

Postmemorial sincerity in the writing of Sergei Lebedev and Maria Stepanova

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The works of Russian-language fiction that are most appreciated by readers, critics and scholars are pieces that undermine the state politics of past and memory. These texts remind the audience about the tragic, traumatic, and painful, not the heroic. In this article, we offer a comparative reading of two such books, Maria Stepanova's *Pamiati pamiati* (2018; Eng. trans. *In Memory of Memory*, 2021) and Sergei Lebedev's *Liudi avgusta* (People of August, 2016). So far, at least one comparative analysis of these two authors' literary creations has appeared (see Urupin and Zhukova 2020). However, among Lebedev's novels, his debut *Predel zabveniiia* (2010; *Oblivion*, 2016) has received the majority of critical attention from both Russian and Western literary scholars (see Heinritz 2017; Jandl 2020; Lunde 2020, 2022; Novikova 2021; Pčola 2019; Zywert 2020; Zherber and Ertner 2018). As far as we know, *People of August* has very rarely been subjected to academic inquiry.¹ On the other hand, Stepanova's *In Memory of Memory* has been translated into many languages (as is the case with Lebedev's books), and has also been a frequent subject of scholarly reflections both in Russia and abroad (see Hausbacher 2020; Sandomirskaja 2020; Scandura 2018; Tarkowska 2020; Tippner 2019).

Maria Stepanova, born in 1972, is a well-known Russian poet, fiction and non-fiction author, who won the prestigious Andrei Bely Prize for her book of poetry *Fiziologiia i malaia istoriia* (Physiology and private history, 2005). In 2018, *In Memory of Memory* won the Russian literary prizes Bol'shaia kniga and NOS (Novaia slovesnost'), and also reached the shortlist of the 2021 International Booker Prize. The work was widely praised by literary critics, who used such labels as "one of the most important texts written in Russian language in recent years" (Oborin 2017).²

Sergei Lebedev, born in 1981, is the author of five works of fiction. He began his literary career with the aforementioned novel *Oblivion* that is part of a loose trilogy, together with the novels *God komety* (2014; Eng. trans. *The Year of the Comet*, 2017) and *People of August*, dedicated to the totalitarian Soviet past and its reflection by a young man immediately before and after the dissolution of the USSR. Two of his other novels, *Gus' Fritz* (2018; Eng. trans. *The Goose Fritz*, 2019) and most recently

Debiutant (2020; Eng. trans. *Untraceable*, 2021) deal with the past, too. Lebedev, as well as publishers and critics, underline the biographical fact that he worked on geological expeditions in northern Russia and Central Asia for several years. The most probable reason for stressing this fact is that the motif of travelling to remote places is frequently used in Lebedev's novels and it is intertwined with the issue of bringing the truth about the traumatic past to the surface.³ Lebedev's novels were twice nominated to the longlist of Bol'shaia kniga, *Oblivion* in 2010/2011 and *The Goose Fritz* in 2017/2018. The novel *People of August* appeared among the final nominees for the prizes NOS and Russkii buker in 2016.

Regarding the issue of Stalinism that plays a major role in both novels, Stepanova and Lebedev represent what Marianne Hirsch in her study of post-Holocaust literature and art has called "the generation of postmemory". This is the generation that has experienced collective trauma mainly "by means of the stories, images, and behaviors among which they grew up" (2012, 5). There exists an affective connection between postmemory and actual memory, nevertheless, the main difference lays in the fact that postmemory relates to the past "not by recall but by imaginative investment, projection, and creation" (5). In our inquiry, we will try to scrutinize precisely the "imaginative investment" in the reflection of the traumatic Soviet past in both *In Memory of Memory* and *People of August* (which will also be read in relation to other Lebedev's novels) and how the rhetoric and ethos of sincerity is pursued through such an investment.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Ever since memory has become a widely reflected topic among (mainly cultural) historians in the 1980s, there has been a significant rise in the quantity of scholarly works. The Holocaust remains the most discussed issue, which, of course, does not mean that other significant traumatic events experienced by different nations and communities are not being reflected. For example, the journal *Memory Studies* has prepared many special issues that shed more light on previously overlooked topics and regions, including post-dictatorial Latin America (Andermann 2015) or suppressed memories in Eastern Europe (Tali and Astahovska 2022). The field has also considerably diversified in terms of theory. It has led to a state when we can no longer expect universal methodology or a uniform canon of theoretical works.⁴ Many of the key terms of memory studies have transformed as well. For example, where German-speaking scholars think of transgenerational memory, or the memory of the second or third generation, English-speaking theorists are more likely to use the term postmemory.⁵ In spite of the major rise in research, the application of memory theories and especially concepts related to trauma in literary studies remains an object of debate (see Erll 2010; Milevski and Wetenkamp 2022; Weinberg 2010). It does not mean that new papers and books that analyze fictional writing devoted to past traumas do not lead to our better understanding of cultural and specifically literary mechanisms of mourning and commemoration. However, in terms of methodology, these works are not homogenous and, on many occasions, intersect with other research fields, such as postcolonial studies (see Uffelman and Ulbrecht 2017).

In general, conceptualization of the relationship between memory and literature can be divided into two areas.⁶ The first one is the so-called memory of literary texts. This area includes approaches that aim at the mnemotechnics and “rewriting” of texts within a certain intertextual continuum. Renate Lachmann was among the first scholars to use this perspective in the inquiry of the bond between memory and literature. Using models based on Cicero’s treatise *De oratore*, she pointed at the importance of the connection between forgetting and remembering and also suggested (with reference to the Greek legend of the poet Simonides of Ceos) that death might be the starting point for remembering (Lachmann 1990, 18–27).⁷ Lachmann’s theoretical works (see Lachmann 1990, 2002; Lachmann and Haverkamp 1993) later became a fruitful background for the memory studies research conducted by the Constance school of reception aesthetics.

