls (*kopek* novels), tales about banditry and chivalry, crime stories and adventure novels were all being widely read at that time. *Lubok* literature, which mainly contained illustrations accompanied by short texts, enjoyed particular popularity.⁶⁹ Alarmed by the success of this cheap fiction, educated readers felt a moral obligation to provide the ‘common reader’ with some form of guidance as to what authors and what literature they ought to read (Brooks 1985: 317–22). ‘Proper’ reading material was highly didactic in nature, offering spiritual and moral guidance. This explains why, for the intellectual elite, the bodily naturalism of ‘low culture’ was considered incompatible with the idealistic spirituality of ‘high culture’, an approach that also affected the literary representation of corporeality and sexuality. As Viktor Erofeev notes, in literature ‘preference has always been given to spiritual, “platonic” love than to sensuality and carnal, physical passion’ (1990a: 97). *Mat* as the linguistic representation of sexuality was found incompatible with these idealistic aims.

2.2.2. Preserving norms: Censors’ attitudes to *mat*

The avoidance of verbal obscenity was, however, not merely a result of the aesthetic and moral norms prevailing at that time, nor was it at writers’ sole discretion. Writers and literary critics had considerable influence on the formation of literary norms, yet they, too, were subject to the official censorship practices that were in place in Imperial Russia. As Lev Loseff states, ‘from the era of Peter the Great on, the entire history of Russian literature is to a significant degree also the history of censorship’ (1984: ix). Under the reign of Nikolai I (1825–1855), censorship regulations were particularly strict. Prior to publication, all writings had to pass through the hands of censors, who would ban any material found harmful and

⁶⁹ The tradition of the *lubok*, which means ‘popular print’, can be traced back to the early 17th century. It continued to dominate the Russian literary scene up to 1918, when this form of literature was finally banned to make room for the literature of the new Soviet state. At the peak of their popularity, in the late 1880s, publishers specialising in *lubok* literature produced ‘a million cheap pocket sized books a year’ (Brooks 1978: 121).

threatening to the government, Christian beliefs or morality. This is a noteworthy difference to censorship practices in Western Europe. Obscene language and explicit sexual descriptions were also a thorn in the side of Western authorities, but in contrast to Tsarist Russia, books could only be banned after they had been published.

This means that regardless of whether or not Pushkin's bawdy poems were the result of the writer's boredom or immaturity, the Golden Age was not ready for the publication of sexually explicit literature, a fact literary critic Boris Tarasov did not mention (Poliakov 2008: online). Works containing erotic and obscene elements were consigned to manuscript circulation or had to be published by foreign or private press. As Igor Kon explains, 'a lot of bawdy verse was anonymous and passed from hand to hand in manuscript form', which is why '[this kind of poetry] existed at the periphery of "high" literature' (1995: 26). Censorship as an obstacle to getting published was, for example, the reason why folklorist Aleksandr Afanas'ev had to publish his collection of bawdy tales and poems, released as *Russkie zavetnye skazky* (1872, *Russian Secret Tales*), in Geneva.

In 1905, the year of the Revolution, preventive censorship was finally abolished, and censorship committees were now only able to react after a work had been printed by prosecuting the author, publisher or printer. This change in censorship practices enabled the publication of a whole range of literary works unprecedentedly explicit in their representation of sexuality.⁷⁰ Leonid Andreev's *Bezdna* (1902, *The Abyss*), Fedor Sologub's *Melkii bes* (1905, *The Petty Demon*), Mikhail Kuzmin's *Kryl'ia* (1906, *Wings*), Mikhail Artsybashev's *Sanin* (1907, *Sanin*), Anastasiia Verbitskaia's *Kliuchi shchast'ia* (1909, *The Keys to Happiness*) and Aleksandr Kuprin's *Iama* (1915, *The Pit*) all stirred up a lot of controversy upon their publication, but it was more the unconventional standards of sexuality that made them appear 'pornographic' in the eyes of the intelligentsia and the authorities than the language used. In the latter respect, these novels appear quite chaste and innocent by contemporary standards. The Russian word *grud'* ('bosom'), for example, was

⁷⁰ Critics at that time often treated these novels as belonging to one category. As Otto Boele notes, 'the boundaries that we may find tempted to draw between serious literature and popular fiction [...] were not at all that obvious to the popular press and its readership [...]. Authors as divergent as Artsybashev, Sologub, Kamenski, Balmont and Kuzmin were often grouped together on the assumption that they all wrote pornography and openly professed sexual license' (2009: 10). For a more detailed discussion of Russian fin-de-siecle literature, see Laura Engelstein's *The Key to Happiness* (1992, Chapter 10) and Olga Matich's *Erotic Utopia* (2005).

identified as one of the many ‘pornographic’ features of Artsybashev’s novel *Sanin* (Boele 2009: 108).

This shows that, with the exception of the Silver Age, literature in Imperial Russia was strongly anti-sexual and anti-erotic in nature. This was partly due to the censorship rules imposed by the Church and the state and partly due to the functions ascribed to the printed word by the cultural elite, in particular with regard to the formation of a national identity. As a result, *mat* as the linguistic representation of sexuality and corporeality did not find a place in Russian literary tradition prior to the October Revolution.

2.2.3. Enforcing norms: Politics’ attitude to *mat*

The Revolution of 1917 led to the fall of the Russian Empire and to the creation of the Soviet Union in 1922, heralding a new age in world politics. The Revolution brought with it massive socio-economic transformations, which led to massive linguistic changes (see Chapter 1). The latter also found reflection in literature. The horrors and atrocities of the war demanded a harsh and cruel language, as is evident from the way in which poets and writers reacted to the Revolution. Aleksandr Blok’s narrative poem *Dvenadtsat’* (1918, *The Twelve*) was one of the first literary responses to the Revolution, and it is a good example of the linguistic revolution taking place at that time. Set in Petrograd, the poem follows 12 Red Army guards on their march through the city, describing their plundering and slaughtering in a highly symbolist manner, mixing refined speech and crude colloquialisms. The poem mingles street slang with religious motifs and folk rhymes, thus symbolising the massive upheaval that had been caused by the clash of the two worlds, old Tsarist Russia and the young Bolshevik state. Blok himself was aware of the clashes between the low and the high during that time, stating that vulgarisms were ‘an essential if contradictory part of the Russians’ spiritual nature’ (quoted in Neuberger 1993: 150). Yet even though Blok’s symbolist poem revolves around the destructive atrocities of war, he did not resort to verbal obscenity as a linguistic means to convey those cruelties.

Similarly, *mat* was avoided in the various movements of the Russian avant-garde of the early 20th century. This is a highly curious point to make, in particular in light of their rebellious, exhibitionist and confrontational nature. Joan Neuberger, for

example, regards futurism as a form of hooliganism, calling it ‘the most important form of artistic rebellion’ (1993: 143). Futurists like Vladimir Maiakovskii and Aleksei Kruchenykh were perceived as radical because they attempted to free art from institutional control and traditional conventions and because of their call for new writing techniques in poetry, thus ‘slapping the face of public taste’.⁷¹ These new techniques did not, however, include verbal obscenity. Even Maiakovskii’s biggest rival, the infamous ‘poet hooligan’ Sergei Esenin, did not use *mat* in his works.⁷² While his two poems *Khuligan* (1919, *Hooligan*) and *Ispoved’ khuligana* (1920, *A Hooligan’s Confession*) include expressions from spoken and colloquial Russian, they are devoid of *mat* words and are, from a contemporary view, rather tender in tone.⁷³

The image of the radical ‘poet hooligan’ mainly had to do with the way these writers behaved in public and the many scandals they caused. In an attempt to ‘[join] art to life’ (quoted in Larionov and Zdanevich 1913: 244), Futurist poets reclaimed their right to recite poetry on the streets, attracting the attention of the crowd through public performances. Esenin, too, caused several public scandals. With his friend and fellow poet Anatolii Mariengof, he painted blasphemous verses on the walls of a convent, and he chopped up icons for firewood in order to heat up some tea (McVay 1976: 119). Yet all these public scandals were part of the literary persona he had created for himself, ‘the tender hooligan, gentle and crude, humane and cynical all at once’ (ibid). By performing the obscene in public, Esenin and Maiakovskii created ‘hooligan’ images that were also projected onto their works. They did not, however, go so far as to use *mat* words in their poetry.

Russian *mat* did not acquire strong subversive political overtones until it was systematically hunted down by Soviet censors. As was discussed in Chapter 1, obscenities, curses and anything considered inappropriate and ‘dirty’ were purged

⁷¹ Their 1912 manifesto ‘A Slap in the Face of Public Taste’ rebelled against ‘good taste’ and ‘common sense’ (Lawton and Eagle 2005: 52) and demanded that ‘the poet’s *rights* be revered’ (ibid: 51). These rights included, among other things, the enlargement of the scope of the poet’s vocabulary with ‘arbitrary and derivative words’ (ibid) and the right to express hatred towards the language of the classics.

⁷² Esenin belonged to the circle of the Imaginists, who saw themselves in rivalry with the Futurists. However, as Gordon McVay states, ‘their animosity seemed in part to have been artificially generated for the sake of publicity’ (1976: 167).

⁷³ As McVay points out, the poem *Ispoved’ khuligana* initially included the line ‘Today I feel the desire to piss from the window at the moon’, but this line was published in full only in the 1920s and removed from all later publications (1976: 145).

from public discourse, including euphemisms and allusions. It is, however, important to emphasise that *mat* was not simply repressed in Soviet Russia. In fact, the subject of obscene language became very much part of the official discourse on linguistic issues. As cultural historians Peter Stallybrass and Allon White observe, ‘what is *socially* peripheral is frequently *symbolically* central’ (1986: 5). This is a significant point to consider because it largely accounts for the reason why *mat* became such a powerful tool for writers. The strong opposition to foul language was also emphasised in an order issued on 26 November 1934, in which Boris Volin, former head of the Press Section of the People’s Commissariat of Foreign Affairs, instructed his subordinates to ‘fight resolutely against coarse expressions, swearwords, and the jargons of professional thieves’ (quoted in Ermolaev 1997: 56). As discussed earlier, the State also launched several campaigns against foul speech and instructed censors to pay increased attention to verbal impurities. Although censorship treatment of *mat* words was sometimes quite inconsistent, ‘the puritanical censorship of literary works began simultaneously with the political one and was carried out with an equal degree of vigilance’ (ibid: 42).

Verbal obscenity was also found incompatible with Socialist Realism, the official practice of Soviet literature and literary criticism. With literature now being a state affair, it was a powerful propaganda tool for the Soviet regime, applied to influence the masses. Soviet writers were to give ‘a truthful, historically concrete depiction of reality in its revolutionary development’ (ibid: 197), but they were also to mould and educate readers in the spirit of Socialism. In other words, Socialist Realism attempted ‘a subordination of historical reality to the preexisting patterns of legend and history [bridging] the gap between “is” and “ought to be”’ (Clark 1981: 40). Verbal obscenity, embodying everything that Soviet culture ought *not* to be, thus acquired strong ideological and political overtones. Writer Maxim Gorky was one of the first to point out the correlation between Soviet ideology and Russian verbal obscenity, claiming that the use of vulgarisms in literary texts would make ‘a clear ideology impossible’ (1953: online, my translation). This shows that verbal obscenity was not merely a linguistic phenomenon lingering at the periphery of Soviet literary culture, but an integral element thereof, creating meaning through its exclusion (not absence) from official discourse.

The strong interdependence between obscene language and the dominant, official culture is an important point to consider when discussing the extent to which *mat* came to function as a subversive element in the post-Stalin and late Soviet periods. Nikita Khrushchev's 'secret speech' about abuses during the Stalin years, delivered at the Twentieth Party Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in 1956, had stimulated the publication of a number of works diverging from the literary and linguistic norms prescribed by Socialist Realism, thus attempting to break away from the totalitarian past. Vasilii Aksenov and other practitioners of Youth Prose used slang in their texts,⁷⁴ while Village Prose writers like Valentin Rasputin reintroduced forms of non-standard speech typical of rural Russia.⁷⁵

The desire to come to terms with the Stalinist past was particularly evident in the many Gulag narratives published during that time. One of the most influential Gulag voices, if not *the* Gulag voice to be heard, was that of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn. His *Odin den' Ivana Denisovicha* (1962, *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovitch*) became the most significant text of that time. Published in the literary journal *Novyi mir*, Solzhenitsyn's tale of life in a Gulag camp triggered a response unparalleled in Russian literary criticism. While most readers applauded Solzhenitsyn's attempt 'to tell the truth', he was criticised for his use of profane language in the text. Readers not only had issues with the appearance of profane language per se, they also questioned its authentic nature. 'One pensioner described how he almost laughed at the made-up criminal (*blatnoi* [sic]) words, but was then overcome with confusion as to how this kind of "concoction" came to be published' (Dobson 2005: 589). Employing the slang spoken in the Gulag camps, Solzhenitsyn made ample use of euphemisms and neologisms, in particular with regard to *mat* words.

The 'small window of freedom' pushed open in the Thaw period was soon shut tight when Leonid Brezhnev was appointed as the new Soviet leader after Khrushchev's removal. With the screws of official censorship re-tightened, writers were now bound to publish their works by means of *samizdat* (underground) or

⁷⁴ Youth Prose (*molodezhnaia proza*) was a literary movement of young writers in the 1960s. Most of them published in the journal *Iunost* ('Youth'). Youth Prose featured 'the rebellion of young heroes who try to cleanse themselves of the bloody Stalinist past and win individual freedom' (Lipovetsky 1999: 319).

⁷⁵ Village Prose (*derevenskaia proza*) was a literary movement that began in the Thaw period and that focused on life in the peasant village. For a detailed discussion, see Kathleen Parthé's *Russian Village Prose* (1992).

tamizdat (literature published abroad). Yet the linguistic landslide that had been set in motion in the Thaw period was not to be stopped, only delayed. This became evident when the five writers Vasilii Aksenov, Viktor Erofeev, Andrei Bitov, Evgenii Popov and Fasil' Iskander published the literary almanac *Metropol'* in 1979, which was a first attempt at publishing literary works uncensored. While the texts included in the almanac represented various genres and styles, they had one principle in common, which was 'opposition to the totalitarian state of mind, and commitment to overcoming it' (Aksenov 1982: 155). One way of overcoming 'the totalitarian state of mind' was through the use of *mat*, which caused the Soviet authorities to take reprisals against the writers concerned, including their suspension from the Soviet Writers' Union.

While the Soviet regime had power over the publications within Soviet Russia, they could not control the texts published abroad, in émigré journals and newspapers. Many *samizdat* writers decided to leave the country and/or were forced into emigration, where they continued their literary activities. It does therefore not come as a surprise that Russian *mat* made its first 'proper' appearance in émigré literature, with writers Eduard Limonov and Iuz Aleshkovskii pioneering the use of verbal obscenity in literary texts.

2.3. Conclusion

This chapter has examined the role of obscene language in literature. We have seen that, while verbal obscenity has at all times played a role in literary cultures, it did not become a menace and threat until it appeared in print, as a result of which it was subjected to strict censorship regulations and bans. Obscenity laws were thus introduced as regulatory tools, which the authorities drew upon to discipline the culture of the working classes. Literature deemed obscene did not necessarily include obscene language. In fact, as the chapter has demonstrated, verbal obscenity played a remarkably subordinate role in the emerging genre of obscene fiction. This also had to do with the fact that the notion of obscenity had begun to shift towards pornography, a genre that avoided all too explicit language. It was not until the late 20th century that obscene language was granted a place in 'high' literature, when censorship regulations were gradually lifted.

The observations made with regard to verbal obscenity in global literatures also apply to Russian literature. As was the case in Western literatures, the exclusion of verbal obscenity was motivated by the desire to regulate readers' cultural consumption and to define morality standards. A main difference is the extremely strict ban on taboo language and the way censorship regulations were imposed: *Mat* was subjected to preventive censorship regulations, which in turn also led to its being eroded by self-censorship. The latter was also motivated by the didactic and ideological functions ascribed to literature in Russian culture.

The incompatibility of *mat* with literature also shows in the fact that Russian *mat* was not employed as a subversive tool of political attack until the late Soviet era, which is another fundamental and noteworthy difference to the Western literary tradition of obscene language. In French literature, in particular, obscene language has a long-standing tradition as a tool of attack, employed to unmask the hypocritical conventions of those in power. Russian obscene language, by contrast, did not acquire strong political overtones until it was erased from public discourse by Soviet censors. *Mat* represented everything Soviet officialdom proscribed, which is why it became such an appealing linguistic tool for *samizdat* and *tamizdat* writers.

This chapter has also demonstrated that the literary role of verbal obscenity is strongly interrelated with its socio-cultural context, both reflecting and negotiating socio-cultural norms and standards. The next chapter will explore the dialogic nature of verbal obscenity further and introduce the methodological framework that will be employed to analyse the texts selected.

Chapter 3: Theory and methodology

The purpose of this chapter is to lay out the methodological framework that will be applied to the narrative analyses. Chapter 1 demonstrated that obscene language fulfils an array of communicative functions, which makes it an important tool in identity formation. Chapter 2 showed that obscene language has always played a crucial role in literary cultures, shaping and reflecting literary norms. This implies that obscene language has a strong dialogic potential, which I will draw on in my narrative analyses.

This chapter starts with a short discussion of the authenticating potential of obscene language. Drawing on Bakhtin's concept of dialogism, the second section of the chapter analyses how dialogism serves as a useful tool to answer the research questions posed at the beginning of this thesis. The final section introduces cultural narratology as a framework of analysis and sets out the benefits of combining dialogism and cultural narratology in order to meet the research objective of the thesis, which is to analyse the functions of Russian obscene language in late Soviet and post-Soviet prose and to trace its diachronic development.

3.1. The authenticating potential of obscene language

The brief historical sketch outlined in Chapter 2 showed that both in Tsarist Russia and in the Soviet period, writers had considerable influence on the establishment and enforcement of language norms and standards. Similarly, writers were not at a loss for words when it came to defending the emergence of non-standard speech forms in literature in the late Soviet period. As discussed earlier, dialect forms, slang and colloquialisms slowly crept into literary texts during the Thaw period, challenging the notion of *literaturnyi iazyk*, or the standard language. The principal argument put forward in support of these non-literary forms was that they would lend authenticity to fictional texts. For example, Vladimir Petrov, editor of the notorious *Apollon*'-77 almanac, defended the non-standard speech varieties employed by a few of the contributors by referring to them as part of 'the honest and uncompromising' manner in which these authors attempted to depict the reality from which they came, the 'broken, cast-iron slang of courtyards and streets, the unbelievable slang of factories and boarding houses' (1977: 5–6, my translation).

When Russian *mat* started to emerge in literary texts in the late 1970s, the claim to authenticity was also brought forward in its defence. Writer Eduard Limonov, for example, who was among the first to employ verbal obscenity in fiction, defended the use of *mat* by claiming that it would render his novel ‘authentic’ (see Chapter 4 for a more detailed discussion). As Svetlana Boym states, in Russian, the notion of ‘authenticity’ is closely related to the concept of *istina*, which ‘is a kind of truth and faithfulness to being’ (1994: 96).⁷⁶ In the context of Soviet ideology, ‘authentic’ thus stood in opposition to official culture, to the worn-out clichés of Communist propaganda and the empty rhetoric of Socialist Realism. As Gasan Guseinov, a Russian cultural historian, asserts, at that time, writers wishing to express the ‘truth’ had no other choice but to resort to ‘the lowest layer of the Russian language’ (1989: 64, my translation). Even contemporary writers keep defending the use of *mat* on the grounds of its potential to render narrative accounts ‘authentic’, with the latter now closer to the meaning of mimicking real-life speech. Writer Diana Rubina, for example, employs taboo language for ‘the sake of its naturalness’ (Dmitrash 2009: online). Aleksei Ivanov, a young writer from Perm, argues in a similar way, claiming that, in his texts, he would merely imitate the way people speak in real life (Parfenov 2007: online).

Reducing the function of Russian *mat* to a mere imitation of how people speak in real life would, however, be a gross oversimplification. First of all, *mat* is by no means essential for the creation of an ‘authentic’ account. This becomes evident when looking at Gulag literature. As was discussed earlier, obscene language was a distinctive feature of life in Soviet Gulag camps, used by both inmates and prison guards. It would thus be reasonable to assume that Gulag literature, which saw the rendition of ‘true’ accounts as its main objective, includes *mat* and vulgarisms as a means of evoking authenticity. The dedication in Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn’s monumental *Arkhipelag GULAG* (1973, *The Gulag Archipelago*) is telling in this respect: ‘I dedicate this to all those who did not live to tell it’ (1974). The use of obscenity is, however, not a technique employed by all Gulag chroniclers; as a matter of fact, most Gulag narratives are surprisingly devoid of obscene terms.⁷⁷

⁷⁶ Another word for ‘truth’ is *pravda*, which ‘evokes justice, fairness, and righteousness’ (Boym 1994: 96).

⁷⁷ Ann Komaromi explains Gulag chroniclers’ reluctance to use *mat* by their age (2002: 318, note 12). It is, however, more plausible that the avoidance of obscenity has more to do with the fact

Writer Evgeniia Ginzburg, for example, although surely exposed to vulgar and obscene speech in the camps, refrains from using obscene language in her autobiographical account *Krutoi marshrut*,⁷⁸ which gives an account of her eighteen-year odyssey through Soviet prisons and labour camps. Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn employs an artificial form of camp slang devoid of *mat* words in his groundbreaking novel *Odin den' Ivana Denisovicha* (1962, *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*). Contrary to common Western belief, he did not use euphemisms to avoid censorship, but rather because he himself did not want to use overly colourful expressions in his novels. In a new edition of *Bodalsia telenok c dubom* (1975, *The Oak and the Calf*), he expresses his annoyance with translators who rendered these 'hints at profanity' (1996: 54) with explicit four-letter words. Yet nobody would contend that the novels *Odin den' Ivana Denisovicha* and *Krutoi marshrut* lack credibility or authenticity because of their avoidance of obscene language. On the contrary, in *The New York Times Literary Review*, Ginzburg's *Krutoi marshrut* was praised as 'the single most vivid report on that epoch of terror' (Salisbury 1981: online) and referred to as 'an intensely personal and passionately felt document in which every syllable clangors with awful authenticity'.⁷⁹ Similarly, Solzhenitsyn's novel was hailed as 'a completely authentic account of life in the forced-labour camps under Stalin' (Rahv 1963: online).

The claim to authenticity loses further force when we consider that fictitious representations of linguistic varieties are not deemed true reproductions of speech varieties as they are spoken in the 'real' world. As Raymond Chapman points out, the representation of non-standard varieties in fiction is often inconsistent and idiosyncratic when 'the ear-code of speech' is rendered into the 'eye-code of writing' (1994: 2). Roger Fowler makes a similar argument, stating that 'needless to say, these uses of "extrinsic" varieties are not transcriptions of real speech, but

that most writers chronicling the Gulag experience belonged to the *intelligentsia*, the intellectual elite, sent to the Gulag for their political views. As was discussed at length in Chapter 2, writers tended to shun *mat* for aesthetic reasons. In addition, they were aware of censorship regulations, which fostered self-censorship. Evgeniia Ginzburg, for example, wrote her novel *Krutoi marshrut* in Moscow (see note below), while her son, Vasilii Aksenov, wrote and published *Ozheg* (1980, *The Burn*) in the United States, which means that he was considerably less restricted in his writing than his mother was.

⁷⁸ Ginzburg wrote *Krutoi marshrut* in Soviet Russia, but was unable to publish it. *Krutoi marshrut* did not see the light of day until 1989. It was translated into English in 1967 (*Journey into the Whirlwind*, Volume 1) and 1979 (*Within the Whirlwind*, Volume 2).

⁷⁹ Quote on the back cover of the English translation *Journey into the Whirlwind*, published in 2002.

stylizations' (1981: 197). The reason for this is, as Jonathan Culpeper and Merja Kytö conclude, that 'speech [in literary texts] is constructed for fictional and literary goals [...] rather than as an attempt to represent "real life" speech' (2000: 182). This point has also been made with regard to Russian *mat*. As Ann Komaromi remarks, 'the structure and usage of truly oral Russian profanity should be distinguished from the artificial construction of profanity as a literary device' (2002: 328).

More importantly, fiction itself is deemed unable to copy reality because '[it] is a representational form and a representation can never be identical with that which it represents' (Morris 2003: 4). Literary texts function through words and words 'function completely different from mirrors' since 'writing has to select and order, something has to come first, and that selection and ordering will always, in some way, entail the values and perspective of the describer' (ibid). This argument echoes Roman Jakobson's perception of language as a mode governed by the two fundamental principles of selection and combination (1960: 358). In his view, a writer will always select from the linguistic repertoire available to him and arrange these choices in a specific pattern.⁸⁰ That writers choose certain words over others implies that they do so with a specific purpose in mind, or put differently, linguistic varieties in literary texts might mimic the world, but they do so for a reason. Applying sociolinguistics as a tool for analysing literary discourse, Roger Fowler states that 'linguistic varieties in the sociolinguistic sense — registers, codes, distinct languages in diglossia — encode different semantic potentials' (1981: 195), thereby instilling meaning, hence functions, into texts. Or, to quote Roland Barthes, 'a narrative always consists of nothing but functions: everything in it, to varying degrees, signifies' (1988: 104).

Returning to Russian *mat*, I therefore argue that its literary function cannot be restricted to a purely mimetic one, simply imitating that which is outside the narrative text. Such an approach would ignore the fact that 'the taboos and myths surrounding the use of profanity in literature shape its function and reception' (Komaromi 2002: 324). Obscene words in literary texts echo the status they assume in the real world, and they are therefore able to provoke a response (which in turn

⁸⁰ The idea of linguistic choice has also been used as a parameter to explain the concept of literary style. 'That is what style is — the selection of particular linguistic units and the variation in their arrangements' (Whatmough 1956: 88).

affects their status). This suggests that the functions of obscene language in literary texts are largely determined by its dialogic potential.

3.2. The dialogic potential of obscene language

The notion of ‘dialogism’ is strongly associated with the Russian thinker Mikhail Bakhtin and has found ample resonance in literary criticism and narratology. Bakhtinian ‘dialogism’ is based on the idea that no word or utterance exists in a vacuum but is always embedded in a chain of speech communication. It is thereby defined by its relationship to instances in the past and the future. After all, as Bakhtin argues, ‘all our thought itself [...] is born and shaped in the process of interaction and struggle with others’ thought, and this cannot but be reflected in the forms that verbally express our thought as well’ (1986: 92). This means an utterance is always ‘filled with dialogic overtones’ (ibid), and that these must be taken into account in order to fully understand its meaning. Bakhtin pointedly observes that ‘every word is directed toward an answer and cannot escape the profound influence of the answering word that it anticipates’ (ibid: 280).

The dialogic nature of an utterance is thus marked by what Bakhtin terms ‘addressivity’ or ‘answerability’ (*obrashchennost*) because an utterance is always directed at someone (ibid: 95). This implies that discourse as a string of utterances is fundamentally dialogic, as it is inseparable from the place and the time it was produced. The idea that an utterance is shaped and defined by its socio-ideological context is therefore at the centre of the Bakhtinian concept of ‘dialogism’. As he states, ‘at any time, in any given place, there will be a set of conditions [...] that will insure that a word uttered in that place and at that time will have a meaning different than it would have under any other conditions’ (ibid: 428).

The Bakhtinian concept of dialogism also applies to verbal obscenity, a point that has often been overlooked in the scholarly discourse on obscene language in literature. As discussed in Chapter 2, obscene language is usually analysed in relation to censorship practices and taboo-breaking. Instead of focusing on its norm-violating potential, I emphasise the fact that obscene language, like language in general, is also highly dialogic in nature. Firstly, it is always directed at an interlocutor, and secondly, and more importantly, its various meanings and functions are strongly dependent on context. In other words, the function of an obscene word

is inseparable from the place and time it was uttered. Moreover, as was shown earlier, obscene language always anticipates a response from the person it is directed at (compare Feinberg's concept of obscene words as 'fighting words', 1985: 235). As a result of their dialogic nature, obscene words are therefore highly instrumental in defining and establishing relations between speakers.

While for Bakhtin, all utterances are dialogic in nature, in particular literary utterances, he regards the novel as the most effective way to demonstrate the dialogic quality of literary discourse, even though the latter must be distinguished from non-literary, everyday discourse.⁸¹ Bakhtin was well aware of the specific nature of literary discourse. Distinguishing between primary (simple) and secondary (complex) speech genres, he attributes 'novels, dramas, all kinds of scientific research, major genres of commentary' to the latter category since these would 'absorb and digest various primary (simple) genres', which in turn assume 'a special character' upon entering the secondary ones, thereby losing their 'immediate relation to actual reality and to the real utterances of others' (1986: 62).

In other words, there are different levels of dialogism at work in narrative fiction. On the one hand, characters, narratee(s) and narrator(s) enter into dialogues within the narrative (internal dialogicity). This subdomain of dialogism is also encompassed in Bakhtin's concept of polyphony, which means that voices representing different ideological positions can engage equally in dialogue, free from authorial judgement or constraint (Bakhtin 1984b: 6). On the other hand, the narrative text itself can be viewed as a literary utterance produced by an author at a given time in a given context addressing a particular readership.

This does not mean that there is no interrelation between these forms of dialogism. On the contrary, as Bakhtin also notes, these levels of dialogism are strongly interrelated while at the same time drawing on the way language is perceived in the 'real' world.

⁸¹ Bakhtin initially illustrated the dialogic quality of language in Dostoevsky's works. Only later did he expand his ideas to the genre of the novel in general. *The Dialogic Imagination* (1981), which includes four selections from *Voprosy literatury i estetiki* (1975, *Questions of Literature and Aesthetics*), and *Problemy poetiki Dostoevskogo* (1929, 1963, translated into English in 1984 as *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*) are the most important sources with regard to his reflections on dialogism.

The prose writer does not purge words of intentions and tones that are alien to him, he does not destroy the seeds of social heteroglossia embedded in words, he does not eliminate those language characterizations and speech mannerisms (potential narrator personalities) glimmering behind the words and forms, each at a different distance from the ultimate semantic nucleus of his work, that is, the centre of his own personal intentions.

(Bakhtin 1986: 298)

Relating this idea to obscene language, we can argue that, in using verbal obscenity, writers draw on the connotative potential of obscene words in the external world. Obscene language can therefore function as a powerful indicator of a character's social background (diastratic differentiation) and regional origin (diatopic differentiation), as well as their psychological state (diaphasic differentiation). Recognising the signs that are familiar to them from everyday life and their personal experiences, readers resort to this knowledge when encountering these speech patterns in narrative texts. For this reason, non-standard speech varieties have a long tradition of serving as powerful characterisation devices. As Irma Taavitsainen and Gunnel Melchers state, 'in fiction nonstandard forms are mostly found in dialogues and they are used as a powerful tool to reveal character traits or social and regional differences', which means that '[their] function in literature is to indicate the position and status of the character' (2000: 13).

Yet the inclusion of primary speech genres into secondary speech genres can result in conflicts and tensions. This has primarily to do with the fact that, in Bakhtin's view, 'the speaking person in the novel is always, to one degree or another, an ideologue, and his words are always ideologemes' (1981: 333). Developing this idea, Cates Baldrige makes the following observation:

Whenever a character in a novel speaks, he or she reveals a perspective on reality shaped by concrete cultural factors such as class, occupation, gender, or generation, meaning that when fictional persons interact, what really comes into proximity and often into conflict are the various self-interested and partial descriptions of the social system they articulate.

(1994: 12)

The ideological forces represented by the various voices in the narrative can challenge or subvert another force present in literary discourse, the force of authoritative discourse (Bakhtin's *avtoritetnoe slovo*). Authoritative discourse is, as the term implies, discourse that demands submission and unqualified

acknowledgment. It is no coincidence that Bakhtin formulated this concept in 1934, the year that Socialist Realism was declared the official method for all Soviet art, silencing all other forms of expression. In developing this concept, Bakhtin had in mind the language of the Soviet regime and the party, but the ‘authoritative word’, as the concept translates literally, refers to any word ‘that is located in a distanced past that is felt to be hierarchically higher’ (1981: 342). Socialist Realism, which was indebted to the tradition of the Russian classics, was thus a form of authoritative discourse, and hence the norm to be followed. Authoritative discourse, then, means privileged discourse, discourse that does not encourage interaction, but is monolithic and enforced.

According to Bakhtin, authoritative discourse is always in a power struggle (which is also a form of dialogue) with internally persuasive discourse (*vnutrenne-ubeditel’noe slovo*). Internally persuasive discourse is ‘denied all privilege’ and supported by no authority, as its practices are often in opposition to socially accepted norms and views (ibid: 341). Discourse that is internally persuasive celebrates the ambiguity of the word and is open to other influences and discourses, which means that this form of discourse is subject to change.

Russian *mat* in Soviet society is a good example of internally persuasive discourse. While purged from official (authoritative) discourse, obscene language was very much alive in the private spheres of Soviet society (see Chapter 1). *Mat* was also an integral part of thieves’ speech (*blatnaia fenja*) and Gulag camp slang. The exclusion from authoritative discourse explains why readers reacted with shock to the invasion of ‘dirty’ words into the ‘sacred’ domain of literature and why Gulag chroniclers refrained from using *mat* even though it would have been appropriate for the narrative setting described. As was discussed earlier, in Soviet Russia, *mat* connoted an ideology that was in opposition to the ideology sanctioned by the Soviet state and therefore erased from official discourse. This ‘power struggle’ between the obscene word and the authoritative one, to use Bakhtin’s term, is what I call ‘norm negotiation’ (see Introduction). The ‘authoritative word’, as an explicit norm, stands in opposition to the implicit norms imposed by individual writers, resulting in a dynamic correlation and relationship between these discourses.

In short, narrative discourse comprises various levels of dialogism, including ‘the dialogic interaction between characters, of course, and between utterances, but also between words, between styles, between languages, between a character and his words and thoughts, between character(s) and author, between novel and reader, between the author and his other works, between the text and the intertext’ (Morace 1989: 5). It is through this ‘cobweb of dialogues’ that the functions of Russian *mat* in narrative discourse are realised, both reflecting *and* shaping the socio-ideological context in which the respective narratives are embedded. The dialogism inherent to these discourses thus also entails a strong performative potential in the Austinian sense that ‘things are done with words’ (1962: 6).

3.3. The performative potential of obscene language

Pointing out the interrelations between the various levels of dialogism, Bakhtin states that an analysis of these interrelations and the socio-historical context can shed light ‘on the complex problem of the interrelations among language, ideology, and worldview’ (1986: 62). This means that, in order to understand the functionality of verbal obscenity in narrative texts, we need to take into account *all* levels of dialogism, in particular the socio-ideological context in which a narrative was produced.

The significance of the socio-ideological context has in recent years also been acknowledged and supported by narratology, a discipline that traditionally was concerned with anything but context and socio-historical culture.⁸² Classical narratology of the French school primarily attempts to identify and systematise the formal features of narrative texts by using a set of tools and models applied to texts regardless of context.⁸³ Regarding narratives as self-enclosed systems detached from context, classical narratology neglects all ideological and cultural aspects. Even though narratologists have distinguished between extratextual literary communication on the one hand (real author and real reader), and intratextual communication on the other hand (narrators and narratees, as well as implied author

⁸² Classical narratology refers to the theories of Roland Barthes, Seymour Chatman, Jonathan Culler, Gérard Genette, A. J. Greimas, Gerald Prince and Tzvetan Todorov, to name but a few of the most prominent theorists.

⁸³ A classic example is Vladimir Propp’s article ‘Morphology of the Folktale’ (1928), in which he analyses the structure of fairy tales by identifying 31 different functions.

and implied reader),⁸⁴ thereby acknowledging the fact that literature is a special form of communication, classical narratology focuses on the ‘internal properties’ of narrative texts.

In recent years, the field of narratology has not only experienced a remarkable revival, but it has also gained immense popularity in numerous other fields, a development that prompted David Herman to speak of ‘narratologies’, rather than ‘narratology’ (1999).⁸⁵ Narratology has branched out into a vast number of fields, adapting ‘a host of methodologies and perspectives — feminist, Bakhtinian, deconstructive, reader-response, psychoanalytic, historicist, rhetorical, film-theoretical, computational, discourse-analytic and (psycho)linguistic’ (1999: 1). What these new directions and approaches in the theory of narrative have in common is that they all show a strong interest in the dialogic relationship between literary texts and their various contexts, thereby trying to understand ‘how literary production is engaged in the ongoing process of cultural construction’ (Bender 1987: xv). Ansgar Nünning demands that ‘it is time for narratology to catch up with the cultural turn in literary criticism’ (2009: 59).

The enthusiasm for these new trends in narratology has not been shared by all scholars. In particular, supporters of classical narratology have expressed their discontent with the ‘postclassical approach’ in narratology, arguing that such an approach would not meet the actual objective of narratology, which is to provide a universal toolkit for the ‘science of narrative’ (Todorov 1969: 10). Tom Kindt therefore demands to ‘leave narratology as it is’ (2009: 44). However, as Ansgar Nünning argues, context-sensitive approaches to narratology can offer new possibilities for understanding the dialogic relationship between novels and their cultural contexts. Postclassical narratology views culture as an ‘ensemble of narratives’ (2009: 70), thus allowing for diachronic analysis as well. Despite its strong focus on context and historicity, this form of narratology still resorts to the

⁸⁴ The terms ‘implied author’ and ‘implied reader’ were introduced by Wayne C. Booth in 1961 (*The Rhetoric of Fiction*) and have evoked a strong response from narratologists. For a thorough discussion of the concept and its significance for narratology, see Tom Kindt and Hans-Harald Müller’s *The Implied Author: Concept and Controversy* (2006).

⁸⁵ The revival of narratology has resulted in an ever-growing surge of publications. Among the most recent are Tom Kindt and Hans-Harald Müller’s *What is Narratology?* (2003), Sandra Heinen and Roy Sommer’s *Narratology in the Age of Cross-Disciplinary Narrative Research* (2009) and Greta Olson’s *Current Trends in Narratology* (2011).

‘toolkit’ offered by classical narratology, which allows for a systematic approach to cultural analysis. This approach is also supported by Gabriele Helms, who applies a framework of ‘cultural narratology’ to analyse Canadian novels. ‘We cannot understand narratives by simply classifying their formal elements; rather, we need to examine the complex interplay between narrative forms and their contexts, and we need to do so from a diachronic perspective’ (2003: 11).

Supporters of context-sensitive approaches to narratology argue that text and context are highly interdependent. Not only do narrative texts reflect the socio-ideological context in which they were produced, but they are also an active force in their own right, ‘one that is involved in the actual generation of the ways of thinking and attitudes that stand behind historical development’ (Nünning 2009: 61). John Bender, for example, asserts that the attitudes expressed in 18th-century narrative fiction on the British penitentiary system had a significant impact on changing the punitive system in England.

I consider literature and the visual arts as advanced forms of knowledge, as cognitive instruments that anticipate and contribute to institutional formation. Novels as I describe them are primary historical and ideological documents; the vehicles, not the reflections, of social change.

