

Autism, Love, and Writing in and around Russian Literature

On Feeling, Non-Feeling and Writing as a Communicative Medium to Express Emotions

INGEBORG JANDL

1. INTRODUCTION

In Russian literature, the discussion on autism¹ appears in the 19th century with the topos of the ‘superfluous man’, which will continue to be a crucial but not exclusive point of reference for further reflections on this topic up to the present day. A fundamental connection to writing is already given in Aleksandr Pushkin’s *Eugene Onegin* (*Evgeniĭ Onegin*, 1823-1830) and Mikhail Lermontov’s *A Hero of Our Time* (*Geroĭ nashego vremeni*, 1841). In these initial texts, writing is a means of intimate communication and self-reflection, symptomatic of an emergence of feelings of love even in characters with an autistic disposition. Later on, this context will be opened to aesthetics, providing the

- 1 The term ‘autism’ was introduced in 1911 to describe the negative symptoms of schizophrenia. Cf. Bleuler 2014: 304-305. In this paper it is used according to the criteria in contemporary diagnostics, where these symptoms are classified as a separate concept. Irrespective of the late introduction of the term and the shifts within its definitions it is equally used for the analysis of characters in novels of the 19th and 20th century. Literary studies on the ‘superfluous man’ usually name the respective characteristics separately, talking e.g. of ‘inability to love’ (cf. Göbler 1999: 84), ‘indifference against society’, ‘cold intellect’, ‘individualism’, ‘repugnance against restrictions’, ‘arrogance and arrogation’, ‘egoism’, ‘unsociable characters’ and ‘dangerous eccentrics’ (cf. Wedel 1961: 357-358).

question of whether literary writing is possible for an autistic author. Gaïto Gazdanov, for example, responds in the negative to this question in some of his stories, rejecting the idea that feelings could be invented, whereas in others, as an antithesis, he connects autism to the notion of artistic genius. Vladimir Sorokin will use the same topic in the later Soviet and post-Soviet context for provocation, emphasising that he is an autistic writer.

Theoretically, neither autism nor love is the main focus of this paper. These two categories serve rather the purpose of examining two other structuralistic problems: firstly, the opposition between feeling and non-feeling and, secondly, the connection between the inside and the outside of the individual, assuming that inside is where emotions originate and outside is where they are expressed and shared with others. The impact of autism on this topic consists of the separation of the feelings inside the individual from their connection to an outside object, which autism entails.

This disconnection reflects the symptomatology of autism described in the international diagnostic manuals ICD-10 and DSM-5, which primarily mention personal deficits in social interaction and communication, especially in building and maintaining relationships, recognising feelings expressed by others, an absence of emotional reciprocity and a challenge in dissimulating feelings.² The symptom-oriented description of diagnostic manuals reveals little about the inner reasons for autistic behaviour, which, besides the functional priority of symptoms in this context, seems also to be due to the difficulty of ‘seeing inside’ an autistic subject. Given that facial expressions and body language often reveal little about thoughts or possible affects and that emotional situations as well as intimate dialogues are avoided, much of this stays unknown.

Within the psychology of perception, autism is related to a specific focus on details without connecting them to the social situation of their occurrence. This seems to explain how affected persons can have a cognitive and exceedingly detailed overview, while at the same time emotional and social components might remain entirely unconsidered.³ The origin of a focus of perception excluding emotional information is assumed to lie in a high level of sensitivity, due to the fact that the individual is emotionally affected more easily, as well as more strongly and persistently, within various contexts. This can harm vital resources, particularly in connection with negative emotions, and affected persons might therefore learn to protect themselves.⁴ A further observation within psychology and psychoanalysis is that autism is often accompanied by an intense longing for

2 Cf. ICD-10 2015: 344-345; DSM-5 2015: 34-39.

3 Cf. Goldstein 2015: 146-147.

4 Cf. Behrmann 2006: 258-264.

being loved by others, which seems to constitute one important reason for the correlation with a high motivation for creative achievements.⁵

The contrast between feeling and non-feeling, however, is a more general one than the contrast between love and non-love. These two binary extremes are not meant to be confused in the following. Love has been chosen as point of reference because it is a strong emotion that establishes a persistent connection to another person. A second reason is that, in the literary examples, love often constitutes the main link between feeling and writing. Concerning the literary representation of autistic characters, the possibilities seem to range, maybe among other possibilities, from non-transparent or impulsive characters to others with a very rational world view and a third group with a perception-focus on arbitrary details and deficits in the interpretation of social situations. Literature can go beyond diagnostics by interpreting specific settings and contexts from more than one perspective and by giving insights into an unknown world view. Through mode, style and content, writing reveals characteristics of the emotional pattern of the literary subject, which seems to be the case in personal writing as well as writing in literary or journalistic contexts. The texts within existentialist, aesthetic and ethical discourses in particular are shown in the following to turn to writing in order to reflect emotional dynamics between individuals and society. Reactions of addressees or readers show that with a continual shift according to cultural contexts, feeling and non-feeling remain essential categories in literary and public discourses on self-expression and artistic genius, as well as a political statement.

2. THE 'SUPERFLUOUS MAN' AND EMOTIONAL ATTACHMENT THROUGH WRITING

Motivated by the success of Molière's *Misanthrope* (1666) on the Russian stages, the topos of the 'superfluous man' was instantly established within Russian literature, where it has remained in use since the 19th century.⁶ Emotional reserve, avoiding personal attachment, provocative disrespect of social graces, independence, unforeseen decisions and condescension towards others represent some of the traits typical of these characters that may be linked to autism, too. Writing is not necessarily linked to this discourse, but it plays an important part

5 Riemann 2013: 61.

6 Cf. Wedel 1961: 355-367.

in Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin* and Lermontov's *A Hero of Our Time*, which will therefore be discussed in the following.