The second area of literary memory studies is based on historical and cultural-historical approach and aims at national histories and historical events that play significant role in the process of the creation of national identities. These events can be both progressive and regressive, or, in another word, traumatic.

Both approaches are influenced by the reception of research conducted by Aleida and Jan Assmanns. The Assmanns focused on the role of memory in the processes of state and national identity construction (J. Assmann 1997), as well as on the topography of places with traces (both hidden and otherwise) of historical and especially traumatic memory that await revelation (A. Assmann 1999).⁸

The past and memory as topics of contemporary Russian literature and their relationship to the traumatic historical milestones of Russian society have not yet been systematically scrutinized, even though major progress has been made in recent years in the field of Russian-language memory studies (see Barskova and Nicolosi 2017; Epple 2020; Kocheliaeva 2015; Kopusov 2011; Ushakin and Trubina 2009; Voronina 2018).⁹ In comparison to the Western research of intersections between memory and literature, Russian research has remained underdeveloped for a long time, which is not to say that there has not been any autonomous attempt at all to reflect upon the issue. The case of Yuri Lotman (1985) proves that there exists a Russian-language legacy of cultural-historical thinking about memory. When it comes to the notion of memory of literature, the legacy is even richer, thanks to the research of the Moscow-Tartu semiotic circle.

SINCERITY AND MEMORY IN LITERATURE: FROM PERESTROIKA TO PUTIN’S RUSSIA

The beginning of perestroika and the policy of glasnost (publicity, openness) led to a paradigm shift in Russia’s approach to its own past. In the official discourse, the idea of “essentialized anti-Communism” (Lipovetsky 2019, 168) started to prevail. This meant that the public demand for reflection of the traumatic Soviet past was supported by the government. This turn was discursively intertwined with the revived sincerity rhetoric. Remembering and commemoration of the victims of state violence were organically linked to the need of being honest with oneself

in establishing one's identity. That was seen as the essential condition in dealing with the Soviet trauma, which had not been allowed during previous decades. To describe the interweaving relation between different modes of honesty and grasping the past, Ellen Rutten (2017, 89–93, 107–110) used the term “curative sincerity”. The concept of sincerity is therefore related to the question of truthfulness, but “the imperative of objective truthfulness” is replaced by “the imperative of a subjective intention to convey only what one personally believes to be true” (Dufner and Kühler 2019, 398). Sincerity is then not only a moral virtue, but can describe attitudes and actions of individuals in relation to themselves and others: Are they living in accordance with their convictions? Are they sharing these convictions and their personal experience with others? In a broader social framework, sincerity can be also a matter of historically preferred social and cultural norms and even state politics, as the case of late Soviet and early post-Soviet years showed.

In this regard, it is not surprising that during the first post-Soviet decade, memoirs, and other genres of (auto)biographical writing that turned toward the past became vastly popular among Russian-language authors and readers.¹⁰ In 1999, the literary-critical journal *Voprosy literatury* even organized a discussion among authors of such works in one of its issues. In their answers, the writers overtly connected the rising popularity of creating and reading memoirs with the experience with the totalitarian state and its systems of repression, propaganda, and censorship. The following quotations highlight different aspects of the rhetoric and ethics of sincerity. The authors claimed that “it wasn't possible to disclose one's attitude without reserves” (Sergeev 1999, 32–33) and that “for more than seven decades the country lived in an imaginary world” (Gandlevskii 1999, 15), because of the “Party's habit of lying” (Retseptor 1999). The dissolution of the USSR appeared to them as an opportunity “to give a testimony of a witness” (Zorin 1999, 21) and “to write about the talented, extraordinary people pushed into the graves, who couldn't speak about themselves and their time” (Borshchagovskii 1999, 12). The authors also emphasized that they do it for the sake of “the new generation, who doesn't even want to think about the whole unlikely Stalinism (stalinshchina), although they are historically under its influence” (Korzhasin 1999, 23).

Such opinions are related to the politics of “remembering as dealing with the past” (A. Assmann 2011) that characterized the Yeltsin era in the 1990s (Koposov 2018, 207–220). However, with the turn of the century, the official political discourse and policies became gradually hostile towards the attempts of commemorating victims of the Soviet regime. In Putin's Russia, the heroic aspects of the past drive the state politics of memory and the past. The key determining historical event is now the “Great Patriotic War”, which can be even called the origin myth of post-Soviet Russia (247–259). The contemporary Russian memory laws are in this regard unique in the context of European legislation, because they are indifferent to the victims of state policies: “The Russian legislators were, rather, seeking to protect the memory of the state against that of its victims” (295). The official state memory lacks critical reflection and in terms of cultural semiotics, it can be labelled as a cult of pseudo- or quasi-mnemonic model of the past (see Lachmann and Haverkamp 1993, xxi–

xxii). For literary reflections of history, this means oscillating between falsification and oblivion. After the 2014 events in Ukraine, one should even think of the securitization of the Russian past and memory, since the “defense of traditional Russian spiritual-moral values, culture and *historical memory*” [emphasis added] became vastly discussed in the strategic documents of national security (see *Strategiia* 2015, 28–31 and especially *Strategiia* 2021, 34–38). The narrative frame of the origin myth even played a crucial role in the discursive legitimization of the current Russian invasion of Ukraine. In this regard, contemporary nationalist Russian literature employs the schemata that the myth subsumes. However, their employment in literature is not to be understood as a direct result of the state politics. They exist in both discourses simultaneously, as probably best shown in the case of Zakhar Prilepin and his 2006 novel *San'kia* (see Höllwerth 2017). These schemata are very much built upon a more archetypical West/East opposition and their employment culminated in the nationalist literary creations after the Russian annexation of Crimea (see Ulbrechtová 2022, 249–255).