(1987: 1)

Drawing on Bender’s observations, we can thus argue that narratives entail not only a dialogic dimension, as was demonstrated by Mikhail Bakhtin, but a performative dimension as well. In other words, narratives not only reflect and represent reality, but they shape and change it as well, thereby corresponding to John Austin’s concept of ‘performative speech acts’ (1962). Austin argues that utterances not only have a propositional content, but they ‘do’ something as well. With regard to narrativity, Austinian performativity operates on two levels. On the one hand, it is present within the narrative discourse, in the form of character dialogues. On the other hand, the narration itself can be viewed as a performative speech act, particularly when seen in a larger cultural context since it ‘performs’ an action as well. Drawing on Austin’s concept of performativity (1962), Judith Butler accentuates the role of ritualised repetition in performativity, which in turn accounts for its normative power (1993: 95). According to Butler, performative speech acts are thus able to produce gendered and cultural identities. This also applies to Soviet

Russia, where literature was the dominant mode of cultural life. Socialist Realism regarded literature as a tool in order to *shape* reality and ‘sovietise’ the reader. Last, but not least, performativity can also be realised in the form of actual performances since oral narratives are ‘performed’ in front of an audience. As I pointed out in Chapter 2, the ‘rebel poets’ Vladimir Maiakovskii and Sergei Esenin ‘performed’ their poems in cafés and in the street, which had a significant impact on their identities as writers.

3.4. Conclusion

By allying the Bakhtinian concept of dialogism with a context-sensitive narratological approach, I will show that Russian *mat* played a significant role in the process of norm negotiation that took place in the late Soviet and post-Soviet eras. As Ann Komaromi argues, ‘the literary use of *mat* must be understood within its socio-historical context’ (2002: 328), and this is also my point of departure for the literary analyses conducted in the subsequent chapters. What I intend to do, then, is to analyse how Russian *mat* is employed at the various discourse levels such as dialogues between characters, between words, between texts, between the individual levels of narrative discourse, as well as between author and reader. These findings will allow me to determine how *mat* functions as a means of ‘negotiating’ literary and linguistic norms, as well as to gauge the impact of these implicit norm negotiations and their wider cultural ramifications.

The methodological approach outlined above offers a number of benefits. Firstly, it allows a holistic approach, one that takes account of the fact that *mat* assumes a wide variety of roles and functions in literary contexts. Scholars have so far not acknowledged this diversity of *mat*. As we will see in Chapters 4 to 7, there have hardly been any attempts to analyse the function of verbal obscenity in the novels selected, apart from seeing it as a tool to ‘shock’ readers or ‘to speak the truth’. Moreover, as pointed out in the Introduction, only a handful of scholars have attempted to discuss *mat* in literary contexts, summarising their findings in lists of functions. Not only do these lists vary in numbers and structure, they also fail to demonstrate the dialogic and dynamic relationship between text and context. Andrei Zorin, for instance, distinguishes between three functions of *mat*, the mimetic, the expressive and the conceptual (1996: 132–3). Yet the strong anti-official stance of

obscene language gives rise to the assumption that *mat* was also employed as a linguistic weapon by dissident writers (research question 2), a function that Zorin did not address. Birgit Beumers and Mark Lipovetsky, on the other hand, put this function of *mat* at the very top of their list, which in total includes four functions of *mat* (2009: 220). They view verbal obscenity as a marker of linguistic freedom, as a language of power and submission, as the linguistic embodiment of aggression and frustration and as a direct nominative language in the sexual sphere. In contrast to Zorin, Beumers and Lipovetsky's list does not include an expressive function of *mat*. These two examples show that the drawing up of lists is not completely satisfactory, as they appear to be of a random and subjective nature, defying a systematised approach.

Such an approach is also not concerned with the socio-historical context. Obscene language is highly dialogic in nature, and this also comes into effect in literary contexts. As was discussed earlier, the functions of *mat* are strongly contingent upon the socio-cultural context in which a text was produced. The theoretical approach developed above will enable me to take account of this interrelation, as well as of the fact that the way writers employ *mat* in their texts also helped shape the socio-cultural environment. Translating the Bakhtinian concept of dialogism into narratology will thus shed light on the dialogic potential of *mat* on all narrative levels, including the extra-textual one (between reader, author and text).

Last, but not least, this methodological approach will also allow me to gauge the evolution of *mat* over the course of time (see research question 5).

Chapter 4: Identity formation through obscene language in Eduard Limonov's *Eto ia — Edichka*

As was discussed earlier, Russian *mat* made its first appearance in Russian literature long before the official abolition of censorship in the early 1990s. Pushkin, Lermontov, Barkov — they all had used obscene language in their poems but were restricted by censorship regulations. Yet it was not only the ‘mighty red pen’ that erased *mat* words from literary texts; writers themselves avoided obscene language because of its ‘non-literary’ status. The incompatibility of *mat* with the ‘sacred’ realm of literature was also the reason why most Gulag chroniclers avoided *mat* in their narratives, even though obscene language was a highly distinctive feature of Soviet camp life.

Obscene language did not find a way into literature until the late 1970s. One of the first novels featuring an unprecedented abundance of *mat* words in full print was Eduard Limonov's debut novel *Eto ia — Edichka* (1979, *It's me, Eddie*), which is a reflection of the writer's experiences in the United States.⁸⁶ The novel caused a scandal upon its publication in 1979, which was largely because it discusses sexuality and bodily matters in a frank and explicit manner, thereby re-introducing the body and its desires into Russian literature. Yet it is not only the explicit depiction of bodily matters that made the novel so explosive for its readers. *Eto ia — Edichka* was also the first novel to employ obscene language as a means of constructing and preserving the self.

The purpose of this chapter is to analyse the role of *mat* in Limonov's literary discourse on sexuality, thereby addressing the first research question. Starting with a brief overview of Limonov's prose, as well as his approach to obscene language, the chapter then moves on to analyse the function of *mat* on the various narrative levels of the novel, paying particular attention to its correlation with sexuality. While the role of *mat* in Limonov's novel has traditionally been interpreted as a tool to evoke authenticity, my analysis emphasises the performative dimension of verbal

⁸⁶ Limonov wrote the novel in 1976. It took him three years to see an abridged version of the novel published in the Paris-based émigré journal *Kovcheg* and yet another year until he was able to sign a contract about its publication with the French publishing house Simoën (Rogachevskii 2003: 170). The English translation by S. I. Campbell was brought out by Random House, New York, in 1983. This is also the translation I quote from in this chapter (abbreviated ED). For Russian quotes, I use a 1998 edition of the novel (abbreviated ETO).

obscenity, accentuating the role of obscene language as a means of constructing identity. Drawing on the methodological framework laid out in the previous chapter, I will show how Limonov draws on the authenticating potential of obscene language to construct identities both within and outside the narrative discourse.

4.1. Limonov and the obscene: Nothing but the naked truth?

Since the very beginning of his literary career as a prose writer, Eduard Limonov has known how to attract and maintain the attention of the reading public. The ‘bad boy of Russian literature’ (Borden 1999: 239) was one of the most successful and most widely read émigré authors of the Third Wave,⁸⁷ and it was not long before scholars of Russian literature started to pay attention to his work (Glad 1999: 459). In 2011, Limonov even became the subject of a book-length biography, published by French writer Emmanuel Carrère. The biography is more than a mere collection of data regarding Limonov’s extraordinary life, clearly exceeding the confines of non-fiction. As reviewer Warren Motte argues, it ‘makes many gestures in the direction of the novel’ (2012: 76). This is also reflected in the fact that, in 2011, Carrère received the prestigious Prix Théophraste-Renaudot award, which is normally only awarded for novels. Carrère’s biography did justice to Limonov’s life and career. After all, blurring the boundaries between fact and fiction is a hallmark of Limonov’s prose. Most of his novels are written in the first person, with the character-narrator strongly resembling the flesh-and-blood author himself. His best example of self-fiction is the novel *Istoriia ego slugi* (1980–1, *His Butler’s Story*), in which a fictional character called Eddie Limonov discusses the fictional characters the writer Eduard Limonov introduced in his previous works of fiction.

The scholarly discourse on Limonov leaves little doubt that ‘no one in contemporary Russian letters has created more sensation from the practice of self-fiction than Eduard Limonov’ (Borden 1999: 239). In fact, the question that has been posed most often is whether or not the author Eduard Limonov and his fictional character-narrator(s) are one and the same person (Shukman 1983: 6; Glad 1993: 265). Andrei Rogachevskii devotes an entire chapter to the question of

⁸⁷ The Third Wave is associated with the Brezhnev era, when the regime eased emigration restrictions for Soviet Jews. While, in theory, only Jews were allowed to leave, many others emigrated as well, including dissident writers and artists. As Kathryn Henry points out, between 1971 and 1983, more than 150 dissident writers left the Soviet Union for the United States (1990: iv).

‘Dichtung und Wahrheit’ in Limonov’s fiction, only to conclude that ‘the only thing I can establish for certain at the end of this long investigation is that Limonov the writer and Limonov the character are not the same thing’ (2003: 51).

Limonov’s debut novel *Eto ia — Edichka*, in particular, has caused much confusion as to whether the novel’s character-narrator Edichka is to be taken for Limonov the author. Not only does the character-narrator carry the author’s name (‘Edichka’ is a short form of ‘Eduard’), the narrated events bear striking similarities to Limonov’s personal life. The novel is basically a tale of the American dream gone wrong, chronicling the character-narrator’s struggles to find his place (and his self) in the jungle of New York. Like Limonov the author, the character-narrator enjoyed some acclaim as an underground poet in Moscow, while his life in exile is characterised by marginality and a strong sense of disorientation. A main source of desperation is the fact that his wife and muse, Elena (Limonov’s second wife is also named Elena), has left him for a wealthy American, and so his life in exile turns into a painful and strenuous quest for identity, accompanied by fear of extinction and oblivion. In a desperate attempt to re-establish and preserve his identity, he finds himself entering numerous sexual relationships with both male and female lovers, which have a more or less healing effect on his unbalanced psychological state. The novel is populated with numerous characters bearing a strong resemblance to Limonov’s friends and acquaintances in real life, and it also contains many references to real places and incidents.

Limonov himself added fuel to the confusion over the character-narrator’s identity. When asked in an interview whether or not ‘Eddie [was] really 100 percent Limonov’ (Glad 1993: 265), he replied that ‘of course the book is autobiographical’ (ibid), only to contradict himself a little later by saying that ‘one should still distinguish me from my hero, of course’ (quoted in Rogachevskii 2003: 11). It is thus for the reader to determine to what extent the novel is the author’s personal account of his experiences in the United States.⁸⁸

⁸⁸ When the novel was published, several commentators pointed out that the fictional hero Edichka was not to be mistaken for the author Eduard Limonov. They were, however, clearly outnumbered by those critics who mistook Edichka for Limonov. Nina Voronel’ was particularly strongly convinced about the inseparability between author and character, asserting that ‘Limonov is talking about himself, not his lyrical hero’ (1979: 190).

Despite the confusion over how much Limonov there is in *Edichka*, most scholars have described the novel as autobiographical. As Karen Ryan-Hayes argues, one crucial criterion of autobiographical writing is the assumption that the events described therein are “‘true’” and subject to verification’ (1995: 108). The majority of critical readers have not questioned the ‘truthfulness’ of Limonov’s account but have accepted the events described in *Eto ia — Edichka* as truly authentic. Olga Matich, for example, regards the novel as ‘unabashedly autobiographical’ (1986a: 828). John Glad describes the novel as a ‘non-fictional autobiography’ (1999: 459), calling Limonov the ‘ultimate realist’ (ibid). As Ryan-Hayes also points out, however, it must not be overlooked that Limonov clearly attempts to create an illusion of authenticity, which is why she treats the novel as pseudo-autobiographical: ‘Limonov’s truth is an aesthetic one. The events and characters he describes (or invents) to illustrate his truth are valid to the degree that they accomplish this end’ (1995: 109).

What Ryan-Hayes does not point out is that this effect of authenticity is largely achieved by Limonov’s use of Russian *mat*. Those critical readers who were able to see beyond the fact that Limonov employs taboo vocabulary (of whom there were not that many) saw its main function as an authenticity marker. The use of obscene language would be necessitated by the authentic nature of the novel, reflecting the way Russian men speak. Aleksandr Shatalov, who was the first to publish *Eto ia — Edichka* on Russian soil in 1990, defended the author’s use of *mat* by arguing that *Edichka* would use genuine male speech, which would match his personality (1992: 8).

Limonov himself has justified the presence of *mat* in the novel in a similar way, arguing that the novel’s language is authentic and ‘real’. For example, in an interview with *Knizhnoe obozrenie* in 1990, he denied any intention of wishing to shock his readers, emphasising the ‘truthfulness’ and authenticity of his narratives (Shatalov 1990: online). According to Limonov, the use of obscene language was motivated by his desire to make his prose vivid and alive — features that would be absent in émigré literature:

The typical representative of Russian unofficial literature is a bibliophile, a bookworm worn out by the burden of world literature [...]. This jerk ought to

be vacuumed out, beaten up, and thrown into some dump. Then maybe he'll be able to squeeze out of himself something alive and nonliterary.

(quoted in Matich 1984: 230)

While the use of *mat* evokes a sense of authenticity, thereby supporting the creation of a real-life atmosphere in the novel, it is clearly not restricted to that function. In fact, as the following sections will show, *mat* plays an even greater role in the character-narrator's process of identity formation and search for the self.

4.2. Eddie, Edichka, Eduard: Identity preservation through obscenity?

Edichka, from whose perspective the novel is told, is a Soviet émigré writer who left his home country for the United States of America. That his new life is anything but the American dream is made clear from the very beginning. The opening scene shows Edichka sitting on his balcony eating *shchi*, a typical Russian cabbage soup, complaining about his 'invisibility' to the people working in the many offices around his hotel.

Проходя между часом дня и тремя по Мэдисон-авеню, там где ее пересекает 55-я улица, не поленитесь, задерните голову и взгляните вверх — на немытые окна черного здания отеля «Винслоу». Там, на последнем, 16-ом этаже, на среднем, одном из трех балконов гостиницы сижу полуголый я. Обычно я ем щи и одновременно меня обжигает солнце, до которого я большой охотник. Щи с кислой капустой моя обычная пища, я ем их кастрюлю за кастрюлей, изо дня в день, и кроме щей почти ничего не ем. Ложка, которой я ем щи — деревянная и привезена из России. Она разукрашена золотыми, алыми и черными цветами. Окружающие оффисы своими дымчатыми стеклами-стенами — тысячью глаз клерков, секретарш и менеджеров глазуют на меня. Почти, а иногда вовсе голый человек, едящий щи из кастрюли. [...] Я часто вожусь с голой жопой и бледным на фоне всего остального тела членом в своей неглубокой комнатке, и мне плевать, видят они меня или не видят, клерки, секретарши и менеджеры. Скорее я хотел б, чтобы видели.⁸⁹

(ЕТО 1998: 9)

⁸⁹ 'If you're walking past the corner of Madison Avenue and Fifty-fifth Street between one and three in the afternoon, take the trouble to tip back your head and look up — at the unwashed windows of the black Hotel Winslow. There on the topmost, sixteenth floor, on the center-most of the hotel's three balconies, I sit half naked. Usually I am eating *shchi* and at the same time working on my tan, I'm a great sun lover. *Shchi*, or sauerkraut soup, is my usual fare; I eat pot after pot of it, day after day, and eat almost nothing else. The spoon I eat the *shchi* with is wooden and was brought from Russia. It is decorated with flowers of scarlet, gold, and black. The surrounding office buildings gawk at me with their smoky glass walls, with the thousand eyes of the clerks, secretaries, and managers. A nearly, sometimes entirely naked man, eating *shchi* from a pot. [...] I am often to be found bare-assed in my shallow little room, my member pale against the background of the rest of my body, and I do not give a damn whether they see me or don't, the clerks, secretaries, and managers. I'd rather they did see me' (ED 1983: 3).

The scene provides a vivid impression of Edichka's sense of disorientation in his new home country. Having moved from the USSR to the USA, he is forced to adapt to a new cultural system, a process that proves difficult and painful for him. With no steady job and no income, he finds himself at the bottom of American society and at the mercy of the state, and he realises that a poet is worth nothing in America. Afraid of sinking into oblivion and fading away, he has an urge for attention — attention he received in abundance in Soviet Russia and that is now very scarce and desirable. Not even the female guests at the Hilton restaurant, where he temporarily accepts a manual job as a busboy cleaning up after people, seem to be aware of his existence. The imminent risk of losing his identity is also reflected in the fact that the restaurant manager is unable to remember his real name, calling him 'Alexander' instead of 'Edward', which is the English version of his Russian name 'Eduard'.

Loss of identity is often experienced by people changing their cultural identity, as sociologist Richard Kolm points out: 'One of the greatest problems of the immigrant as a person changing from one system of symbols to another is the maintenance of his identity' (1980: 141). People migrating to a new socio-cultural environment are forced to assimilate to a new system of values and cultural codes, yet at the same time they are determined by the values of the socio-cultural system they are migrating from. This means that they have to cut loose their ties with the old system and establish ties with the new one, which demands a reorientation and redefinition of identity. This redefinition of identity requires a 'large amount of learning' (ibid), which is based on previous knowledge and experiences. In other words, rather than learning everything anew, immigrants are forced to assimilate to a new environment, which is a process that can be highly disturbing and confusing. This assimilation process must not be confused with the process of childhood socialisation. Kolm observes that 'in changing to another socio-cultural environment [the immigrant] faces more than the problem of a renewed process of "growing into" the receiving society, that is, of again progressing through the process of childhood socialization' (ibid: 68).

In light of the above, it is curious to note that Limonov's pseudo-autobiography has repeatedly been interpreted as an account rendered through the lens of childhood. Karen Ryan-Hayes, for example, states that 'the child's point of view is

particularly appropriate to Limonov's evocation of émigré life' (1995: 118), arguing that 'the dominant voice is that of the fearful, angry child' (ibid: 129). Olga Matich makes a similar point: 'Edichka is a name for a child, and like a toddler who has just learned to talk, he often speaks about himself in the third person, even though the novel is an Ich-Erzählung' (1986a: 529). What both Matich and Ryan-Hayes do not mention is that Edichka's 'childlike reactions' are the attempts of a grown-up man to find his place in a socio-cultural environment alien to him. Edichka is in a stage of assimilation, in which he is fully aware of his marginal status and the need to redefine his identity.

Edichka's split identity — he is torn between his past in Soviet Russia and his present in America — is reflected in the constant shift of narrative perspective. Although the novel is narrated by a first-person narrator, there are constant changes between the narrating I and the experiencing I. For instance, when describing his first sexual experience with Raymond, Edichka concludes that 'we must have looked like Japanese wrestlers' (ED 1983: 61), a remark made by the narrating I. At the beginning of the novel, when he introduces himself and the hotel, it is clearly the experiencing I that speaks to the reader. Edichka also refers to himself by using several different names (Edichka, Eddie, Edik and Limonov), and he sometimes shifts between first- and third-person narration. On still other occasions, the character-narrator appears as almost omnipotent (for instance, when sitting on his balcony, he concludes that 'they don't know it's *shchi*, though'; ED 1983: 3), presenting his own assumptions as objective truths.

Edichka's estranged identity is also strongly reflected in the languages he uses. In this regard, it is surprising to discover that scholars have not paid attention to the strong correlation between Russian *mat* and identity. As discussed at length in Chapter 1, Russian *mat* is a strong marker of Russian identity, in particular of male identity. It is thus curious to see that the use of *mat* in the novel has been interpreted as inappropriate. Ann Shukman, for instance, refers to Edichka's language as 'contaminated' (1983: 6). Olga Matich describes his speech as 'generally primitive and naïve' (1986a: 529). Reading the novel as an example of aberrant discourse, Cynthia Simmons states that 'Edichka goes too far' (1993: 113), concluding that 'on account of the quantity and nature of Edichka's obscene subject matter and

expressions, *It's me, Eddie* fails interpersonally for all “civilized” readers’ (ibid: 120).

Yet Limonov did not put *mat* into Edichka’s mouth to ‘contaminate’ (Shukman 1986: 6) and ‘disrupt’ (Simmons 1993: 17) the text. On the contrary, within the novel, obscene language reflects Edichka’s manliness, functioning as an important tool to preserve his male identity. This becomes evident when looking at Edichka’s conversations with his male friends. On the beach of Long Island, for instance, Edichka’s friend Naum recounts how he was cheated by a prostitute. The dialogue, which is saturated with obscene terms, is a good example of male bonding and the role obscene language plays therein.

- И ты дал? — с интересом спрашивает Багров.
- Дал, — говорит Наум, — ну ее на хуй связываться, у нее сутенер есть.
- Да, лучше не связываться, — говорит Багров.
- Ебаная эмиграция! — говорит Наум.⁹⁰

(ETO 1998: 24)

That obscenities are part of his male identity is also indicated by the fact that Edichka is less accepting of dirty talk coming from the mouth of Elena, his beautiful muse and ex-wife. While he despises her for her obscene and bad English, he is conscious of his own frequent use of swear words (‘I’ve taken to swearing a lot here’; ED 1983: 19), and he also notes that these words might be perceived as dirty ‘from the standpoint of a respectable person’ (ED 1983: 81). However, he is quick to add that what he regards as vulgar and obscene is the selfish and egocentric attitude many Americans display towards others. He feels particularly repulsed by the expression ‘that’s your problem’ (ED 1983: 132–3), which he sees as emblematic of America’s cold-bloodedness and ignorance.

Russian *mat* is not only a marker of his male identity, it also serves as one of the last ties with his home country, thus helping him preserve his ‘old’ self. When Carol, his Russian-speaking American friend, does not understand a Russian slang word, he says apologetically that ‘I had forgotten that Carol couldn’t know Russian slang’ (ED 1983: 94), which echoes the widely accepted assumption that non-standard

⁹⁰ “‘Did you give it to her?’ Bagrov asked with interest. ‘I did,’ Nahum said, ‘but I’ll be damned if I’ll get involved with her, she has a pimp.’ ‘No, better not,’ Bagrov said. ‘Fucking emigration!’” (ED 1983: 15).

varieties are not accessible to foreigners. Within the novel, *mat* stands in stark contrast to Edichka's many lexical and syntactic borrowings from English, with the former signifying his (Russian) past and the latter his new life in America, a point also made by Felix Dreizin (1988: 65). That these two linguistic registers co-exist in the narrative is reflective of his reorientation in the new environment and his sense of displacement. In the same way that his foreignisms appear alien in the Russian text, so does Edichka in his new home country. Yet these borrowings also show that he has, to some extent, assimilated into the new culture. Edichka is, for example, willing to take language classes to improve his mastery of English, which shows that he is willing to engage in a dialogue with his new countrymen. His wish to improve his command of the English language is also one of the reasons why he decides to quit his job as a busboy in a hotel. This is also what he tells his manager: 'Excuse me, sir, but after looking at this work I have come to the conclusion that it's not for me. I'm very tired and I need to learn English, I want to leave' (ED 1983: 41).

4.3. Stripping down to tear down linguistic boundaries?

Edichka's eagerness to improve his English is strongly motivated by his realisation that his poor language skills constitute an enormous barrier to entering American society. On several occasions, he is made painfully aware of his linguistic impotence and the resulting disadvantages. In the Hilton restaurant, for example, he would have been hired as a waiter if his English had been better. He is also dependent on the help of his American friends to have his articles translated into English. His poor command of the English language is also the reason why his acquaintances include, first and foremost, Russian-speaking immigrants, although he despises the Russian community for their weakness and inferiority to the American social order.

Edichka's linguistic impotence also shows in his inability to express feelings and emotions other than in his mother tongue. He usually falls back on his native language in highly emotional situations. For example, overwhelmed by his feelings for an actress he meets at a party, he '[whispers] wild Russian caresses and diminutives to [her], words that exist in no other language' (ED 1983: 177). Similarly, after having intercourse with Chris, a homeless black man, he automatically switches to Russian. He also teaches Chris a few Russian words, 'хуй,

любовь, и еще что-то в том же духе' (ETO 1998: 92).⁹¹ In particular, Edichka expresses his anger by using *mat* words, which prompts Karen Ryan-Hayes to conclude that 'obscenities are essential to his art in that they permit Edichka to describe [...] what [his world] feels like' (1993: 26).

I argue that Edichka not only describes what his world feels like, he virtually strips bare in front of the implied reader, exposing himself to the greatest extent possible. This form of literary exhibitionism is also strongly reflected in his language. In fact, Edichka's speech might itself be described as 'naked' — devoid of any metaphors, paraphrases or euphemisms, it is to unveil the 'naked truth', the very core of his self, without any embellishment or euphemistic circumscriptions. This stylistic feature has also been noted by others. Ann Shukman notes that 'the shocking events, the details of Edik's heterosexual and homosexual encounters are described in "plain" (i.e. in obscene) language' (1983: 11–2), which is why she regards Limonov's writing as a 'strongly non-metaphoric type' (ibid: 7). In fact, on the rare occasions when Edichka uses a simile or metaphor, he includes mocking disclaimers. He apologises, for example, to the reader for using a simile when describing Luz, a woman attending his English class, since this would be a vulgar style: 'Forgive me this very vulgar and trite simile, but she arched like the stem of a rose' (ED 1983: 141).

The same 'nakedness' can be observed with regard to his use of obscenities. Throughout the novel, *mat* words are frequently used in their primary meanings, referring directly to the act of love-making or to sexual organs. For instance, when frustrated about Sonia's inability to achieve an orgasm, he tells her:

Я куплю тебе искусственный член, и буду ебать им тебя до тех пор, пока ты не будешь падать с постели, пока ты не станешь кончать много раз.⁹²
(ETO 1998: 125)

The 'nakedness' of his prose is also part of the reason why Limonov has been attacked for his 'poor' usage of Russian *mat*. Leonid Geller was particularly outspoken in his criticism. Arguing that 'the great and mighty Russian *mat* has earned worldwide renown', Geller laments that 'Edichka somehow expresses

⁹¹ 'Prick, love, and others in the same spirit' (ED 1983: 81).

⁹² 'I'm going to buy you an artificial member, and I'm going to fuck you with it until you fall off the bed, until you start to come over and over' (ED 1983: 113).

himself very poorly — not in terms of quantity but in terms of quality’ (1980: 85). *Mat* definitely has a place in literature, Geller argues, but a writer needs to know when and how to use verbal obscenity, which Limonov does not know. In particular, the obscene term *khui* figures prominently in the novel. As Edward Brown observes, ‘the linguistic pivot [...] is a seemingly endless inflection of the vulgar word for the male organ of generation’ (1986: 382).

Yet while Edichka’s language can be described as ‘naked’ and ‘plain’ — devoid of metaphors, paraphrases or euphemisms — his body, to be more precise his sexual organ, becomes a symbol of his gradual Americanisation, with the core root *khui* serving as a signifier for his gradual entry into American society. Although Edichka despises America for its cultural values (for instance, he is shocked when his American girlfriend Roseanne offers him some cheap wine, although she has several bottles of good, expensive wine at home), he nevertheless wishes to find a place in this new society and to restore his position as a poet. As language has proven to be an insufficient tool for transgressing cultural boundaries, he seeks to compensate his linguistic impotency through his bodily functions. Edichka is fully aware of this process, explaining to the reader that this would be part of his ‘programme’ to integrate into American society.

Когда я пытался заставить себя спать с американской женщиной Розанной, это была часть разработанной мною программы вползания в новую жизнь [...].⁹³

(ETO 1998: 26)

In other words, Edichka attempts to re-establish his identity through his sexuality, or to be more precise, through his sexual organ. In the introduction to his monolingual dictionary on Russian obscene language, Aleksei Plutser-Sarno states that ‘*khui* is a person [...] it is I, or, as psychoanalysts would say, it is the “actual self”’ (2005a: 18, my translation). Indeed, on several occasions, Edichka compares the risk of losing his identity with the loss of sexuality, with impotence. Thus, when telling his friend Kirill that he intends to find himself a male partner, he admits that he is right at the bottom of society, even outside society, and this status is reflected in his decreasing sexual potency.

⁹³ ‘When I tried to force myself to sleep with the American woman Roseanne, this, too, was part of the programme I had developed to glide into this new life’ (my translation, as this part was left out of the published translation).

— А что, я шучу? — ответил я. — Посмотри на меня, я одинок, я на самом дне этого общества сейчас, да какой на дне, просто вне общества, вне людей. Сексуально я совсем сошел с ума, женщины меня не возбуждают, хуй мой изнемог от непонимания, он болтается, потому что не знает, чего ему хотеть, а хозяин его болен. Если так дальше пойдет, я превращусь в импотента.⁹⁴

(ЕТО 1998: 54)

Edichka's linguistic impotence has thus also led to his sexual impotence, which is why he assumes that a restoration of the latter will compensate for the former. The strong correlation between his linguistic and his sexual impotence is also evident in the scene where he makes love to the American woman Roseanne. When she mispronounces the Russian term for 'to come, to have an orgasm' (*konchat*) this mistake extinguishes immediately any sexual desire he might have felt towards her.

— Ты не можешь кончить, — говорила она ебась, и немного задыхаясь от ритма ебли. — Ты слишком нервный, ты торопишься, не торопись, не торопись, милый! Я бы ее и ударил, но только она бы не поняла, за что. Не мог же я ей объяснить, что русский ее язык с акцентом действует на меня ужасно, что мне кажется, будто я нахожусь не в постели, а в жутком убогом помещении эмигрантской русской газеты с ее ободранными стенами, пылью, вонью и мусором. — Ты кончил, — говорит она, и с последним тонким ее «и» незримая ледяная рука сжимает мой хуй, и он опадает, вянет, мой бедный пылкий цветок, когда-то моя гордость и часто моя беда. Я не могу, ничего не могу, совсем не могу... и не хочу...⁹⁵

(ЕТО 1998: 193)

In this regard, it is interesting to note that Edichka differentiates between *chlen* and *khui*, which are signifiers of the same signified, employing them in different ways and for different purposes. A good example is where he returns to 'the place where she [Elena] made love' (Chapter 7). Describing his sexual arousal, he says that his *chlen* is growing into a *khui*. 'От прикосновения туалетной бумаги мой

⁹⁴ "“You think I’m joking?” I replied. “Look at me, I’m alone, I’m at the very bottom of this society — the bottom of it, hell, I’m simply outside it, outside of life. Sexually I’m totally freaked out, women don’t arouse me, my dick is faint with incomprehension, it just dangles because it doesn’t know what to want and its master is sick. If things go on like this, I’ll end up impotent”” (ED 1983: 44–5).

⁹⁵ "“You can’t come,” she said in Russian, fucking, and panting a little from the rhythm of the fuck. “You’re too nervous, you’re hurrying, don’t hurry, don’t hurry, darling!” I would have hit her, only she wouldn’t have understood what for. I could not explain to her that her accented Russian had a terrible effect on me, it made me feel as if I were not in bed but in the grim, squalid office of the Russian émigré newspaper with its peeling walls, dust, stink, and garbage. “You came,” she said — *ty koncheel*. At her last thin, misaccented ee-sound, an invisible icy hand gripped my cock, and it fell, it faded, my poor ardent flower, once my pride and often my misfortune. I couldn’t. Couldn’t do anything, anything at all... and didn’t want to’ (ED 1983: 180).

нежный член вздрагивает, что-то во мне начинает шевелиться, член медленно вырастает в хуй' (ЕТО 1998: 149).⁹⁶ There are numerous other instances in the novel where Edichka refers to his sexual potency by using *khui*. This shows that the obscene signifier is mainly used to refer to his sexual potency and his sexual desires while the neutral *chlen* ('penis') is employed to refer to his sexual organ. It is through the former (*khui*) that he tries to make contact with other people in order to become a full member (*chlen*) of American society. This is also emphasised by the fact that like its English counterpart, the Russian word *chlen* means both 'penis' and 'member' (of an organisation).

The above shows that the obscene signifier *khui* assumes a strong performative function. Edichka literally intends to penetrate into American society, and since women are a painful reminder of his split from Elena, who is another symbol of his Russian past, he decides to 'change sides' in order to overcome his isolation and loneliness. His first homosexual experience is a daunting one, partly due to his insecurity and partly due to his not being attracted to Raymond, his first partner. His encounter with Chris, by contrast, is as unexpected as it is fulfilling, and for the first time in a long time Edichka feels loved and accepted.

His sexual encounter with Chris can be read as a turning point in his personal development because he gains new strength and willpower to cope with his miserable existence. After this meaningful event, he adopts a more positive view of life, although the overall tone of the narrative never becomes truly positive. Edichka is now ready to approach women again, and in the course of the novel he moves from the American leftist Carol, with whom he maintains a platonic relationship, to Sonia, a Jewish immigrant from Ukraine, to Roseanne, his first American woman. This development reflects his gradual integration into American society since he moves from men (Raymond, Chris) to a platonic relationship with an American woman (Carol) until he again starts to have sexual relationships with women (Sonia and Roseanne). In other words, his gradual cultural adaptation and Americanisation is reflected in his increasing sexual potency. While his affair with Sonia is on the verge of a catastrophe, leaving neither Edichka nor Sonia truly satisfied, he feels more attracted to Roseanne, with whom he makes love on the 4th of July, American

⁹⁶ 'At the touch of the toilet paper my delicate member shudders, something in me begins to stir, my member slowly grows into a cock' (ED 1983: 136).

Independence Day. The historic date enhances the symbolic meaning Edichka attaches to this event. Roseanne embodies America and having sex with her allows him to overcome cultural boundaries, despite his linguistic impotence. Again, Edichka is fully aware of the historic significance. In fact, the date was deliberately chosen by him, as he tells the reader (ETO 1998: 187). The symbolic nature of this episode is increased by Edichka's differentiation between Roseanne and her female sex organ. While put off by Roseanne's stinginess and her character, he is much more attracted to her vagina, which he even personifies. The sexual act thus becomes not only a symbol for Edichka's (gradual) entry into, and acceptance by, American society, it also materialises his personal development.

At the same time, the gender asymmetry inherent in Russian *mat* allows him to express his contempt and repulsion for America and its values. Roseanne not only materialises America (which is also feminine in Russian grammar), the act of love-making with her also reflects his attitude to his new home country. Since it is only the man who is (grammatically) able 'to be on top' (see Chapter 1), the woman is degraded to a passive object, both grammatically and very often physically. In other words, Edichka's love-making to Roseanne enables him to invade the new territory without having to give up his negative attitude towards it. Put bluntly, by having sex with Roseanne, he is able to 'screw' America.

The above shows that Edichka's literary exhibitionism clearly goes beyond the realm of the pornographic. In fact, the purported pornographic obscures the view to other meanings encapsulated therein such as the character-narrator's longing for belonging and being accepted. Limonov undermines the notion of the pornographic by mixing the corporeal with non-pornographic elements such as romantic love or warmth. For instance, the pornographic nature of Edichka's sexual encounter with Chris is undermined by his excitement to have found warmth, love and a parent, which evokes sympathy rather than sexual arousal. When he tries to sleep with Sonia, Edichka's pitiful efforts to stimulate her ridicule the situation rather than create feelings of sexual excitement. A similar conclusion is drawn by Andrei Kodiak, who notes that 'some of his episodes could be classified as pornographic, however [...] by mistake' as they '[serve] an artistic purpose rather than sexual excitement in the reader' (quoted in Rogachevskii 2003: 131).

As noted earlier, the ‘artistic purpose’ of obscene language, to use Kodiak’s expression, is to preserve and re-establish the character-narrator’s male identity and his sense of belonging. This is achieved by drawing on the ‘Russianness’ of *mat* and its strong correlation with manliness. At the same time, however, the character-narrator literally ‘performs’ the process of cultural integration in the form of sexual intercourse, which he confesses to the reader by using obscene language referentially. In other words, Edichka literally ‘does things with words’, to quote John L. Austin, which is why *mat* fulfils a strong performative function in the text. Moving from a heterosexual Russian to a bisexual émigré writer, his sexual adventures reflect his gradual stabilisation in this society and the redefinition of his identity. This also suggests that the character-narrator gradually accepts the values of American society and finds a place therein. Towards the end of the novel, for example, when taking a stroll through the streets of New York, he sees among the people familiar faces from his hometown, and he realises that there is not that much difference between America and his Soviet Kharkov. This shows the character-narrator’s gradual integration into society and his personal growth along the progression of the narrative.

Edichka’s sexual adventures in the jungle of New York are thus anything but ‘random encounters, which come into Edik’s life as a result of the free play of his desires and which have little effect on his essential self beyond a temporary change of mood’ (Shukman 1983: 12). On the contrary, it is through these encounters that he is able to enter American society, in both a literal and a figurative sense. *Mat* not only helps him preserve his old (Russian) identity, it also functions as a means of re-establishing his self in his new society. In other words, Edichka’s non-metaphorical language becomes a metaphor for his integration into American society, allowing him to overcome both his linguistic and his sexual impotence.

4.4. The narcissist poet?

The use of obscene language in the novel not only reflects the character-narrator’s struggle for identity preservation and redefinition, it also serves as a means of reaching out to others. As Mark Tappan points out (2005: 55–6), identity can only be formed in constant dialogue with others, thus echoing Mikhail Bakhtin’s dialogic orientation of discourse, which was discussed in detail in Chapter 3. Edichka clearly

seeks to engage in dialogue with others, and it is through the use of verbal obscenity that he attempts to achieve his goal.

At first glance, obscene words do not appear to fulfil such a function, as they are often considered destructive to communication. Cynthia Simmons, for example, argues that the main function of Russian *mat* words in *Eto ia — Edichka* ‘is to reject, denounce, destroy — even if in an idiosyncratic (and creative) fashion’ (1993: 114). Yet as discussed in Chapter 1, *mat* words (and obscene words in general) possess a certain poetic quality in that they draw attention to themselves, albeit in a shocking manner, and attention is a precondition to communication. We can therefore argue that the *mat* words employed in the novel fulfil a strong phatic function, to use Roman Jakobson’s term, since they are used to establish communication, without carrying any informative content.

And attention is exactly what the character-narrator Edichka is striving for. Finding himself in an environment alien to him, he feels physically and emotionally isolated from his own culture and alienated within the new one. For this reason, Edichka has become extremely solipsistic and centred in on himself, a psychological state of mind that has commonly been interpreted as narcissistic. The Russian émigré writer Nikolai Bokov was the first to employ the word ‘narcissistic’ with regard to the novel. In his review, he argues that Limonov’s character-narrator is ‘a narcissist in the Freudian sense of the word’ (1979: 12, my translation). Several scholars have taken up his argument, diagnosing Edichka’s psychological state as narcissistic (Simmons 1993: 100; Smirnov 1983: 25).