The plot of Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin* is constructed around two love letters, each of them being answered with rejection. Beyond their specific content, these documents reveal the emotional patterns of the two main characters also through styles of world literature. Tatyana's letter stylistically reflects French sentimental love-literature, whereas Onegin's reproduces characteristics of English seduction-novels. These allusions reflect the readings of each of the characters, and will serve as a basis for their mutual understanding of their later discourse, after having already missed the chance of being together, irreversibly.⁷ This paper focuses on the situational components and implications of writing.

Having read Tatyana's naive writing, Onegin rejects her, outlining his inability to love.

"[...] Without romance, or false insistence,
I'll say: with past ideals in view
I would have chosen none but you [...]"

XIV

But I was simply not intended
for happiness – that alien role.
Should your perfections be expended
in vain on my unworthy soul?
Believe (as conscience is my warrant),
wedlock for us would be abhorrent.
I'd love you, but inside a day,
with custom, love would fade away;
your tears would flow – but your emotion,
your grief would fail to touch my heart,
they'd just enrage it with their dart."⁸

Onegin's autistic traits are already depicted earlier in his general dissatisfaction and feeling of boredom, in his contempt of society, in his unsteady and affectionless relationships with women and in his non-committal comradeship with the neighbour. Being aware of his emotional instability and dislike of commitment he rejects the simple, gracious and slightly melancholic Tatyana, even though he would have preferred her to other women.

7 Cf. Ebbinghaus 2004: 156, 214-222, 413-417.

8 Pushkin 1977: 112-113. Pushkin 1960: 79.

The connection between Tatyana's feelings and Onegin's lack of feelings is here represented by writing. Tatyana writes a letter but the male character does not answer in written form, he explains the reasons for his rejection to her orally. This relation is paralleled in the course of their second meeting, taking place later, when Onegin's desire for the by then well-situated, married Tatyana arises, so that it is his turn to write a love letter to her. The fact that he even writes two more letters when her answer fails to appear shows again the strength of his awakened feelings. But the heroine does not answer at all, abiding with her husband. Her decision not to write illustrates the fact that she is suppressing her persistent feelings for Onegin, which she admits later.

Failing to engage in direct interaction, he falls ill, as Tatyana does after Onegin's rejection of her. Writing is a symptom of lovesickness, which makes even Onegin write, who generally attributes as little sense to writing as to feeling.

[H]is illness lends him courage and
to the princess, in his weak hand,
he sends a letter, penned with passion.
He deemed, in general, letters vain,
and rightly so, but now his pain
had gone in no uncertain fashion
past all endurance.⁹

A similar storm of uncontrollable feelings has already been the reason for Tatyana's writing. Even though she is not, in contrast to her neighbour, emotionally cold in general, writing overcomes her as a wave of previously unknown desire. The narrator subsequently even constructs the scene as a metaphor of Tatyana losing her innocence through writing, by accentuating corporal signs of arousal:

Now Tanya's groaning, now she's sighing;
the letter trembles in her grip;
the rosy sealing-wafer's drying
upon her feverish tongue; the slip
from off her charming shoulder's drooping.¹⁰

A second parallel between the two letters is that both of them include a vow. Tatyana writes:

9 Pushkin 1977: 221. Pushkin 1960: 168.

10 Pushkin 1977: 103. Pushkin 1960: 70.

“[...]
Decreed in highest court for ever...
heaven’s will – for you I’m set apart;
and my whole life has been directed
and pledged to you [...]”¹¹

Having read the letter, Onegin even insists on this irreversible bond to one’s words through writing:

“You wrote to me, and nothing spoken
can disavow that. [...]”¹²

In his own letter he renews Tatyana’s vow of fate and fidelity.

“[...]
But so it is: I’m in no state
to battle further with my passion;
I’m yours, in a predestined fashion,
and I surrender to my fate.”¹³

The letters show that Pushkin’s characters believe in a magical love they are obliged to enact, having revealed their feelings in a written form. Given that these feelings will remain in spite of the circumstances prohibiting their coming together, the superstition is fulfilled, proving that writing establishes a binding emotional attachment to the addressee.

Another important aspect of writing is its character of intimate communication. This intimate character stimulates not only confession but also self-reflection, which becomes especially important in Mikhail Lermontov’s novel *A Hero of Our Time*. Pechorin, the main character, is the second famous ‘superfluous man’ of Russia’s 19th century literature, often compared to Onegin, with whom he shares his autistic traits. In the first chapters, Lermontov’s narrator depicts how Pechorin disappoints especially those who feel close to him. The Circassian girl Bèla only falls in love with him due to his insistency, but when she agrees to follow him, he soon loses interest in her and even her approaching death does not touch him.

11 Pushkin 1977: 101. Pushkin 1960: 69.

12 Pushkin 1977: 112. Pushkin 1960: 78.

13 Pushkin 1977: 223. Pushkin 1960: 170.

At night she became delirious [...] then she spoke of Pechorin also, called him various fond names [...]. He listened to her in silence, his head sunk in his hands; but yet, during the whole time, I did not notice a single tear-drop on his lashes. I do not know whether he was actually unable to weep or was mastering himself [...].¹⁴

In spite of the tragic moments around Bêla's death, Maksim Maksimych, a travel acquaintance, affectionately remembers Pechorin as a dear friend because of his open honesty. He is the second person to experience a great disappointment, when, during their second encounter, Pechorin shows indifference to their unforeseen reunion and remains reserved. What is hardly apparent from external observation of the eccentric becomes clearer through his diary entries, which lend more human traits to him. Descriptions of key situations in society and in private life disclose his emotional instability, often accompanied by dissatisfaction, ennui and remorse.

To none has my love brought happiness, because I have never sacrificed anything for the sake of those I have loved: for myself alone I have loved for my own pleasure. I have only satisfied the strange craving of my heart, greedily draining their feelings, their tenderness, their joys, their sufferings – and I have never been able to sate myself.¹⁵

Pechorin's emotional spectrum is not limited to disdain, regret, nostalgia and amusement, but contains also feelings like fear and even love for Vera, a bygone liaison. Although she still loves him, she no longer believes in his feelings for her. However, the longer she refuses herself to him, the stronger becomes not only his desire but also his consciousness of tender feelings for her, so that when he finally loses her, he is bowed down with grief.

