

Title: Diseases, Doctors, and Medical Terms in the Poetry of Russian Postmodernism

Author: Natalia Vesselova, University of Ottawa

Postmodern literature sees the world as sick, and sickness as the norm. Motifs of disease, pathology, mental and physical deformity are perceptibly recurrent in the “classic” postmodern prose of Tat’ana Tolstaja, Sasha Sokolov, Marina Palej, and others. The same feature applies to the poetry: the theme of illness and disorder frequently appears, medical terms penetrate the poetic language and doctors become “characters” of poems. Russian postmodern poetry seems to focus mostly on cardiologic conditions and physical traumas. It is important to note that instead of the traditional Romantic metaphor of the poet’s heart the heart is an organ of the human body; although the metaphoric aspect remains important, its meaning manifestly shifts. Traumas and surgery are referred to with an abundance of concrete physiological details and often suggest autobiographic experience (as in “67-ja bolnitsa. Vid s kojki” by Aleksandr Karvovskij). Another malady typically addressed by postmodern poetry is alcoholism and the medical aspects of dealing with it (“Palata N5” by Oleg Barabanov).

Doctors as characters are almost exclusively surgeons, committing marvelous acts of healing in extraordinary situations; in ballad-type poems they are described with distinct irony that alludes to the tradition of seeing doctors’ lives as a series of heroic deeds (“Znamenityj xirurg” by Genrix Sapfir; “Sluchaj v bolnice” by Igor Irten’ev).

The increasingly wide use of medical terminology is not only naturally connected to the themes mentioned above, but also becomes a part of the general process of linguistic experimentation so central to Russian postmodern poetry (as in Vladimir Strochkov and Aleksandr Levin). Drawing on both basic and professional medical terms allows intricate word play, new elaborate rhymes and the poetic transformation of words from a conventionally “non-poetic” sphere, a tendency highly characteristic for postmodern literature.