SERGEI LEBEDEV: “THE PAST HAS RETURNED...”

At first glance, *In Memory of Memory* and *People of August* (as well as Lebedev's other novels) do not share any formal features, nor do they have much in common generally, except that both deal with historical trauma and memory. While the nature of Stepanova's text is difficult to define, Lebedev's text can be unambiguously considered a work of fiction with a conventional first-person narrative structure. *People of August*, as well as other novels of the trilogy, are built around the unnamed narrator. In *People of August*, which takes place during the 1990s, the narrator acquires a job as a smuggler thanks to his childhood friend.¹¹ During one of his illegal operations, he was meant to check an alternative “black route” for diamond trafficking. He had to cross the Ukrainian-Polish border carrying an urn filled with fake dust of his imaginary deceased aunt, who wished to be buried in her motherland. He made up a cover story that she was the daughter of a Polish communist, who had moved with their whole family to the USSR and became a victim of the Great Terror. After a successful mission he decided to spend a day in Lviv, where he met an older man named Kastal'skii, to whom he “disclosed” the story of his life by “uniting own experience and other people's histories” (Lebedev 2016, 94).¹² In the end, Kastal'skii asked him to help him find his father's remains. His father died in Kazakhstan, where he was deported during Stalinism. This is the beginning of the main protagonist's new career as a searcher of missing people, specializing in discovering the fate of the victims of state repressions. Throughout the story, the history of his own family is continuously revealed (including the real identity of his grandfather Mikhail).¹³

Several scholars have interpreted Lebedev's writing using the term “magical historicism” created by Alexander Etkind (see Heinritz 2017; Lunde 2020; Pčola 2019; Urupin and Zhukova 2020). Even though Etkind originally underlined the presence of “magical” elements in such writing, the essence and aim of such literature seems to dwell in delving “into the past in order to contextualize the present” (2015, 105); thus such texts are based on “grasping the power of the past, the haunted nature

of the present, and the impossibility of emancipating one from the other, the present from the past” (105). In a similar manner, Ingunn Lunde interprets the opening scene of *Oblivion*, where the main character stands “at the boundary of Europe” heading “backwards into time and history” (2022, 187). Such a movement and unbreakable bond between the past and present are characteristic of all of Lebedev’s writing.

It is in this regard when the imaginative investment comes into play. In Lebedev’s case, it is thanks to the metonymical approach to allegorical constructions of reality that takes “parts for the whole” (Etkind 2015, 108), leading to the reenactment of “the catastrophe, distorting all its features but actualizing the most important one – its horror” (108). Nevertheless, Lebedev’s novels do not lack the presence of magical or irrational forces. The main character develops a “sixth sense” that helps him to navigate his actions during his searching missions. Staying in Lviv, he “needed to do something illogical” (2016, 93).¹⁴ His intuitive decision to visit an expensive restaurant leads to an encounter with Kastal’skii. Lebedev’s book contains many self-revelations about the presence of irrational forces that drive the protagonist’s actions. For example, in *The Year of the Comet*, the narrator states: “But I also knew: if what I was seeking, what I needed, was there, then I would be able to re-create the knot. I didn’t know the way now, but afterward I would” (2017, 90).

Regarding the allegories that re-enact the horror, in *People of August* the story of the Dog Tsar (Pesii Tsar’) seems to be symptomatic.¹⁵ It is a story of a dog specialist, who worked in one of the Soviet labor camps. After the dissolution of the USSR, he started to breed dogs with wolves. With the help of the newly acquired breed of wolfdogs he founded an illegal slave colony on the territory of the former camp he had used to work for before. The narrator’s remarks on what he found in the remote forest appears as a perfect allegory of the Soviet regime and of the danger that its legacy represents for the future of the Russian state and society:

The smell of bread and the spikes of barbed wire as a single whole, which cannot be split; agonizing feeling of a kinship. “That’s it, – I thought looking at the colony after overcoming initial lunacy, – that’s the Soviet, its very essence and flesh.” When the smell of bread drifted in from the side of a colony, we all felt the same, I could tell by the faces. It means that it remains in us. Not the Communist, in which was seen the main danger, but the Soviet sentimental heritage will keep on living even in Musa, Dzhailil and Danil. (2016, 178–179)¹⁶

After the destruction of the illegal colony and the death of the Dog Tsar, who was accidentally killed by one of his wolfdogs, the narrator continues his previous thoughts: “We destroyed a terrifying nest, however, I couldn’t call this action blessed. I felt that we all are tied up by the unexpected death of the lord of the dogs and that our far future is predestined by what we have done here, by what we felt doing it” (190).¹⁷ Significantly, the narrator underlines the role of feelings and not the mere fact of doing something. It is the rationally ungraspable force that would influence the future and not the actions themselves. The narrator sees it as a sign of future development.

The Dog Tsar episode also indicates who the people of August are. The meaning is twofold. On the one hand, they are the hope for the brighter future of the state.

In the prologue, Lebedev uses this expression in his description of those who gathered at the Lubianka square in August 1991 and tore down the sculpture of Feliks Dzerzhinsky.¹⁸ On the other hand, later in the novel, there appears another possible meaning of the expression that is related to the narrator's perception of the Soviet legacy after the Dog Tsar incident. He relates it to the appointment of Vladimir Putin to the position of prime minister in August 1999. Without explicitly naming him, the narrator reflects upon the new political leader with "the surname resembling an operational nickname that ends with 'in', like Lenin and Stalin" (242).¹⁹ After this short remark, he starts reflecting upon how his thinking changed in the new social context and he started to perceive his former buddies with suspicion, reminding him of Stalinism.²⁰ He concludes with the reference to the Dog Tsar allegory: "And now we were all residents of the little town next to which settled the Dog Tsar: the past has returned, and we are going to live in it" (242).²¹