Yet a ‘narcissist’ reading of the text is refuted by the fact that Edichka is very much afraid of oblivion, experiencing a strong feeling of loneliness and being unloved. As studies have shown, narcissism is inversely related to loneliness, which means that people who are narcissistic in nature tend to feel less lonely and depressed than others.⁹⁷ This is clearly not the case with Edichka, who is desperate for human contact, even though this desperation has turned into rage, anger and disappointment. His fear of losing human contact is also the purported reason for his decision to become a practicing homosexual: ‘I was forced to grasp at anything, I

⁹⁷ For a detailed discussion of the correlation between loneliness and narcissism, see Raskin, Novacek and Hogan (1989).

had nothing, we were alien to this world' (ED 1983: 50). He also repeatedly asserts his need for social contact. For example, he confesses to his friend Kirill that 'I want attention, I want to be loved and fussed over' (ED 1983: 50). Later on in the text, he admits 'I rarely get invited anywhere, but I so love company' (ED 1983: 101). This shows that his emotional outbursts are more a reflection of his loneliness and frustration than a 'narcissistic rage' or 'desire for vengeance' (Simmons 1993: 107, 108).

Unable to change his miserable situation, he shifts the blame away from himself in order to release his frustrations.⁹⁸ The implied reader is confronted with Edichka's anger from the very beginning of the narrative.

Я вам не нравлюсь? Вы не хотите платить? Это еще очень мало — 278 долларов в месяц. Не хотите платить. А на хуя вы меня вызвали, выманили сюда из России, вместе с толпой евреев? Предъявляйте претензии к вашей пропаганде, она у вас слишком сильная. Это она, а не я опустошает ваши карманы.⁹⁹

(ETO 1998: 11)

Shouting 'You don't like me? You don't want to pay?' (ED 1983: 5), he attempts to provoke a reaction from his addressee, even though it is not entirely clear who Edichka's anger is directed at. Initially, it seems to be directed at an American audience, a view that is also supported by Karen Ryan-Hayes (1995: 140). There are also other passages in the novel that seem to address an American (Western) audience. In the Rosanne chapter, for example, Edichka comments that her behaviour demonstrates 'stinginess in my view, gentlemen, only in my view. To you, perhaps, it's the rule' (ED 1983: 189). Ryan-Hayes thus concludes that the novel as a whole is clearly more oriented towards an American readership than a Soviet one.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁸ The effects of frustration and its strong correlation with aggression were determined as early as 1939 when a team of social scientists led by John Dollard, Leonard Doob and Neal Miller developed the frustration-aggression hypothesis. They argued that frustration always produces an aggressive urge and that aggression is always the result of frustration. Their hypothesis was later examined and amended by Leonid Berkowitz (1969).

⁹⁹ 'You don't like me? You don't want to pay? It's precious little — \$278 a month. You don't want to pay. Then why the fuck did you invite me, entice me here from Russia, along with a horde of Jews? Present your complaints to your own propaganda, it's too effective. That's what's emptying your pockets, not I' (ED 1983: 5).

¹⁰⁰ Leonid Pochivalov, who reviewed the novel for the Soviet *Literaturnaia gazeta*, also argued that the *mat* in the text was mainly directed against 'America, Israel and the whole free world' (1980: 14, my translation).

However, the language Edichka speaks is Russian, not English, and he is therefore unlikely to reach an English-speaking audience, which is a further indication of his social alienation. It is also evident that the tone in which he addresses his interlocutor(s) changes constantly throughout the novel. He seeks sympathy as well as empathy. He shouts at and scorns the implied reader. In doing so, he tries to provoke a reaction — any reaction — from his addressee. This shows that Edichka does not explicitly have a Western interlocutor in mind. The epilogue, in particular, suggests that his anger is directed against the world at large. Sitting on his balcony and cursing the world, he whispers ‘perhaps I’m addressing these buildings around me. I don’t know’ (ED 1983: 264).

In addition, the text abounds in cultural and literary references unlikely to be understood by American/Western readers, a point also made by literary critic John Bayley. Reviewing several émigré novels in his article, he laments that ‘all [these writers] take for granted in their readers a thorough familiarity with Russian literature, its texts and traditions’ (1984: 29). *Eto ia — Edichka* is no exception to this feature of Russian émigré writing, as the many intertextual references to both literary figures and texts in the text illustrate.¹⁰¹

This gives rise to the assumption that the novel is more oriented towards a reader familiar with both Soviet culture and life in emigration, an assumption that is also supported by the novel’s critical reception. While the novel provoked many readers, the strongest reaction came from the Russian émigré community. At first glance, such a reaction seems predictable when considering its themes and the vocabulary used therein. Not only does the novel make use of linguistic varieties that were considered a violation of the literary norms prevalent at that time (obscenities, foreign words, colloquialisms), it also shocked its readership because of its delicate subject matter (sexuality, including homosexuality), its strong apolitical stance (desecration of the dissidents Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn and Andrei Sakharov) and its doubtful moral standards. By blurring the public and the private, the high and the

¹⁰¹ Olga Matich shows Limonov’s indebtedness to poets and writers such as Vladimir Maiakovskii, Velimir Khlebnikov and the Obèriu authors. Limonov’s novel also shows strong parallels with Dostoevsky’s *Zapiski iz podpolia* (1864, *Notes from Underground*) and *Prestuplenie i nakazanie* (1866, *Crime and Punishment*). She concludes that ‘although Limonov seems to have rejected his affiliation with Russian literature, the primary subtexts of *Eto ia — Edichka* are Russian, and his literary anthropology is clearly Dostoevskian’ (1986: 534).

low, fact and fiction, as well as the sacred and the profane, Limonov challenged the notion of *literaturnost'* ('literariness') in the most radical way — too radical for many. For example, as Viktor Perlman wrote in *Novoe russkoe slovo*, a New York-based daily newspaper in Russian: 'Before us is a hollow man who, writhing in pornography and semi-Trotskyist ravings, in hatred towards Russia and towards the West, tries to present himself in the aura of a Personality [...] a moral stump sticking out in the bowels of New York' (quoted in Shukman 1983: 1). Others decided to 'deal with the Limonov case' by simply ignoring him, a strategy pursued by the Russian émigré journal *Kontinent*. While Vladimir Maksimov, the journal's editor-in-chief, was enthusiastic about Limonov's poetry, he apparently had nothing to say about his prose, for which he was attacked by émigré writer Nikolai Bokov at a meeting of representatives of the Third Wave in 1979 (Ryan-Hayes 1995: 104).

This indicates that the émigré press was anything but a homogenous and unified body. The Paris-based journal *Kovcheg*, for example, which was the first to publish a slightly abbreviated version of *Eto ia — Edichka*, openly declared its support for authors whose unconventional style would make them unacceptable for print both in Soviet Russia and in Russian-language publications abroad. Nikolai Bokov, the journal's founder, claimed not to pursue any ideological programme but to promote 'avant-gardism at any cost' (quoted in Henry 1990: 105). The diversity in political and literary orientation notwithstanding, many émigré writers and readers exploited these magazines and journals as channels of communication, as a form of dialogue, exchanging their ideas by writing letters to the editors. The exchange of ideas and views was an important function of the émigré press, as the literary journal *Ekho* wrote:

Если литература вызывает споры, эти споры не должны *загоняться* внутрь. Тем более, как нам кажется, эти споры живописуют нашу литературную жизнь так ярко, как не удалось бы ее описать, если б постараться нарочно.¹⁰²

(Maramzin and Khvostenko 1978: 118)

The strong response to Limonov's *Eto ia — Edichka* is a good example of this literary dialogue within the émigré community. The presence of *mat* in the novel

¹⁰² 'If literature is controversial, then these controversies should not be *driven* inside. This is all the more so since these controversies, it seems, paint such a vivid picture of our literary life that it would be impossible to describe it even if you expressly tried to do so' (my translation).

played a crucial role in the many opinions exchanged on the novel (there were hardly any reviews that did not comment on the presence of *mat* in the text), which is why it became the focus of a great controversy within the émigré community. We can therefore argue that the dialogic function of obscene language went well beyond the narrative discourse, affecting the discourse *about* the novel in much the same way. Obscene language thus helped re-establish the literary dialogue between readers and writers, breathing new vitality into Russian literature.

What the many reviews written about *Eto ia — Edichka* also show is that the reactions to the novel were not exclusively negative. On the contrary, Arvid Kron, who was the first to discuss the novel in 1979, admitted that while it had not been easy to publish the novel in an uncensored manner, it was the best that had been written by an émigré writer, depicting an extraordinarily frank human portrait (1979: 90). Literary critic Aleksandr Gidoni also praised the novel for its frankness, which would be achieved through verbal obscenity (1979: 235–6). While the abundance of *mat* words would not evoke pleasant feelings with the readers, Gidoni argued, these terms would revitalise Russian literature. In this way, Gidoni wrote, *Eto ia — Edichka* would compare to the fiction of American writer J. D. Salinger.

Limonov's novel indeed bears certain similarities to Salinger's classic coming-of-age novel *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951). In both novels, the dominating voice belongs to a character-narrator who is trapped in his misery and shares his negative feelings and frustration with his readers. At the time when Limonov's *Eto ia — Edichka* was first made available to a larger readership, Salinger's novel had already firmly established itself in the Anglo-American literary world. In the context of Russian émigré writing, however, this literary convention, in particular its confessional nature, was a novelty. This is not to say that there was no confessional prose before that point.¹⁰³ While confessional narrative techniques were absent in Stalinist Russia, the genre of *ispovedal'naia proza* resurfaced in the late 1950s. Writers like Vasilii Aksenov and Chingiz Aitmatov brought back the questioning individual to literature, which has been interpreted as a counter-reaction to the 'functionalist man' in Soviet prose. Yet these writers' confessions differ significantly from American coming-of-age narratives and beat prose. While

¹⁰³ The genre of confessional prose and its peculiarities in a Soviet context are discussed in Oleg Kharkhordin's *The Collective and the Individual in Russia* (1999: 343–8).

regarded as a narrative technique applied to analyse and understand the inner thoughts and desires of certain characters, confession in Soviet prose still served a certain goal and purpose, namely to reflect on deeds and actions. This is clearly not the case in the beat prose of the 1960s, where confession serves as an end in itself. Limonov's *Edichka* was thus closer to the American tradition than to the Soviet one. As Petr Veil' and Aleksandr Genis state, 'the Russian reader always expects to detect some kind of particular truth of life in a literary text' (1987: 122, my translation). *Eto ia — Edichka* clearly lacks this quality in that it is mainly about the inner reflections and confusions of a single individual. And this individual does not offer any solutions as to how to deal with life. On the contrary, being too preoccupied with himself and his woes, he struggles to find his place in the world.

It is not only the character-narrator Edichka who is trying to find his true self. When the novel was published, its author, Eduard Limonov, was also struggling to assert his identity as a writer. In an interview given to John Glad, he admitted to regarding the novel, i.e., the act of writing, as 'an act of self-affirmation' and 'proof of [his] existence' as a writer (1993: 265). This attitude is related to his status as an émigré writer and his attempts to create an identity independent of the émigré community. Limonov did not grow tired of emphasising his detachment from the group, repeatedly denying his affiliation with the Third Wave. In 1980, for example, he told Glad that he considered himself outside the émigré community and that he never intended to write for other émigrés. Limonov, nevertheless, attended the 1981 Los Angeles Conference on Third Wave Literature. Yet there, too, he kept asserting his 'incompatibility' with other émigré writers, albeit in a much milder and more moderate tone and with certain exceptions.

I feel myself to be a representative of an entirely new generation of Russian writers. I sense a compatibility with writers like Sasha Sokolov, Aleksei Tsverkov, Yuri Miloslavsky, and Zinovy Zinik.... What actually unites us? I think we represent an entirely new phenomenon — we are Russian politics outside of politics. We cannot be used for any political purposes.¹⁰⁴

(Glad 1999: 435)

¹⁰⁴ Limonov's alleged apolitical stance did not prevent the Soviet authorities from exploiting the novel for their own political purposes. The country's most influential literary journal, *Literaturnaia gazeta*, declared it a warning for those lured to the West (Pochivalov 1980: 14).

Limonov not only refused to support émigré writers' political aims, he also criticised the United States for denying him the opportunity to develop as a professional writer, which had been his main reason for leaving the Soviet Union. Expected to write mainly about anti-Soviet themes, émigré writers would be as restricted as writers at home, Limonov argued.¹⁰⁵

In his attempt to detach himself from the émigré community, Limonov also resorted to obscene language, thereby showing certain parallels with the character-narrator in the novel. *Mat* has always been part and parcel of his technique of 'constructing identities', both within and outside his fiction. While Edichka employs obscene language to maintain and re-create his male identity, Limonov the writer has employed *mat* as a tool to construct his identity as a writer, 'a rebel poet'. While *mat* has always been associated with rebellious behaviour, its correlation with anti-social behaviour and hooliganism was particularly strong in the late Soviet years (see Chapter 1). In the era of de-Stalinization following 1956, a whole generation of young, nonconformist rebel poets emerged and subverted the traditional 'poet as prophet' image by mixing it with the image of the hooligan, thereby following in the footsteps of the poets Vladimir Maiakovskii and Sergei Esenin (see Chapter 2). Colloquialisms, vulgarisms and *mat* were seen as inherent features of this new generation of 'rebel poets'. Limonov, too, quickly appropriated the reputation of a *pisatel' khuligan* ('rebel poet') and, to a certain extent, has cultivated this image. In an interview with *The Guardian* in 2010, he littered his speech with English swear words as if to demonstrate that he was 'a non-conformist from birth' (Bennetts 2010: online). That the use of obscenities is part of his 'art of self-promotion' is also obvious when looking at how Limonov has presented himself in other contexts. When arrested in December 2010 for petty hooliganism, including swearing in public, Limonov strongly protested this decision, arguing that he had not been using *mat* for the last 40 years (Interfax 2010: online, my translation).

The image of the radical, non-conformist writer has also strongly marked his political career, which began soon after his return to Russia in 1992. Interestingly, it was his 'apolitical' novel that would pave the way for his career as a politician.

¹⁰⁵ Limonov's scorn for the émigré community and his contempt for America made the novel undesirable for American publishers. Limonov eventually found a publisher for his manuscript, albeit abroad, the French publishing house Simeon.

When *Eto ia — Edichka* was eventually able to see the light of day in Russia, word of mouth had already spread, and Limonov's novel was immediately elevated to cult status, selling in high numbers.¹⁰⁶ The novel's popularity was reflected in the media attention paid to Limonov after his return to Russia. The country's most influential newspapers and major literary magazines published interviews with Limonov, welcoming the abandoned son and praising him for his success in the West. Limonov's novel was read by a mass readership, even though it had been hard for him to find publishers willing to print his book in an uncensored manner, as he explained in an interview with *Knizhnoe obozrenie* (Shatalov 1990: online). *Eto ia — Edichka* was eventually published by a small publishing house specialising in queer literature, a true niche market at that time. Founded by Aleksandr Shatalov in 1990, *Glagol press* was the first Russian publishing house specialising in homoerotic prose. The very first novel chosen to appear in print was Limonov's *Eto ia — Edichka* (Essig 1999: 290–1). Shatalov even went so far as to claim that the novel had contributed significantly to the abolishment of the notorious paragraph on homosexuality (1995: 42). The novel was thus again exploited as a political instrument by drawing attention to the rights (or rather the lack thereof) of the Russian gay community.

With his gradual success in post-Soviet Russia, Limonov the politician seemed to have lost interest in fostering his career as a writer. Soon after his citizenship had been reinstated, he decided to enter politics, only to apply the same extreme standards to his political career as he did to his career as a writer. In fact, Limonov's radical fictional and non-fictional personas have strongly influenced the way Limonov the politician was (and is) seen by the Russian press (and the Russian population). Unable to separate Limonov from his many other personas, the Russian media have treated him either as a 'writer-cum-politician' or 'writer-turned-politician', thus projecting his image as a scandalous writer onto his political activities.

While the 'enfant terrible' image has continued to haunt him from his literary career, Limonov has cemented his scandalous reputation through frequent arrests and clashes with the authorities. Having replaced 'provocative words' with

¹⁰⁶ According to Davrell Tien, the novel sold over 2 million copies upon its first publication in Russia (1993: 34).

‘provocative deeds’, the writer has now begun to perform his ‘enfant terrible’ role on the political stage. In other words, there has been a shift from shocking words to shocking deeds. This also accentuates the performative nature of obscene words. As Iurii Levin argues: ‘Curses are close to performances: the statement is simultaneously an act and action’ (Levin 1996: 108–9, my translation).

4.5. Conclusion

Obscene language in *Eto ia — Edichka* functions mainly as a tool to assert and re-establish the character-narrator’s identity. Limonov challenges the notion of authenticity by creating numerous ‘authentic’ and ‘real’ images of his self, both outside and within his fiction. Due to its strong evocation of authenticity, obscene language assumes a crucial role in these processes of identity formation. *Mat* is not only significant in the character-narrator’s identity formation and redefinition; it has also contributed significantly to the construction of Limonov’s ‘enfant terrible’ image both in his career as a writer and in his career as a politician.

In *Eto ia — Edichka*, Limonov uses Russian *mat* as a means of transferring the narrative discourse of belonging and disorientation into the realms of corporeality and sexuality. Put differently, he resorts to the lower bodily stratum to express the character-narrator’s strong sense of disorientation and loneliness. Obscene language means both ‘act and action’ since the character-narrator literally performs sexual acts in order to integrate into American society. In the context of émigré writing, this strong focus on individualism was highly provocative, as the strong reactions to the novel showed.

At the same time, the novel gave a new impulse to Russian/Soviet literature by re-encouraging literary dialogue. The impact of the novel becomes particularly obvious when comparing it with two novels published shortly after *Eto ia — Edichka*: Iuz Aleshkovskii’s *Ruka* and *Kenguru*. Like Limonov, Aleshkovskii is regarded as one of the pioneers in the use of Russian *mat*. Yet while Limonov employs *mat* to accentuate and establish Edichka’s individual self, refraining from ascribing a political function to *mat*, Aleshkovskii uses verbal obscenity as a political weapon, employed in an attempt to subvert the existing hierarchical order. In short, Aleshkovskii employs verbal obscenities in a ‘carnavalesque’ way, as the next chapter will discuss in more detail.

Chapter 5: Obscene language as civilised political protest? Iuz Aleshkovskii's *Kenguru* and *Ruka*

As was discussed in the previous chapter, Eduard Limonov went to great lengths to show his detachment from the émigré community and his apolitical stance, which is also reflected in his use of obscene language. It is the formation of his (fictional) self that has been at the centre of his work. Dissident writer Iuz Aleshkovskii, by contrast, pursued a clear political agenda with all his writing. He was at the forefront of writers who protested against the lack of artistic and political freedom in Soviet Russia, and his primary aim was to fight the Soviet system, the injustice and brutality of which he experienced personally.

Chapter 2 argues that Russian obscene language did not acquire strong political overtones until it was rigorously excluded from Soviet official discourse. As a result, *mat* became strongly associated with anti-official and rebellious behaviour. At the same time, however, *mat* was still determined by its aesthetic status as a non-literary element. The conflicting roles of verbal obscenity in Soviet culture explains why dissident writers like Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn and Evgeniia Ginzburg shunned *mat* in their writings (see Chapter 3) and why Limonov's debut novel provoked such a strong critical reaction (see Chapter 4). It was, in fact, not until the late 1970s that *samizdat* writers started to exploit *mat* for its politically subversive potential.

Taking two of Aleshkovskii's earliest novels, *Ruka* (1980, *The Hand*) and *Kenguru* (1981, *Kangaroo*), as a case in point, this chapter explores how and to what effect *mat* played a role as a tool of political protest in unofficial writing, which addresses the second research question. The chapter will also discuss how the changes brought about by the collapse of the Soviet Union have affected the function of *mat* as a subversive element since 1991. This will partly address the fourth research question, which considers the status of verbal obscenity in post-Soviet Russia. While previous scholarly attempts have interpreted Aleshkovskii's use of *mat* as an effective means of challenging the dominant culture, I will show how the use of *mat* in the two above-mentioned novels strengthens, rather than challenges, official ideology. My argument is that, despite its unofficial nature, the use of obscene language does not lead to a suspension of official norms and hierarchies, but to their reinforcement.

Since Aleshkovskii's biography has had a strong influence on his approach to obscene language, the chapter will start with a brief biographical outline before giving a short overview of the scholarly discourse on the writer's oeuvre. Since scholars have analysed Aleshkovskii's novels exclusively through a carnivalesque lens, I will briefly introduce Bakhtin's concept of carnival before discussing to what extent this concept applies to *Kenguru* and *Ruka*. On the basis of these findings, the chapter will then move on to discuss how the use of obscene language relates to the formation of power relations and collective bodies in the two novels. This section will also include a discussion of sexuality in *Kenguru* and *Ruka* and its correlation with *mat*, which will lay the ground for illustrating the limitations of carnival and the extent to which these apply to Aleshkovskii's works. Aleshkovskii's literary legacy in post-Soviet Russia forms part of the concluding section of the chapter.

5.1. Aleshkovskii and the obscene: Mastering the Russian language?

While both Iuz Aleshkovskii and Eduard Limonov are associated with émigré writing, the former is much less well known in the West than the latter,¹⁰⁷ even though his writing is by no means more innocent or moderate than Limonov's prose and poetry. On the contrary, this Soviet émigré writer, who has been living in the United States since 1979, is often mentioned in the same breath as 'rebel authors' Vladimir Sorokin, Eduard Limonov and the Erofeevs (both Viktor and Venedikt).¹⁰⁸ In fact, there is hardly a name in Russian literature more strongly associated with *mat* than Aleshkovskii's. The writer had earned himself a reputation for employing 'unprintable words' long before his emigration to the United States. While making a living by writing officially acceptable materials for the Soviet state (children's literature, television and radio screenplays), Aleshkovskii also wrote unofficial materials for the underground, of which his songs *Tovarishch Stalin, Vy bol'shoi uchenyi* (1959, *Comrade Stalin, You're a Great Scholar*) and *Okurochek* (1965, *Cigarette Stub*) became particularly popular (Lipovetsky 1999: 122).¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁷ Only three of his *samizdat* works have been translated into English: *Ruka* (1980, *The Hand*) was translated by Susan Brownsberger in 1989, *Kenguru* (1981, *Kangaroo*) was translated by Tamara Glenny in 1986 and *Persten' v futliare* (1992, *A Ring in a Case*) was translated by Jane Ann Miller in 1995. I use Glenny and Brownsberger's translations for quotes in English (abbreviated KA and HD). Quotes from *Kenguru* are referenced 'KE', from *Ruka* 'RU'.

¹⁰⁸ See, for instance, Robert Porter's *Russia's Alternative Prose* (1984) and Mark Lipovetsky's *Russian Postmodernist Fiction* (1999).

¹⁰⁹ Aleshkovskii's unofficial songs are published on his website yuz.ru.

At that time, Aleshkovskii was already quite well known in *samizdat* circles for his ‘exclusively oral, pre-written [...] genre of song, joke, pun and party improvisation’ (Bitov 1991: 36, my translation), which would also feature the occasional *mat* word. As Aleshkovskii explained in an interview, he became acquainted with the *mat* spoken on the streets sooner than with Grimm’s fairy tales (Sul’kin 2009: online). It was, however, not only the *mat* heard on the streets that he was to portray in his works. When caught hijacking a car that belonged to the secretary of the regional party committee in order to make his train on time, he was sentenced to four years in a labour camp. Aleshkovskii was thus to experience the world of the Gulag from the inside, which is why he became a ‘master of the Russian spoken by criminals, prisoners, and policemen’ (Brown 1982: 375). When, in 1979, three of his songs featuring lesbian love in prison camps and other taboo topics appeared in the notorious 1979 *Metropol’* almanac, which was published as an attempt to break free from the rigorous literary norms established in Soviet Russia, Aleshkovskii was forced to leave the Soviet Union. He first emigrated to Vienna, from where he later left for the United States. His first works of fiction were published by the émigré publishing house Ardis Publishing.¹¹⁰

Aleshkovskii’s political engagement and his biographical background have had a significant impact on his reception in the West. His works have been analysed exclusively in the light of his strong anti-Soviet stance and his personal experiences with the Soviet system of justice, with Mikhail Bakhtin’s concepts of carnival and dialogue serving as the main theoretical concepts applied. As Julia Kristeva points out, ‘carnavalesque discourse [is] a social and political protest’ (1980: 65). For instance, in the introductory chapter to his monograph *Bakhtin, Stalin, and Modern Russian Fiction*, Keith Booker justifies his choice of authors by arguing that ‘Aleshkovsky’s two major works, *The Hand* and *Kangaroo*, are both usefully read within the context of Bakhtin’s discussions of carnival, dialogism, and history’ (1995: xiv). He reinforces his stance by pointing out that Aleshkovskii’s narrative technique strongly echoes Bakhtin’s work (ibid: 104). Mark Lipovetsky also finds the carnivalesque omnipotent in the writer’s oeuvre, arguing that ‘all of the most important components of the carnivalesque tradition [...] appear in Aleshkovsky’s

¹¹⁰ All biographical information is taken from his essay ‘Avtobiograficheskaia spravka’ (1996).

fiction with exceptional precision' (1999: 117). He concludes that 'one cannot find a more carnivalesque writer than Yuz Aleshkovsky' (ibid).

A carnivalesque approach has also been taken to the function of obscene language in Aleshkovskii's fiction. Interpreting the presence of Russian obscenities, thieves' argot and non-standard speech varieties through the Bakhtinian lens of the 'carnivalesque', scholars have viewed the role of *mat* in the writer's texts as an attempt to break free from and subvert the (linguistic) norms imposed by Soviet official culture. Mark Lipovetsky, for example, describes Aleshkovskii's prose as 'ferocious anti-regime pathos' (2001: 38, my translation), directed against the Soviet system at large. Olga Matich, too, sees the use of obscene language motivated by its strong ideological significance, arguing that 'in the politicized atmosphere of unofficial Russian culture, even sexually explicit literature and obscenity have become informed with political meaning' (1986b: 415).

Analogous to this view, several critical voices have interpreted Aleshkovskii's use of obscene language as an attempt to 'speak the truth', which echoes the observations made in Chapter 3. Stressing the liberating and rehabilitating force of Russian obscene language, scholar Edward Brown, for example, argues that Aleshkovskii attempts to reveal the 'truth through obscenity' (1982: 375). While speaking of a 'shock therapy' (1994: 31) for Aleshkovskii's readership, Robert Porter also emphasises the liberating power of obscene language (ibid: 38). Porter interprets the use of verbal obscenity as an attempt 'to rehabilitate the living language' (ibid: 33), echoing the arguments writer Andrei Bitov raises in his essay *Povtorenie neproidennogo* (1991). Bitov, who was one of Aleshkovskii's earliest supporters and admirers, not only sees the use of obscene language as a life-affirming and purging power, he also regards it as the only layer of the Russian language untouched by any ideological marking.

И родился новый язык, удивительный конгломерат советских и бюрократических клише с языком улицы, обогащенным лагерной феней. Единственно, что оставалось в таком языке родного, это мат.¹¹¹

(1991: 41)

¹¹¹ 'A new language was born, an astonishing conglomeration of Soviet and bureaucratic clichés, mixed with the language of the street and enriched by camp slang. The only part of the native tongue that remained in this new language were the obscenities' (my translation).

Priscilla Meyer goes one step further, suggesting that the use of ‘dirty’ language in Aleshkovskii’s fiction serves a ‘holy purpose [...] purging the corrupt language that is forced upon every Soviet citizen’ (1984: 460). Writers needed a new, ideologically uncontaminated language, Meyer argues, which is why they turned to *mat*. Keith Booker finds the use of obscene language a strategy typical of émigré writers, ‘who have used the technique both to proclaim their newfound linguistic freedom and to highlight the lack of that freedom in the Soviet Union’ (1995: 109).

The argument that obscene language is a linguistic register typical of émigré writing is not completely accurate. As was discussed in the previous chapters, not all émigré writers used obscene language, as *mat* was considered incompatible with the realm of literature. Moreover, a closer look at Aleshkovskii’s body of work points to a more complex functionality of obscene language than suggested in the scholarly literature. Priscilla Meyer also warns of taking too one-sided a stance towards Aleshkovskii’s use of *mat*. She argues that ‘*mat*, like thieves’ slang, is simply one pure form [of spoken language]’ (1984: 455). Robert Porter advances a similar argument, noting that ‘the essential element is that the power of Aleshkovskii’s writing does not simply depend on his use of obscenities — it is their *combination* with other registers that makes in part for the comedy’ (1994: 34). Yet neither Meyer nor Porter develops these observations any further. Taking Porter’s statement as a point of departure, the following section discusses to what extent *mat* engages in a dialogue with other linguistic registers in the two novels.

5.2. *Mat* as carnivalesque language in *Kenguru* and *Ruka*?

Porter’s observation immediately brings to mind the notion of carnival, which constitutes one of the core concepts of Bakhtin’s scholarly legacy. Exploring *The Life of Gargantua and of Pantagruel* by French writer François Rabelais in his monograph *Tvorchestvo Fransua Rable i narodnaia kul’tura srednevekov’ia i Renessansa* (1965, *Rabelais and His World*), Bakhtin traces the origins of carnival back to the festive activities characterising the Middle Ages up to Rabelais’s time in the 16th century. At that time, carnival played a highly significant role in the life of ordinary people. Bakhtin identified the period of carnival as ‘the true feast of time, the feast of becoming, change, and renewal’ (1984: 10), which was opposed to the official system, where everything was categorised, pure, stabilised and within

boundaries. For Bakhtin, carnival constitutes an integral part of mediaeval popular culture since it ‘celebrated temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order; it marked the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms and prohibitions’ (ibid).

Bakhtin maintains that the temporary suspension of hierarchies during carnival time would also result in a temporary suspension of linguistic hierarchies, thus leading to the creation of ‘a special type of communication impossible in everyday life [...] frank and free, permitting no distance between those who came in contact with each other and liberating from norms of etiquette and decency imposed at other times’ (ibid: 10). The language of carnival is thus strongly permeated by unofficial speech elements such as curses, profanities and abuses. This is partly because of their non-conformity with official language, thereby serving as a form of subversive challenge to authoritative speech conventions. At the same time, however, the language of carnival entails a regenerative element as a result of its reference to the lower bodily stratum.

Another striking feature of Bakhtin’s concept of carnivalesque language is the popular culture of laughter. In contrast to earlier theoreticians on this subject, Bakhtin regards laughter as an entirely positive feature, describing it as ‘the laughter of all people [...] directed at all and everyone, including the carnival’s participants’ (1984: 11). The main characteristic of carnivalesque laughter is its ambivalence. Hub Zwart observes that ‘it is gay, triumphant and at the same time mocking, deriding’ (1996: 11–2). He concludes that ‘in gay laughter [...] a basic positive force is at work, and its basic aim is renewal and affirmation rather than destruction’ (ibid: 53). In other words, carnivalesque laughter is a means of liberation, ridiculing that which is threatening. Obscenity thus plays an important role in Bakhtin’s understanding of carnivalesque laughter, since the obscene, like laughter, both materialises and degrades, it both exposes and unites.¹¹²

It does not take hours of scrupulous reading to detect linguistic features of carnival in Aleshkovskii’s novel *Kenguru*. The carnivalesque mood of the narration is established from the very beginning, penetrating all layers of the novel. *Kenguru*

¹¹² For a more detailed discussion of the interrelation between obscenity, humour and laughter, see James Robson’s monograph on humour and obscenity in Aristophanes’s plays (2006: 70ff.).

tells the story of Fan Fanych, an ‘international crook’ (KA 1986: 62), who is accused by the KGB of raping and murdering an aged kangaroo in the Moscow Zoo on the night between 14 July 1789 and 9 January 1905. The grotesque accusation and bizarre date were fabricated by a special computer programmed to produce such cases. The absurdity of the situation is further highlighted by the bizarreness of the show trial, during which Fan Fanych becomes so upset when watching a film about his alleged crimes (for which he himself had to write the script) that he asks to be sent away to a Gulag camp in Siberia. There he shares quarters with a group of dyed-in-the-wool Bolsheviks, who keep proclaiming their loyalty to state and nation despite their imprisonment. When he is finally released, he returns to his flat in Moscow.

The carnivalesque nature of the text is not only reflected in the many grotesque situations and absurdities peppering Fan Fanych’s unbelievable tale. He claims, for example, to have been involved in major historic events such as the 1945 Yalta Conference. It is, first and foremost, the language of the novel through which the carnivalesque is evoked. Narrated from the point of view of a petty thief, the narration features an abundance of argot, slang, vulgarities and scatological obscenities, linguistic forms closely associated with the billingsgate of carnival. Since ‘scatological liberties’ (Bakhtin 1984a: 147) such as the tossing of excrement and drenching people in urine played an important role in medieval carnival festivities, scatological imagery has become a strong verbal marker of billingsgate. This is also the case in *Kenguru*, which mainly features scatological *mat* and euphemisms, as well as swearwords taken from the semantic fields of animals and insects such as *gnida* (‘louse’), *tvar* (‘creature’) or *zver* (‘beast’). Animal imagery was a central element of carnival, reflecting both the earthiness and the grotesque characterising the carnivalesque (Kalof 2007: 59–66).¹¹³ The first dialogue between Fan Fanych and his opponent, KGB officer Kidalla, provides a good example of the carnivalesque nature of language in *Kenguru*:

Междугородний звонок. Подхожу.

¹¹³ Animals, in general, play an important role in the text. Not only does the crime of which Fan Fanych is accused involve a kangaroo, the novel also includes many allegories involving animals. The teacher, for example, is compared to a ‘hungry wolf’ (KA 1986: 36), and the Moscow Zoo is compared to a Gulag camp (ibid: 24). Most toasts are made to animals.

— Гуляев, — говорю весело, — он же Сидоров, он же Каценеленбоген он же фон Патофф, он же Экранц, он же Петянчиков, он же Тэде слушает!
 — Я тебе пошучу, реакционная харя! — слышу в ответ и тихо поворачиваюсь к окну, ибо понимаю, что скоро не увижу воли, и надо на нее наглядеться.
 — Чтобы ровно через час был у меня. Пропуск заказан. За каждую минуту опоздания сутки кандея. [...] Ясно, гражданин Тэде?
 — С вещами? — спрашиваю.
 — Конечно, — отвечает чекистская гнида после паузы. — Захвати индийского, высший сорт, а то у меня работы много. Чифирку заварим. Бросил он, гумозник, трубку, а я свою, Коля, держу, не бросаю.¹¹⁴
 (KE 1992: 5)

As was pointed out above, Bakhtin regards laughter as an essential feature of the world of carnival, and laughter in *Kenguru* is strongly reminiscent of Rabelais's carnivalesque laughter. Aleshkovskii is a master in combining the obscene with a sense of humour, using laughter to relieve the tensions arising through the employment of obscenities. In a Rabelaisian manner, the terrifying and intimidating reality of Stalinist terror is transformed into something grotesque and bizarre. This effect is for the most part achieved through register shifts, with obscene language occurring in situations and contexts normally not associated with *mat*. For example, during the court proceedings, the female prosecutor, when reading Fan Fanych's indictment, has to pronounce all of Fan Fanych's aliases, including *Kharityn Ustinych Iork*. Forming the obscene word *khui*, the three initials create a humorous effect, which is heightened by the fact that the indictment is written in highly technical legal language. These comic effects undermine the seriousness of the court proceedings.

Рассказал я сначала, где родился и где крестился.
 Старуха-заседательница: Почему, подсудимый, вы — Йорк?
 Я: Я полумордва, полуангличанин. И прочитайте начальные буквы моего имени, отчества и фамилии.
 Старуха-заседательница: / написав и прочитав / Это — распад! Это слово на букву хэ!

¹¹⁴ 'So the phone rings, long distance. I pick it up. "Gulyaev speaking," I say cheerfully. "Alias Sidorov, alias Katzenelenbogen, von Patoff, Ekrantz, Petyanchikov, alias Etcetera!" "Forget the jokes, you reactionary jerk," a voice replies. I turn quietly to the window. I won't be seeing freedom much longer, I can tell, so I'd better get a good look at it now. "Be there in exactly one hour. There'll be a pass waiting for you. Twenty-four hours in the cooler for every minute you're late. [...] Capito, Citizen Etcetera?" "I have to bring my things?" I ask. "Right," says this KGB louse, after a pause. "And bring some Indian tea, grade A. I don't have time to shop. We'll brew some chifir." The asshole slams down the receiver, and I stand there listening to the mournful beeping [...]' (KA 1986: 3–4).

Представитель чукчей / из зала /: Ты почему моржиху не захотел изнасиловать? / аплодисменты /.

Я: Моржихи мне глубоко несимпатичны и еще по одной причине, о которой могу сказать только при закрытых дверях.¹¹⁵

(KE 1992: 58)

Another example is the well-known political slogan ‘Workers of all Nations, unite’, which appears above the loo in Fan Fanych’s deluxe cell, degrading the ‘holiness’ of the phrase by its association with a place clearly pointing towards the lower stratum of the body.

A further technique of creating comic effects through obscenity is by changing the original wording of an obscene phrase, as is done in the following example: ‘Ну, всякие дела о покушениях на Иосифа Виссарионовича я откннул к ебенной, извини за выражение, бабушке’ (KE 1992: 17). In this example, *mat* (‘mother’) is replaced by *babushka* (‘grandmother’), thus transforming the infamous mother curse into a ‘grandmother curse’. Obscene terms are employed to relieve tension and to create grotesque effects, which is why sexual *mat* words, which are the most severe in terms of aggression, can be counted on one hand. Fan Fanych resorts to the Russian mother curse only a couple of times. For example, when he is to be seduced by a woman in his cell, he feels insecure and nervous about how to handle the situation, which is also reflected in his speech. ‘Что за еб твою мать, занервничав слегка, думаю и говорю: “Развяжите меня, пожалуйста, Руки затекли и, извините, пур ля пти не мешало бы...”’ (KE 1992: 34).¹¹⁶ When the woman keeps treating him like a kangaroo, he resorts to the mother curse in order to vent his anger about the helpless position he finds himself in: ‘Я психанул, задержался, но посвязали меня крепко, и кричу Кидалле: “Мусор! Какая каракатица ебала твою маму? Какой зверь?”’ (KE 1992: 32).¹¹⁷

¹¹⁵ ‘First I described where I was born and baptized. *Old woman assessor*: Defendant, why are you called Tarkington? *Me*: I’m half Mordvinian and half British. Now read the initial letters of my names. *Old woman assessor (writing them down and reading)*: That’s disgusting! It’s a four-letter word! *A Chukchi representative (from the audience)*: Why didn’t you rape a walrus? (*Applause*) *Me*: I’m just not attracted to walruses. And there’s a more intimate reason I’ll only discuss privately’ (KA 1986: 82–3).

¹¹⁶ ‘What the fuck is this, I think, getting a little nervous. I say, “Untie me please. I’ve got pins and needles in my arms and there’s another little problem, too”’ (KA 1986: 48).

¹¹⁷ ‘I freaked out totally and struggled, but I was tied up tight. “Bastard! It was a spastic who fucked your mama, right?! Or maybe it was an animal?”’ (KA 1986: 48).

