

Claudia Criveller

Madness as an aesthetic and social act
in Russian autobiographical prose.

The case of Venedikt Erofeev's *Memoirs of a Psychopath*

In an interview released to Leonid Prudovskii for the journal *Kontinent*¹, Venedikt Erofeev said he started writing when he was six. His first attempt at writing was entitled *Записки сумасшедшего* (*Diary of a madman*), a title the author took directly from an edition of Gogol's homonymous tales lying on the shelves of his family library. As the interviewer asked how can a little boy be regarded as 'mad', Erofeev answered that the 'madness' of the title was just a narrative mask, and added that anyone can be mad at any age. Erofeev decided to wear that mask again in his first novel, *Записки психопата* (*Memoirs of a Psychopath*), which was written in 1957, when the writer was nineteen. It was never published in USSR, although it circulated in samizdat. Only in 2000 it was published in the incomplete but only available edition directed by Vladimir Murav'ëv, who was a friend of Erofeev and who has been taking care of his work ever since his death.

*Записки психопата*² addresses but a short period in Erofeev's life, and it focuses on two traumatic episodes which took place, according to his *Летопись жизни и творчества* (1938–1984), between January and March 1957: his expulsion from the university and that from the university dormitory. A leaned and gifted student, Erofeev had been accepted at the Faculty of Philology at Moscow State University the year before and he had already passed some exams, but his intellectual independence and fierce critique of Communist society led him to skip lessons. This

© Claudia Criveller, 2011

© TSQ 36. Spring 2011 (<http://www.utoronto.ca/tsq/>)

An abridged version of the article was presented at the 'International Auto/Biography Association Conference. Life Writing and Intimate Publics', University of Sussex, 28th June – 1st July 2010.

¹ Сумасшедший можно быть в любое время, *Континент*, 1990, 65. Now also in Erofeev V., *Собрание сочинений в 2 тт.*, под ред. Муравьева В., т. 2, Москва, 2001, pp. 239–282.

² Quotes are from *Записки психопата* as included in *Собрание сочинений в 2 тт.* See above quote, pp. 7–174. Quotes will be indicated in the text throughout the article.

consequently led to his expulsion. His ousting from university causes an enormous uproar, which in the book surfaces in the comments of other students on which the author reports in a realistic way. This event actually had a terrific impact on the writer: in the book, the young Erofeev lies in bed, falls asleep or descends into alcohol-induced delirium.

Both biographical passages from the book and later comments by Erofeev key into an openly autobiographical reading of the book. Narratological devices add to this hypothesis, such as the widespread use of slightly different versions of the author's name (especially of his surname, but also of the more familiar Venedikt or Ven'ka) which points to the main character/author — whom, on the other hand, is occasionally referred to in the third person; the comparison between the book and Erofeev's life; and, finally, the very timeline of the novel. The latter deserves some specific remarks. Dates (ranging from the October of 1956 to the November of 1957) are in fact sometimes confusing and unreliable, though they are accurately placed as subtitles to the five chapters. They apparently refer back to real episodes in the life of the writer which are also included in his *Летопись жизни и творчества (1938—1984)* as well as in his detailed — yet not always true — account of his life.

It is nonetheless impossible to regard this novel as a classic form of autobiography. Too many elements are purely fictional in it. In particular the oneiric sketches which follow the character's alcohol-induced delirium, and where plausible yet imaginatively distorted episodes (his discussions with his colleagues, with policemen, with Soviet leaders who all try to 're-educate' him) merge with pure imagination (for example his dream of writer Erofeev's spectacular debut at the opening of the theatre season). Curiously enough, some of the episodes borrow from literary works: for example, the representation of Stalin as a 'mountain eagle' which springs from Mikoian's words at the Eighteenth Party Congress (a leitmotiv in contemporary popular songs) and the representation of Soviet society as an 'Isle of birds' (pp. 150—156), whose main characters are, apart from the Eagle, Petrel Gor'kii, Penguin Khrushchëv, and Lark Erofeev (p. 159) — a group and a subject which remind readers of the Animals Tribunal in the popular *Повесть о Ерише Еришовиче* where the world is a shoal of fish.

Especially in the novel's title, Erofeev spins an overt intertextual web with Gogol's *Зануски сумасшедшего*. Because of its artful merging of fiction and autobiography, Erofeev's work (which has been almost unexplored by scholars as the only two titles quoted reveal) has typically been

made to fall into the 'diary fiction'³ genre — more specifically into the 'madman's journal' subgenre, which started to spread all over Europe from the late nineteenth century onwards. According to Kononen, Gogol's *Записки* are the prototype for the genre, whose development is closely linked to the various degrees of confessional literature, memoir novel, fictional autobiography, and biography. Izotova does not really depart from this hypothesis since, though denying the novel any artistic appeal, she regards the novel as a sort of answer to Gogol's *Записки*⁴.