MARIA STEPANOVA: UNGRASPABLE AND THEREFORE BELOVED

As we have stated before, Stepanova's work seems more difficult to define in terms of genre than Lebedev's. The subtitle of *In Memory of Memory* is "a romance" (Russ. romans), which supports the self-reflectivity of the text. Together with the title, it suggests that we are not about to read traditional memoirs or fiction, but a piece that reflects upon its own nature. Some scholars even call it a meta-novel (Novikova 2020). The text can be called a literary depiction of the process of recollection with a special focus on the possibilities and limits of reconstructing the past. Among the inspirational sources might be Marcel Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu* (*In Search of Lost Time*, 1908–1922). Stepanova refers to Proust's novel on several occasions (see, for example, Stepanova 2018, 120–123; 2021, 168–171). Generally, Stepanova's book might be compared to similar Central European texts that combine autobiographical experience with reflection of literary traditions, which represent solid ground for the narrator's storytelling. The space in which the narration is enacted is usually closely linked to the authorial/narrative subject's life. Such is the case of Austrian essayist and journalist Karl-Markus Gauß (see Ulbrechtová and Ulbrecht 2020). Therefore, the space is fashioned in accordance with cartographic poetics or geopoetics (see Marszałek and Sasse 2010) and does not rely on the work with traumatic places and commemoration of the victims of totalitarian terror, as it appears, for example, in the writing of Martin Pollack (see Ulbrechtová and Ulbrecht 2020).

We may also think of Stepanova's book as an ambitious project of essayist literature combining family history narration with documentary research in archives.²² The function of fictional elements is absorbed by thoughts about time and different modes of recollections, as well as the narrator's self-identity, family identity, and place in the family history, predominantly in the context of post-Soviet Russia. As in Karl-Markus Gauß, the recollecting subject is the agent of the narration emergence and fusion.

The text consists of three parts that are further divided into chapters. The first part functions as a prologue, as it is mostly devoted to the description of the beginning

of the author's preoccupation with (family) memory, as well as general thoughts about memory and the mechanisms that it is built upon. There appears the awareness of the unreliability of memory that goes through the whole text as a red thread. Initially, the belief of impossibility to reconstruct the past remind the aforementioned distrust toward official document and narratives (essentialized anti-Communism), but the last part shows that Stepanova managed to overcome this "trauma" thanks to her work with academic literature, gathering available facts and creating the picture of family and its everyday life in pre-revolutionary and Soviet Russia.

It is the second part that contains mainly essay-like chapters about art and writing concerned with trauma and memory. We may say that these chapters are preoccupied with cultural memory. An important part of these chapters, as well as of the first part of the book, are the so-called "non-chapters" (Russ. *ne-glavy*). These consist of family letters inserted into the text in a-chronological order. On the other hand, the chapters of the third part of the book contain documents ordered chronologically. This final part tells stories of Stepanova's family members, while describing her search for the relevant document and personal correspondence and travelling abroad to archives and places, where her ancestors lived or stayed.²³ As we have already stated, the fictional narration is replaced by the authorial subject's reflections and thoughts about her ancestors and by the process of reconstruction of the family history (and memory). Academic texts, essays and literary fiction are used by Stepanova to support her thoughts. She freely retells these sources, recreates them into a new literary form and combines them with her own remarks and ideas.²⁴

Let us now return to the book's subtitle. In the chapter devoted to the legacy of the artist Charlotte Salomon, Stepanova uses the term "romance" to point at the lyricism of Salomon's *Leben? oder Theatre? (Life? or Theatre?, 1940–1942)*. Moreover, she uses it with a reference to Sigmund Freud's short essay *Familienroman der Neurotiker (Family Romances, 1909)*. This is how Stepanova understands Freud's theory of romance: "In the article, Freud describes a particular stage of development when the child begins to consider how he, such a 'special' child, could be born to such ordinary parents, and so he invents new parents..." (2021, 270)²⁵ After a brief look at Freud's original text, it is obvious that Stepanova simplifies the theory. Nevertheless, in the context of Stepanova's book, the Freudian subtext seems more than relevant, because both Freud and Stepanova stress the importance of the work of imagination. The key idea of Freud's theory is that imaginative parents "are derived entirely from real recollections of the actual and humble ones", which means that the child glorifies their parents instead of wishing to get rid of them (Freud 1959, 240). For that reason, Freud concludes his elaboration with a statement that the replacement is "only an expression of the child's longing for the happy, vanished days when his father seemed to him the noblest and strongest of men and his mother the dearest and loveliest of women" (241). There is an obvious tendency towards idealization and nostalgia and therefore, the imaginative investment is what matters the most. This is, for example, how Stepanova concludes her notes on Rafael Goldchain's book *I Am My Family* (2008): "The oath of fidelity to family history becomes its destruction, a parody of resurrection of the dead: another is replaced by oneself, the known

world is squeezed out by the invented world” (2021, 212).²⁶ Imagining and inventing are proper ways to get closer to the family history since Stepanova struggles with the absence of knowledge and actual memory. Knowledge can even turn into an obstacle for embracing family history, as the final sentence of the novel suggests: “Frozen Charlottes, representatives of the population of survivors; they seem like family to me – and the less I can say about them, the closer they come” (500).²⁷ It shows how Stepanova in the end embraces and accepts the impossibility of getting to the core of family history. Throughout the book, she repeatedly mentions her preoccupation with this issue: “It’s all pointless: scoop it all out, to the very bottom of the cup, its tin walls, you can walk into the house of the past, but you can’t penetrate it, nor will it enter you, like the chill slick of a ghost that appears out of nowhere in the warm twilight of a July evening” (247).²⁸ However, closer to the end she is not disappointed that “[e]verything I wasn’t able to save is scattering in all directions” (498)²⁹ and that no “small box of secrets” (499)³⁰ was hidden at the end of her journey.