While obscene language in *Kenguru* functions as a means of debunking and exposing the hypocrisy and cruelty of the Stalinist regime, transforming the latter into a bizarre and grotesque spectacle, *Ruka*, by contrast, is devoid of any carnivalesque spirit. Written in the form of a grim confession told by KGB Colonel Vasilii Vasilievich Bashov, the novel tells the story of a long and painful personal vendetta. In the course of Stalin's harsh 1929 collectivisation campaign, the young Bashov is forced to watch the Bolsheviks destroy his childhood village and kill his father and other family members. The orphaned Bashov is sent to an 'Anti-Fascist Children's Home', where he becomes notorious for his extraordinary physical strength and his large, brutal hands. His hands are also the reason why he is called *Ruka* ('hand'), a nickname given to him by Stalin after saving the leader with his bare hands from an attack by a mad dog. Enjoying the protection and support of Stalin himself, Bashov becomes a member of Stalin's innermost circle, a position that allows him to avenge himself on his father's killers. Like a black spider sitting patiently in the corner of an invisible net, he catches, one by one, those he considers responsible for the eradication of the village and its inhabitants, with the high-ranking Soviet official Vasilii Vasilievich Gurov being the last one on his list. The custody of Gurov, who is being held captive by Bashov and his men in his villa to be subjected to brutal interrogation and torture, is the point of departure of the novel.

Bashov feels nothing but contempt, disgust and hatred for Gurov, which is strongly reflected in the way he addresses him. Like Fan Fanych's idiolect, his speech is peppered with swearwords, vulgarities and obscenities, yet the tensions building up through the use of obscene language are not released in the form of laughter and humour. The use of obscene language primarily serves one function, namely to dehumanise and degrade the person these curses are directed at. This explains why Bashov largely uses sexual *mat*, which is considerably stronger in effect and more aggressive than scatological *mat*. In Bashov's eyes, Gurov is guilty of the crimes committed against his village and its inhabitants and thus deserves to be punished, which is also expressed verbally:

А ты, сука, ты, мразь, спасительница и насильница моя, ты получишь в первую очередь, в первую! И последние твои минуты будут страшны, пададь усатая, на ляжках пупырышки, ложись уж, ложись, пьянь, раздвигай ножищи мерзкие, не лезь ко мне с поцелуями, получи напоследок удовольствие, больше не будет у тебя его никогда, никогда,

никогда, никогда не будет, кончи, проститутка, последний раз, кончи, гадина, ненавижу, ненавижу, не-на-ви-жу те-бя, сексотская ха-ря!¹¹⁸
(RU 1993: 181)

The *mat* words achieve the desired effect of intimidating the prisoner and breaking his spirit. When Bashov notices Gurov's fear, he allows himself to joke about it.

Информационная программа Время, ебит вашу мать!... вздрагивайте, гражданин Гуров, не дергайтесь! Не вашу мать, успокойтесь! Свою мать вы сами свели в могилу тридцать лет назад.¹¹⁹
(RU 1993: 30)

Like Fan Fanych in *Kenguru*, Bashov frequently uses animals' names such as *gnida* ('louse'), *krysa* ('rat') and *zmeia* ('snake'). Yet in contrast to Fan Fanych, he employs these names to express his utmost contempt for Gurov, which is a common rhetorical strategy in the practice of hate speech.¹²⁰ The helpless other is lowered to the level of parasites, vermin and other animals evoking negative associations.

Открывай глотку, падла, открывай, подыхать тебе еще рано, глотай коньяк, сволочь, да зубами не стучи, хрусталь раскусишь, глотай, ты у меня еще поживешь, гнида, пей, говорю!¹²¹
(RU 1993: 26)

In the light of the above, it comes as a surprise that *Ruka* has also been interpreted through the Bakhtinian lens of the carnivalesque, although the text is devoid of any carnivalesque spirit. Bakhtin understands carnival as a 'true feast of time' (1984: 10), characterised by a sense of change and renewal, with people united by collective and jovial laughter. There are no traces of jovial laughter in *Ruka*. A grim account of a violent and cruel world, populated by corrupt and selfish people, the novel exposes the atrocities of the Soviet system without any humorous or satirical

¹¹⁸ 'And you, sleazy bitch, you my saviour and rapist — you're the first in line! You! Your last moments will be horrible, you moustachioed crowbait, pimples on your thighs, lie down, then, lie down, spread your loathsome fat legs, don't go kissing me, finish this off, get your pleasure, you'll never get it again, never, never, never again, *come*, prostitute, last chance, *come*, snake, I hate, hate, *ha-a-ate you*, undercover spy face!' (HD 1989: 126).

¹¹⁹ 'The News. Up your mother's ass! Don't jump, Citizen Gurov. Don't throw a fit. Not your mother. Rest easy. You sent her to the grave yourself, thirty years ago' (HD 1989: 19).

¹²⁰ For a discussion of dehumanisation in hate speech, see Kevin Saunders's *Degradation*. He discusses the role of animals in the process of degradation in Chapter 2 (2011: 16ff).

¹²¹ 'Open your gullet, scumbag! Open up! It's too soon for you to croak! Swallow the cognac, bastard, and stop chattering your teeth, you'll bite through the crystal. Swallow! You're going to live a while yet, cockroach. Drink, I say!' (HD 1989: 15).

camouflaging. Bashov, through whose eyes the narration is rendered, has grown up in this cruel environment. From his early years onwards, he has experienced nothing but violence, corruption and coldness. The novel also clearly shows that the world of the jailed operates according to the same codes, rules and brutality as that of the jailors. This is also reflected in the fact that Bashov and Gurov share the same first names and patronymics. The narration abounds with horrifying tales describing the everyday of those exposed to this milieu, and there is no relief in the form of laughter.

Bashov is conscious of the fact that he uses obscenities and thieves' slang, for he once had to work with Gulag prisoners. Gurov, on the other hand, has never experienced the brutal world of the Gulag. He is therefore not familiar with the slang terms and expressions used by the *urki*, the professional criminals, who wielded considerable influence in the camps. As Meyer Galler and Harlan Marquess also note, obscene language constituted a firm part of the world of the Gulag, used by both inmates and prison guards (1972: 33–4). In his ground-breaking work *Arkhipelag GULAG* (1973, *The Gulag Archipelago*) Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn mentions obscene language as one of the key strategies applied to break prisoners' spirit. 'Foul language is not a clever method, but it can have a powerful impact on people who are well brought up, refined, delicate' (1974: 101).

Bashov regards *mat* as the only linguistic form capable of debunking the true meanings behind words.¹²² He calls attention to the cathartic function of *mat* early on in the text, warning Gurov that he will not shy away from calling things by their names (HD 1989: 9). Later on, he gives a lengthy explanation of his frequent use of non-standard terms and expressions.

Матюкаюсь же я потому, что мат, русский мат, спасителен для меня лично в той зловонной камере, в которую попал наш могучий, свободный, великий и прочая и прочая язык. Загоняют его, беднягу, под нары кто попало: и пропагандисты из Цека, и вонючие газетчики, и поганые литераторы, и графоманы, и цензоры, и технократы гордые. Загоняют его в передовые статьи, в постановления, в протоколы допросов, в мертвые доклады на собраниях, съездах, митингах и конференциях, где он постепенно превращается в доходягу, потерявшего

¹²² As Edward Brown points out, this is a clear case of the many authorial intrusions in the text (1986: 376).

достоинство и здоровье, вышибают из него Дух! Но чувствую: не вышибут. Не вышибут!¹²³

(RU 1993: 9)

Attacking the language of Stalinism, Bashov asserts that, behind the slogans, phrases and words repeated over and over again, there would be nothing but lies and emptiness. The Russian language has lost its connection with reality, and in order to restore this connection, its original and true semantic richness needs to be rediscovered. Bashov argues that evil forces have gained power over the Russian people by misusing the Russian language:

СИЛЫ использовали слово, использовали ЯЗЫК, одновременно пытаюсь уничтожить его сущность, в своем нахрапистом наступлении на человеческое.¹²⁴

(RU 1993: 130)

Bashov's Christian Orthodox attitude and ideas stand in sharp contrast to the reality and circumstances under which Gurov's interrogation is taking place. His victim 'agrees' to tell him the truth, but only under threat and fear. Moreover, while Bashov regards *mat* as a form of liberation, he employs verbal obscenity to achieve the exact opposite effect: to break his victim's spirit, to intimidate him and make him surrender. In the course of the long 'confession' (in which it is actually Bashov who confesses), Bashov begins to realise that, despite his hateful attitude towards the system, he must acknowledge being one of the many cogs in the gigantic wheel of Stalinism. The only way for him to find salvation is through a bullet through his heart.

5.3. Forming collective bodies through obscene language?

The above indicates that *mat* serves as an important tool for establishing power relations, signalling who belongs to the dominant group and who to the dominated one. In fact, in both novels, verbal obscenity strengthens ideological coherence and hierarchical structures rather than creating intimacy and closeness. This is a curious

¹²³ 'I speak foully because foul language, the Russian kind, is a salvation to me personally in that malodorous hole our mighty, truthful, majestic — and so forth — Russian language has gotten into. They're driving it to death the poor thing, all of them, propagandists from the Central Committee, and the stinking journalists and the filthy writer types and nonwriter types, and the censors, and the self-satisfied technocrats. They're trying to knock the life out of it. But I have a feeling they won't succeed. They won't kill it!' (translation by Brown 1982: 376).

¹²⁴ 'The Forces, in their high-handed attack on what was human, used the Word, they used Language, and at the same time tried to destroy its essence' (HD 1989: 92).

point to note since both novels are written from a male perspective, and obscene language is a feature typical of male bonding. There are only a few incidents in the two novels where verbal obscenity functions as a marker of intimacy and promoter of social cohesion. In *Kenguru*, obscenities feature between Fan Fanych and his invisible buddy, Kolia, indicating a certain degree of intimacy and familiarity between the two. Recalling how he left for the KGB headquarters, Fan Fanych explains why he decided to leave the utility bills unpaid:

Подумал, что платить за газ и свет — это я ебу, извини за выражение, по девятой усиленной норме, пускай за газ платит академик Несмеянов, а за свет сам великий Эйнштейн — специалист по этому Делу.¹²⁵

(KE 1992: 6)

Whenever he uses a three-storey *mat* expression,¹²⁶ he apologises, somewhat ironically, to Kolia, which shows that he is aware of the effect these words exert and that he respects his interlocutor as being equal. That Kolia's speech is similar to Fan Fanych's is made clear through the latter's remark 'я съел, ты совершенно точно выразился, от хуя уши' (KE 1992: 97),¹²⁷ when telling him about his attempt to rip a few snacks off King George's birthday buffet. The trustful and intimate nature of their relationship is further signalled by phrases such as 'between us', 'believe it or not' and 'this is only between you and me', as well as the many toasts they make.

Swearwords and mild forms of abuse and degradation also feature prominently in the dialogues between KGB agent Kidalla and Fan Fanych. Yet here, they mainly serve to reveal their intimate but hostile position towards one another. At first glance, Kidalla and Fan Fanych appear to be opponents on equal terms, since they are, to some extent, dependent on one another. Fan Fanych is waiting for his 'very special own case' (KA 1986: 18), while Kidalla needs to create a case for the Anniversary of the Very First Case. Yet their relationship is clearly not on equal terms. Kidalla, representing the official system, has the upper hand, a fact that is reflected by the different forms of address they use. While Fan Fanych usually

¹²⁵ 'But fuck the utility bills, if you'll excuse the expression. Academician Nesmeyanov, that great chemist, can pay for the gas and let Einstein himself for the electricity — that's his speciality' (KA 1986: 5).

¹²⁶ 'Three-storey' *mat* expressions (*trekhetazhnyi mat*) are more complex *mat* expressions that usually contain the word *mat* ('mother') such as the phrase *eb tvoiu mat* ('fuck your mother'). As Charles A. Kauffman explains, 'the speaker using third-level/story obscenity can go no further in severity' (1981: 275).

¹²⁷ 'I hadn't eaten a fucking thing, to use your apt expression' (my translation).

addresses Kidalla in a formal way, especially during their first meetings, Kidalla changes constantly between the familiar and disrespectful form of the personal pronoun *ty* (informal ‘you’), Fan Fanych’s nickname *Tede* (‘Etcetera’) and a seemingly more formal *grazhdanin* (‘citizen’). The latter, however, only adds to the scornful attitude he expresses towards Fan Fanych, as in Soviet times, a Gulag prisoner was not addressed as ‘comrade’, but as ‘citizen’.¹²⁸ Similarly, no matter what number Fan Fanych dials on the phone in his deluxe prison cell, he always reaches Kidalla and only Kidalla. It is also Kidalla who usually uses forms of abuse when addressing Fan Fanych, while Fanych degrades Kidalla only in front of his buddy, Kolia.

Obscenities also function as a marker of power in the relationship between Fan Fanych and his new cellmate, Valerii Chkalovich Kooler, the man who made the computer that fabricated Fan’s case. Here, it is Fan Fanych who has the upper hand, which he immediately demonstrates by intimidating the scared Kooler with his questions and by pretending to have a certain level of insider knowledge. When Valerii Chkalovich tries to establish a sense of solidarity between them by addressing Fan Fanych with ‘comrade’, Fan Fanych quickly changes his tune:

Я тебе, сукоедина мизерная, не товарищ! Я тебе гражданин международный вор Фан Фаныч. А товарищ твой в Академии наук на параше сидит и на ней же в загранку летает! Ясно?¹²⁹

(KE 1992: 44)

Again, it is the combination of obscene language with other linguistic elements that makes the nature of their relationship clear. Like Kidalla, Fan Fanych changes to the disrespectful *ty* and adds a strong form of abuse to demonstrate his power over Kooler.

Terms of abuse also feature in the speech of senior prison guard Dziuba, signalling his power over the prisoners and his contempt for them. When Fan Fanych is led by Dziuba to the barracks, the latter starts yelling at the imprisoned ‘enemies of the people’: ‘Вот вам староста, фашистские падлы! Выкладывайте

¹²⁸ Similarly, prisoners were not allowed to address prison guards by using ‘comrade’. They had to use the prerevolutionary term ‘citizen’. This change in address indicated the change in their legal status since prisoners were no longer deemed Soviet citizens (Mochulsky 2010: 210, note 3).

¹²⁹ ‘I’m not your comrade, asshole! I’m Citizen Fan Fanych, international crook. Your Academy of Sciences comrade is flying to the West in a latrine! Got it?’ (KA 1986: 62).

международные арены, пока шмон не устроил, сутки в забое продержу!!! Живо!’ (KE 1992: 94).¹³⁰ Again, the same rhetorical devices are used to signal power and authority: *mat*, the personal pronoun *ty* and the imperative.

In *Ruka*, Bashov assumes a similar powerful position. Having swapped their former roles, Bashov has turned into a powerful avenger, while the former Komsomol leader of the ‘Young Red Devils’ is now in the helpless position of the victim and at Bashov’s mercy. Bashov is clearly aware of the power he is able to exercise over Gurov and, explaining that he is ‘an unbribable executioner’ (RU 1993: 2, my translation), he leaves no doubt about the allocation of roles during their ‘conversation’. Right from the beginning, he lays out the ground rules of this game of ‘non-equals’. He allows his victim to understand that this conversation will take the form of a confession revolving exclusively around him, with Gurov merely playing the passive part of the listener.

These examples show that, in the two novels, verbal obscenity does not result in ‘a suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions’ (Bakhtin 1984a: 10), which was at the core of Bakhtin’s understanding of carnival, but to their enforcement. The nature of all these power relations also finds reflection in the way sexuality is represented in the two novels. Bakhtin understands physicality as a source of authenticity and truth, as a productive and life-affirming force. The grotesque body of carnival is as an open, constantly absorbing one, celebrating the lower bodily stratum as a symbol of fertility and growth. Sexuality is thus perceived as an entirely positive force, overcoming the negative energies of fear and destruction. For Bakhtin, everything from the corporeal realm was therefore a source of authenticity and truth.

On the surface, Aleshkovskii appears to be employing sexual and bodily imagery in close analogy with Bakhtin’s interpretation of the lower bodily stratum as a symbol of fertility, renewal and authenticity. Keith Booker states that ‘the physical — for Aleshkovsky as for Bakhtin’s *Rabelais* — is a source of authenticity’ (1995: 118). *Kenguru*, in particular, employs bodily imagery in order to underline the life-affirming power of sexuality. The human body is opposed to the sterility of

¹³⁰ ‘Here’s your warden, fascists! Fork over your international arenas before I toss your cell! I can spend the whole night in the slaughter house! Move your asses!’ (my translation).

technology and science, challenging the Soviet obsession with control and authority. For example, when a zoology expert is sent to Fan Fanych in order to prepare him for his forthcoming trial, the elderly man turns out to be a virgin. Assuming the role of a teacher, Fan Fanych introduces him to sexuality, which injects new life and spirit into the man. When leaving the cell, the professor expresses his sincere gratitude. “Thanks to you, Fan Fanych,” he wept, “I’ve lived my whole life in one week” (KA 1986: 42). Through his newly awakened sexuality, the professor has overcome all fear, explaining that he is now afraid of nothing.

The lower bodily stratum is also acknowledged as a locus of truth. Thus, when KGB agent Kidalla attempts to destabilise Fan Fanych’s sense of time, the growth of his beard and his toes reassure him of the passing of time, debunking the lies of Kidalla and his other captors. Similarly, at the Yalta Conference, Stalin’s right foot stages a revolt, cursing him and calling him names.

Вот тут правая сталинская нога, ты, Коля, хочешь верь, хочешь не верь, сказала тихо, но с немалым злорадством и полнейшей убежденностью:
 — Ты, Сталин, говно!
 — Что? Что? — переспросил Сталин.
 — Говно, жопа и дурак, — быстро повторила правая нога, а левая придавила ее, но заставить замолчать не могла. — Дурак, жопа и говно!¹³¹

(KE 1992: 132)

When Stalin’s attempts to silence his right foot fail, he considers amputation. Again, it is mainly scatological *mat* that is directed at Stalin. As Allon White and Peter Stallybrass point out, scatology has often been considered the ‘ditch of truth’ (1986: 141), representing that which should be disguised from the public eye. Analogous to this interpretation, Stalin’s right foot can be seen as a locus of truth, revealing the true nature of the Soviet leader. Karen Ryan observes that ‘for Aleshkovsky the physical body irrationally resists oppression even when the mind rationally complies’ (2009: 88). This is all the more the case when considering that the second meaning of *pravyi* (‘right’) means ‘true’ and ‘just’ in Russian.

¹³¹ ‘Suddenly, Kolya — you don’t have to believe this if you don’t want to — Stalin’s right foot spoke. Quiet, but with a mean laugh, and a lot of spunk. “Hey, Stalin. You’re a shit.” “What? What?” said Stalin. “A shit, an asshole, and a dope,” the right foot said, again, quickly. The left one stomped on it, but it wouldn’t shut up. “A dope, an asshole, and a shit”’ (KA 1986: 191).

While Stalin is unable to silence his right foot, Fan Fanych's body is not to be deceived, either. When a young woman tries to manipulate Fan Fanych into thinking that he has turned into a kangaroo, forcing him to make animal sounds and offering him carrots, and attempts to seduce him, he is unable to make love to her, realising that he cannot deceive his body and his sexuality.

Потому, что Фан Фаныча, Коля, можно заставить ходить на карачках, говорить 'Кэ-э-э', облизывать эрогенные зоны сексотских харь и жевать заморские листики, но заставить Фан Фаныча кинуть палку самке человека было невозможно. Дело не в принципах, Коля, не учи меня, пожалуйста, жить! Мне на принципы также насрать, извини за выражение, как и тебе. Я не мог трахнуть человеческую женщину. У меня на нее, хочешь верь, хочешь нет, не стоял [...] потому что я, в отличие от тебя, не сексуальный монстр, а нормальный человек!¹³²

(KE 1992: 39).

This shows that, in contrast to the corporeal imagery in Rabelais's work, in *Kenguru*, the bodily does not succeed in overcoming hierarchical differences. It is also a sexual crime that has brought Fan Fanych into this unfortunate situation, namely the rape and murder of an aged kangaroo. Sexuality is thus not an exclusively constructive force, particularly in light of the fact that Fan Fanych fails to perform sexually.

While in *Kenguru*, the life-affirming power of sexuality is preserved to a certain degree, in *Ruka*, sexuality is degraded to a destructive, negative and perverse force. This is also reflected in the language used to refer to bodily matters. While in *Kenguru*, the life-affirming power of sexuality is reflected in the use of scatological *mat* and vulgarisms, sexuality in *Ruka* is mainly referred to by sexual *mat*. This is particularly evident in the figure of Bashov, whose unfulfilled sexual desires are the main driving force behind his revenge. Since the Bolsheviks' attack, when he was exposed to the cold and snow for much too long, Bashov has been impotent, thus unable to indulge in any physical pleasures. Like Edichka in Limonov's novel, he uses sexualised language in an attempt to compensate for his impotence.

¹³² 'You could make Fan Fanych walk on all fours, you could make him say "Keh-eh-eh," lick the erogenous zones of sex-mad whores at foreign leaves, but you just couldn't make him get it up for a human female. It's nothing to do with principles, Kolya, don't try to teach me how to live. I feel the same way about principles you do — fuck 'em, excuse the expression. I couldn't screw a human woman. It's as simple as that. Believe it or not, I couldn't get a hard-on [...] because I'm a normal guy, not a sicko like you' (KA 1986: 55–6).

[...] мужиком, мужчиной, блядуном, ебарем, мужем, отцом я не стал. Отморозили вы мне тогда на проклятой колодине то ли яйца, то ли простату, то ли плоть самого хуя — диагноз неважен — и не стоял у меня после этого ни-ко-гда.¹³³

(RU 1980: 31)

Unable to fulfil his sexual desires, Bashov channels his sexual energy into his revenge in an attempt to sublimate his cravings, a process he is fully aware of. While his friends in the orphanage use every single minute to indulge in sexual fantasies, his energy is fully taken up by his desire to avenge the crimes committed against his father and his village. In the same way that Sigmund Freud considers sexual repression as the main force behind the greatest achievements in civilisation,¹³⁴ Bashov uses his sexual energies to quench his thirst for revenge. Yet rather than transforming his libidinal drives into socially useful and life-affirming achievements, Bashov responds to his sexual frustration by transforming his sexual energies into something utterly destructive and negative.

As in *Kenguru*, the bodily in *Ruka* is ‘blended with the world, with animals, with objects’ (Bakhtin 1984a: 26–7). Here, however, this form of debasement takes on a highly dehumanising and humiliating form. The narrative ‘climax’ is the scene of mass copulation performed in one of the Gulag prison camps, to which Bashov becomes an unwanted witness. In this ‘provincial attraction’ (HD 1989: 213), male prisoners are forced to have intercourse with female prisoners. They are, however, not allowed to see each other, as they are on the opposite sides of a timber fence that has holes in it. The animal-like nature of this performance is particularly epitomised in Gurov’s father, Poniāt’ev, who is one of the prisoners. Having had to ‘donate’ his arms and legs to his fellow prisoners in a failed escape attempt in order to save the group from starvation, he is pushed towards the fence by two prison guards, as he literally has no feet to stand on. The sight of the limbless Poniāt’ev, nicknamed ‘Turtle’, becomes more bizarre still when Bashov learns that the missing extremities have no effect on Poniāt’ev’s manliness. Unable to bear the sight of this ‘provincial attraction’, Bashov commands the dismantling of the wooden fence, allowing the

¹³³ ‘[...] I didn’t become a man either — a man, a regular guy, a cocksman, cunt-chaser, husband, father. Thanks to you, I got frostbite on that damned log. You froze my balls, or my prostate, or the actual flesh of my prick — who cares about the diagnosis — after that I never got a hard-on. *Never*’ (HD 1989: 20).

¹³⁴ Freud develops this theory in *Civilisation and Its Discontents* (1930).

prisoners to ‘совокупляются по-человечески’ (RU 1980: 284), to ‘copulate like human beings’ (HD 1989: 213). Here, the sexual act is rendered through the term *sovokupliat’sia*, which is normally employed to refer to reproductive sexual intercourse between non-human animals. This shows that the brutality and horror of the Soviet prison camps leave no space for dignity, morality or humanity, turning sexuality into a manifestation of monstrosity and bestiality, which is also expressed linguistically.

The notion of sexuality as a positive force is also undermined in moments of privacy and intimacy. A man tells his wife the truth about the Stalinist system in ‘intimate moments’ (HD 1989: 129). But these moments of intimacy take place under the watchful eye of their grandson, who keeps his observations in a logbook, describing the intimacies in dry and bureaucratic language. He finally hands the logbook over to the NKVD, denouncing his grandparents. When asked by Bashov what he understands as an ‘intimate moment’, the young man explains that ‘it’s a moment when two close confidants candidly expose to each other their thoughts on our era, Stalin, Fascism, and the building of the new life’ (HD 1989: 131).

Sexuality is thus transformed from something intimate, positive and individual into something public and impersonal, detached from bodily functions and physical desires. This is also reflected in the language used to describe ‘intimate moments’, which is bureaucratic and sterile, as well as aggressive and dehumanising. This means that instead of enforcing dialogue and interaction, sexuality, much in the same vain as the language used to describe it, strengthens the power relations in the two novels, between the dominant and the dominated.

5.4. The politics of *mat*: Obscene language as political protest?

What follows from the above is that the lower, unofficial voices were as ideologically charged as the official high voice, being in fact just flipsides of the same coin. This contradicts the observation that non-standard speech varieties were ‘uncontaminated’ and ‘neutral’ (Meyer 1984: 455), and also questions their ‘liberating’ effect. As was pointed out earlier, in Soviet Russia, obscene language was not only strongly associated with hooliganism and anti-social behaviour, it was also a distinctive feature of life in Gulag camps, as accounts of Soviet prison camps show. This explains why verbal obscenity, embodying everything that Soviet culture

ought *not* to be, acquired strong ideological and political overtones. *Mat* was therefore not merely a linguistic phenomenon lingering at the periphery of Soviet culture, but an *integral* element thereof, creating meaning through its exclusion (not absence!) from official discourse. Peter Stallybrass and Allon White highlight the interdependence of the high and the low, stating that ‘the cultural categories of high and low [...] are never entirely separable’ (1986: 2).

The interdependence between the high and the low is clearly evident in Aleshkovskii’s novels. While at first glance, the taboo topics dealt with in the two novels (the milieu of criminals and the world of the Gulag) and the substandard speech varieties employed in the texts might be interpreted as ‘liberating’ (Porter 1994: 31; Bitov 1991: 41), when taking a closer look, it becomes obvious that Aleshkovskii employs obscene language in close accordance with the ideology of the dominant culture. Soviet official culture associated *mat* with the language of criminals, crooks and other ‘anti-social elements’, and it is exactly this world that Aleshkovskii portrays so vividly in his fiction. Fan Fanych in *Kenguru*, for example, is a petty thief, and his adventurous journey takes him to the very sites of Soviet culture that ran counter to the ideology of *kulturnost*. He is first taken to the Lubianka, the KGB headquarters in Moscow, has then to attend a show trial and is finally sent to a Gulag camp. Kidalla, his opponent, is a KGB agent. Similarly, in *Ruka*, both Bashov and Gurov know the inhuman system of Soviet justice from the inside, with their language reflecting the world they come from. Bashov grew up in a Soviet Anti-Fascism Children’s Home, only to later become a brutal KGB investigator. He is familiar with the unofficial side of the Soviet system, as his detailed knowledge of Gulag camps demonstrates.

This shows that Aleshkovskii’s novels give a rather one-sided and distorted picture of verbal obscenity and its proliferation in Soviet society. As was discussed at length in Chapter 1, *mat* was spoken not only by people related to the criminal world and ‘anti-social elements’, nor was it restricted to the world of the Gulag. On the contrary, verbal obscenity constituted an important element of the unofficial Soviet culture of laughter. Obscene language featured strongly in bawdy jokes, *chastushki* and anecdotes that were told behind closed doors and at the kitchen table. Yet this aspect of obscene language is not used in either novel. In fact, in

Aleshkovskii's fiction, 'non-normative' language is closely tied to 'non-normative' sites such as prisons, labour camps and the KGB headquarters, thereby reinforcing the non-normative character of this world.

We can therefore argue that Aleshkovskii's political protest takes a highly licensed form, an observation that brings us back to Bakhtin's notion of carnival and its limitations. Scholars have challenged Bakhtin's understanding of carnival as a 'temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order' (1984: 10) by pointing out the fact that this form of subversion was usually authorised by official culture. While Bakhtin saw carnival as a means of overthrowing official culture and initiating bottom-up changes (1984: 18–21), critical voices have stressed its dependence on the dominant culture. In fact, we might argue that the function of medieval carnival was not to liberate society from the clutches of a readily acknowledged class hierarchy, but to evoke the temporary *illusion* that no class hierarchy existed. Carnival was an effective means for the ruling class to preserve the status quo. Terry Eagleton argues that 'carnival, after all, is a licensed affair in every sense, a permissible rupture of hegemony, a contained popular blow-off as disturbing and relatively ineffectual as a revolutionary work of art', concluding that 'there is no slander in an allowed fool' (1981: 148). While authorities sanctioned these festivities, they often provided security measures to ensure that the enthusiasm generated by such events did not get out of control. Carnivals were thus regarded as 'safety-valves', relieving the tension that had built up in society. Social anthropologist Max Gluckman reflects this idea in his concept of 'rituals of rebellion' (1954, 1963). According to Gluckman, such rituals would allow the lower classes to express their resentment and dissatisfaction with the dominant culture. They would, however, not lead to any real changes and would only reconfirm the established social order — if, that is, 'the social order is unquestioned and indubitable — where there are rebels, and not revolutionaries' (1963: 134). Victor Turner, a student of Gluckman's, expanded this theory by reintroducing the concept of 'liminality' (1969),¹³⁵ which describes an in-between state or space holding potential for subversion and change. Liminality, according to Turner, is defined by both spatial and temporal aspects that are inextricably linked.

¹³⁵ The concept of liminality was first developed by anthropologist Arnold van Gennep in 1908 in *Rites de Passage*. While Gennep acknowledges the spatial dimension of liminality, his concept of liminality is predominantly temporal.

The differentiation between space and time is also relevant with regard to the concept of carnival since carnival festivities were linked to certain times, as well to certain places. With regard to the former, Bakhtin writes that ‘the dates of the fairs were usually adapted to the great feasts of the year’ (1984: 154). Medieval carnivals were also linked to certain places such as the marketplace. With time, the notion of carnival was extended to public street life in general, including urban topoi such as slums and red-light districts. Identifying ‘places on the margin’ as contemporary sites of the carnivalesque, Rob Shields (1991) argues that, in modern times, the spatial has replaced the temporal, with cyclical festivities having given way to places of fun and naughtiness.

Shields’ argument is highly useful in the context of Aleshkovskii’s licensed protest. In Soviet Russia, expressions of political protest and undesirable resistance to the established order, or rather the consequences thereof, were associated with certain geographical sites. As Caroline Humphrey (2001) argues, social exclusion in Soviet Russia often took a spatial and geographical form in the way that there were sites of marginality. Humphrey supports her argument by referring to the Gulag system as an example of such a site of social exclusion. Gulag camps were located far away from major cities, and released criminals were denied the right to reside in major cities. Spatial exclusion was thus one form of social control, ensuring a minimal dialogue between the excluded and the other members of society.

This form of spatial exclusion is represented in both novels under investigation. *Kenguru* and *Ruka* both represent worlds that had to remain invisible from the general public. For example, Fan Fanych has to endure a cross-examination at the notorious Lubianka headquarters, where suspects were brutally interrogated in the prison’s basement. He is then transferred to a Gulag prison camp located far away from the capital. Spatial exclusion is also a theme in *Ruka* since Gurov’s interrogation takes place inside his own house, secluded from public gaze. As a result of this form of exclusion, the dialogue between Bashov and Gurov assumes an enclosed form, allowing no participation from outside. Bashov and Gurov are the sole participants in the cross-examination. The fact that they swap roles in the course of the ‘confession’ only enhances the feeling of a closed system. In *Kenguru*, the narrated dialogue takes a more open form, allowing participation from outside, but

here, too, the dialogic structures are rather monologist and one-sided in nature. For example, Fan Fanych always reaches Kidalla and only Kidalla, and his drinking buddy, Kolia, is a silent interlocutor. In short, dialogues in both novels do not correspond to the open and unfinished nature of carnival as proposed by Bakhtin, which would constantly absorb new elements and change its form.

Forcing non-conformist writers out of the Soviet Union can also be described as a form of spatial exclusion, a fate that also befell Iuz Aleshkovskii. Like other émigré writers, Aleshkovskii was able to publish his works through the US publishing house Ardis Publishing, one of the leading *tamizdat* publishers of that time. Founded by Carl and Ellendea Proffer, Ardis was a US publishing house that provided a literary haven for writers expelled from the USSR such as Iosif Brodskii, Sasha Sokolov and Vasili Aksekov (Komaromi 2013: 28–30). I argue that émigré publishing houses like Ardis can thus also be seen as carnivalesque sites because they allowed a subversion of hierarchical structures, while still holding on to the ideological system of the dominant class. As was discussed in the previous chapter, writer Eduard Limonov strongly criticised the ideological indebtedness to the Soviet system, which in his eyes found reflection in the fact that only émigré writers fitting into this scheme would get published in the United States. Limonov argues that there can therefore be no talk of a genuine liberation for émigré writers.

Since the Soviet unofficial world was closely tied to certain sites, it was not able to generate much dialogue with the official world, nor could it overthrow the ruling system of norms. This is clearly shown in the critical reception of Aleshkovskii's fiction. Although his novels were directed at a Soviet readership, it was unlikely that they would reach that readership. While the occasional *tamizdat* work did find its way back into the USSR, these channels of communication were highly unofficial, allowing books to be distributed in low quantities and restricted circles only. Masha Gessen states that 'the palpable sense of danger kept the Thaw generation from performing the intelligentsia's most romanticized function: enlightening the masses' (1997: 15). The average Soviet reader did not become acquainted with Aleshkovskii's prose works until perestroika in the late 1980s. The publication of his novels in the United States had largely gone unnoticed, with neither the Soviet press

nor émigré journals reacting to the novels upon their first publication. The overall impact of Aleshkovskii's fiction cannot be described as massive.

Yet it was not only the geographical distance between official and unofficial sites of Soviet culture that made a dialogic exchange between the official and the unofficial worlds difficult. Aleshkovskii himself put the reader at a distance from the narrated world through his narrative technique of *skaz*. While there are no precise definitions of *skaz*, one attempt renders it as an 'artistic construction taken to the second power' (Vinogradov 1975: 242). An obligatory feature of classical *skaz* is the distance between author and narrator, which is achieved through the use of an unreliable and illiterate narrator. In other words, *skaz* is a narrative technique allowing writers to distance themselves from their first-person narrator. As a result, however, the same distance is also created between the narrator and the flesh-and-blood reader. Aleshkovskii deliberately chose a form of narrative discourse that would not allow the reader to identify with the narrated events but put them at a certain distance from the narrated text. The distance is increased even further by the provision of two glossaries of argot and slang terms at the end of the text. The provision of these glossaries indicates that Aleshkovskii did not expect the average Soviet reader to be familiar with these non-standard terms. Considering that almost 20 million citizens spent time in labour camps and/or labour colonies and that the Gulag subculture entered official culture after the mass release of Gulag prisoners in 1953, it is, however, more likely to assume that the average Soviet reader knew these terms. In other words, the function of these two glossaries is to increase the *skaz* effect of the two novels, indicating that the unofficial world was not to mingle with the official one.

This also reflects the limitations of the Bakhtinian notion of carnival as a form of discourse that brings together all people, 'permitting no distance between those who came in contact with each other and liberating [them] from norms of etiquette and decency imposed at other times' (Bakhtin 1984a: 10). In fact, Aleshkovskii creates a distance between reader and text through the carnivalesque, reinforcing the role of *mat* as a feature of the unofficial. Instead of overcoming the hierarchies between the official and the unofficial culture, Aleshkovskii thus reconfirms these boundaries through the use of obscene language.

5.5. After the storm: Aleshkovskii's legacy in post-Soviet Russia

The boundaries between the unofficial and the official disappeared with the collapse of the Soviet Union, which eventually made it possible for Aleshkovskii's works to appear on the shelves of Russian bookstores. Yet while in the Soviet era, Aleshkovskii's protest bore features of a sanctioned rebellion as a result of its geographical (and narrative) distance, it was now a temporal distance that was to deprive it of its power. In other words, it was exactly when the former 'bad boy of Soviet literature' (Bouis 1990: online) became available to the broad public that he 'lost his power' (ibid). When the English translation of *Ruka* appeared in 1990, *New York Times* reviewer Antonia Bouis left no doubt about the fact that she considered the novel outdated and 'belated' (ibid). Arguing that 'the novel reveals nothing new to today's readers, either in the West or in the East', she concluded that the novel had lost much of its shock value. Even 'the sight of four-letter words is not the bombshell it used to be — certainly not in English and not even in Russian' (ibid). Regarding the literary use of obscenities as 'a necessary stage to get through, much like adolescence', Bouis found that most writers have now 'moved on to a style that permitted, but did not require, obscenity as a narrative device' (ibid).

Russian literary critic Iurii Volodarskii takes a similar view, describing Aleshkovskii as a 'visitor from the past', a writer from 'another world' who 'sang something about prison camps' (2009: online, my translation). He adds that younger readers might even react with an astonished 'Oh, he is still alive?' to the mention of Aleshkovskii's name. The reason why Volodarskii decided to write about this 'visitor from the past' in the first place was the publication of the writer's most recent novel, *Predposledniaia zhizn'* (*The Penultimate Life*), which appeared in 2009. Volodarskii argues in his review that, despite the stylistic achievements of the novel, the writer failed to capture the spirit of contemporary Russia, which, according to Volodarskii, is why he had better leave the stage to make room for the next generation of writers.

However, not all literary critics consider Aleshkovskii 'a visitor from the past'. In *TimeOut*, Nina Ivanovna claims that 'unless Aleshkovskii's novel [*Predposledniaia zhizn'*] is at least shortlisted for the Booker literary award, this means there is no longer such an award' (2009: online, my translation). *ExLibris* critic Evgenii Lesin

describes Aleshkovskii as the author of ‘numerous brilliant works’ (2009: online, my translation) and regrets that he does not publish more often. He also remarks that there is a lot of *mat* in *Predposledniaia zhizn'*, but ‘how could that be any different considering that [Aleshkovskii] served in the army, did time in a labour camp and has lived in emigration?’ (ibid). He does admit, though, that ‘I did not stop worrying [about encountering a *mat* word in the text] until I had finished half of the book’ (ibid). Nina Ivanovna takes a similar position, stating that ‘there is, of course, a lot of *mat* but this *mat* is the *mat* employed by the author of works like *Pesnia o Staline* (Song about Stalin), *Okurochek* (Cigarette Butt) and *Sovetskaia lesbiiskaia* (Soviet Lesbian)’ (2009: online, my translation). She concludes that only Aleshkovskii would master the art of using *mat*. This shows that, while Aleshkovskii’s use of *mat* has lost much of its shock value, it has, at the same time, become the writer’s hallmark.