Despite its obvious formal flaws, it is easy to detect in *Записки* the core of Erofeev's compositional and linguistic experimentation in his later masterpiece *Москва-Петушки*, which *Записки психопата* seems to foreshadow. On a narrative level, the novel is organized as an interior monologue which often lays bare its markedly parodic and ironical overtones, and its overt critique of Soviet society. The narrator's monologue is variously shaped and formulated: confessions, reflections, thoughts, questions, or self-directed remarks alternate and are constantly interrupted by dialogues with imaginary and real interlocutors who invariably reproach the author for his behaviour. The narrative line is further broken by passages from letters, discussions which sound like transcriptions of dramatic scenarios, informing and personal notes, quotes (in particular from both the Old and the New Testament), and sketches which remind us of Queneau's *Exercises in Style*, or even mathematical formulas which somehow sum up autobiographical episodes. Narrative shifts ultimately result in a very complex narrative structure which somehow thwarts reading — something not altogether untypical of contemporary Russian literature.

A certain degree of ambiguity ensured by the coexistence of many genres, alongside linguistic experimentation, the intermingling of fiction and biography, and intertextuality lead us to place (adopting a contemporary, retrospective perspective) the book on the theoretical horizon of autofiction, where extremely flexible conventional limits readjust to such indefinite cases of self-representation as *Записки психопата*. Though debates around this much-discussed theoretical framework have been tak-

³ Kononen M., *Me, the Madman — Writing the Self in Russian Diary Fiction*, *Scando-Slavica*, 2008, 54, p. 80. Kononen formulates the key features of the genre: 'It is a first-person narrative written at periodic intervals by a single fictional narrator whose words are not addressed to a fictive addressee or recipient and who writes a more or less introspective narrative concentrating on his or her own thoughts, emotions and events of his or her own life. Unlike fiction memoirs or autobiographies, diary fiction is non-retrospective emphasizing the time of writing thus creating a sense of immediacy'. Ivi.

⁴ Изотова Е., *Гоголевские аллюзии в «Записках психопата» Вен. Ерофеева*, in *Изменяющаяся Россия. Изменяющаяся литература. Художественный опыт XX века-начала XXI веков*, вып. II, Саратов, 2008, pp. 322—325. In this article, Izotova mentions all the literary reminiscences which surface in Erofeev's work.

ing place outside the boundaries of Russian literature⁵, there are more than just a few cases of autofiction in the panorama of Russian letters, both in Soviet⁶ and in today's literature⁷.

According to those who have focused on the genre, one of the leading strategies of autofiction pivots on its psychoanalytical aspect⁸, which in *Записки психопата* is articulated through the psychiatric case of madness considered as a cultural assumption whose significance is both aesthetic and social, and which involves the figure of the 'mad in Christ' or *юродивый*⁹ — a phenomenon that has been largely observed in the history of Russian culture.¹⁰

This strategy is first hinted at in the very title of the novel as well as in the internal 'inter-titles' of the five chapters (all of which are structured upon the same word — *Дневник* —, upon two dates indicating the interval of time which the episodes or the time of 'journal writing' require, and respectively, upon the following subtitles: *Записки сумасшедшего I; Продолжение записок психопата II; Еще раз продолжение и окончания не будет III; Продолжение записок сумасшедшего, IV; Записки психопата V (окончание)*). Inter-titles evoke not only the well-established tradition of the 'Fool's Memoirs' (Gogol's *Записки сумасшедшего*, Dostoevskii's *Записки из подполья*, Belyi's *Записки чудака*), but also a whole tradition of 'madness' or 'foolishness' which has been drawing both on popular folklore¹¹ (in particular on fairy tales on the 'дурак', such as 'Иван-дурак'

⁵ The following monographs are worth mentioning: P. Gasparini, *Est-il je? Roman autobiographique et autofiction*, Paris, 2004; V. Colonna, *Autofiction et autres mythomanies littéraires*, Auch, 2004; *Genèse et autofiction*, edited by J. Jeannelle and C. Viollet, Louvain, 2007; and P. Gasparini, *Autofiction. Une aventure du langage*, Paris, 2008.

