

Mikhail Lurye

## Sadistic Verse as a Genre of Russian Urban Folklore: Typical and Specific Features, Child and Adult Audiences<sup>1</sup>

### 1.

A good deal has been written about sadistic verse<sup>2</sup>—‘one of the main genres of contemporary school folklore’, in the apt expression of one scholar [Lyskov 2003: 83]—in the decade and a half since it first began attracting attention. The bibliography of scholarly works devoted to this genre now amounts to several dozen items; and sadistic verse has received special attention

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<sup>1</sup> The ‘sadistic verse’ (sadistskii stishok) is a comic poem about gruesome events and acts that became popular in the late Soviet era. Examples of comparable poems in English include the work of Harry Graham (e.g. ‘Little Willy from his mirror/Licked the mercury right off/Thinking in his childish error/It would cure the whooping cough.//At the funeral his mother/Gaily said to Mrs Brown//Twas a chilly day for Willy/When the mercury went down’) and Tom Lehrer’s ‘The Irish Ballad’ (one verse of which runs, ‘One day when she had nothing to do,/Sing rickety-tickety-tin,/One day when she had nothing to do,/She cut her baby brother in two,/And served him up as an Irish stew,/And invited the neighbors in’), or the anonymous: “‘Oh dear mama, what is that mess, that looks like strawberry jam?’” “Hush, hush, my dear, it is Papa, run over by a tram”, or ‘He jumped from forty thousand feet without a parachute...’. As in these cases, the effect of ‘sadistic verses’ rests on the offsetting of tightly constrained form and anarchic content. The translations offered below (by Catriona Kelly) are primarily intended to convey the spirit of the sadistskii stishok, and sometimes adapt the content of the original. [Editor].

<sup>2</sup> The scholarly tradition is to write ‘sadistic verse’ in quotation marks. One might think that the regularity with which it is employed by researchers in the field of school folklore would permit the name of the genre to be ‘de-quote-marked’. The only exception is that presented by the work of I. N. Raikova, who believes that ‘children do not know this term’ and who prefers to speak of ‘cruel verse’ [zhestokie stishki]. We can agree with Raikova that the term is not particularly fortunate: it has an undeniable suggestive force, but remains rather clumsy. But the reason here is that the word ‘sadistic’ is being used in a sense that is very far removed from the dictionary definition—a sense that is, in fact, characteristic of the way children understand and use the word. Among schoolchildren in the 1970s

not only in articles, but also in monographs and annotated collections ([Trykova 1997]; [Mutina 2005]), as well as in dissertations ([Kuchegura 2000]; [Mutina 2002]; [Vlasova 2006]). All the same, the incredible popularity and the specific appeal of the genre have not been fully explained. In the present article I aim to share some of my own views on the complex and multi-directional links between sadistic verse and the wider world of urban folklore; on the circulation of this material among children and adults; and also on what I believe to be the distinctive characteristics of the genre.

Firstly, the adult origin of sadistic verse is a fact that no researcher doubts. A different question is the issue of circulation. According to A.F. Belousov's observations, sadistic verse had been 'disseminated' into the child population by 1980. On the other hand, some observers found such verse circulating among young adults, predominantly students, in the early 1990s — a fact they linked with the declining popularity of the genre among adolescents: K.K. Nemirovich-Danchenko wrote in 1992 that 'over recent years, in the opinion of this author, there has been an observable diminution in the popularity of this genre among children: its main enthusiasts are now former children aged 18-19' [Nemirovich-Danchenko 1992: 105]. The basis for these confident statements about a transition between two different audiences is open to question. Obviously, those who had sons aged 7-10 in the early 1990s must themselves have been of student age, at the youngest, in the early 1980s. One could also cite copious evidence that sadistic verse was known and was circulated quite actively among adults in the mid-1980s, at least in Leningrad and Moscow, but this would seem otiose, since no-one is likely to express doubt about this anyway. (To clarify, we should say that when we speak of adults in connection with sadistic verse, we are referring primarily to young people (older schoolchildren, students, 'young professionals') and not to those 'middle-aged women who do not "get" the fictional nature of these verses, but who interpret them literally and with a naive straightforwardness' among whom the genre 'evokes the greatest distaste' [Trykova 1991: 91]).

