A LITTLE HERO: QUEER WRITING OF VALERIY PECHEYKIN

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Abstract

Today Russia is known as one of the world's most prominent political powers, where, however, human rights are violated and neglected on a daily basis. This is particularly relevant when LGBTQI+ rights are concerned, especially after the notorious law against the "propaganda of non-traditional sexual relations" passed in 2013 and the alarming evidence of anti-gay purges in Chechnya became public in 2017. Under such circumstances, it is urgent to pay attention to Russia's queer voices, rising against all odds.

This thesis focuses on the works of the contemporary Russian playwright Valeriy Pecheykin (b.1984). Pecheykin, who is openly gay, currently lives in Moscow and works at Kirill Serebrennikov's Gogol Centre. This paper seeks to conceptualize what I will refer to as queer writing in Pecheykin's works, that is, a practice of writing that is subversive towards the heteronormative discourse. As the main theoretical basis, I will use Giorgio Agamben's interpretation of the *state of exception*, Hélène Cixous' concept of *écriture féminine* and Elizabeth Stephens' related idea of *écriture homosexuelle*, as well as Laurie Essig's observations on queer life in post-Soviet Russia.

I will discuss how Pecheykin's queer writing subverts notions of traditional values that are a crucial part of the ideology in present-day Russia. I will also look into his creative process of inscribing queer corporeality into his texts, and how in his works a figure of the queer hero evolves. The queer hero, I will argue, has a revolutionary potential specific to Russia's historical context.

Résumé

Aujourd'hui la Russie est connue comme l'un des pouvoirs politiques les plus importants du monde où, néanmoins, les droits humains sont violés et négligés dans le quotidien. C'est particulièrement pertinent quand aux droits des personnes LGBTQI+, surtout après que la loi infâme contre la « propagande de relations sexuelles non-traditionnelles » a été passée en 2013, et après l'alarmante découverte des purges anti-gai en Tchétchénie en 2017. Dans cette situation, il est donc urgent de prêter attention aux voix de personnes queer de la Russie, qui s'élèvent malgré tout.

Cette recherche se concentre sur les œuvres du dramaturge russe contemporain Valeriy Petcheykine (né en 1984). Ce dernier, qui est ouvertement gai, habite présentement à Moscou et travaille avec Kirill Serebrennikov dans le fameux Centre Gogol. Ma thèse cherche à conceptualiser ce que je décris comme « écriture queer » dans les œuvres de Petcheykine, c'est-à-dire, une pratique d'écriture qui est subversive vers le discours hétéronormatif. Comme bases théorétiques principales, j'utilise l'idée d'état d'exception comme interprétée par Giorgio Agamben, les concepts d'écriture féminine d'Hélène Cixous et d'écriture homosexuelle développé par Elizabeth Stephens, ainsi que les observations de Laurie Essig sur le mode de vie queer en Russie post-soviétique.

Je discute comment l'écriture queer de Petcheykine renverse la notion de valeurs traditionnelles, qui font partie principale de l'idéologie dominante en Russie d'aujourd'hui. Je parle aussi de son processus créatif, où il inscrit la corporalité queer dans ses textes et comment le personnage de l'héros queer évolue dans ses œuvres. Le héros queer, comme je propose, possède une potentialité révolutionnaire – spécifiquement dans le contexte historique de la Russie.

BOO. And anyway, that's the very reason
they put rubbers on the ends of pencils.
FLEABAG (to BOO). To fuck hamsters?
BOO. No, because people make mistakes.
Phoebe Waller-Bridge, *Fleabag*, 2019, 75.

As this journey comes to an end, I would like to express my deepest gratitude to some of the people who made it possible.

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Introduction.

1. Valeriy Pecheykin

"A conspiracy against humanity and theatrical culture" and a path to "destruction and decay" of the nation: these are only a few concerns expressed by some scandalized members of the public in their open letter to the Russian Ministry of Culture. The reason for their discontent was an award that a certain young playwright received in a prestigious state-sponsored playwriting competition in 2009. According to the letter, the play contained detailed descriptions of "incest, promiscuity, cannibalism, transvestism, zoophilia, necrophilia, and genocide," and sought no less than to raise a generation of "murderers and perverts."[1] The play was called *My Moscow*, and the playwright at the heart of this controversy was the twenty-five-year-old Valeriy Pecheykin, who had only moved to the Russian capital from Tashkent a few years before.

In recent years, the name of the playwright Valeriy Pecheykin (b.1984) [Fig.1] has become a staple of Moscow's theatre scene. A recipient of multiple prestigious awards, Pecheykin currently still resides in Moscow and works at the Gogol Centre, a theatre founded and curated by Kirill Serebrennikov.

Despite the rather complicated social climate in the country, Pecheykin does not hold back on expressing his progressive political views, from publicly supporting the mass protests following the scandal around Moscow elections in 2019, to opposing censorship in state-funded institutions. Particularly, he was heavily involved in the controversy around a film called *Seven* directed by a student of the Gerasimov Institute of Cinematography (VGIK), Artem Firsanov, and written by Pecheykin himself. Initially

[1] Анна Яковлева, '«Новая Драма»', *Livejournal* (blog), 25 November 2010, https://lappa-rastyapa.livejournal.com/167344.html.

meant to tell the story of "the case of Seventh Studio," an investigation into the embezzlement of a state subsidy allegedly masterminded by the creator of the theatre company, Kirill Serebrennikov, which led to his arrest in 2017.[2] However, the film eventually turned into a documentary about the attempts of VGIK's direction to disrupt the process of its creation. Finally, the showing of the film was cancelled at the very last moment and Kirsanov's final grade was announced as "satisfactory." In the consequent battle between Kirsanov and Pecheykin on one side, and VGIK on the other, one episode especially stood out: referring to Kirsanov and Pecheykin, Kirsanov's supervisor messaged him with the question: "So, who is fucking who?"[3]

Pecheykin has been open about his sexuality and, in late 2019, he appeared alongside five other openly gay public figures on a talk-show hosted by a journalist and 2018 presidential candidate Ksenia Sobchak, in an episode titled "Round Table: Six Gays and Sobchak"[4]. His sexual orientation has been addressed in the responses to his plays for much longer. In an unfavourable review of Pecheykin's newly presented play *My Moscow* (2009), a theatre critic Alexei Bitov wrote in a blog post: "This is precisely what Pecheykin wanted to show: look, what a disgusting bunch those heterosexuals are, they don't care who they fuck—be it their own mother or a cat. And the point is not in Pecheykin being gay, but in him being a spiteful gay. […] Evidently, the author [of the play] is a pervert. Again, I'm talking not about his sexual orientation, but his worldview.

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[2] Following massive public outcry and further investigation, Serebrennikov and other people arrested in relation to the "Studio Seven case" were released from house arrest in April 2019.

[3] Артем Фирсанов, '"Кто Из Вас Кого Е**т", Или Искусство Оскорблять', Сноб., 20 February 2019, https://snob.ru/profile/31979/blog/149601?utm_source=fb&utm_medium=social&utm_campaign=snob&utm_content=blog&fbclid=IwAR2xDTaC67U3ScRs28I-QosOmnuUqC0Gvzqv16WxCIAZiCUh01C2duCcPY0.

[4] Ксения Собчак, 'Каминг-Ауты, Гей-Лобби и Запрет Пропаганды: Шесть Геев и Собчак', YouTube, 27 November 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ksdptbnbu8c&t=2s.

Until this pitiful young man doesn't reconsider his relationship with the world, nothing good will come out of him."[5] What is especially notable about this comment is not referencing Pecheykin's homosexuality as such, but suggesting that he, specifically as a *spiteful* gay man, has a particular vision of the world that can be discerned in his work. Michel Foucault spoke of a queer way of life in 1981: "I think that's what makes homosexuality "disturbing": the homosexual mode of life, much more than the sexual act itself."[6] Jack Halberstam elaborates in his book *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives*:

> In this book, the queer "way of life" will encompass subcultural practices, alternative methods of alliance, forms of transgender embodiment, and those forms of representation dedicated to capturing these willfully eccentric modes of being. Obviously not all gay, lesbian, and transgender people live their lives in radically different ways from their heterosexual counterparts, but part of what has made queerness compelling as a form of self-description in the past decade or so has to do with the way it has the potential to open up new life narratives and alternative relations to time and space."[7]

Could such "queer modes of being" be seen as the main principle behind Pecheykin's works?

This study will focus on the analysis of Pecheykin's plays as a form of queer writing, specific to the contemporary Russian context and the heteronormative discourse of Putin's Russia. The influence of the New Drama, a hyper-naturalistic movement in

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[5] Алексей Битов, 'Радость и Гадость', *Livejournal* (blog), 9 December 2009, https://dik-dikij.livejournal.com/24461.html.l

[6] Michel Foucault, Paul Rabinow, and James D. Faubion, *The Essential Works of Foucault, 1954-1984* (New York: New Press, 1997), 135–40.

[7] Judith Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives*, Sexual Cultures (New York: New York University Press, 2005), 1–2.

contemporary Russian theatre, and some of its predecessors (Lyudmila Petrushevskaya and Vladimir Sorokin, for example) is evident in Pecheykin's work. In the case of Pecheykin, however, the pessimistic, somber naturalism and post-modernist playfulness are characterized by a certain *queer* twist, on which this research will focus. The discussion of the playwright's works seeks to determine the main principles of Pecheykin's queer writing, and what place and application this mode of writing might have in contemporary Russian culture.

Talking about the heteronormative discourse in Russia, it is necessary to consider its direct connection with the current state propaganda. Based on the notion of "traditional values," this ideology sees everything that does not fit its mold as foreign, and therefore hostile and dangerous. In his final statement, delivered in court on December 4, 2019, the twenty-one-year-old student and blogger Yegor Zhukov, arrested in relation to the resonance "Moscow process," began by outlining those traditional values:

> But first I want to say this. The Russian state claims to be the world's last protector of traditional values. We are told that the state devotes a lot of resources to protecting the institution of the family, and to patriotism. We are also told that the most important traditional value is the Christian faith.[8]

The entire speech of the activist is based on subverting the way in which the aforementioned values are presented by the state propaganda by way of reclaiming them and turning them against his opponents, establishing his moral superiority. In the

[8] Masha Gessen, 'A Powerful Statement of Resistance from a College Student on Trial in Moscow', The New Yorker, 7 December 2019, https://www.newyorker.com/news/our-columnists/a-powerful-statement-of-resistance-from-a-college-student-on-trial-in-moscow.

following section, an overview of Pecheykin's play *Russia, Forward!* demonstrates how the author subverts traditional values through his queer writing.

2. Traditional values.

In *Russia, Forward!*, following the assassination of the president, the prime-minister orders time to go backwards, which means that people now die by returning into their mothers' bodies. The fear of death becomes synonymous to the fear of losing one's masculinity. Similar to the mythological vagina dentata, the female genitalia become a threat to masculinity. That also exposes the objectifying of women for the sake of reproduction, normalized within the traditional family: when the woman's body signifies not only the beginning, but also the end of life, the desire to control her body becomes especially urgent, as this power may be the key to immortality. This speaks to the cult of virility ideologically built around Putin's image of a "real man," or *muzhik*. According to Valerie Sperling, "the term 'muzhik' and its content have become part of the Putin regime's legitimation strategy. […] Putin's image was brought into line with the *muzhik* mold, as his presidency coincided with the rise of the *muzhik* as a masculine type."[9] Despite a number of similarities between the image of Russian president and that of his Western counterparts, it is culturally specific to Russia in many aspects (a combination of Soviet and liberal types of masculinity without fully pertaining to either; the myth of "tsar-father"; the opposition to the West and its corrupt values). Sperling also quotes Tatiana Riabova and Oleg Riabov, who note that "even Western commentators like Michael Gove, a Conservative British member of parliament, regarded the exhibition of Putin's body as a means to show his political counterparts (outside of Russia) that he was

[9] Valerie Sperling, *Sex, Politics, and Putin: Political Legitimacy in Russia*, Oxford Studies in Culture and Politics (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 39.

the "physical embodiment of his nation's strength and energy" and that his "bare-chested peacockery [was] in line with the cult of Putin as his nation's silverback—the leader of the band."[10] Being the result of Kremlin imagemakers' relentless work, this masculine identity is highly performative and artificial, and therefore, as any gender identity according to Judith Butler,[11] is constructed. Masha Gessen demonstrated this in her book *The Man Without a Face: The Unlikely Rise of Vladimir Putin*, where she tracks the metamorphosis of an unremarkable but ambitious KGB agent into one of the most powerful men in the world.

Russia, Forward! also exposes how dysfunctional and flawed the traditional family is as a social institution regulated by norms imposed by the ideology. Familial life is not a part of the president's public image: Putin's family is mostly out of reach of the public eye; moreover, officially, he has been single since 2014. That being said, the importance of the traditional heterosexual family has been one of the cornerstones of the ideological program of Putin's regime. As a direct result of the demographic crisis of the 1990-2000s, ideologically, the traditional family became the stronghold of traditional values in contrast to the decadent West (same-sex marriage, voluntary childlessness, polygamy, polyamory, etc.) However, the traditional family is not simply a given, something that occurs naturally, even if it may seem so. It is a heteronormative construct that is also a subject of cultivation and regulation, with "positive" examples (the legend of Saint Pyotr and Saint Fevronia, which inspired the Day of Family, Love, and Faithfulness;[12] the stories of families with many children regularly appearing in the

[10] Ibid. p.40

[11] Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, Routledge Classics (New York: Routledge, 2006).

[12] Celebrated annually on July 8 since 2008. G.V.

media) permeating the culture, where even sexual and reproductive functions are regulated. Through these regulations, the state controls the most intimate aspects of people's lives: their relationships, sexual life, and even bodily functions.

In an exaggerated form, the latter is depicted in the reversed world of the play, where feces must be sucked back into the body through the anus instead of being discharged. Controlling people's anuses is the ultimate form of control, and ultimately, it is not that much of a poetic exaggeration, considering that sodomy was decriminalized in Russia only in 1993.

In Yegor Zhukov's final statement quoted above, he emphasizes the "Christian faith" as the most prominent of the traditional values. Denouncing yet another social institution, *Russia, Forward!* shows how religious thought in Russia can be adjusted to the needs of the ideology: since time is reversed, Christ will come back to *return* to people their sins. In a carnivalesque scene at a Sunday school, one of the characters, a six-year-old boy with a mind of a grown-up man, teaches this reversed soteriology to a group of priests. They, on the contrary, act like children, or simply clueless fools. This direct mockery of the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) has to do with its disproportionate role in today's politics. The head of ROC, patriarch Kirill (who was allegedly a KGB agent, just like Putin) recently proposed that a mention of "faith in God" should be included in the revised Constitution.[13] Despite Russia having the status of a multicultural country, where most recognized religions are present, the ROC holds a privileged position in what is formally a secular state. Highly influential, the Church

[13] 'Патриарх Кирилл Предложил Внести в Конституцию Упоминание о Вере в Бога', Телеканал Дождь, 1 February 2020, https://tvrain.ru/news/patriarh_predlozhil_vnesti_v_konstitutsiju_upominanie_o_vere_v_boga-502135/.

shares a very intimate relationship with the state as a unifying and most conservative spiritual element of the nation, which also makes it one of the important components of the heteronormative discourse in contemporary Russian society.

Last but not least, the Russian language itself has also been weaponized as a means of state propaganda. In *Russia, Forward!,* Pecheykin shows how speech acts can be regulated. Since the world order has changed, the characters begin to wonder if it is now necessary to change their way of speaking (for example, the word order) as well. They are profoundly confused by all the dramatic changes in the country, as demonstrated in the following exchange between the characters:

> TSURYUK: So, how are you doing, Olya? (*to Vorontsova*) Am I saying it right? Or should I shuffle the letters, too? It's just really hard.
> LYUBOV: It's alright, Dina Albertovna. But I'm not Olya.
> VORONTSOVA: (*whispers*) Lyuba.
> TSURYUK: Oh, I'm sorry, Lyubochka, I'm just… because of all the perturbations…[14]

When characters fail to make sense of the new order of things, the intervention of a *smyslovik* is necessary. A neologism overtly resembling the word *silovik* (a member of security or military services, such as KGB or FSB), *smyslovik* is a member of a similar formation that possesses and enforces *smysl* (meaning, sense). Visibly queer, the smyslovik is wearing short shorts and a diadem. Everyone who cannot think backwards is

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[14] Печейкин, Валерий. "Россия, Вперёд." 2011. Unpublished play.

ЦУРЮК: Дела ваши как, Оля? (*Воронцовой*) Я правильно выражаюсь? Или буквы тоже переставлять? Это просто очень трудно.
ЛЮБОВЬ: Всё хорошо, Дина Альбертовна. Только я не Оля.
ВОРОНЦОВА: (*шёпотом*) Люба.
ЦУРЮК: Ой, прости, Любочка, я просто… из-за всех этих пертурбаций.

immediately annihilated—a feature of a fundamentally flawed system, where all problems are solved by the complete annihilation of their source.

The importance of language, or, more importantly, *meaning*, is highlighted in the scene where one of the characters figures out the key word combination that "breaks" the world. The moment he says "Russia, forward!", everything goes dark; yet moments after he is magically teleported straight into prison.

While it is, of course, inevitable and expected that language, as the primary form of communication, would be used in such capacity, the Russian language has a special mission beyond its linguistic function. It is not only used, but appropriated by Russia, notably in an effort to create the *Russian World*, as a concept and a homonymous organization, the Russkiy Mir Foundation (Russian: Фонд "Русский мир"). This project, brought into existence by Putin's decree in 2007, meant to popularize the Russian language, as well as unite Russian speakers across the world on the basis of their shared language and culture. The name itself is a play with the triad of meanings of the word "mir": "world," "peace," and "community." In Putin's own words,

> The Russian language not only preserves an entire layer of truly global achievements but is also the living space for the many millions of people in the Russian-speaking world, a community that goes far beyond Russia itself. As the common heritage of many peoples, the Russian language will never become the language of hatred or enmity, xenophobia or isolationism.[15]

Used to project Russia's "soft power,"[16] the Russkiy Mir aims to consolidate Russian "compatriots," emphasizing the Russian way of living, and opposing "Russian values" to

[15] 'About Russkiy Mir Foundation', Фонд "РУССКИЙ МИР", accessed 9 March 2020, https://www.russkiymir.ru/en/fund/index.php.
[16] Andis Kudors, '"Russian World"—Russia's Soft Power Approach to Compatriots Policy', *Russian Analytical Digest*, no. 81 (16 June 2010): 2–4.

those of the West. While the idea of "peace" is inherent to the concept of "mir," the implementation of the Russkiy Mir policy is seen as problematic by many, especially in ex-Soviet republics, which it often targets. As Andis Kudors explains, "Politicians and analysts in the Baltic States are increasingly concerned about the fact that the values popularized by Moscow in the neighboring countries are irreconcilable with democratic values. Former Communist countries in Russia's immediate neighborhood feel that the acuteness of their exposure to Russian influence is not always seen and understood further west."[17] In a number of polls, respondents were asked to express their opinion on whether Russia should take measures to protect compatriots abroad (with some of the questions bringing up a possibility of military intervention).[18] The politics of language notably had a crucial role in the Ukrainian crisis, when the Russophone separatists were backed by Russia, which led to a military intervention, along with the annexation of Crimea.

With this brief outline of the traditional values at the core of Russia's current ideological program, it is now possible to analyze in more detail how Valeriy Pecheykin subverts them in his texts. However, prior to discussing Pecheykin's queer writing, it is necessary to establish what queer writing is and how relevant it is in the context of contemporary Russia.

3. "Who Is Fucking Who?"

This unceremonious question that a VGIK official posed to Valeriy Pecheykin and Artem Firsanov is notable in its impropriety. Does the answer define them and their 'role'

[17] Andis Kudors.
[18] Andis Kudors.

in society? Where does this question seek to position their suggested relationship within the dichotomy of the public and private spheres? Discussing it may provide some valuable insight into how queerness fits into Russian realities. With the United States being most commonly recognized as the infamous source of the ideas subverting Soviet/Russian (traditional) values, US policy on "non-traditional" sexualities may serve as a point of reference in determining the position of queerness in Russia.

In his article *Homo Sacer, Homosexual: Some Thoughts on Waging Tax Guerrila Warfare*[19], written in 2005—ten years before the U.S. Supreme Court legalized same-sex marriage in all fifty states—Anthony C. Infanti reflects on the legal status of same-sex relationships, as well as that of a single homosexual person. The term *homo sacer* ("sacred man") comes from the works of Giorgio Agamben, in particular, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*[20] and *State of Exception*[21]. Agamben, in turn, adopted it from Roman law, where it was applied to a man banned from society and deprived of all privileges of a citizen; thus, a homo sacer could be killed by anyone, yet he could not be *sacrificed*, as his life was considered "sacred." Agamben defines it as "human life ... included in the juridical order solely in the form of its exclusion (that is, of its capacity to be killed)"[22] and extends this idea to the modern politics of power and law. Even though Agamben himself suggests that "there is no longer any one clear figure of the sacred man" (adding that "we are all virtually *homines sacri*"),[23] Infanti sees a clear parallel

[19] Anthony C. Infanti, 'Homo Sacer, Homosexual: Some Thoughts on Waging Tax Guerrilla Warfare.', in *Critical Tax Theory: An Introduction*, ed. Anthony C. Infanti and Bridget J. Crawford (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 215–220.
[20] Giorgio Agamben, *Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, Homo Sacer 1 (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 1998).
[21] Giorgio Agamben, *State of Exception* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).
[22] Agamben, *Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, 99.
[23] Agamben, 115.

between the position of homo sacer and homosexuals in our society: "I imagine, however, that most lesbians and gay men would, like me, readily identify with the figure of *homo sacer*."[24] As his partner and himself were filing their tax returns, the procedure, back in 2005, once again pointed at the fact that their relationship was "beyond the law," or excluded from it: "And, like *homo sacer*, each lesbian and gay man has been reduced to a bare life, one that may be killed but not sacrificed. We are no longer put to death by the 'sanctioned ritual practices' of the state simply for being homosexual; that barbarity was left behind long ago. But the state's pervasive marking of us as the exception to the general rule of heterosexual privilege does open the space for individuals to attack and kill us with impunity."[25]

It appears that "heterosexuality" is, in fact, a surprisingly uncertain label. Being the "norm," it is rarely questioned and interrogated in terms of what constitutes and defines it, apart from being the opposite of "abnormal." The presence of "non-normative" sexuality presupposes and makes possible the existence of the ideal, normative sexual behaviour. According to Laura Doan, "A product of negative identification, the category of the heterosexual would come to be perceived not for what it *is* but for what it is *not*."[26] This is similar to how femininity is, according to Elizabeth Stephens, necessary to define masculinity within the dominant phallocentric discourse: "This is because the formulation of any concept or idea requires the existence of an opposite or outside against which it can define itself, and in western thought women have become the prime metaphor for this

[24] Anthony C. Infanti, 'Homo Sacer, Homosexual: Some Thoughts on Waging Tax Guerrilla Warfare.'
[25] Anthony C. Infanti.
[26] Laura Doan, '"A Peculiarly Obscure Subject": The Missing "Case" of the Heterosexual', in *British Queer History: New Approaches and Perspectives*, ed. Brian Lewis (Manchester University Press, 2015), 88.

otherness."[27] As Infanti puts it, "[homosexuality] gives meaning to the general rule of heterosexual privilege."[28] This holds true even as the rights afforded to queer people have been expanding over time. Decriminalization of same-sex relationships made sexual acts between consenting homosexual adults legal, yet that does not suggest that heteronormativity was in any major way destabilized by the change (nor was it even disturbed by marriage equality). Homosexuality, as Teemu Ruskola observes, enters the sphere of "universal human intimacy," thus becoming subjected to the same regulations as heteronormative relationships: "The Court, and the Constitution, will respect our sex lives, but on condition that our sex lives be respectable." [29] The way queer subjects are treated by the legal system tactically shifts between the focus on *sexual acts* and *sexual identities*. Notably, the 1986 Bowers v. Hardwick upheld the constitutionality of a Georgia sodomy law, which criminalized oral and anal sex between consenting adults, in particular by ruling that "[t]he Constitution does not confer a fundamental right upon homosexuals to engage in sodomy."[30] This phrasing of the question itself (whether the Federal Constitution confers a fundamental right upon homosexuals to engage in sodomy), as Ruskola points out, predetermined the answer at the time: "The answer to that question could of course only be negative. An argument to the contrary was, in the Court's notorious phrase, 'at best, facetious.'"[31] In Lawrence v. Texas, a 2003 Supreme Court ruling that overturned Bowers v. Hardwick, the "rhetorical mode" is not the sexual

[27] Elizabeth Stephens, *Queer Writing: Homoeroticism in Jean Genet's Fiction* (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire [England]; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 143
[28] Anthony C. Infanti, 'Homo Sacer, Homosexual: Some Thoughts on Waging Tax Guerrilla Warfare.'
[29] Teemu Ruskola, 'Gay Rights Versus Queer Theory: What Is Left of Sodomy after Lawrence V. Texas?', *Social Text* 23, no. 3–4 (Fall-Winter 2005): 84–85.
[30] 'Bowers v. Hardwick, 478 U.S. 186 (1986)', Justia, accessed 9 March 2020, https://supreme.justia.com/cases/federal/us/478/186/.
[31] Teemu Ruskola, 'Gay Rights Versus Queer Theory: What Is Left of Sodomy after Lawrence V. Texas?'

act, but the identity. Lawrence denounces the 1986 decision, stating that in Hardwick the laws

> … seek to control a personal relationship that, whether or not entitled to formal recognition in the law, is within the liberty of persons to choose without being punished as criminals. The liberty protected by the Constitution allows homosexual persons the right to choose to enter upon relationships in the confines of their homes and their own private lives and still retain their dignity as free persons.[32]

Finally, in 2015 the landmark Obergefell v. Hodges ruling granted same-sex couples the right to get married across all fifty states. Confirming Ruskola's observations, it focuses strongly on identity politics rather than sexual acts in order to justify affording same-sex couples this fundamental right previously reserved to heterosexual couples exclusively. Repeatedly, in the syllabus[33] of the Supreme Court decision we find references to fixed sexual identities ("Questions about the legal treatment of gays and lesbians soon reached the courts;" "[…] intimate choices defining personal identity and beliefs") as well as their inscription into the private sphere of society, as opposed to the public treatment of sexual activity in Hardwick ("Decisions about marriage are among the most intimate that an individual can make;" "[…] the right […] is inherent in the concept of individual autonomy.") It is equally important that one of the arguments in support of the decision is that historically, liberal adjustments to the institute of marriage actually make it stronger:

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[32] 'LAWRENCE et al. v. TEXAS', Legal Information Institute, accessed 9 March 2020, https://www.law.cornell.edu/supct/html/02-102.ZS.html.