⁶ See Caramitti M., *Strategie autofinzionali in Sinjavskij, Sokolov e Venedikt Erofeev*, PhD Dissertation, Università di Roma "La Sapienza", a. a. 2000—2001.

⁷ See, for example, Гальего Рубен, *Я сижу на берегу!*, Санкт-Петербург, Москва, 2005.

⁸ P. Gasparini, *Autofiction. Une aventure du langage*, cit., pp. 28—31.

⁹ Apart from the various contributions which will be mentioned in the present article, see the following, recent studies: Kobets S., The Paradigm of the Hebrew Prophet and the Russian Tradition of Jurodstvo, *Canadian Slavonic Papers*, 2008, 50/1-2, pp. 17—32; Кобец С., Юродство и юродствование в пост-советском кино, *Toronto Slavic Quarterly*, 2009, 28; Morris M. A., *Saints and Revolutionaries: The Ascetic Hero in Russian Literature*, Albany, 1993. As far as Italian researchers are concerned: Piccolo L., Lo jurodivyj e la città, *Europa Orientalis*, 2006, 25, pp. 83—109, and Marco Sabbatini's works about *юродство* in the Leningrad underground poetry: Пафос юродства в ленинградском подполье, *Toronto Slavic Quarterly*, 2009, 28; and Id., *Quel che si metteva in rima: Cultura e poesia underground a Leningrado*, Salerno, 2008.

¹⁰ See for example, Ковалевский И., *Юродство о Христе и Христа ради юродивые восточной и русской церкви*, Москва, 1902.

¹¹ Гусева С., «Дурацкая литература» и карнавальный «праздник дураков»: особенности интерпретации традиции, мотивов и образов, in *Проблемы истории, филологии, культуры*, Москва, Магнитогорск, Новосибирск, 2007, вып. 5, pp. 106—112.

and 'Петя простачок'¹²) and on 'high' literary works falling into the *Lives of Holy Fools* or *юродивые* ('Fools in Christ') trend — characters who are common in Russian literature until well into the nineteenth century (Pushkin's drama *Борис Годунов* or Dostoevskii's novel *Идиот* are cases in point) and who of course have been surfacing throughout world literature in the wide-ranging series of fools, idiots, and dreamers that populate it.

The narrator's attention to words relating to madness in both the novel's title and in its inter-titles (which are repeatedly commented) offer a second clue into Erofeev's treatment of madness in *Записки психопата*. The alternation and variation of words such as 'сумасшедший', 'чудак', and 'психопат' make us think about a deliberate choice, which might help us to trace the whole story of madness back through Russian literature. Moreover, the use of the 'scientific' term 'психопат' might suggest an unparalleled stage in the literary representation of madness.

Almost every page of the book contain phrases such as 'у меня бессмыслица' (p. 9); 'я сойду с ума' (p. 55); 'это сумасшествие' (p. 56); 'я — не оригинал' (p. 66); 'я сам чудак' (p. 80); 'я прежде всего — психопат' (p. 86); 'не стройте от себя дурака!' (p. 103); 'я от рождения — идиот' (p. 106); 'бедный помещанный' (p. 127); 'я уже дураком давно не был' (p. 128); 'я совершенно нормальный' (p. 137). The second term that typically emerges in the main character/narrator's own comparisons is 'как сумасшедший'. True cases of folly are mentioned elsewhere, such as the story of the main character/narrator's great-grandfather (p. 75) or of the mad serial killer (p. 57–58). Some passages in the novel are then devoted to the description of the character's own psychology. One of them includes a dialogue with a non specified interlocutor, probably himself, where the narrator reveals a crucial assumption underlying Erofeev's life and work:

Не встречали ли вы, господа тип людей, сознательно бегущих счастья и обрекающих себя на страдания, которым мысль о том, что только его сознательные действия превратили его в страдальца и что он был бы счастливым, если бы предусмотрительно не лишил себя счастья, — дает ему почти физическое наслаждение!.. [...] Не заметили ли вы, господа, что совершенно необязательно быть тонким психологом, чтобы прослыть им... Не нужно только уходить из области больной психологии и касаться психически уравновешенных... (p. 19)

¹² Пак В. Е., *Образы простых простецов в испанской и русской культуре*, in *Актуальные вопросы культурологии*, Москва, 2007, вып. 5, pp. 84–93.