All these sources and more give us every reason to believe that sadistic verse in the period when the genre flourished (1980s to mid-1990s)

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and 1980s the word 'sadist' was very current in the sense of 'one who physically hurts others' (being used, for instance, of one who used excessive force in a play fight); many derivative words were employed similarly ('to sadize' [zasadirovat'] — to torture, to play cards 'sadistically' — where the loser would have his arm twisted, be flicked on the forehead, etc.), and real sadists were imagined to be people whose special activity was to inflict cruel pain on others. It is in just this sense that the word occurs in sadistic verse itself: The children were playing at sadists, and screams / Filled the yard as they tortured a whole judo team' [Belousov 1998: 36], 'A sadist snatched a toddler, a glint in his eye / In the toilet the sadist floats, taking ages to die' [Sadistskie stishki 1992: 5]. Thus, there is no scope for doubting the 'natural' origin of the term that has become generally accepted to identify this genre.

was not in the process of crossing from one age group to another, but was circulating in different age groups in parallel. Unlike the majority of other genres and texts from the contemporary urban tradition, sadistic verse always belonged (and, apparently, still belongs) simultaneously to the folklore of children and adults: this is one of the basic particularities of this genre, one of the factors making it so palpably distinctive.

While the corpus of texts (or, more precisely, the stock of themes) circulating is largely identical, however, each age group not only performs the verses differently [see Belousov 1998: 550] but also interprets them differently, and also creates texts that suit its own taste and requirements. Thus, to speak of ‘sadistic verse in general’, based simply on the total content of the texts, is possible only at the level of extreme philosophical abstraction. If, on the other hand, we are aiming to solve the puzzle of the phenomenal popularity these texts enjoy, then it is necessary to distinguish between sadistic verse as a genre of children’s folklore and sadistic verse as a genre of adult folklore, and to establish both the universal component and also the elements that are conditioned by the social and age characteristics of one or the other environment.

## 2.

Basically, researchers are in agreement in how they account for the colossal popularity and productivity of these brief, blackly humorous texts: sadistic verse is unanimously interpreted as a genre of ‘alternative folklore’ in the late-Soviet era, one whose guiding intention is an ironic subversion achieved through grotesque images and situations and through a tone of black humour. ‘The whole system of allusions found in the ‘sadistic verse’ of the second half of the twentieth century,’ writes M. Yu. Novitskaya, ‘expresses the tragic contradictions of contemporary life as consequences of the total hegemony of falsehood and ‘double thinking’. The beginning of an ironic (i.e. conscious) opposition to this hegemony is found in the very act of performing a chastushka cycle based on the uncompromising and aggressive motif of the well-known 1920s song ‘The white army, the black baron...’ [Novitskaya 1992: 103; emphasis original]. O. Yu. Trykova writes that ‘social and political motifs [...] also find their way into ‘sadistic verse’, and are expressed in the genre’s characteristic, sharply satirical way’ [Trykova 1997: 97]. ‘The genre is almost entirely constructed not only from clichés borrowed from children’s literature of the ‘sentimental, lipping’ variety, but also from a similarly borrowed myth of the infant’s happy childhood, as thought up by adults’, writes K. K. Nemirovich-Danchenko, the author of one of the first (and still, in our view, the richest) scholarly articles on sadistic verse [Nemirovich-Danchenko 1992: 131]. S. M. Loiter and E. M. Neyolov

also argue that sadistic verse ‘rethinks the clichéd themes, motifs, images, rhythms, and intonations of Soviet children’s poetry’ [Loiter, Neyolov 1995: 74]. ‘The background against which these “rhymes” originated is recreated and discredited. In mocking literature distinguished by a particular emotional expressiveness, these “rhymes” oppose the usual manner of recounting “fears and horrors” connected with children,’ writes A.F. Belousov, discussing the circulation of sadistic verse among young people and students; the ‘target of the polemic’ in the interpretation of the genre among children and adolescents, according to Belousov, ‘is the constant flow of parental instructions and warnings’ [Belousov 1998: 550]. M.P. Cherednikova wrote of the same thing a few years earlier, saying that ‘all those poems about “the little boy and the machine gun” are an ironic reproduction of the myth propounded by adults, in whose inflamed imagination the triumph of a “horrible event” is an inescapable law of nature. Parental “scare stories”, illustrating the system of prohibitions, come back like a boomerang in the form of “sadistic verse”’ [Cherednikova 1995: 62]. The chapter dealing with sadistic verse in A.S. Mutina’s dissertation on the genres of contemporary children’s folklore is entitled “‘Sadistic verse”: the adolescents’ protest’ [Mutina 2002: 19].