Interestingly, the thieves’ songs (*blatnye pesni*) that established Aleshkovskii’s reputation in Soviet Russia do not include any *mat* words at all. It is therefore curious to note that Ivanovna compares the use of *mat* in his latest novel with the *mat* employed in his folk songs. This suggests that (sanctioned) verbal obscenity is now strongly associated with Soviet counter-cultures such as *samizdat* and *tamizdat*, which are situated in the past. In other words, while in Soviet Russia, the carnivalesque was sanctioned at certain marginalised sites such as the underground or *tamizdat* press, in the Russia of today, there has been a shift from the spatial to the temporal. In post-Soviet Russia, obscene language is thus predominantly seen as a linguistic register associated with the world of the Gulag, i.e., as a highly marginalised phenomenon of Soviet culture. For example, searching for reasons for the alleged deterioration of contemporary Russian, Arkadii Prigozhin (2007: 182–3) puts the ‘blame’ on the fact that a considerably large part of Soviet citizens had to do time in prison or labour camps. Being exposed to the language of the criminal world, they would then have absorbed *mat* into their own language. This attitude is also reflected in the fact that Iuz Aleshkovskii is frequently provided as an example of how *mat* should be employed in literature (if at all). *Mat* would lose its ‘magic force’ and be degraded into something low if transferred to other contexts. Writer Andrei Dmitriev even went so far as to maintain that *mat* in literature only made sense in the

1970s and 1980s, as a literary device ‘making Soviet language impossible’ (Gandlevskii *et al.* 2005: online).

It is not only his critical readers who see the use of obscene language as indebted to the atrocities of Stalinist terror. Aleshkovskii himself takes a somewhat biased approach to the role of obscene language in literary texts. In an interview given to the Russian weekly magazine *Itogi*, he admits to disapproving of the way contemporary authors like Vladimir Sorokin use *mat*.

To be honest, even in those days when his *Ochered'* [*The Queue*] appeared, I could not read Sorokin. An absolutely abstract and speculative thing. I refuse to talk about this author. I don't give a sh... about his *mat*.

(Sul'kin 2009: online, my translation)

Aleshkovskii's legacy of using verbal obscenity in order to fight an oppressive regime has recently been resurrected. In present-day Russia, opposition groups have increasingly turned to obscene language as a means of expressing their dissatisfaction with the current regime and of protesting artistic oppression and corruption. In the same way that Limonov has exchanged ‘provocative words’ for ‘provocative deeds’, the politically subversive potential of *mat* has been realised in the form of subversive performances. The art group *Voina*, for example, has become known for its radical and provocative street performances, of which sexual and scatological imagery constitutes a firm part. This is largely indebted to Aleksei Plutser-Sarno, author and lexicographer of the *The Great Dictionary of Mat*, who joined the group in 2006 to become its chief media artist. One of their most notorious installations was a performance called *Khui v plenu u FSB* (*Cock Captured by FSB*), which featured the painting of a 65-meter-long phallus on the Liteiny drawbridge in St Petersburg. When the bridge opened, the literally ‘erect’ phallus faced the FSB headquarters. Yet in the same way that Aleshkovskii's protest took the form of a ‘licensed affair’, so does *Voina's*. In 2010, the group was awarded the 400,000 rouble (£8,700) Innovation Prize by the National Centre for Contemporary Arts in Moscow, which is supported by the Ministry of Culture (Parfitt 2011: online). This indicates that their protest was ‘sanctioned’ by the regime, as a result of which it lost its subversive effect.

Another radical artistic group that employs obscene language and imagery to mock the authorities is the feminist punk rock group *Pussy Riot*. The group came to prominence in 2012 after performing an ‘anti-Putin prayer’ at Moscow’s Cathedral of Christ the Saviour, employing scatological *mat* (*sran*, ‘shit’) and vulgarisms (*suka*, ‘bitch’) alongside religious rhetoric in order to desecrate a sacred place of worship. Their performance resulted in the imprisonment of two of the group’s members in 2012, from which they were released on 23 December 2013.¹³⁶ While the group does not resort to sexual *mat* in their songs, the extremely strong reactions to the group’s use of religious imagery alongside scatological *mat* as a political protest are a reflection of the increasing conservatism and religiosity of national discourse in the Putin era.¹³⁷

5.6. Conclusion

This chapter has discussed the mechanisms Aleshkovskii employs to use *mat* as an element of political protest. The two novels *Ruka* and *Kenguru* both feature *mat* words, but they draw on different obscene registers (scatological *mat* vs. sexual *mat*), employing verbal obscenity for different ends. Told from the perspective of a petty thief, *Kenguru* employs verbal obscenity in a manner reminiscent of Bakhtin’s carnivalesque language, exposing and ridiculing the Soviet regime. *Ruka*, by contrast, is told through the eyes of a brutal and merciless avenger, which is reflected in his speech.

Representing the Stalinist system of injustice from its opposing sides (victim and victimiser), the two novels are thus flipsides of the same coin. This is reflected in the fact that, in both novels, verbal obscenity not only strengthens hierarchical relations, but it also reconfirms and establishes ideological coherence. This makes it hard to speak of a genuine liberation of the Russian language through *mat*. As a matter of fact, Aleshkovskii uses *mat* in close coherence with Soviet official ideology, employing it mainly as a marker of ‘non-normative’ worlds and characters.

The limitations of Aleshkovskii’s protest thus also make visible the limitations of Bakhtin’s concept of carnival. While Aleshkovskii’s works have been described as ‘carnavalesque’, this chapter has illustrated that his protest takes on the form of a

¹³⁶ For background information on the trial, see Anya Bernstein (2013).

¹³⁷ For background information on the role of religion in post-Soviet Russia, see Brian Bennett’s *Religion and Language in Post-Soviet Russia* (2011: 20–39).

licensed affair, a criticism that has also been levelled at Bakhtin's notion of carnival. This effect is enhanced still further by the fact that his works were published in the United States and therefore did not reach a larger Soviet readership. Aleshkovskii's legacy maintains this form of 'licensed protest', as is reflected in the activities of, and reaction to, recent artistic opposition groups.

The chapter has also revealed that Aleshkovskii saw (and still sees) the function of Russian *mat* exclusively in its politically subversive potential, which he exploited to challenge the boundary between the official and the unofficial rather than the status of verbal obscenity as a non-literary element per se. The literary status of Russian *mat* did not change until the abolition of censorship in 1991, which also made the notion of unofficial literature obsolete. It was, however, also a writer associated with the 'alternative' world of Soviet culture who would take on the task of introducing verbal obscene language into the realm of literature, Viktor Erofeev.

Chapter 6: Lending sexuality a female voice? Viktor Erofeev's *Russkaia krasavitsa*

Moving from the writers of the Third Wave to the perestroika years, this chapter explores a novel by a writer who bridges both the Soviet and post-Soviet eras, both Russia and the West. Viktor Erofeev grew up in Paris but made his first attempts as a writer in Soviet *samizdat* circles long before becoming one of post-Soviet Russia's most acclaimed international authors. The novel that earned him international success was his first, *Russkaia krasavitsa* (*Russian Beauty*).¹³⁸ Erofeev wrote the novel in the later years of Brezhnev's stagnation but was unable to get it published until ten years later, in the aftermath of Gorbachev's perestroika, albeit in censored form (1990). An uncensored edition featuring *mat* words spelled out in full appeared in 1994, after the novel had become an international bestseller.

The time of the novel's publication was characterised by radical ideological transformations affecting all spheres of life, as well as a very strong spirit of political and literary freedom. For the first time in decades, censorship was completely abolished (officially on 27 December 1991), and writers were thus no longer forced to adhere to the official party line on literature. As a result, unofficial literature, which had existed in the form of *samizdat* and underground literature, soon became an obsolete phenomenon, disappearing from the literary landscape. Previously banned books became available to the Russian reader, and new genres emerged, leading to a complete change of Russia's literary landscape. Sexuality, a taboo topic in Soviet Russia and repressed for more than six decades, began to penetrate all layers of Russian culture. For the first time in decades, Russian *mat*, formerly excluded from public discourse, began to appear in print, including in the realm of literature.

This chapter explores the extent to which the impact of these normative shifts affected the role and status of *mat* in literary culture. More specifically, it raises the question of how the rhetoric of the 'lower bodily stratum', formerly banned from the sphere of literature, challenged and changed the notion of literature as 'high art', which corresponds to research question 3. As discussed in Chapter 2, before

¹³⁸ I quote from a 1999 edition of *Russkaia krasavitsa* (abbreviated RK). I mainly use Andrew Reynolds's translation *Russian Beauty* (abbreviated RB), which was published in 1992.

perestroika, writers deemed the rhetoric of the lower bodily stratum incompatible with high culture's 'supreme spirituality', which was part of the reason why writers avoided *mat* in literary texts. Since the title of *Russkaia krasavitsa* suggests a female perspective incorporated in the text, the chapter will also discuss whether Erofeev was able to break with the traditional gender patterns inherent in Russian obscene language, employing *mat* as a universal language for talking about sexuality and bodily matters. This will help answer my first research question, which asks what role *mat* has played in literary discourses on sexuality and bodily matters.

Following the structure of the previous two chapters, I will first discuss Erofeev's approach to obscene language and sexuality before analysing the function of *mat* in the novel's sexualised discourse, in particular with regard to female sexuality. These findings will allow me to demonstrate how Erofeev employs Russian *mat* as a means of accentuating and exposing the 'spirituality' of Russian literature. The chapter concludes with a discussion of how Erofeev's *Russkaia krasavitsa* represents the spirit and ideology of the post-perestroika years, when *mat* started to take on a new role as a negotiator between high and mass-produced forms of literature. I will draw on Mikhail Bakhtin's concepts of heteroglossia and parody to make my point.

6.1. Erofeev and the obscene: In search of a new language?

Viktor Erofeev is typically associated with *alternativnaia literatura*, 'alternative literature', a literary trend that developed in the 1970s but that did not rise to the surface until the later years of perestroika. Defying any clear-cut definition, the term *alternativnaia literatura* has been used interchangeably with *drugaia proza* ('other prose'), *underground* ('underground'), *zhestkaia proza* ('tough prose'), *zhestokaia proza* ('cruel prose') and *novaia proza* ('new prose'). As a result, there is no set of fixed criteria by which a writer would be excluded from, or included in, the category of *alternativnaia proza*. Robert Porter, for instance, applies the term 'alternative literature' to writers who had emigrated and to writers who had stayed at home, as well as to writers who fought the establishment and to writers without any political agenda (1994: 1–19). He treats Limonov and Aleshkovskii as 'alternative writers'. Literary critic Vladimir Potapov describes *alternativnaia proza* as 'the prose of yesterday's "outsiders"', as "'self-seeded" literature' (1990: 158). Mikhail Berg, editor of the St Petersburg-based periodical *Vestnik novoi literatury*, provides a

much narrower definition of this ‘other’ literature. Describing it as ‘literature of the end’ (referring both to the end of the century and the end of the Soviet system), he regards ‘alternative literature’ as ‘literature without illusion’ (1995: 175, my translation). In light of these definitions, we can thus describe *alternativnaia literatura* as ‘literature at a crossroads’ since it relates to both émigré and Soviet literary cultures, as well as to post-Soviet literature.

While the writers associated with *alternativnaia proza* are too distinct in their themes and modes to be identified as a single group, they do have certain features in common. Firstly, they all repudiated the idea of following a prescribed ideology or programme, putting aesthetic considerations ahead of ideological and pedagogical ones. In attempting to create a new aesthetic, they demanded a clear break with the Soviet literary heritage. Secondly, they all displayed ‘an intimacy with contemporary Russian vulgarity of outlook, speech, and demeanour, a sense of the national roots of this vulgarity, and a fascination with the essential naked and rough humanity that underlies this vulgarity’ (Brown 1993: 169). In other words, alternative prose writers sought to expose the ugliness of human life in all its facets, while at the same time combining the horror of the everyday with the comic, sometimes even dwelling into the absurd and the fantastic (ibid: 169). While strictly excluded from Soviet literary representation, the human body with all its functions became a primary signifier in these writers’ works. Yet the body that functions as a discursive site in these writings is not a healthy and stable one; it is ailing, tortured, violated, penetrated and abused. As Helena Goscilo writes, ‘much of the fiction published since glasnost’ has suddenly reversed the heritage of anatomical taboo with a vengeance by plunging deeply, as it were, into physiology’ (1993: 147).

Obscene language became a highly popular literary device with alternative prose writers. For writer Andrei Bitov, glasnost and *mat* have the same roots (quoted in Koschmal 1996: 34). Evoking connotations of shocking openness, excess and brutality, Russian *mat* was found to be a suitable means of fighting the ‘hypermoralist disease’ (1995: 152), as Erofeev diagnosed the condition of Russian literature at the end of perestroika. Declaring all literature produced by the Soviet system irrelevant and outdated — regardless of whether these texts supported Soviet ideology or fought it — he called for an alternative form of literature free of any

ideology, committed only to the aesthetics of the word. Obscene language would be a device that would allow these writers to go ‘beyond the borders of “ordinary” realism as well as of those of socialist realism’ (Latynina and Dewhirst 2001: 236), while reflecting the ‘wild Russian reality and the excessive moralism of Russian culture’ (Erofeev 1998: 14, my translation).

It is thus of little surprise that Russian *mat* has featured prominently in Erofeev’s writing. Making his literary debut in 1979 in the infamous *Metropol’* almanac by contributing the three stories *Iadrena fenia* (‘Piss Off’), *Prispushchennyi orgazm stoletiia* (‘The Half-mast Orgasm of the Century’) and *Trekhglavoe detishche* (‘The Three-Headed Brain Child’),¹³⁹ Erofeev left little doubt about his stylistic approach. Highly disturbing and grotesque, the three stories are loaded with bodily and sexual details while containing an abundance of vulgar and obscene words — features that were to become the writer’s hallmarks. It is not without reason that Viktor Erofeev’s name is strongly associated with verbal obscenity. Tat’iana Sotnikova illustrates how Russian readers tend to react to the mention of Erofeev’s name: “‘Erofeev? Which one? The one who wrote *Russkaia krasavitsa*? The one using *mat*?’” (1997: 213, my translation). The latter comment is particularly revealing when considering that Erofeev’s namesake, Venedikt Erofeev, also uses obscene language in his *samizdat* classic *Moskva — Petushki* (1970).¹⁴⁰

This reaction can partly be explained by the fact that Viktor Erofeev is one of the most prominent (certainly one of the most eloquent) public figures defending the place of *mat* in literature. While admitting in a roundtable discussion on Russian obscenity that ‘this topic has made me sick for the past 15 years’ (Poliakov 2008: online, my translation), he has not tired of sharing his views with the broader public, both in his native Russia and abroad. In 2003, for example, he published a comprehensive article on obscene language in *The New Yorker* entitled ‘Dirty Words: The Unique Power of Russia’s Underground Language’, in which he not only analyses the origins, etymology and evolution of *mat* but also discusses its many cultural meanings, explaining this complex phenomenon of Russian culture to foreign readers. Erofeev has also made extensive attempts to ‘educate’ Russian

¹³⁹ The English translations of the three stories’ titles are taken from Porter (1994: 140–5).

¹⁴⁰ It has also been translated as *Moscow Circles* (1981), *Moscow to the End of the Line* (1994) and *Moscow Stations* (1997). It did not get published in Soviet Russia until 1988. While the first edition contained obscene words, they were removed from the second edition.

readers on *mat*, as his many articles, interviews and statements on this subject matter reveal.

A point he has made repeatedly in this regard is that, as a result of its long repression, Russian *mat* lost its original function as a language for talking about sexuality and bodily matters. Since the Russian language lacks neutral sexual terminology, using either terms borrowed from clinical Latin or euphemisms to address bodily matters, there was, for a long time, hardly any talking ‘about that’ at all. He argues that ‘[in Russian literature] preference has always been given to spiritual, “platonic” love than to sensuality and carnal, physical passion’ (1990a: 97, my translation). For Erofeev, it is thus no coincidence that the ‘liberation of the body’ (2008: 34, my translation) started around the same time that *mat* began moving aboveground, which is why he sees a strong correlation between the liberation of sexuality and the lifting of the taboo from *mat*. He argues for a return to its original, primary meanings, regarding *mat* as ‘the language of the body repossessed’ (ibid: 54, my translation). At the same time, he acknowledges its metaphorical potential. ‘Where sex is a literary metaphor, where it is a device that aids the development of the narrative and movement of the text, in those instances it is brilliant [...] I think that even the most monstrous, filthy description of sexual organs is good if it works for the text’ (Rougle and Rich 1995: 77).

Erofeev made his position on obscene language and sexuality clear as early as 1975 in his essay on the Marquis de Sade. Stressing the importance of de Sade for understanding 20th-century Western European culture, he argues that sexuality, or rather its repression, has played a significant role in expressing power and oppression. Arguing that ‘culture must pass through de Sade, must verbalise the erotic forces of nature and define the logic of sexual fantasies’, he states that ‘only with a rich understanding of the laws of the erotic, the elimination of hypocritical taboos, free mastery of the language of the passions [...] will it be possible to overcome the sickness of dumbness that fetters our embarrassed culture’ (1990b: 254, my translation). Unfortunately, Erofeev concludes, Russian is almost devoid of eroticisms and poor in its representation of the erotic: ‘We can, of course, be proud of our tightened “innocence” and find a particular charm in it; at times,

however, this “innocence” is too strongly reminiscent of ignorance’ (ibid, my translation).

6.2. Voicing female desires? Obscene language in *Russkaia krasavitsa*

Erofeev decided to tackle the enormous task of forcing Russian sexuality out of the closet by writing a novel in which the main voice belongs to a female character-narrator, a ‘noble nymphomaniac’ (Mozur 1994: 392). The 23-year-old Irina, or Ira, Tarakanova (literally meaning ‘cockroach’, a name referring to her humble origins) is lured away from a provincial town to Moscow in search of a more exciting and glamorous life in the Russian capital. With beauty as her main asset, she engages in a series of affairs with diplomats, musicians, bureaucrats and other members of Moscow’s upper class, sleeping her way up into high society. She finally becomes the mistress of Vladimir Sergeevich, whom she tenderly calls ‘Leonardik’ (in reference to the Italian Renaissance artist Leonardo da Vinci). The former literary celebrity is completely smitten with her beauty and begins an affair with her, promising to get divorced and marry her if she is able to ‘resurrect his Lazarus’ (RB 1992: 74). Ira, not without reason dubbed a ‘genius of love’ (ibid: 94), succeeds, although the price he has to pay for this ‘resurrection’ is high, as he suffers a fatal heart attack during a violent orgasm. His sudden death also marks the beginning of Ira’s gradual downfall. She has to answer uncomfortable questions from the media and the authorities about his passing, is fired from her job and let down by most of her former friends. To make things worse, she is visited by Leonardik’s ghost, who makes love to her and leaves her pregnant with a child, which also means the end of her attractiveness to other men. Driven to despair, she decides to sacrifice herself for the sake of saving Russia and the Russian people. Instead of being elevated to the status of a martyr, however, her mission fails. Seeing no other solution, she commits suicide by hanging herself in the bathroom.

As Erofeev claims with some pride in an interview; ‘my “Russian Beauty” was among the first female literary characters who decided to tell us about their relationships with men and other characters’ (Fesenko 2010: online, my translation). And telling us about her relationships is what she does — almost exclusively. Ira’s voice is the voice of a woman of desire, fully aware of her sexuality and the sexuality of others. Speaking with unprecedented frankness about physical matters,

she openly expresses her sexual desires and fantasies. In fact, never before in Russian literature had a woman been given the opportunity to talk so openly about her sexuality and the sexuality of others, which turns her narrative into an unprecedented example of Russian ‘body talk’.

This physical explicitness distinguishes Erofeev’s novel from previous attempts to voice physical desires and needs, of which there are not too many. In fact, as critics have observed, for a long time, Russian literary culture was marked by a distinct lack of sexuality and corporeality, a development that reached its peak in the Soviet era, ‘which conscripted the body to serve either as the peg on which to hang the leather jacket of the political activist or as the ideologically orthodox womb/factory, tirelessly producing future workers at the behest of the national economic plan’ (Goscilo 1993: 146). The absence of all that is associated with the body from the realm of literature is also indebted to the lack of vocabulary referring to sexuality, forcing speakers of Russian to voice their bodily desires either in obscene *mat* words or sterile medical terms. As Igor Kon explains:

The most widely used Russian word to describe sexual intercourse, *trakhat’sia* or *trakhat*’, is completely devoid of any romantic connotations. Other terms are either archaic (*soitie*, ‘coition’; *sovokuplenie*, ‘coupling’) or medical (*koitus*, ‘coitus’), deliberately vague (*spat*’, ‘to sleep with’; *sostoiat’ v intimnykh otnosheniakh*, ‘to be in a sexual relationship’), or openly obscene, with the latter being much more offensive than their English and French counterparts.

(1997: 256, my translation)

Physical desires were therefore often not voiced at all, alluded to at best by employing markers such as ‘then’, ‘later’ and ‘afterwards’.

At first glance, Erofeev’s Ira Tarakanova appears to call ‘a spade a spade’ since she is more than willing to regale her readership with explicit accounts of group sex, sadomasochism, masturbation, lesbian love and all kinds of sexual experiments. Engaging in sexual relationships with both men and women, Ira lives on and through her voracious sexual appetite. It is these passages that fill most pages of the novel and that give the narrative a strong provocative edge, ‘suggesting a work that borders on the pornographic’ (Porter 1994: 147). Feminist critics Nadezhda Azhgikhina and Helena Goscilo are thus quick to debunk Ira as ‘a pseudo-female narrator’, through

whose voice Erofeev ‘ventriloquized [...] his own purely male complexes and problems’ (1996: 94).

Yet while the text might border on the pornographic, it clearly does not venture into that domain. As Susan Mooney observes, although Ira’s voice at first glance seems to confront the reader with a pornographic text, her writing challenges the traditional pornographic formula of a woman revealing her persistent desire for sex. While a typical pornographic text ‘promises the illusion of an uncomplicated expression of the desiring woman and pleasure without a further exploration or grounding in ethics and judgement’ (Mooney 2008: 243), Ira’s voice is the voice of a woman trying to understand the position she finds herself in. Galina Rylkova makes a similar observation: ‘Ira places great importance on the question of verisimilitude: on the one hand, she longs for a scientific explanation of her supernatural experiences, on the other, she fears ending up in a madhouse as the result of her writing’ (2007: 184).

The pornographic potential of the text is further undermined by Ira’s style of narration. As Lindsey Hughes observes, ‘[the text] rushes back and forth, through different time-planes, in a torrent of grotesque, often crude images, obscenities, and Russian literary and historical references’ (1992: 17). Defying any chronological order, the stream-of-consciousness narrative renders Ira’s thoughts as they come to her, giving her narrative a strong oral quality. In many instances, the narrated time and the narrating time are simultaneous and eliminate all distance between her writing of the text and the events being described, making it unclear whether or not she is speaking from beyond the grave. The opening scene, for example, which shows Ira undergoing a gynaecological examination, creates the impression that it is being told by an extradiegetic narrator.¹⁴¹ To some critical readers, the narrative has thus appeared ‘confusing’ (McCausland 2006: 108) and ‘chaotic’ (Schuckman 2008: 48).

Upon closer examination, however, a certain order emerges from the alleged chaos. Ira’s voice does not ‘rush back and forth’, to quote Hughes (1992: 17), but moves in circles, thereby corresponding to communication patterns of female

¹⁴¹ The extradiegetic narrator ‘hovers over the narrated world’ (Herman and Vervaeck 2001: 81), thereby occupying the highest place in the hierarchy between narrative levels.

discourse. As Julia Kristeva argues in her 1979 essay 'Le temps de femmes' ('Women's Time'), female subjectivity is divided between cyclical (repetition) and monumental time (eternity), which reflects motherhood and reproduction. Linear lines of narration, by contrast, are traditionally associated with male discourse. A similar point has been made by Luce Irigaray. Arguing that 'the geography of [a woman's] pleasure is far more diversified, more multiple in its differences, more complex, more subtle, than is commonly imagined' (1985: 28), she sees feminine discourse in opposition to 'phallic discourse' (ibid: 222), with the latter being characterised by linearity, self-possession and authority. Ira's discourse clearly follows a cyclical line of narration; in fact, the narrative discourse is cyclical on several levels. For example, the novel starts at a gynaecologist's practice and ends with her death, thus corresponding to the 'cycle of life'. Similarly, the reader learns at an early stage about Ira's 'mission' to save the Russian people; yet the full picture is only revealed gradually over the course of the novel, with Ira repeatedly coming back to this incident, every time disclosing more and more details. The cyclical mode of narration is even evident at sentence level, as the following example shows:

Пила исключительно только шампанское, пила вообще мало, не возводя в хлеб насущный, отстраняясь от простонародной привычки, нечасто и мало пила, и только шампанское, ничего, кроме сухого шампанского, и перед тем, как выпить, крутила в высоком бокале проволочку, что сдерживает выхлоп пробки.¹⁴²

(RK 1999: 20)

Ira's narrative is not only cyclical, it is also highly heteroglossic, constructed out of an array of different voices and genres. According to Bakhtin, heteroglossia constitutes a form of dialogism since 'it represents the co-existence of socio-ideological contradictions between the present and the past, between differing epochs of the past, between tendencies, schools, circles, and so forth, all given a bodily form' (1981: 291). This form of dialogism is also present in Ira's discourse. 'Quoting' other people's statements at length, she engages in numerous dialogues with her surroundings. Many utterances are thus 'filtered' through Ira's voice, which means they appear as if pronounced by Ira, although she merely quotes them. She

¹⁴² 'I drank only champagne, without exception. Generally I drank little, not making it my daily bread, avoiding the common people's habit; I drank frequently and little, and only champagne, nothing but dry champagne, and before drinking I would dip into the tall goblet the wire that stops the cork from popping like a car exhaust backfiring' (RB 1992: 19).

also quotes extensively from literary sources, thereby moving between the past and the present.

This observation is highly important with regard to the function of obscene language in Ira's narration. In fact, when disentangling the 'jumble of voices' comprising Ira's discourse, it becomes obvious that, for the most part, the female voice of Erofeev's character-narrator adheres to highly traditional gender patterns of Russian speech, which is particularly reflected in her use of, or rather lack thereof, verbal obscenity.

Ira thus hardly resorts to sexual *mat*. In fact, she claims not to have used swearwords until her arrival in Moscow — since swearing is considered to be evidence of a lack of culture and not 'ladylike' (RK 1999: 50). She is more at ease with scatological *mat* and vulgarisms such as *govno* ('shit'), *staryi podlets* ('old rogue'), *suka* ('bitch'), *gad* ('bastard') or *kozel* ('scoundrel'), which she uses frequently, in particular to degrade those exploiting her or looking down on her (in most cases these invectives are directed against men). Scatological *mat* also features prominently in her descriptions of the Russian provinces. For example, on the way to the battlefield where her 'mission' is to take place, Ira and her friends stop in a rural town. In Rabelaisian fashion she describes the countryside as the origin of life, where 'бабы не носят трусов, любят пожрать и норовят соснуть после обеда' (RK 1999: 186).¹⁴³ In another instance, she uses the verb *pozhrat'* ('to gorge, to wolf down') to tell the reader about how she and Leonardik loved to indulge in culinary delights, a description that clashes with the fine food they were served in the posh restaurants where they used to dine. But the best part, Ira writes, usually came after dinner: '[...] и от этой обильной и щедрой пищи так прекрасно спралось, словно это поэма' (RK 1999: 105).¹⁴⁴

While scatological *mat* and vulgarisms abound, thereby further undermining the pornographic potential of Ira's narrative, sexual *mat*, by contrast, does not occur very often, and if it does, it is usually embedded in other characters' speech. For example, when finding out about her husband's affair with Ira, Zinaida Vasilievna,

¹⁴³ '[...] where peasant women do not wear underwear, love to stuff their bellies and can nap afterwards' (my translation).

¹⁴⁴ '[...] and after all this plentiful, rich food, taking a shit was such a pleasure, it was like an epic poem!' (RB 1992: 128).

Leonardik's wife, says in a resigned voice: 'Да ебись он с кем хочет!' (RK 1999: 65).¹⁴⁵ Ira does not reveal her source of information, and it remains unclear to what extent this statement reflects her own contempt for Zinaida. Obscene language is also frequently used by her best friend Ksiusha despite her scorn for vulgarity and *poshlost'*. It is also Ksiusha's speech that contains sexual *mat* words most often. Asked how she likes her new life in France, she replies, 'Хуево' (RK 1999: 22), which means 'fucking awful', an expression that is anything but ladylike. Her vulgar speech stands in sharp contrast to the fact that she considers herself a Frenchwoman, thus contradicting the stereotype of the cultivated and well-mannered French person. In contrast to Ira, she is also self-confident enough to call things by their names in front of men, thereby making Ira feel slightly uncomfortable. For example, when arriving at Anton's dacha, she asks her lover whether he would make love to them, which is quite blunt and direct for a Russian woman, even though she uses the verb *trakhat'* ('to screw') instead of the much stronger *mat* equivalent. As she explains, 'Вообще, слово трахаться [...] облегчает тяжелое дело русской ебли' (RK 1999: 27–8).¹⁴⁶ Ksiusha argues for using *mat* words in their primary meanings, which strongly echoes the author's attitude to Russian *mat*: 'Когда [...] к слову возвращается его первобытный смысл: это — кайф!' (RK 1999: 50).¹⁴⁷

Obscene words are, however, rarely employed in their primary meanings. Ira mainly uses euphemisms and circumscriptions when referring to the sexual organs and sexual acts. The male sex organ, for example, is referred to as *bormashina* ('drill'), *shtopor* ('corkscrew') and *miasisty otrostok* ('meaty appendage'), which are all terms associated with male strength and potency. The female sexual organ is not mentioned in explicit terms, either. Thus, Ira often uses the expression *bergamotovy sad* ('bergamot orchard') when talking about her sexual organ. In other instances, the female genitals are referred to by medical terms or euphemisms.

¹⁴⁵ 'Oh, let him fuck who he likes!' (RB 1992: 75).

¹⁴⁶ 'Generally speaking, the verb *screw* [...] lightens the heavy business of Russian fucking' (RB 1992: 28).

¹⁴⁷ '[...] when a word's primordial meaning is acknowledged, this is a high!' (RB 1992: 57).

Ira's gynaecologist, for example, uses the euphemistic term *kiska*, which is both a nickname for a cat and a playful slang word for vagina.¹⁴⁸

Erotic passages are also devoid of *mat* words. For instance, the passage about the threesome with Ksiusha and Anton does not include any obscene terms at all. Instead, the language of the whole passage is highly euphemistic and ambiguous, as the following excerpt illustrates:

Казалось, меня обложили, и я недоумевала, представленная на крыльце одному Антону, не мог же он настолько раздвоиться, однако была занята и только удивленно промычала, да и Ксюша наконец-то попалась, но вместо того, чтобы от меня отползти, она еще больше прижалась, и мы, обнявшись, поднялись в воздух. Охваченные волнением, пламенем и оттопырьась, мы набрали высоту и — понеслись! понеслись! вытянув головы, наперегонки, смеясь и повизгивая — понеслись! понеслись!¹⁴⁹
(RK 1999: 28–9)

'Being lifted into the air' and 'gaining height' are sexual euphemisms that lend a certain poetic touch to the passage, even though they leave no doubt as to what is being described in this scene. The obvious is only hinted at, lending more importance to what is left unsaid. A similar example is Ksiusha and Ira's trip to Koktebel, a popular sea resort situated on the shores of the Black Sea. Splashing around in the water, the two women catch the attention of the border guards, who are attracted to them, which does not go unnoticed by the experienced Ira: 'The border guards examine us, and their trousers twitch, at the wondrous sight' (RB 1992: 68). Again, Ira only gives a hint at the obvious, avoiding coarse terms or too explicit expressions. Although the border guards at first refuse to join the two girls in the water, explaining that they are obliged to watch the border, they agree to have a smoke with them on land.

Ну, мы вышли. Ночь в звездах, вокруг скалы, и волны шуршат. Природа располагает. Не выдержали хлопцы, скинули тяжелые автоматы, ведут нас раскладывать на скалах, позабыв о шпионах, плывущих из Турции.

¹⁴⁸ The Russian *kiska* is the equivalent of the English word *pussy*. The double meaning of *kiska* is wittingly exploited in both the novel (RK 1999: 8) and the translation (RB 1992: 4).

¹⁴⁹ 'It seems to me that I was surrounded, which I couldn't understand since, on the porch, I had been introduced to Anton alone; surely, he couldn't have split himself in two, but I was busy and could only mumble in astonishment, and Ksiusha was finally caught, but instead of moving away from me, she pressed herself against me even harder, and embracing, we were lifted into the air. Overcome with emotion and passion, we gained height and — we were going faster and faster! With our heads stretched out, racing against each other, laughing and squealing — going faster and faster!' (my translation).

Сняли замок с государственной границы. Посидели потом, покурили. Оправили солдатики мундиры, водрузили на плечи оружие. Расстаемся друзьями. Пошли они дальше стеречь границу, а мы снова в море — бултых! — и плывем по лунной дорожке. — Как думаешь, говорю, — не заразные? — Что ты! Чистые! — плещется. — Онанисты!¹⁵⁰

(RK 1999: 59–60)

This short scene is strongly reminiscent of the image of the goddess Venus as depicted in Sandro Botticelli's painting 'The Birth of Venus'. Emerging from the sea foam like Venus, Ira causes a physical response in her viewers, who then succumb to her beauty and grace. Again, the sexual act itself is not given much space but is instead conveyed in the unusual and slightly comical expression *raskladyvat' na skalakh*, which literally means to 'to be spread out, to be unfolded on the rocks', conveying passivity and submissiveness on the part of the women. That Ira and Ksiusha share more than a cigarette with the young men is also clear from the word *potom*, 'afterwards', thus implicitly pointing to something that had happened before.

Sexual *mat* does, however, occur in scenes in which Ira's voice (and body) is subordinate to the male voice of the implied author. In these scenes, Ira's inferiority is also expressed in linguistic terms. A good example to illustrate this point is when she recalls how she got raped by a stranger. As Karen Ryan-Hayes notes, 'rape is a leitmotif in *Russkaya krasavitsa* and functions on several levels' (1999: 582). On her way home, Ira is waylaid in the entrance hall to her building and raped by 'an elegant man, well dressed and rather tall' (RB 1992: 214). Trying to fight back, she is quickly overpowered when the stranger starts choking her, and afraid of being killed, she succumbs and endures the sexual assault until the bitter end:

Я очнулась и вижу — он на мне и — работает, ну, думаю, не убил, и чувствую по некоторым второстепенным признакам, дело к концу приближается, хотя ничего не чувствую, будто хуя у него и в помине не существует, будто пустотой меня ебет, и чувствую, джинсы мои узкие-преузкие через сапоги снял, мерзавец, профессионально, лежу: неужели

¹⁵⁰ 'Well, we went out. It was a starry night; there were cliffs all around, and the waves were crashing. Everything that nature had to offer. The guys couldn't stand it any longer; they dropped their heavy machine guns, led us to the rocks to have us spread out there, forgetting about spies sailing from Turkey. They removed the locks from the state border. Afterwards, we sat around and had a smoke. The soldiers straightened their uniforms, hoisted their weapons onto their shoulders. We parted as friends. They went off to continue guarding the border, and we went back into the sea — plop! — swimming along the moonlit path. "What do you think?" I asked. "Are they clean?" "Sure!" she says, swimming off. "They're masturbators!"' (my translation).

никто не придет мне на помощь, плачу, неужели не слышали моих пронзительных криков (а я кричала!), вот люди...¹⁵¹

(RK 1999: 173–4)

The rapist's dominant position is expressed through the *mat* words *khui* ('cock') and *ebat* ('to fuck'), which reflect Ira's helpless and weak position. She is clearly represented as an object; even grammatically it is impossible for her to become the subject, as *ebat* always take a male agent.

The above shows that Ira herself does not venture into male territory. Her voice is inferior to the voice of the implied author, who, more often than not, intrudes into her narrative, forcing her to surrender to his fantasies and desires. What Dina Rabinovitch describes as '[dipping] in and out of femaleness' (1992: online) is, in fact, a discursive power struggle between the sexes, in which the female voice is unable to gain the upper hand. Ira's narrative therefore does not constitute a break with the male tradition in Russian literature, as Erofeev argues in his interview with Rabinovitch (ibid). In fact, Ira not only continues the 'phallogentric tradition' (Marsh 1998: 22) of Russian literature, in many ways she represents a modern version of the 'fallen woman', a figure who was a staple feature of Russian 19th-century literature.

6.3. 'And the word was made flesh': Resurrecting Russian literature

At first glance, Erofeev's Irina Tarakanova seems to resemble a 'fallen woman' but superficially. Particularly prominent in 19th-century literature, the 'fallen woman' appeared in most novels by Dostoevsky and Tolstoy. Anna Karenina from the eponymous novel (1877), who left her much older husband for the young Count Vronskii only to be ostracised by society, Sonia Marmeladova from *Prestuplenie i nakazanie* (1866, *Crime and Punishment*), who was forced to sell her body to save her family, Katiusha Maslova from *Voskresenie* (1899, *Resurrection*), who descends into prostitution after she loses her job as a maidservant — they are all powerful literary examples of women who have 'fallen' to the bottom of society. While the 19th century saw a sharp rise in prostitution, a development the government tried to

¹⁵¹ 'I woke up and saw that he was on me, working away, well, I think, he didn't, and I can feel from secondary signs, it's coming to an end, but I don't feel anything, as if his cock is nonexistent, as if he's fucking me with emptiness, and I realize he's pulled my tight jeans over my boots, the bastard, a real professional; I think, lying there: surely someone will come to my rescue, I cry, does nobody hear my penetrating cries (and I was yelling!), what can you expect from people' (my translation).

regulate by legalising it from the 1840s onward,¹⁵² the ‘fallen woman’ in literature did not primarily have a social-critical function. Rather, the ‘fallen woman’ was a powerful literary figure ‘who either disillusioned the men with whom they associated or raised them to a higher plane of being’ (Bernstein 1995: 11). The ‘fallen woman’ thus mainly had a moral and spiritual function, serving less as an individual character than as the embodiment of a moral dilemma. The ‘fallen woman’ was primarily defined through the categories of suffering and redemption.

A cursory glance at prominent representatives of literary prostitutes and women led astray shows that the ‘fallen woman’ has, in fact, never been a subject in her own right but always a projection of the male hero’s moral and spiritual values and virtues. Scholar Olga Matich (1983) distinguishes between four categories of the ‘fallen woman’ and her male component: female victim and male victimiser, female victim and male redeemer, female victim-redeemer and male victim, as well as female victimiser and male victim. The female victim-redeemer, Matich’s third category, is a particularly prominent figure in Dostoevsky’s works, represented, for example, by Sonia Marmeladova.