Whereas for Erofeev's imaginary interlocutors this line of thought is pure 'Мастурбация страданий' (p. 19), the narrator overtly addresses mental illness — that widespread plague of Erofeev's contemporaries — and regards it almost as an aspiration: 'психическая неуравновешенность — моя мечта! — и, смею сказать откровенно, в мечтах я уже — сумасшедший' (pp. 19—20). Being totally at odds with Soviet conformism, he longs for inaction and wants to plunge into *reverie*, insomnia, and dream — anything that might carry him away from the memories on which he lives despite his youthfulness. Anything might become true in oneiric fantasy, and Erofeev consequently regards madness as a positive thing. While others look at the Fool's idiot-like inaction and non-conformism as dangerously 'contagious' (so thinks his boss, who eventually organises a march in the name of 'contagious Erofeev', 'ерофеевская зараза'; p. 89) and therefore despise, abandon and forget about him, in Erofeev's view that 'heap of nonsense' turns out to be positive since he is basically a psychopath (p. 86). In the narrator's view, madness is a most precious resource on which the writer draws — in his case his antisocial attitude, the very inaction which grabs hold of him after his brother's death, ultimately turns into creative activity. After all, madness used to be regarded as God's gift, which is why the Fool, a figure which bears much resemblance to the *юродивый*, was a steady member of European courts¹³.

Sources have widely testified to the large diffusion of 'folly in Christ' (*юродство*) in Russia. Those who adopted this form of asceticism not only had to refuse any kind of material goods, to abandon all their loved ones and to live a life of physical and spiritual deprivation. They also had to forgo their own intelligence in front of other men. This trend of asceticism belongs to early Christianity. It arrived in Russia through the mediation of Byzantium and it eventually developed throughout the fourteenth, fifteenth and above all the sixteenth century. The 'Foolishness in Christ', indeed, finds its origins in the Bible (Saint Paul says that the first 'Fools in Christ' are the Apostles) and its target is to reach perfection in God, escaping the material world, although living in it.

Although Erofeev's use of the *юродивый* and of related *topoi* has been largely investigated¹⁴, none of his critics have ever focused on his

¹³ On the analogies and differences existing between the *юродивый* and the Fool, and on their respective presence in Russian literature, see Есаулов И., Юродство и шутовство в русской литературе. Некоторые наблюдения, *Литературное обозрение*, 1998, 269/3, pp. 108—112.

¹⁴ Мотеюняйте И., *Венедикт Ерофеев и юродство: заметки к теме*, in *Москва-Петушки Вен. Ерофеева. Материалы третьей международной конференции Литературный текст: проблемы и методы исследования*, под ред. Ю. Доманского, Тверь, 2000, pp. 142—145; Нугманова Г., 'Юродство' в поэме Венедикта Ерофеева 'Москва-Петушки' и поэзии

Записки психопата. A closer reading and a textual analysis of the novel might therefore show how all the qualities of the 'Fool in Christ' which Panchenko¹⁵ mentions in his famous essay on *смеховая культура* in old Rus', are present in Erofeev's novel — and ultimately lead us to regard the writer as a latter-day 'Fool in Christ'. It is therefore worth exploring them at some length.

The first aspiration of a full-blown 'Fool in Christ' — which Venedikt perfectly matches — is his renunciation of intelligence. Just like Erofeev, the *юродивые* are usually learned and wise, but basically pretend to be mad. When related to self-representational strategies, the author's lexical choices support this hypothesis. The words that are used (and repeated many times) to define the author/protagonist mostly fall into the semantic field of madness and idiocy, such as: 'болван', 'кретин', 'идиот', 'сумасшедший', 'глупый', 'чудак', 'дурак', 'дурачок', 'бедный помещанный', 'щут', 'оригинал', 'слишком своеобразный человек', 'человек, упавший с луны'. More words are written in a unique list in a page of the last chapter ('гений', 'слишком мрачный человек', 'обломов', 'хулиган', p. 139): this is how people refer to Erofeev, but also how he describes himself.

The text is interspersed with similar words and expressions 'у меня/у всех бессмыслица', 'мечты о сумасшествии', 'чувственная трусость', 'психическая неуравновешенность — моя мечта!', 'знаете, что такое бессонница мечты', 'как вы неудачно имитировали сумасшедший бред...вы хихикали, она еще смеет прикидываться дурочкой', 'это — хуже сумасшедших перспектив', 'Это сумасшествие! Бред!', 'Поэтому не стройте из себя дурака', 'Я прежде всего — психопат', 'Такой чудак — этот Ерофеев', 'Завтра меня свезут в сумасшедший'. Venedikt's real and imaginary attitude draws him close to the *юродивый* — as his thoughts at the crowd on the bus reveal: 'Сидят — ну и бог с ними ... а все-таки, для чего сидеть, если можно встать... или даже на пол лечь — это ведь гораздо умнее, лечь на пол и коврыть в носу...' (p. 107).