In Lermontov's novel, writing is clearly limited to mono-directional communication. Writing is Pechorin's way of self-reflection and, as his notes show, writing is also a way of concentrating his sensibility, stimulating him to express feelings. Moreover, this novel also contains a love letter written by Vera, which can be classified as a devoted and emotional piece of text. In the same way as Onegin, Pechorin does not answer, in spite of his feelings for Vera expressed in his diary. The barrier of strong feelings, which stay enclosed within an individual without being shown to the addressee, is also counted among the typical symptoms of autism.¹⁶

14 Lermontov 1947: 78. Lermontov 2000: 337.

15 Lermontov 1947: 294-295. Lermontov 2000: 418-419.

16 Cf. Riemann 2013: 59-60.

3. EXISTENTIALISM AND ETHICS: THE AUTISTIC SAVANT AND THE THERAPEUTIC VALUE OF WRITING

Gaïto Gazdanov's poetics include intertextual connections to Pushkin's *Onegin*¹⁷ as well as to Lermontov's Pechorin, but autistic characters appear even more multifaceted, e.g. through references to Lev Tolstoï's realist novel *Anna Karenina* (1877-78). In Gazdanov's earlier texts, the plot connected with unrequited love in the context of the 'superfluous man' and the Karenin-text remain the main focus. His later works provide two new dimensions to this topic: firstly, the background of French existentialism and, secondly, the connection of the topic to aesthetics. Gazdanov's common denomination as the 'Russian Camus' seems closely connected to the influence of Camus' *The Outsider* (*L'Étranger*) and *The Myth of Sisyphus* (*Le Mythe de Sisyphe*), both of which appeared in 1942, since similarities with both works subsequently appear in Gazdanov's poetics.¹⁸

In order to illustrate the nuances of autistic characters, it seems important to also mention the main difference between the representatives of the 'superfluous man' and other key-characters. Focussing on the level of writing, this difference lies for Karenin in the intransparency of his feelings, which are not moderated by his written expression. On the contrary, Karenin's writings characterize him as an ambitious workaholic and do-gooder, who sanctimoniously answers to requests¹⁹ and his letter to his wife Anna reveals his purely rational approach even within close relationships. Addressing her formally in French, Karenin forgives her for her infidelity and he even adds some financial support to this letter. As outlined by the character's further reflections, this choice is not motivated by empathy, but by Karenin's wish to force Anna to stay as well as to stress his own generosity and even to humiliate her. "He went through the letter, entirely satisfied, especially because of the fact that he had not forgotten to add the money; and that the letter contained neither a hard-hearted word nor a reproach, but no forbearance, yet. But most important he estimated the golden bridge for her return."²⁰ While the representatives of the 'superfluous man', in spite of their inapproachability, can be qualified as well respected heroes due to their honesty and their often justified criticism of society, Karenin represents a purely negative

17 Cf. Göbler 1999: 83-84.

18 For a more detailed outline cf. Yandl' 2014: 168.

19 Cf. Tolstoï 1934: 116.

20 All translations by I.J. unless indicated otherwise. Ibid.: 300.

character. He does not overcome his disposition of non-feeling towards others and, through his writing, egoistically and aggressively acts against them.

In a different way to Karenin, the stoic, distant and apathetic characters typical of existentialism, together with their very general feelings of alienation, present an autistic world view, too. Already in Camus' *Outsider*, these emotional experiences are reflected in situations connected to writing. "Today my mother has died. It might have been yesterday as well, I don't know. I have received a telegram from the retirement home: 'Mother died. Funeral tomorrow. Deepest sympathy.' That means nothing."²¹ Just as Karenin's uncomfortably formal writing of commonplaces unconnected to his feelings reveals his autistic disposition in Tolstoï's novel, Camus' character Meursault is not emotionally affected by this telegram about his mother's death; thus, the discourse around his lack of emotionality that finally will entail his execution is introduced right at the beginning. Furthermore, the novel reveals the arbitrariness of feelings for Meursault's own writing, which is interpreted as symptomatic for his indifference towards others. Consenting to compose a letter of revenge for his neighbour Raymond, he does not care about the exact content, nor about Raymond's cordial feelings. Indeed, he makes this decision in pure indifference and guided by the wish to stay alone.

I have written the letter. I have written it a bit by chance, but I have made an effort to satisfy Raymond, because I had no reason not to satisfy him. [...] Only when he declared: "Now, you are a real friend," it scandalised me. He has repeated his phrase and I have said "Yes." I did not care about being his friend and he really seemed to want it.²²

Meursault's difficulty in coping with emotions becomes obvious in his feeling "scandalised" by Raymond's enthusiastic declaration of friendship. At the same time, the existentialist context does not concentrate on an autistic individual – which would mean condemning Meursault with the judgement of not being emotionally affected by his mother's death – but on careless non-feeling within society. Describing the trial as "a quick reading of the indictment, in which I

21 "Aujourd'hui, maman est morte. Ou peut-être hier, je ne sais pas. J'ai reçu un télégramme de l'asile: 'Mère décédée. Enterrement demain. Sentiments distingués.' Cela ne veut rien dire." Camus 2013b: 179.

22 "J'ai fait la lettre. Je l'ai écrite un peu au hasard, mais je me suis appliqué à contenter Raymond parce que je n'avais pas de raison de ne pas le contenter. [...] C'est seulement quand il m'a déclaré: 'Maintenant, tu es un vrai copain', que cela m'a frappé. Il a répété sa phrase et j'ai dit: 'Oui.' Cela m'était égal d'être son copain et il avait vraiment l'air d'en avoir envie." Ibid.: 194-195.

[Meursault] recognized some names of places and persons”,²³ outlines the lack of respect towards a single life. Non-feeling is exemplified at this level through writing, too: firstly, in terms of the indictment, which is no more than a formality connected to the judge’s career-making, and secondly, in terms of the journalists waiting for the process as an exciting spectacle.