Regarding the imaginative potential of remembrance, Stepanova proposes a division of memory into three types: that which is lost, that which has been received, and that which has never been (247). Most importantly, she states that “[t]he object of remembrance can be the same in all cases” (248).³¹ As we have already indicated, memory in Stepanova’s work is the third type; it is imaginative, inventive, and not based on first-hand recollection, instead relying on different media. Whether these are other people’s stories, archival documents (even personal correspondence), or private photos, they are all unreliable sources; memory is grasped as mediated and therefore unreliable. There is always a gap between the subject and the object, a gap of which Stepanova as well as Lebedev are well aware. For that reason, they both pay such close attention to imagination, intuition, emotional bonds, and experiencing the past through journeys, by visiting places or touching objects. In Stepanova’s book, this becomes especially obvious in the fourth chapters of the last part that is fully dedicated to individual family members’ stories. She is trying to get closer to them by travelling to places where they lived, despite not always having exact information about the location. Therefore, she spends much time imagining what it would have been like. Moreover, this might be the reason for her to pay so much attention to cultural memory and reflect upon the artworks of other writers and artists; it may help her in a better understanding of the past, the work of memory and her own ancestors.

PROTECTIVE (IN)SINCERITY AND THE ROLE OF A MEDIUM

There is, however, a big difference between the nature of imagination of Stepanova and Lebedev’s narrators. While Stepanova’s imaginative and emotional investments are unreliable and are likely to fail, for Lebedev they seem to be most of the time a very reliable source, if not the only one. This difference also underlines the difference of genre of each text. While Stepanova’s text oscillates between the non-fiction genres of family chronicle or essays and fiction, Lebedev’s text is a fiction that turns toward past and its reflections and it might be considered an example of magical historicism as we have proposed before. Therefore, some critics accuse Lebedev’s novels

of artificiality or schematism (see Markarian 2017), because they do not fit the expectations of a realist style.

As we have stated, Lebedev's characters always got where they needed using their intuition and imagination. On the contrary, Stepanova is often misled by such extra-rational forces. A short episode about visiting an old house where her great-grandfather should have lived in Saratov seems symptomatic:

I recognized my great-grandfather's yard unhesitatingly. There was no doubt in my mind, even though I'd never seen it or had it described to me. The wooden slatted palisade with the Rudbeckia growing up against it, the crooked walls with their bricks and wood, and a useless old chair with a broken frame standing by a fence – all of it was mine, all of it instantly part of my family. It seemed to speak to me, saying: here, you needed to come here. [...] I seemed to know how it had all been, in this, *our* place, how we had lived and why we had left. (2021, 53, emphasis added)³²

The week later, she received a call from a colleague, who helped her find the apartment and informed her that “[h]e'd mixed up the address. That street all right, but a different house” (53–54).³³

The novels also share an interest in family history. Both open up with a discovery of a family member's diary. The nature of these discovered texts reveals why Stepanova and Lebedev have to turn to imagination and cannot take them as reliable evidence about the past. Stepanova and Lebedev understand that these diaries are media and shape the information they communicate. This is what Stepanova writes about her aunt Galya's diary: “It was as if the main task of each and every note, each completed year's diary, was a faithful witnessing of the exterior, and a concealment of the authentic and interior. Show everything. Hide everything. Preserve it forever” (24).³⁴ In a similar manner, Lebedev sees his grandmother's memoirs: “[I] started to think that granny literally hid behind the family history to avoid telling her own story”,³⁵ and concludes his reflection with the following statement: “I was even struck by the beauty of the idea: hide everything behind the redundancy of the exposed memory” (2016, 20).³⁶ The attitude of both authors toward these texts is well characterized by another quotation from Lebedev: “It seems like there is so much written, so much is revealed, but in reality, you see only a frame, curtains, because you will never know what was *not* written about” (20, emphasis added).³⁷ Even though Lebedev's narrator later discovers another diary of his grandmother in which she had talked about her life more openly, he does not learn the whole truth, because even here she kept on hiding the real identity of the father of her son and referred to him only as “M.” The narrator must employ his imagination to reach the conclusion that grandfather Mikhail was probably a NKVD agent (this is later confirmed by an archival file). What is even more significant, his grandmother tried to destroy the diary, but could not find it anywhere, because she had put it into a cover of a book by the socialist-realist poet Konstantin Simonov, but did not remember this.

These scenes not only point at the mediatized nature of the past (which the younger generation is fully aware of) but underline the difference between the older and younger generations' attitude toward it. We may identify here a motif of insincerity that could be grasped as a reaction to both personal and collective trauma, if we un-

derstand trauma as “a repeated suffering of the event” as well as “a continual leaving of its site” that leads to the “impossibility of witnessing” (Caruth 1995, 10). It can be therefore called a protective insincerity whose aim is to protect oneself and others. For that reason, lying or at least not telling the whole truth is depicted with compassion and empathy in both analyzed texts. Those who suffered trauma have the status of victims, so their insincerity cannot be the same as the insincerity of the perpetrators (or the state). While for the victims, it is a coping strategy, for the perpetrator, it is an instrument of manipulation. Therefore, we may think of a continuity with the ethos of perestroika and the early post-Soviet rhetoric of sincerity that is intertwined with the essentialized anti-Communism, when (in)sincerity was projected “onto specific sociocultural groups” and “attributing hypocrisy” to the ruling social strata (Rutten 2017, 16; see also 35–77). From this perspective, the older generations cannot be condemned for their insincerity. Their protective insincerity was not a result of their choice, but of the outer circumstances, of the outer repressive political regime, as well as the work of trauma. The political aspect of insincerity is well expressed in Stepanova’s chapter dedicated to the case of her great-uncle Liodik who fought in World War II and died during the Siege of Leningrad. Liodik sent letters to his evacuated mother and obviously kept on lying about his current situation:

It’s as if a person wanted desperately to send news but was instead obliged to simply cover the whole surface of a piece of paper with one and the same question. The correspondence is the only way to reach out and touch his beloved family, but at the same time he can’t let them know what is actually happening to him. (2021, 322)³⁸

In Lebedev’s novel, the results of experienced trauma are depicted in the scenes with the narrator’s grandmother. Moments before her death, she recites Tatiana’s letter to Onegin from Pushkin’s “novel in verses”. The narrator grasps it as her last attempt to connect with the father of her son, the narrator’s grandfather Mikhail. Even though the relationship with this person determined the whole course of his grandmother’s life, she could not speak about it even during the last moments of her life. The narrator perceives it with empathy, which is also his attitude towards the whole post-Soviet Russian nation. At first, he looks with anger at those who deny the existence of victims and those who would wish Communism to return (2016, 143–144), but after the Dog Tsar incident, he starts to think differently (187–188).

In the closing paragraphs, we would like to underline that an important question is not only how the younger generation (the generation of postmemory which Stepanova and Lebedev’s narrators represent) perceives the insincerity of their predecessors, but also what modality of sincerity they render. In Lebedev’s case, the narrator reveals through the process of narration everything he feels, thinks, and knows. However, in his actions and interactions with other characters, he acts like his predecessors, hiding the truth and not telling everything. After finding his grandmother’s diary, he does not share it with his father, who spent his whole life without the knowledge of who his father really was. Similarly, the narrator keeps the secret from his girlfriend. Like his predecessors, he is driven by a need to protect others from being hurt (physically and emotionally), as seems natural to him. His philosophy is well expressed in *The Year of the Comet*:

I imagined that every old thing had an empty space, like that within a porcelain statuette, filled with silence; every person had a space like that. Not swallowed words, not a secret, but silence; it was a silence that did not require the nominative case – who or what? – but the prepositional – about whom or what? (2017, 24)

Lebedev's style adopts some features of confessional writing, as the narrator shares with the readers details from his personal and family life that does not put him into a good light (the smuggling or the death of the Dog Tsar). On the other hand, the repeated scenes, where narrator makes something up or does not mention important information, prove that confessional writing "is poetic not mimetic, it constructs rather than reflects some pre-textual truth" (Gill 2006, 4). This means that there is always space for leaving something out, which only underlines the awareness of the presence of a medium in constructing the utterance.

As we have already stressed several times, the motif of absence, gap, or something being left aside or out appears in Stepanova's book as well. In this regard, the chapter entitled "Things I don't know" (2021, 359–381)³⁹ describes a letter Stepanova's father sent home from the Kazakh steppe, where he worked as a civilian instructor in 1965. The letter pictured him as "the hero in a Soviet-era 'cheerful-young-men-building-Socialism' film" (372).⁴⁰ She states that she "had internalized the logic of ownership" (373)⁴¹ by wishing to quote from the letter without doubting her father's willingness to permit it. After her father told her that he did not wish the letter to be published, Stepanova realized that she acted "like the tyrant's enlightened neighbor, with a landscaped park and a theatre in which his serfs acted and sang" (373)⁴² and "was prepared to betray my own living father for the dead text" (375–376).⁴³ This passage has an evident confessional manner, as Stepanova pleads guilty for having such insensitive thoughts. Moreover, she also acknowledges that her father did not want to be seen as someone whom he thought he had never been. For both Stepanova and her father, the image that the letter created "were stylizations of a sort" (376),⁴⁴ but while the father wrote it "to please and entertain his family" (376),⁴⁵ Stepanova saw in the text the historicity and medium-dependence of "the language used to describe everyday experience" (375).⁴⁶

CONCLUSION

Regarding the previous paragraphs, we may conclude that excluding something from the book or narration may mean preserving someone's identity and the ways they perceive it. This might be considered as a very interesting finding also in regard to the concept of sincerity. As we have stated before, the concept of sincerity is intertwined with different notions of openness and personal authenticity. The exclusion of something in an utterance or staying silent might seem to be an opposite to the principals of personal honesty and authenticity. Nevertheless, certain modalities of silence may function as a manifestation of authentic experiencing of life. It may be even perceived and interpreted as a sign of understanding and compassion. The inevitability of using language to perform sincerity and authenticity is a question that would need further scrutiny.

Furthermore, we believe that our analysis has proven that subjectivity plays an important role in understanding the concept of sincerity. One crucial factor seems to be the work of individual imagination and projection that is typical for the generations of postmemory (although not only for them). The case with Stepanova's father's letter illustrates it very well: Stepanova presupposed that the letter demonstrates the historicity of language, while the father considered it a joke. Both were sincerely convinced about the truthfulness of their opinions. The latter case points at another topic that requires further consideration: the relationship between documents and sincerity. The question is how documents depicted in literary texts and historical documents, when used to create works of fiction, relate to the concept of sincerity.