Despite all the differences and contradictions in defining the ontological essence and precise outlines of the target of mockery, parody, and polemic (the *myth* of a happy childhood, the *texts* and *intonations* of Soviet children’s poetry, the crying *reality* all around), the judgements cited above are united by an intention to represent sadistic verse as an ‘acutely satirical’ genre, to see in it first of all a biting popular parody of the dominant culture, and the expression of a dissident passion for exposing and discrediting everything associated with officialdom, adulthood, seriousness, sentimentality, pathos, etc.

Yet, as far as ‘parental scare stories’ are concerned, it is scarcely appropriate to consider them as the main target of ironic treatment in sadistic verse – since only a proportion of the themes found in sadistic verse do more or less correspond with typical adult prohibitions. We can essentially see as relevant to the issue of prohibitions only those texts where, firstly, bad luck overtakes the child fortuitously and does not come about through the child’s own agency, and, secondly, where the source of it is an object (weapons, ammunition) or a place (a building site, the roof, the lift, an electricity substation) that is known to be ‘dangerous’. Those verses where, let’s say, the parents themselves have the role of monsters cannot be fitted into this conception, and the extensive series about playing in the cellar is also awkward: it is hard to imagine parental warnings along the lines of ‘Children, don’t play in the cellar, it’s dangerous: you might kill a plumber!’ Of course, themes drawn from stories about dangers can

be used, alongside others, to provide a certain quantity of material for the genre. But we cannot say that ridiculing ‘pedagogic idiocy’ constitutes the genre’s central drive.

Another interpretation of the idea of sadistic verse as specifically ‘subversive’, this time related to the idea of its ideological content, seems to deserve more attention. On the one hand, sadistic verses do seem marked by the obvious presence of a destructive irony directed, in part, at the social, cultural, and ideological priorities of the time. On the other hand, however, the idea of sadistic verse as ‘polemically sharpened’, of a general ‘counter-propaganda drive’ as the fundamental hidden nerve of the genre strikes us as being, firstly, rather exaggerated, and, secondly, more appropriate to the adult, not the pre-teen and adolescent, manifestation of the genre.

Let us examine one instance that seems indicative.

A little boy found a dropped buck on the street,  
He went to the Beryozka to buy foreign sweets.  
After visiting the Committee hundreds of times  
His gran got the cash back. The boy’s still inside. (2)<sup>1</sup>

The political, even oppositional subtext of this verse is quite obvious: the boy disappears into the bloody hands of the unsleeping ‘Committee’ (of State Security, KGB), a place from which one, as everyone knows, never returns. But a question arises: for whom is this subtext obvious? For whom would the idea of the possibility / typicality of the situation that is here reproduced in grotesque form be relevant, and for whom would the verse’s irony correspondingly be comprehensible and fill a need? Children aged 9-13 in the 1980s, the main bearers of the traditions of school folklore, could hardly be adequate respondents to this text, or more accurately of this sense: in general they were indifferent to all political problems and ideological questions, they had a very dim idea of what the KGB was and what it was famous for, and they would have been unlikely to understand or to try to understand what the reference to ‘the Committee’ was all about.

M.P. Cherednikova wrote about precisely this, ten years ago, in her polemic against M.Yu. Novitskaya: ‘In assessing and interpreting this phenomenon, a deeply ideological approach tends to predominate. [...] But these characteristics of the genre [‘opposing the clichés and canons of official 1970s ideology’ – M.L.] are rather a

<sup>1</sup> Here and below, unless stated otherwise, sadistic verse texts are quoted from the fullest and most representative of the existing scholarly publications [Belousov 1998]; it is important for our purposes that this collection was compiled largely on the basis of materials collected in the late 1980s, that is, represents a cross-section of the oral circulation of these verses among adolescents in the Soviet era, before the journalistic and publishing boom around the genre during the 1990s (see [Belousov 1998: 551-555]). The texts are keyed here to the number given by Belousov.

manifestation of the particular consciousness of adults, without whose help ‘ironic’ poetry would not have arisen’ [Cherednikova 1995: 60]. All that can be added to this is to say that the tradition of sadistic verse not only ‘arose’, but also continued to thrive, among adults.