Nakedness is the second attribute of a real 'Fool in Christ'. The *юродивый* typically abandons sin by getting naked and wearing rags. His distinctive clothes cast him out of society, since they are always grotesque or extravagant: 'обнажаться' and 'обнажение' are actually recurring expressions in the text. Marginalisation is exactly what happens to Erofeev,

Егора Летаева, ivi, pp. 146—149; Эпштейн М., *После карнавала или вечный Венчик*, in Ерофеев В., *Оставьте мою душу в покое*, Москва, 1997, pp. 7—13.

¹⁵ Лихачев Д. С., Панченко А. М., Поньрко Н. В., *Смех в древней Руси*, Ленинград, 1984.

to the point that a friend of his reproaches him for dressing in an inappropriate way.

A third prominent feature of the 'Fool' is his lifestyle. The 'Fools in Christ' are typically homeless and they live in the churchyard in sheer poverty. Yet they do not beg but survive only thanks to other people's charity. After being expelled by the University dormitory, Erofeev sleeps at the station, then at the workers' hostel. It is interesting to remark how the writer, in later years, managed to live in Moscow and other Soviet cities without the 'прописка', the paper (or leave) anyone who wanted to settle in the capital needed. He practically remained a homeless for the rest of his life.

A fourth aspect of the 'Fool in Christ' inheres in the Russian well-founded stereotype of the kind of existence he leads, protesting against man's earthly things as well as against society and those who rule. The *юродивые* typically need a crowd to speak out, and their words target society, accusing it of violating morality. The 'Fool in Christ' is thus somehow related to the fool of the western courts, although his laugh is distinctively religious and didactic. Just like them, Erofeev utters his bizarre speeches only in the presence of students, workers, or even of the director of *комсомол*. What he wants is to debunk and denounce the vices of Soviet society. His stubborn refusal of any rule clearly recalls the manners of the *юродство*.

A fifth feature is likewise highly telling. Sometimes the 'Fool in Christ' voices his protest through silence or through an incomprehensible language — an unintelligible gibberish that resembles that of babies. Significantly enough, in *Записки психопата* Erofeev is repeatedly pointed at as that who 'молчит-молчит' (p. 79); 'да ничего он не скажет' (p. 80).

A rather peculiar form of silence Venedikt adopts is that of the body. Venedikt drops any kind of action, goes to bed, and sleeps: he either dreams or lies on the ground in alcohol-induced delirium. Erofeev usually refers to his behaviour as to 'горизонтальность' (p. 162), which draws the character close to the 'лишний человек', and more in particular to apathetic Oblomov, who is explicitly mentioned (p. 133). Set against the context of Soviet Russia, however, his inertia turns into overt protest, and into intolerable antisocial behaviour into which Venedikt feels society is forcing him (меня 'засыпают', p. 44). For him, this is a real ban ('отделение', p. 44), which results in further confusion, a state of numbness provoked by his return to a standing position ('Помутнение, которое бывает у людей болезненных от резкого перехода в вертикальное состояние', p. 43). Whereas this separation from the world certainly leads to the loss of human senses, the narrator elsewhere suggests

that lyricism might be the ultimate product of marginalised, inert individuals. Madness and isolation consequently take on a different, positive meaning. Whenever Venedikt lies down, autobiography turns into a series of hallucinations, mostly due to alcohol or to dreamlike torpor. The narrator defines these moments as 'нелепости', and does not realise whether they are the product of imagination or of real life. Anyway, this is the condition from where he can voice universal truths or simply play the role of the 'rebel' — which is part of everybody's nature. As a result, the up becomes down, the good turns bad, and the whole world turns upside down. Dream marks the very end of subjection, of man's necessity to conform to social rules. Sleep consequently becomes the reign of chaos, where anything might happen: 'только во сне может иметь место такой безнравственный разлад' (p. 45).

While Venedikt is sleeping, nobody can force him to talk. He can shut up and laugh at his own fragility and thus reach supreme awareness. It is only waking up that he forgets about all the genial thoughts he has conceived while sleeping and dreaming. He is thus left with the feeling of having thought about something important, something that might have been crucial for a still largely undefined world. Dream is thus crucial to both his individual and his social existence.