[33] 'SUPREME COURT OF THE UNITED STATES Syllabus OBERGEFELL ET AL. v. HODGES, DIRECTOR, OHIO DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, ET AL. CERTIORARI TO THE UNITED STATES COURT OF APPEALS' (SUPREME COURT OF THE UNITED STATES, October 2014), https://www.supremecourt.gov/opinions/14pdf/14-556_3204.pdf.

"These new insights have strengthened, not weakened, the institution."[34] Largely unimaginable just a few decades ago, this decision marked a grand achievement in the fight for gay rights, notably ignited by the Stonewall Riots back in 1969. It has also inscribed homosexual people into the heteronormative discourse as fixed, stable identities, whose relationships are governed in the same fashion as those of private heterosexual citizens.

In Russia, queer history of the twentieth century was not quite as linear. Laurie Essig suggests, however, that "[…] Russia's history of sexuality shaped homophobia in a particular way, marking the gay body as foreign and a threat to native populations, but that homophobia was not caused by that history any more than it was preordained that 2014 would be a relatively good time to be gay in the United States."[35] Moreover, while the American model of gay liberation did not succeed in Russia as a movement, Russian homophobia might have been influenced by American evangelical Christianity.[36] One of the major Russian Christian anti-LGBT political figures, Vitaly Milonov, cited a direct Western influence on his homophobic views.[37] Essig proceeds to argue that

> […] the most obvious difference between a Russian history of sexuality and an American one is that the homosexual was never quite born in Russia or, more precisely, the homosexual was born as a momentary aberration, a sick or criminal individual who must, for the health of society, be cured of his or her desires. To

[34] 'SUPREME COURT OF THE UNITED STATES Syllabus OBERGEFELL ET AL. v. HODGES, DIRECTOR, OHIO DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, ET AL. CERTIORARI TO THE UNITED STATES COURT OF APPEALS'.
[35] Laurie Essig, '"Bury Their Hearts": Some Thoughts on the Specter of Homosexuality Haunting Russia', *QED: A Journal in GLBTQ Worldmaking* 1, no. 3 (Fall 2014): 39–58.
[36] Laurie Essig, 44.
[37] Виталий Милонов, «Сбитый фокус», interview by Леся Рябцева and Алексей Венедиктов, 17 April 2015, https://echo.msk.ru/programs/focus/1531038-echo/.

> paraphrase Foucault, the homosexual was born in the West, but she or he was stillborn in Russia.[38]

After a short period of de jure legalisation of same-sex relationships (however inconsistent the treatment of queer citizens was de facto) following the abolishment of the Tsarist legal code by the Soviets in 1917, homosexuality was criminalized again in 1933 under Joseph Stalin. It was not until 1993 that Boris Eltsin, the first president of now independent Russian state, decriminalized consensual homosexual relationships. The first decade of post-Soviet Russia was remarkably liberal, including growing visibility of the queer community. Gay-rights organizations, magazines, and film festivals grew and multiplied, and queerness even entered mass culture. Western missionaries, American in particular, visited Russia frequently to organize and partake in workshop and various events. As Laurie Essig observes in her book *Queer in Russia,* documenting her time in Russia as an American, the response of Russian activists to this kind of workshops was often a rejection. Foreigners failed to understand the differences between the historical paths to gay liberation in the United States and in Russia, or what was perceived as liberation to begin with. Despite all their efforts, a true "Russian Stonewall" never happened. Multiple organizations appeared and dissolved due to lack of self-organization and cooperation between unorganized groups, their leaders' ambitions, their members' class differences and often short-lived enthusiasm, but most important—lack of common ideology.[39] From what Essig suggests in her book, the attitude towards identity demonstrated in the post-Soviet queer community, as described by her, offers an interesting case to discuss a possibility that fluid, non-fixed queer identities as theorized

[38] Виталий Милонов.

[39] Laurie Essig, *Queer in Russia: A Story of Sex, Self, and the Other* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999), 70.

by (post-identity) queer critique may come as more natural to Russian society than American mainstream identity politics. According to Essig, "Even some [Russian] activists for the rights of sexual minorities found Western notions of gay identity oddly foreign."[40]

This view is confronted by Brian Baer in his article "RUSSIAN GAYS/WESTERN GAZE: Mapping (Homo)Sexual Desire in Post-Soviet Russia." He notes that "[t]he idea that Russians do not recognize and inhabit exclusive sexual identities (i.e., gay or straight) is a thread that runs through the work of many Western writers and scholars who have sought to understand the construction of (homo)sexuality in Russia."[41] Baer argues that such attempts to "find an alternative to Western gay and straight identities" in Russia, as he characterizes Essig's observations, first of all, overlook the existence of similarly varied forms of sexuality in the US (that is, also queer and not limited to strictly outlined identities, especially in the more conservative regions outside the "gay havens," like New York and Los Angeles). Secondly, they ignore the fact that many Russian queers, contrary to what Essig and a number of other authors (notably, David Tuller or Duncan Fallowell, who clamed that "People's sense of identity is liquid. Russia itself is a liquid"[42]) lead us to believe, did, in fact, identify as gay and bisexual. Here, Baer cites the data collected by Daniel Schluter in 1990-91: 72.5 percent identified themselves as "gay", 24.2 percent as bisexual, and only 1.9 percent chose the category "other."[43]

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[40] Laurie Essig, '"Bury Their Hearts": Some Thoughts on the Specter of Homosexuality Haunting Russia'.
[41] Brian James Baer, 'RUSSIAN GAYS/WESTERN GAZE: Mapping (Homo)Sexual Desire in Post-Soviet Russia', *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 8, no. 4 (1 October 2002): 499–521.
[42] Duncan Fallowell, *One Hot Summer in St Petersburg* (London: Vintage, 1995), 302.
[43] Daniel P. Schluter, *Gay Life in the Former USSR: Fraternity without Community*, Issues in Globalization (New York: Routledge, 2002), 77.

Baer posits, then, that "several models of homosexual desire coexist in a discontinuous, nonunitary way [in Russia], as they do in the West."[44] He connects Russia's homophobia with its sexism, and warns against interpretations of sexuality in Russia such as Essig's: it is not fluidity or queerness that make the Russian lesbian a person of "the third gender," but sexism, as one half of a lesbian couple has to assume the "man's role." In a similar fashion, a homosexual man may fear being identified as gay because of the "stigma" of femininity that comes with it. It is crucial, says Baer, to address the problem of Russian sexism and not mask it behind the idea of queerness.

He showcases this by quoting a book written by the scandal-hungry politician Vladimir Zhirinovskii and his co-author Vladimir Iurovitskii, called *Azbuka seksa* (1998). In its discussion of homosexuality, the book also assigns gender roles to same-sex partners. However, according to Baer, "Zhirinovskii and Iurovitskii's tolerance of homosexuality is necessarily limited. It must not ultimately challenge the statistical norm: heterosexual sex."[45] It is evident that homosexuality here encounters the heteronormative discourse: on the one hand, through sexism, and on the other hand—through "othering" the West, whose identity politics went "too far."

Ultimately, while Baer's argument about Russia's sexism is extremely important, and while his critique of Essig's research as extrapolating individual experience on the whole nation (while on the quest for "alternative sexuality") has to be taken into account, Essig's ideas about Russian queerness are still relevant for this thesis. Baer does not deny that in Russia, just like in the USA, different "models" of sexuality may co-exist.

[44] Brian James Baer, 'RUSSIAN GAYS/WESTERN GAZE: Mapping (Homo)Sexual Desire in Post-Soviet Russia', 513.
[45] Brian James Baer, 515.

Moreover, when comparing Russia and the USA, it is necessary to consider the two countries' different political climates. It is true that the notion of heteronormativity is essentially the same in both, but historically, certain features of the heteronormative discourse developed there differently. In other words, some queer people in America may experience a similar degree of oppression to their Russian counterparts, yet these two comparable experiences occur in significantly different contexts.

Finally, even if Essig's vision of queer Russia is utopian, it offers a *possibility* of what resistant queerness may be like in the Russian context—a possibility that aligns with the concept of queer writing, as discussed in this thesis through Valeriy Pecheykin's works.

As the country was reshaping itself after the collapse of the Soviet Union, many marginal voices gained a chance to be heard and obtain a political platform for the first time. Gay rights movement was among such previously silenced groups that began to gain momentum at the onset of the first decade of the Russian Federation. The beginning seemed promising, and, with a significant input from Western activists, it looked like American-style identity politics would firmly establish itself in the new Russian society. However, that was not meant to happen, and Essig cites a number of interconnected reasons at the root of the failed dream of Russian gay liberation.

First of all, it is the lack of common identity around which multiple groups of activists could be mobilized. Essig posits that in Russia, instead of a fixed queer identity, a *queer subjectivity*[46] was the organizing principle of the queer community. This suggests that what people had in common was not a shared identity, but shared *activities*. Bars, discos, parties, theatre shows, concerts, publishing allowed Russian queers to socialize,

[46] Essig, *Queer in Russia*, 80.

meet new people, and share their interests, but did not require to adhere to and be defined by a certain identity. Even the most radical activists, like Evgeniia Debrianskaia, rejected the imperative to "identify" based on one's sexuality.

The reason for rejecting a fixed identity, such as a "homosexual," lies partly in the history of medicalization (especially of female homosexuality) and criminalisation (male homosexuality) of alternative sexualities in Russia. Presumably, an identity based solely on sexual behaviour would equate an individual with such stigmatized groups as GULAG prisoners and the mentally ill. Fluidity of identity allowed queer people to move in and out of the "norm" as they pleased, without being defined by any sort of performance deviant in relation to the normative behaviour. The criminal code did not contain a definition of a homosexual identity either. It was the act (*muzhelozhstvo*: a term originating in the Russian Orthodox ecclesiastical law and used to describe a sexual relationship between men, particularly sodomy), not the identity of the person being punished. The terms muzhelozhstvo and lesbianism remain in the penal code to this day, but only in relation to non-consensual sexual acts involving people of the same sex.

At an organizational meeting for a queer conference in 1994, Essig witnessed a heated debate about the future of the national gay rights movement, where someone noted that in the beginning of the decade, as a new state was being formed, there were multiple opportunities for different movements to become a part of the new establishment, but "[…] that opportunity is probably gone and we've missed it. It won't exist again."[47] And indeed, things began to change drastically in less than a decade.

[47] Essig, 70.

In 2000, Vladimir Putin became president. After a decade of unprecedented freedom, but equally unruly chaos, it was time to unite the nation—and tighten the reins. The policy based on traditional values became increasingly strong, and inevitably it had to take action against one of the biggest "threats"—subversive sexualities. Multiple attempts to introduce legislations targeting queer people had been made in the decade following the first 2003 initiative, until the infamous "gay propaganda" federal law passed in 2013.

Known internationally as the "gay propaganda law," its exact phrasing refers to the propaganda of "non-traditional sexual relationships" among minors (the initial phrasing "homosexual relationships" had to be changed, as the State Duma pointed out that a legal definition of the term "homosexual" is absent from the Legal Code of the Russian Federation). Thus, again, there is no LGBTQI+ identity that the law targets specifically, but rather it is geared against sexual acts that are not "traditional." However, just like with any similar law, inevitably queer individuals, whether they identify as such or not, are directly affected by state-sanctioned homophobia. The exponential growth in violence against queer people has been documented by Alexander Kondakov.[48]

This law's most important function is, of course, to strengthen the ideology of traditional values: the existence of "non-traditional values" affirms the existence of traditional values. Moreover, the values in question concern one of the most intimate aspects of human life—sexual relationships, over which the state thus claims control. "Non-traditional" sex is denied the privacy of the traditional sex of a married heterosexual

[48] А. А Кондаков, *Преступления на почве ненависти против ЛГБТ в России : отчет* (СПб. : Центр независимых социологических исследований, 2017).

couple; on the contrary, it is exposed into the public sphere, while presented in the most negative light possible—as intending to corrupt minors.

This is combined with the erasure of queer individuals and their representation in society. The recently uncovered anti-gay purges in Chechnya (first reported by Novaya Gazeta in 2017[49]) present this paradox in a highly intensified form. On the one hand, the president of Chechnya Ramzan Kadyrov has publicly declared that gay people simply do not exist in his republic. On the other hand, the state-sanctioned campaign to hunt down, capture, torture, and kill queer people in Chechnya suggests that Kadyrov and his government are well aware of the fact that they do indeed exist, and therefore have to be eradicated.

A caption accompanying a popular meme depicting Putin in drag sums this up with a sarcastic precision: "Electors of Putin are like homosexuals; there are many, but among my friends there are none."[50] In their article *"You cannot oppress those who do not exist": Gay persecution in Chechnya and the politics of in/visibility*,[51] Maria Brock and Emil Edenborg discuss the problematic role of queer visibility in Chechnya, and by extension—in Russia. Being visible in a traditionalist society is dangerous for queer people, but so is being invisible, as their presumed non-existence does not stop the repressions against them. State-supported homophobia is instrumental in the process of

[49] Елена Милашина, 'Убийство Чести', Новая газета, 1 April 2017, https://novayagazeta.ru/articles/2017/04/01/71983-ubiystvo-chesti.

[50] James E. Baker, Kelly A. Clancy, and Benjamin Clancy, 'Putin as Gay Icon? Memes as a Tactic in Russian LGBT+ Activism', in *LGBTQ+ Activism in Central and Eastern Europe : Resistance, Representation and Identity*, ed. Radzhana Buyantueva and Maryna Shevtsova (Cham : Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 211.

[51] Maria Brock and Emil Edenborg, '"You Cannot Oppress Those Who Do Not Exist": Gay Persecution in Chechnya and the Politics of in/Visibility', *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 27, no. 1 (2021), http://orca-mwe.cf.ac.uk/128198/1/Pre-proof%20You%20cannot%20oppress%20those%20who%20do%20not%20exist%20Final%20version.pdf.

"state-building,"[52] as is the case in Russia, and specifically in Chechnya. Kadyrov's hypermasculine image mirrors that of Vladimir Putin, intensified by the conservative traditions of the region. As Brock and Edenborg argue, "it is indicative that president Putin and other Russian politicians explicitly referred to Muslim and especially Chechen traditionalism as an argument for introducing a federal ban on 'propaganda for non-traditional sexual relationships.'"[53]

As we previously discussed, queer identity politics never managed to establish itself on the Russian soil the same way it did in the United States. Even though queer activism exists in Russia, and there is a small number of public figures who are openly gay, for the majority of people being visible as queer is still not an option. One of the reasons is the stigma that surrounds this identity. Those who overcome this obstacle, or even appropriate the stigma, like a twenty-three-year-old Moscow-based beauty blogger and now rapper Andrei Petrov, who recently released a music video titled *Pidor*[54] ("faggot"), still have to face a more direct danger. For instance, according to Petrov himself, his day-to-day life is structured so as to not get killed[55].

But identity politics is not the sole form of queer existence. As Essig posits,

> The lack of identity in Russia produced other possibilities. For one, in Russia queer desires are always potentially universal, not limited to homosexuals, but a set of desires available to everyone. To add to these queer political possibilities,

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[52] Michael J. Bosia, 'Why States Act: Homophobia and Crisis.', in *Global Homophobia : States, Movements, and the Politics of Oppression*, by Meredith L. Weiss and Michael J. Bosia (Urbana : University of Illinois Press, 2017).

[53] Maria Brock and Emil Edenborg, '"You Cannot Oppress Those Who Do Not Exist": Gay Persecution in Chechnya and the Politics of in/Visibility', 9.

[54] ANDREI PETROV, 'Pidor (Премьера Клипа, 2019)', YouTube, 19 December 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jp_5geu5HUw.

[55] Ксения Собчак, 'Каминг-Ауты, Гей-Лобби и Запрет Пропаганды: Шесть Геев и Собчак'.

> the fact that there was no stable gay subject meant that there was also no stable straight subject.[56]

Queerness in Russia often appears as a fluid, non-fixed mode of living, which has a complicated relationship with heteronormativity. Constantly moving between in- and outside of the dominant discourse, queerness manages to co-exist with heteronormativity, not in a binary opposition, but in its own position "elsewhere." It also possesses the potential to subvert it, and in the literary medium that ability may be best represented by a distinct mode of writing—queer writing.

4. Writing Queer

Defining queer writing—or the word queer itself, for that matter—is not an easy task. To quote Carla Freccero, "Queer, to me, is the name of a certain unsettling in relation to heteronormativity."[57] The idea of a form of writing that is subversive and destabilizing towards the dominant discourse and capable of inscribing the experience of marginalized groups was first articulated by French feminist theorists in the 1970s. Such authors as Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray, and Julia Kristeva discussed the concept of women's writing (i.e., Cixous' *écriture feminine*, Irigaray's *parler-femme*), an idea as elusive in its description as *queer* in Freccero's interpretation. According to Elizabeth Stephens, "the concept of feminine writing itself remains necessarily ambiguous and difficult to describe" and is "best thought of not as propounding or proposing the inscription of a 'pure' femininity, but as articulating a paradox that exposes the limits of, and problematizes the phallogocentric system in which it is inscribed."[58] As Cixous

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[56] Laurie Essig, '"Bury Their Hearts": Some Thoughts on the Specter of Homosexuality Haunting Russia'.
[57] Carla Freccero, 'Queer Times', in *After Sex?: On Writing since Queer Theory*, ed. Janet Halley and Andrew Parker (Duke University Press, 2011), 485.
[58] Stephens, *Queer Writing*, 152.

writes in her influential essay "The Laugh of Medusa," "It is impossible to *define* a feminine practice of writing and this is an impossibility that will remain, for this practice can never be theorized, enclosed, coded—which doesn't mean that it doesn't exist."[59] This feminine mode of writing cannot be defined, as defining it would mean to enclose it once again in the phallocentric language that it seeks to subvert. Cixous warns: "As soon as the question 'What is it?' is posed, from the moment a question is put, as soon as a reply is sought, we are already caught up in masculine interrogation."[60] This helps to surpass one of what is perceived to be the most problematic aspects of the *écriture feminine*— its essentialism—by shifting focus from inscribing into text a fixed female identity and corporeality to destabilizing the dominant discourse and exposing its limits and failures, a "practice that would work at the limits of the dominant language, that would work on the limits of language".[61] Irigaray argues: "The issue is not one of elaborating a new theory of which woman would be the subject or object, but of jamming the theoretical machinery itself, of suspending its pretension to the production of a truth and of a meaning that are excessively univocal"[62] For Kristeva, "A feminist practice can only be […] at odds with what already exists so that we may say 'that's not it' and 'that's still not it.' By 'woman' I mean that which cannot be represented, what is not said, what remains above and beyond nomenclatures and ideologies."[63]

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[59] Hélène Cixous, 'The Laugh of Medusa', in *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, ed. Vincent B. Leitch, Third edition (New York : W.W. Norton & Company, 2018), 1942–59.
[60] Hélène Cixous, 'Castration or Decapitation?', trans. Annette Kuhn, *Signs* 7, no. 1 (Autumn 1981): 45.
[61] Stephens, *Queer Writing*, 153.
[62] Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*, trans. Carolyn Burke (Ithaca, N.Y: Cornell University Press, 1985), 78.
[63] Julia Kristeva, 'La Femme, Ce n'est Jamais Ça', in *New French Feminisms : An Anthology*, ed. Elaine Marks and Isabelle De Courtivron (Amherst : University of Massachusetts Press, 1980), 137.

If *écriture feminine* is meant to subvert the dominant patriarchal discourse, then queer writing is set to attack heteronormativity—one of the key concepts of queer theory coined by Michael Warner in the early 1990s.[64] Heteronormativity is not limited to or exclusively based on sexual practices. It is, in fact, a system of *cultural* practices, that include the construction of gender and gender norms, as well as social institutions, such as the nuclear family. Therefore, for example, same-sex marriage that follows closely the heterosexual model, might be more heteronormative than a heterosexual partnership that opposes traditional social practices.

Building upon the concept of women's writing, Elizabeth Stephens uses the term queer writing (or *écriture homosexuelle*) in her homonymous book discussing this phenomenon in the works of Jean Genet: "The idea of *écriture féminine* provides a productive model with which to interrogate further the idea of queer writing central to this book because it addresses, in a way very similar to Genet's, the extent to which the relationship between marginal subjects and dominant languages can be reconfigured and reconceptualised through the practice of writing itself."[65]

The juxtaposition of the terms *écriture feminine* and *écriture homosexuelle* (the latter being used by Stephens interchangeably with 'queer writing') may appear problematic, as both seem to suggest inscribing a fixed, stable identity (femininity in its essentialist interpretation and homosexuality as defined within the framework of identity politics) into the text. However, both terms are referring to specific modes of writing rather than specific identities. As Stephens explains, these modes of writing are characterized by

[64] Vincent B. Leitch et al., eds., *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, Third edition (New York ; London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2018), 2598.
[65] Stephens, *Queer Writing*, 141.

being "fluid and transformative."[66] Femininity and queerness move between, outside and inside of the dominant discourse, thus disturbing it without relying on a fixed identity. As Lee Edelman puts it, "queerness could never constitute an authentic or substantive identity, but only a structural position determined by the imperative of figuration."[67] In the Russian context, the notion of queerness becomes especially problematic.

Currently, only 26 years after same-sex relationships between consenting adults stopped being a criminal offense, and with devastating effects of the more recent Putin-era anti-gay legislation, the queer identity remains on the margins of Russian society. Dmitry Kuzmin, a queer poet and scholar, points out that it is difficult to discuss queer writing in the context of a culture where "even the question of women's writing has not truly been posed."[68] Comparing it to American queer culture, however, he notes another extreme—the utilization of queer writing as a means of "group and individual emancipation," where everything comes down to the author's "self-identification and their relationship with identity politics." Kuzmin defines queer not as an identity or one of the multiple possible "strategies," but as a distinct era, or episteme, using Michel Foucault's terminology, and as such compares it to postmodernism.

Heteronormativity is realized in particular social practices that secure its dominant position. In the Russian context, this coincides with the official state ideology based on "traditional values." As we discussed in previous sections, this concept is represented in a number of specific social and religious institutions, such as the Russian Orthodox

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[66] Stephens, 158.
[67] Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Duke University Press Books, 2004), 59.
[68] Дмитрий Кузьмин, 'К Русской Квир-Поэзии: Леденёв, Чернышёв, Данишевский', сигма, 6 October 2017, https://syg.ma/@kirill-korchaghin/dmitrii-kuzmin-k-russkoi-kvir-poezii-liedieniov-chiernyshiov-danishievskii.

Church, marriage and nuclear family, and the cult of virility. The latter finds its ultimate personification in the public image of Vladimir Putin. The central figure in contemporary Russian politics for nearly two decades, his carefully crafted image of a "real man" is just one of the elements of the ideological program that unfolded throughout his years of presiding in the Kremlin. Alexander Kondakov and Marianna Muravyeva write about these populist ideas: "First, populism comes 'from above,' not 'from below.' In other words, it is not that people demand for traditional values: on the contrary, they are demanded to want those. Secondly, it relies heavily on being structured around a name (no matter if it is Putin or Navalnyi), which acts as a nodal point, sort of an empty signifier for an empty signifier of the very 'traditional values.'"[69]

President Putin's hypermasculine image is a remarkable example of a constructed gender identity. The artificial nature of this identity has been emphasized by numerous studies. Masha Gessen's biographical account of Putin's coming into power shows that already in the title: *The Man Without a Face: The Unlikely Rise of Vladimir Putin*.[70] An unremarkable public servant with a seemingly unremarkable career, Putin was made into a symbol of the renovated state by the Kremlin imagemakers. His public persona is more complex than it might seem at first glance. Michael Gorham distinguishes five different communicative and linguistic styles, or profiles, that characterize Putin as a public figure. These profiles are *technocrat*, *delovoi*, *silovik*, *muzhik*, and *patriot*. The *technocrat* profile

[69] Marianna Muravyeva and Alexander Kondakov, 'What's Queer about Russia: Traditional Values and Modern Society', *Development of Russian Law* (blog), 27 May 2019, https://blogs.helsinki.fi/developmentofrussianlaw/2019/05/27/whats-queer-about-russia-traditional-values-and-modern-society/?fbclid=IwAR2oNAWthqULO9v30DoZGXho2vgmXeQvICtyKy91UJdLwJasan5XiqDctzg.
[70] Masha Gessen, *The Man without a Face: The Unlikely Rise of Vladimir Putin* (New York: RIVERHEAD BOOKS, 2012).

"can be categorized as the relative neutral discourse of a competent, if not eloquent, functionary or technocrat."[71] The *delovoi* profile is characterized by an active vocabulary, that of a "man of deeds," a "doer."[72] Presenting as a *silovik*,[73] Putin uses a language that may be seen in his "tough talk primarily centered around issues of Chechnya, terror, and crime," having produced some memorable figures of speech like "*zamochit' v sortire*" (to bump off in a shithouse). Putin as a *patriot* "manifests this melding of strength, fairness, and populist affinities into the area of national identity and in so doing brings another set of emotions into play – pride and shame – with the intent of restoring the dominance of the former over the latter." Finally, his *muzhik* identity is somewhat similar to the *silovik* in its reliance on colloquialisms and slang, "[b]ut if the latter invokes images of violence and toughness with the intent of sending a strong message to ones enemies, the former is softer and folksier in tone, geared more toward speaking to the common sense of the people, or narod."[74] While the term "muzhik," as Valerie Sperling also noted, is highly important to Putin's hypermasculine image, in fact, all of these profiles serve a common goal of creating a picture of a strong, patriarchal leader, who can unite the nation and protect its true values.