Erofeev’s Ira is a mixture of all these types: Both victim and victimiser, redeemer and redeemed, she is a modern Mary Magdalene, a saintly sinner. Thus, we learn early on that Ira was abused as a child and beaten by her second husband because she was unfaithful to him while he was hospitalised. She repeatedly speaks of ‘love’, but it is physical love she seeks, not spiritual love. Like her literary predecessors, she is mainly defined through her relationships with men and is dependent upon her lovers’ wealth and privileged social status. At the beginning of the novel, she tries to reassure herself of her feminine power and self-worth by recalling her many lovers, who were almost exclusively men of power and wealth. Yet it is Ira who is always the weaker party in these relationships, deprived of the opportunity of ever becoming the dominant one. The disparity in power is evident in all her relationships, even in her relationship with Leonardik. Although she insists on his marrying her at the beginning of their affair, Leonardik shows no intention of leaving his wife. On the contrary, he seems to be reluctant to be seen with Ira in public and only hesitantly agrees to take her to a concert by a British orchestra, where she embarrasses him by

¹⁵² For an excellent portrait of prostitution as a social phenomenon in 19th-century Russia, see Laurie Bernstein’s *Sonia’s Daughters* (1995).

throwing oranges into the audience. Similarly, although she despises her gynaecologist, Stanislav Albertovich, and is turned off by his making passes at her, she needs his medical services, a fact of which she is very much aware: 'What's the point of turning him down, if from now on I'll be in need of him, even if he is a bastard!' (RB 1992: 3). Ira also falls victim to the social conventions prevalent at that time. She is unable to marry the Georgian musician Dato because she is not a virgin anymore. His marriage does not stop him from seeing Ira, though.

Upon closer examination, however, it becomes obvious that Erofeev did not merely create a modern version of the 'fallen woman'. His Ira Tarakanova is a brilliant parody of the 19th-century prototype. According to Mikhail Bakhtin, parody is inherently dialogical in its nature, transforming features of the parodied target to expose and lay bare the very same. Erofeev draws repeatedly on the 'fallen woman' trope of 19th-century Realist literature — only to lampoon it by means of subversion. Thus, for example, Tolstoy's Katiusha Maslova is seduced by Prince Nekhliudov and impregnated by him. Becoming pregnant, Katiusha is disgraced and leaves her godmother's service. After her child dies, she is forced into prostitution. Erofeev's Ira is impregnated by Leonardik's ghost. For Ira, the unborn child also means the beginning of her downfall, but unlike Katiusha, her pregnancy forces her to end her sexual life, not to start it. While Mary Magdalene, the archetype of the 'fallen woman', is almost stoned to death by a mob, it is Ira who throws oranges into the audience at the concert by the British orchestra.

Erofeev first and foremost subverts the fallen woman's moral and spiritual aspirations by translating them into physical and sexual ones. In other words, the spiritual discourse is converted into a sexualised one. This becomes particularly obvious when comparing Ira Tarakanova to Dostoevsky's Sonia Marmeladova. As critics have pointed out, Sonia is the archetypical female victim-redeemer. Forced into prostitution to save her family from starving, she accepts her plight without losing faith in God despite the humiliation and degradation she has to suffer for exchanging her internal passport for a 'yellow ticket'.¹⁵³ With her deep faith in God's willingness to help others, Sonia is in many ways a Christ-like heroine,

¹⁵³ A registered prostitute was required to exchange her internal passport for a 'yellow ticket', which was a medical card that provided details about her state of health. It was also a certification of her trade (Bernstein 1995: 22).

enabling the spiritual redemption of others. Olga Matich observes that ‘it is Sonya who is the Christlike savior in the novel’ (1983: 340). As a result of her influence and faith, Raskolnikov, the novel’s conflicted protagonist, eventually seeks redemption in Christ and is morally saved. We can thus argue that Sonia is an embodiment of divine love, a point that has also been made by Frank Seeley: ‘The essence of Sonya is love — of course, not in the romantic but in the Christian sense’ (1999: 91).

Ira, by contrast, can be seen as an embodiment of physical love. While striving for ‘true’ love, she is unable to express this desire other than with her body. Ira defines herself exclusively through her sexual relationships with other men and women; she is incapable of communicating by any other means than her body. The permanent focus on her lower bodily stratum thus undermines the spiritual ‘high’ that is a distinctive feature of the pious and humble Sonia. As Veronika, Ira’s friend and colleague, says: ‘Лобок твой, Ириша, сильнее, чем лобик’ (RK 1999: 78).¹⁵⁴

This is also reflected in the way she sees others. Men, in particular, are almost exclusively described in terms of their sexual potency and their ability to satisfy her physical desires and wishes. Leonardik, for example, is predominately characterised through his impotency, which Ira ascribes to his old age. She writes that Leonardik is ‘powerless in the most important area’ (RB 1992: 48), and it is thanks to her skills as a ‘genius of love’ that ‘his Lazarus rose again’ (ibid: 94). When her friend’s boyfriend, an Armenian called Hamlet, makes a pass at Ira, she lets him have his way, although she is neither impressed with him nor with his skills as a lover. Throwing a side glance at his member, she concludes that he is an uninteresting and uneducated man who is planning to marry a little fool, an opinion she does not hide from him. When making love to her, he tries to be extra gentle with her in order not to harm the unborn baby. Being asked whether it is possible to pull the baby out like a corkscrew, she replies, ‘как жаль, милый Гамлет, ереванский вы человек, что у вас хуй не штопор’ (RK 1999: 251),¹⁵⁵ making fun of his abilities as a lover. Rene, Ksiusha’s French husband, fails to live up to his wife’s expectations and turns out to be a disappointing lover. Ksiusha complains that, although he spends hours at his

¹⁵⁴ ‘Your beaver, Irina, is bigger than your brainbox’ (RB 1992: 93).

¹⁵⁵ ‘What a shame, dear Hamlet, my man from Yerevan, that your cock doesn’t screw like a corkscrew’ (RB 1992: 312).

dentist's office drilling teeth, 'его член не похож на бормашину и вообще ни на что путное' (RK 1999: 22).¹⁵⁶

Women, too, are mainly defined through their bodies. Yet here it is not the sexual, but the 'scatological low' that is mainly drawn upon in the descriptions. For instance, Ira describes her co-worker, Nina Chizh, as a woman who loves pastry cream rolls, but does not exactly know where women piss from. The image of a woman licking cream rolls is reminiscent of a young, naive girl unaware of her own sexuality and of the sexual arousal she is able to create in onlookers. Ira sees other women mainly as rivals, trying to compete with her for men's favours. Perceiving intelligent women as a particular threat, she degrades them by describing their sexual organs as ugly and huge. For example, she comments that 'даже мыслящие женщины с лошадиным нечутким клитором плачут, глядя в старение лиц, сухость кожи пугает их ретивое воображение' (RK 1999: 93).¹⁵⁷ Even women who are well below her league do not escape Ira's scornful examinations. When having breakfast at her lover's dacha, she observes that 'высокая худая прислуга [...] была миловидна, однако несколько пучеглаза, и рот был похож на куриную попку' (RK 1999: 30).¹⁵⁸ On that very morning, Ira also makes the acquaintance of Leonardik's wife, Zinaida Vasilievna. Ira develops a dislike for the mistress of the house from the moment she is introduced to her — partly because she is well aware of the fact that Zinaida looks down on her:

Ей все было вредно, этой перекормленной индейке, этой невоспитанной гусыне, которая в светском обществе корчила из себя образованную женщину, разбирающуюся в искусстве, и, смерив меня с головы до ног, словно я была воровка их фамильного серебра с вензелями [...] она составила обо мне превратное впечатление и вышла из помещения.¹⁵⁹
(RK 1999: 40)

Even her friends are predominantly defined by their bodily features. She describes Natasha, one of her friends, as having 'шерсть колючая, груди жидкие,

¹⁵⁶ 'His penis isn't like a drill and indeed it doesn't resemble anything useful at all' (my translation).

¹⁵⁷ 'Even brainy women with clitorises the size and sensibility of a horse's weep when they look at their aging faces' (RB 1992: 112).

¹⁵⁸ 'Though the servant looked nice, she was goggle-eyed, and her mouth looked like a chicken's butt' (my translation).

¹⁵⁹ 'Everything was bad for her, this overfed turkey, this uneducated goose, who in high society passed as an educated woman, knowledgeable about art; and having surveyed me from head to toe, as if I had stolen the monogrammed family silver [...] she held on to a false impression of me and left the room' (RB 1992: 43).

как дачный стул' (RK 1999: 94).¹⁶⁰ The only woman who is represented in almost exclusively positive terms is her closest friend, Ksiusha, who looks at her 'without open curiosity, without a trace of rivalry' (RB 1992: 8). She describes Ksiusha as having a smell 'of a string of dried mushrooms sold in the market at a phenomenal price, which is a powerful smell and belongs to a woman with an intelligent and expressive face' (RB 1992: 8). Yet even Ksiusha is not without flaws; although her best friend is a *krasotka* ('a beautiful thing'), this is not to say that beauties like her might not have backs covered with blackheads and spots (RB 1992: 84).

The most striking example of how Erofeev renders the 'high' by means of the lower bodily stratum is, without doubt, by drawing on the Biblical story of the resurrection of Lazarus. In this parable, Jesus brings Lazarus back to life four days after his burial, which is deemed the greatest miracle he has ever performed. Dostoevsky uses the Biblical story of the raising of Lazarus as a metaphor for the 'rebirth' of Raskolnikov, who experiences a moral resurrection, supported by the pious and humble Sonia. While physically alive, Raskolnikov has been spiritually dead as a result of his crime, for as he tells Sonia, 'I killed myself, not that old creature' (Dostoevsky 1995: 402).

Leonardik, too, is in some way physically dead — he is impotent. Like Sonia Marmeladova, Ira is able to resurrect him; she literally 'raises his Lazarus'. This resurrection is linked to death; yet while in the Christian doctrine death precedes Christ's resurrection, in Erofeev's novel, death follows Leonardik's resurrection, for Leonardik dies after suffering a fatal heart attack. As Galina Rylkova points out, the religious terms *voskresenie* ('resurrection') and *voskreshenie* ('raising from the dead') appear frequently throughout the text, yet they are employed exclusively as sexual euphemisms (2007: 191). The resurrection of Christ is the principal doctrine of Christian belief: 'On the third day he rose again in accordance with the Scriptures' (quoted in Edwards 2009: 1). The theme of resurrection is also central to Erofeev's *Russkaia krasavitsa*, as it marks the beginning of Ira's downfall. Leonardik's resurrection (his orgasm) leads to her death.¹⁶¹

¹⁶⁰ 'We examined Natasha — a covering of prickly hair, breasts as sloppy as your shift after you've pigged out on fruit in the country' (RB 1992: 113).

¹⁶¹ George Bataille considered death the ultimate eroticism (1986: 144). In this context, it is interesting to note that an orgasm is called *la petite mort* in French, literally meaning 'the little

Another theme that occurs frequently throughout the novel is the Christian principle of self-sacrifice. Erofeev subverts the Christian ideal of self-sacrifice by translating it into uncompromising physical submissiveness. While Tolstoy's Katiusha Maslova explains that 'she would not give in to him, would not let him make use of her spirituality as he had done physically' (1928: II, 13, 253),¹⁶² Ira, by contrast, would not hesitate to give herself to anyone. The novel abounds with scenes showing Ira's submissive behaviour. For example, the Georgian musician Dato prefers to make love to her from behind, taking her by surprise. As Galina Rylkova rightly observes, 'her narrative is open and vulnerable to intrusion as is her body to all who want to satisfy their sexual needs' (2007: 196). Yet it is important to stress that Ira does so because she *feels* she has to sacrifice herself.

This is also illustrated in the instances of rape that occur in the novel. An act of domination, rape is typically perceived as a battle for power, an effective metaphor for exploring power relationships. Erofeev exploits rape as a metaphor to show Ira's self-sacrifice — it is thus never her pain that it is in the fore but the rapist's state of being. This is particularly evident in her dreams about being raped by a stranger, an experience from which she gains more pleasure than pain:

[...] и вот он поднялся, подходит ко мне, жуя невидимую травинку, и, ни слова не говоря, достает, как топор, свой такой... то есть такой! то есть такой, Вероника!!!! [...] Я б сама, я б сама, и с большим удовольствием! До диафрагмы!... Только лица не видно... А Вероника, ведьма, она со страшными силами водится, она говорит, морщась: а он кончает? Я задумалась, не подготовленная к ответу. То есть, я точно кончаю, но вот он? Я говорю: по-моему, да... Вероника с облегчением: тогда прекрасно!¹⁶³

(RK 1999: 168)

Offering a feminist reading, Karen Ryan-Hayes argues that the above passage, while rendered through the eyes of a woman, clearly reflects a male point of view in

death'. The correlation between death and sexuality is also preserved in the Russian language since *konets* ('end') also means 'penis' in colloquial Russian, and the verb *konchit'* not only means 'to end something' but also 'to have an orgasm'.

¹⁶² The novel is cited with reference to book and chapter, as well as to page.

¹⁶³ '[...] and now he's reached the top, he comes up to me, chewing his invisible cud, and, not saying a word, takes out, like an ax, his huge – I mean huge! – I mean *huge* weapon. Veronika! [...] I would have agreed to it myself, and with great pleasure! Right up to my midriff! Only you can't see his face. But Veronika, the witch, who dabbles in dangerous powers, she says, making a wry face, "But does he come?" I think, I don't have a ready answer. That is I certainly came, but does he? I say, "I think he does..." Veronika says with a sigh of relief, "Well, that's fine, then!"' (RB 1992: 207–8).

subjecting the woman to the status of an object and in depicting rape as being pleasurable to her. This is particularly evident in her language. Ira describes the rapist's penis as *topor* ('axe'), using a euphemism to express his masculinity and impressive sexual potency. Yet we must not overlook the hyperbolic parody of this scene. As Ira confides in her friend, she herself would have wanted him to rape her, 'with great pleasure', as she adds. Ira also reassures Veronika that the rapist, too, was fully satisfied, whereupon her friend expresses a deep sigh of relief.

The most striking example of Ira's 'self-sacrifice' is her attempt to save the Russian people by 'giving herself' to the earth force. Convinced that she has to sacrifice herself in order to save the Russian people, she decides to run naked across the ancient Russian battlefield of Kulikovo, in the manner of a Russian Joan d'Arc. Ryan-Hayes argues that Ira's attempted martyrdom is described in a language that strongly recalls the male-oriented conventions of pornographic rape, since 'she asks for it' (1999: 583). Yet Ira does not merely 'ask for it', she describes the entire passage in highly sexualised language by comparing it to the building up of an orgasm, which is not achieved. The earth force itself is described as 'a ray or column' (RB 1992: 253), and thus clearly a phallic symbol, which is also expressed grammatically by the personal pronoun *ON* ('HE'). Yet here, too, Erofeev parodies the theme of self-sacrifice and suffering since it is the earth force that pulls away from her, thus not allowing her to complete her 'mission'. Again, her being rejected is translated into highly sexualised terms; Ira compares this rejection to a penis not able to maintain an erection. The earth force also rejects her a second time, releasing her before she is able to bring her mission to an end. Again, Ira leaves no doubt about how much she herself wants to be taken by the earth force despite the pain that is inflicted upon her as a result of her immolation. Ira is disappointed because she sees it as her task to satisfy the earth force, interpreting his turning away from her as her fault. The language used reflects her submissive desire; Ira clearly enters male utopia by using terms such as *vyebat* ('to fuck'). She is determined to run a third time, willing to satisfy the earth force at all costs:

Постояла я так, постояла, обливаясь слезами невозможного воскресения, а потом подняла голову да как закричу не своим голосом, обращаясь к тучам и смутной луне: да будешь ли ты меня ебать?!¹⁶⁴

(RK 1999: 210)

This time she puts herself in the most vulnerable position — she is on her knees, facedown, with her backside in the air — a position of total submission and inferiority. Yet once again, the pornographic potential is undermined when she is rejected by the earth force — instead of raping her, the earth force breaks wind on her, thus ridiculing and humiliating her.

Ira is objectified more and more throughout the course of the novel. This is another subversion of the stereotypical ‘fallen woman’ of Russian literature, who has to undergo a transformation from a sex object to a moral object in order to be saved. As Eve Levin points out (1995: 74), the redemption of a fallen woman to a life of chastity was a recurring theme in pre-revolutionary Russian literature, with marriage to a ‘good’ man frequently presented as a ‘solution’ to the moral dilemma. A marriage proposal required that the ‘fallen woman’ reject further sexual activity and lead a ‘chaste’ life. Ira, by contrast, does not give up her sinful life; she literally turns into a sex organ. At the end of the novel, she is willing to sacrifice her genitalia to the Russian people, for whom a monument is to be erected ‘somewhere in a small courtyard’ (RB 1992: 328), with flowers around it, ‘as a counterweight to glory in battle, glory to love at the other end’ (ibid: 329). Selecting her gynaecologist as the one to keep an eye on her vagina, she decides to give her vagina to the Russian people:

Мою пизду отдайте бедным, отдайте инвалидам, калекам, служащим нижайших чинов, неспособным студентам, онанистам, старикам, тунеядцам, дворовым мальчишкам, живодерам — первому встречному!¹⁶⁵

(RK 1999: 262–3)

This shows that Ira is not only objectified, but that, in the end, she literally turns into a sexual object, in the form of a monument. Her body, i.e., her sexual organ,

¹⁶⁴ ‘I remain like that for a while, weeping in vain [about the failed resurrection], and then I raise my head and, boy, how I shout with a voice not my own, appealing to the storm clouds and the dim moon: So are you going to fuck me or what?’ (RB 1992: 260).

¹⁶⁵ ‘Give my cunt to the poor, give her to the invalids, the cripples, the workers in lowly positions, the little men, bad students, to masturbators, old men, parasites, street urchins, butchers, to anyone’ (RB 1992: 327–8).

materialises to become an object of sexual pleasure and sexual satisfaction, detached from her own self. This form of objectification is also clearly expressed through the very strong sexual *mat* word *pizda*, which is male territory. In fact, it is no longer her ‘bergamot garden’ that is on offer, Ira offers womanhood. As Aleksei Plutser-Sarno points out, the term *pizda* not only signifies the female genitals, it is also a powerful signifier for all womanhood (2005b: 25).

The materialisation of Ira’s sexuality fully undermines the ideology of disembodied spirituality, which was for a long time a major characteristic of Russian literature. As Eliot Borenstein points out, ‘redemption and salvation are central to the entire literary tradition’ (2008: 81). Tim McDaniel puts forward a similar argument: ‘The theme of redemption through suffering is absolutely fundamental to Russian culture, and central to a great many views of Russian distinctiveness’ (1996: 34). This explains why Russian literature was for a long time asexual, giving strong preference to the realm of the spiritual (*dukhovnost*) over the bodily and material (*telesnost*). In this context, the absence of corporeality was interpreted as a positive development. For example, philosopher Nikolai Berdiaev (1874–1948) explained the absence of eroticism by referring to the innate spirituality of the Russian people, which would also make them distinct from the decadent West. His ‘Russian idea’ celebrates the ‘triumph of morality and spirituality over the temptations of the flesh’ (Costlow *et al.* 1993: 10). The conflict between body and soul was also reflected in the literary incompatibility between romantic love and carnal lust (sexuality).

It is this corporeality that Erofeev sought to bring into literature by sexualising the Russian literary discourse of spirituality. In *Russkaia krasavitsa*, the obscene word literally becomes ‘flesh’, turning the high Christian ideals of divine love into pure lust. This transformation is expressed through verbal obscenity; it is thus not a ‘vagina’ that is given to the Russian people, but a ‘cunt’ (*pizda*). And it is not simply a ‘penis’ (*chlen*) that is resurrected, but a ‘cock’ (*khui*), since the latter has the performative power that the former lacks. Drawing on the conventions of the great 19th-century novel, Erofeev literally ‘resurrects’ Russian literature, expressing the ‘loftiness’ of Russian letters by means of the ‘lower bodily stratum’. This corresponds to Bakhtin’s understanding of parody as ‘an intentional dialogised hybrid within [which] languages and styles actively and mutually illuminate one

another' (1981: 76). Yet as Bakhtin also points out, 'it is the nature of every parody to transpose the values of the parodied style, to highlight certain elements while leaving others in the shade: parody is always biased and this bias is dictated by the distinctive features of the parodying language' (ibid: 75). Since Erofeev largely employs Russian *mat* (the 'lowest' linguistic category) as parodying language to 'illuminate' the 'sacredness' of Russian literature, it thus does not come as a surprise that his 'resurrection' of the Russian classics is a highly gendered affair, based on the very traditional (discursive) patterns of male and female sexuality.

6.4. Cherish the (obscene) word? The new freedom of the obscene

Viktor Erofeev could hardly have anticipated that Ira Tarakanova's decision 'to give [her] cunt [...] to anyone' (RB 1992: 327–8) turned — metaphorically speaking — into reality in the early 1990s. When the constraints of official censorship were gradually relaxed from the mid-80s and freedom of the press was declared in August of 1990, sex quickly found its way into nearly every facet of Russian culture, becoming omnipresent and highly explicit in Russian everyday life. Sexual matters were now being openly discussed in the media (particularly on television shows such as *Pro eto*),¹⁶⁶ sex shops were making their appearance across the country, and street vendors were selling pornographic magazines and sex toys on every street corner. Within a year, an entire publishing market seeking to satisfy the newly awakened interest in bodily matters had developed, producing publications like *Azbuka seksa* (*Sex from A to Z*), *Tekhniki polovoi zhizni* (*Sexual Practices*) and *Entsiklopediia erotiki* (*The Encyclopaedia of Erotica*), as well as a wide range of lowbrow bestsellers (Chuprinin 1991: 227). Pornographic imagery also appeared in mainstream newspapers and journals. In fact, as Borenstein states, 'pornography was so prevalent in the streets and stores that it rarely merited a second glance' (2008: 26). It is therefore not without reason that scholars speak of 'erotic glasnost' (Kustanovich 1993: 136), the 'sexualisation of the culture' (Borenstein 2008: 49) and the 'eroticisation of the entire country' (Chuprinin 1991: 227, my translation) when describing the wave of pornography sweeping through Russia in the early 1990s.

¹⁶⁶ *Pro eto* (*About That*) was a Russian talk show about sexual matters. Interestingly, the name of the show was borrowed from Vladimir Maiakovskii's eponymous poem, in which the central theme is love. He devoted the poem to his muse and lover, Lilia Brik (Lahti 2010: 161).

Considering the degree of explicitness in which sexuality was present in early post-Soviet culture, it seems, however, more appropriate to speak of ‘pornographisation’. Borenstein observes that the concept of pornography became ‘both an integral part of the nation’s culture and an allegory for it’ (2008: 56), embodied by the figure of the prostitute. While concepts of nationhood have always been highly gendered in Russian culture, with the state assuming a masculine form and the nation a female one (Goscilo and Lanoux 2006: 9), in Imperial and Soviet Russia, the dominant female allegory was that of ‘Mother Russia’ (*Matushka-Rus’*, *rodina-mat’*).¹⁶⁷ Post-perestroika Russia, by contrast, was allegorised by the image of the prostitute. Yet it was not a pious and humble Sonia Marmeladova who was to become the image of post-Soviet nationhood. Post-perestroika Russia was to be allegorised by some Ira Tarakanova, showing an excessive sexual appetite and selling herself to rich foreigners in exchange for Western mass products and porn. The correlation between limitless desire and mass consumption has also been noted by French philosopher Jean Baudrillard. For him, sexual liberation always takes a feminine form:

[...] sexual liberation, like that of the productive forces, is potentially limitless. It demands a profusion come true, a ‘sexually affluent society’. [...] Now, this utopian continuity and availability can only be incarnated by the female sex. This is why in this society everything — objects, goods, services, relations of all types — will be feminized, sexualized in a feminine fashion.

(1990: 26)

Initially, this ‘pornographisation’ was interpreted as an explicit expression of political freedom and democracy, linked to the (Western) concept of freedom of speech. As it says in one of the first editions of *Andrei*, Russia’s counterpart to *Playboy*, ‘we’re certain that *Andrei* and its battle helped strengthen democratic tendencies in the area of social awareness and rights’ (quoted in Goscilo 1996: 136). The term *svoboda slova* itself was, in fact, borrowed from Western democratic value systems, and a highly alien concept in the context of Russian culture. Complete freedom of speech was an entirely new phenomenon since never before had there been the possibility to print and read everything. As Sergei Chuprinin recalls, ‘we had received the right to watch, listen to and read what people worldwide watch,

¹⁶⁷ The construction of a gendered national discourse was also enhanced by grammatical categories since *rodina* (‘motherland’), *zemlia* (‘soil’), *Rossia* (‘Russia’), *Rus’* and *Moskva* (‘Moscow’) are all feminine nouns, thus fostering the construction of a female image of Russian nationhood.

listen to and read' (1991: 229, my translation). Explicit sexuality was thus transformed to signify 'the absolute victory of capitalism over socialist totalitarianism' (Kustanovich 1993: 136), equating pornography with democracy and freedom of speech.

The newly emerging discourse on sexuality also affected the way in which obscene language was perceived, in particular with regard to its role in literature. While shunned as a 'remnant of capitalism' and 'bourgeois dirt' in Soviet Russia (see Chapter 1), the appearance of obscene language in print was now being viewed as a symbol of political freedom. This largely had to do with the fact that Russian *mat* had entered the sacred realm of Russian literature 'from outside', through dissident and émigré literature published in the West. Works formerly banned on grounds of their explicit language and/or content were now found on the shelves of bookstores and sold on the street, available to everybody. This is why the obscene word came to be associated with freedom of speech, turning from an unprintable into a printable and hence 'free' word. Eduard Limonov's scandalous *Eto ia — Edichka* (1979, *It's me, Eddie*) was now accessible to a Russian readership, as were Iuz Aleshkovskii's novels and Afanas'ev's infamous collection of Russian bawdy folktales *Russkie zavetnye skazki* (1872, *Russian Secret Tales*). Foreign erotic classics such as Henry Miller's *Tropic of Cancer* (1934) finally became available to Russian readers, leading to a rediscovery of Russia's own erotic past. The literary journal *Literaturnoe obozrenie*, for example, devoted an entire issue (No 11, 1991) to Russian erotic literature. The Moscow-based publishing house Lodomir, founded in 1991, started to publish erotic classics and folklore, as well as academic studies on Russian pornography and eroticism. Yet it was not only 'hidden treasures' that were brought to light, young writers, too, started to employ *mat* in their works.

In the mid-90s, the interest in erotic and pornographic materials started to subside, with explicit pornography vanishing from the streets. Yet while Russian people were now less exposed to explicit sexuality in the form of ads, pictures and texts, pornography became increasingly more significant in the discursive construction of post-Soviet national identity. This also shows in the fact that the concept of pornography, while first oriented towards Western models, was now geared to a Russian ideological discourse. Borenstein explains that 'the ties between

sexual freedom and political liberalization proved to be a marriage of convenience and a rather short-lived one at that' (2008: 81). The knot between pornography and liberalism was thus soon untied, only to be replaced by a much stronger bond between pornography and nationalism, 'allegorizing the culture's obsession with embattled masculinity, wounded national pride, and the country's perennially fraught relations with the West' (ibid: 55).

The discursive shift in the signification of the body was also reflected in the status of verbal obscenity, particularly with regard to its place in literature. While *mat* was initially regarded as a symbol of freedom of speech, its inherent gender asymmetry and sexual aggressiveness made it a somewhat awkward indicator of (linguistic) liberalism. Soon, the phenomenon of verbal obscenity was also looked at through the lens of nationalism. This found expression in the fact that its folkloric roots were now more strongly accentuated, with *mat* being seen as belonging to the language of the Russian people. Vladimir Zhirinovskii, founder and leader of the Liberal Democratic Party of Russia, strongly defended the use of *mat* on national grounds: 'This is our living language! Who has decided that *mat* is just bad words and deviant vocabulary? They're rejecting the language of the people' (quoted in Erofeev 2003: 47).

That Russian *mat* is an extraordinary linguistic phenomenon, one that needs to be preserved, was also argued by those who were against its frequent use in literature. Writers thus stated that the 'purity' of *mat* would be at stake if obscene words were to be employed frequently and carelessly. Writer Mikhail Uspenskii, for example, argued that 'these pearls need to be used with caution and to the point' (Gandlevskii *et al.* 2005: online, my translation). Elena Shvarts suggested that *mat* needs to be reserved for 'extraordinary' situations, for 'situations that go beyond the ordinary, the reasonable' (ibid).

There was particularly broad consensus on the assumption that Russian *mat* would lose its 'magic' force if transferred to the realms of mass literature. In other words, the 'linguistic low' was not deemed compatible with the 'low' category of mass literature. This reminds us that a correlation between mass literature and poor quality did not emerge until the restructuring of the Russian literary landscape after the collapse of the communist regime. As Birgit Menzel (2000: 425–6) points out, in

Soviet Russia, mass literature did not automatically mean popular or bestselling literature since literature was not produced for commercial reasons or entertainment. Reading was not for pleasure but for ideological education. The main function of literature was to educate ‘the masses’, but it was not supposed to be a mere commodity, produced on a mass scale. In fact, the term *massovaia literatura* had a negative meaning in Soviet Russia, as it was usually associated with the highly commercialised mass-produced fiction of capitalist countries, defined in the *Kratkaia literaturnaia entsiklopediia* (*Small Encyclopaedia on Literature*) as “‘vulgarized romanticism”, typical of popular literature being “pornography” and stimulating “passive, consuming private reception”” (Menzel 2000: 426). The Soviet form of mass culture thus differed significantly from the American concept of mass literature.

This paradigm changed with the emergence of a book market dominated by readers’ tastes in the early 1990s. While in Soviet Russia, a ‘top down’ approach had been in place, with the authorities controlling the reading habits of the population, the new Russia started to follow a Western ‘bottom up’ model, with readers’ demands as the main driving force of the book market. As a result, popular fiction in the form of crime novels, cheap detective potboilers and science fiction started to conquer the Russian book market, at the expense of ‘serious’ literature. As literary critic Aleksandr Genis recalls, during perestroika, it was possible to trade three copies of Vasilii Grossman’s anti-Stalin novel *Zhizn’ i sud’ba* (1959, *Life and Fate*) for one copy of *Nigerian Detective Stories* (1999a: 99).

The normative shifts taking place in literature are also reflected in the critical responses to Erofeev’s novel. When *Ruskaia krasavitsa* first appeared in Russia in 1990, critics did not pay much attention to the novel, with the few who read it dismissing it as *poshlost’* (‘vulgarity’). Yet while the novel fell short for most literary critics, *Ruskaia krasavitsa* was extremely popular with Russian readers. In terms of copies sold, the novel became an immediate bestseller, following its success in the West, where it had been the highlight of the 1989 Frankfurt Book Fair. According to sales figures, the first Russian-language edition of 100,000 copies went over the counter within two days (Wolffheim 1990: 265).

With Erofeev's growing popularity and constant media presence, the novel started to receive more attention from critics in the mid-1990s. Literary critic Vadim Balduev reviewed the novel alongside other works by Erofeev, paying particular attention to the question of linguistic norms. Comparing Erofeev's use of *mat* with spices, he argues that the writer uses too many of them, thus making his 'dish' inedible. While acknowledging that *mat* is part of 'our dear mother tongue' and 'Russian folklore', Balduev states that 'the detabooisation of this mother tongue in a text published in large numbers leads to an effect equivalent to that of spicy additives' (1996: 181, my translation). In other words, Balduev regards *mat* as an artificial element in literary texts. Literary critic Evgenii Ermolin was even more outspoken in his criticism of Erofeev's debut novel. In response to a Western critic's positive verdict about the novel, Ermolin argues that the originality of Erofeev's oeuvre would simply lie in the fact that his texts are unsuitable for young readers. Readers had better muster some courage before opening the book, and having closed it, at least wash their hands thoroughly (1996: 227).

What these two reviews reflect is the growing concern regarding the role of obscene language, in particular with regard to its place in literature. The primary issue was not the use of obscene language per se but its association with popular literature written for a mass readership. This indicates the role that was to be assigned to obscene language in literature and that would become accentuated more strongly in the years to come. While, on the one hand, *mat* was seen more and more as an indicator of the degradation of literary culture, in particular when used in popular fiction, it was, at the same time, turning into a marker of 'serious' postmodern fiction, fiction that was not written for a mass audience.

6.5. Conclusion

This chapter has shown that the function of Russian *mat* was subject to significant changes during perestroika and the early 1990s. While dissident writers like Iuz Aleshkovskii had turned to obscene language to attack authoritative discourse, Viktor Erofeev attempted to lift *mat* from its status as a taboo language by employing it as a language of literature. This means that, with the beginning of the post-Soviet era, verbal obscenity ceased to function as an antidote to authoritative

discourse, becoming instead a symbol of the newly acquired freedom of speech before it was incorporated into the sexualised discourse of nationalism.

Erofeev's *Russkaia krasavitsa* shows how 'the low' slowly began to move upward to mingle with the 'high', thus subverting and dissolving the boundaries between pornography, popular fiction and the Russian classics. Yet in contrast to Aleshkovskii, Erofeev did not employ the rhetoric of the 'lower bodily stratum' to 'bring down' all that is high and spiritual; he actually translated the 'spirituality' of Russian literature into the rhetoric of the 'lower bodily stratum', thereby bringing the very essence of Russian literature to the fore. In doing so, Erofeev did not, however, challenge the gender asymmetry inherent in Russian *mat*. On the contrary, his use of *mat* reinforces the female identity of his character-narrator Ira Tarakanova, turning her into a symbol for post-perestroika nationhood. His novel is therefore an excellent illustration of how Western values became integrated into the newly emerging state, forming post-Soviet identity: While sexual freedom and a free market economy were assimilated into a post-Soviet cultural context, this came at the expense of gender liberation.

This shows that Western concepts were not deemed suitable for the identity of the newly emerging democratic Russia. As a matter of fact, as the next chapter will show, after Russia's initial flirtation with Western democratic concepts such as the freedom of speech and diversity, the issue of establishing and maintaining language norms soon became crucial in Russia's quest for national identity, with postmodern writer Vladimir Sorokin assigned a vital role in this process of norm negotiation.

Chapter 7: Exposing norms through non-normative language? Vladimir Sorokin's *Goluboe salo*

The previous chapter ended with the observation that, since the mid-1990s, there has been a noticeable shift in linguistic norms that has found particularly strong reflection in the changing status of Russian *mat*. While regarded as a symbol of freedom of speech in the early 1990s, by the end of that decade, verbal obscenity had turned into a symbol of the degradation of Russian culture. Writers and literary critics started to express their concerns with regard to the proliferation of obscene language in literature, calling for some sort of regulation. That the freedom of the obscene word was a rather short-lived one is also reflected in the critical reactions to Viktor Erofeev's *Russkaia krasavitsa*, which was popular among 'common' readers but dismissed by literary critics.

It was, however, not only writers and literary critics who called for some sort of regulation of obscene language. Since the turn of the millennium, in particular, the 'language question' has again taken centre stage in politics. After the chaos of the 1990s, the desire to return to normality found ample expression in heated debates about the re-establishment of norms and regulations. The discourse on language norms reached a climax in 2002, in the form of the first obscenity trial held in post-Soviet Russia. Paradoxically, the subject matter of the trial was a novel that, at first glance, seems to be a highly unlikely candidate for such an affair: Vladimir Sorokin's grotesque sci-fi novel *Goluboe salo* (1999, *Blue Lard*).¹⁶⁸ The scandal appears even more paradoxical in light of Sorokin's conceptualist roots and his fascination with the dismantling of authoritative discourses, which is one of his primary stylistic features.

Taking Sorokin's novel as a case in point, this chapter analyses the general status of verbal obscenity in post-Soviet Russia and its correlation with the maintenance of linguistic norms and norm negotiation, thereby addressing the fourth research question. As was discussed earlier, literature has, at all times, constituted an important site for norm negotiation. The chapter will show that, in post-Soviet Russia, literature has not ceased to function as a reflection of, and site for, the

¹⁶⁸ I quote from the 2002 edition of *Goluboe salo* (abbreviated GS), published by Ad Marginem. All translations into English are my own.

negotiation of linguistic norms. On the contrary, Sorokin's postmodernist novel and its critical reception demonstrate how a literary text can shape and reflect a changing linguistic environment.

As in previous chapters, a brief discussion of the writer's approach to Russian obscene language will help lay the foundation for a close analysis of the functions of *mat* in the individual parts of the novel. Given Sorokin's conceptualist roots, I will show how he employs non-normative language as a means of exposing the norms regulating authoritative discourse. Since the novel was blamed for its alleged 'pornographic' content, I will pay particular attention to the correlation between physical matters and obscene language as the linguistic representation of sexuality. The final part discusses the scandal revolving around the novel and the role *mat* played therein. The section will close with an in-depth discussion of the correlation between verbal obscenity and Russian national identity.

7.1. Sorokin and the obscene: Only letters on paper?

Like all the other authors dealt with in this thesis, Sorokin, too, has had his say on Russian *mat* in literature. While fellow writer Viktor Erofeev has not tired of stressing the 'unique power of Russian *mat*' (2003: 42), Sorokin has taken the very opposite position by declaring that obscene words are, like all other words, 'only letters on paper', a phrase he has also brought forward in defence of using *mat*:

У меня нет общественных интересов. Все мои книги — это отношение с текстом, с различными речевыми пластами, начиная от высоких, литературных и кончая бюрократическими или нецензурными. Когда мне говорят об этической стороне дела: мол, как можно воспроизводить, скажем элементы порно- или жесткой литературы, то мне непонятен такой вопрос: это всего лишь буквы на бумаге.¹⁶⁹

(1992: 21)

The often-quoted dictum of words being mere letters on paper also reflects Sorokin's general position on literature and writing, which, in his eyes, should be free of any didactical or moral commitments. As David Gillespie and Elena Smirnova pointedly sum up, 'to Sorokin, literature and life are nonintersecting lines,

¹⁶⁹ 'Public life does not interest me. All my books are only relationships with texts, with different speech layers, ranging from high and literary styles to bureaucratic and obscene ones. When I am asked about the ethical side of things, when I am asked about how I can, for example, use elements of pornography or cruel literature, then I do not understand, for aren't these just letters on paper?' (my translation).

two independent phenomena. Literature is never married to reality, and so the author cannot be held responsible for his fantasies' (2003: online). In fact, according to Sorokin, a text is 'dead and delusive the moment ink reaches paper' (ibid). Sorokin's stance on literature echoes his close ties with the movement of Moscow Conceptualism, which emerged in the 1970s as a reaction to Soviet reality. While at first only applied to the visual arts, Conceptualism quickly spread to the realm of literature, with Sorokin becoming one of its main representatives.¹⁷⁰ Like the conceptualist poets Lev Rubenstein and Dmitrii Prigov, Sorokin drew on the all-pervasive Soviet signs and employed them in new contexts, thereby transforming them and/or depriving them of their original meanings. As Sally Laird states, 'the Russian conceptualists took as their premise that [Soviet] culture was inescapable: the writer or artist had no language of his own, but must operate within the prevailing system of "signs"' (1999: 143). The Conceptualists did not aim to destroy the prevailing language or invent a new one. They employed the official language for their own means, albeit without making any claims to truth, official aesthetics or content. In other words, the Conceptualists used the existing language like modelling clay, employing it as linguistic material to form new expressions.¹⁷¹

As Sorokin explained in an interview with his translator, Sally Laird, the idea of using the language of others seemed 'very natural' to him because 'it had an obvious relevance to our situation here, to our attitude towards the language of our state, its literary language' (1999: 149). The Conceptualists did not strive for the illusory creation of a new meaningful reality. On the contrary, by separating the signifier from the signified, they tried to emphasise the transparent and illusory quality of the latter. According to Mikhail Epstein, Conceptualism 'liberates both objects and signs from their mutual co-responsiveness' (1989: 227). In the conceptualist world, language was supposed to exist by itself, as a closed system, independent from the

¹⁷⁰ As Boris Groys explains, Conceptualism initially referred to 'the use of the text in the visual space of art — primarily in the space of a picture' (2000: 32). Groys differentiates between Sots-Art and Conceptualism. While both are related to Western artistic movements, Sots-Art 'emphasises the use of visual and textual material of Soviet mass culture, just as American artists of pop art used material from American mass culture' (ibid: 32). Conceptualism, by contrast, is not restricted to Socialist Realism but 'deconstructs and de-mythologizes authoritative cultural signifiers and entire languages of culture' (Lipovetsky 2011: 187).