NOTES

- ¹ We managed to find only one scholarly article that cites this Lebedev novel (see Razuvalova 2021).
- ² For a selection of similarly overwhelmed reactions see the unnumbered pages 3–5 in the most recent edition of the novel's English translation (Stepanova 2021).
- ³ Moreover, Lebedev's novels are not only filled with geological metaphors, but geological processes also often determine the protagonists' fates. For example, the main character and narrator of *The Year of the Comet* was born during an earthquake. Therefore, he states that "[t]he earthquake was my first impression of being" (2017, 4) and "[m]y feelings, my ability to feel, were fashioned by that underground blow" (6).
- ⁴ Among German-speaking scholars, works of Jan and Aleida Assman and Pierre Nora are considered canonical. Nevertheless, many other works emerged in reaction to the approaches of Nora and both Assmans and there are no real restraints in relying more on these "new" works than on the "original" ones. On the development of memory studies, see Angehrn 2004; Erll 2003; Kansteiner 2004, 122; Kratochvil 2015; or Milevski and Wetenkamp 2022.
- ⁵ One should also keep in mind that today, it is not possible to strictly differentiate between different national academic contexts. Many German and German-based scholars turned toward Hirsch's influential term in their own theoretical explorations; see and compare chapters in Drosihn, Jandl, and Kowollik 2020. Moreover, there are many other concepts that describe transgenerational remembering, for example, "absent memory", "received history" or "haunting legacy"; see Milevski and Wetenkamp 2022, 205.
- ⁶ Astrid Erll (2010) further distinguishes five areas: the art of memory, memory of literature I (intertextuality), memory of literature II (history of literature), memory in literature (modes of literary representations of memory), literature and mediality of memory.
- ⁷ We should also mention Frances Yates, who was the first to pay attention to mnemonic systems transformations in her 1966 monograph *The Art of Memory*.
- ⁸ In the context of literary fiction, such an "archaeological" academic perspective has its parallel, for example, in searching for the crimes of Nazism and Communism, which are usually depicted in connection to the private stories on the background of major historical events. Boris Pasternak's *Doktor Zhivago* (*Doctor Zhivago*, 1957) is usually considered to be a novel that meets these criteria. The memory is here expressed on the meta-level and the novel as such is a lyrical narration of fictional character with autobiographical features. The main topic of the novel is the philosophy of history and rejection of revolution in favor of evolution.
- ⁹ We should underline that most of these works were published by the Moscow-based publishing house *Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie*.
- ¹⁰ In the post-Soviet period, Russian literature developed a variety of devices for dealing with the past, as shown in the individual chapters of the collective monograph *Russian Literature since 1991*, Dobrenko and Lipovetsky 2015.

- ¹¹ One may think of Vavilen Tatarskii, the main protagonist of Viktor Pelevin's cult novel about the Russian 1990s, *Generation "P"* (1999), who also acquired a job in this way and also participated in more or less illegal activities.
- ¹² "собственный опыт и чужие истории"
- ¹³ The whole Lebedev's trilogy is related to the grandfather figures. The story of the grandfather Mikhail as well as the grandmother's diary appears earlier in *The Year of the Comet*, the second part of the trilogy. In *Oblivion*, the first part of the trilogy, the fact that both his grandfathers are deceased is reflected as well and the whole story is about a man, who replaced the grandfather figures in the family structure and is called "Grandfather 2".
- ¹⁴ "мне хотелось сделать что-то нелогичное"
- ¹⁵ This is not the only allegory in the novel. One should keep in mind that they are part of Lebedev's poetics. The novels are often built upon them. In the novel *Oblivion*, the main protagonist is given a blood transfusion by his Grandfather 2. The transfusion saves his life, however, Grandfather 2 dies. It is a "life-giving death" that the protagonist tries to overcome (Lund 2020, 192). This might be read as an attempt to overcome the whole legacy of the Soviet generations, especially when we consider that Grandfather 2 was a former chief commander of a labor camp. In a similar indirect manner, the narrator of *The Year of the Comet* describes the nature of the Soviet regime through the character of his grandmother Mara, who is called "Soviet Power" behind her back for her decisiveness and action that seem "ruthless even in kindness" (Lebedev 2017, 41). This is illustrated by her approach to gardening: "I was amazed that the apple or cherry trees that were alive and full of juice just yesterday, cracking under the blade of the axe, had been burned, and that the old woman was sifting their ashes; but it could be no other way, because of all the grown-ups only Grandmother Mara was capable of deciding without a second thought what would live and what would die; she stood on the border of life and death, ordering one to be chopped and burned in order to fertilize another, more worthy tree" (43). Moreover, the narrator adds that when he followed her orders, "it seemed that we were serving something greater than concern over the harvest; Soviet Power was revealed to me as a life force and the mystery of annihilation simultaneously. Grandmother Mara, despite her lowly public position, was an apostle or at the very least a Soviet zealot in the true, invisible hierarchy" (44).
- ¹⁶ "Хлебный запах и острия 'колючки' – как одно целое, которого не разложить; щемящее чувство родства. 'Вот это, – подумал я, глядя на колонию, уже отрешившись от наваждения, – и есть советское, его суть, его плоть'. Когда от колонии потянуло хлебом, мы почувствовали одно и то же, я видел это по лицам. Значит, это останется в нас. Не коммунистическое, в котором видели главную опасность, а советское сентиментальное наследство будет жить даже в Мусе, Джалиле и Даниле."
- ¹⁷ "Мы разрушили жуткое гнездо, но язык не поворачивался назвать это дело благим. Я ощущал, что все мы повязаны нечаянной смертью властителя псов и наше далекое будущее predetermined тем, что мы совершили здесь, тем, что мы почувствовали, совершая."
- ¹⁸ It is also one of the final scenes in the second novel of the trilogy *The year of the Comet*.
- ¹⁹ "фамилией, похожей на оперативный псевдоним, заканчивающейся на «ин», как Ленин и Сталин"
- ²⁰ We should probably remind that the novel was first published in German translation in 2015 before it appeared in Russian original the next year (Lunde 2022, 180).
- ²¹ "А теперь мы все были как жители поселка, рядом с которым обосновался Песий Царь: прошлое вернулось, и в нем придется жить."
- ²² Essays, autobiography and documentation are important part of contemporary literary studies research. According to Reiner Baasler and Maria Zens, these literary genres cannot be excluded from the research of literary fiction, because they also use language to depict something "other" or abstract and mediate specifically subjective view of reality (2005, 21). For further details about this topic see particular concepts in Wagner-Egelhaaf 2019.
- ²³ Typically, in this kind of memory writing, grandparents and especially grandmothers acquire the role of the family memory holders. See, for example, the works of Victor Erofeev and Martin Pollack, for whom the paternal grandmother plays an important role; see Ulbrechtová 2019.