Therefore, it does not come as a surprise that homosexuality (and, in this context, male homosexuality in particular) is repressed, but also publicly antagonized. With the homosexual identity rendered as effeminate, weak, deviant, subversive, and straight out dangerous as a presumed attack by the West against traditional (Russian) values, the

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[71] Michael S Gorham, *After Newspeak: Language Culture and Politics in Russia from Gorbachev to Putin*, 2016, 383.
[72] Gorham, 385.
[73] Gorham, 388.
[74] Gorham, 391.

state-sponsored homophobia (and the underlying misogyny, if we consider the implied connection between homosexuality and femininity) is also used as a weapon against Putin's political adversaries inside and outside the country. As we could see in the previous section, it does not matter whether there is a visible queer community or an active movement in Russia; for the discriminatory campaign to begin, it suffices that there are such movements in the West (external enemy) and there is a constructed idea of the sexual Other within the country (internal enemy).

Discussing the now famous Internet meme showing Putin in drag against a rainbow backdrop, James E. Baker, Kelly A. Clancy and Benjamin Clancy analyze the complex dynamics between Putin's masculinity, homosexuality, and institutionalized homophobia.[75] The image is known to have first appeared at a protest against the propaganda law outside the Russian embassy in Madrid, but was later circulated online, prompting the Russian Ministry of Justice to ban it as giving "the impression of a non-standard sexual orientation of the RF president."[76] Initially meant to subvert Putin's hypermasculinity, on the Russian soil it fitted perfectly into the homophobic narrative. As masculinity in the heteronormative discourse is equated with power, using queer imagery to emasculate political adversaries is a common practice in Russia. This practice, even if recognized as a threat to patriarchal masculinity, eventually only perpetuates the homophobic (and misogynist) alignment of male homosexuality with femininity and, therefore, with weakness and subordination. The perception of homosexuality as foreign (specifically Western) and its association with pedophilia,

[75] James E. Baker, Kelly A. Clancy, and Benjamin Clancy, 'Putin as Gay Icon? Memes as a Tactic in Russian LGBT+ Activism'.
[76] James E. Baker, Kelly A. Clancy, and Benjamin Clancy, 210.

circulated by anti-gay and religious groups, makes it an effective weapon against political and ideological opponents, but, as a double-edged sword, it equally hurts the queer community, as it feeds on hatred and intolerance towards the sexual Other. As Baker et al establish, "An unholy alliance between nationalists, communists, United Russia (the Putinist party), parental organizations, and the Orthodox Church has subsequently established anti-gay rhetoric as the norm in the public sphere."[77] Although identity politics never managed to take root in Russia, a more fluid, alternative sexuality did not live up to the promise of liberation either, as the heteronormative state is quick to antagonize both, the identity and the sexual act.

However, it is possible to argue that a certain middle ground might be achieved between embracing sexual difference and expressing it in a way that will not allow it to be caught up in the homophobic heteronormative discourse, while preserving its subversive quality. As Laurie Essig puts it, referring to the controversial statement by news anchor Dmitriy Kiselyov that if a gay person dies in a car accident, their heart should be burned rather than used for transplantation,[78] "Russian truths about sex and desire exist and those truths, as much as any others, can be mobilized to combat state and social homophobia, a homophobia that rests on its own fundamentalism, a fundamentalism that insists that queer sexual practices and identities are fixable, curable, and always a source of foreign pollution, a heart that needs to be buried."[79]

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[77] James E. Baker, Kelly A. Clancy, and Benjamin Clancy, 222.
[78] Владимир Еремин, '«Меня Всегда Интересовали Пограничные Вещи»: Валерий Печейкин о Православии, Кафке, Деле «Седьмой Студии» и «Кислоте»', Hydra Journal, 25 March 2020, https://hydra-journal.ru/valeriy_pecheykin/?fbclid=IwAR1UmE93xBK8dgeTm0utFrHGegUcgOWUuNKP79X7150qanSnby8bcUNjYOc.
[79] Laurie Essig, '"Bury Their Hearts": Some Thoughts on the Specter of Homosexuality Haunting Russia', 53.

As this study will suggest, in the literary medium this can be achieved by entering through existing subversive literary practices, namely, the violence of chernukha and New Drama. As the example of Valeriy Pecheykin's plays will demonstrate, an openly gay author can work in a mode of writing that is markedly queer, subversive towards the traditional values and "way of life," and yet capable of escaping precise categorization in the binary opposition of hetero- and homosexual, which would have subjected it to direct homophobic attacks. Positioned simultaneously within and outside the dominant discourse (similar to how écriture féminine finds itself *elsewhere* in relation to the phallocentric discourse), the queer writing of Valeriy Pecheykin will be analyzed in the following chapter.

Chapter I. *Falcons* (2005)

Telling a story of a Russian family living in Uzbekistan, the play opens with a scene in the Sokolovs' kitchen. The family's typical day, filled with constant quarrels between Alena Sergeevna Sokolova, the mother, her seventeen-year-old daughter Ksyusha and eleven-year-old son Denis, all against the backdrop of relative poverty, is interrupted by an unfortunate event: Sokolova's mother, Anastasia Kirillovna Nenashinskaya, fell in her apartment and lost the ability to walk. The father, Andrei Sokolov, is yet to make an appearance, yet his presence is already palpable. Out of work, since the buses from Kazakhstan that might require technical assistance can no longer cross the closed border[80], he is expected to come home earlier. The family has mixed feelings about this fact, and Sokolova switches between demanding from her children that they respect their father and showing total disdain towards his annoying and straight-out abusive personality. Her children, the permanently annoyed and spoiled Ksyusha and the family scapegoat Denis seem to share the later sentiment.

The family brings the disabled grandmother to their apartment, where Denis now has to share a living room with her. As if that trouble was not enough, the story is punctuated by persistent and unwelcomed visits of Nina Borisovna Golovaiko, Andrei Sokolov's mother. The tensions between family members keep growing in an infinite series of outbursts of anger, aggression, and violence. The most abused member of the family, Denis begins to lose his mind and respond with violence, until he tragically turns against himself in the shocking final scene of the play.

[80] The complicated process of the border's demarcation began after the dissolution of the USSR and was still ongoing as of 2019.

The language and tone of this play sound remarkably mundane and natural: Pecheykin commented that all he did was simply follow the people around him (just like his characters, he grew up in Tashkent) and write down everything they had to say. This language gives the characters volume: the inventiveness and liveliness, the wit and total absence of any "filter" create a sense of a living colloquial language that is being improvised as the action unfolds. There is not, however, that much action in the play itself; most of it occurs in the language, as the characters reflect on their reality with the endless outpour of linguistic (and eventually physical) violence.

The setting bears resemblance to that of many Lyudmila Petrushevskaya's plays: it is a small and slightly dilapidated apartment—so small that there is barely enough space for everyone. This is the kind of setting that Petrushevskaya took to the extreme in her plays, such as *Bifem* (2002), where she shows a mother and daughter in such a claustrophobic closeness that they literally inhibit the same body. In case with the Sokolovs, the arrival of Nenashinskaya becomes the last drop that causes the overflow of violence and abuse.

In an interview, Pecheykin discussed his interest in the institute of family:

> At some point, I realized that I'm interested in the family model and its decay. Family is a microcosm, which reflects the processes occurring outside. Family had a very serious malfunction, like a cell, in which a mutation has occurred. Its members have nothing in common.[81]

A family is, therefore, a reflection of society as a whole, an analogy that will manifest itself at a grander scale in Pecheykin's later play *Russia, Forward!* (2011). But along

[81] Валерий Печейкин, «ПОЧЕМУ БЫ МНЕ НЕ ВЕСТИ НАЦИЮ В ПОДВАЛЫ?», interview by Татьяна Джурова, November 2013, http://ptj.spb.ru/archive/74/sociality-or-die/valerij-pechejkin-pochemu-bymne-nevesti-naciyu-vpodvaly/.

with demonstrating the decay of society, Pecheykin also shows the failure of the traditional family as an institution. The concept of traditional values relies largely on the idea that they are passed down from generation to generation, which requires strong ties and continuity. Pecheykin shows three generations of the family, but the connections between them have been emptied of all their significance. Moral values become but an act of duty, hollowed from their supposed meaning: it is the sense of duty that makes the Sokolovs bring Nenashinskaya to live with them, but then she is subjected to endless emotional and physical abuse. It is clear that she is nothing but a burden to the family: Sokolova constantly complains about having to take care of her mother, keeps losing her temper, and is almost sadistically indifferent to Nenashinskaya's physical suffering. The children perform their tasks when forced to, without much emotional involvement. In one of the scenes, Denis makes his sister listen to a song that is, according him, "just like our life." The disturbing and inappropriate lyrics tell a story of a family:

> Granny shat all over the place:
> Crap all over the bedpan,
> Dirty dishes.
> Here is our apartment—
> A shithole!
> Every day she eats,
> Every day she takes a dump.
> She lives to eat,
> Not eats—to live!
> And when she falls from the sofa
> And begins to scream,
> Dad, mom, and I
> Kick the fuck, kick the fuck, kick the fuck
> Out of the old hag!

"We've fucking had enough with you! When will you finally croak?"
And then suddenly, her eyes filled with tears,
And from her lips came the words
That I shall never forget:
"I AM AN OLD, SICK PERSON!"
Yeah-yeah-yeah!
I am and old, sick person![82]

In the following lines of the song, a "grandmother" demands that the family eats her excrements and drink her urine, because she is old, had a "hard life" and "went through the war." In the second verse, the family finally kills the grandmother. In the last verse, mirroring the first one, the narrator himself becomes old and is similarly beaten by his grandson. The song, intentionally simplistic, reveals the harsh truth about the relationships in the Sokolov family, which in real life is still disguised behind a crumbling mask of dutiful propriety. It is also a kind of "play within a play," which, much like works of some contemporary authors, including Pecheykin, shocks and amuses its audience (in this case, Denis and Ksyusha) with its unapologetic resemblance of their own life.

[82] Печейкин, Валерий. "Соколы." 2005. Unpublished play.

Бабуля всё загадила:
Обосранное судно,
Немытая посуда.
Вот квартира наша -
Говно и параша!
Каждый день она ест,
Каждый день она срёт.
Она живёт, чтобы есть,
А не ест, чтобы живёт!
И когда она, свалившись с дивана, истошно орёт,
Я, папа, мама,
Все пиздим, все пиздим, все пиздим
Бабку ногами!
«Заебала, старая! Когда же ты сдохнешь?»
И вдруг её взгляд увлажнился слезами,
А с уст слетели слова
И их не забыть мне вовек:
«Я СТАРЫЙ, БОЛЬНОЙ ЧЕЛОВЕК!!!»
Да-да-да!
Я старый и больной человек!

As for Alena Sergeevna, the reasons behind her anger become clear in the scenes with her mother and mother-in-law. In an emotional outburst, she accuses Nenashinskaya of being a bad parent when she was a child, and later, after she became a mother herself, of forcing her to move out in poor health and with a new-born daughter. She also lashes out at Golovaiko for her constant visits, even though years ago she equally mistreated the then young family. This bottled-up hatred poisons the life of the entire family. Sokolova hates her children "in advance," as she already expects them to be ungrateful when they grow up. Being underappreciated and unloved is at the centre of her tragic state. Thus, the only thing that is passed down through generations is mutual resentment. Even some of the formal markers of family ties do not quite work here: only the four Sokolovs are united under the same last name. The two grandmothers, who have different last names, appear as outsiders; thus, even symbolical connections are broken. Moreover, in one scene, Sokolova refers to her mother-in-law's husband as Roman Antonovich, while her own spouse's name is Andrei Vitalievich. The inconsistency of Sokolov's patronymic and his mother's partner's first name, not particularly remarkable as such, points at the family's complicated past and, on the symbolical level, at disruptions in its paternal line.

As the father figure of the family, it is notable how absent Sokolov is: he only appears in a few scenes. He is almost a mythical figure: his image is constructed in the words of his family, and this is where it is also dismantled. His performance of masculinity is so artificial that no one takes it seriously anymore. However, Sokolova, perhaps motivated by the same sense of duty before the "traditional" order of things, actively "constructs" and reinforces his masculinity through a number of stereotypes, mostly that of the man as a "provider." She forces her children to feel guilty and scorns

them at every occasion when they presumably show disrespect towards their father. In reality, Sokolova routinely despises her husband, whose authority in the family is based on fear of emotional ("He will be yelling again!") or physical ("He looks as if dad has punched him!"). Sokolov himself is mostly withdrawn from the life of his family. His interactions with them resemble a poorly executed act with very imperfect timing: he laughs at the wrong moments; he shows up when he is neither expected nor needed. In a way, he is also a tragic figure, as he is trying to fulfill his roles of the "man," "father," and "the head of the family," which are completely empty of meaning. He goes to work, but there is no work; he tries to teach his son to be a man, but does not really know how to do that, and this lesson ends up being nothing short of a torture for Denis. When he hits the boy and shouts "Do you understand what a father is?" it is unclear whether anyone in the family, including Sokolov himself, can answer this question.

In a family home that resembles more a war zone where "everybody is everybody's enemy," Denis is the ultimate victim. It seems like everyone wants to give him a lesson on masculinity and "forge" him into a "proper" man. Every time he attempts to point out the unfairness of having to do things that his older sister would have done better, even if just because she is physically stronger, the only answer he gets is "Ksyusha is a girl!" He has to face the gender binary as the ultimate explanation of why he is treated like this, which begins to sound increasingly absurd every time this formula is repeated.

In Denis' scene with his father, Sokolov literally attempts to "shape" his son into a man. He scolds him for not exercising and being physically weak and mocks his body. "You have to be young, daring, healthy, to be proud of your body, you got me?"[83]—Sokolov

[83] Ты должен быть молодым, дерзким, здоровым, чтоб гордиться своим телом, понятно?

proclaims in a parodic homage to the Soviet ideological obsession with youth and physical strength. He tries to force his son to start boxing, swimming, and stop wearing a tee short. Closely resembling the health advice promoted by some Soviet agitational posters, Sokolov's attempts in physical education look anachronistic, if not absurd, coming from Sokolov, who mostly complains about his health, and especially in the hopelessness of the surroundings, where being a "superhuman" has become pointless.

It is not only his son's body that provokes Sokolov's anger: he is infuriated even with the way Denis does his hair:

> SOKOLOV: How many times have I told you not to slick your hair like that! Come here now! (*Denis approaches meekly*) What is that pancake on your head? Why don't you listen to what your father tells you? I already had a heart episode at work two days ago, thought I wouldn't make it… (*combs his son's hair à la Sergei Esenin*) You gotta have a forelock, got it? A forelock! Not an oakum! Like that, like that…

Using Esenin as the reference for achieving the right "look" is illustrative and has to do not as much with the poet's literary legacy as with his popularized image of the "countryside poet," a romanticized version of *muzhik*—the epitome of the "Russian soul."

Sokolov even hates the way his son walks, and this scrutiny finally leaves Denis in tears. At one point, Sokolov himself begins to question his role and the source of the abuse:

> SOKOLOV: (*to himself*) Why am I yelling? But why does he do his hair like that? I've told him a hundred times, a huuundred times, but he doesn't give a damn about what I'm saying. Why the hell am I mutilating myself for him, fuck?! I fucked up all my health at work!

This moment of guilt and momentary realization about the pointlessness of violence is one of the few moments that humanize Sokolov. There is another scene, where Denis is

stuck on the phone with his father calling from work. He reports to the other family members everything he hears from Sokolov, and it appears as a succession of unrelated stories, memories from the distant past. This series of memories is so disconnected with the main events of the play and so unexpected as something that would come up in a regular phone conversation, that the inclusion of these stories is almost surreal, like a dream sequence, especially when juxtaposed with the usual family quarrels. The images, which Denis repeats without understanding or processing them, do indeed sound like a description of a dream. However, no one attempts to interpret them—no one even listens, including Denis, who is instructed by his mother to say "a-ha" occasionally to make an impression that he actually pays attention. Thus, Sokolov's attempt to communicate is ignored, proving that the communication between the members of the family other than through violence is improbable. In this regard, Pecheykin's work can be contextualized within the New Drama movement, which focuses on violence as a form of communication that shaped post-Soviet Russian society. As Mark Lipovetsky writes in *Performing Violence: Literary and Theatrical Experiments of New Russian Drama*, "On the one hand, communicative, communal violence cements a collective body; on the other hand, violence stuns and alienates each of the members of the collective. On the one hand, violence establishes quasi-linguistic connections that appear to facilitate the transfer of information; on the other hand, it continuously destroys them."[84]

Denis, as a child, cannot fully process and accept the violence and unfairness of the world he lives in. In the beginning, he is not yet fully consumed by the violence in his family, but rather has adapted to live within it. However, with time, outbursts of violent

[84] Mark Lipovetsky and Birgit Beumers, *Performing Violence: Literary and Theatrical Experiments of New Russian Drama* (Bristol, UK ; Chicago, USA: Intellect, 2009), 136.

behaviour begin to be increasingly common in him. He suddenly threatens to kill his family members, which often shocks them, but it also gives them the freedom to retaliate. At one point, he physically attacks Golovaiko, thus expelling his grandmother out of the family home like a foreign body. He does the same with the miserable and defenceless Nenashinskaya, thus acting out the message of the violent song he played to Ksyusha. This speaks also to the relationship between art and reality. The young Sokolovs relate to the song so much, because it exposes the truth of their life to the extreme: this is something that everyone thinks but never dares to do. But the line between reality and fiction is thin, and Denis replicates the song, which, much like Pecheykin's own play, is already a reflection of reality.

Denis, however, preserves the remainder of affection for his family throughout most of the play. When his mother says that none of her children will come to visit her grave, Denis naively responds that he would, which Sokolova brushes off. Later, overwhelmed by the misery surrounding him, Denis asks his mother, why his parents allowed all this to happen: living in humiliation, allowing people to humiliate them, like when his sister was rejected from a job, despite a bribe that the Sokolovs offered. He sees no future in Uzbekistan for himself and his sister and blames his parents for not trying to give them a better life. The violence that rises in him can be interpreted as different from that in his family, and thus it sets him apart. Even though he threatens their lives a few times, he never tries to physically harm his parents and sister. However, he attacks and wishes to exterminate everyone who is presumably a threat to his most immediate family. In such an attempt to protect their shared life, he physically attacks his grandmothers, who both act as "invaders." This is different from the mindless, selfish, and irrational

hatred that permeates everyone in the Sokolov's household. The concentration of violence is eventually too overwhelming, and Denis destroys himself—at the end of the play he pours a pot of boiling water over himself.

An earlier breaking point for Denis occurs in his scene with Alisher, the son of a nurse medically assisting Nenashinskaya. Alisher bullies Denis, then he pulls down his shorts and underwear, exposing his genitals. He begins to make fun of Denis for having dried semen on his underwear, but soon, as his bullying becomes more elaborate, he pushes Denis into the abyss of existential crisis:

> Do you know, by the way, that a dried sperm spot—it is millions of your children? Imagine, you could've also dried up like that on your dad's underwear! And then your mom would've washed you off and flushed you into the canalisation. No, just imagine that it's not you, but a piece of your dad's jizz. You just were in his dick, and then you splashed on the sheet, and your mom goes: "Ugh, fuck, now I have to wash this." Then she goes to the bathroom and scrubs you off with her finger, just like that. All dried.[85]

After that, Denis faints and becomes delirious, seeing a giant spermatozoid on the ceiling. Following this incident, he becomes increasingly violent, as his realization of the utmost unfairness, pointlessness of life and alienation from his surroundings becomes more acute. And with it comes the fear of death, which he associates with Nenashinskaya. While assaulting her physically, Denis exclaims: "You are death!" Analyzing Vasili Sigarev's play *Plasticine* (2000), Lipovetsky discusses the logic of "the transformation of

[85] АЛИШЕР. А ты знаешь, что высохшее спермяное пятно – это миллионы твоих детей? (Денис молчит.) Прикинь, и ты бы мог также у папы на трусах засохнуть! (Денис молчит.) А мама бы тебя потом постирала и смыла в канализацию. (Денис молчит, Алишер злится.) Нет, ты представь себе, что ты это не ты, а кусочек папиной кончинки. Что ты был у папы в хуе, а потом выплеснулся на простыню, а мамашка такая говорит: «Ох, бля, теперь стирать придется». И идет потом в ванну и так пальчиком тебя отковырвает. Засохшего.

Eros into Thanatos and Thanatos into Eros, life to death and death into sexuality." He writes: "Moreover, the non-eroticized, but simply non-violent compassionate attitude to the hero is associated with death: when Maxim's grandmother dies – the only person who loves Maxim – the compassion from an unknown woman at the polling station makes Maxim faint ('little death'), and this is followed by an outburst of aggression."[86] For Denis, it is not compassion but the exposure to something much bigger than him, the mystery of life and death, that causes this reaction. The logical progression from Eros (intercourse and conception) to Thanatos (the (im)probability of being born, the realization about mortality) is triggered by Alisher's short monologue about sperm, which required over-sexualized circumstances of exposing Denis' body and his sexuality.

For Denis, his grandmother's arrival changed the habitual order of things (even if that means an endless cycle of normalized violence) and disrupted their "natural state." However, it is his interaction with Alisher that appears to have changed him the most. In a review of the play's premier, a critic wrote that "nothing changes in his behaviour when Denis comes back to life."[87] But the changes that this symbolic "death" brings forth might be simply more subtle than what could be expected. It is unclear what Denis saw and understood[88], but it certainly *queered* him. It destabilized his identity, and through him it destabilized the whole family. Marked by his relatives as sick, defective, different, from this point on Denis had no chance to survive among them. This corresponds to the general tendency in New Drama, where, according to Birgit Beumers and Mark

[86] Mark Lipovetsky and Birgit Beumers, *Performing Violence*, 158.
[87] Ольга Галахова, 'Соколы Кружат в Подвале', Театральный смотритель, 29 December 2008, http://www.smotr.ru/2008/2008_doc_sokol.htm.
[88] In Pecheykin's later play *Russia, Forward!* we will see another character, also a young boy, occupied with the questions of existence, from conception and its probability to death and its rejection.

Lipovetsky, "plays about the family reveal the total wreckage of the home as fundamental value."[89] Denis realizes his difference and alienation from the rest of Sokolovs. At one point he exclaims: "I'm not your child! You hate me!" He is simultaneously a part of this cycle of violence (due to the fact of being a part of the family) and a force of disruption. Even though his "language" is also that of violence, Denis' resilience baffles and enrages his family. He is a sort of *homo sacer*: everyone is allowed to harm him as the youngest and the weakest; but as such, his position is "sacred." He is thus trapped between being included into and excluded from his family. Denis, however, redirects the meaningless cruelty of his relatives that they use in lieu of means of communication. He makes sense of it as a desperate attempt to protect his family, yet doing so only alienates him more. Finally, he turns against himself, but this self-destruction does not have to be interpreted as a failure of his lonely rebellion. On the contrary, it disrupts the cycle of violence, as the *homo sacer* sacrifices himself. It is only logical that the play ends immediately after.

If the Sokolovs are, as Pecheykin puts it, a microcosm and a reflection of the society at large, their relationships illustrate those amongst members of society. Similarly, their relationship with what surrounds them is representative of how this society interacts with the outside world. The Sokolovs are a Russian family in the capital of Uzbekistan, and their attitude towards Uzbek people is aggressively racist. When they invite a nurse for Nenashinskaya, it is a Russian woman Natasha, because "Uzbeks don't do a good job." As Golovaiko admits, however, even Natasha is not flawless—she lived with an Uzbek man, and even had a son with him. Later, Natasha complains that at work she is forced to be selling a book titled *What do Uzbek names mean?*, written by the chief

[89] Mark Lipovetsky and Birgit Beumers, *Performing Violence*, 160.

doctor's son-in-law. Upon learning that the book is, actually, in Uzbek, Sokolova commented: "Who the hell would need that?" The women are equally outraged by the fact that *Russian* children in schools have to greet the domla (the word for "teacher" in Uzbek) with a hand pressed against their heart. This demonstrates a high level of antagonism towards local culture and people. Pecheykin emphasizes this by the fact that the entire play takes place inside the Sokolovs' apartment, which establishes very clearly the line between them and the Others. As ethnic Russians, the Sokolovs claim a cultural and linguistic superiority over Uzbeks. Even though they are technically a minority in Uzbekistan, this sentiment has pronounced colonialist undertones. At the same time, they perceive locals as a threat. In a scene with Denis, Ksyusha says: "It's like last Sunday, when some boorish Uzbek came in the morning—ding dong, ding dong. 'Makhboob-opa! Makhboob-opa!'—I thought they were gonna slaughter us, so I began to pray."[90]

The situation with the Russian minority in Uzbekistan, or the "Russophone population issue," is indeed problematic. While the question of whether the Russian population (being the largest ethnic minority) is violently discriminated against[91] in Uzbekistan lies beyond the specific interests of this study, it is of interest that the Russian propaganda definitely picked up on that notion with enthusiasm. For instance, Tsargrad TV, a conservative, pro-Putin, and markedly Orthodox Christian television channel penned an article[92] presenting the hardships of Russian people in Uzbekistan in a very specific light,

[90] Ксюша: Как в прошлое воскресенье какой-то кишлачный утром дзынь-дзынь, дзынь-дзынь. «Махбуб-опа! Махбуб-опа!» - я думала, что будут нас резать и взмолилась.