The silence of Erofeev's voice and body in *Записки психоннта* gradually leads him to utmost deprivation — that of life. Whereas at the beginning of the book Venedikt represents himself sleeping or laying — an 'horizontal' body — at the end of the book he goes so far as to imagine his own funeral. He even smells his own corpse. Lying on the frozen floor of a station, totally drunk, he actually dreams of his corpse — his eyes open wide and his mouth forever smiling while he is lying in the middle of a crowd that does not avoid him anymore but indeed watches him decomposing. The scene recurs twice in the novel. Erofeev eventually sees himself totally motionless in a tomb, while the crowd surrounds him, ready to make fun of him (p. 130). Everybody thinks he is really dead, while at the same time expecting him to give himself away with a sudden movement or sigh. What he fears is that, should he ever wake up, the people would laugh at him once more (p. 132). This is why he utters a prophecy: 'Наверное, завтра меня свезут в сумасшедший дом' (p. 133)¹⁶.

The opening of the fifth chapter of the book reads: 'Меня похоронили на Ваганьковском кладбище' (p. 135). In it, Venedikt tries hard to remember all the details of his own funeral. He can not remember about hearing a funeral march and thinks that those who accompanied him did

¹⁶ On the relation between death and madness, see M. Foucault, *Storia della follia nell'età classica*, Milano, 1979⁴, p. 30.

it unwillingly, waiting for the moment when they would get away. He has the feeling that all-pervading silence might cast the whole scene in motionless time, destroying the tomb and swallowing down all the participants. The only melody he remembers is that of sand and earth thrown on his tomb and down into the grave, while he gradually plunges into silence. (p. 136). Significantly enough, this quite realistic representation of his own death draws Erofeev close to a famous predecessor, the author of a fool or a loony's memoirs: Andrei Belyi, whose *Записки чудака* share with *Записки психопата* the leading themes of isolation and of society lack of understanding¹⁷.

The sixth and last prominent aspect of the 'Fool in Christ' is the others' mocking attitude to him — a pivotal theme of the old *смеховая культура*. Using the mask of madness, the 'Fool in Christ' attracts the derision of other people through his behaviour, through his looks, and above all through his speeches. In *Записки психопата* the author/protagonist is invariably jeered by others. Verbs such as 'смеяться' and 'хохотать' run throughout the text, and there always echoes a laughter ('ха-ха-ха-ха-ха'/'ах-ах-ах'/'хи-хи-хи'/'хе-хе-хе'/'ха-ха/кххх') which is at once his and other characters' laughter. Erofeev typically says that others misunderstand him, make fun, and laugh at him: ex. 'А эти люди не понимали меня. За минуту до того спасенные мною, они смеялись над моим умилением', p. 103; 'Они снова не понимают меня и смотрят на меня вопросительно-весело... Они ужасно любят шутов, им нравится, когда их развлекают... А то ведь жизнь — вещь скучная ... работа в бухгалтерии ... жена, дети... сливочное масло ... зевота ... А тут — есть над чем посмеяться, блеснуть былой образцованностью'. (p. 142)

In fact, it is him that provokes those reactions, putting himself in grotesque or bizarre situations, as happens when a totally drunk and delirious Venedikt sees himself as a Lilliputian surrounded by giants who make fun of him and look at him through a magnifying glass, while they threaten him to throw him among miniature creatures and point the finger at him. For Venedikt this is of course a miserable episode, but for the reader this scene is frankly comical until it is interrupted by a policeman who wakes the drunkard up (p. 77). Only those who feel close to him, the marginalised and the lonely, understand him: it happens, for example, that a prostitute comes to admire his lines (p. 128).

¹⁷ These two autobiographical works share a whole range of features: for example the theme of cold and of misunderstanding, in particular, which pervades the scene of the corpse and of the funeral; the presence (relentless in Belyi, occasional in Erofeev), of a 'Брюнет в котелке', or the self-representation as 'ecce homo'.