The journalists already held their pens in their hands. They had all the same indifferent and slightly sneering expression. However, one of them, a lot younger, vested in grey flannel with a blue tie, had kept his pen lying in front of him and watched me. In his slightly asymmetric face I saw nothing but his two eyes, attentively regarding me, with an indefinable expression.²⁴

In both cases writing is directly connected to judging, and in the given contexts the mode is a clearly non-empathic one. ‘Writing non-feeling’ therefore marks a social deficit that is, in contrast to personal non-feeling, neither condemned nor reflected upon.

Narrating from Meursault’s perspective, Camus gives a close insight into autistic perception. Meursault is not able to empathize with those who will decide his fate and therefore is not able to adapt the categories of their discourse in order to defend himself. Less specifically, his autistic perception within the whole book becomes apparent in fragmented perceptions, which he is not able to interpret emotionally, like the “two eyes [of the younger journalist], attentively regarding me [him], with an indefinable expression”. As mentioned initially, autism is an important topic within Gazdanov’s poetics already before Camus’ *Outsider*. Characteristic of his early main characters is their discomfort or nonunderstanding within emotional situations and, vice versa, frequent individualistic reactions hardly understood by other characters. Gazdanov’s characters furthermore share with Meursault the focus on the perception of arbitrary details, and constantly describe a highly emotional reaction to music and the visual arts, i.e. in non-social contexts.²⁵

23 “une lecture rapide de l’acte d’accusation, où je reconnaissais des noms de lieux et de personnes” Ibid.: 220.

24 “Les journalistes tenaient déjà leur stylo en main. Ils avaient tous le même air indifférent et un peu narquois. Pourtant, l’un d’entre eux, beaucoup plus jeune, habillé en flanelle grise avec une cravate bleue, avait laissé son stylo devant lui et me regardait. Dans son visage un peu asymétrique, je ne voyais que ses deux yeux, très clairs, qui m’examinaient attentivement, sans rien exprimer qui fût définissable.” Ibid.

25 These specifics also touch the plot-level, which might be perceived as not sufficiently motivated, as has been portrayed in negative critiques. Cf. e.g. Khodasevich 1938: 9.

The Outsider especially influences Gazdanov's works, and, e.g. in the novel *Evelyn and Her Friends* (*Ėvelina i ee druž'ya*, 1968), the character of the novelist engages with the obviously erroneous writings of judges and journalists, trying to defend the defendant. Considering the diachronic development, Gazdanov's texts increasingly reflect autism also from an external perspective, which is accompanied by the perception of emotional indifference as a deficit. While the texts focussing on the Onegin plot are concerned with the internal longing for a distant and unspecific female ideal, those referring to Karenin judge the respective character for his lack of empathy from the outside perspective. With the influence of existentialism these two conflicts are subsequently brought together.

Since Gazdanov's earliest works, the topic of writing is continually represented in his texts, but not initially linked to autism. It first serves as a satiric device for the imitation of fatuitous or mawkish journalists and untalented novelists. A connection between writing and autism becomes crucial in his late poetics where Gazdanov poses the question of whether literary writing is possible for an autistic author. Rejecting the idea that feelings could be invented, he answers in the negative for example in the story "The Homeless" ("Nishchii", 1962), where a well-situated man with educational achievement leaves his family, to live, poor and homeless, in the streets of Paris. The reason for this decision is his identification with the psychological state of homelessness, which will persist during his whole life.

Afterwards he had a couple of lovers, compliantly undressing when he visited them in the evenings. He knew that none of them really loved him and this was understandable, because neither did he ever feel an irresistible attraction to a woman himself nor these feelings of love he had so much read about in books. He felt instead something like a physical craving, discomfoting, exhausting and setting his nerves on edge; and when this craving was satisfied, all this left only a sour taste, and nothing more. Later he understood that he was too poor emotionally to perceive real feelings [...].²⁶

The character realizes his lack of emotional commitment by comparing his own feelings to those of the heroes in literary texts. Reading here becomes the link between feeling and writing, because it provides an insight into the emotions of others. At this point Gazdanov's link between emotions and artistry also begins.

He [...] had a lot of interests – music, painting, literature, philosophy. [...] He wanted to become a writer; it seemed to him that just this was his calling, and he kept searching for a

26 Gazdanov 2009b: 575.

story for his first novel – only later, considerably later, he understood that under no circumstances would he become a writer, – exactly because he was looking for a story.²⁷

His searching for a story demonstrates to Gazdanov's hero a lack of his own affections and emotional states, which would serve him as the material for artistic creation.

Not all of Gazdanov's characters end up as desperate. The poet George in the novel *Evelyn and Her Friends* is an example of an autistic savant.

This miserable and unruly insipid man obviously had a poetic talent, and more than anything in the world, he loved poetry, in which he was inerrably versed. [...] More than any of us, George in every poem could feel the motion of vowels, the rearrangement of accentuations and all shades of meaning. Everything that he wrote himself always seemed to me wonderful. I remembered his dark eyes becoming ardent at once and the verses he read to us in his soundless voice. Nobody who had heard him could ever forget it.²⁸

At the same time, Gazdanov does not content himself with an autistic savant for his concept of the artist. Motivated by references to the Bakhtinian ethics, where the novelist is regarded as a dialogic partner of his characters and as being responsible for them,²⁹ this novel is to be interpreted rather as an attempt to overcome autism. George is killed, and the novelist rewrites his story, developing deep feelings of empathy for this character.

Beyond this, he becomes his advocate, not only, as mentioned above, by mistrusting the legislative when his character is accused of murder, but also in conversations with the other characters, who unanimously distrust and reject George. Their antipathy is well motivated by his obvious social deficits of egocentrism, meanness, ignorance and disrespect towards others. The novelist discusses ethical questions around George and the justification for condemnation especially regarding his brother Andrej, who has directly suffered from his autistic traits, and therefore rejects him the most.

– You know, Andrej, I believe that nature has given to each of us a limited amount of feelings, outside of which we react to what happens in a considerably weaker way than one might expect. Not because we are good or bad, but because we have not enough inner fortitudes that do not suffice. [...] [W]hat does George mean to you, although he was your brother? – Yes, it is indeed strange, the whole thing has moved you more deeply than me.