[91] К.Е. Мещеряков, '«ПРОБЛЕМА РУССКОЯЗЫЧНОГО НАСЕЛЕНИЯ» В УЗБЕКИСТАНЕ И РОССИЙСКО-УЗБЕКСКИЕ ОТНОШЕНИЯ' (ВЕСТНИК САНКТ-ПЕТЕРБУРГСКОГО УНИВЕРСИТЕТА, 2007), 09-03-2020, https://cyberleninka.ru/article/n/problema-russkoyazychnogo-naseleniya-v-uzbekistane-i-rossiysko-uzbekskie-otnosheniya.

[92] Егор Спирин, 'Русские и Узбекистан: Чем Нам Отплатили За Цивилизацию?', Царьград/Tsargrad, 30 July 2018, https://tsargrad.tv/articles/russkie-i-uzbekistan-chem-nam-otplatili-za-civilizaciju_149628.

aligned with the purpose of the Russkiy Mir Foundation. The main focus here is not as much the mistreatment of ethnic Russian citizens in terms of workspace discrimination and violence, but the attack on some of the vital elements of Russian culture. That ranges from excluding any mention of the Russian language from the Constitution to changing the name of the Victory Day to the "Day of Memory and Honours" and referring to the Great Patriotic War as World War II. The life of the Sokolovs fits easily into this narrative. Living in poverty, without any hope or opportunities, or even any means to leave Uzbekistan and go to Russia like many of their compatriots did, along with constant humiliation—such is their reality. But it is their persistent sense of superiority, so grotesque in contrast with their misery, that is equally noteworthy. In addition to their very realistic difficulties of a Russian family trapped in an essentially foreign country, the Sokolovs represent Russia as a whole, a nation that interacts with the outside world with caution and perceives everything foreign as an enemy. The fear of conspiracies against Russia is not a new one, but in Putin's Russia—the last protector of traditional values— it is as strong as ever. Ironically, the example of the Sokolovs shows how these values begin to deteriorate on their own and lose their meaning. Even though they unanimously agree that only Russian medical specialists know what they do, the nurse Natasha nearly kills Nenashinskaya, having almost overlooked a bubble of air crippling down her drip bottle. After Denis collapses and becomes delirious, Natasha recommends that he is treated with "prayers."

An essential part of their identity is the Russian language. The family speaks in a very realistic and colourful colloquial Russian that is also broken beyond repair. This effect is enhanced by occasionally rejecting syntax and stripping the words down to their

basic meaning (something that would be developed much more in *My Moscow*), as in Sokolova's tirade: "Go-buy-earn-yourself,"[93] or individual speech patterns, such as Ksyusha's incomprehensible mumbling. Largely, this is based on Pecheykin's own experience growing up in Tashkent: "The linguistic space around you is shrinking every day. But language is, in many ways, what constitutes us. Less language means less self."[94]

As a Russian family in predominantly Muslim Uzbekistan, religion is crucial for the Sokolovs. Their faith, however, is also grotesquely distorted. Nenashinskaya, who represents the remains of Soviet atheism, exclaims in surprise at the mention of God: "What, God exists?" The rest of the family are only Christian through ritual, with which they have long lost any meaningful connection. Denis recalls his christening as a bizarre experience, with a child-like estrangement. When his mother and sister try to cure him from being "possessed," they use a towel with writings in Church-Slavonic and say the prayers provided by Natasha, yet the whole ritual is absurdly pagan. They perform carromancy (divination with wax), while reading the prayers, which Pecheykin renders as a monotonous, repetitive sound without meaning. The divination itself seems meaningless: Sokolova demands that Denis interprets a piece of wax poured from the candle on water, and this act of recognition itself is supposed to cure him. Denis cannot see anything in the wax, which causes his mother's anger. This act of communication, recognition, and interpretation fails yet again. Denis, however, sees something else:

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[93] Соколова: Возьми-сходи-купи-сама-заработай.

[94] Владимир Еремин, '«Меня Всегда Интересовали Пограничные Вещи»: Валерий Печейкин о Православии, Кафке, Деле «Седьмой Студии» и «Кислоте»', Hydra Journal, 25 March 2020, https://hydra-journal.ru/valeriy_pecheykin/?fbclid=IwAR1UmE93xBK8dgeTm0utFrHGegUcgOWUuNKP79X7150qanSnby8bcUNjYOc.

mysterious eye floaters, spots in his vision, one of them shaped as a seahorse. His attempts to communicate this are abruptly disregarded by his family. The seahorse can be interpreted as a symbol of fatherhood, with a connection to masculinity[95]. That being said, there is a definite queer twist in this symbolism, as seahorses are famous for reversing gender roles, where males take over pregnancy and childbirth (a "seahorse" metaphor appears in the title of a 2019 documentary about a transgender man: *Seahorse: The Dad Who Gave Birth*[96]). This subtle symbolism gives a more multilayered meaning to Denis' inability to fit into his own family.

Symbols are generally omnipresent in Pecheykin's play. An article that followed the 2008 premier at Teatr.doc, an independent theatre in Moscow, quoted the author saying that "his characters are demigods, because humans are incapable of doing things like that," referring to the Ancient Egyptian god Ra, who was sometimes depicted with a head of a falcon.[97] This tongue-in-cheek comment can be expanded with some more obvious interpretations. Falcons are associated with victory, power, virility—in Russian folk tradition, the word "sokol" was commonly used to address a handsome, brave young man, and during the Great Patriotic War it was often used to refer with reverence to Soviet pilots;[98] in 2019, Vladimir Putin gifted two falcons to king Salman of Saudi Arabia and sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan of the United Arab Emirates.[99] In

[95] For example, a seahorse is the symbol of Father Direct, a UK fathers' organization: http://www.fatherhoodinstitute.org/why-the-seahorse/
[96] Jeanie Finlay, 'Seahorse: The Dad Who Gave Birth - Official Trailer', 3 April 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0MUtJJDaDPk.
[97] Ольга Галахова, 'Соколы Кружат в Подвале'.
[98] С. А. Кузнецов, ed., 'СОКОЛ', in *Большой Толковый Словарь Русского Языка.*, accessed 9 March 2020, http://gramota.ru/slovari/dic/?word=%D1%81%D0%BE%D0%BA%D0%BE%D0%BB&all=x.
[99] 'Эксперт: Подаренные Путиным Кречеты Арабским Шейхам Считаются "Бриллиантом"', РИА Новости, 16 October 2019, https://ria.ru/20191016/1559834575.html.

the name of the head of the family, Andrei Sokolov, the virile aspect is doubled, as the name Andrei itself comes from the Greek *Andreas*, meaning "manly," "brave," "strong."[100] Another notable function of the titular family name will become evident with the analysis of several other Pecheykin's plays, where a few "ornithological" last names will appear, thus presenting a leitmotif connecting these works.

In naming the two grandmothers, Pecheykin follows the Gogol-esque tradition of using charactonyms. Nenashinskaya's last name sounds almost noble at first glance, like many last names ending in -skiy (masculine) or -skaya (feminine). Ironically, it is simply the phrase *ne nashinskaya*, low colloquial variation of *ne nasha*, meaning "not ours." This charactonym contains some critical information about the character: Nenashinskaya is supposed to be "ours," a member of the family, but she is nothing but a burden for the Sokolovs, and they treat her accordingly: she does not belong in their world. Golovaiko's name is derived from the word *golova*, "head," which is probably a reference to her bossy and intrusive character. Finally, the old cat who occasionally stays with the Sokolovs is named Shizik, which is a colloquial derogatory term for a person suffering from schizophrenia, or, by extension, demonstrates symptoms associated with any mental illness. Existing mostly in the background throughout the play, Shizik has an important symbolic role at the end of the play. When the cat is killed by strangers outside, this starts a chain reaction of violence: Denis throws the dead animal at Ksyusha, Sokolov hits Sokolova in the face, and the culmination of it all—Denis burning himself with boiling water. Shizik connects several of the play's themes: the fear of the outside world and "the Other" and the fear of death. He is also a double of Nenashinskaya, in the sense that they

[100] Alexander, the name of a gay character in *A Little Hero* containing the same root, is interpreted similarly in the text of the play.

are both old, defenceless victims of mindless violence. Last but not least, the name Shizik signifies the pathological madness that unfolds in this family, which is aggravated by their living situation—in the heart of a foreign country. Pecheykin himself compares a life in such a situation to having schizophrenia: "People with schizophrenia often experience a feeling of alienation. In this sense, a Russian-speaking person born in Tashkent is predetermined to have schizophrenia."[101]

This early play fits naturally into the context of contemporary Russian drama with its naturalistic approach and focus on social issues, giving spotlight to the violence that permeates post-Soviet Russian society and to a great extent has shaped it. New Drama and its precursors (notably, *chernukha*[102]), are provocative and subversive by nature. As we explore the concept of *queer writing*, it becomes apparent that *Falcons* already contains most of its elements that will be developed in Pecheykin's later plays. Pecheykin illustrates the failure of "traditional values," such as heteronormative family, cult of virility, nationalist superiority expressed through linguistic, cultural, and religious identification. This broken ideological system makes it impossible to survive for an individual who is different from the majority. The only way is to incorporate oneself into the dominant discourse. Here is where the purpose of queer writing becomes especially evident. A queer subject is simultaneously within the heteronormative discourse, seemingly "playing by its rules," and outside of it, having a subversive effect on it. In *Falcons*, the character of Denis is an early example of such queer subjectivity in Pecheykin's works. His sexuality is not discussed in the play and is not determined as

[101] Владимир Еремин, '«Меня Всегда Интересовали Пограничные Вещи»: Валерий Печейкин о Православии, Кафке, Деле «Седьмой Студии» и «Кислоте»'.
[102] Eliot Borenstein, 'Chernukha', in *Encyclopedia.Com*, accessed 9 March 2020, https://www.encyclopedia.com/history/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/chernukha.

non-heterosexual. In fact, that would be dangerous for queer writing, because it would have neutralized its effectiveness: assigning a certain identity to Denis could simply mark him as "Other" and lead to his total exclusion. However, his position as simultaneously a part of the family and an outcast is what makes him a destabilizing element. It is important that this function is given to a child, which is a recurring motif in Pecheykin's plays. Denis is surrounded by people who are trying to shape his identity, and he naturally resists that influence. His own identity is undetermined; following what Kristeva says about feminist practice, we can only determine what it is *not*: in this case, he is not his father. What Denis does realize is that he does not belong with his family, in their apartment, city, and country. In the more realistic stratum of Pecheykin's text, the locus where Denis *should have been* is specified as Moscow. Symbolically, however, it does not signify anything, it is an empty signifier, a "black hole," into which many Uzbek Russians went to never return. These two loci, real and symbolic, sometimes overlap, as for example when Sokolova mentions an acquaintance whose daughter "vanished" in Moscow. For Denis to locate himself there suggests a position similar to what Hélène Cixous attributes to écriture féminine in relation to the phallocentric discourse, and Elizabeth Stephens—to queer writing in relation to the heteronormative discourse: they are located elsewhere, which is inside and outside the dominant system at the same time. In Pecheykin's 2008 play *My Moscow* the Russian capital becomes the real—and dystopian—setting.

Chapter II. *My Moscow (2008)*

Perhaps Pecheykin's most scandalous play, *My Moscow* was first presented at the Volodin festival ("Five Evenings") in St. Petersburg as a part of a program introducing audiences to new promising playwrights. Actors and directors refused to work on the controversial text, and playwrights did the reading of the play instead.[103] Sharing its title with Moscow's official anthem, the play presents the Russian capital in a light directly opposite to its utopian representation in the song. Moscow, a dreamland for generations of literary heroes, from Chekhov's three sisters to Pecheykin's own Denis (*Falcons*), becomes a dystopian *waste*land in the 2008 play.

The outrage that the play caused comes first and foremost as a response to the atrocities that the characters commit in the play, which includes incestuous sex, bestiality, expression of racism, and blasphemy—to name just a few. *My Moscow* is also notable for its linguistic choices, which will be crucial to our analysis of the play. Much of the criticism seems to provide a more literal reading of the play, which makes it easier to label it, along with its author, as immoral, and therefore dangerous. This chapter will examine *My Moscow* through its language as the key to understanding its content and the specificity of the queer writing in the play.

Just like *Falcons*, *My Moscow* is centred around one family. Continuing the trope of "bird" last names, Pecheykin chose Sorokin (Russian *soroka*: magpie) as the last name for his characters. As he explained in an interview, this is also an homage to Vladimir Sorokin, who has been an important literary influence for Pecheykin specifically and new Russian drama in general. This influence is especially notable in *My Moscow*: "As for the

[103] Валерий Печейкин, Мы живем во сне Путина, 29 July 2016, https://www.svoboda.org/a/27886997.html.

aesthetics [of the play]… It's not a coincidence that the characters of *My Moscow* have the name Sorokin in their passports."[104]

The Sorokins have just moved into their new Moscow apartment. Living under the same roof are the older Sorokins, their son Pyotr, his wife Svetlana, and his younger brother Ivan. The Sorokins have guests coming over: the Proskudins, husband and wife. The guests are important: they are "real" Muscovites and therefore—a valuable connection. After a series of events one stranger than the next, a full-blown war starts on the streets of Moscow just outside the Sorokins' apartment. Trying to survive, the characters go through multiple physical and metaphysical transformations, and most of them make it till the end—right until they have to face a power that they thought they had long outwitted.

The play opens in what might be its most characteristic feature—a language stripped down from grammar and any additional layers of meaning. With all verbs in the infinitive; all nouns, adjectives, and participles in the nominative case and no agreement with one another, this is a language of pure action and intent. It takes up around one-third of the play, when abruptly, the characters switch to regular colloquial Russian. But while the new form of expression appears to be normal, the meaning soon begins to steadily shift further and further towards absurdity. Finally, the last portion of the play, just as suddenly, switches back to the unconventional linguistic experimentation of the play's beginning. In terms of the form, the entire piece evokes a musical composition—perhaps it is not accidental that Mozart's string quartet mysteriously begins to play in the apartment, coming from an undiscovered source. Without delving unnecessarily into the

[104] Валерий Печейкин, «ПОЧЕМУ БЫ МНЕ НЕ ВЕСТИ НАЦИЮ В ПОДВАЛЫ?».

intricacies of musical forms, it is worth noting that conceptually, the form of the play indeed resembles that of the classical sonata form. In *My Moscow*, the material is first presented, then it undergoes development, and finally, it is repeated. It is reprised, however, at a qualitatively new level: similar to how the sonata form would have it, various conflicts introduced in the beginning are resolved at the end. The play ends, just like *Falcons*, on a high note: with an unexpected, shocking event.

The idea of Moscow as a special locus that is an accumulation of power, both destructive and granting, desirable and feared, holy and degraded, is the driving force of the play. Pecheykin commented on the bizarre language of the Sorokins by saying that it is people of Moscow who inspired it: "'I fucking you,' 'you gobbling me up,'—this is more or less the language people in Moscow speak now. Not the Tajik [immigrants], as many believe. No, it is precisely Moscow people [who do]. Mixing languages, accelerating processes, simplifying—all this is particularly pertinent to the Moscow lifestyle."[105]

> SVETLANA: Want to God sooner.
> SOROKINA: (*hugs her*) Oh you, accelerator. Needs living life first, paying off mortgage, children from cunt, work sick and tired, then finally heart attack and to God.[106]

Sometimes leaving out prepositions, overall simplifying syntax, grammar, and meaning, Pecheykin achieves a language that is all about action, immediate and straightforward. It is instinctive, and so it is used to express basic instincts, desires and needs. Using infinitives voids the characters and their interlocutors of their identities, but it highlights

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[105] Валерий Печейкин.
[106] Печейкин, Валерий. "Моя Москва." 2008. Unpublished play.

СВЕТЛАНА. Хочется поскорее к Бог.
СОРОКИНА (прижимает ее к себе). Эх ты, ускоритель. Надо сначала жизнь жизнь, ипотека оплачивать, дети из пизда, работа задолбать, потом уже инфаркт и к Бог.

the act itself. Destroying the grammatical links in phrases and sentences allows for the economy, if not scarceness, of language that Pecheykin points at when he describes how it is similar to the way people speak in Moscow: in the notoriously fast-paced rhythm of the megapolis, it becomes necessary to "chisel away" the superfluous. The result is, however, quite unlike a Michelangelo sculpture—it is often a monstrous, unsightly skeleton of expression. Doing away with traditional language patterns is surprisingly refreshing. Not only does it prove to be as effective as more traditional forms of verbal communication, it can be at times more successful in carrying across the message. When the characters suddenly switch to a normal conversational language, their small talk demonstrates a lack of mutual understanding, attention or trust for each other's words. This is different from the imperative of the experimental language (for the sake of convenience, hereinafter referred to as *the Moscow language*). The latter, however, has its own "communicative failures": for example, when Sorokina makes a note for Svetlana saying "Suck off Petya" in order to remind her to only perform oral sex on her husband, other people who see that impersonal and decontextualized message begin instantly to do exactly what the note asks. Pecheykin himself describes theatre as an exchange of actions, and words—as expression of intentions.[107] In this sense, it is similar to *mat* (the obscene register of the Russian language), which Pecheykin employs extensively (and yet selectively) in his plays. Such active but limited use of mat preserves its key characteristic: being emotionally charged, raw, authentic, and "straight to the point." A lot of mat has markedly sexual connotation, which it has in common with the language of the first part of the play, where the characters often engage in sexual activity. Mat is

[107] Valeriy Pecheykin, Personal interview by Gleb Vinokurov, 2019.

subversive and marginal by definition, and the official attempts to regulate it in real-life Russia are not surprising: a law prohibiting the use of non-normative (obscene) language in public (including cinema and live performances) passed in 2014.[108] A project of an amendment making swearing at home a punishable offense was proposed in 2017, although its consideration was postponed.[109]

The linguistic specificity of *My Moscow* showcases Vladimir Sorokin's influence that Pecheykin himself acknowledges. Birgit Beumers and Mark Lipovetsky write about Sorokin: "Sorokin's language conflicts are directly translated into action, either psychopathological or adventurous; sometimes this happens, as in prose, through a literal rendering of metaphors, and sometimes through a more complex image when each hero displays in his behaviour a different kind of destruction of discourse."[110] Similarly, in Pecheykin's Moscow language, words-intentions translate directly into actions.

> ENTER Anna Sergeevna holding a big tray. There is a huge bowl of Olivier salad on the tray.
>
> SVETLANA: (*pointing at the salad*) Gobble! Olivier! Gobble!
>
> Runs towards Anna Sergeevna, shovels handfuls of salad into her mouth.[111]

[108] 'Вступает в Силу Закон о Запрете Ненормативной Лексики в Кино, Спектаклях и На Концертах', ИТАР-ТАСС, 30 June 2014, https://tass.ru/kultura/1289487.
[109] Вера Холмогорова and Мария Макутина, 'Госдума Отложила Рассмотрение Закона о Наказании За Мат в Семье', РБК, 4 July 2017, https://www.rbc.ru/politics/04/07/2017/595bba479a7947c54200046a.
[110] Mark Lipovetsky and Birgit Beumers, *Performing Violence*, 90.

[111] Входит Анна Сергеевна с большим подносом в руках.
На подносе огромная салатница с оливье.
СВЕТЛАНА (указывая на оливье). Жрать! Оливье! Жрать!
Подбегает к Анне Сергеевне, зачерпывает салат руками и ест его.

The word *жрать* (low colloquial: to eat, to gobble) being one of the first words pronounced on stage is possibly also an homage to Vladimir Sorokin, as this is the title of one of the pieces appearing in his book *Feast* (*Pir*, 2001), which, as a whole, is dedicated to literal and metaphorical consumption and processing of food. According to Beumers and Lipovetsky,

> For Sorokin, food represents the point where the body of an animal turns into an object of culture: when it is translated into a discursive dimension (recipes of dishes, cultural traditions of consuming food, etc.), and the discourse in turn is directly consumed by the body, or literally becomes the body. However, just as discourse in this conceptual (and post-structuralist) interpretation is a demonstration of power and latent violence, so does food in Sorokin's plays generate rituals of power and violence.[112]

Discussing particularly cannibalism in Sorokin, Beumers and Lipovetsky argue:

> Cannibalism is, of course, a typical metaphor for social violence, but for Sorokin it acquires a double meaning: the reason of violence – the transition of discourse into corporeal dimensions – is congruent with the consequence: the consumption of the human being as meat.[113]

Consumption of food and cannibalism are highly important in *My Moscow*. Consumerism, as a form of gluttony, is a sin often associated with grand megapoleis in general, but in the Russian context, it is especially relevant to Moscow:

> PROSKUDINA: Hooray! Eating, stomach, intestine, shitting, living.[114]

Svetlana is so persistent in bringing up excrements in conversation that even other characters become uncomfortable. For her, however, body waste (which is the final stage

[112] Mark Lipovetsky and Birgit Beumers, *Performing Violence*, 93.
[113] Mark Lipovetsky and Birgit Beumers, 94.
[114] ПРОСКУДИНА. Ура! Есть, желудок, кишка, срать, жить.

of processing food, or—metaphorically— of transitioning discourse into the sphere of the corporeal) is a vital sign:

> SOROKINA: Sveta, why are you going on about shit?
> SVETLANA: Because it shows life. I used to burp, had hiccups, farted. All thanks to food. But now I just have this hunger diarrhea, because my stomach is empty.[115]

When the characters of *My Moscow* hide in their apartment from the war raging outside, Svetlana finds masochistic pleasure in reading receipts from supermarkets and reminiscing of the past days of luxury, until Sokolova reminds her that they never actually lived well. Svetlana is also the one who comes closest to eating human flesh, but the news about the end of the war leaves the body of Sokolov senior, already dead by the end of the play, untouched.

In the play, the consumption of food is closely related to sex. The body parts mostly mentioned in relation to sex are the same as those involved in processing of food (mouth and anus). The gap between the characters' intentions and the realization of these intentions is reduced so much that it is no longer possible to separate them. Therefore, the reading of the play where certain episodes (such as where the characters uncontrollably have sex, including with their blood relatives and animals) are interpreted literally seems to overlook this important quality of this discourse. All these shocking events happen within the language itself; the intentions that the words express materialize in the play immediately as a *performance,* be it a sexual intercourse or a simple act of consuming food:

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[115] СОРОКИНА. Что ты, Света, все про говно.
СВЕТЛАНА. Потому что оно показывает жизнь. У меня раньше отрыжка была, икота, пукала я. И все от еды. А сейчас голодный понос, потому что желудок пустой.

PROSKUDINA: (*goes around Svetlana and towards the table)* Food. (*eats the olivier salad in large portions*)[116]

[…]

In his 1916 essay "The Magic of Words," the Russian symbolist poet Andrei Belyi writes about words as incantations—they are inseparable from the phenomenon they are tied to, hence their magical property: "The word creates causality."[117] In *My Moscow*, theatrical action is the word itself. This also leaves little space for complex ideas and figures of speech. Abstract ideas are still present in this discourse, but in the context of simplified (or rather corporealized) discourse, they are rendered bizarre by a form of *estrangement*; their artificiality and constructedness are thus exposed. When in response to Svetlana's expressed desire to perform fellatio on Proskudin her mother-in-law asks how she would feel if her husband behaved like that, she responds that this is impossible:

SOROKINA: And if he cunt of women fucking?

SVETLANA: No, no! Only my cunt—the pledge of love![118]

The idea of "the pledge of love" seems almost comical in this context, especially when pronounced by a character who does not seem to be able to control her sexual desire. This effect is enhanced by Svetlana's unconvincing apology:

SVETLANA: Not on purpose. My love for Petya big. Just memory bad.[119]

This form of language requires a direct link, or unity, with the act it signifies ("fuck," "eat," "kill," "beer," "food") that can be enacted (or imagined to be enacted) immediately—then it can function successfully. Abstract ideas contain too many steps

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[116] ПРОСКУДИНА (обходит Светлану, направляется к столу). Еда. (Ест оливье большими порциями.)

[117] Андрей Белый, 'Магия Слов', in *Символизм Как Миропонимание* (Moscow: Республика, 1994), 131–42.

[118] СОРОКИНА. А если он пизда женщин трахать?
СВЕТЛАНА. Нет, нет! Только мой пизда – заповедь любви!

[119] СВЕТЛАНА. Не специально. Моя любовь к Петя большой. Просто память ужасный.

that constitute their meaning; therefore, they easily disintegrate. Names may easily shift and be reattached. For example, when the characters talk about family, they associate it with housing, until family and mortgage become the same:

> SOROKINA: (*hugs her son*) We with love, you with love. Together—mortgage.[120]

But then, they just as easily conclude that through a metonymic connection mortgage, as it comes from God, is indeed God:

> SOROKINA: Mortgage is God.
> SOROKIN: God is mortgage.
> SVETLANA: Who striving for mortgage, striving for God.[121]

In these particular pairings, certain indirect logic may be discerned: Svetlana's "pledge of love" is family, and mortgage, or hypothec—*ипотека*—is derived from a Greek word that also has "a pledge" as one of its meanings; everything is from God, including mortgage, so mortgage is God, and God is mortgage. Considering Pecheykin's text as a whole, equating family and religion with something so mundane and material is a way to effectively destabilize these elevated concepts by rendering them meaningless.

When it comes to the identities of the characters, signifiers shift freely and without any logical justification.

> IVAN: You saying that I—faggot.
> SOROKIN: No, you—God.
> IVAN: But I saying that you—faggot.
> SOROKIN: I? Why I?
> IVAN: I taking this word and at you throwing!

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[120] СОРОКИНА (обнимает сына). Мы с любовь, ты с любовь. Вместе – ипотека.
[121] СОРОКИНА. Ипотека – есть Бог.
СОРОКИН. Бог – есть ипотека.
СВЕТЛАНА. Тот, кто стремление к ипотека, тот стремление к Бог.

SOROKINA: (*gets up and points at Sorokin*) Rip him into piece!!

IVAN: (*points at his mother*) I taking the word "God" and throwing at you! (*yells*) You—God!