We cannot, of course, completely deny the possibility that the rhyme about the ‘dropped buck’ might have circulated among young teenagers, but can the overall scale of its familiarity be compared with that of other examples of the genre, like the famous ‘A little boy found a machine-gun one night / And now the whole village is empty and quiet’ – fairly primitive in its theme and structure, but also free of any specific political subtext? In the light of what has been said it seems not entirely coincidental that the published text about the little boy and the buck was recorded, a note tells us, in 1982 or 1983 by Vadim Lurye – later a well-known collector and publisher of school folklore, but then a 16-year-old from an intellectual family in Leningrad, who attended an elite literary school famed throughout the city for its free-thinking spirit.

If we are to speak of the soil on which this new genre of children’s folklore grew up, bearing in mind that adults are the roots of the phenomenon, then it will be more accurate to say that the ‘environment in which “sadistic verse” thrived’ was not ‘Soviet reality and the Soviet myth of the 1970s and 1980s’ [Neyolov 1996: 104] as such, but rather the reality of a specific social stratum: the intellectual and educated consciousness, the dissident myth and folklore of that epoch.<sup>1</sup>

In speaking of ‘intellectuals’ and ‘dissidents’, we are referring not to the narrow circle of the intellectual elite or to the small group of people who consistently undertook human-rights work (the professional dissidents, so to speak) but rather to a fairly broad social stratum, chiefly ‘workers by brain’, who accepted and broadcast everyday anti-Soviet texts on the level of stories and arguments about daily experience ‘with people you can trust’, tirades, familiar jokes, stories, anecdotes, and at times also ‘scare stories’ about Soviet power, the Communist party, the ‘leaders’, the KGB and the ‘spooks’, etc., etc. It was in this setting, by and large, that the theme of Soviet citizens with hard currency was also crucial: the state’s

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<sup>1</sup> We will illustrate the point with a single example. In his note on the verse about the boy who found a buck, A.F. Belousov writes: ‘The committee is the State Security Committee (KGB), whose successes in the struggle against foreign intelligence agents and opponents of the regime were trumpeted in the mass media and glorified in Soviet art’ [Belousov 1998: 571]. In our view, this historical commentary is, in the present instance, fundamentally inadequate and requires something like the following addition: ‘The KGB’s lack of principle in how it gathered information and recruited sources and its cruelty in persecuting any manifestation of freedom-loving or unconventional thinking during the stagnation years were favourite topics of so-called ‘kitchen conversations’, rumours, jokes, the folklore of the intelligentsia, and the underground dissident literature of the 1960s-1980s’.

appropriation of the majority of hard-currency earnings, if one had any, the imposition of a blatantly unfair exchange rate (60 kopecks to the dollar), the investigation of Beryozka customers by the ‘agencies’, etc.<sup>1</sup>

‘It is obvious,’ writes A.F. Belousov in the preamble to his collection *School Life and Folklore*, ‘that the following ‘verse’:

To set an example kids should never forget,  
A Pioneer trampled a writer to death.  
The little boy’s shoe slammed his specs in the air:  
Death to all dissidents in the USSR.

is intended for an adult audience.’ Indeed, here we have a ‘pure case’: the form of sadistic verse is employed by an adult author to create his own text, for a select circle of the intelligentsia, which had no chance of reaching a wide audience among children. But the rhyme we were looking at earlier (about the boy and the machine gun) did have a chance of reaching such an audience, and in fact did reach it: it had no special marks of intellectual discourse that an ordinary child would find difficult to understand (‘specs’,<sup>2</sup> ‘dissident’), and, chiefly, alongside its ‘political’ meaning it possessed the necessary complement of features (content, style, structure) that rendered it a ‘normal’ text, appropriate to the standards of the genre and therefore amusing to children and adolescents as well as to adults.

