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Monstrosity of Zeitgeist

The writer is the last artisan in the middle of industrialized world. Writing is a purely manual activity – pushing the letters one after another on the sheet of paper or the screen of a computer. The usual position of the body of a writer is unhealthy. It is deforming the human body. In his novel “Blue Lard” Vladimir Sorokin underscores this manual, corporeal character of writing. The novel describes a farm in which the blue lard is produced. It becomes accumulated inside the bodies of the writers during the writing process – in this case of the clones of famous Russian writers from Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky to Akhmatova. And the blue lard is a valuable substance because - also after being removed from the writers’ bodies - it keeps the same temperature and, thus, resists the general process of entropy. The clones look almost like their human originals but at the time they are not quite human – and, thus, monstrous.

One may ascribe this monstrosity to the imperfect cloning technology but, more plausibly, this monstrosity can be interpreted as a manifestation of total submission and reduction of the writers to the process of writing. Paul de Man said about literary writing: “Writing always includes the moment of dispossession in favor of the arbitrary power play of the signifier and from the point of view of the subject, this can only be experienced as dismemberment, a beheading or a castration.”(1) In Sorokin’s novel this act of dispossession is described as a removal of the blue lard. But, as readers, how do we imagine the writers’ clones? Of course, we have a vague knowledge of how these writers did look like. Their images can be easily found on Internet or on the covers of their books. And, of course, from reading of

the novel we know that the clones were deviating from these writers' standard, publicly established images. Nevertheless the novel left a lot to imagination of the readers.

Now Sorokin offers his own illustrations of the novel – and, thus, as it seems, establishes his own, authorial and authoritative vision of its protagonists. However, from the beginning of his work as a writer Sorokin was well aware of the death of the author and crisis of the writer's authority. In his writings Sorokin always plays with different literary styles – from the Russian realistic 19th Century prose and official literature of the Soviet era up to the different modernist styles. He does not invent his own “subjective” style but develops a very idiosyncratic and, actually, easily recognizable use of already established literary styles. His illustrations to “Blue Lard” expand this play on the field of artistic styles – namely, they are produced in collaboration with AI.

Speaking about AI contemporary media often use adjectives like inhuman or post-human. However, there is nothing inhuman in production of texts or images with the help of AI. The artist formulates a prompt, and AI realizes this prompt using a storage of already existing – humanly produced - images to which it has access. As a text or image producer AI is defined by the grade of its training, sophistication of its technology but also – and maybe in the first place – by the historically accumulated mass of texts and images with which AI operates. As the history goes further this mass of texts and images is changing – some images become added, some images get lost. So if, as an artist, I write a prompt and the AI produces an image prompted by this prompt I can immediately see how my prompt is understood and interpreted at this particular historical moment – not by an individual or a group but by the whole civilization in which I live. AI is nothing

else as the embodied zeitgeist. And prompting this zeitgeist- machine I become able to analyze and diagnose the moment of history to which I am a contemporary.

The AI has the ability to process a huge amount of already existing texts and images whereas as writers, readers, artists or spectators we always live in a cultural bubble. The main part of the cultural – textual or visual – heritage escapes our knowledge. So one expects that AI - being able to process much bigger portions of existing information – will respond to a prompt with answers that would reflect an already accumulated mass of texts and images better than every individual writer would be able to do. Today, the prompting seems to be the only way to start a dialogue with this “objectified culture” – the embodied zeitgeist.

In his books and artworks Sorokin initiates precisely such a dialogue with zeitgeist. *Zeitgeist* is not something like *vox populi* or, as they say now, “the hive mind”. *Zeitgeist* is not unified, does not speak with one voice. It is, rather, full of ruptures and inner contradictions. It has dark, violent aspects and hidden areas that are dangerous and repulsive. One can say that zeitgeist is monstrous because it is a combination of heterogeneous linguistic and visual body parts. As a writer Sorokin was always aware of this monstrosity of zeitgeist and attentive to its dark areas. Now he demonstrates the same approach as an artist.

When I speak about monstrosity, I do not mean necessarily the mass-cultural monsters who are able to set everything on fire with one glance of their eyes or sweep everything away with their tail or tongue. Sorokin’s monsters are passive monsters. They are monsters because they *demonstrate* themselves in an environment that is foreign to them. Their own culture and milieu have disappeared. Like the books that they have written they become reproduced –

cloned – far beyond their own historical time. Thus, they are doomed to write ever further in their already well-known manner – an occupation that obviously has no sense in their new environment. However, Sorokin suggests that for humans to live in Anthropocene does not only mean to poison the environment with the by-products of their activity but maybe also produce something still unknown but valuable – something that can enrich the material composition of Universe. Not mere writing but blue lard.

1. Paul de Man, *Allegories of Reading: Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke, and Proust* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1979), 296.