SOROKIN: (*gets up and points at his wife*) Rip her into piece!! She—God!![122]

The scene demonstrates how in this discourse an entire identity can be changed by simply attaching a new name to a person or object. One of the words is a homophobic slur ('faggot') and it is being "thrown" at the opponent. This highlights the violent nature of this language, in which the intention to insult is enacted as "throwing a word" like a weapon. For Pyotr, it is enough to "identify" a cat as a "new Sveta," a version of his wife, to attempt a violent sexual intercourse with the animal:

PROSKUDINA: (*looking at the cat*) Sveta?

SVETLANA: (*takes the cat*) Me?

PYOTR: Two Sveta? Two fucking? Which first?

SVETLANA: (*passes the cat*) This one, new.

PYOTR: (*takes his penis out of the pants*) Trying now.[123]

There is another element of social critique expressed through this language. When the Proskudins watch TV at the Sorokins', they see Patriarch Kirill, referred to in the play as Metropolitan (he became Patriarch in January 2009). "This is God," Proskudin says. Sorokina changes the channel, and a glass of yellow liquid appears on the screen.

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[122] ИВАН. Ты говорить, что я пидорас.
СОРОКИН. Нет, ты Бог.
ИВАН. А я говорить, что ты пидорас.
СОРОКИН. Я? Почему я?
ИВАН. Я брать этот слово и на тебя бросать!
СОРОКИНА (встает, указывает на Сорокина). Рвать его на кусок!!
ИВАН (указывает на мать). Я брать слово «Бог» и бросать на тебя! (Кричит.) Ты Бог!
СОРОКИН (встает, указывает на жену). Рвать ее на кусок!! Она Бог!!

[123] ПРОСКУДИНА (смотрит на кота). Света?
СВЕТЛАНА (берет кота). Я?
ПЕТР. Два Света? Два ебать? Какой первый?
СВЕТЛАНА (передает кота). Вот этот, новый.
ПЕТР (вынимает член из брюк). Сейчас пробовать.

Proskudin reacts immediately: "God as well." The fact that both the image of Kirill and a glass of (most likely) urine—another kind of body waste—are identified as God, allows for several observations. It speaks to the crisis of faith, where "obligatory" spirituality, imposed as a part of ideology, is revealed to be artificial: it refers to random objects and phenomena as "God," having no stable, even if ideal and abstract, referent. The juxtaposition of the head figure of the Russian Orthodox Church and a glass of urine, and especially their identification under the name of God, is also satirical, and this seemingly random combination appears to have a humorous effect.

When the characters switch back to the Moscow language in the finale of the play, this discourse spirals into an almost anarchic unruliness. They openly state that they do not believe in God and are determined to behave ungodly now that the war is over—they only pretended to be righteous so that God would stop it:

> IVAN: Phew! Tired! Wanting to jerk off.
> SOROKINA: God seeing—throwing to hell.
> IVAN: You yourself in God not believing. You lying.
> SOROKINA: (*laughs*) Yes, not believing but pretending. During the siege praying: God save, I will be alive and good. While myself thinking: if saving, being bad again, lying to God.
> PROSKUDINA: Filya and I also lying to God when young. Saying, God, give us a Moscow apartment—we going to church, helping people. But when God giving us, we lying and teasing the poor.[124]

[124] ИВАН. Уф! Уставать! Желание дрочить.
СОРОКИНА. Бог видеть – в ад кидать.
ИВАН. Ты сам в Бог не верить. Ты врать.
СОРОКИНА (смеется). Да, не верить, а притворяться. Во время блокада молиться: Бог спаси, я буду живой и хороший. А сама думать: если спасать, снова быть плохой, обманывать Бог.
ПРОСКУДИНА. Мы с Филя тоже Бог обманывать в молодость. Говорить, Бог, давать нам московский квартира – мы в церковь ходить, человек помогать. А когда Бог нам давать, мы обманывать и нищих дразнить.

For them, to believe means to follow the ritual and recognize the authority. By stating "I do not believe in God" they suggest that they have outwitted God and obtained what they wanted without having to adhere to any obligations, therefore, by definition, they do not deny God's existence. This paradox reveals that they have not managed to escape the oppressive system, and their behaviour is more mischievous than rebellious. Their political views are similar in that regard:

> PROSKUDINA: We filing a complaint on you to Medvedev.
> PYOTR: Medvedev—a puppet. No real power.
> SVETLANA: All power Putin's.
> PROSKUDINA: We filing a complaint on you to Putin.
> SOROKINA: Ah! Don't! Putin killing us! (*serves glasses and tartlets*) Here's a drink, food.
> PROSKUDINA: Ha-ha, being scared![125]

This (quite literally) "kitchen politics" is an illusion of understanding politics and having some sort of control, which they do not have in reality when it comes to the structure of power—at least, for as long as they remain passive. Putin's hegemony is programmed into the dominant discourse of political power at all levels. As Valerie Sperling argues:

> As Putin's prime minister, Dmitriy Medvedev, prepared to become president for the 2008–2012 term (as something of a placeholder for Putin who, according to the Russian Constitution, was not allowed to serve three presidential terms in a row), the Kremlin seemed careful to continue the message that Putin remained in charge. While the language Putin directed at Medvedev was not insulting, Wood notes that Medvedev was "feminized" during the faux campaign as a means to

[125] ПРОСКУДИНА. Мы на вас жалобу писать Медведев.
ПЕТР. Медведев – марионетка. Нет настоящий власть.
СВЕТЛАНА. Вся власть у Путин.
ПРОСКУДИНА. Мы на вас жалобу писать Путин.
СОРОКИНА. Ах! Не надо! Нас Путин убивать! (Подает бокалы и тарталетки.) Вот напиток, еда.
ПРОСКУДИНА. Ха-ха, испугаться!

> highlight Putin's macho image. In February 2008, for example, Medvedev was sent to meet with a gathering of mothers in Novosibirsk, while Putin was charged with attending a massive press conference in Moscow.[126]

However, the disbelief that the characters demonstrate in the arrangements between the president and prime minister is still important. As Pecheykin himself noted in retrospect, at the time, this presumed change in power was still seen by some as a possibility for a change, an illusion that he even more strongly rejected in his later play *Russia, Forward!*[127]

The oversimplified language, therefore, brings to the fore the ideological power structures engraved into the characters' (sub)consciousness. When Pecheykin appeared on the talk show *I Don't Believe* on the Russian Orthodox Christian TV channel Spas ("savior"), as a non-believer (an agnostic, in this case) in conversation with a member of the Church, he recalled his experience with baptism as a child:

> My parents put me into the car, […] we went to the church together with my sister, and I asked: "Mom, where are we going?" "To the church, we'll be baptizing you." I asked: "What for?" […] Mom said that if we don't get baptized, not only will we keep getting sick, but possibly also go to hell—although she wasn't sure, she didn't know much about it either. Finally, we were baptized, we didn't understand anything, we were handed baptism certificates, and went back home […]. *I realized that there was some enormous power that never explained but only manifested itself, [a power] that you only have to obey.*[128]

[126] Sperling, *Sex, Politics, and Putin*, 3.
[127] Pecheykin, V. Personal interview with G. Vinokurov, July 2019
[128] Телеканал «СПАС», 'НЕ ВЕРЮ! ПРОТОИЕРЕЙ МАКСИМ ПЕРВОЗВАНСКИЙ И ДРАМАТУРГ ВАЛЕРИЙ ПЕЧЕЙКИН.', YouTube, 22 December 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ACic8_7SLFc.

This anecdote, which might have also inspired the character of Denis in *Falcons*, illustrates the idea of oppressive power that looks to regulate people's lives even within a semblance of freedom. The characters of *My Moscow* may believe that they "fooled" God, but at the end of the play, a ball of fire enters their apartment, and Sorokina immediately identifies it as God. She begs for forgiveness (again, only being able to solve problems "the Moscow way"—in material terms, by offering to buy the most expensive candles at the church), but it is too late. One by one, the fire ball/God kills all the characters, thus ending the play in this punitive version of deus ex machina.

The middle part of the play does not utilize the experimental Moscow language, yet it is equally important for the discussion of queer writing. The transition to it is abrupt and unexpected. While still in the grasp of the Moscow language, the youngest Sorokin, Ivan, demands luxury goods: an iPhone and a trip to a popular tourist destination, Egypt. As names can be randomly assigned to referents, it is collectively decided that a sweater that Svetlana finds is, in fact, an iPhone. When Svetlana proceeds to look for *Egypt* in a drawer, suddenly, it is overflowed with white porridge. This disturbing discovery is a turning point in the play. The characters begin to speak normally, in a very realistic conversational language similar to that of *Falcons*, and their reaction to this extraordinary event seems reasonable: they are perplexed and try to find a logical explanation. What happens here is a shift from a unidimensional world existing and functioning exclusively at the linguistic level to a multilayered one, where the constructed imitation of reality and the fictional poetic level are distinguishable. However, this "realistic" illusion starts to crumble very soon. The porridge, as Ivan discovers, comes from a hole in the wall that is "round," "soft," and pulsating, as it emits the white substance. The resemblance of this

image to a post-intercourse anus is unambiguous. When Hélène Cixous wrote about inscribing female corporeality into text in order to bring forth *écriture féminine*, some of the criticism that this concept faced had to do with the approach that was perceived as essentialist, and therefore reinforcing the phallocentric discourse. In Pecheykin's case, the body that becomes a part of the text, its fabric, does not have an identity, but rather represents a subversive sexual act, and thus escapes normalization through identification.

Another possible interpretation for the porridge coming out of the anus-like hole in the wall is a symbolic representation of the act of defecation, the final stage of digestion, where the high concentration of discursive disturbance is temporarily relieved. These two interpretations are not mutually exclusive. On the contrary, sex and consumption are closely interrelated in *My Moscow*.

When the characters switch to the traditional conversational language, the task of communication does not become any easier. In fact, the superstructures of additional meanings often appear to obscure the message. Pecheykin shows the improbability of communication by writing certain discursive disturbances into the text. First of all, this allows for continuous development. The change to normal diction does not breach the dynamic of the play, and the tension continues to rise. A notable example is a conversation between Sorokina and Proskudina. Presented in a form of a personal exchange about the difficulties they face living in Moscow, particularly with regards to housing, the actual content of what they say is increasingly surreal. Proskudina says that a long time ago, when her husband and she had just moved into their new apartment, she had an abortion. After that, the spirit of her unborn child (in the form of a demon from Slavic mythology) was visiting her to sit on her chest and threaten her to never leave until

she turns down the new apartment. This disturbing revelation treads a thin line between reality and fiction, a balance that is disturbed as the narrative swings decisively into the sphere of the absurd with Sorokina's response:

> SOROKINA: So much trouble with all that housing, so much trouble! Kirill and I also had our share of that. We had just come from Yaroslavl, got a small apartment in Altufyevo, and everything seemed fine. But then I got really sick: *I had a face growing on my back*. I saw every single doctor—didn't know what to do. They kept on sending me to different hospitals. […] I couldn't even lie on my back—it would start hurting and mumbling. […][129]

Several important observations can be made here. First, in line with the Moscow theme of the play, the characters, again, focus on housing. Housing is important not only because it is so hard to get an apartment in Moscow, but especially because having one helps separate "us" (Muscovites) from "others" (immigrants and internal migrants from other regions of Russia). While being the main destination for migration, there is an entire xenophobic lexicon associated mainly with Moscow. Words like *ponaekhali* ("came in large numbers," derogatory), *limita* (derogatory, initially used for temporary workers coming to big cities, now often for migrants in general), *churka* (a racial slur, mainly for people from Central Asia and the Caucasus) to name a few, are characteristic of this language and a stereotypical "Muscovite identity," which the characters of *My Moscow* are referring to (and strive for) at the end of the play:

> SOROKINA: Before Moscow be total shit—churka, traffic jam.
> IVAN: Now we Muscovite. Now we call everyone shit. Say "ponaekhali."

[129] СОРОКИНА. Сколько бед с этой жилплощадью, сколько бед! Мы тоже с Кириллом намучались. Приехали мы тогда из Ярославля, квартирку получили в Алтуфьево и все вроде в порядке. Только заболела я сильно: на спине лицо начало расти. Я по всем докторам ходила — не знала, что делать. Гоняли по госпиталям, гоняли. […] На спине лежать невозможно — болеть начинает и бормочет. […]

SVETLANA: Walking as if cultured, as if pedigree and silver cutlery, while empty inside.

IVAN: Yes, empty like Muscovite.[130]

This example comes from the end of the play, where Pecheykin goes back to the Moscow language. But the theme of the "Other" as an enemy runs consistently through the entirety of *My Moscow*. Around the middle of it, in the most "realistic" section (both linguistically and narratively), the Sorokins begin to question whether they were indeed lucky to get their new apartment when they have to clean up human excrements from the staircase landing. The trope of "marginalized elements" (hooligans, drug addicts, alcoholics, homeless people, and immigrants) who come to "shit in your stairwell" has become a part of modern-life folklore, used both literally and figuratively (as a metaphor for a stealthy malicious act). In the symbolic repertoire of the play, human waste is a vital sign; in this case, the excrements are an ominous sign of the enemy's very real presence and physical existence. Just like the family at the centre of *Falcons* is a microcosm that reflects society as a whole, in *My Moscow* this idea expands to the scale of a megapolis. Carving out their space in the city, the characters adapt by learning to hate the presumed intruders (be it a supernatural creature or a Central Asian immigrant), who can potentially steal their food, jobs, or take over their apartments. Ironically, the language that Pecheykin invents for the contemporary inhabitants of Moscow is as broken as the Russian spoken by their "enemy." The play is still focused on a particular family, but the

[130] СОРОКИНА. Раньше Москва полный говно быть — чурка, пробка.
ИВАН. Теперь мы сам — москвич. Теперь мы всех говном обзывать. «Понаехали» говорить.
СВЕТЛАНА. Как будто интеллигентный ходить, как будто родословная и столовый серебро, а сам пустой внутри.
ИВАН. Да, пустой, как москвич.

family attempts to integrate itself into a larger system, even though this process is never quite completed—and it is eventually fatal for the wannabe Muscovites.

The conversation between Proskudina and Sorokina also demonstrates the improbability of communication. Despite the extraordinary absurdity of the experiences that they share with each other, neither seems to have any reaction to what they hear: they either do not listen to each other or assume each other's stories to be normal. This logical "error" sets off a spiral of madness. First, Sorokin-senior is abducted by a giant crow (a relative to the magpie of the main characters' last name; also a link to Pecheykin's next play, *Russia, Forward!*, where the Vorontsov family (Russian: *voróna,* "a crow") is introduced). Then, a full-blown war begins, with bombs exploding outside, damaging the apartment.

The event is referred to as the siege of Moscow, which is, in the context of the play, is a clear reference to the siege of Leningrad. One of the most tragic pages in the history of the Great Patriotic War, the memory of the 872-day-long blockade is an important part of Soviet and Russian culture, and its survivors are among the most revered Russian citizens. Therefore, any portrayal of these events other than tragic and heroic, or reference to them that may be deemed disrespectful, are a definite taboo in Russia, where victory in the war is still a crucial part of national identity. One of the latest examples is the 2019 movie *Holiday* written and directed by Alexey Krasovsky. Announced as a comedy about the siege of Leningrad, it caused a massive outrage from the government and the conservative part of population, even though the film does not focus on the ordinary people of Leningrad[131]—but does allude to the people currently in

[131] The film is based on archival evidence that some Party officials and people close to them continued living a privileged and luxury life in the occupied city, while millions of people were starving to death.

power.[132] In *My Moscow*, Pecheykin takes even more freedom in using images of the siege. This includes animalistic, satirical representation of cannibalism (also related to the trope of people "eating each other" metaphorically as a part of the competitive Moscow lifestyle) and the scene where Proskudin is said to have accidentally turned his sled over himself (in Leningrad during the siege, people used sleds to transport various objects, but also the bodies of their deceased). At the end of the play, the characters are planning a decadent celebration to mark the end of the blockade. The ensuing conversation reveals the hypocrisy that often accompanies the celebration of past heroic achievement as a part of national identity, while the separation in time gradually voids it of its original meaning:

> SVETLANA: (*picks up the TV remote*) Oh! TV working!
> PROKUDINA: What it showing?
> SVATLANA: A program: "They survive the blockade."
> PROSKUDINA: (*sits down next to her*) Interesting…
> SVETLANA: Here a funny blockade story.
> PROSKUDIN: I so scared when the sled turning over.
> IVAN: (*puts away the phone*) Mother, I going soon.
> SOROKINA: Where?
> IVAN: To a foie-gras party for the end of blockade.
> SOROKINA: Stopping by the store—buying fricassé and a calendar about the one-year blockade![133]

[132] Алексей Красовский, «Я все выдумал! И надеюсь, что имею на это право в нашей стране», interview by Саша Сулим, 15 October 2018, https://meduza.io/feature/2018/10/15/ya-vse-vydumal-i-nadeyus-chto-imeyu-na-eto-pravo-v-nashey-strane.

[133] СВЕТЛАНА (берет пульт). О! Телевизор работать!
ПРОСКУДИНА. Что показывать?
СВЕТЛАНА. Передача: «Они пережить блокада».
ПРОСКУДИНА (садится рядом). Интересный…
СВЕТЛАНА. Здесь смешной историй про блокада.
ПРОСКУДИН. Я так бояться, когда санки перевернуть.
ИВАН (убирает телефон). Мать, я скоро уходить.

Just like in this and previous examples, the Moscow language lays bare the deepest, subconscious intentions of the characters and ideological models that shape their consciousness. Achieving this fusion of word and action requires simplifying the language. Consequently, this erases a lot of additional information expressed by means of the rich and complex Russian grammar. Using the infinitives almost exclusively eliminates the notion of gender that is inscribed into certain forms of the verbs. This is even more relevant for nouns and modifiers, which should normally agree in several grammatical properties, including gender—a rule that Pecheykin often ignores. This results in gender fluidity: gender is no longer something essentially predetermined. It can be "put on" the same way as a sweater can be called "an iPhone" if it is marked as such. In the play, the inescapable idea of gender is destabilized by way of disrupting grammatical agreement:

> SVETLANA: Petya is not like *it*. Cultured.[134]

In the original Russian, Svetlana refers to Petya in neuter, instead of the expected masculine gender. Later, Sokolova uses a masculine modifier when talking about Svetlana:

> SOROKINA: (*quickly puts a dish on the table*) Not allowed! Sveta—*your son*-in-law![135]

Consequently, the characters do not immediately recognize each other's gender, or do so upon further reflection, which only emphasizes the constructed nature of gender identity.

СОРОКИНА. Куда?
ИВАН. На фуа-гра-party в честь конец блокада.
СОРОКИНА. Заходить в магазин — покупать фрикасе и календарь про годовой блокада.

[134] СВЕТЛАНА. Петя не такое. Интеллигентный.

[135] СОРОКИНА (быстро ставит блюдо на стол). Нельзя! Света — твой невестка!

The situation becomes more complicated when they switch to normal language. It solidifies gender identification and corresponding expectations for how gender is to be performed. The character of Ivan becomes the one to disrupt these expectations. Ivan suddenly introduces himself as a woman, moreover, Ivan's (his own) beloved. This transition is marked with little more than some red lipstick:

> IVAN: Yes, I heard about it. My beloved went to war…
> PYOTR: And you…
> IVAN: I'm waiting for him. Because I love Vanya.
> PYOTR: And you are… a woman?
> IVAN: (*laughs*) Can't you see? (*points at the lips*) I am a woman.
> PYOTR: And you have all the lady parts?
> IVAN: (*laughs*) Yes.[136]

Ivan's act of changing his gender identity startles the family, as it is strongly subversive in contrast to the (hetero)normative discourse of this part of the play. Ivan's performance is of particular interest here: he laughs while answering Pyotr's questions about his gender identity. According to Elizabeth Stephens, laughter is crucial for Jean Genet's version of queer writing. For Genet (and for Hélène Cixous, who perceived Genet's work as a notable example of *écriture féminine*), "[…] laughter is a mode of disruption, a defiant celebration of impropriety that challenges the dominant culture and provides an escape route out of a language that so often functions as a prison for marginal subjects."[137] Stephens argues that "[a]s a simultaneously verbal and physical act,

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[136] ИВАН. Да, я слышал. Мой возлюбленный ушел на войну…
ПЕТР. А вы…
ИВАН. Я его жду. Потому что люблю Ваню.
ПЕТР. А вы… женщина?
ИВАН (смеется). Разве не видно? (Указывает на губы.) Я женщина.
ПЕТР. А у вас все женское?
ИВАН (смеется). Да.

[137] Stephens, *Queer Writing*, 140.

laughter occurs at, and also blurs, the margins of language."[138] This corresponds to the discursive-corporeal transition already discussed previously: in the language of the play, the simultaneously symbolic and literal references to consumption of food, cannibalism, and sexual acts, blur the margins between the linguistic and corporeal dimensions. This creates an "escape route"[139] from the dominant discourse. Queer writing occupies this marginal space, which allows it to subvert the heteronormative discourse. The characters are placed in a critical and extraordinary situation: hiding in their apartment from war, trying to survive in the face of hunger and imminent death. They begin to lose their humanity and slide into the same condition that they occupied in the realm of the Moscow language, where all desires, reduced to basic instincts, required being articulated verbally—and thus, were immediately realized. But the normative language, permeated by social constructs, resists this freedom of expression, causing a moral dilemma. Svetlana, the only person who openly talks about her desires (to eat, to live a better life, to have sex) is hypocritically despised by other characters. A seemingly marginal character amongst them, she still belongs to the same discourse as everybody else; it is Ivan who escapes it by abandoning his identity. At one point, Svetlana suggests that Ivan could be sold to a gay couple allegedly living next door from the Proskudins:

> SVETLANA: I thought that maybe sodomites would buy Vanya.
> PROSKUDINA: What for?!
> SVETLANA: Quiet. (*whispers*) To fuck him, while he's still alive.
> PROSKUDINA: Sveta, you're sick.
> SVETLANA: (*crawls away*) I'm not sick, I am thinking about how we're going to survive… (*crawls*) in the state of crisis…[140]

[138] Stephens, 140.
[139] Stephens, 140.
[140] СВЕТЛАНА. Я подумала, что, может быть, содомиты купят Ваню.

Svetlana's mention of "the state of crisis" evokes the idea of the "state of exception" described by Carl Schmitt and later developed by Giorgio Agamben. The state of exception, which suggests a presumed threat to the state, gives the sovereign power to transcend the law, dismantle it, and take away citizen rights from the population, reducing citizens to "bare life." Agamben builds upon the distinction between two Greek words, *bios* and *zoē*. Both words mean "life," yet in two very distinct meanings. *Bios* refers to political life, that is, the life of an individual as a part of society and politics. *Zoē* is the "bare life," or life in its general, biological sense. If these two concepts are to be applied to the fictional world of *My Moscow*, the state represented by the experimental Moscow language may be interpreted as the closest to *zoē*. This means that the language invented by Pecheykin positions them into a marginal state where they are expelled from the dominant discourse, but not completely; the ideological ties (traditional family, religion, patriotism) are still in place, even if very loosely. The more animalistic, *zoological* nature comes forward through bodily acts: sexual intercourse and pleasure, consumption, and defecation—with the discursive and biological becoming one. The characters would even refer to each other occasionally as "clumps of atoms." The situation is different with the "normal" language. This part of the play represents the normal condition of an individual belonging to a modern society. In this individual, both bios and zoē are combined, with the political element dominating and governing the existence. In *My Moscow*, the war, however, simulates the state of exception; the balance shifts towards the animalistic mode of living. That being said, the social ties are still

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ПРОСКУДИНА. Зачем?!
СВЕТЛАНА. Тихо. (Шепотом.) Трахать его, пока он живой.
ПРОСКУДИНА. Света, вы больная.
СВЕТЛАНА (отползает). Я не больная, а думаю, как нам жить… (ползет) в условиях кризиса…

strong: the characters are capable of evaluating the situation and considering possible repercussions of breaking the social order. Svetlana attempts to meddle with it, but never successfully; the only character who manages to subvert it is Ivan. Ivan's role, in Agamben's terms, may be interpreted as a *homo sacer*. In Roman law, a homo sacer is an individual who is deprived of his rights as a citizen and therefore can be killed with impunity by anyone. His *sacred* status implies, however, that he cannot be sacrificed. Thus, the existence of homo sacer is a paradox, as he is simultaneously expelled from the society, existing outside, *elsewhere*, but is still a part of it *by way of being excluded from it*. In *My Moscow*, Ivan, just like a homo sacer—or (to an extent) his Russian Orthodox counterpart, *yurodivy* (a holy fool)—is no longer a part of his social group. Ivan can be subjected to violence and humiliation (Svetlana strips him naked; Pyotr touches his genitals to prove that Ivan is not a woman), but when Svetlana suggests that Ivan can be eaten or sold, this idea is rejected. Eating a person in the act of cannibalism is perceived as that person's sacrifice. When Svetlana puts herself forward to be eaten by the members of her family (even though her real plan is to trick them), her sacrifice is accepted with reverence. Ivan, however, cannot be sacrificed. Not even the corpse of Sorokin senior would be suitable for this role: he did not give his consent while still alive. The ritualized cannibalism requires a person with the rights of a full citizen and human to make this decision. Both, dead Sorokin and queer Ivan have lost those rights and are in a liminal position on the margins of society.