- On the other hand, for Stepanova, the maternal grandmother side seems more significant. In contrast to Erofeyev and Pollack, Stepanova does not attempt to deconstruct the legacy of the representative of state terror, but to reconstruct family memory. Lebedev's case is in this regard peculiar, as his trilogy oscillates between these two positions (deconstruction and reconstruction).
- ²⁴ It reminds of Osip Mandelstam's essays, who, by the way, appears as an implicit authority throughout the whole text. One of the chapter's is even dedicated to him; see Stepanova 2018, 163–176; Stepanova 2021, 222–238.
- ²⁵ “Речь там идет об определенной стадии развития, когда ребенок перестает верить, что он, такой особенный, мог родиться у своих заурядных родителей, и сочиняет себе новых...” (Stepanova 2018, 199)
- ²⁶ “Присяга на верность семейной истории оборачивается ее, истории, уничтожением, пародией на воскрешение мертвых: другой заменяется на себя, знакомое вытесняется воображаемым” (Stepanova 2018, 156).
- ²⁷ “Замороженные Шарлотты, представители популяции выживших, кажутся мне родней – и чем меньше я о них могу рассказать, тем ближе они становятся” (Stepanova 2018, 404).
- ²⁸ “Бесполезно – и то и это вычерпывается, как ложкой, до дна, до жестяных стенок. В прошлое входишь, не проникая и не проникаясь, как во влажный ледяной столб, откуда-то возникший в июльских сумерках” (Stepanova 2018, 182).
- ²⁹ “То, что я не смогла спасти, разлетается во все стороны” (Stepanova 2018, 402)
- ³⁰ “коробочка – секретик” (Stepanova 2018, 403)
- ³¹ “Предмет воспоминания при этом может быть один и тот же” (Stepanova 2018, 183).
- ³² “Никогда не виданный, никем не описанный двор моего прадеда безошибочно узнавался как тот самый, разночтений не было никаких: и низкий палисадничек с кустом золотых шаров, и кривые стены, их дерево и кирпич, и какой-то, кажется, стул со сбитой перепонкой, стоявший у забора без особой причины, были *свои*, сразу стали мне родственники. Тут, говорили они, тебе сюда. [...] до такой степени я вспомнила под этими окнами всё, с таким чувством высокой, природной точности я догадывалась о том, как тут у нас было устроено, как жили здесь и зачем уезжали” (Stepanova 2018, 35–36).
- ³³ “... перепутал адрес. Улица была та, номер дома другой” (Stepanova 2018, 36).
- ³⁴ “Словно главной задачей каждой записи, каждого ежегодно заполняемого тома было именно оставить надежное свидетельство о своей жизни – а жизнь настоящую, внутреннюю, оставить при себе. Все показать. Все скрыть. Хранить вечно” (Stepanova 2018, 16).
- ³⁵ “я стал думать о том, что бабушка буквально спряталась за семейную историю, чтобы не рассказывать свою собственную”
- ³⁶ “Я даже поразился красоте идеи: скрыть нечто через изобилие предьявленной памяти.”
- ³⁷ “Кажется, столько написано, столько всего открывается – а на самом деле ты видишь рамки, занавески, потому что никогда не узнаешь, о чем *не* написано.”
- ³⁸ “Выглядит это, как если бы человек хотел отправить телеграмму, но вместо этого вынужден заполнить все пространство тетрадного листа одним и тем же, неотступно занимающим его вопросом. Переписка оказывается единственным способом прикоснуться к близким; при этом никак нельзя дать им понять, что происходит на самом деле” (Stepanova 2018, 254).
- ³⁹ “Чего я не знаю” (Stepanova 2018, 286–304)
- ⁴⁰ “вел себя как герои хорошего советского кино о веселых парнях, рабочих социалистического строительства” (Stepanova 2018, 297–298)
- ⁴¹ “я уже вела себя в логике *владельца*” (Stepanova 2018, 298)
- ⁴² “то его просвещенного соседа с крепостным театриком и прекрасным парком” (Stepanova 2018, 298)
- ⁴³ “я почти готова была предать живого папу ради мертвого документа” (Stepanova 2018, 300)
- ⁴⁴ “чем-то вроде стилизации” (Stepanova 2018, 300)
- ⁴⁵ “чтобы развлечь и порадовать родных” (Stepanova 2018, 300)
- ⁴⁶ “язык, которым повседневность говорит о себе” (Stepanova 2018, 300)

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Postmemorial sincerity in the writing of Sergei Lebedev and Maria Stepanova

Cultural memory. Imagination. Memory politics. Politics of the past. Sincerity rhetoric. Post-Soviet Russian novel. Sergei Lebedev. Maria Stepanova.

This article deals with the ways the Russian writers Sergei Lebedev and Maria Stepanova conceptualize memory, remembering, and the past. The special focus is on the presence of sincerity rhetoric and its intertwinement with memory in Lebedev's *Liudi avgusta* (The people of August, 2016) and Stepanova's *Pamiati pamiati* (2018; *In Memory of Memory*, 2021). At first, the study outlines the current position of memory studies within literary theory and the main tendencies of cultural memory development in post-Soviet Russia. Lebedev's and Stepanova's novels are then comparatively read on this cultural-theoretical and cultural-historical background. The crucial aspect can be considered the ethos of "curative sincerity" (Ellen Ruten's concept) that both texts seem to rely on. We approach Lebedev's and Stepanova's texts as examples of postmemorial writing, which does not rely on the first-hand experience with the past it depicts, but encounters the mediatized forms of the past. Therefore, imagination plays an important role for the narrator or authorial subject. The imaginative investment into remembrance accompanies the attempts to sincerely retell the truth about the past, while being aware of the impossibility of retelling the whole truth, which leads to an understanding of predecessors' actions with empathy and compassion.

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