To give another example, we will cite a passage from M.Yu. Novitskaya. She quotes the verse

Red Square, and the tribune’s loaded with flowers,  
The little boy’s wearing a green shirt and trousers,  
A ‘Volga’<sup>3</sup> slides by with a whisper of tyres —  
Mum and Dad got the news after waiting for hours<sup>4</sup>

and writes of ‘The 1970s, the Afghan war, the “little boys” whose destiny was cut off, the mothers deprived of their sons by a flourish from a geriatric hand...’ [Novitskaya 1992: 118]. The interpretation is rather over-burdened with emotion, but it is quite justifiable — so long as we are considering the text from the standpoint of an adult

<sup>1</sup> Because members of the intelligentsia, especially the ‘creative intelligentsia’, were more likely to have relations and friends living abroad, and/or to travel themselves, which meant that they were more likely to have access to supplies of hard currency. As for the ‘unfairness’ of the exchange rate, in the late 1970s – early 1980s the official rate of hard currency to rouble exchange was approximately one-tenth of that operating on the black market [Editor].

<sup>2</sup> ‘Pince-nez’ in the original. [Editor].

<sup>3</sup> In other words, a Soviet-made limousine. A black ‘Volga’ was the car of choice for highly-placed officials in the Soviet period. [Editor].

<sup>4</sup> In the original, *dolgo* (for a very long time). The combination of sudden action and long waits is a genre characteristic of the sadistic verse; unfortunately, in non-literal versions, this feature is lost. [Editor].

intellectual in the perestroika period. The author of this commentary interprets the verse on the basis of the major ideological and ethical themes found in the social consciousness that produced it. The foreground is occupied by the cultural semantics of the 'black Volga'—a familiar image in the urban folklore of the stagnation period (cf.: 'A black Volga went whispering past...' (60)). Thus, there was a popular story in the 1980s about a militiaman who decided out of interest to establish the speed of a government 'Volga' as it went past, so he pointed his 'speed gun' at it and was instantly shot by a bodyguard. It was no doubt in this environment, fairly broad and without clear social boundaries, that verses 'with a political subtext' emerged and tended to circulate. So what are these texts really doing: are they 'mocking what young people found particularly alien and hostile in official culture' [Belousov 1998: 548], or are they transmitting the established stereotypes of the unofficial, alternative culture of the intelligentsia, the very culture within which the big-city intellectual young people who created and performed them grew up in the 1970s?

The mass audience of children, on the other hand, finds such meanings incomprehensible and uninteresting, and easily dispenses with them in the process of textual variation. Thus, K.K. Nemirovich-Danchenko gives a variant of the 'black Volga' text in which the 'black Volga' itself has disappeared, replaced by a 'car' [Nemirovich-Danchenko 1992: 135]. The political subtext has vanished, but the verse itself, or rather its humour value for children and adolescents has lost nothing from the substitution.

Many 'political' sadistic verses show still more clearly that they are secondary in terms of theme to other urban folklore genres in the stagnation period (predominantly young people's folklore). A striking example here is the group of verses featuring careless treatment of the (nuclear) 'red button':

A general's daughter whose pet name was Nata  
 Pressed a red button out there in Nevada,  
 The rocket shot out with a terrible whine —  
 Goodbye, lovely country, my fair Argentine. (21)

These texts are none other than a remoulding into the genre form of sadistic verse of the themes of then-familiar jokes, uniformly beginning with an enraged officer saying something like 'Who pressed the red button?!' or 'Who stuck his boot on the controls?!', etc. The primacy of the jokes over the corresponding verses does not admit of any doubt. Indeed, some quatrains (including that given above) refer directly to concrete sources in joke form: compare, for instance, the sadistic verse beginning, 'The soldiers were using the controls to chop slaw...' [Novitskaya 1992: 116] and the joke punchline: 'the colonel

rushes in and says to the men, ‘So which of you was chopping coleslaw on the controls?!’

Or we can take another well-known ‘political’ verse:

The children were playing at Sasha Ulyanov —  
Their bomb hit a ‘Volga’ that was driving Romanov (51)

This is also quite obviously derived from the jokes and stories that were popular among Leningraders in the 1970s and early 1980s, playing on the coincidence of surnames between the then *de facto* mayor, the First Secretary of the Regional Committee of the Communist Party, Grigory Romanov, and the last imperial dynasty<sup>1</sup>.