In a carnivalised world where everything is upside down (as the slogans are: 'не забудьте, что и смерть, как жизнь, прекрасна'; p. 7), it is the *юродивый* who might make fun of what surrounds him ('И сейчас я имею полное право смеяться над вами; Я пытаюсь даже рассмеяться... И не могу; Меня непреодолимо тянет к ржанию ('вот видите — вам опять смешно; Только я не понимаю, почему тебе все — смешно', p. 85; 'Венедикт! Почему тебе все — смешно', p. 126). For him, as for all the the *юродивые*, the world is nothing but a stage where he can put on the Fool's mask in order to lay bare the vices of his society. The scene of a dancing soirée at the university dormitory thus looks like a *mise en scène*. A group of students meet for the dances, then start to discuss while Venedikt is on his own, quietly reading a book by Thomas Mann. Once he feels implicated by their words, he replies with vehement ejaculations and with bursts of laughter towards other characters, who are not mentioned by name but using generic definitions written in bold characters ('Дама в белом', 'Дама в голубом', 'Библиотекарь', 'Парень', 'Оскорбленный' etc.) as it might happen in a scenario. Any burst of laughter following Erofeev's banters or during his speeches is underlined in brackets. Venedikt laughs at those for whom everything is just the same, at the conformists ('смеяться над дураками, которым все равно', p. 83) but his irresistible laughter often hides a private tragedy. This sometimes cannot surface in his face and results instead in the idiotic contraction of his lips, or in a stupid laughter where teeth are chattering with cold. Laughter and tragedy mix up throughout different stages of the novel. This happens for the very first time when the narrator reports on three (either real or imaginary) murders which apparently take place at his university and which is told in such a way as to provoke 'дикий смех' in those who are listening, and which the narrator himself regard as 'смешной' and 'лепый' (p. 58). When it is related to the murder of the somnambulist who asks for suffocation, the merging of dream and real life becomes ridiculous and looks like the parody of murder rather than a true event. Venedikt even finds his funeral quite comical: though the whole scene is just a dream, its underlying implications are nonetheless anguishing.

In *Записки психоната*, the *юродство* serves not only self-representation but also the representation of other characters who oppose the conformism of Soviet society. Erofeev thus describes (using this explicit definition, 'юродивая Ворошнина, p. 27) Lidiia Aleksandrovna Voroshnina, a former classmate and lover, as a lively, cheerful, light-hearted girl: she is the one who makes other classmates cheerful, who is so bright that she ends up being marginalised at school, just like the protagonist (both

are actually defined as 'водонерозливаемый', p. 21). Lidiia is described as 'легкомысленная идиотка с проституционными наклонностями'. Her look is 'отвратительный' (p. 27), and like *юродивые* she is almost nauseating. She laughs coarsely ('идиотское ржание', p. 31) and she makes fun of others, she is always drunk, she swears and her language is coarse, too. Voroshnina even happens to lie in her bed while she tries to seduce Venedikt, but she eventually tells him that she probably suffers from a venereal disease (p. 34), which reminds readers of Foucault's remarks on disease as a sort of marginalisation and social 'madness'¹⁸. Reading a newspaper, Venedikt will eventually learn that his friend has been arrested. Lidiia ultimately appears as a 'fallen woman' yet Venedikt firmly believes that his friend was the one who could understand him: 'неудачно имитировала сумасшедший бред' (p. 34).

It is worth noting that Erofeev sometimes let a secret hope surface in his book: the outsider, the anti-social individual might well turn into a model ('Вы не верите, что можно вскармливать нарывом', p. 35), because an abscess is not necessarily to be excised to safeguard society's health. An external organism can intimately believe, can educate others. So the narrator/character repeatedly insists that he is not 'оригинал', that he is not mad, and that though so many 'unbridled Communists' live on the same flame he is simply misunderstood: 'совершенно нормальный' (p. 137). He does not want to protest (p.66), he does not approve of that. He just wants to claim his right to be indifferent. What thrills him is basically all that departs from so-called normality. He is not happy, but he is also afraid of happiness. He does not hesitate to point out that whereas the others, the 'intelligent' ones, cannot understand him, the 'дурак', the opposite might also be truer: a 'дурак' can hardly understand the 'intelligent' ones.

Although the budding young writer's lack of literary experience ostensibly results in too overt, exasperated experimentation, the book is pervaded by Erofeev's intimate hope that the conformists will regard anti-social behavior as something to imitate — that they will drop their belief that poetry is just a part of youth and youthful romanticism, to be discarded when a man starts to live, to work and to contribute to the common objective of Communist Society (p. 104). In Erofeev's view, inaction and a man's interest in the prosaic aspects of life are instead keys to the world of dreaming and of creating. In his dialogues with his imaginary partners, he thus suggests: 'Они не хотят существовать просто так... Они в мечтах — мировые гении... И, мечтая, существуют... ' (p. 39). It is the superfluous, it is anything that is not immediately necessary, it is

¹⁸ M. Foucault, *Storia della follia nell'età classica*, cit.

lyricism that is a sign of intelligence. What is supremely important is purity of feeling (p. 39). A true 'аурак', a real madman is not a man who can be satisfied with anything and who gets drunk to lose consciousness of life: it is rather a man who complains about the miserable life he leads and who therefore drinks. In the last pages of the book Erofeev's secret dream comes true: some of his schoolmates write some notes but this time they do not mean to denounce their friend the idler. Their tones have utterly changed, and they regard him as an aspiration: it is thanks to him that they start to write their journals, that they write poems, read, and listen to music.