27 Ibid.: 574.

28 Gazdanov 2009a: 183.

29 Cf. e.g. Bakhtin 2002: 74-75.

– Maybe because of my sometimes disastrous strong leaning towards dark thoughts and generalisations. [...] It would be better to move away from all that as far as possible, for example to Sicily. In this respect you are right. I am going to visit you there somehow. All right?³⁰

The novelist resolves the ambivalences around autism for his characters and for himself. Stating that emotional patterns in any case are individually different allows him to plead for tolerance towards other emotional dispositions and thus for autism, too. At the same time he experiences that empathy can be emotionally exhausting, and deduces the necessity to distance oneself at the right moment from negative emotions. In some way, keeping emotional distance means the conscious decision for non-feeling, i.e. the rapprochement towards an autistic state of non-affectedness. As a high sensibility for negative emotions, which the novelist attributes to himself, often correlates with an autistic disposition, this second part of the statement is as important for resolving the ambivalences around non-feeling as the proclamation of tolerance towards other emotional patterns. Only the ability to distance oneself allows finding the right balance between high sensibility and a disturbing emotional overload.

Evelyn and Her Friends is Gazdanov's last novel, in which he reconciles his ambivalent thoughts on the dependency between literature and feelings, admitting that the artist can even surpass the problem of his enclosed feelings by writing.

4. THE AESTHETICS OF AUTISM AS A POLITICAL STATEMENT

Autism remains an important topic also in contemporary literature, where it is often linked to political activism. Vladimir Sorokin for example uses it for provocation, declaring himself an autistic writer. Speaking of his “innate immodesty”, he links this self-characterising statement to his personality as well as to his literary ambitions.³¹ His artistic self-concept closely combines the notions of the author as ‘individual’, ‘innovative’, ‘intellectual’, ‘provocative’ and ‘political’. The last two of these components are obvious in his open political statements and in the undisguised political allusions in his novels. The former are more complex and subtle, considering that Sorokin's artistic vision in the title quote of

30 Gazdanov 2009a: 349.

31 Sorokin 2013a: 360.

the interview – “I wanted to fill Russian literature with shit”³² – implies not only a provocative reference to his literary ancestors in Russian literature, but – via Rabelais³³ – also his clear positioning as an author of world literature.

Within Sorokin’s literary oeuvre, connections to autism can be drawn on several levels. The approach to political topics in his dystopias stays distanced and rational, deducing and rejecting possible developments without pleading for one ethical point of view. Nadezhda Grigoryeva states that his *Ice Trilogy* (2002-2005), “marks the end of cardiocentric culture”. Connecting the “speaking of the heart” to eugenics by referring to the physical source of a metaphoric concept, the original mystical notions of “thought, memory, mind, soul and spirit” are destroyed in a twofold way: firstly, literally as a linguistic picture and, secondly, on the plot level as an ethical concept.³⁴ On the level of language, Sorokin’s skilful pastiche of different styles from the classics of Russian literature and postmodern self-constructed languages furthermore encourages a loss of authenticity when it comes to personal interaction, because intimate speech is thereby connected to imitation, too. This becomes especially true within emotional contexts, like the love-letters in *Blue Lard* (*Goluboe salo*, 1999) and *Telluria* (*Tellurriya*, 2013), where exceedingly emotional phrases contrast with profane, sexualized content and post-human neologisms that further reinforce the impression of artificiality.³⁵

Genre and style always imply a specific emotional perspective. For the post-human dystopia, such an emotional perspective characteristically seems to approach an autistic world view. Vera Nünning quotes a contemporary dystopia, where characters “act purely on account of conscious deliberations and logic”,³⁶ i.e. according to the categories of autistic thinking. Michel Houellebecq’s oeuvre, closely connected to Sorokin’s, constitutes a further example of a post-human approach to emotions involving a distanced and analytical view by introducing intermediate layers – that is to say, clones – to original feelings in order to reflect upon them.³⁷ Sorokin and Houellebecq use both the imitation of written genres and explicit reflexion on emotions as a barely known subject as devices that effect an estrangement of feelings. Given that, usually, most corporal arousals,

32 Sorokin 2002.

33 In this interview Sorokin’s point of reference is Antonin Artaud. Rabelais too, however, plays a major role for Sorokin’s poetics, for example in the novel *Roman* (1989). Cf. *ibid.*

34 Grigoryeva 2013: 109.

35 Sorokin 2012a: 669-693; Sorokin 2013b: 12-19.

36 Cf. Vera Nünning’s contribution in this volume.

37 Cf. Sabine Schönfellner’s contribution in this volume.

individually interpreted as feelings, remain unconscious, the examples reveal how a too detailed, rational description of corporal signs, leading to the deductive consciousness of an emotion, counteracts the perception of situative emotionality, even if the symptoms can be qualified as appropriate.

Already before Sorokin turns towards the post-human dystopia as his currently preferred genre, autism is prominently reflected in his works. Comparable to his later poetics, his early texts already reveal the author's genius for very detailed observation and its cognitive description, typical of autistic perception. In *Marina's Thirtieth Love Affair* (*Tridtsataya lyubov' Mariny*, 1984) he focuses this ability especially on social constellations. Non-feeling becomes a key category on the structural level of this novel and is therefore approached explicitly as well as more seriously than in the later contexts. Valentin, one of Marina's lovers, is a genius pianist, who elicits tremendous emotions in her not through their sexual relations but through his music.³⁸ Throughout this novel, autism constitutes the major philosophical problem that Sorokin introduces right at the beginning, where Valentin complains about his lack of feelings.

– My whole life, I have dreamt of loving somebody, [...] to be head over heels in love. Such as to agonize, to sob with passion, to turn grey out of jealousy. [...] Only one thing I cannot understand: Either it is because of our Soviet conditions that we cannot develop this feeling, or I simply haven't met the right person yet. – Maybe you have just dissipated your energies and that's the end of it? – I'm not sure about that. Here deep inside myself, – he tenderly touched his breast with his fingertips, – there is something locked up. No one has ever affected it.³⁹

Valentin describes the typical state of non-shared feelings enclosed inside him. Still, music provides, like writing in the previous examples, a way of self-expression and of touching someone through the arts.