Further examples could be added, but we think those given above are sufficient to draw a conclusion: sadistic verse with a political subtext is generally derived from folklore narratives in prose (jokes, rumours, etc.) belonging to a partly adolescent and partly adult urban repertory. In extreme cases the sadistic verse itself becomes a kind of versified joke, a rapid-reaction genre providing an unexpected version of a ‘hot’ event in its own ‘dark’ format. Thus texts can arise with uncharacteristic endings, tying the theme of the verse to a big fact of the day. The following verse about a famous accident, for instance, is constructed according to a well-known joke model:

The little boy stood on the roof of the wing,  
He let out a kite on a very long string.  
The string gave a jerk: it was caught in an engine.  
The Pakhtakor forwards are playing football in heaven (50).<sup>2</sup>

The same can be said of some other, generally quite late, texts. But the presence of these does not entitle us to speak of sadistic verse as a contemporary, politically provocative genre (on which see e.g. [Trykova 1997:96]). Sadistic verse deals with universal categories and works with faceless characters in conventional situations: diverting the ironic accent in the direction of currently relevant problems inevitably leads to blurring the original specificity of the genre.

A common point in interpretations of sadistic verse is the idea of ‘parodic use of current clichés, the markers of the official high style:

<sup>1</sup> For instance, there were stories that Romanov had celebrated his daughter’s wedding reception by sailing the Aurora, flagship of the Revolution, round Leningrad, and that he and guests had smashed the Frog Service commissioned by Catherine II during the drunken revels, etc. [Editor].

<sup>2</sup> Pakhtakor is a Tashkent football club that was one of the premier teams in Soviet times. The incident that is joked about here was a tragic air crash that took place on 11 August 1979: two jets collided, and as a result 17 members of the team were killed. See the club’s official site, <http://www.pakhtakor.uz/index.php?id=33>. In this ‘sadistic verse’, an instance of the typical ‘for a long time’ has also been sacrificed to metrics. [Editor].

“Behold the base echo of war!”, “A girl by the sun-bright name of Rita”, “Red scarves are flying in the wind” [Novitskaya 1992: 103-104]. ‘The poetics of the grotesque,’ writes A.S. Mutina, ‘assumes a juxtaposition of ever-changing life and “dead” literary form, which is why the employment of clichés from the Soviet press and Soviet children’s literature is so popular in these verses’ [Mutina 2002: 21]. An instance of this kind of subversive counterpointing of the worn-out clichés of the official grand style is cited and commented on by E.M. Neyolov. ‘The contrast between the high, or sacred, and the low, or blasphemous,’ he writes, ‘is a general principle of the construction of “sadistic verses”, noted by all researchers in the field of modern school folklore:

Red scarves are flying with zest and aplomb!  
The Pioneer Palace was hit by a bomb’ [Neyolov 1996: 102].

To all appearances, the contrast was appreciated by Soviet adolescents as well, adding to the comic value of the verse: flying scarves (still more if they are flying ‘proudly’, like Gorky’s stormy petrel) were a thoroughly recognisable cliché for schoolchildren in the 1970s or 1980s. But in the absolute majority of texts there is no hint of a comparable sense of ideological blasphemy, although that does not make them any the less funny or popular. The effect of contrast, which is indeed fundamental to the poetics of the genre, works, so to speak, with the basic thematic material itself: life / death, health / injury, bodily soundness / mutilation. The best example of this is provided by a text resembling the one just quoted both in its theme and in its structure:

Naked fat ladies are flying pell-mell!  
The bath-house was hit by a twenty-ton shell. (87)

It seems difficult to find anything ideologically ‘high, or sacred’ in naked fat ladies flying through the air.

Let us take one more instance of the contrasting conjunction of ‘high’ and ‘low’ in sadistic verse:

The little boy sat with his rod on the bank —  
When up swam a crocodile — A juicy bite! Thanks!  
But the croc found that feast very tricky to pass:  
A Pioneer badge had got wedged in his arse. (93 (A))

The last line of this text evidently had a ‘blasphemous’ meaning that was accessible to a Pioneer audience: it is not for nothing that the Pioneer badge gets wedged precisely in the beast’s ‘arse’. For children this variant is preferable to another (‘in his throat’) because it is ‘ruder’, and therefore funnier; it is also, if you like, ‘more blasphemous’ — and so, again, funnier. A similar example of the scabrously low and the grandly high being combined in a single context

occurs in a well-known addition to the verse ‘Little bones, little stars all go flying — ker-bam! / A troop of Octobrists<sup>1</sup> got squashed by a tram’ (74):

On the right is one titty, on the left is another:  
Their troop leader, Klava, went down like a martyr.