Svetlana's suggestion to sell Ivan to "sodomites" is also an attempt to identify, label him, and thus "translate" him and his body into the heteronormative discourse. Even the experimental language of the play is still demonstratively, even parodically

phallogocentric, a quality that is physically enacted in the play in a very carnivalesque form, like when Pyotr's erect penis immediately becomes the centre of attraction:

> SVETLANA: Petya!.. (*sees that he is naked*) Shaved willy! Washed willy! Sucking!!!
>
> Runs towards her husband, kneels down, and begins to suck his penis.[141]

Ivan's metamorphosis disrupts this paradigm, and Pyotr is definitely disturbed by this fact, hence his attempt to touch Ivan's crotch—to demonstrate the *presence* of phallus/penis and reestablish its destabilized dominance. Ivan does not allow that to happen, resisting any form of gender identification other than performative (red lipstick and self-presentation). Ivan goes on to briefly assume another identity and announce himself to be *Satan*. This is the ultimate subversive role in the system where God (to whom Satan is the polar opposite) represents the dominant normative power. During a sudden aerial attack on the city, Ivan/Satan is the only one in the room who does not try to hide, thus demonstrating that he is beyond the reach of the dominant power and represents a separate, parallel discourse. He proclaims: "None of you matters to me."[142] This is an empowered version of the moment in *Falcons* where Denis realizes his exclusion from the family and says: "I'm not your child, you hate me!" Even as a Satan, of course, Ivan does not completely evade the dominant discourse: Satan does not exist without God, just like the idea of God relies on the idea of Satan as its counterpart. He is able, however, to cross the discursive threshold and obtain the power to disrupt it that is inaccessible for those existing only within that discourse: with a hand gesture, he stops

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СВЕТЛАНА. Петя!.. (Видит, что он голый.) Бритый пися! Мытый пися! Сосать!!!
Подбегает к мужу, опускается на колени и начинает сосать его член.

142 Никто из вас не дорог мне.

the bombing of the city. But in the following scene he transforms back into a *woman*, Ivan's "beloved." The transformation is triggered by the discovery of Proskudins' dead kitten, whose body is so deformed that it is no longer identifiable as a cat. Even Pecheykin's stage directions refer to it as "something strange," or something *queer*.[143] Ivan's female alter-ego ($Ivan_{she}$), however, identifies him as *Ivan*. By naming it, she turns a shapeless substance into Ivan's body. But the entity created in this manner is a pure fiction that does not exist outside of the utterance that brought it into being. Yuri Lotman and Boris Uspenskii write in "Myth—name—culture": "Let us recall in this regard that the general meaning of proper noun is tautological in principle: any name is not characterized by differential features but merely denotes the object to which the given name is attached."[144] This means that $Ivan_{she}$ essentially gives the name "Ivan" (which, by virtue of being a proper name, only has a meaning when it refers to a particular person known in a given context) to a unidentifiable object. This would be only natural in the beginning of the play, which constructs a reality that is purely linguistic, with multiple floating signifiers; in a multilayered reality (even though the world of the play is, of course, still fictional) it is no longer possible: nobody can read a sign that does not refer to anything in the real world and thus bears no meaning. Just like turning bread and wine into the flesh and blood of Christ, this form of *transubstantiation* is only possible when its witnesses are believers. What was possible in the realm of the Moscow language (turning sweaters into iPhones, animals into people, and people into gods), does not work in the reality of the normative language. At this moment, two discourses co-exist in the

[143] Филипп Романович вываливает из тряпки на пол что-то непонятное.
[144] Iu.M. Lotman and B.A. Uspenskii, 'Myth—Name—Culture', in *Semiotics and Structuralism: Readings from the Soviet Union*, ed. Henryk Baran (White Plains, NY: International Arts and Sciences Press, 1976), 6.

play, which again evokes the sonata form: after two "themes" (linguistically experimental and normative) are first introduced separately, their intensive parallel development ensues.

To ensure such dynamic development, Ivan's "satanic" metamorphoses are counteracted by Svetlana's unexpected religious awakening. In a stark contrast to the harsh, obscene language she used throughout the play, now her elevated speech sounds more like a prayer:

> SVETLANA: O Lord! Out of the depths have I cried unto thee! I am guilty of everything, and everything I repent! My punishment is that I lost you—we all did. You left quietly, like a dove, and Satan arrived right after.
> PROSKUDINA: Sveta speaks so beautifully…
> SVETLANA: And even if I survive, what is the point of this life? I am asking but one thing—do not punish me. One day without bread, two more, three, but what is eternity without you, o Lord? I am hungry for you, Father. You are my bread, you are my food. It's not Moscow that is under siege, it is my soul…
> SOROKINA: She's lost her mind.
> PROSKUDIN: Right, this doesn't sound like Sveta.[145]

Svetlana then offers her family members to eat her. After an emotional farewell, they leave her alone in the room to let her prepare for this sacrifice. As soon as they are out of the door, however, she is about to eat the late Kirill Sorokin's corpse, and is only stopped

[145] СВЕТЛАНА. Господи! Я взываю к тебе из бездны! Во всем виновата, во всем раскаиваюсь! Наказана тем, что лишена тебя — мы все лишились тебя. Ты ушел тихо, как голубь, а сатана вошел следом.
ПРОСКУДИНА. Как Света хорошо говорит…
СВЕТЛАНА. И даже если выживу, зачем мне эта жизнь? Об одном прошу — не карай меня. Еще день без хлеба, еще два, три, но что такое вечность без тебя, Господи? Я изголодалась по тебе, Отец. Ты мой хлеб, ты моя пища. Это не Москва в блокаде, это душа моя в ней…
СОРОКИНА. Она сошла с ума.
ПРОСКУДИН. Да, это не похоже на Свету.

by the announcement of the war's termination. In the mythology of this play, Svetlana is a trickster-like figure. Her behaviour is subversive towards social norms, although never enough to transcend the dominant discourse the way Ivan does. However, when the play as a whole is considered, Svetlana and Ivan form an unlikely tandem that helps to "stretch" the heteronormative discourse, thus being an important component of Pecheykin's queer writing.

Overall, in order to describe the principle behind the implementation of queer writing in *My Moscow*, it is necessary to consider its many components that together form this mode of writing. All of them are intertwined and would not have had the same effect each on their own. First of all, the linguistic element of the play is crucial for understanding the functioning of queer writing. Pecheykin begins with an ungrammatical, "broken" version of Russian that may be referred to as "the Moscow language": according to Pecheykin, it is an exaggerated imitation of how people speak in the fast-paced, consumerism-oriented Russian capital. It is abruptly juxtaposed with a very normal, conversational Russian. Alluding to Giordano Agamben's ideas, it is possible to describe the Moscow language as that of "bare life," or *zoē.* This language represents an attempt to do away with social norms by reducing a word to its intent, to *action*. This language cannot completely separate itself from the dominant discourse. However, the abstract ideas belonging to that discourse (family, religion, patriotism, etc.) are exposed in their artificiality, and its phallogocentric nature is parodied. The Moscow language is a purely linguistic construct, and as a dramatic text to be enacted on stage, it can be compared to performance of a ritual, realized through direct, unmediated connection of word and action. Another parallel could be drawn with Shklovsky's *laying bare* the

device, where a literary device (like a metaphor) is used in its *literal* sense, and even visualized in a different medium.[146]

The normative language, on the contrary, has multiple dimensions, including that mimicking the reality. It adheres to certain social codes that dictate what is appropriate and what is not, what lies within social norms and what does not. Early on, however, Pecheykin introduces surrealist elements, until the development of the play is in full swing during "the siege of Moscow." In the state of war, the characters slide surely from their life "as social beings" (*bios*) into "bare life" (*zoē*). This mostly applies to Svetlana, who subverts social norms by demonstrating a behaviour that was only possible in the world of the Moscow language. She demonstrates all of the seven deadly sins as per Christian teaching: her sexual desire (*lust*), her unsatisfiable hunger (*gluttony*), *greed*, outbursts of anger (*wrath*), indifference to God and the mores of society (*sloth*), her *envy* for others' possessions, and most importantly—*hubris*: the pride of being a Muscovite and the feeling of superiority and selfishness associated with it. Almost everyone else in the play is guilty of the same vices (especially pride), but nobody manifests them quite as strongly as Svetlana. This almost costs her being excluded from the society (at one point, her husband pronounces her "dead," other characters repeatedly suggest that she is "insane.") However, she manages to avoid this exclusion by undergoing an unexpected transformation: she purifies herself with the faith of God. Pretending to be willing to sacrifice her life, she elevates herself in the eyes of her family to be the closest to God of them all. This also puts her into an opposition to Ivan, who assumes the role of Satan.

[146] For instance, in cinema. The 1926 silent film *Overcoat* (written by Yuri Tynyanov) offers a number of examples. One of them—visualizing the idiom "the business is in the hat" (expressing the certainty of success—the deal is "*in the bag*") as a close-up of a hat with a document folder in it.

Ivan is at the centre of the more specifically queer element of the play. He easily changes his identity, and the very ease with which it is done—with laughter (expression of impropriety, the point where discourse turns into body), exposes the performativity of gender and subverts the dominant discourse, into which fixed gender identities are inscribed. Transforming himself into Satan is the peak of his metamorphosis. A genderless being, apart from the dogmatic interpretation as the personification of all things evil, Satan is the epitome of a figure excluded from the normative world order, and yet inseparable from it, as one cannot exist without the other. The expelled figure also continues to "tweak" the system that ostracized it from the outside. This nontheistic interpretation of Satan has entered popular culture, and unsurprisingly, such organizations as the Satanic Temple attract many queer followers.[147] In *My Moscow*, when Ivan begins performing as Satan, he briefly acquires the power beyond what any other character could fathom—he even can control the narrative of the play and stop the attack on the city for a moment. With his disruptive behaviour, he allows the *queering* of the heteronormative discourse by introducing the discourse of the "bare life" into that of the social order. Symbolically, this is represented by the hole in the wall that resembles an anus and emits white substance. This opening marks the discursive shift and is first discovered by Ivan. In a very queer interpretation of this symbol, the anus is not only a point of exit, but also a point of entry—for the subversive discourse into the normative one.

Agamben highlights the importance of language in the distinction between *bios* and *zoē* by quoting a passage from Aristotle's *Politics*:

[147] Kate Ryan, 'How the Satanic Temple Became a Queer Haven', Vice, 24 July 2017, https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/zmv7my/how-the-satanic-temple-became-a-queer-haven.

> Among living beings, only man has language. The voice is the sign of pain and pleasure, and this is why it belongs to other living beings […] But language is for manifesting the fitting and the unfitting and the just and the unjust. To have the sensation of the good and the bad and of the just and the unjust is what is proper to men as opposed to other living beings, and the community of these things makes dwelling and the city.[148]

The Moscow language is indeed a language, and yet it notably demonstrates a lack of proper judgement, being effective only in communicating basic, immediate intentions. In this sense, it is closer to what Aristotle calls a *voice*, rather than a language, and appears as an expression of the biological life, *zoē*. Therefore, the eruption of the Moscow language into the normative discourse signifies the eruption of *zoē* into *bios*. That being said, what is at issue here is different from Agamben's discussion of modern states, where bare life enters the political discourse and is consequently politicized. Aspects of human life pertaining to its biological constituent, such as sex, procreation, overall physical existence are subject of regulations from the state, the "sovereign," who may choose to expell a part of the population, take away their political rights based on the discrepancy, real or even invented, between their biological life and the social code. Elements of *zoē* are already present in the life of the Sorokin family. Their fascination with (and, occasionally, their fear of) everything corporeal showcases that, as well as the fact that social norms shape and regulate their relationship with their own bodies. Sex has to happen within the heteronormative family, while the idea of family is fused with capitalistic consumerism (acquiring a mortgage and *better* housing), and religion as a spiritual justification for the existence of family as a social institute. Ivan, as the queer

[148] Agamben, *Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, 7.

hero of the play, creates a window through which the non-normative discourse can penetrate and disrupt the whole machinery of the dominant discourse, and this elusive, unidentifiable ability is the main principle of queer writing.

Pecheykin not only deconstructs some of the concepts that are known as traditional values (family, religion, gender roles), exposing their constructedness and loss of meaning. He also plays with ideologically important elements of culture, by parodying the siege of Leningrad or stereotypes associated with Moscow, all of which have to do with national identity and its opposition to "the Other," or external enemy: an enemy outside one's home, family, city, or country. This antagonist is never specified (other than by a racial slur) or shown, and nobody even questions who and why is attacking Moscow.

With Ivan, *My Moscow* sees the formation of a queer hero that started in *Falcons* with Denis. By no means a "typical" hero, a character in this position is instrumental to queer writing. This figure will transform again in Pecheykin's 2014 play *A Little Hero*.

From one family in *Falcons*, a family and *the* city in *My Moscow*, Pecheykin continues to expand the stage for the action of his plays, scaling up to a dystopian version of the entire country in *Russia, Forward!*

Chapter III. *Russia, Forward!* (2011) and *A Little Hero* (2014)

This chapter will focus on Pecheykin's later plays and discuss how the playwright's queer writing continued to develop in his works.

1. *Russia, Forward!*

Talking about *Russia, Forward!*, Pecheykin acknowledged how, in retrospective, the play "predicted" later political situation in the country. Similarly to *My Moscow*, this play was written when Dmitriy Medvedev was president, and in popular imagination, this was supposed to be the time of change and progress. However, *Russia, Forward!* shows the exact opposite—an image of a country that is not just stagnated, but, in fact, moves backwards. Soon, after the law against the propaganda of "non-traditional" relationships among minors was passed in 2013, the journalist and author Masha Gessen would be talking about an "image of time turned abruptly backwards."[149]

The play's name references an article penned by Dmitriy Medvedev in 2009 under the same title ("Russia, Forward!"), discussing ways in which President Medvedev was going to lead the country into its brightest future.[150] In 2010, the oppositional Russian journalist Oleg Kashin published a satirical book *Roissya Vperde: Fantasticheskaya Poverst'* ("Ruissa Forwadr: A Sci-Fi Story", Russian: *Роисся впердe: фантастическая повесть*). The title of the book shuffles the letters in the name of Medvedev's article following a popular Internet meme.[151] The motif of changing the order of letters will be also referenced in Pecheykin's play, where it develops into a fictional example of *verbal*

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[150] Дмитрий Медведев, 'Россия, вперёд! Статья Дмитрия Медведева', Сайт Президента России, 10 September 2009, http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/5413.

[151] https://d3.ru/vpered-239320/?sorting=rating

hygiene, when one of the characters wonders if in the country turned backwards she has to change the way she speaks as well.

In the same fashion as his previous plays, Pecheykin gave his characters a "bird" family name. In this case it is Vorontsov, which (regardless of its actual etymology) has the same root as *vóron* – "raven." All these last names—including Sokolov (*Falcons*) and Sorokin (*My Moscow*)—are also very popular and "typically Russian." In contrast to Vorontsov, the Jewish characters in *Russia, Forward!* have the German last name Tsuryuk (Zurück), which is most definitely a charactonym. Meaning "backwards" in German, it encapsulates the premise of the play, but also points at the unusual direction in which these characters are set to take the narrative.

Russia, Forward! shows a dystopian version of Russia, where, following the assassination of the president, at prime minister's order time begins to move backwards. Now everyone in the country has to live their lives backwards: the dead come back to life and the living grow younger until they return into their mothers' wombs. The Vorontsov family is no exception. They have to follow the strict laws of the new Russia: dig out their dead grandfather, vomit their food instead of eating it, and suck their excrements back into their bodies through their anuses. Maxim, Lyubov Vorontsova's husband, seems to be the only person who notices that the new order of things is fundamentally absurd; he, however, has his own skeleton in the closet.

His has to confront his own six-year-old son Borya, a wiseman in the body of a child, who dreams of immortality. The mysterious main antagonist of the play, and the ruler of the country, is Melkiy (the Little One), who de-aged into an embryo the size of a pea and has to be looked at through a magnifying glass. He feeds young boys to the Mother (a

depiction of an old woman with her legs spread and a deadly black hole in place of a vagina) in order to live forever and not have to return into her.

Leaving his family, who have all succumbed to the absurdity of the new order, Maxim has to save his own mother, Dina Tsuryuk. Then she starts a revolution and eventually defeats Melkiy, thus restoring the course of time. In the final scene, she gives birth to Maxim again, who comes out to the sound of fanfares waving a Russian flag.

Maybe even stronger than *My Moscow*, the play demonstrates the influence of Vladimir Sorokin on Pecheykin, notably his satirical dystopian plays, like *Shchi* («Щи», 1995-1996), or his novel *Norma* (1979-1983), which Pecheykin also adapted for stage at the Gogol Centre in 2019. *Norma* ("the norm") is especially relevant in relation to *Russia, Forward!*, as both works show the degree of absurdity to which the conformity imposed by a totalitarian government can get, be it eating human waste or putting it back into bodies.

A distinct element of *Russia, Forward!* is the prominence of the mother figure, who represents simultaneously beginning and end of life. Death by returning into mother's body brings to mind a wide-spread cultural myth of *vagina dentata*. For instance, in Māori mythology, the hero Māui attempts to win immortality for the humankind by defeating Hine-nui-te-pō, the goddess of night and transition into the afterlife, by going through her body. [Fig.2] But Māui fails: he is crushed by the teeth in Hine-nui-te-pō's vagina. While no vaginal teeth are present in Pecheykin's play, male characters are still terrified of female genitals—the symbol of their inevitable demise. For them, such death is not only the end of life, but also of their masculinity. In the play, this is demonstrated mostly through the character of Borya, who objectifies his mother's body

and seeks to seize control over it. Thus, the female body becomes the point where discourse and material world (corporeality) meet and fuse into each other.

The theme of *the Other*, an enemy, which was already prominent in Pecheykin's earlier plays, finds a continuation in *Russia, Forward!* in the form of blatant antisemitism. Dina Albertovna Tsuryuk and her son Maxim are Jewish, a fact that other characters do not hesitate to use in order to marginalize them as enemies. When Borya receives a boardgame called "The State: United and Whole" as a gift, he lists the kinds of figurines that are expected to come with it ("there are kikes, faggots, yanks"[152]), to which his mother responds: "That was in the outdated version, son. The one you have is a new one. There are only figurines of Russian people left, and the squares are arranged simply, in a circle."[153] The lineup of the "enemies" expelled from the game (and presumably from the country)—Jews, homosexuals, and Americans—was not selected by chance. Presenting the latter two as a joined force against Russian values (and its sovereignty) has become a staple of the Russian nationalist discourse. It is important to note, as Eliot Borenstein points out in his book *Plots against Russia: Conspiracy and Fantasy after Socialism*,[154] that it is specifically Western liberalism that is considered to be a threat. Unsurprisingly, among those public figures who publicly made antisemitic statements are people also known for their anti-Western and anti-gay stance, such as Dmitry Kiselev and Vitaly Milonov.[155] But there is another point of view on the correlation between

[152] Печейкин, Валерий. "Россия, вперёд!" 2011. Unpublished play.
Я знаю, там есть жидяры, гомосеки, пиндосы.
[153] Это устаревшая игра, сынок. Та, что у тебя - новая. Там остались только фигурки русских людей, клеточки расположены просто и по кругу.
[154] Eliot Borenstein, *Plots against Russia: Conspiracy and Fantasy after Socialism* (Cornell University Press, 2019), 135.
[155] Stephen Ennis, 'Russian Jews Fear Anti-Semitism amid Crimea Fervour', BBC News, 28 March 2014, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-26786213.

antisemitism and homophobia that is equally important to consider in the context of this study.

One of the most important Russian queer poets, Yevgeny Kharitonov (1941-1981), wrote in his "gay manifesto"[156] titled "Listovka" ("The Leaflet", 1990):

> We are barren fatal flowers. And like flowers we should be gathered and put in a vase for our beauty. Our question is in some respects like the Jewish question. […] Just as Judaic people have to be ridiculed in anecdote and as the image of the sparrow-Jew has to be held firm in the consciousness of all non-Jewish humanity so that Judeophobia is not extinguished—otherwise what would prevent the Jews from occupying all positions in the world? (and there is a belief that exactly this would be the end of the world)—even so our lightweight floral species with its pollen flying who knows where has to be ridiculed and turned by the crude straight common sense of the simple people into a curse word.[157]

Antisemitism and homophobia are a product of the national idea based on traditional values that need to be protected from traitors and "foreign agents." Then, the "sovereign" of the state can execute his power to demonstratively expell an antagonized group from the public discourse. In this context, the antisemitic element in *Russia, Forward!* parallels the homophobia in *A Little Hero*.

2. A Little Hero

A Little Hero is one of the very few Pecheykin's works that deal *openly* and directly with homosexuality and homophobia. In an interview, Pecheykin admitted that the play was

[156] Kevin Moss, 'Yevgeny Kharitonov (1941-1981)', Russian Gay Culture, accessed 9 March 2020, https://community.middlebury.edu/~moss/Kharitonov.html.
[157] Yevgeny Kharitonov, 'The Leaflet', trans. Kevin Moss, Russian Gay Culture, accessed 9 March 2020, https://community.middlebury.edu/~moss/Listovka.html.

written "to be translated," and "with a different audience in mind."[158] Its American debut took place in New York City in the summer of 2014, at Shetler Studios and the Gene Frankel Theatre. [Fig.3] Pecheykin's friend, photographer, filmmaker, and director Alexander Kargaltsev directed the play under the title *Crematorium*. In this rendition, the play had an even stronger focus on the current sociopolitical situation in Russia (the "gay-propaganda" law and annexation of Crimea, where the setting of the play was relocated).[159]

The play opens with a scene in the Crematorium, where one of the characters, Alexander Ivanov, is being interrogated. Through the humiliating process he affirms that all the methods of conversion therapy applied to him have been unsuccessful, and his homosexuality remains unchanged. The next scene in the Crematorium takes place later in the play, but instead of Alexander, his partner Sergei Morozov is subjected to the same procedure. Presumably, at that point Alexander is already dead, and Sergei expresses indifference towards a similar prospect for himself, seeing no reason to live without his partner.

The following part introduces the *Little Hero* himself. Vovochka is a teenager of unspecified age raised by his strict grandmother, who made sure to instill into her grandson the utmost hatred towards queer people in order to guarantee that he would never become one of them. Vovochka grew up to be an all-too-enthusiastic social warrior

[158] Виктор Вилисов, '«Страшный Ор в Интеллигентской Среде Начинается, Когда Кто-Нибудь Напишет "Миньет" Вместо "Минет"»', Buro 24/7 Russia, 1 July 2016, https://www.buro247.ru/culture/theatre/zanimatsya-ya-mogu-tolko-tem-k-chemu-otnoshus-s-kh.html.
[159] Zachary Stewart, 'Crematorium Collaborators Alexander Kargaltsev and Pavel Solodovnikov Discuss Russia, Ukraine, and Their Latest Show', TheaterMania.com, 25 May 2014, https://www.theatermania.com/new-york-city-theater/news/kargaltsev-russia-ukraine-gay-crematorium_68660.html.

of Putin's regime. Having discovered a homosexual couple, Alexander and Sergei, Vovochka employs his friend Vanya to spy on them. After that, he exposes them to their whole neighbourhood with letters signed *LH* (a "Little Hero"). As a result, Alexander and Sergei are terrorized, and finally immured in their own apartment, when their door is sealed with spray foam.

Vovochka's friend Vanya is in love with Lyubochka, and Lyubochka has a secret: she has two mothers. Vovochka already knows about them, and Lyubochka asks Vanya to find out what his friend knows about her mothers, fearing he would try to expose them too.

Meanwhile, Vovochka's abusive grandmother tells him that a man renting an apartment next door must be a pedophile because of the way he watches her grandson. Vovochka then lures and captures the man, subsequently forcing him to commit suicide.

Lyubochka and Vanya decide to kill Vovochka after he causes Lyubochka's lesbian mother to lose her job. The two then see Vovochka on a talk-show, where he addresses Vladimir Putin with an idea of building a crematorium for "perverts." Vanya visits Vovochka but finds himself unable to shoot him. Following an emotional scene, Vanya gives the gun to Vovochka, who uses it to kill his grandmother.

Vovochka's organization "Crematorium" is dismantled, and soon he dies from unknown causes during the investigation of its activities. After his death, he is deemed a hero. Vanya and Lyubochka find his anonymous grave, and later Lyubochka has a dream, where she sees Vovochka's grave collapse into hell.

Stylistically, this play demonstrates a significant departure from those previously analyzed in this study. Its form shows the influence of documentary theatre, a branch of

the New Drama movement. It is separated into three parts, each one broken down into short thematic fragments with individual titles that together form a coherent narrative. The characters switch between playing their roles and narrating the story, and a lot of their speech is, in fact, monologues of different length. Those are intimate testimonies, but the register is far from the *verbatim* commonly used in documentary drama. The language does not have the ambition to closely resemble real-life colloquial speech. On the contrary, the register is quite literary, and this tone is consistent throughout the play, from character to character. This may be explained by the fact that in much of the play, the characters share their already lived experience, hence a certain distance between them and the moment they are narrating, even if in the play the action and the commentary unfold simultaneously. The play, then, imitates a combination of documentary and fiction, where situations are acted out and narrated at the same time:

> MOROZOV: He approached me and asked if I was ok.
> IVANOV: *Are you ok?*
> MOROZOV: I answered that no, I was not. There's nothing else I could say, otherwise he would have left.
> IVANOV: I wouldn't have.[160]

This rather simple and transparent form is different from the way Pecheykin's other, more dynamic and multilayered works are constructed. Unlike *Falcons*, *My Moscow*, and *Russia, Forward!* this play does not deconstruct traditional values in the same way as others do. It is much more topical, and it is very open about its message. Some elements

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[160] Печейкин, Валерий. "Маленький герой." 2014. Unpublished play.
МОРОЗОВ. Он подошел ко мне и спросил, все ли у меня в порядке.
ИВАНОВ. Все ли у тебя в порядке?
МОРОЗОВ. Я ответил, что нет, не в порядке. Я не мог ответить иначе, он бы иначе ушел.
ИВАНОВ. Я бы не ушел.

of queer writing discussed before can be found in *A Little Hero*, but they are significantly diluted by identity politics.

The play references many worn-out stereotypes about gay people, from their presumed femininity to the existence of a "gay lobby" in arts. The childish naïveté of Vovochka's ardent homophobic tirades looks comical, thus mocking the rhetoric used by certain adult politicians (such as Vitaly Milonov) and pro-Putin youth organizations. Such nationalist youth organizations as *Set'* (Russian: «Сеть», *Net*) might have inspired the "Crematorium," a group led by Vovochka. It bears an even closer resemblance to Occupy Pedophilia, a Russian neo-Nazi group that entrapped, beat, and humiliated men who were allegedly pedophiles—exactly what Vovochka does to an unnamed man in the play.