In this novel, Sorokin connects autism to private relationships and to the arts, but also to the political circumstances, which he blames for the coldness of individuals born into an authoritarian system. Valentin appears only in the initial scene but this opening seems to shed light on a crucial point of the plot, constructed around the non-autistic main character Marina and her meanders through various sexual relationships within the dissident milieu. Only her 'thirtieth love affair' provokes her first orgasm in a heterosexual constellation and this happens with a secretary of the communist party, while the Soviet anthem is playing on the radio.

38 Cf. Sorokin 2012b: 392-394.

39 Ibid.: 387.

– Just hurry up... I want to sleep... [...] [H]e lay down on her – heavily, hotly, kissed and immediately penetrated her – roughly and uncomfortably. [...] And the unbearable, sweet, maddening. Oh... my God... The orgasm, and what an orgasm, – in an unprecedented force and continuation. [...]

UNITED FOREVER IN FRIENDSHIP AND LABOUR
OUR MIGHTY REPUBLICS WILL EVER ENDURE.

Marina wept, her heart burst with the new, unexplainable feeling, and the words, the words... exhilarating, bright, solemn and joyous, – they are more comprehensible than ever, and directly reach her heart [...]. Marina feels that joy that for her whole life was not bestowed on her. [...] In her body sounded still the words of the marvellous song, her lips kept trembling, while the tears on her cheeks were drying. [...] Never had she felt as delighted and calm as now.⁴⁰

Marina's orgasm is depicted throughout a dozen pages, portraying her tremendous emotions as a combination of bodily reactions, feelings and associations evoked by the Soviet anthem. This episode parallels the initial encounter with Valentin, where sexual actions are emphasized in order to stay disconnected from Marina's orgasmic soaring that she owes to his playing Chopin. Marina's orgasm with the secretary of the communist party brings together these two separated levels of feeling and sexual abandon. Illustrating her first acceptance of losing control, Marina's orgasm is metonymically extended to a figurative level and represents her loss of her political consciousness, i.e. an assimilation of the dissident to a patriot. Marina's enthusiasm is henceforward focused on the idea of communism, including all her feelings, needs, ideas, expectations and her whole personality.

That feelings play a major part in the liaison with the secretary of the communist party is outlined already in the scene in which he tries to seduce her, which includes not only critical remarks on her alternative lifestyle but also his claiming of her 'love' for the nation: "The skirt she loves! With dissidents she messes around! [...] You live apart from the nation, you see? This is what causes all these turbulences. You'd better be together with the nation, together. This would be easier for you and better for the nation. One has to love one's own nation, Marina. To love!"⁴¹ Consequently, after her orgasm, Marina enacts this 'love' for the nation. Her feeling "delighted and calm" indicates that in this new state nothing stirs her up personally. Revolutionary activism, the reading of forbidden books, hidden in the drawer, and homosexual love represent the affec-

40 Ibid.: 557-562.

41 Ibid.: 553.

tive content of her life so far, which she, on the spur of the moment, decides to leave behind.

Marina quietly looked at this man, who knew nothing whatsoever of WHAT he had revealed to her during the previous night. [...] [O]nly now, she felt that something was disturbing her pleasure. [...] [I]ncreasing with every movement of freedom, [Marina] withdrew the drawer from the commode. [...] The Bible, Chukovskaya, GULAG, – all this stirred up with photographs and cuttings. Marina smiled: – So it is... I have to burn... the useless past. [...] The books burst into flames. The photograph contracted, the triangular face twinkled with a repulsive grimace and disappeared forever. [...] Vika... Natasha... Nina... [...] – That’s it... – whispered Marina, feeling on her face the heat of the flames.⁴²

The personal and political passions shaping Marina’s previous character are closely linked to written artefacts and pictures, preserving her feelings as a differentiated spectrum. Personal writings and photographs give proof of her attachment to friends and lovers, while books reflect her respect for cultural values – disregarded in the Soviet Union – like religion, underground literature and non-conformist political thinking. Burning these objects is reminiscent of the historical book burnings during the Inquisition and in the Third Reich, so that the act by which Marina irreversibly eliminates her passionate critical thinking and personal attachments is designated as a cruel act against cultural and social values.

As predicted by her first politically conformist orgasm, Marina’s new identity is emotionally shaped by the feelings of calm and delight. “Marina delightedly cleaned the work bench, brushing away the grey swarf.”⁴³ Through this and similar sentences, the final third of the novel illustrates Marina’s digression. In addition to her conformist behaviour and feelings, the insights into her personal thinking gradually disappear until she, as an individual, becomes fully absorbed by the collective identity of the ‘nation’. The narrator even stops calling her Marina, switching to her last name, Alekseeva.⁴⁴ Furthermore, the novel stylistically devolves into an extensive article of the central communist Russian newspaper *Pravda* and thus performatively writes the end of individual emotions.⁴⁵

In view of Marina’s disinterest in personalized affectivity and her untying of former attachments, this new identity shows obvious emotional affinities with

42 Sorokin Ibid.: 565-568.

43 Ibid.: 605.

44 Cf. Ibid.: 611.

45 Sorokin will revisit such a performative writing in later novels, such as to mark in *Roman* the end of language and in *Blue Lard* the end of literary culture.

autism. Still, the systematic is more complex than this, because Marina is a patriot, which proves that she *does* love and moreover has an unspecific but even very strong social attachment to the collective, i.e. to others. While the enthusiastic Marina wholly renounces her own position, the autistic Valentin, at the beginning of the novel, neither loves nor sacrifices anything of himself for others.