But when we interpret these and similar cases we must also bear in mind the fact that the use of words designating various ‘indecent’ facts, facts that are also linked with the idea of something alternative and forbidden, is a self-sufficient factor producing laughter in children’s folklore. Something scabrous that is uttered or written down is funny in itself for a child or adolescent, in any context rather than specifically in a ‘high’ one. And sadistic verse is no exception: there are plenty of ‘arses’, ‘titties’, and so on here, predominantly of course in variants that circulate among adolescents. Even from the versions that we are aware of (as opposed to the much larger corpus of ones actually circulating), there are many more of these body parts than there are ‘Pioneers’, ‘scarves’, and ‘troop leaders’: ‘Poor Papa’s balls have got stuck in his boots...’, ‘Old Grandad’s balls they fly up to the sky...’, ‘Masha bent down — whoops! An axe in the bum...’, ‘She was using a stick of explosive to wank...’, ‘And they picked up his arse-hole a few streets away...’, ‘Someone once found half a tit in a loaf...’, etc., etc.

Incidentally, the indecent and the satirical have about the same position in the genre’s arsenal of artistic means to create a comic effect. This position is a secondary one. Adolescent sadistic verse can easily get by without either, replacing a ‘Volga’ with a ‘car’ and ‘balls’ with ‘brains’ or ‘ears’. Censorship has nothing to do with this process.

Another well-known mechanism of satirical opposition to officialdom is the lowering of the image of a hero. In sadistic verse there is a whole series of references to various figures from the Soviet pantheon. But these figures are selected according to a clear and distinct principle: they are the ones who are remembered in the mass consciousness wholly or partly for the way they died. Otherwise, a series consisting of Chapaev, Gastello, and Pavlik Morozov<sup>2</sup> might seem odd:

The little boy swims in the river. Such fun!  
But old Grandpa Sidor is training his gun.  
A high childish squeal rises up in the dark:  
‘Look, just like Chapaev!’ the nasty man laughs (94)

<sup>1</sup> ‘Octobrists’ was the Communist organisation for the smallest children, from seven or eight upwards. [Editor].

<sup>2</sup> Because these are heroes of very different kinds: Chapaev is a hero of the Civil War, Gastello a crack pilot from the Second World War, while Pavlik Morozov was celebrated for having denounced his father to the authorities, after which he was murdered by his grandfather and cousin [Editor].

Up on the roof, kids were playing Gastello:  
A body flames earthwards without a propeller (43)

Little boy's lying in the street,  
Soaked with blood from head to feet.  
You see, his dad — oh what a shame! —  
Was playing the Pavlik Morozov game (31)<sup>1</sup>

But playing with ironically-lowered sacred names and their associated heroic motifs is neither an end in itself nor a specific element of sadistic verse as a genre. The Chapaev theme recalls the joke about an old man who's invited to meet the schoolchildren and tell them about the time he 'saw Chapai', a tale that ends with the words: 'So I seez 'im swimming; well, I takes good aim, doan I?...' Gastello can easily be replaced by another 'flying' character:

The little boy climbed on the roof all alone,  
He shouted — 'I'm Karlsson!' — and boom! he was gone.  
Down on the pavement blood started to pool:  
He'd mucked up the motor, you see, little fool (49)

What is more, in another instance of these 'dead hero' texts the name of Gastello is brought in to complete the independent theme expressed in the first couplet, one that is found in other variants with other punchlines:

The little boy went in a lift one fine day,  
And all of a sudden the cable gave way.  
They found his charred body deep down in the shaft,  
And remembered Gastello. How everyone laughed! (42 (B))

Cf. the final couplet of variant 42 (A):

His Mum scanned the bones in sheer desperation:  
'Those trainers cost money! Where are they? Tarnation!'

The quatrain dealing with Pavlik Morozov coincides with the canons of sadistic verse in its theme and in the presence of the 'playing' motif, but metrically it derives from the *chastushka*: it is not impossible that this text arose independently of sadistic verse and was later 'attributed' to it by tradition (as has happened with many other works).

In general, the inclusion of a heroic name in a 'sadistic' context is a characteristic device of adolescent folklore. We might, for instance, recall the famous schoolchild and student parody of a fragment of a song, playing on another heroic death from the Soviet book of martyrs:

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<sup>1</sup> This poem also exists in a mirror-image version: 'Papa's lying in the street [...] His little son [...]'. [Editor].