Making a boy or a young man the centre of his plays is common for Pecheykin (for example, Denis in *Falcons*, Ivan in *My Moscow*, Borya and Maxim in *Russia, Forward!* and, finally, Vovochka in *A Little Hero).* However, for a play inspired by the law against the propaganda of non-traditional values *among minors*, the main character's age is of a particular importance. As a result, Pecheykin plays with a very dangerous trope that connects pedophilia and homosexuality. He draws on the fact that the infamous legislative act proclaims protecting children as its main purpose. This is remarkably close to the concept of *reproductive futurity* that Lee Edelman discusses in his book *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive.* The heteronormative discourse, or "the Symbolic order," as Edelman puts it using Lacanian terminology, is oriented towards procreation,

and thus "the [symbolic] Child has come to embody for us the telos of the social order and come to be seen as the one for whom that order is held in perpetual trust."[161] Pecheykin subverts this cornerstone of heteronormativity by making Vovochka, a child, the main executor of the law that was meant to protect him. Empowered by this law, he turns into a ruthless aggressor, while the presumed "perpetrators," a harmless and lovable gay couple, become his victims. In their analysis of Vasilii Sigarev's play *Plasticine*, Mark Lipovetsky and Birgit Beumers write: "The play underscores that the habitus into which he tries to integrate does not leave him the choice of non-participation in this every-minute war. The teenager can only be saved by becoming an aggressor; this is not easy, and requires strong support of both adults and authorities, or belonging to a group (youth gang, pack). Otherwise the teenager is doomed to become a victim of violence, as it happens in *Plasticine* with Maxim."[162] Vovochka also does not have any other option but to become an aggressor in the outpour of internal homophobia instilled into him through his upbringing. The grandmother, a figure so one-dimensional that she might as well be just a voice in his head, drilled Vovochka to be *masculine* and see everything that is different, feminine or queer, as weakness or perversion:

> OLD WOMAN: Hello, my name is Vova. My mother raised me alone and, one would think, I had all the chances to become a homosexual. […] Thanks to my grandmother, her strict character and will, that with her yelling and beating she didn't let me turn into a little pervert. Often, grandma pulled my ears while saying that if I won't listen to her, I'll grow up to be not a man, but a woman in pants. When I cried, grandma would take out a lipstick, put me in front of the mirror,

[161] Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*, 31.
[162] Mark Lipovetsky and Birgit Beumers, *Performing Violence*, 153.

> and smudge it over my lips: look, you're a girl, do you see what you look like now? Thank you, my kind granny, for saving me![163]

This is Vovochka's very first introduction, performed in the first person, yet it comes from his grandmother. This shows the authoritative control she has over him, and further suggests that the old woman is the voice of this traumatic experience, the personification of his self-hatred and trauma that is fused with his consciousness, rather than a separate person. The abuse that Vovochka experienced is similar to what Denis endures in *Falcons*, when his entire family tries to shape him into something that he is not, while making him hate what he is. Such violent educational methods are characteristic of the late Soviet and 1990s Russian crisis of masculinity. As Dan Healey writes, this period saw a failure of some models of masculinity (Soviet heroism) and the general inaccessibility of others (pre-revolutionary aristocratism and Western self-made type). According to Healey, "In place of these types arose a widely observed countertype, a perverse late- and eventually post-Soviet variant of the *muzhik* (literally, "peasant man," but now, more colloquially, a crude-mannered lower-class lout) who rejected the woman-dominated domestic sphere."[164] Alienation of men, their refusal to take responsibility, and often antisocial behaviour created the need for a new masculine identity. Here is when Vladimir Putin takes the stage. Building upon the *muzhik* archetype, Putin offered its rebranded, hypermasculine patriarchal version that delivered the longed-for sense of

[163] СТАРУХА. Здравствуйте, меня зовут Вова. Мать воспитала меня без отца и, казалось бы, у меня были все возможности, чтобы стать гомосексуалистом. […] Спасибо бабушке, ее суровому характеру и воле, что своими криками и побоями она не дала мне стать маленьким извращенцем. Часто бабушка драла меня за уши, приговаривая, что если я не буду ее слушать, то из меня вырастет не мужчина, а баба в штанах. Если я плакал, бабушка вынимала помаду, подводила меня к зеркалу и мазала губы: смотри, ты девчонка, смотри, как ты сейчас выглядишь. Спасибо тебе, добрая старушка, что уберегла!

[164] Dan Healey, *Russian Homophobia from Stalin to Sochi.* New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017, 139.

stability and power. In Pecheykin's plays, both Denis and Vovochka do not fit into the mold of a "real man." Denis's father is lost in his lack of purpose and uselessness, and Vovochka, unsurprisingly, grew up without a father altogether. For Vovochka, Putin becomes a role model that he has no other way but to look up to.

One of the most important scenes in the play is Vovochka's address to Vladimir Putin on a TV-show. He introduces himself as Vladimir Pushkin, emphasizing that his name combines Putin's first name with the last name of Russia's most famous poet:

> VOVOCHKA: Hello, dear Mr. President! My name is Vladimir Pushkin. My last name is like that of Pushkin, the great Russian poet, and the name is yours. Let us be honest, I am all yours! I've always known that there is something between us other than just a name.[165]

His diminutive nickname is the most infantilized of commonly used forms of this highly popular name, which shows his vulnerability and the fact that he is permanently stuck in his traumatizing early childhood. It also creates a stark contrast with his dark, maniac ideas. The nickname Vovochka has gained multigenerational notoriety as the name of the main character from a whole tradition within the genre of anecdote. The image of "Vovochka" is rather subversive as a young schoolboy who swears, misbehaves, and otherwise contradicts social norms, despite his endearing name. When Vladimir Putin became president, some parallels with this character were inevitably drawn in popular culture.[166]

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[165] ВОВОЧКА. Здравствуйте, уважаемый господин президент!
Меня зовут Владимир Пушкин. Фамилия моя, как у Пушкина, великого русского поэта, а имя — ваше. Да что скрывать, я весь ваш! Я всегда знал, чувствовал, что между нами что-то есть, кроме имени.

[166] 'Штирлиц Помогает Путину Стать Мифом', Русская служба Би-би-си, 8 March 2004, http://news.bbc.co.uk/hi/russian/russia/newsid_3543000/3543829.stm.

However, addressing Putin, Vovochka uses his full name Vladimir, to demonstrate his seriousness, but most importantly—to identify himself with his idol, which is accompanied by almost erotic undertones. In a way, his dedication to the leader is reminiscent of that expressed in Hitler's Jungvolk oath: "In the presence of this blood banner which represents our Führer, I swear to devote all my energies and my strength to the savior of our country, Adolf Hitler. I am willing and ready to give up my life for him, so help me God."[167] This impression only intensifies, as Vovochka proposes his idea to build a crematorium near Moscow to burn all the "perverts." The juxtaposition of the name Vladimir, as an obvious reference to Vladimir Putin, and Pushkin as Vovochka's last name, encapsulate the two in a symbol espousing political power and Russian culture.

Meanwhile, Vovochka's self-identification with Putin grows increasingly strong. He compares the burden of having to keep one's true sexuality a secret with that of the responsibilities coming with being a political leader. For that purpose, he uses a bizarre metaphor of having a spinning top on one's nose:

> Imagine, Mr. President, that you are having a very important meeting. Say, some dam has exploded, and everything is flooded. So, you are sitting in the meeting, and suddenly a mysterious voice tells you that there's a tiny spinning top on your nose. Yes, that's right, a tiny spinning top. […] Just unbearable! And on top of that, there's that voice again telling you that a terrible calamity awaits Russia if you drop the spinning top and someone sees it! And so, you start to hold your head so that your invisible spinning top is in balance at all times and doesn't fall.

[167] 'Hitler Youth', The History Place, 1999, http://www.historyplace.com/worldwar2/hitleryouth/hj-timeline.htm.

> Every minute you spend among other people becomes a torture—what if it falls down?[168]

Finally, Vovochka and Putin are morphed into one person through a real-life event. On June 28, 2006, while meeting his electorate near the Kremlin, Vladimir Putin singled out a young boy named Nikita Konkin from the crowd. After asking the child a few simple questions, suddenly, Putin pulled Nikita's shirt up and kissed his stomach. Captured on video, this problematic kiss went viral across the world, sparking rumors about Putin's possible pedophilic tendencies. In Pecheykin's play, this episode marks the moment when two Vladimirs became one:

> VOVOCHKA: I have a terrible secret.
> VOICE: What is it, Vovochka?
> VOVOCHKA: I like boys, I like their hair, eyes, lips…
> VOICE: What? Maybe you wanted to say that you have an imaginary spinning top on your nose?
> VOVOCHKA: I don't have any spinning tops. I'm looking at the boy over there, Nikita, and want to kiss him on the stomach.
> VOICE: Oh my god, oh my god, that spinning top drove you crazy. Poor boy!.. Ah, what are you doing Nikita… Nikita… You are whispering this name, sweet, like hematogen. You're pulling up the boy's little shirt and kiss, kiss and lick, stick out your tongue and tickle the boy's stomach with it, then pinch a thin fold of his sweetest skin with your teeth… What a delight! This milky smell of a child! You want this whole boy, all of him to the last bit, but…

[168] Представьте, господин президент, что вы ведете очень важное совещание. Ну, например, взорвалась какая-то плотина и всех затопила. И вот вы сидите на совещании и вдруг неведомый голос говорит, что у вас на носу — маленькая юла. Да-да, маленькая юла. Это просто невыносимо! А тут еще снова голос говорит, что Россию постигнут страшные беды, если вы уроните юлу с носа и это кто-нибудь увидит! И вот вы начинаете держать голову так, чтобы невидимая юла все время балансировала и не падала. Каждая минута, проведенная среди людей, становится пыткой — а если юла упадет?

> VOVOCHKA: You're the president and you have to move on. You get up and leave, and you take with you the memory of this child and the taste of his body. Nikita… What was I talking about?[169]

Forced to suppress his sexuality and reshape it in the image of Vladimir Putin, Vovochka can no longer hold up his "spinning top." His true identity erupts into the ideological discourse and takes over the idea of Putin. Through this "Lolitaesque" sensual fantasy the image of the president is subverted by "injecting" into him Vovochka's own experience. Of course, playing with a dangerous homophobic stereotype of relating homosexuality and pedophilia is a risky undertaking, so much that it is unclear whether it was a risk worth taking. Just like the "Putin as a gay clown" meme ends up fitting perfectly into the homophobic discourse by reinforcing the stigma surrounding non-traditional sexualities as it becomes a weapon against political adversaries, projecting homosexuality on Putin through pedophilia might do more harm than good. That being said, it introduces a form of self-expression for the marginalized communities through which to find their voices and establish their presence in the political discourse: it has to "contaminate" the dominant discourse, show its revolutionary and subversive potential as a force to be reckoned with. However, the cost of directly portraying the homosexual identity is its

[169] ВОВОЧКА. У меня есть страшная тайна.
ГОЛОС. Какая, Вовочка?
ВОВОЧКА. Мне нравятся мальчики, мне нравятся их волосы, глаза, губки…
ГОЛОС. Что-что? Может быть, ты хотел сказать, что у тебя на носу воображаемая юла?
ВОВОЧКА. Нет у меня никакой юлы. Я смотрю на того вон мальчика, Никиту, и хочу поцеловать его в живот.
ГОЛОС. Боже мой, боже мой, это юла свела тебя с ума. Бедный мальчик!.. Ах, что ты делаешь, Никита… Никита… Вы шепчете это имя, сладкое, как гематоген. Вы задираете маечку мальчика и целуете, целуете и лижете, высовываете язык и щекочете им живот мальчика, затем сжимаете зубами тонкую складочку сладчайшей кожи… Какое наслаждение! Этот молочный детский запах! Вы хотите мальчика всего, всего без остатка, но…
ВОВОЧКА. Вы президент и вам нужно идти дальше. Вы встаете и уходите, унося навсегда память об этом ребенке и вкусе его тела. Никита…
О чем это я?

resulting extreme vulnerability and the risk of being "ingested" by the heteronormative discourse.

3. Law and Body

In the prior analysis of *My Moscow*, we discussed the transformation of discourse into corporeality and vice versa, where the line between the two becomes blurred. In *Russia, Forward!* and *A Little Hero* something similar can also be observed.

In *My Moscow*, the oppressive, incognizable power that claims control over people is represented by the idea of God, although not in the strictly religious sense, but rather as an "enormous power that never explained but only manifested itself*",*[170] one that only has to be obeyed. The "earthly" rulers are only mentioned in passing. In *Russia, Forward!* and *A Little Hero* this power becomes much more recognizable. In both plays, everything starts with a law. The "law," or the prime-minister's emergency order, in *Russia, Forward!* is fictional. It is worth noting that it comes from the prime-minister and not the president (who, in the play, was assassinated). This hints at the fact that it is the prime-minister (Vladimir Putin in real-life Russia at the time) who has the ultimate power. As the whole country is ordered to live backwards, this begins to affect human bodies. Their basic functions are reversed, and the ultimate form of control is the control over the *anal sphere*. As Maxim, one of the central characters, puts it: "This is all disgusting. And discussing it is disgusting. A country where people are forced to shovel shit up their asses and throw up food—this country doesn't have a future!"[171] People are forced to reverse the process of defecation—a political interference into one of the most intimate spheres

[170]Телеканал «СПАС», 'НЕ ВЕРЮ! ПРОТОИЕРЕЙ МАКСИМ ПЕРВОЗВАНСКИЙ И ДРАМАТУРГ ВАЛЕРИЙ ПЕЧЕЙКИН.'

[171] Все это мерзко. И обсуждать это мерзко. Страна, в которой человека заставляют засовывать дерьмо в жопу и отрыгивать еду - эта страна не имеет будущего.

of a human's life. This way, the line between political and biological life becomes indiscernible: the law directly translates into physical control, as the sovereign executes his right to reduce his subjects to "bare life."

We can observe something similar in *A Little Hero*, except, in this case, the law in question is a real-life legislation. The 2013 law prohibiting the propaganda of non-traditional sexual relations among minors is also known as the Federal law 135-FZ. In the play, Vovochka calls the machine he invented to cremate "perverts" the *Apparatus 135*. This apparatus is designed to burn people *alive*, and has a transparent cover, so that the relatives of the executed, who have to be present, could see their suffering as a punishment for allowing them to grow up to be sexual deviants. Here, the machinery of law transforms into a literal machine. If one seeks to outlaw a certain group of people based on their sexuality (corporeality), the other is a realized metaphor of that process, taking it to the extreme: destroying queer bodies altogether. The idea of a crematorium surely alludes to Nazi Germany; for instance, when Vanya and Lyubochka discuss killing Vovochka, Vanya says:

> VANYA: My grandfather left us two pistols: TT-33, a Soviet pistol from WWII. And a Walther PP – a German Wehrmacht pistol. I was thinking, couldn't decide, and finally chose Walther. Somehow it felt right to kill Vovochka with the Walther.[172]

But the idea of burning queer people also reflects some of the more recent homophobic comments that were made by certain public figures. Among them Dmitry Kiselyov, the

[172] ВАНЯ. После деда у нас осталось два пистолета: ТТ-33 — советский пистолет со Второй мировой. И Вальтер ПП — немецкий пистолет Вермахта. Я думал, выбирал и, наконец, решил взять Вальтер. Мне почему-то показалось, что будет правильно убить Вовочку именно Вальтером.

porte-parole of Putin's regime, who suggested burning gay people's hearts.[173] He is joined by Ivan Okhlobystin, an actor and religious activist, who once said during a "spiritual" meeting with fans that gay people should be cremated alive, as they are "a danger" to his children—and one of the dangers from which Russia will save the world.[174]

Overall, this transformation of the law putting people's lives at risk[175] into the machine that performs the killing exposes the process of turning *bios* into *zoē.* The expulsion of a marginalized group from the society into the sphere of bare biological life, based on their "non-traditional sexual relations," allows the institution of power to use queer people as scapegoats (target as enemies), while not naming them or inscribing that name into the law (the mention of the word "homosexual" was scrapped from the initial project of the legislation[176]). An actual homosexual couple is present in the play, and when Vovochka exposes them to their neighbours, much to his disdain, *no one cares*. While Alexander and Sergei are faced with numerous misconceptions and stereotypes about gay people, their neighbours are, in fact, surprisingly kind and tolerant to them. It is only when Vovochka exposes them to the entire neighbourhood, the harassment begins. The couple previously existed on the margins, avoiding the dangerous recognition and identification as *homosexuals*. Vovochka not only bares their identity to the public, he does so through the rhetoric of the law 135, thus marking them as enemies.

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[173] Илья Азар, '«Это капризные нарциссы, а не оппозиция». Интервью с телеведущим Дмитрием Киселевым', Lenta.ru, 25 September 2013, https://lenta.ru/articles/2013/09/25/kiselev/.
[174] Елена Мальгина, 'Иван Охлобыстин: «Я бы их живьем в печку запихал!»', НГС.НОВОСТИ, 11 December 2013, https://news.ngs.ru/more/1551208/.
[175] А. А Кондаков, *Преступления на почве ненависти против ЛГБТ в России : отчет*. СПб. : Центр независимых социологических исследований, 2017.
[176] 'Госдума Установила в I Чтении Штрафы За Гей-Пропаганду Среди Детей', РИА Новости, 25 January 2013, https://ria.ru/20130125/919782816.html.

In the backward world of *Russia, Forward!,* queerness also remains marginal. That goes to show that this seeming backwardness is not a result of the world order being inverted, but rather is a continuation of the usual Russian political discourse, only shown through a grotesque exaggeration. The love that "dare not speak its name" finds a place between the lines, where it is both visible and concealed, like in the scene where Maxim meets with his friend Sergei, who instructs him how to best master sucking his excrements back in with his anus:

> SERGEI: You can start with any object. I mean, one that you like, that you trust. You can take a pen and try to suck it in. It's easy. Much easier than you think. You just need to get used to the idea that some object will penetrate your ass. Or just ask someone to help you. Do you have someone to ask? A friend you trust? A guy who could put it in your ass? Then you'll understand right away how it works. So, Max?.. Do you have a friend like this, what do you think?..
> MAXIM: I don't have a friend like this. [177]

Everything in this scene points at the fact that the two are *more than friends*: sexual innuendos, suggestive pauses and stage directions (Sergei 'takes Maxim's hand,' 'grasps his hands and looks him in the eye'). Maxim does not believe that time goes backwards, while Sergei tries to convince him to play along. Their coded relationship, a date in a park (one of the traditional gay cruising sites),[178] shows the marginal position of queer

[177] СЕРГЕЙ: Можно начать с любого предмета. Ну, который тебе приятен, которому ты доверяешь. Можно взять шариковую ручку и попробовать втянуть ее. Это просто. Проще, чем ты думаешь. Надо просто свыкнуться с мыслью, что какой-то предмет будет проникать тебе в зад. Или попроси кого-нибудь, чтобы он тебе помог. У тебя есть, кого попросить? Друг, которому ты доверяешь? Парень, который бы мог сунуть тебе в зад? Тогда ты сразу поймешь, как это работает. А, Макс?.. У тебя есть такой друг, как ты думаешь?..
МАКСИМ: У меня нет такого друга.

[178] Agata Pyzik, 'Cruising Past: Photographer Yevgeniy Fiks Resurrects Moscow's Forgotten Gay History', The Calvert Journal, 17 July 2013, https://www.calvertjournal.com/articles/show/1235/moscow-cruising-sites-fiks.

love in Russia, both Soviet and, after a short dream of liberation, in the time of Putin. This ability to exist in a hostile environment and elude being caught up in a fixed identity is what Alexander and Sergei, the gay couple of *A Little Hero,* lost because of Vovochka. They were exposed, and then imprisoned in their own apartment, which symbolizes the double threat of being entrapped in the dominant discourse (which includes even the seemingly positive stereotypification of their benevolent neighbours: "you (gays) all help each other," "it's better than being a drug addict," etc.), while also persecuted as a result of the state's homophobic rhetoric. The only way to escape their confinement with sealed doors is to use a window. It is suggested that Alexander's attempt to do so ended tragically. In a scene with the entrapped "pedophile," Vovochka forces him to imitate suicide exactly by throwing himself out of the window. This deadly role of windows is definitely not limited to Pecheykin's plays. The main character of Vasilii Sigarev's 2000 play *Plasticine* dies when thrown out of a window by his rapists. Another example is Nikolai Kolyada's 1993 play *The Slingshot*, produced in Russia by the icon of Russian queer theatre Roman Viktyuk. One of the first plays to show a sympathetic representation of a same-sex relationship, Kolyada's play has one of its protagonists take his own life by jumping off his balcony. The significance of this precise escape route (to death) is revealed by Vovochka himself in *A Little Hero*. It happens in the scene where he forces a supposed pedophile to commit suicide:

> VOVOCHKA: Do you want me to let you go?
> MAN: What?.. (pause) Yes, yes, I do.
> VOVOCHKA: But not through the door.
> MAN: But then how?

> VOVOCHKA: Well, how do *enter each other*? Huh? *Through the window*. If you manage to get out through the window—you're free. Do you want it?[179]

Vovochka directly compares "going through a window" with the act of anal sex. Interestingly enough, this gives a symbolic window a dubious nature: it is simultaneously exit and entrance. Vovochka interprets windows as a sight of penetration, a way *inside*, while Alexander and Andrei see it as an escape route, a way to freedom: "Good thing at least we still have a window so we can breathe."[180] We have already seen something similar in *My Moscow*, where queer corporeality is inscribed into the text, while also being a "window," symbolizing a way to escape categorization and identification within the dominant discourse, but simultaneously, to penetrate and subvert it.

We have previously discussed the role of the anal in *Russia, Forward!*, where it serves as a point where the political discourse transforms into, and takes over, the body and life. Another such locus where two different discourses intersect, is the female body. The dominant discourse turns it into a peculiar object, containing the mystery of life and death—and affirming the inevitability of the latter. A woman's own life and agency are pushed to the margins. They do, however, still exist, in the concurrent dimension of the material life, where time cannot go backwards, and physiological processes cannot be inverted. In that dimension, where only Maxim is anchored, the female body is a living

[179] ВОВОЧКА. Хочешь, я тебя отпущу?
МУЖЧИНА. Что?..
Пауза.
МУЖЧИНА. Да, да, хочу.
ВОВОЧКА. Только не через дверь.
МУЖЧИНА. А через что?
ВОВОЧКА. А через что вы входите друг в друга? Ну? Через окно. Сможешь выбраться через окно — свободен. Хочешь?

[180] Хорошо, что у нас еще есть окно, чтобы мы могли дышать.

biological body. In one of the most disturbing scenes of the play, the young Borya looks "death in the eye," that is, his mother's vagina. Lyubov' plays her role, in which her body becomes a cult object for her six-year-old son, who considers himself as wise as Solomon. For the sake of this ritual of playing with death, Borya immerses himself into his mother's body. As he is overcome with existential dread, suddenly, Lyubov' makes an attempt to bring him back to reality:

> Lyubov' sits down and spreads her legs.
>
> BORYA: (*comes closer*) Death… I see my death…
>
> LYUBOV': Borya, this is just my genitals…
>
> BORYA: Shut up. I'm looking death in the eye.
>
> LYUBOV': There are no eyes there.
>
> BORYA: (*kneels down*) Wait… Let me…
>
> LYUBOV': Again? Are you going to stick your hands in it again?
>
> BORYA: Quiet, mommy, quiet.
>
> Borya spreads his mother's knees wider and puts his head between them; then it disappears under her skirt.[181]

This scene shows the point where the two discourses that constitute the world of the play collide. One is the political discourse, where time and nature can be controlled and adapted to the needs of the ideology, where a six-year-old child can be a wiseman with

[181] Любовь садится и раздвигает ноги.
БОРЯ: (подходит) Смерть... я вижу свою смерть...
ЛЮБОВЬ: Боря, это всего лишь мои половые органы...
БОРЯ: Заткнись. Я смотрю в глаза смерти.
ЛЮБОВЬ: Да нету там глаз.
БОРЯ: (встает на колени) Подожди... дай я...
ЛЮБОВЬ: Опять? Опять руки совать будешь?
БОРЯ: Молчи, мамочка, молчи.
Боря раздвигает руками пошире колени матери и просовывает голову между ними, она исчезает под юбкой.

the ambition to become a demigod. Borya uses the term *bogochelovechestvo* ("a divine humanity"), borrowed from Russian religious philosophy, although the ideal that he strives for is somewhat reminiscent of the Nietzschean *Übermensch,* mostly in the sense of "overcoming" the current state of the mankind and achieving a new evolutionary stage. At the sight of his mother's vagina, that is, "looking his death in the eye," he exclaims: "Never! Humanity will find a way to escape this! If humanity won't, the *divine humanity* will!"[182] The female body here becomes the place of birth and death at the same time. There is no contradiction, if birth is considered as, essentially, a promise of death: once one is born, one will inevitably have to die. This is what his mother's body signifies for him; therefore, getting back into her body means a reversal of birth and, thus, a claim to immortality. The premise of the whole play—the reversal of time—is also an illusion of eternal life: the six-year-old Borya emerged from his mother's body, still remembers being in her womb, and then has to return there. The cycle seems perpetual, and metaphorically may well represent Russia itself: with retrophilia and retrograde tendencies, after a period of progress, the time closes up in a circle and returns to the starting point. A simple metaphor for this is Borya's board game with "only Russian" characters that can only move in a circle. The flow of time in any direction is questionable; as Pecheykin said in an interview, "We are living in a situation, where the historical time has stopped."[183]

Sigridur Thorgeirsdottir argues that Nietzsche, a "philosopher of birth," opposed the traditional dichotomy of body and soul and sought to espouse the two: "Nietzsche

[182] Никогда! Человечество найдет способ избежать! Если человечество не найдет, то богочеловечество найдет!
[183] Владимир Еремин, '«Меня Всегда Интересовали Пограничные Вещи»: Валерий Печейкин о Православии, Кафке, Деле «Седьмой Студии» и «Кислоте»'.

opposes binary thinking about mind and body, birth and death, self and other, that has been gender coded."[184] However, for Borya the distinction between the intellectual and the corporeal is clear, so is their gender attribution. In relation to traditional Western thought, Thorgeirsdottir writes: "The fear of the natural and bodily nature of women is in effect terror of the finiteness of human life."[185] Nietzsche also posits in *Beyond Good and Evil*: "That which inspires respect in woman, and often enough fear also, is her nature, which is more 'natural' than that of man."[186] Borya's "masculine" philosophising mind distinguishes itself from his mother's "feminine" body, symbolizing nature, birth, and death—that which he fears the most. Borya's fascination with birth is evident in a philosophical poem that he recites in his monologue right before his scene with Lyubov': even the events of his prenatal life are associated with death. The moment of conception itself means fratricide: only one spermatozoid wins the competition, the rest of them must die; this success is but a matter of chance. We already saw how a similar realization petrified Denis from Pecheykin's early play *Falcons*; but Borya is a thinker, and he deals with this existential dread by philosophising it. His intellectual superiority is demonstrated in a scene where he teaches theology to a group of adult priests. If Borya represents the power of ideology, the sphere of ideas, the priests stand for a simple, biological life: they fail to understand anything he explains, mindlessly believe his every word, while loudly flatulating during his elaborate lecture on theological concepts, turned upside down by the all-Russian reversal of everything. This carnivalesque, satirical scene

[184] Robin May Schott and Sara Heinämaa, eds., *Birth, Death, and Femininity: Philosophies of Embodiment*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010, 164.
[185] Schott and Heinämaa, 170.
[186] Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future*. New York: Vintage, 1966, 190.

demonstrates how ideology can control the "bare life". This interaction, however, belongs to the same level of ideas as Borya's existential meditations and quest for immortality: the child-like priests are about as realistic as a philosopher-preschooler, a fiction *within* fiction. In contrast, the scene between Borya and Lyubov' is where the two strata that constitute the dramatic conflict in *Russia, Forward!* collide. Borya "translates" his mother's body into the realm of symbols, and she plays along—until she no longer can. When she utters: "Borya, this is just my genitals…", she takes us to the reality where her flesh is not a mystical portal into the afterlife, but a real physical body that is being violated. This is the world where the laws of logic (and physics) cannot be reversed, and abiding the rules imposed by the government looks like a surrealist farce. The focus of the play keeps shifting between the two realities, never quite asserting which one is "true." More important is that there are characters that can travel between the two. But if Borya is more of a trickster-like, almost demonic figure, Maxim can be interpreted as the queer hero of the play, in line with Denis (*Falcons*) and Vanya (*My Moscow*). He is forced to exist between two discourses, having to live in the one that does not favour his existence. His sexuality is only hinted at (and it is very important that it is not *identified*), but he is nonetheless marginalized as a Jew amidst overwhelming antisemitism. While using antisemitism as a metaphor for homophobia is not unproblematic, this comparison is hardly new, as we could see in Yevgeny Kharitonov's "The Leaflet." Moreover, there is no need for any form of oppression to "replace" another—what is more important is that *there is* a marginalized hero.