¹⁷¹ These 'new' expressions are not understood to be original expressions. The notion that it is impossible to create original texts corresponds with Roland Barthes's concept of the death of the author and his understanding of a literary text as a *chambre d'échos*, a chamber of echoes, a chamber in which the echoes of other literary works are endlessly reflected (1975: 78).

extra-textual reality, a view that has also been expressed by Sorokin himself. ‘I feel actually that I can’t be inside this language, because to be inside it, to use it as mine, means that I’m inside this state — and that’s something that I’ve always feared’ (Laird 1999: 149). Sorokin has remained an ‘aesthetic outsider’ by deconstructing the ‘ready-made texts’ of the Soviet and Russian canons, making the stylisation and imitation of other writers’ styles one of his primary trademarks.¹⁷² In doing so, he disavows any hierarchical order of texts and/or genres. For Sorokin, there are no ‘high’ or ‘low’ texts: ‘For me, there is no difference between Joyce and Shevtsov, between Nabokov and some sort of railway advertisement. I can be fascinated by any kind of text’ (quoted by Vladiv-Glover 1999a: 275).

Considering Sorokin’s conceptualist roots, it does not come as a surprise that the academic discourse on Sorokin has been strongly dominated by discussions of his use of language(s) while the socio-cultural aspects of his works have largely been ignored. Ellen Rutten somewhat dryly observes that ‘it doesn’t take hours of scrupulous reading to see that literary theorists are inclined to focus in the first place on the world within Sorokin’s texts’, concluding that ‘the intraliterary world is a first concern in “Sorokinology”’ (2008: 164). Rutten primarily targets the articles in Dagmar Burkhard’s collection of essays *Poetik der Metadiskursivität*, published in 1999 as the result of the very first conference on Sorokin’s postmodernist oeuvre.¹⁷³ The volume is still considered one of the leading academic book publications on Sorokin. The majority of essays in this collection, Rutten argues, are construed according to the principle ‘theme X in the oeuvre of (or work Y by) Sorokin’ (2008: 163), thereby taking a highly formalist approach to his texts. German Slavic scholar Dirk Uffelmann arrives at a similar conclusion in his review of *Poetik der Metadiskursivität*. Most articles seem to reduce Sorokin’s poetics to an analysis of certain motives and linguistic peculiarities within individual works or to engage in

¹⁷² Sorokin’s technique is frequently referred to as ‘pastiche’. According to Frederic Jameson, ‘pastiche is, like parody, the imitation of a peculiar or unique, idiosyncratic style, the wearing of a linguistic mask, speech in a dead language. But it is a neutral practice of such mimicry, without any of parody’s ulterior motives, amputated of the satiric impulse, devoid of laughter’ (1991: 17).

¹⁷³ The conference took place at the University of Mannheim from 6 to 8 October 1997. A collection of articles was published two years later by Otto Sager Verlag. The collection reflects the German dominance in research on Sorokin. Out of the 22 articles included in the monograph, 15 were contributed by German/Austrian scholars, five by Russian scholars and only two by Anglo-American scholars (by David Gillespie and Slobodanka Vladiv-Glover). In an attempt to fill this large gap in Anglophone academia, the first English-language conference on Sorokin’s oeuvre was held in Aarhus, Denmark, in 2012, which produced the monograph *Vladimir Sorokin’s Languages* (2013).

superficial metadiscursive discussions of his oeuvre as a whole (2000: 279). Uffelmann particularly criticises the many attempts to interpret Sorokin's texts in light of Derrida's concept of deconstruction and argues that the label 'deconstruction' would be applied in too superficial a manner to Sorokin's texts.¹⁷⁴

While the terms 'deconstruction' and 'destruction' are indeed used interchangeably by many critics, it cannot be overlooked that in 'Sorokinology', to borrow Rutten's apt term, Derridean 'deconstruction' often approaches a form of (negative) destruction. In other words, authoritative discourses are often deconstructed by means of violence on both the thematic and the lexical levels of his narratives. Violence is not only exerted against certain linguistic structures and by means of violent discourses, but also expressed thematically by graphic representations of sadomasochism, incest and other forms of sexual perversions. This particular feature of Sorokin's writing, namely the verbalisation of sexuality, obscenity and violence, is also reflected in the way the author is usually introduced, both to Sorokin's readership and in scholarly discussion. Sorokin has been dubbed an 'enfant terrible' (Engel 2007: 708; Gillespie 1999: 161), the 'leading monster of the new Russian literature' (Erofeev 1998: 28) and the 'Russian de Sade' (Vladiv-Glover 1999a: 273), labels applied as a result of the many obscenities and other monstrosities to be encountered in his texts. As a matter of fact, there are hardly any scholarly discussions of Sorokin's oeuvre that manage to avoid the terms 'taboo breaking', 'violence' and 'obscenity', resulting in more or less lengthy discussions of his 'aesthetics of disgust' (Groys 1988: 109, my translation), his 'theatre of cruelty' (Lipovetsky 2000: 167)¹⁷⁵ and 'excremental poetics' (Vladiv-Glover 1999a: 269). Dagmar Burkhard summarises Sorokin's poetics by stating that, in Sorokin's oeuvre, 'language means violence and violence means language' (1999: 14, my translation). David Gillespie draws a similar conclusion by arguing that 'Sorokin delights in all manner of literary excess: grotesque, absurd, satire,

¹⁷⁴ For Derrida, 'deconstruction' had less to do with 'tearing down' than with laying bare the multiple ways a text can be read and interpreted. In dismantling the oppositions and hierarchical systems within a text, deconstruction can also be seen as a form of critique of authoritarian structures.

¹⁷⁵ In his discussion of Sorokin's oeuvre, Mark Lipovetsky draws some interesting parallels between Sorokin's poetics and the 'theatre of cruelty' (2000: 187), a concept introduced by the French playwright, poet and Surrealist theoretician Antonin Artaud. According to Artaud, this form of theatre would evoke responses in the audience that were previously inaccessible.

parody, the assault on taboos, and the destruction of all manifestations of authority' while offering 'no celebration of the Bakhtinian carnival' (1999: 161).

It must, however, be noted that the deconstruction of authoritative discourses by means of violent discourses was a particular feature of Sorokin's earlier works. It is also a feature of *Goluboe salo* (1999, *Blue Lard*), even though the novel is less concerned with the dismantling of authoritative discourses than works such as *Ochered'* (1983, *The Queue*), *Norma* (1979–83, *The Norm*) or *Roman* (1985, *A Novel*). This confirms what Dirk Uffelman points out, namely that Sorokin's oeuvre must not be understood as a uniform and coherent body of work. In fact, Uffelman writes, Sorokin's body of work is subject to periodisation, with the novel *Goluboe salo* '[marking] the turn in Sorokin's poetics away from the exclusive use of uniform mechanisms of shocking deconstruction' (2006: 108). Nevertheless, as the following analysis will show, *Goluboe salo* draws heavily on authoritative discourses, exposing them by numerous means of de(con)struction, particularly by verbal obscenity. The following section looks at the narrative functions of verbal obscenity, taking its poeticity into particular consideration, before examining the nature and background of the scandal revolving around the novel in 2002. In other words, the following will be an attempt at 'applied Sorokinology'.

7.2. Poeticising the obscene

If there is one thing the average Russian reader knows about Sorokin's novel *Goluboe salo*, it is the notorious gay sex scene between two fictional characters called Stalin and Khrushchev, which seems to have become a text in its own right isolated from the remainder of the novel.¹⁷⁶ The attention that has been paid to the 'infamous buggery scene' (Borenstein 2008: 3) stands in no relation to its meaning for the novel — and from a narrative point of view, the sex scene does not constitute the core of the novel, that is, if there even is such a core. As reviewer Aleksandr Genis pointedly states, '[the novel] tells a story while at the same time not telling a story', thus 'hiding its contents [*soderzhanie*] in the lack of the same' (1999b: online, my translation). Analysing the narrative structure of *Goluboe salo*, Peter Deutschmann concludes that the *fabula* of the narrative shows several

¹⁷⁶ Bersthein and Hadden state that, although almost none of the Duma officials condemning *Goluboe salo* were familiar with the novel, they all knew about the infamous gay sex scene between Stalin and Khrushchev (2007: online).

ambiguities (2003: 286), which makes a coherent reading of the text problematic.¹⁷⁷ Several breaks in the temporal and narrative modes of the text make the novel resemble a collage comprising many individual texts rather than a coherent whole. The only linking device between all these texts is the substance that gives the novel its title, namely *goluboe salo*, commonly translated as ‘blue lard’.¹⁷⁸

The patchwork nature of the text is further enhanced through the use of various linguistic codes, supporting the meaning and setting of the very same. In this regard, verbal obscenity, to be more precise, the poeticity of obscene words, plays a particularly significant role. As was discussed in Chapter 1, obscene words possess a poetic quality in that they refer to themselves, while at the same time referring beyond themselves, and they are distinct from other words by their mere phonetic sounds. This strongly echoes Roman Jakobson’s notion of poeticity:

Poeticity is present when the word is felt as word and not a mere representation of the object being named or an outburst of emotion, when words and their composition, their meaning, their external and inner form acquire a weight and value of their own instead of referring directly to reality.
(1987: 378)

Sorokin not only exploits the poeticity of obscene words in *Goluboe salo* by drawing on their self-referentiality, but he also maximises their poetic effect by establishing a new signifier/signified system. This is particularly the case in the first part of the novel. Set in a futuristic Russia that has come under Chinese influence, this section is told from the perspective of Boris Gloger, a ‘bio-philologist’ working in a laboratory in the middle of Siberia. The year is 2068, and Gloger writes letters to his lover telling him about the GS-3 project, which is the third attempt to extract blue lard from seven cloned writers (Tolstoy-4, Chekhov-3, Nabokov-7, Pasternak-1, Dostoevsky-2, Akhmatova-2 and Platonov-3). These letters are all written in a new

¹⁷⁷ Here, *fabula* is employed in a formalistic sense, referring to the chronological order of the retold events. *Fabula* is usually opposed by the concept of *siuzhet*, which is the way a story is organised.

¹⁷⁸ See, for example, references to the novel in Mark Lipovetsky’s overview of Russian postmodernism in *The Cambridge Companion to Twentieth-Century Russian Literature* (2011: 188) or Eliot Borenstein’s *Overkill* (2008: 52). This translation fails to convey the connotations evoked by the Russian title. The Russian *goluboi* (‘blue’) is also commonly used as a slang word for ‘homosexual’, a meaning that is completely lost in translation. The many different connotations of the word *salo* are also lost in translation; unlike bacon or lard, Russian *salo* has little or no meat and is not rendered. It is a food typically associated with Ukrainian and Russian culture and is often eaten with vodka. Stereotypically, *salo* is a staple in the diet of workers and members of the lower classes. Thus, choosing *salo* as a signifier for literature is in itself highly taboo-breaking. Pairing it with the adjective *goluboi* increases the shock effect even more.

form of Russian that is characterised by a mixture of scientific abbreviations and pseudo-scientific terms, neologisms and foreignisms, spelt in both Cyrillic and Latin letters, thereby reinforcing the futuristic and exotic atmosphere of this part:

Привет, mon petit. Тяжелый мальчик мой, нежная сволочь, божественный и мерзкий топ-директ. Вспоминать тебя — адское дело, рипс лаовай, это тяжело в прямом смысле слова. И опасно: для снов, для L-гармонии, для протоплазмы, для скандхи, для моего V 2.¹⁷⁹

(GS 2002: 7)

As this passage shows, Gloger's idiom features an abundance of pseudo-Chinese borrowings, which are reflective of the Chinese dominance in this futuristic Russia. The pseudo-Chinese words, as well as most scientific abbreviations and neologisms, are explained in two glossaries provided at the end of the text. Their actual usefulness is, however, highly questionable, as the explanations given are mostly self-referential or very obscure. This is particularly the case with the glossary of 'Other Terms and Expressions'. The 'Glossary of Chinese Words and Expressions' is more explanatory, but the high frequency of these foreignisms still makes it difficult to fully comprehend the text. Gloger's idiom can thus be regarded as a form of *novoiaz* ('newspeak'), as it is not created from scratch but based on an existing 'oldspeak' (the Russian language as of today).¹⁸⁰

In deciphering the possible meanings of these foreignisms, the reader is, however, not left completely in the dark. For example, it becomes clear from the context that a number of these pseudo-Chinese words are employed expressively, conveying both positive and negative feelings, thereby assuming a function similar to expressive *mat* words. For example, when Gloger expresses his disappointment over his partner's infidelity in the letter dated 5 January, he unleashes a stream of invective against the alleged cheater:

И ты гордился своей М-смелостью, узкий подонок: «Я пробирую natural!» Фальшивая мерзость, достойная скуннеров и диггеров. Бэйбиди

¹⁷⁹ 'Hello, mon petit. My heavy boy and tender bastard, my divine and nasty top-direct. Remembering you is a hellish thing, rips laovai, it's heavy in the very meaning of the word. And dangerous — for my dreams, for L-harmony, for the protoplasm, for skandkhi, for my V-2.'

¹⁸⁰ For a definition of the term *novoiaz*, see Elena Zemskaja (1996: 23).

сяотоу, кэйчиди лянмяньпай, чоуди сяочжу, кэбиди хуайдань, рипс
нимада та бень!¹⁸¹

(GS 2002: 17)

Even though the meaning of these words is somewhat obscure, there is no doubt about their emotional force, which is also signalled by the exclamation mark at the end of this outburst. In particular, the word *rips* comes up frequently in all of Gloger's letters and is often combined with *nimada* or *nimada ta ben'*, thereby assuming a linguistic role similar to three-storey *mat* expressions.¹⁸² For instance, Gloger uses these expressions as expletive interjections or gap fillers: 'Ну и: температура в аппаратной -28°C. Не плохо, рипс лаовай?' (GS 2002: 9).¹⁸³

Mat words are replaced not only by pseudo-Chinese words and other foreignisms but also by euphemisms and graphemes. Again, the established signifiers are not replaced randomly, but Sorokin chooses signifiers associated with the obscene, in particular on the phonological level. Thus, Gloger finishes his first letter with the greeting 'Целую тебя в ЗВЕЗДЫ' (GS 2002: 10).¹⁸⁴ The Russian *ZVEZDY* ('STARS') sounds similar to the *mat* word denoting vagina (*pizda*), although here it does not refer to the female genitals since Boris Gloger's partner is male. Even though it is not entirely clear what *ZVEZDY* signifies, it is without doubt that it refers to a signified related to sexuality since *zvezdechki* ('little stars', asterisks) are often used instead of *mat* words.

In the poem written by the clone Pasternak-1, Sorokin employs a similar analogy, yet this time 'star' is replaced with the *mat* word denoting vagina. Instead of featuring a star, one of the recurring motifs in symbolist poetry, the poem gives praise to the 'cunt' (*pizda*). Again, this substitution is not random, as both motifs are related to the concept of sublimity. In the same way that the star connotes intangibility and infinity (and hence sublimity), the *mat* word in question borders on the limits of representation as a result of its taboo nature. It is, literally, the unspeakable, that which must not be said, let alone written, and thereby also characterised by a certain limitlessness and intangibility.

¹⁸¹ 'And you were proud of your M-courage, you narrow scumbag: "I am trying natural!" False disgustingness, worthy of skunners and diggers. Beibidi siaotou, keichidi lianmian'pai, choudi siaochzhu, kebidi khuaidan', rips nimada ta ben'!

¹⁸² For an explanation of three-storey *mat* expression, see footnote 126, Chapter 5.

¹⁸³ 'So: the temperature in the apparatus room is -28°C. Not bad, rips laovai?'

¹⁸⁴ 'Kissing you on your STARS.'

Similarly, the graphic symbols embedded in Gloger's letters resemble sexual organs. In his second letter, for example, Gloger compares the Siberian laboratory with 'a frozen hole', using the grapheme 'O' for the latter: 'Пытаюсь забыть твоё л и п к о е свинство с Киром и Дэйзи, и не могу. Даже здесь, в этой мерзлой **O**' (GS 2002: 16).¹⁸⁵ Another example can be found in the letter dated 12 January: 'Начну писать тебе письма, длинные, как твой божественный **olo**' (GS 2002: 31).¹⁸⁶ In other words, *rusmat*, as Gloger refers to Russian *mat*, gives way to a new form of *mat*, one that comprises partly incomprehensible neologisms and foreignisms but whose pragmatic functions are still intact.

Yet *rusmat* has not disappeared completely from Gloger's newspeak. While pseudo-Chinese borrowings and foreignisms replace certain *mat* words, obscene signifiers are preserved in Chinese words such as *benkhui* (*katastrofa*, 'catastrophe'), *dakhui* (*s"ezd*, 'arrival') and *shanshuikhua* (*peizazh*, 'landscape'). Even though these terms are not related to sexuality or bodily functions, the obscene lexemes immediately catch the (Russian) reader's eye, which is another illustration of the poeticity of *mat*.¹⁸⁷

Mat not only plays a vital role in the newspeak of Gloger's world but also forms an integral part of the language spoken by the members of the *Bratstvo Rossiiskikh Zemleebov* ('Brotherhood of the Russian Earthfuckers'). After attacking the laboratory in order to steal the blue lard, in the course of which they kill Boris Gloger, the *zemleebys* take their loot to their headquarters, located inside a holy mountain. This part of the novel is clearly set apart from the Gloger story. Not only is the beginning of this passage marked by an abrupt shift from first- to third-person narration, it is also marked by a different linguistic code, which is most evident in the way Russian *mat* is employed. While, in the futuristic world of Boris Gloger, *rusmat* is not appreciated¹⁸⁸ and is replaced by pseudo-Chinese words, the language

¹⁸⁵ 'I am trying to forget your s t i c k y messing around with Kir and Daisy, but can't. Even here, in this frozen **O**.'

¹⁸⁶ 'I'm going to write letters to you, letters as long as your divine **olo**.'

¹⁸⁷ To Russian ears, some Chinese syllables bear strong phonological similarity to *mat* words. In particular, the Chinese *khui* sounds like the *mat* word for 'penis', which is why, since 1956, the Russian transcription for this syllable has been *khuei*. Similarly, Soviet newspapers and journals used to transliterate Chinese names consisting of the syllable *khui* as *khoi*. The Chinese military leader Chuan Khui was therefore usually rendered as *Chuan Khoi* (Plutser-Sarno 2005a: 25).

¹⁸⁸ Gloger expresses his dislike of *rusmat* repeatedly. On one occasion, he reprimands a colleague for using *rusmat*: 'Я прошу не употреблять русмат в моем присутствии, — сканировал я его'

of the *zemleby* is quite coarse and vulgar, featuring an abundance of *mat* words. Here, too, the language employed is reflective of the narrative setting described, and the ritualistic and strictly hierarchical nature of the Brotherhood resembles the way they speak. *Mat* is employed in a highly formulaic, almost prayer-like way:

Великий магистр пяткой нажал на пол; яшмовая панель с нежным перезвоном колокольчиков опустилась вниз, в стене открылся проем, из которого стали выходить карлики и ставить на пол агатовые чаши с едой и напитками.

— Здоров ли ты, детка? — спросил великий магистр.

— Слава Земле, здоров, великий отче.

— Готов ли ты к Весенней Ебле?

— Готов, великий отче.

— Стоит ли хуило твое?

— Стоит, великий отче.

— Покажи, детка.¹⁸⁹

(GS 2002: 157)

As this passage illustrates, obscene language is used alongside religious expressions like *otche* ('Father') and *velikii magistr* ('Grand Master'). This is reminiscent of the fact that obscene curses and prayers have similar historical roots, assuming similar linguistic functions, a theory supported by Mikhail Bakhtin and Boris Uspenskii. Bakhtin identifies oaths and curses as 'two sides of the same coin' (1984: 165), arguing that both forms are inherently connected with the lower bodily stratum and originally related to ancient pagan practices. Boris Uspenskii, too, states that Russian obscene language has deep pagan roots, tracing the infamous mother curse back to pagan prayers, spells and curses (1983). Both curses and prayers are highly formulaic in their linguistic constructions by making use of recurring patterns of syntax and redundant vocabulary, which accounts for their strong mnemonic effect. For this reason, ritualised language plays a significant role in constructing collective identity and collectivism, thereby also assuming a strong performative function.

(GS 2002: 23; "I ask you not to use *rusmat* in my presence," I said, scanning him.'). Gloger also refuses to comment on the poem written by the clone Pasternak-1 because it contains *rusmat*: 'Ты знаешь, я терпеть ненавижу русмат. Поэтому и не комментирую' (GS 2002: 91; 'As you know, I can't stand *rusmat*, which is why I won't comment on this.').

¹⁸⁹ 'The Grand Master pressed his heel into the floor; a jasper panel sank down accompanied by some delicate tinkling and a small door opened in the wall, through which dwarves came out to put agate bowls with food and drinks on the floor. "Are you in good health, my little one?" asked the Grand Master. "Glory to the Earth, in good health, Great Father." "Are you ready for the Spring Fuck?" "Ready, Great Father." "Has your dick hardened?" "It has, Great Father." "Show it to me, my little one."'

Ritualised speech acts such as slogans, appeals and party speeches constitute a defining and essential element of authoritarian and totalitarian languages, both as a means of indoctrinating party ideology and of reinforcing the collective spirit. At the same time, however, ritualised languages are also often characterised by their detachment from reality, transforming slogans, phrases and fixed expressions into clichés devoid of any meaning. The ‘performative dimension’ of ritualised speech acts therefore often becomes more important than their actual meaning, as Alexei Yurchak argues in his analysis of the last Soviet generation: ‘It became increasingly more important to participate in the reproduction of the *form* of these ritualised acts of authoritative discourse than to engage with their constative meanings’ (2006: 25).¹⁹⁰

What makes the above-quoted scene so overtly grotesque, then, is the fact that not only are obscene phrases uttered in order to construct collective identity among the members of the Brotherhood, they are also employed literally. Moreover, the ritualised language of the *zemleby* draws significantly on such authoritative discourses as Soviet slogans and phrases, which adds to the grotesque effect of this part of the novel. For example, conquering the Siberian land, Father Andrei Utesov is quoted as saying: ‘Только мне другой земли не надо — здесь ебал, здесь ебу, здесь ебать буду до червья могильного’ (GS 2002: 154),¹⁹¹ a phrase that is modelled on Vladimir Maiakovskii’s famous phrase *Lenin zhil, Lenin zhiv, Lenin budet zhit* (‘Lenin lived, Lenin lives and Lenin will live forever’),¹⁹² which in turn echoes the Christian liturgy ‘Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again’.

Transformations also define the third part of the novel, which is set in an alternative Stalinist Moscow — one in which Stalin is still alive, reigning over a powerful empire after winning the Second World War jointly with Hitler. Again, the blue lard links this section to the previous one. The *velikii magistr* orders Baby Vil to travel back in time and deliver the blue lard to the Soviet leaders. Frozen in a glacier funnel, Vil is sent back to the year 1954 and lands on the stage of Moscow’s Bolshoi Theatre, where the opening of the All-Russian House of Free Love is being

¹⁹⁰ Yurchak uses the expression ‘performative dimension’ in an Austinian sense, i.e., as ritualised speech acts that bring about changes in social reality.

¹⁹¹ ‘I don’t need any other land — here I fucked, I do fuck and I will fuck until I die.’

¹⁹² This phrase comes from the poem *Vladimir Il’ich Lenin*, which Maiakovskii wrote as a reaction to Lenin’s death in 1924.

celebrated. This is not the only (ironic) divergence from historical Stalinist Moscow. In this alternative version of Soviet history, the fictional characters merely share the same names with their historical prototypes while their outward appearance and behaviour have undergone significant transformations. Hitler, for example, is described as being tall and slim and a connoisseur of fine meat — a description that clashes with the historical Hitler, who was a vegetarian and rather short. Stalin's sons are represented as transvestites who love dressing up in women's clothes. The language used by these characters also shows some significant divergence; in particular, obscene language is put in the mouth of characters whose historical prototypes are known for their avoidance of 'dirty' words or who are not associated with *mat*. A female character by the name of AAA is particularly foul-mouthed, which reflects her low status in this society; dressed in rags, she roams the streets of Moscow before giving birth to a hideous-looking black egg that is to be swallowed by her successor.

The abbreviation AAA is easily understood to refer to Anna Andreevna Akhmatova, even though the extremely vulgar woman has little in common with the historical Akhmatova. A good example to illustrate this point is the scene in which AAA runs into her old friend Osip (Mandel'shtam), who has just been released from prison. Overwhelmed with joy, she vents her feelings by releasing a stream of verbal obscenity:

— Осип... — хрипло выдохнула AAA и всплеснула заскорузлыми руками. — Что б мне сухой пиздой подавиться! Что б на своих кишках удузиться! — Освобожденный посмотрел на нее мутными, серо голубыми глазами, медленно приседая на сильных ногах, разводя длинные хваткие руки: — AAA... AAA? AAA! — Оська!!! — взвизгнула она и лохматым комом полетела к нему в объятия. — AAA! AAA! AAA! — сильно сжал ее рыхлое тело Осип.— Значит, не уебал Господь Вседержитель! — визжала AAA, повисая на нем и пачкая его светлое пальто.¹⁹³ (GS 2002: 227–8)

¹⁹³ “‘Osip...,” AAA gasped hoarsely and clasped together her hardened hands. “I’ll be choked by my dry cunt! I’ll be strangled by my guts!” The freed man looked at her with dull, grey-blue eyes, slowly squatting on his strong legs and opening his long, strong arms: “AAA ... AAA? AAA!” “Os’ka!!!” she screamed and flung herself round him. “AAA! AAA! AAA!” Osip firmly squeezed her flabby body. “So, you didn’t get screwed by the Lord Almighty!” yelled AAA, hanging on him and smearing his bright coat.”

This representation clashes with her significance as a cultural icon and her status as one of the greatest poets of the 20th century.¹⁹⁴ Akhmatova became a cult figure soon after her first collection of poems was published in 1912, and the myth built around her only began to increase with the passing of time, not least because it was partly created and fostered by the poetess herself, as critics have pointed out.¹⁹⁵ Sorokin debunks this ‘Anna Akhmatova cult’ by relating her name (AAA) to a woman who is literally at Stalin’s feet and who shouts obscenities to the people around her. In other words, the signifier ‘AAA’ is related to a new signified.

7.3. Materialising the obscene

Sorokin not only allowed the discourses within *Goluboe salo* to clash with the authoritative discourses outside the novel, he also transformed immaterial (textual) concepts into physical materiality and vice versa. In other words, he challenged the correlation between physical materiality and (immaterial) textual representation. A good example to illustrate this point is the materialisation of metaphors, in particular of obscene metaphors, a technique frequently applied throughout the novel. In the second part of the novel, for example, the core phrase of Russian obscene language (*eb tvoiu mat*, ‘fuck your mother’) is employed in its literal meaning and materialised through the Brotherhood of the *zemleebys*. Having massive genitals many times larger than the rest of their body, these gnomes do exactly what their name implies: they penetrate and copulate with the Siberian soil. Here, Sorokin undoubtedly draws on Uspenskii’s widely accepted theory that the infamous *mat* formula has its origins in pagan myths, according to which the fertility of the earth is the result of the sacred marriage between Heaven (the *Gromoverzhets*, ‘the Thunderer’) and (Mother) Earth.¹⁹⁶ Developing this theory, Mikhail Epstein points out (2006: online) that there is a strong correlation between matter/materialism, the image of Mother Nature and *mat*, not least because all three words have the same root, namely *mat*. Sorokin’s image of the *zemleebys* is thus the materialisation of the infamous mother curse, a metaphor for the fertile mother soil come alive. At the

¹⁹⁴ As Gleb Struve stated in 1965, ‘there can be no doubt that, since the death of Boris Pasternak, Anna Akhmatova is the greatest living Russian poet’ (quoted in Rylkova 2007: 155).

¹⁹⁵ Alik Zholkovskii refers to the cult surrounding the figure of Anna Akhmatova as the ‘AAA institute’ (1996: 211–27). He claims that Akhmatova herself contributed significantly to the myth surrounding her, applying in fact the same mechanisms as the regime itself.

¹⁹⁶ Uspenskii argues (1981) that the Thunderer was later replaced by a deity in the form of a dog (*pes*) and Mother Earth by the interlocutor’s own mother, which then led to the creation of the *mat* formula as it is known today.

same time, it is also the physical manifestation of the love Soviet citizens were expected to express towards their Soviet motherland,¹⁹⁷ an idea that also drew heavily on the concept of the ‘motherland mother’ (*rodina mat'*) as being represented by a maternal figure.¹⁹⁸ In *Goluboe salo*, the Soviet slogan ‘love your motherland’ is thus desecrated by being rendered literally in the obscene image of the *zemleeb*y:

На что отец Андрей Утесов обнажил десятивершковый хуй свой, лег на Дающий Холм и проебал три раза подряд родную сибирскую землю, с криком и уханьем. Затем встал он и рек: «Братие! Только что на глазах ваших три раза испустил я семя свое в Землю Восточной Сибири, в Землю, на теле которой живем мы, спим, дышим, едим, срем и мочимся. Не мягка, не рассыпчата Земля наша — сурова, холодна и камениста она и не каждый хуй в себя впускает. Земля наша — хоть и камениста, да любовью сильна: чей хуй в себя впустила — тот сыт ее любовью навек, того она никогда не забудет и от себя не отпустит».¹⁹⁹

(GS 2002: 154)

Throughout the text, physical materiality is often expressed by means of corporeality. Saturated with bodily images and tropes, *Goluboe salo* is a good illustration of the fact that, for Sorokin, textual bodies become physical bodies and vice versa. This becomes particularly evident in the way these bodies are treated: Like his textual bodies, Sorokin’s physical bodies are destructed, constantly transgressing, forming and reforming (new) boundaries. Both textual and physical bodies are open systems in constant flux, absorbing and rejecting new influences. In the same way that *Goluboe salo* appears disjointed and fragmented, so do the human bodies within the text. Violated, dissected, sewn together, mutilated, penetrated and destroyed, they reflect the patchwork nature of the novel. Examples are numerous

¹⁹⁷ This also meant that Soviet citizens were expected to give their lives for their ‘motherland mother’. The fictional Stalin’s remark that the *zemleeb*y ‘must indeed love their motherland’ (GS 2002: 219) while examining their massive genitals is therefore highly ironic.

¹⁹⁸ The image of the Soviet Union as a nurturing mother was immortalised by the song *Shiroka strana moia rodnaia* (*Song of the Motherland*) in Grigorii Aleksandrov’s 1936 film *Tsirk* (*Circus*). Analysing the image of the mother in the song, Hans Günther (2005) concludes that it draws heavily on the pagan cult of the Moist Mother Earth, thus embracing vegetative aspects such as fertility and collectivism.

¹⁹⁹ ‘To which Father Andrei Utesov exposed his ten-verst-long cock, lay down on the Giving Hill and fucked the soil of his native Siberia three times in a row, screaming and hooting. Then he rose to his feet and cried out: “Brothers! Three times before your very eyes I have just given my seed to the soil of Eastern Siberia, on whose body we live, sleep, breathe, eat, shit and piss. [...] Our Land is neither soft nor crumbly — it is hard, cold and rocky, and it does not admit every cock. Yet even though it is rocky, our Land is full of love: he whose cock is let in will be fed her love forever; she will never forget him and never let go of him.”’

and appear in almost every single section of the text. Thus, early on in the novel, in the text produced by the clone Dostoevsky-2, a machine invented to sew together human bodies in order to unify humankind is introduced to the guests assembling at Count Reshetovskii's house. One of the strongest scenes in the novel is the one in which Khrushchev tortures a young artist to death in the basement of his mansion only to later devour the man's body with other guests at a lavish feast.²⁰⁰ It is reasonable to argue that Sorokin's open, penetrable and fluid bodies are directly opposed to the 'closed' Soviet body that signified ideological homogeneity, stability and strength, as well as resistance to external influences. While the Soviet body was kept under control, Sorokin's bodies spin out of control, growing to excessive proportions, only to ultimately destroy themselves, which is also the case in *Goluboe salo*. At the end of the novel, Stalin's brain grows bigger and out of proportion until it finally blows up and destroys the universe.²⁰¹

In many cases, sexuality serves as the driving force behind these bodily transformations. Violent and destructive, sexual acts are never performed to provide pleasure but almost always function as anti-carnavalesque indicators of power. Therefore, they are usually associated with pain and excess, turning the highly sexualised discourse of the novel into an extremely anti-erotic one. In the Turgenev story, for example, the count is sexually aroused by a bleeding 16-year-old maid urinating on him. At the dinner reception at Berchtesgaden, Hitler finds an opportunity to rape Stalin's daughter Vesta and is shocked to learn that she is in fact no virgin. In the second part of the novel, the gnome Vil is asked to masturbate in front of the *velikii magistr* in order to demonstrate his suitability for embarking on a journey through time. Khrushchev tells Stalin about the case of a certain Ivan Leopol'dovich Denisovich, a teacher who was sentenced to ten years of LOVELAG for luring female students to his house, drugging them, raping them and sewing up their vaginas after filling them with his faeces.

In other words, sexuality in *Goluboe salo* is highly transgressive, transcending boundaries in both a literal and a figurative way. Despite its violent and destructive

²⁰⁰ This can be interpreted as a materialisation of the way in which culture (materialised by the artist) was literally 'fed' to the Soviet people.

²⁰¹ This excessiveness does not entail pure negativity, since the ending means literally a (new) beginning. Readers find themselves again at the beginning of the novel: Stalin turns out to be a servant of Gloger's lover, who is reading out to him the first letter written by Gloger.

nature, sexuality is, however, not rendered by obscene language, a fact that contradicts the often-expressed dictum that where there is sexual transgression, there must be *mat*.²⁰² For example, the infamous sex scene between Stalin and Khrushchev only features one *mat* word. In fact, the dialogue between Stalin and Khrushchev is rendered in almost child-like language:

Хрущев поцеловал его в засос между лопаток, дотянулся губами до уха, прошептал:
 — Чего боится мальчик?
 — Толстого червяка... — всхлипывал Сталин.
 — Где живет толстый червяк?
 — У дяди в штанах.
 — Что хочет червяк?
 — Ворваться.
 — Куда?
 — Мальчику в попку.
 [...]
 — Ты... это... ты... — замычал Сталин. — Что дядя делает с мальчиком?
 — Дядя ебёт мальчика в попку — жарко шептал Хрущев.²⁰³
 (GS 2002: 258)

What makes this scene even more disturbing than the subject matter alone is that the sexual intercourse between the two political figures clashes with the language describing it, thus enhancing the shock effect of this passage. A similar discrepancy between content and form can be noticed with regard to the rape scene between Hitler and Stalin's daughter at Berchtesgaden.

Руками он дернул ее за предплечья, наклоня к себе. Волосы Весты накрыли его. Он стал подробно сосать ее грудь. Веста смотрела в сторону на бронзового рабочего, гнущего винтовку о мускулистое колено. Гитлер разорвал на ней трусики, толкнул. Она упала на диван с сиренево-белозолотистой обивкой. Адольф подполз к ней на коленях, развел ей ноги и беспощадно растянул пальцами половые губы, покрытые не очень густыми волосиками. Орлиный нос его жадно втянул запах ее гениталий, коснулся неразвитого клитора и тут же уступил место языку. Гитлер

²⁰² In analysing Sorokin's poetics, Vitaly Chernetsky states that 'suddenly and without warning the calm tone of the narrative [...] shifts to a depiction of transgressive acts (of a sexual, excremental, or violent nature) that is usually combined with transgressive vocabulary (profanities and curse words)' (2007: 75). This observation certainly does not apply to *Goluboe salo*, as Sorokin here evokes obscenity *without* using obscene terms.

²⁰³ 'Khrushchev kissed him passionately between his shoulder blades, brought his lips up to Stalin's ear and whispered: "What is the little boy scared of?" "Of the fat worm," Stalin sobbed. "Where does the fat worm live?" "In the nice man's pants." "What does the worm want?" "To force his way in." "In where?" "In the boy's butt." [...] "You ... what ...," Stalin moaned. "What is the nice man doing to the boy?" "The nice man is fucking the boy in the butt," Khrushchev whispered hotly.'

прошелся им по раскрытой раковине Весты снизу вверх, потом сверху вниз, впился в узкое влагалище. Но вдруг язык фюрера разочарованно отпрянул за его неровные зубы.²⁰⁴

(GS 2002: 322)

Rendered in a highly emotionless language that clashes with its disturbing content, the passage abounds with detailed descriptions conjuring up numerous images of bodily imperfections, thereby enhancing the degree of its nauseating effect. Hitler's nose, for example, is described as 'aquiline' (*orlinyi*), his teeth as 'uneven' (*nerovnye*). The feeling of nausea, as Jean Paul Sartre shows in his novel *La Nausée* (1938, *Nausea*), is typically the result of excess. This is also realised by Roquentin, the novel's protagonist: 'I shouted "filth! what rotten filth!" and shook myself to get rid of this sticky filth, but it held fast and there was so much, tons and tons of existence, endless: I stifled at the depths of this immense weariness' (1964: 134).

Sorokin achieves this nauseating effect by means of textual excessiveness, which in turn is informed by corporeal excessiveness, as is the case in the scene where Vesta is woken up by her governess and made ready for the day. Even when Vesta is on the toilet, the governess is right next to her and has to wait until Vesta has finished 'her business', thereby being exposed to both the sound and smell of the very same. This is also reflective of the power relations between Vesta and her governess; despite her young age, it is Vesta who is in a domineering position, forcing the governess to succumb to her moods and demands. Like the governess, the reader is compelled to witness this scene, which is rendered in minute detail.