– And do you understand the dilemma? I am not able to love, as much as I try. And I really want to. [...] I want to! I want it instantly! You will say that love is a sacrifice in the first place, and that of a sacrifice the old snob is not capable. I am! I am ready to give everything, to spend and burn everything, if only I could truly love somebody. That’s what I envy you. Really!⁴⁶

In contrast to this, Marina’s new affectivity might therefore be interpreted rather as misdirected than as inexistent. Her fate sheds a new light on the critically introduced concept of autism, too, because a similar political misleading could not happen to Valentin, who is protected by his inability to love and therefore to sacrifice himself. Non-feeling is therefore also outlined positively as a basis for independence and logical deductive decision-making.

Although envying Marina’s ability to love, the autistic genius anticipates her vulnerability due to her feelings. He reflects about this in terms of a discourse on art, when he qualifies her playing of Chopin as accurate, explaining this with her emotional understanding of the composer’s music. Valentin’s compliment includes the earnest indication that the emotional component of artistic creation has to be well tempered.

– Seriously, for Chopin you precisely strike the cord. You feel it. – Thank you. – One only mustn’t fall from feelings into sentimentality, always be aware of the limit. Nowadays many aren’t. Either academism, a dry typing on the typewriter, or sobbing and mawkishness. Chopin, dear Marina, in the first place was an urbane man. You have to play him with elegance.⁴⁷

Within this novel, reflections on literature and music occur interchangeably and refer to the arts in general. Valentin’s comment on Chopin, who had “in the first place” been an urbane man, shows that he understands arts in terms of the Russian *intelligentsia* as interconnected with integrity and nobility of feeling. His reflection on artistic techniques may also be applied to writing, where ‘dry acad-

46 Ibid.: 388.

47 Ibid.: 391.

emism' of Marxist doctrines and 'mawkish bootlicking' in the dictated poetics of socialist realism and the writings of opportunist party officials appear closely linked.⁴⁸ The warning to follow neither the former nor the latter becomes clear only when Marina, infected by the national anthem, loses control over her affects and indiscriminately adopts both, forfeiting her sensitivity for the 'elegance' of emotions and the arts.

5. CONCLUSION

The very different literary examples show that autism, love and the arts may mutually influence each other. Unexpectedly, tremendous feelings of attraction to the unattainable Tatyana lead Onegin, the convinced sceptic of love and writing, to write. For Lermontov's Pechorin, writing is a way of self-reflection and shows that even the cold dandy possesses feelings of love. In contrast, non-feeling can be reflected in writing, too, as has been exemplified by Tolstōi's Karenin and Camus' Meursault. Even though their reflection-based letters also occur in contexts that could motivate a high emotionality, the writings do not express feelings but fulfil necessities.

The novels mentioned illustrate the personal and social failure of autistic characters because of their inability to harbour affections. Gazdanov's manifold addressing of this topic becomes, especially in his late works, linked to literary writing, because not succeeding in this area would mean the worst kind of failure for his solitary but intellectual characters. The gap between two extremes elaborated in earlier texts, such as failure on the one hand and the idea of a literarily productive autistic savant on the other, can be surmounted in the author's last novel. Inspired by the Bakhtinian concept of a dialogic relation between the novelist and his characters, he claims tolerance regarding the emotional dispositions of others and illustrates his view on the arts as a medium of authentic emotions which may furthermore advance personal development.

In contrast to the outlined focus on the therapeutic character inherent in writing, politically inspired critical texts concertedly reflect on autism and writing to illustrate social deficits in society. This is true within the existentialist context, where Camus as well as Gazdanov reveal and accentuate the irrational decisions of legislative authorities by non-reflected remorseless writings of journalists and judges. A further genre that in another way appropriates the combination of autistic characters and a focus on emotional shades in writing is the dystopia.

48 Kneip 1995.

Stylistically as well as in interactions within plots about generations beyond emotions, non-feeling becomes an important indicator of a problematic development society could possibly undergo. At this point, written reflection on emotions is used also as a pastiche outlining how little is still left of humanity.

Before Sorokin commits to the post-human dystopia where feelings are reduced to an irrational object of often cruel satire, he examines them as structural categories. Connecting feeling and non-feeling to personal relationships and to the arts he outlines the irrational and potentially dangerous force of emotions that can easily be misdirected. Losing one's political consciousness by assimilation to an authoritarian system is illustrated as entailing a successive disintegration of aesthetic taste, attachment to beloved persons, empathy and one's proper identity. Sorokin thereby blames totalitarian politics for destroying the individual and at the same time sheds a new light on the non-feeling that protects his isolated autistic character Valentin from such a digression. Through performative strategies in writing and public self-performing, Sorokin allows his critical statements to go beyond literature.

Not only in his case, the reception of the texts under discussion also shows a change of public opinion on autism, where readers feel sympathy for and identification with the eccentrics of the 19th century, disapproval of or indifference to Gazdanov's apathetic characters and worship or disgust for the autistic writer Sorokin and his heroes who resemble him.

At least the Russian text examples reveal writing as a means for surpassing the gap between the feelings inside a subject and non-feeling for others. Even the passage around Karenin's formal letter to Anna, in which he does not express feelings, gives one of the rare insights into his emotional state through his reflection on his writing. The importance of building a "golden bridge for her return" shows Karenin's fear of losing Anna and thus some form of attachment to her. Such a potential of writing as a communicative medium for emotional expression that involves attachment to others is shown in a similar way as being inherent to personal and to literary writing and to artistic creation in general.

In this context, one important factor favouring emotional expression over direct interaction might be owed to the reserved characters' setting that allows them to keep their distance. An addressee usually will, like Tatyana, read the letter in the absence of its embarrassed writer and, as Karenin's reflection shows, what is more, writing allows the content to be reconsidered, which also means that the message might even not be transmitted to an addressee at all, as in the case of Pechorin's diary. Regarding literary writing and the arts, the meta-level allows Gazdanov's heroes a distant view of their own feelings, such as in the case of his autistic savants who even fully exclude personal emotions from the

writing process, which can in a similar way be stated for Valentin's piano-playing.