As has been mentioned above, Erofeev draws upon a well-established cultural tradition where the Fool's mocking laughter undermines a world of fake culture, of illusory order and wealth, thus restoring the world of anti-culture, which is dominated by hunger, poverty, and drunkenness. His use of the *юродство* somehow foreshadows a phenomenon that developed in Leningrad underground culture in the Seventies: several dissenters actually used the same device first to denounce Soviet utopia, then to react to the general need for spiritual resources. In Sabbatini's view¹⁹, the poems that the Leningrad samizdat poets produced were pervaded by unmistakably religious pathos. They actually remind readers of the numberless *юродивый* of old Russian literature, where the religious overtones of madness were traced back to St. Paul's idea of 'Foolishness in the Cross' in his *Letter to the Corinthians*. However, in my view Erofeev's *Зануски психоната* does not share this kind of religious reflection and research. His character might rather be regarded as a self-conscious *юродствующий писатель* who uses the typology of *юродивый* to fulfil aesthetic and social goals and ultimately to denounce Soviet conformism and subvert generally accepted rules — an incomprehensible act for the conformists who regard him as a ridiculous man, but a sensible act for those who share with the 'madman's' views.

It is rewarding to construe Erofeev's use of *юродство* through a perspective based on poetics. This mask has been used since early stages of literature as a rhetorical, auto-representational device. It variously appears in what is generally regarded as the very first Russian autobiography, *Житие протопопа Аввакума им самым написанное*²⁰. At least one detail might be turn out to provide an intertextual link between the

¹⁹ See Sabbatini M., *Пафос юродства в ленинградском подполье*, cit

²⁰ See Hunt P., *The Foolishness in the Life of the Archpriest Avvakum and the Problem of Innovation*, *Russian History*, ed. Longer L., Brown P., 2008, 3–4, pp. 275–309. [See also: http://lesserg4mini.cs.umass.edu/~lessert/Priscilla_Academic/Articles_files/Foolishness%20in%20the%20Life-website.pdf].

works: in both cases, the narrator/character lends his personality to a third character, and consequently recovers from madness. In his isolation at the St. Pafnutii monastery, Avvakum is attempting to save the cellarer Nikodim who has seriously fallen ill, when 'И в ночи против вторника прииде к нему муж во образе моем, с кадиллом, в ризах светлых, и покадил его и, за руку взяв, воздвигнул, и бысть здра'²¹. A very similar episode is included in *Записки психопата*. The last chapter actually revolves on the young man's expulsion from the dormitory, and the whole scene is evoked through a dialogue where the victim is Iurik, a stage name for Venedikt himself. The narrator thus becomes Iurik's defender, while his interlocutor is the judge who is considering his case and who regards Iurik as an idler. Iurik is further accused of ignoring the Soviet laws and is ordered to stand up and go away. The narrator objects to the order since Iurik is ill and must stay in bed: he tries to reassure the young man and talks him into lying down again, to which Iurik 'встает, силится сдержать слезы... Он совершенно неграмотный... он улыбается...' (p. 142).

Although the *юродство* has typically been a pivotal element of Russian autobiography, some new perspectives on its underlying rhetorical strategy have recently been opened by contemporary reflection on the autofictional genre. Though the genre was theorised in France only in 1977, and it is thus impossible to read Erofeev's adhesion to it retrospectively, this critical trend might prove illuminating. It actually sheds some light on Erofeev's book as far as language ambiguity, psychoanalytical implications and literariness are concerned (especially its intermingling of real and imaginary facts, his highly contrived stylistic choices, and the novel's pattern). Erofeev's strategies in his first book clearly foreshadow some techniques and approaches he would articulate in his later books and especially in *Москва-Петушки*, but they also paved the way for later developments in Russian literature.

In *Записки психопата*, connections to the autofictional genre testify above all to Erofeev's powerful reading: his dialogue with old literary texts brings episodes and protagonists of ancient literature back to life. This is how the writer finds a way to represent himself and the society that surrounds him, and ultimately transforms reading into a creative tool.

²¹ Аввакум, *Житие протопопа Аввакума им самым написанное*, Москва, 1997, с. 125.