— Молчи... — напряженно выдохнула Веста, и ее кал стал падать в воду. Горничная смолкла, отмотала от рулона туалетной бумаги недлинную полосу, сложила пополам. Веста снова выпустила газы. Легкий запах кала пошел от нее. Она выдавила из себя последнюю порцию и со вздохом облегчения встала. Горничная сноровисто подтерла ей оттопыренный упругий зад, кинула бумагу в унитаз, закрыла крышку,

²⁰⁴ 'Bending towards her, he pulled her by the forearm. Vesta's hair covered him. He began sucking her breast. Vesta looked away at the bronze worker who was bending a rifle over his muscular knee. Hitler tore her panties and pushed her. She fell onto the couch, which was upholstered in purple, white and gold. Adolf crawled up to her on his knees, pushed her legs apart and with his fingers cruelly stretched her labia, which were lightly covered with hair. His aquiline nose eagerly sucked in the smell of her genitalia, touched her underdeveloped clitoris and immediately allowed his tongue to run along Vesta's labia surrounding her closed clam from bottom to top and from top to bottom before entering her narrow vagina. But suddenly Hitler's tongue disappointedly slid back behind his uneven teeth.'

потянула никелированную ручку. Забурлила вода, Веста присела на биде. Горничная подмыла ее, затем помогла почистить зубы, расчесала и заплела косу. Душ Веста утром никогда не принимала.²⁰⁵

(GS 2002: 267)

This scene abounds with seemingly superfluous, insignificant details, forcing themselves on the reader. The textual excessiveness discussed above manifests itself in an extreme — hence excessive — mimicking of the extra-literary world, while at the same time drawing on excessive bodily images and tropes. Physical excessiveness is thus reflected by textual excessiveness. It is this abundance of details that makes the text excessive and hence obscene. This brings us back to the first chapter of this thesis in which excess was determined as an element of obscenity. This textual excessiveness shows not only in the extreme level of detail in the descriptions but also in the way this excess is visualised: Instead of hiding inappropriate details, everything is ‘let out’ and put on display. We can therefore argue that obscenity is evoked through excessive realism that at the same time challenges its referentiality to reality. In other words, the obscene nature of the text is informed by a ‘self-referential hyperrealism’. This shows that the text as a whole draws on the poetics of *mat*, employing the latter as a means to ‘visualise the invisible’, as well as that which is to remain invisible.

7.4. Performing the obscene

The visualisation of verbal obscenity entails a strong performative element, affecting both the discourses within and about the novel. As was discussed above, in the novel, obscene verbal images are often visualised by being transformed into corporeal images, which is, for instance, the case with the *zemleeby*. Yet these gnomes not only materialise the infamous mother curse, they also perform it by copulating with the Siberian soil. Another example is the depiction of the Bolshoi Theatre as a huge sedimentation tank, with human faeces and excrement floating on the surface. The sacred place of culture is thus transformed into one that literally

²⁰⁵ “‘Shut up...” Vesta breathed hard, and her stool began to drop into the water. The governess fell silent, unwound a short strip from the roll of toilet paper and folded it in half. Vesta again broke wind. A faint smell of faeces emanated from her. She pushed out the last portion and got up with a sigh of relief. The governess skilfully wiped her soft butt, which she was sticking in her direction, threw the paper into the toilet, shut the lid, pulled the nickel-plated handle. The water began to seethe, and Vesta sat down on the bidet. The governess cleaned Vesta’s behind, and then helped her clean her teeth and combed and braided her hair. Vesta never took a shower in the morning.’

processes ‘dirt’.²⁰⁶ The sex scene between Stalin and Khrushchev also has a performative dimension to it, as Stalin is literally being ‘screwed’ by Khrushchev, as Dirk Uffelmann observes (2006: 114).

It was this scene, among other things, that in February 2002 caused the pro-Kremlin youth movement *Idushchie vmeste* (*Walking Together*) to perform a public campaign against such ‘marginalised writers’ as Vladimir Sorokin.²⁰⁷ In an attempt to ‘cleanse’ Russian culture of harmful influences, they called upon the Russian population to swap books by these writers for a novel by Boris Vasil’ev, a Soviet prose writer mainly known for his patriotic war novels. Initially, however, the campaign backfired. Not only was the book swap anything but a roaring success, with only a handful of books being traded in, but the unexpected media coverage helped promote the works of the writers being attacked, as a result of which book sales flourished (Lenta 2002: online). The campaign reached new heights in June of the same year, and this time Sorokin was the only target of the youth movement. The spark that had ignited the fire was Sorokin’s contract with the Bolshoi Theatre regarding the libretto for the opera *Deti Rozentalia* (*Rosenthal’s Children*). The campaign culminated in *Idushchie vmeste* pressing pornography charges against Sorokin in accordance with Article 242 of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation (illegal dissemination of pornography), which, in the worst case, would have resulted in the writer spending two years behind bars.

What makes the campaign so interesting is the manner of its performance. As Evgenii Bershtein and Jesse Hadden point out (2005: online), it was highly conceptualist in nature: *Idushchie vmeste* had put up a gigantic fake toilet into which they tossed numerous copies of Sorokin’s works. The act of ‘flushing his novels’ thus expressed their opinion of his literary achievements, namely that his books were ‘worthless shit’. Of equal significance is the ‘stage’ they chose for their ‘performance’: in front of the Bolshoi Theatre in Moscow, one of the very symbols of ‘high’ Russian culture. *Idushchie vmeste* did not leave it at that, though, and later marched to the Chekhov monument (with Chekhov representing the Russian classics and hence ‘good’ literature), where they distributed brochures containing excerpts

²⁰⁶ Brigitte Obermayr (2009: 117–23) discusses this passage with regard to the concept of catharsis.

²⁰⁷ Boris Iakemenko, one of the organisation’s leaders, referred to Vladimir Sorokin, Viktor Pelevin, Eduard Limonov and Viktor Erofeev as ‘marginalised writers’ (NEWSru 2002: online, my translation).

from Sorokin's book, including the sex scene between Stalin and Khrushchev (*Ekho Moskv* 2002: online).

Thus, *Idushchie vmeste* not only applied the same technique as Sorokin did in his infamous novel, namely a materialisation of obscene metaphors, they also performed the obscene by reading out the very text they condemned in order to convey their (non-obscene) message. In the same way that Sorokin put the obscene on display, so did *Idushchie vmeste* by reading from the book and transforming verbal images into tangible ones; they, too, 'let out the obscene', which in fact created a conflict between what they publicly stated as the reason for their protest (fighting the cultural and moral decline as exemplified by novels like *Goluboe salo*) and the nature of their performance (acquainting the Russian public with the 'pornographic' contents of the novel). In other words, the discourse revolving around the novel was as sexualised as the discourse in the novel, albeit for different purposes: While Sorokin employed the obscene (the 'non-normative') to make visible the norms regulating collective and authoritative discourses, *Idushchie vmeste* employed the 'non-normative' to fight for the maintenance of the norm.

The culmination of this visualisation process was the trial against Sorokin and its excessive media coverage. Yet rather than representing a celebration of the freedom of speech,²⁰⁸ the trial exemplifies the indirect control measures implemented by the Russian authorities. The year 2000 marked the beginning of the Putin era, which meant a drastic change in the way Russia presented itself on the national and international political stage. After the chaos and instability of the 1990s, many Russian people longed for 'a strong hand' and a return to 'stability and order'. The newly elected president, Vladimir Putin, was thought to be able to offer just that. As Richard Sakwa observes, Putin has been committed to a 'politics of normality' (2007: 51) since the beginning of his first presidency, a process that was clearly imposed from above and carried strong overtones of a 'managed democracy' (ibid). The wish to return to normality was expressed with regard to all facets of Russian society, including culture and language. At the beginning of the new millennium, voices of concern about the dreadful state of the Russian language were growing

²⁰⁸ As Bershtein and Hadden also note (2007: online), the Kremlin did not speak in a uniform voice about *Goluboe salo*, which for many was a sign of the Kremlin defending the freedom of speech. In particular, the then-minister of culture, Mikhail Shvydkoi, reacted immediately to the actions initiated by *Idushchie vmeste*, condemning them as a threat to these writers' freedom of speech.

louder. As Lara Ryazanova-Clarke points out, most language debates were informed by a ‘discourse of threat’ in which ‘the present state of the Russian language [was] regularly conceptualised through metaphors of disease, dirt and death’ (2006: 35). In particular, the penetration of obscene language into the realm of literature became an issue widely discussed in the media and on the Internet. This means that, while in the early 1990s, the sudden appearance of obscene language was interpreted as a sign of (political) freedom, at the end of that decade Russian *mat* was seen as a major threat to the Russian language and Russian literature.

These developments also reflect the two distinct phases identified by Vladimir Elistratov (2001: online) with regard to the linguistic situation in post-Soviet Russia. First, so he claims, there was a ‘destabilisation of the norm’ (*raznormirovanie*), which was caused by the collapse of the Soviet Union, as well as the new political and linguistic situation people were confronted with. This first phase was then followed by a ‘crystallisation of structures’ (*kristallizatsiia struktur*), which would correspond to the above-mentioned ‘return to normality’ that started in the late 1990s. The media turned out to be the most important tool in this second phase, as its influence in shaping public opinion was now also recognised by the Kremlin. This explains the manner in which *Idushchie vmeste* performed the scandal in front of the Bolshoi Theatre. As Christine Engel observes, ‘a scandal is like a public negotiation of boundaries and values to be regarded as normal’ (2007: 707, my translation).

The campaign by *Idushchie vmeste* and their alleged intention of ‘cleansing’ the Russian cultural landscape of harmful influences must therefore be seen in light of Putin’s politics of renegotiating and re-establishing norms, which was regarded as paramount in finding a way out of Russia’s identity crisis. And this process affected first and foremost linguistic norms. As Elistratov argues, ‘the search for a national idea is first and foremost a linguistic problem’ (ibid, my translation).

7.5. Conclusion

Returning to the question posed in the introductory section of this chapter, in light of Putin’s ‘policy of normalisation’, it is therefore not so paradoxical, after all, that Russia’s first obscenity trial should take place in the early years of the new millennium, targeting the work of a former ‘avant-garde hero’. Since the chaotic years following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia has been trying to find and

articulate its new identity. This process has mainly taken place by openly discussing various issues relevant to establishing this identity, particularly language and cultural issues. What the Putin administration tried to achieve in the early years of the new millennium was a renegotiation of boundaries, a re-establishing of what was the accepted norm. This ‘renegotiation of boundaries’ was highly visual in nature: not only did the media (virtual space) play an important role in this process but the latter was also highly performative as the campaigns initiated by *Idushchie vmeste* show. In the same way that Sorokin employs obscene language and bodily images to make visible the constructed nature of fictitious reality, *Idushchie vmeste* employed an apparently pornographic book to make visible the dreadful reality of fictitious literature and the threat it was facing. In other words, in post-Soviet Russia, too, ‘excremental aesthetics’ have left the realm of literature and become a tool applied by those in power to shape and form national discourses and ideas.

The culmination of this ‘visualisation process’ was the trial against Sorokin and its verdict. However, instead of being a celebration of the freedom of speech, the trial exemplifies the indirect control measures implemented by the authorities. In other words, it *creates* the illusion of a public and democratic trial and thus constitutes a form of hyperreality. Sorokin, too, creates hyperreal worlds in his text by excessively mimicking the extra-textual world without directly referring to it (self-referential hyperrealism). This echoes Jean Baudrillard’s definition of the modern notion of obscenity, which draws on the original meaning of the obscene — the ob-scene, i.e., that which is offstage and not exposed to the public eye. Arguing that nowadays nothing is ‘offstage’ anymore and everything is revealed in overwhelming brutality, he maintains that it is this form of over-visualisation that constitutes our modern mode of obscenity. ‘It is no longer the traditional obscenity of what is hidden, repressed, forbidden or obscure; on the contrary, it is the obscenity of the visible, of the all-too-visible, of the more-visible-than-visible’ (1985: 131). This applies to both Sorokin’s fictional worlds in *Goluboe salo* and to post-Soviet reality.

Conclusion

This chapter revisits the thesis objective and the research questions, highlighting the significance of the thesis for the field of Slavonic studies and the originality of its contribution to knowledge. I first restate the thesis objective before re-addressing each of the five research questions posed in the Introduction. In doing so, I refer to the narrative analyses conducted in Chapters 4 to 7 and explain how they answer each of the five questions. I then outline the research contributions made by this thesis and its central argument. The final section reflects upon the limitations of the research and provides recommendations for future scholarly undertakings in the field.

Revisiting the thesis objective

The Introduction states that the key objective of this study is to analyse the function of Russian obscene language (*mat*) in late Soviet and post-Soviet prose, in particular with regard to its role in the negotiation of literary and linguistic norms. The thesis also aims to shed light on the diachronic development of *mat* from its appearance in the late 1970s to the Sorokin obscenity trial held in 2002.

The study focuses on a time span of around two decades, analysing novels published between the late 1970s and the late 1990s. I chose this period because it was characterised by the most radical cultural changes, which also found expression in major shifts of established literary and linguistic norms. It was in the late 1970s that the first novels featuring *mat* words were made available to a wider Russian-speaking readership, albeit abroad, thereby challenging the norms regulating Soviet literary practice. The early 1990s and post-perestroika years were characterised by a ‘landslide of the norm’, to use Tine Roesen and Ingunn Lunde’s apt description (2006: 7), featuring radical transformations in all aspects of culture, in particular with regard to literature and language. During that period, obscene language entered public discourse and started to penetrate all layers of Russian culture. The early years of the new millennium were marked by a wish to ‘return to normality’. This was particularly strongly reflected in the many debates revolving around the state of the Russian language and of literature, as well as in the introduction of language-related regulations, including bans on foul language. This period also saw the first obscenity trial held in post-Soviet Russia.

The texts I selected are related to each of these periods. Eduard Limonov's *Eto ia — Edichka* and Iuz Aleshkovskii's novels *Ruka* and *Kenguru* appeared in the late 1970s, though both authors had to publish their texts abroad. Viktor Erofeev's *Russkaia krasavitsa* was written between 1980 and 1982, but was not made available to a Russian readership until 1990. It was one of the first novels featuring *mat* words spelled out in full to be published in Russia, thereby serving as an illustrative example with which to examine the function of *mat* in the perestroika and post-perestroika years. Vladimir Sorokin's *Goluboe salo* was published in 1999. The scandal revolving around this novel culminated in the first obscenity trial (2002) conducted against the author of a literary work in post-Soviet Russia.

My point of departure was the hypothesis that the appearance of Russian *mat* in literary texts led to a shift in the notion of 'literary' language, i.e., the norm to be adhered to in literary practice. My second hypothesis was that the status of obscene language in Russian culture also had an impact on how these writers employed *mat* in their texts. It is this dynamic and complex dialogue between the obscene word and the 'literary' word (a process I called 'norm negotiation') that determines the function of *mat* in literary texts and that I set out to analyse. My first aim was to explore how and to what end the four writers use *mat* in their works. A second aim of the thesis was to trace the diachronic development of the literary function of *mat* and to explore to what extent 'forbidden' language has penetrated the realm of literature.

Chapter 1, the first background chapter, explores the features of Russian verbal obscenity and analyses its performative functions in Russian culture. Moving from the oral to the written word, Chapter 2 traces the role of verbal obscenity in the context of literature before the late 1970s. Chapter 3 sets out the methodological framework applied to the novels selected. An integrated approach of Bakhtinian dialogism and cultural narratology is then applied to conduct in-depth analyses of the five selected texts, which are discussed in chronological order. Chapter 4 is devoted to Eduard Limonov's novel *Eto ia — Edichka*. Chapter 5 explores the function of *mat* in Iuz Aleshkovskii's *Kenguru* and *Ruka*. Chapter 6 analyses Viktor Erofeev's *Russkaia krasavitsa*. Chapter 7 discusses Vladimir Sorokin's *Goluboe salo*.

Revisiting the research questions

In order to meet the research objective stated above, I posed five questions that addressed the norms that were in place in Soviet literary culture. As I discuss in the two background chapters, literature was a powerful propaganda tool of the Soviet regime, applied to shape and educate Soviet readers in accordance with official ideology. Given their ideological and didactic function, literary texts were thus highly anti-sexual and anti-erotic in nature, excluding all references to the ‘lower bodily stratum’.

Research question 1 addresses the issue of sexuality in literary discourses. Since *mat* refers directly to sexuality and bodily matters, this question asked what role *mat* played in the introduction of literary discourses of sexuality and bodily matters.

While mainly addressed in Chapter 4 (Limonov) and Chapter 6 (Erofeev), this research question features, to a greater or lesser extent, in all chapters. What all the analyses demonstrate is that, in Russian literary discourses of sexuality, the function of *mat* is based on the Russian master trope, the trope of ‘Mother Russia’, thus mainly serving a metaphorical function rather than a referential one. This trope identifies the female body with the Russian motherland while equating the state with masculinity. It is also at the core of obscene language (in the form of the mother curse), with Mother Earth taken (‘fucked’) by the Thunderer, a liaison that results in the fertility of the Russian soil. The most obvious example of this trope can be found in Limonov’s novel. In *Eto ia — Edichka*, the American nation is personified by Edichka’s American girlfriend, Rosanne, and hence literally ‘screwed’ by the male narrator, Edichka, who represents the foreign male intruder. Edichka ‘performs’ the process of integration in the form of sexual intercourse, literally becoming a member of American society by means of his ‘member’. Viktor Erofeev, too, draws on this trope in *Ruskaia krasavitsa*. His Ira Tarakanova, representing the Russian nation, has to sacrifice herself to a phallus-like earth force in order to save the Russian nation. Her subordination is also expressed linguistically, since Ira avoids sexual *mat* in her speech, thus preserving the traditional gender patterns inherent to *mat*. Aleshkovskii employs a variation of this trope to show his narrators’ subordination to the state. Both Fan Fanych and Bashov are unable to ‘perform’ sexually and are thus portrayed as being emasculated and powerless. Sorokin materialises the trope of

Moist Mother Earth in the *zemleeby*, the ‘earth fuckers’. His Mother Russia is, however, not moist but rocky and hard, and the *zemleeby* are unable to ‘perform’ because of the massive size of their ‘members’.

The strong reliance on the Russian master trope explains why *mat* takes on a highly performative role in all these texts, functioning as a vital tool in processes of identity formation. Chapter 1 discusses the fact that *mat* has always assumed a highly significant role in discursive constructions of power and identity, in particular with regard to gender. Verbal obscenity is thus semiotically loaded with meaning, meaning that is also always evoked when *mat* is used referentially in literary texts. This is particularly the case in Limonov’s *Eto ia – Edichka*. My analysis of Limonov’s novel demonstrates that, while the highly sexualised discourse makes abundant use of *mat* words in their primary meanings, sexuality only serves as a surface onto which Limonov projects a narrative of belonging and surviving. Russian *mat* plays a crucial role in preserving Edichka’s male identity and his Russianness while also allowing him to enter American society. Chapter 5 analyses the function of verbal obscenity in collective-identity formation, serving as a tool to establish dissident identity. Yet in Aleshkovskii’s novels, too, verbal obscenity serves as an important tool to preserve traces of the self in Soviet collective society. The function of *mat* in identity formation is also evident in the novels by Erofeev and Sorokin. Erofeev uses *mat* to reinforce the female identity of his character-narrator, thereby turning her into a symbol for post-perestroika nationhood. Chapter 7 demonstrates how Sorokin employs obscene language to make visible and expose the norms regulating authoritative discourses, an effect he achieved by challenging the established signifier-signified relationship of obscene words. The recent linguistic developments in post-Soviet society show that this function of *mat* has also been realised in processes of national-identity formation.

Research question 2 addresses the role of Russian *mat* as an expression of political protest and its role in unofficial writing, thus exploring the correlation between *mat* and the norms proposed by official ideology.

This question is mainly addressed in Chapter 5 (Aleshkovskii), with Chapter 7 touching upon the role of *mat* in the context of Putin’s politics of normality. The two background chapters show that, until the late 1970s, the literary history of verbal

obscenity was mainly one of exclusion and repression. The avoidance of obscene language in literary texts was, however, less a result of the extremely strict preventive censorship regulations imposed in Imperial Russia and Soviet Russia than of the didactic and ideological functions ascribed to the printed word. In fact, *mat* did not acquire strong political overtones until it was systematically erased from public discourse by Soviet censors. These censorship practices were of a highly productive force, as they contributed to the construction of a discourse on obscene language, which regulated its place and role in Soviet official culture. This means that *mat* constituted an important defining element of Soviet ideology, encompassing that which official culture proscribed.

This background provided the point of departure for my analysis of Iuz Aleshkovskii's novels *Kenguru* and *Ruka*. As my study reveals, Aleshkovskii's use of *mat* strengthened, rather than challenged, the very ideology he condemned. Employing verbal obscenity in close accordance with official Soviet ideology, his political protest took the form of a 'licensed affair' that did not result in any profound changes. Aleshkovskii's novels thus illustrate how Russian *mat* contributed to the construction of dissident identity, revealing the interrelation between *mat* and official ideology. The final section of Chapter 5 discusses how, in recent years, the role of *mat* as an element of political protest has been resurrected, thus preserving Aleshkovskii's legacy. Various opposition groups have resorted to non-normative language in their protests against the Putin regime. As in Aleshkovskii's novels, however, their use of *mat* as a language of protest has only strengthened its connotation with non-normative and deviant behaviour, thereby indirectly supporting the norms and restrictions imposed by official culture.

That a carnivalesque use of *mat* results in a strengthening and preservation of the established hierarchical order is also reflected in the fact that the authorities themselves have employed verbal obscenity as a tool of protest, albeit for a different end. Chapter 7 shows that, in attacking Sorokin's *Goluboe salo*, the pro-Kremlin youth organisation *Idushchie vmeste* employed the non-normative in their fight to maintain the 'norm'. This is yet another illustration of how verbal obscenity can contribute to the preservation of (literary) norms rather than to their dismantling.

Research question 3 addresses the function of *mat* in relation to its status as a feature of ‘lower’ cultural forms such as folklore and bawdy humour. The question asked how the rhetoric of the ‘lower bodily stratum’, formerly banned from the sphere of literature, challenged and changed the notion of literature as ‘high art’ after the collapse of the Communist regime.

This research question is primarily addressed in Chapter 6, which explores the function of *mat* in Erofeev’s *Russkaia krasavitsa*. Again, important background information is provided in Chapter 2. This chapter discusses the fact that *mat* has always played a significant role in Russian bawdy humour, with even literary giants like Aleksandr Pushkin having tried their hand at obscene poetry. As I point out, these literary works were not, however, made available to a larger readership until after the abolition of censorship and were widely dismissed as ‘youthful pranks’. Viktor Erofeev was the first Russian writer who attempted to marry the rhetoric of the ‘lower bodily stratum’ with ‘high art’. He parodied the disembodied spirituality of Russian literature by turning the high Christian ideals of divine love and self-sacrifice into pure lust and physical submissiveness, as a result of which he brings the very essence of Russian (‘high’) literature to the fore.

Erofeev’s novel is also a reflection of how established literary boundaries were challenged at the beginning of the 1990s, when the newly acquired political freedom led to the emergence of novel literary genres and styles. This plurality was, however, soon interpreted as chaotic, with critical voices expressing particular concerns about the impact of verbal obscenity on readers. This is also reflected in the critical reactions to *Russkaia krasavitsa*, in particular with regard to the use of *mat* in the novel. This shows us that in the same way that *mat* was deemed incompatible with Soviet official literature (which was for the masses), *mat* has been found incompatible with popular (mass) literature in post-Soviet Russia. Verbal obscenity thus took on a new role as a negotiator between high and mass-produced forms of literature.

Research question 4 addresses the role of literary texts as sites for the maintenance of linguistic norms. It asked what Russian literature tells us about the general status of verbal obscenity in post-Soviet Russia, in particular when compared to its status in Soviet Russia.

This research question is mainly addressed in Chapter 7, which discusses Sorokin's *Goluboe salo*, and partly touched upon in the final section of Chapter 6. Again, important background information is provided in Chapter 1. Discussing the contradictory status of verbal obscenity in Soviet culture, this background chapter reveals that *mat* was viewed as an anti-pole to the Soviet concept of *kulturnost'* and Soviet official ideology while at the same time hailed as an intrinsic element of Russianness, a role indebted to its correlation with Russian folklore.

When literary and linguistic norms started to change following the collapse of the communist regime, the status of obscene language started to change as well, at least initially. In the early 1990s, verbal obscenity was perceived as a signifier of freedom of speech and democracy. This discursive shift is also reflected in the critical reactions to Viktor Erofeev's *Russkaia krasavitsa*, a novel that was praised by Western critics for its linguistic boldness and that enjoyed enormous popularity among readers.

This period of literary and linguistic freedom was, however, rather short-lived. Since the mid-1990s, verbal obscenity has been viewed more and more as a marker of the moral degradation and instability of Russian society. The attitude towards *mat* has become increasingly negative in the Putin era. Since the early years of the new millennium, voices calling for stricter regulations of the use of obscene language in print have become louder. This shift in the status of *mat* is particularly evident in the critical reactions to Vladimir Sorokin's *Goluboe salo*. Published in 1999, the novel did not attract much public attention until it became the target of campaigns initiated by *Idushchie vmeste*. While the purported reason for their protests was the allegedly harmful influence of the novel on 'common' readers, my analysis shows that their campaigns, which culminated in the 2002 obscenity trial against Sorokin, must be seen in the light of the 'normalisation of Russian politics' under Putin. The re-establishment of linguistic norms has been seen as paramount in finding a way out of Russia's identity crisis. This has also affected the function of *mat*. The critical reactions to Sorokin's *Goluboe salo* tell us that language has been ascribed a prominent role in the process of post-Soviet national-identity construction, reflecting the authorities' attempts to maintain political stability and control. Obscene language

has thus once again become a crucial item in the ideological toolbox of nation-building.

Research question 5 addresses the diachronic development of *mat*, exploring the way in which its function has developed and changed over the course of time. It also asked how *mat* reflects the interrelation between émigré, dissident, Soviet and post-Soviet literary cultures.

Chapter 4 (Limonov) and Chapter 5 (Aleshkovskii) provide a good illustration of how the use of *mat* reflects the correlation between émigré and dissident literary cultures. While dissident writers formed a subgroup of émigré writers, we must bear in mind that not all émigré writers were dissident writers. This is clearly reflected in the way Limonov and Aleshkovskii use *mat*. While Limonov employs *mat* as a means of accentuating his (character-narrator's) individual self, Aleshkovskii, by contrast, uses *mat* in order to pursue a clear political agenda with his writing, employing it as an expression of protest. *Mat* also reflects the interrelation between dissident and official cultures, as dissident writers tried to fight the regime with its own weapons, employing the obscene in accordance with the role ascribed to it by official ideology.

With the collapse of the Communist regime, obscene language lost its function as an anti-official element of protest and turned into a symbol of political freedom. This had largely to do with the fact that works formerly banned on grounds of their subject matter and/or style became available to a large Russian readership. As a result of the rediscovery of unofficial writers, late Soviet literature was being reformulated, with authors such as Limonov and Aleshkovskii being incorporated into this new canon. Yet political freedom did not equal gender liberation, as was demonstrated in Chapter 6. The way Erofeev uses *mat* in *Russkaia krasavitsa* is an excellent illustration of how Western values became integrated into the newly emerging state, forming post-Soviet identity: While sexual freedom and a free-market economy were assimilated into a post-Soviet cultural context, this came at the expense of gender liberation.

The late 1990s and early years of the new millennium were marked by excess and *bespredel* ('limitlessness'), particularly when it came to the display of sexuality and

violence. Sexuality and bodily matters were thus materialised through cultural discourse, exposing all that is obscene and indecent. This materialisation of the obscene is also evident in its literary function, as my analysis of *Goluboe salo* demonstrates. The obscene mode of the text is thus no longer evoked through obscene words but through textual and physical excessiveness, exposing all that is to remain invisible. Similarly, the members of *Idushchie vmeste* exposed and materialised the obscene by putting up a gigantic fake toilet, into which they tossed Sorokin's books, a performance that took place in front of the Bolshoi Theatre in Moscow, *the* place for high-quality performances of art.

This shows that obscenity is no longer confined to the signifier, but has become more strongly associated with the signified. Put differently, in the period under scrutiny in this thesis, there has been a significant shift from performative utterances to actual performances, from performative words to actual deeds. This is a crucial finding when considering the importance ascribed to the written word in literature-centric Russia. A shift towards the performance dimension can also be noticed with regard to the writers themselves. Thus, Eduard Limonov has exchanged 'dirty' words for 'dirty' actions in his role as a writer-turned-politician, while Erofeev has chosen the media as a public stage to 'perform' the obscene. Aleshkovskii's legacy has been preserved in the protests performed by various opposition groups. The campaigns against Sorokin and his novel is another example of how obscene words have been replaced by obscene actions, a development that is also noticeable in literary texts themselves. Sorokin's latest novels demonstrate that, while obscenity has been banned from language in an attempt at 'purification', it finds an even stronger form of expression in the brutality and violence that is used to impose these norms.

Research contributions

My study demonstrates that, while Russian obscene language has evolved from an unprintable to a printable language of literature, this has not affected its role as a non-normative element. What all the novels under scrutiny in this study show is that the literary function of obscene language is strongly determined by its correlation with *literaturnyi iazyk* (standard Russian, i.e. the norm to be followed) and the ideology connected therewith. This explains why the intrusion of obscene language

into the formerly ‘sacred’ realm of literature has not contributed to a removal of boundaries and literary norms. On the contrary, as my study reveals, literary *mat* has always been an effective means of exposing and deconstructing socio-ideological norms, thereby also contributing to the establishment and maintenance of the same.

The thesis thus provides a significant contribution to knowledge in the field of Slavonic studies, as it reveals the significance of Russian *mat* as an inherent aspect of Russian literary culture. It is the first comprehensive and book-length analysis of Russian *mat* in the context of late Soviet and post-Soviet prose fiction. As I show in the Introduction, while the interest in Russian obscene language has increased in recent years, the existing research on *mat* focuses predominantly on its linguistic features, with only a handful of articles devoted to its role in Russian culture. The function of verbal obscenity in literature has not been the subject of any systematic and in-depth study. Considering the significance of the written word in Russia and the wide distribution of verbal obscenity, as well as its long history of censorship, this is a major gap in the existing scholarly literature.

The study also contributes to the existing research on Eduard Limonov, Iuz Aleshkovskii, Viktor Erofeev and Vladimir Sorokin. While the four writers are very well known in Russia and not unknown to the interested Slavic scholar outside Russia, surprisingly little research has been conducted on their individual works. Aleshkovskii and Erofeev, in particular, have largely been neglected by the scholarly community (see Chapters 5 and 6), with literally only a handful of peer-reviewed articles available. Vladimir Sorokin’s *Goluboe salo* has also not received much attention in Anglophone academia, which is a surprising and major gap given his highly influential role in post-Soviet literary culture and the attention the novel received in the wake of the 2002 trial. Eduard Limonov’s works have received considerably more scholarly attention than that of the other three writers, with even two book-length studies published, yet none of these scholarly publications explores his use of *mat* in depth. By accentuating *mat* as a key element of these writers’ poetics, my thesis provides new readings of the five novels analysed, thus re-evaluating their position in the late Soviet and post-Soviet literary landscapes.

Not only does the thesis offer new ways of interpreting the chosen texts, it is also a first scholarly attempt to trace the evolution of *mat* as a literary phenomenon over a

period of more than two decades. Exploring the correlation between Russian *mat* and ‘literary language’, this thesis breaks new ground by analysing the shifts in the latter through the prism of verbal obscenity. As a result, it offers a new way of interpreting the role of verbal obscenity in Russian (literary) culture. Rather than seeing *mat* as a mystical phenomenon that lingers somewhere on the cultural periphery, my study reveals that it is a defining element of Russian (literary) culture, with implications for all facets of Russian identity. This finding also bears important implications for other fields of Russian studies such as gender studies and identity studies.

Lastly, the thesis offers an innovative approach to analysing taboo language. At first glance, it would have been an obvious approach to analyse the function of obscene language through the prism of transgression, focusing on the interplay between the profane and the sacred. After all, as I showed in Chapter 2, the literary history of *mat* is mainly defined by its censorship. Yet by exploring the subject of verbal obscenity through the lens of Bakhtinian dialogism, I was not only able to ‘demystify’ the phenomenon of *mat*, showing that its ‘uniqueness’ has less to do with its inherent features than the cultural role ascribed to it, but I was also able to identify verbal obscenity as an integral element of Russian culture. In combining dialogism with cultural narratology, this research offers a systematic approach, which does justice to the dynamic relationship between text and context. This framework yields fruitful results as it takes into account all narrative levels, including the socio-historical context, thereby allowing for meaningful conclusions to be drawn with regard to the processes of ‘norm negotiation’ that have shaped and transformed Russian literary culture since the late 1970s.

This methodological approach is transferable to literary cultures other than Russian, which makes it an important contribution to the field of censorship studies. While obscenity has been studied extensively in other literary cultures (see Chapter 2), in particular with regard to legal censorship and transgression, considerably fewer studies exist on the cultural role of verbal obscenity in literature. The methodological approach developed would thus allow new insights to be gained with regard to the phenomenon of obscene language in literary texts and its correlation with socio-cultural norms.

Limitations and the need for further research

Any research conducted needs to be considered within the context of limitations, and my thesis is no exception. Thus, a first limitation concerns the choice of novels selected for the purpose of my research. The authors whose novels I analyse in Chapters 4 to 7 are not the only examples of writers who have ventured into forbidden territory. It would not take hours of scrupulous research to extend the list of ‘bad boys’: Venedikt Erofeev, Evgenii Popov and Vasilii Aksenov would certainly provide interesting case studies, as would contemporary writers Vladimir Kozlov and Zakhar Prilepin. Prilepin, in particular, has become a bright new star on the literary horizon of post-Soviet Russia, having gained much attention from literary critics in Russia and abroad. Attentive readers have probably also noticed that, while the issue of gender figures prominently in my research, the authors discussed do not include a single woman. This is not because female writers have shunned *mat*. Contemporary writers Linor Goralik and Dina Rubina are two examples of ‘bad girls’ who have used verbal obscenity in their works. However, female writers steered clear of *mat* before the collapse of the communist regime. Since a thesis on *mat* would be incomplete without a discussion of the key post-Soviet obscene novel, Sorokin’s *Goluboe salo*, I decided to take this novel as an example of post-Soviet prose instead of a text written by a female writer. A study of how and to what extent contemporary female writers resort to *mat* would shed light on the question of whether there has been a shift in the gender asymmetry reflected in Russian *mat*.

Another necessary limitation is that, for reasons of comparability, this thesis focuses exclusively on prose texts. Obscene language has also been employed by poets, with Timur Kibirov being one of the first names coming to mind here. Similarly, *mat* has been a prominent feature of new Russian drama, with contemporary artists following in the footsteps of Mikhail Volokhov, author of *Igra v zhmurki* (1990, *Blind man’s buff*), the first Russian play written entirely in profanities. Similarly, this thesis would serve as an excellent point of departure for exploring the function of Russian *mat* in cultural fields other than literature, such as music (the ska punk band *Leningrad* has drawn extensively on the poetics of *mat* in their songs) or graphic arts. Quite a few writers started out as graphic artists before turning to the written word. Vladimir Sorokin, for example, began his literary career

as a book illustrator. Graphic novels and comics would also provide interesting case studies for research.

Since obscene language is not a feature unique to Russian culture, it would be fruitful to explore how Russian *mat* has been translated into other languages. As I point out in the Note on Transliteration and Translation, although almost all novels under scrutiny are available in English translation (with the exception of Sorokin's *Goluboe salo*), I also had to rely on my own skills as a translator since the published translations in many instances fail to capture the subtle nuances of Russian *mat*. As I observe in Chapter 3, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn was one of the first to criticise Western translators for their failure to render his use of artistic camp slang accordingly, thereby giving readers the impression that he employed obscene language in his works. Similarly, the challenge of translating *mat* adequately was part of the reason why, outside Russia, Viktor Erofeev's *Russkaia krasavitsa* has acquired the reputation of a 'sex bestseller'. As my research shows, the novel looks quite prudish when compared to a work by Henry Miller or Eduard Limonov, preserving the traditional gender patterns inherent in Russian *mat*. In this regard, it would also be revealing to explore how Western obscene fiction has been translated into Russian and whether translators are now more at liberty in their linguistic choices as compared to the Soviet era.

The ever-changing nature of obscene language is another reason why this thesis can be anything but a fully comprehensive study of the subject. The function of Russian *mat* is changing all the time, as the legislation of 9 April 2013 indicates. On that date, President Vladimir Putin signed into law a bill that introduced fines of up to 200,000 roubles for media outlets that use foul language. In accordance with this law, individuals, too, will now face fines of up to 3,000 roubles if they create or distribute media containing obscene language. Officials can be fined up to 20,000 roubles, organisations between 20,000 and 200,000 roubles. In July 2013, the ban on foul language was extended to cover the use of obscenities on websites (Earle 2013: web source).

What is interesting here is that the amended law does not provide a definition of obscene language, referring to Russian *mat* as *netsenzurnaia bran'*, a term that translates as 'unlawful swearing'. This brings me back to my point of departure. In

the same way that US Supreme Court Associate Justice Potter Stewart declared that he ‘know[s] it when [he sees] it’ (Gewirtz 1996), the current Russian administration also seems to rely on their instincts when tackling the issue of obscene language. It is also interesting to note that the protection of children is given as the main reason for introducing the recent amendment. This echoes the British Obscene Publications Act of 1857 that came into force to protect ‘women, children and the feeble-minded’ (quoted in Mangham and Depledge 2013: 175) from material that was to corrupt them. The new Russian regulation also bans the ‘propaganda’ of pornography, as well as the glorification of violence. While it is first and foremost the realm of mass media that is targeted by this law, there is, for the time being, no explicit mention of literature.

It thus remains to be seen to what extent the literary fate of *mat* will once again become a political question. As the literary history of *mat* outlined in Chapter 2 shows, while it is possible to ban verbal obscenity from public discourse, it is not possible to eradicate verbal obscenity for good. A censoring of *mat* will only lead to a significant increase in its performative potential. In fact, as discussed in the final section of Chapter 5, a ‘recharging’ of its subversive potential has already started, with protest groups like *Voyna* and *Pussy Riot* drawing on the obscene to express their protest against the ideology of the official regime. Yet the reactions to these protests also show that the obscene has slightly changed its form. While the sexually motivated performance of *Voyna* resulted in the group being awarded a cultural prize, *Pussy Riot*’s blasphemous performance caused a scandal with extremely wide repercussions in the Russian media. This shows us that a new discourse of conservatism, purification and religiosity has established itself at the centre of the Kremlin’s new political and cultural strategy, with obscene language as a linguistic manifestation of ‘dirt’ once again being assigned a prominent role in this newly emerging discourse of national identity.

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