These reasons might seem to diminish the emotional content of writing and the arts, but on the contrary they also allow and demand the selection of what is precious and dear to be more precise. Such a personal basis allows attachments to be more exclusive and special, such as for artistic expression to concentrate on what is of prior importance and therefore to develop a higher quality, both of which are alluded to in Valentin's statement that Chopin has to be played with elegance. The impact of writing and the arts on emotional attachment seems to be closely linked to their materiality, through which they preserve what is, what was and what could be.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Bakhtin, Mikhail M. (2002) [1963]: *Problemy poëtiki Dostoevskogo*, in: id.: *Sobranie sochineniï v semi tomakh VI*, ed. S.G. Bocharov/L.A. Gogotishvili, Moskva, 7-300.
- Behrmann, M./Thomas, C./Humphreys, K. (2006): "Seeing It Differently. Visual Processing in Autism", in: *Trends in Cognitive Sciences* 10, 258-264.
- Bleuler, Eugen (2014) [1911]: *Dementia praecox oder Gruppe der Schizophrenien*. Unveränderte Neuauflage der Ausgabe von 1911. Mit einem Vorwort von Bernhard Küchenhoff. Gießen.
- Camus, Albert (2013a) [1942]: *Le mythe de Sisyphe*, in: id.: *Oeuvres*, Paris, 251-335.
- Camus, Albert (2013b) [1942]: *L'étranger*, in: id.: *Oeuvres*, Paris, 177-239.
- DSM-5 (2015): *Diagnostische Kriterien DSM-5*, ed. Peter Falkai/Hans-Ulrich Witten, Göttingen.
- Ebbinghaus, Andreas (2004): *Puškin und Russland. Zur künstlerischen Biografie des Dichters*, Wiesbaden.
- Gazdanov, Gaïto (2009a) [1968]: *Èvelina i ee druž'ya*, in: id.: *Sobranie sochineniï v pyati tomakh IV*, Moskva, 135-356.
- Gazdanov, Gaïto (2009b) [1962]: "Nishchiï", in: id.: *Sobranie sochineniï v pyati tomakh III*, Moskva, 566-582.
- Goldstein, E. Bruce (2015) [1997]: *Wahrnehmungspsychologie. Der Grundkurs*, ed. Karl R. Gegenfurtner, Berlin/Heidelberg.
- Göbler, Frank (1999): "Zeit und Erinnerung in Gajto Gazdanovs Roman 'Vecher u Klër'", in: *Zeitschrift für Slawistik* 44/1, 79-87.

- Grigorevna, Nadezhda (2013): "Speak, Heart...: Vladimir Sorokin's Mystical Language", in: Rosen, Tine/Uffelmann, Dirk (eds.): *Vladimir Sorokin's Languages*, Bergen, 108-127.
- ICD-10 (2015): *Internationale Klassifikation psychischer Störungen. ICD-10 Kapitel V (F). Klinisch-diagnostische Leitlinien*, ed. H. Dilling/W. Mombour/M.H. Schmidt, Bern.
- Khodasevich, V.F. (1938): "Knigi i lyudi", in: *Russkie zapiski* 22.07.1938, 9.
- Kneip, Heinz (1995): *Regulative Prinzipien und formulierte Poetik des sozialistischen Realismus. Untersuchungen zur Literaturkonzeption in der Sowjetunion und Polen (1945-1956)*, Frankfurt a.M.
- Lermontov, Mikhail Yu. (2000) [1841]: *Geroï nashego vremeni*, in: id.: *Poëmy. Geroï nashego vremeni*, Moskva/Kharkov.
- Lermontov, Mikhail Yu. (1947): *A Hero of Our Time*, transl. Parker, London.
- Molière, Jean-Baptiste de (2011) [1666]: *Le Misanthrope. Comédie en cinq actes/Der Menschenfeind. Komödie in fünf Aufzügen*, ed. Hartmut Köhler, Stuttgart.
- Pushkin, Aleksandr S. (1977): *Eugene Onegin*, transl. Johnston, London et al.
- Pushkin, Aleksandr S. (1960): *Evgeniï Onegin*, in: id.: *Sobranie sochineniï IV*, Moskva, 9-198.
- Riemann, Fritz (2013) [1961]: *Grundformen der Angst*, München, Basel.
- Sorokin, Vladimir G. et al. (2013a): "Translating Sorokin/Translated Sorokin", in: Rosen, Tine/Uffelmann, Dirk (eds.): *Vladimir Sorokin's Languages*, Bergen, 345-366.
- Sorokin, Vladimir G. (2013b): *Telluriya*, Moskva.
- Sorokin, Vladimir G. (2012a) [1999]: *Goluboe salo*, in: id.: *Norma; Tridtsataya lyubov' Mariny; Goluboe salo; Den' oprichnika; Sakharnyi Kreml'*, Moskva, 667-994.
- Sorokin, Vladimir G. (2012b) [1984]: *Tridtsataya lyubov' Mariny*, in: id.: *Norma; Tridtsataya lyubov' Mariny; Goluboe salo; Den' oprichnika; Sakharnyi Kreml'*, Moskva, 373-666.
- Sorokin, Vladimir G./Semenova, Oksana (2002): "Ya khotel napolnit' russkuyu literature govnom", in: *Moskovskii komsomolets v voskresen'e* 21.07.2002, http://www.laertsky.com/sk/sk_037.htm (08.11.2016).
- Sorokin, Vladimir G. (1989): *Roman*, Moskva.
- Tolstoï, Lev N. (1934) [1877-1878]: *Anna Karenina* [chasti 1-4], in: id.: *Polnoe sobranie sochineniï XXVIII*, ed. Chertkov, Moskva/Leningrad.
- Wedel, Erwin (1961): "Onegin – Pečorin – Čackij", in: *Welt der Slawen* 6, 355-367.

Yandl', Ingeborg (2014): "Povtor i giper-rekonstruktsiya kak sposoby samopoznaniya. „Prizrak Aleksandra Vol'fa" Gaĭto Gazdanova", in: Polekhina, Maĭya (ed.): *Russkoyazychnye pisateli v sovremennom mire*, Wien, 164-174.