Finding such character in *A Little Hero* is not as easy as it might seem. The structure and the tone of the play differ significantly from Pecheykin's other works. While *Falcons*, *My*

Moscow, and *Russia, Forward!* all end "on a high note," like musical pieces ending in a loud, unresolved and dissonance, but memorable chord, the finale of *A Little Hero* feels almost slightly didactic, if not melodramatic. Vovochka, a homophobe eager to burn homosexuals alive is a closeted gay. He dies at the end of the play, but, if that was not enough, in Lyubochka's dream his grave collapses into the flames of hell—Vovochka ended up in a "crematorium" himself. However, symbolically, this ending is a triumph of queerness, which, according to Lee Edelman, "for contemporary culture at large […] is understood as bringing children and childhood to an end."[187] As a child, Vovochka symbolizes the cynosure of the heteronormative discourse, the protection of which also justifies, in particular, the oppression of queer people. And, as a child, at the end of the play he is "brought to an end."

The play's dark atmosphere, presence of violence and emotional abuse that become a means of communication, are all similar to what can be found in New Drama, even if this is all somewhat "watered down" here. This is undoubtedly a *Russian* play in its somber social context. That being said, Pecheykin's acknowledgment that the play was not written *for* Russia is not surprising. Naturally, with its inclination towards identity politics, and Russian gay problematic addressed in a more straightforward way than Pecheykin usually does, it landed best abroad, especially when updated by moving Vovochka's crematorium to Crimea. As we noted previously, with the gay purges in Chechnya, the play's premise only becomes more relevant as a commentary on the state-sanctioned homophobia in Russia. Even though *A Little Hero* is notably different from Pecheykin's other plays, it presents certain elements of queer writing that we saw across

[187] Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*, 47.

the playwright's body of work. First of all, in both *Russia, Forward!* and *A Little Hero*, we observe the distinction between *zoē* and *bios*, the bare biological life and the political life proper to a member of society. Pecheykin exposes this distinction, which is highly important as the basis for queer writing. Following Giorgio Agamben's theory, we establish that reducing a certain part of the population to "bare life" can be a means of totalitarian control and oppression. This explains why antisemitism and Nazism have such significant roles in these plays. Pecheykin shows in *Russia, Forward!* how ideology can create a parallel reality and, within that reality, claim control over its subjects that is so strong that it regulates even their bodily functions. *Bios* and *zoē* are intertwined, but the control is achieved through the body and its biological function (defecation, eating, death, and birth). Body can also be translated into discourse, like the female body is transformed into a symbol in *Russia, Forward!,* thus discarding its corporeality to the margins, utilising and enslaving it. In *A Little Hero,* it is the discourse that is "transformed" into "body": the infamous real-life "anti-gay" law is materialized into a killing machine, a crematorium, that is set to destroy queer people *physically*.

Queer corporeality is inscribed into these texts without essentializing queerness. In this regard, the fixation on the *anal* sphere is of particular importance. This includes subverting the functions ascribed to anus in *Russia, Forward!* by suggesting anal intercourse (the scene between Maxim and Sergei) and using windows—a route for escape, an alternative to the "traditional" door—as a metaphor for anus and anal sex in *A Little Hero*. This reminds of the mysterious pulsating hole in the wall in *My Moscow,* which can be interpreted as a symbolic point where different discourses meet, and through which the dominant discourse can be destabilized. The one who can travel

between them is the *queer hero*. In *Russia, Forward!* it is Maxim, a marginalized character, who has to exist within his brainwashed family, within the dominant discourse, whose absurdity he sees all too clearly.

A Little Hero shows a range of *identifiable* queer characters: a gay couple who live their lives neither hiding nor being noticed; a man who occasionally and discreetly has sex with other men. However, it is Vovochka who is the epicentre of subversion in the play. One interviewer noted in conversation with Pecheykin[188] that in *A Little Hero* he uses a number of "crude moves" and exploits "a strange idea" that those fighting presumed perverts are secretly perverts themselves. The way these stereotypes play out in relation to the character of Vovochka is, however, more complex. He does not simply "out" other gay characters, he orchestrates their "exit through the window." Physically traumatic, symbolically it represents being pushed out of the public discourse, which means simultaneously death and liberation. It is liberation because they leave through this *essentially queer* exit as opposed to being processed by the crematorium of law, which would have reduced them to bare life, while also inscribing them into the dominant discourse. As Vovochka says, he could not burn the "perverts," because to do that, a "legislative basis" is needed. He will not murder them either, as that could turn them in heroes (or martyrs), which is not acceptable. Directly or indirectly, Vovochka forces other gay characters to jump out of the window. Ironically, this violent act on his part preserves them from being turned into a fixed identity and losing their marginality. Vovochka himself balances on the margin, as in his own metaphor of a spinning top on one's nose: from militant homophobia to obvious attraction to his friend Vanya. The

[188] Виктор Вилисов, '«Страшный Ор в Интеллигентской Среде Начинается, Когда Кто-Нибудь Напишет "Миньет" Вместо "Минет"»'.

culmination of his subversive function is queering the image of Vladimir Putin. Vovochka associates himself with the president, but instead of reshaping himself into a copy of the hypermasculine image of Putin, he queers Putin by projecting his own secret desires onto the identity of his powerful namesake. As Vladimir Putin (or the *idea* of him) is the essence of the dominant discourse, subverting it makes Vovochka the (unlikely) *queer hero* of this play.

Thus, in this analysis we outlined the main features of Pecheykin's queer writing in these two plays. As the author himself stated in a recent interview, "I've always been interested in borderline and pathological things. Because all other states have been studied quite well. And I, on the contrary, have always been interested in how abomination exists within the everyday life."[189] While significantly different in style, both plays contain that "borderline" subversive element, characteristic of queer writing.

[189] Владимир Еремин, '«Меня Всегда Интересовали Пограничные Вещи»: Валерий Печейкин о Православии, Кафке, Деле «Седьмой Студии» и «Кислоте»'.

Conclusion

In order to find a familiar example of what Carl Schmidt and Giorgio Agamben call "a state of exception," one does not have to look far. In 2020, most of the world population got to experience this phenomenon firsthand, as the deadly pandemic of the novel coronavirus and the infection it causes, COVID-19, rapidly spread around the globe. When the world began to react in order to stop the infection, certain extreme measures, particularly those introduced in his native Italy, were strongly criticized by Agamben. In an article published on February 26, 2020 in "Il Manifesto" he argued that "the state of exception" was completely unmotivated and unnecessary against what seemed to be a relatively mild "variant of flu." It would take less than a month for the disease to wreak havoc on Italy with a death toll of many thousands. But while Agamben might have underestimated the pandemic, in his discussion of the highly restrictive quarantine measures he makes an important point: "[…] what is once again manifest here is the growing tendency to use the state of exception as a normal governing paradigm."[190] The state of exception occurs in a situation of emergency, when the government (the "sovereign") resorts to the extreme measures. Obtaining an unlimited power in the state of emergency, the government transcends the law, suspends it, and therefore the citizens' rights are temporarily suspended as well. However, mentioning "a normal governing paradigm," Agamben suggests that a state of exception may not be as temporary as we would expect from "emergency" measures.

[190] Giorgio Agamben, 'Giorgio Agamben, "The State of Exception Provoked by an Unmotivated Emergency"', POSITIONS JOURNAL, 26 February 2020, http://positionswebsite.org/giorgio-agamben-the-state-of-exception-provoked-by-an-unmotivated-emergency/.

In case with the coronavirus, the state of exception is seen as necessary for the common good: the restrictions on traveling or even leaving one's own apartment, suspension of all activities, surveillance and violations of privacy—all of this is justified by the urgency of saving people's lives. And yet, there is another, totalitarian side to this. For instance, while also in the state of emergency caused by COVID-19, Hungary's far-right prime minister Viktor Orban immediately used his newly obtained unlimited power to strip away the rights of transgender people.[191] It remains to be seen what other governments will do, if the situation in their countries will require exceptional emergency measures.

The fact that the state of exception may be a "a normal governing paradigm" suggests that this is already not a temporary, but, to a certain extent, permanent element of the political system. Agamben's classic example is Hitler's Germany, which remained in the state of exception throughout its entire existence. Under the guise of protecting the state and its citizens, selected parts of the population were deprived of their rights and expelled from the society, thus reduced to "bare life," a biological existence that could be terminated with impunity. Agamben demonstrates that a possibility of a continuous state of exception still remains, even in the most developed of the modern democracies. In the case of Russia's democracy, the state of exception becomes the elephant in the room.

Revisiting Valeriy Pecheykin's plays analyzed in this paper, it is easy to notice that for all of them the setting presents the state of exception. In *Falcons*, it is a violent

[191] Emma Powys Maurice, 'Hungary's Far-Right Leader Viktor Orban Immediately Moves to Strip Away Trans Rights after Being Granted Absolute Power', PinkNews, 1 April 2020, https://www.pinknews.co.uk/2020/04/01/hungary-viktor-orban-trans-rights-bill-rule-decree-coronavirus-transphobia-gender-zsolt-semjen/?fbclid=IwAR2EhvlTVpdloXm_V3VjRgH-B_PWqy5ClSRyhBoG547k9GKBydlLhNtLKRg.

war between the members of the family. In *My Moscow*, it is a literal war in which another family is trapped and then annihilated. *Russia, Forward!* shows a definite state of emergency: as the story goes, the president is assassinated and prime-minister's decree turns time backwards, affecting even people's biological functions. Using Michel Foucault's terms, this is a rather exaggerated version of the *bio-power* that the state exerts upon its subjects. As Foucault writes, "By this [bio-power] I mean a number of phenomena that seem to me to be quite significant, namely, the set of mechanisms through which the basic biological features of the human species became the object of a political strategy."[192] In a similar fashion, in *A Little Hero* the state controls the bodies of its subjects by regulating their sexuality. This critical artistic representation of the state lies at the basis of Pecheykin's *queer writing*.

The concept of queer writing is based on the works of French feminists, such as Hélène Cixous with her theory of *écriture féminine*, as well as the idea of queer writing, or *écriture homosexuelle*, developed by Elizabeth Stephens in relation to Jean Genet. Queer writing, as applied to Valeriy Pecheykin's works in this paper, is understood as a subversive form of writing that seeks to destabilize the dominant heteronormative discourse. One way to do so is to subvert the traditional values, which are the ideological cornerstone of the current political regime in Russia. Among these traditional values, the "traditional" (heterosexual and procreating) family interests Pecheykin the most: three out of four analyzed plays centre around a family. In all of them, the family ties and the relationships within the family are hollowed out of their meaning; family members become worst enemies, and the only available means of communication they have is

[192] Michel Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the Collège de France 1977-78*, Lectures at the Collège de France (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 1.

violence—much in the tradition of New Drama. In *Falcons*, the Sokolovs treat their disabled grandmother as a burden and an intruder, and the youngest child, Denis, endures endless aggression and abuse from his family. In the linguistically experimental part of *My Moscow*, familial relations disintegrate, as the characters "forget" how to treat their relatives appropriately: Pyotr, for instance, ends up raping his mother, unable to express his "love" in any other way. In *Russia, Forward!* the Vorontsov-Tsuryuk family, dazzled by the chaos of their upside-down world, is held together by nothing else but the ideology that requires that their fulfill their roles. *A Little Hero* does not focus on a particular family, but it is a crucial fact of Vovochka's biography that he grew up in a dysfunctional family, without a father and soon abandoned by his mother—just to be raised by an abusive grandmother. This moment of social realism complements Pecheykin's commentary on the decay of the entire institute of family. For him, family is a microcosm that also represents Russia as a whole.[193] Equally important is the fact that in all of the analyzed plays, the centre is the youngest member of the family, usually a child. This brings us to Lee Edelman's idea about the symbolic Child, who is the telos of the dominant discourse, its reproductive future sustained by the heteronormative family. In Pecheykin's works, from play to play we observe the *death of the child*. Denis essentially commits suicide in *Falcons*; Vanya dies twice in *My Moscow*: symbolically, as a formless object, and physically, with his entire family; in Russia, Forward! Dina Tsuryuk kills Melkiy, the ultimate child—an embryo—in a reversed abortion. Finally, Vovochka in *A Little Hero*, a child who protects other children from queers, dies, and his grave collapses into the abyss—an image that can serve as an illustration to Edelman's words: "It is we

[193] Виктор Вилисов, '«Страшный Ор в Интеллигентской Среде Начинается, Когда Кто-Нибудь Напишет "Миньет" Вместо "Минет"»'.

who must bury the subject in the tomb-like hollow of the signifier, pronouncing at last the words for which we're condemned should we speak them or not: that we are the advocates of abortion; that the Child as futurity's emblem must die."[194] Thus, queer writing denounces the figure of a child, the passing of generations, and the idea of family altogether.

The continuity of generations is only one of the "bonds" that hold the country together. Another one is the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC). In *Falcons*, religion appears in the form of meaningless rituals, half-erased from the cultural memory of the Sokolovs, but necessary to maintain their fading sense of identity in the capital of a foreign land. For the characters of *My Moscow*, there are two ideas of God. One is an incognizable higher power that they have to obey, perhaps representing the political power that, as such, is only briefly mentioned in the play. But the idea of God related to the Church as an institution appears in the form of a floating signifier. In the linguistic game of the play it can be assigned to anything or anyone—from a glass of urine to one of the family members; it is enough to simply "throw" the word "God" at them. Thus, Pecheykin deconstructs the idea of God and exposes how empty it is as one of the traditional values. *Russia, Forward!* presents a more satirical representation of religion: channeled through Borya, it adapts to the needs of the dominant discourse and is utilized as a tool of its propaganda. At the same time, Borya appears to be appealing to certain ideas of Russian religious philosophy, such as *bogochelovechestvo* (Vladimir Solovyov and his *Lectures on Divine Humanity*), or resurrecting dead ancestors and immortality (Nikolai Fyodorov). Using these complex philosophical ideas highlights Borya's

[194] Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*, 71.

Russianness in a suggested cultural opposition of his discourse to Western humanism, while doing so in a subversive, carnivalesque way: Borya is a young child preaching to adult, yet infantile priests. Overall, three out four analyzed plays engage with the topic of religion, except for *A Little Hero.*

What *A Little Hero* lacks in subverting other traditional values, it makes up in dealing with the cult of virility and Vladimir Putin in particular. While all plays deal with the crisis of masculinity described by Dan Healey,[195] *A Little Hero* subverts the embodiment of Russia's heteronormative discourse—the image of the president. Vovochka identifies himself with Putin, seemingly aspiring to be *like him*, but instead merges into Putin's image and *queers* it. This transformation is different from, for example, the famous Internet meme showing Putin in drag [Fig.4]. In Russia, that meme aligns perfectly with the homophobic discourse: it hurts Putin's image, because being homosexual is *shameful*. But in the scene in *A Little Hero*, Vovochka takes over Putin: his unleashed queerness overpowers and takes control over the dominant discourse, represented by the president. The language of the play, more or less consistent throughout the play, becomes sensually charged and agitated at this moment.

The role of language in other plays is even more prominent. In *Falcons,* the family is trapped in a foreign linguistic environment that keeps closing up on them. At the same time, the Russian language remains the last stronghold that connects them to Russian "imperial past" and the sense of superiority, in the spirit of the Russkiy Mir project. Inevitably, however, this language deteriorates, and with it—the minds of those who

[195] Dan Healey, *Russian Homophobia from Stalin to Sochi.* New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017, 139.

speak it: for Pecheykin, language is, "in many ways, what we are."[196] This transcends to a whole new level in *Russia, Forward!*, where language is under totalitarian control. This sends us back to "verbal hygiene", a term coined by Deborah Cameron, which she uses referring to various manifestations of "the urge to meddle in matters of language."[197] In Pecheykin's play, the order is imposed by the government, and subsequently people begin to police themselves, like Dina Tsuryuk when she asks whether she has to shuffle letters in words. It is of crucial importance that for Pecheykin language constitutes not only the definitive part of people's mental faculties, but essentially, their existence. Therefore, first of all, the attempts to control language equal to controlling minds, thoughts, and behaviour—we could recall the state ban on the public use of "mat" (obscene language), or Russian officials', including Putin, persistent usage of the controversial preposition *na*, when referring to Ukraine.[198] But this also underscores the importance of linguistic subversion, as in *My Moscow*, where language becomes the main locus of action, where the central dramatic conflict of the play takes place. This immediate connection between language, mind, and body also sets the stage for inscribing queer corporeality into the text. This is not, however, about inscribing a particular, identifiable body, but rather a subversive *sexuality*. Most of such inscribed elements have to do with anal sex, which symbolically translates into the marginal space between discourses, serving simultaneously (as anus does when considered as a sexual organ in addition to its other functions) as exit *and* entrance. The mysterious pulsating hole in the wall is discovered in *My Moscow* at the exact moment of switch between

[196] Владимир Еремин, '«Меня Всегда Интересовали Пограничные Вещи»: Валерий Печейкин о Православии, Кафке, Деле «Седьмой Студии» и «Кислоте»'.
[197] Deborah Cameron, *Verbal Hygiene* (Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon; New York: Routledge, 2012).
[198] Borenstein, *Plots against Russia: Conspiracy and Fantasy after Socialism*, 211.

discourses. In *Russia, Forward!* the dominant discourse dictates what people have to do with their anuses—suck their faeces back in—but on the margins of society, their functions are subversively expanded (as exemplified by the conversation between Maxim and Sergei in the park). In *A Little Hero*, windows are metaphorically equated to anus as a non-normative exit from an enclosed space (as opposed to doors). The process of leaving through a window means penetration, anal sex, and simultaneously—an escape route from the heteronormative discourse. This begs the question, for whom those routes are made and who inhibit that borderline zone?

In Pecheykin's plays, we can observe the birth of a queer hero: a figure that resides at the point where two discourses meet: the dominant, heteronormative discourse of the state ideology, and the discourse of biological life, pure existence, free of constraints. In the life of any modern society, as Giorgio Agamben demonstrates, political life and biological, bare life coexist. Being expelled into the sphere of bare life is dangerous, posing a risk to be "killed with impunity." However, queer subjects of authoritarian states have no other choice but exist between these two discourses and remain unidentifiable. In her book *Queer in Russia*, Laurie Essig discusses queerness in the Soviet and early post-Soviet period. In her interpretation, queer people in Russia could live without a fixed identity, often having heterosexual families, while also maintaining a non-heteronormative lifestyle at the same time. And this is not simply a "life in the closet": even on the wave of liberalization in the 1990s, as Essig notes, "some activists for the rights of sexual minorities found Western notions of gay identity oddly foreign."[199] Brian Baer contests the accuracy of Essig's observations, stating that "it is

[199] Laurie Essig, '"Bury Their Hearts": Some Thoughts on the Specter of Homosexuality Haunting Russia', 53.

certainly misleading to read radical critiques of the Western model of gay and lesbian community, together with the reluctance of provincial gays to come out, as evidence of a common rejection of gay and straight identities."[200] A lot of what Essig describes Baer explains as the result of Russia's sexism. Interestingly, Pecheykin's plays show both, by writing into the text a subversive queerness, while also exposing sexism (from gender roles in *Falcons* that frustrate Denis to Vanya's transformation into a woman by simply putting on some lipstick in *My Moscow* to the traumatizing lessons in masculinity that Vovochka's grandmother gave him in *A Little Hero*). Ultimately, sexism is a part of the heteronormative discourse that queer writing is set to subvert.[201]

The sexual activity of Pecheykin's queer characters is mostly hidden from view, yet it is written *into* the heteronormative discourse in order to destabilize it. Thus, the revolutionary potential of Russian queerness is revealed, defined by, as Laurie Essig puts it, the lack of "stable gay subject." She goes on to say:

> There existed in Russia, there exists in Russia, a chance for the sexual solidarity of all citizens. But for such a possibility to be realized, there would have had to be a rejection of marking some citizens as native and others as foreign. In other words, Russian nationalism, conservative Orthodox Christianity, and a highly reactionary state made such sexual affiliations impossible.[202]

This helps to explain the importance of other marginalized groups in Pecheykin's plays, or other manifestations of Russia's fear of the Other. Antisemitism, racism, xenophobia, sexism, and homophobia are all essential for the Russian normative discourse, which is

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[200] Brian James Baer, 'RUSSIAN GAYS/WESTERN GAZE: Mapping (Homo)Sexual Desire in Post-Soviet Russia', 510.
[201] It is necessary to note, however, that Pecheykin's own queer characters are mostly male.
[202] Laurie Essig, '"Bury Their Hearts": Some Thoughts on the Specter of Homosexuality Haunting Russia', 52.

ready to reduce people to their biological or other innate features, should it be necessary to designate them as enemies. Queer people clearly belong to that category.

This is exactly why it is so important to listen to the rising queer voices in contemporary Russian art, as text, and literature in particular, provide the space for subverting the heteronormative discourse, stretching it to the extreme, erupting into and destabilizing it. From this queer writing, a queer hero is born—a little hero who is strong enough to turn back time.

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Appendix

Fig.1 Valeriy Pecheykin

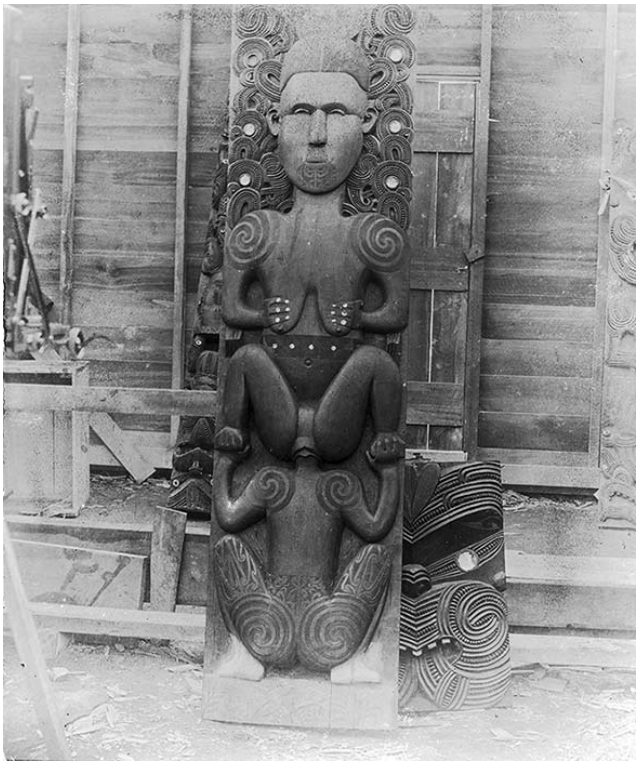

Fig.2 Hine-nui-te-pō and Māui

Fig.3 Alexander Kargaltsev. *Crematorium*

Fig.4 Vladimir f as a "gay clown."