In the closely-packed stove Lazo burns,  
On the pine-log is an eye like a tear...<sup>1</sup>

Thus the effect of discrediting an official text, achieved by conjoining signs from diverse series, is possible for adolescent sadistic verse, indeed, natural, but is by no means obligatory. This has its own explanations. Firstly, this function is successfully accomplished by other, 'specialised' genres of school folklore: reworkings of classic works, parodies and burlesque texts (on this see [Lurye 1992]; [Trykova 1997: 119-125]; [Lurye 1992: 431-436]), but also, to a lesser extent, jokes about various 'great people': Pushkin, Chapaev, Lenin, etc. Secondly, a repulsion from 'high' culture is characteristic of folklore and indeed of any 'low' culture in the first place. Adolescent folklore is no exception here; rather, it illustrates the general pattern. Thus, sadistic verse is polemical to precisely the extent to which children's folklore as a whole is polemical and alternative in its attitude to adult life.

### 3.

If we accept the logic of these remarks, we are left with a 'dry residue' of sadistic verse's genre-specific content: its basic, 'sadistic' thematics and the related system of images, motifs, and themes. But here too, not everything is so unequivocal. In fact, sadistic verse is not at all distinctive in these respects, against the general context of children's oral tradition. Whether the 'sadistic' trend in children's folklore only become so relevant and productive in the stagnation era, and, if so, how this can be accounted for: these are questions whose answers would require more comparative material than we currently have access to. But a fact remains a fact: by the time the mass recording of school and children's folklore began (mid-1980s), the tradition already possessed quite a representative corpus of texts dealing with death, murder, destruction, and bodily harm. As far as genre is concerned, these texts are varied. For example, let us take the following fragments from early recordings of a parody of the popular children's song, 'It's such fun to stride together':

It's such fun to stride together over bogs,  
With your machine-gun, when the day is done,  
Burning villages is fun in squadrons too,  
But if you've got a whole battalion, that's most fun of all,  
It's such fun to stride together over gardens,  
and crush the pretty flowers,  
and inundate young girls with vitriol,

<sup>1</sup> A parody of a famous Second World War song, setting to music verses by Aleksei Surkov: 'In the closely-packed stove the flame plays/On the pine-logs is gum like a tear'. [Editor]

with vitriol,  
with vitriol... (50 B)<sup>1</sup>

There is a variant in the refrain:

And smashing skulls in is more fun with an iron bar... (note to 50 A)

Or take the following rhyme:

One pint, two pint — drunk man in the night,  
One fist, two fist — he's not feeling steady,  
One spade, two spade — and you've dug his grave,  
One plank, two plank — coffin nearly ready (50 A)

There is a great deal here that resembles sadistic verse, on various levels: the theme of destroying a whole settlement (down to the coincidence of details: 'village' and 'machine-gun'); specific and refined methods of torture and killing (smashing skulls with an iron bar, throwing vitriol over girls); the dissonance between the cruel content and the optimistic intonation ('it's such fun to stride together...'); a lexical infantilism, expressed by sentimentality ('pretty flowers'),<sup>2</sup> that contrasts with the cynicism of the actions described. All these are characteristics of the functional poetics of sadistic verse, characteristics that are well-known and that have been abundantly described in the scholarly literature.

In another parody, which was current as early as the 1980s as an independent song among schoolchildren, we meet the familiar sadistic-verse image of the violent loner or avenger, who calmly plans and accomplishes the destruction of everyone and everything he encounters, using a variety of weapons:

Eight wild rovers  
on their way over,  
Let them come, let them come,  
'Cos I got my gun,  
I press the trigger — kerpow!  
Eight corpses in a row.  
And I'll drink to their rest  
On the dead men's chest.  
The good ship Pavlova  
on her way over,  
Let her come, I'll not heed her,  
'Cos I got my torpedo,  
Press the button—whee-hee!  
Burning like buggery!

<sup>1</sup> Here and below texts of these parodies are cited, unless otherwise indicated, from [Lurye 1992], with the text number as published here provided in parentheses.

<sup>2</sup> In the original, 'diminutive suffixes'. [Editor].

And I'll drink to her rest  
 On the dead men's chest.  
 An armoured car in the clover  
 On its way over,  
 Let it come, I won't miss it,,  
 'Cos I got my guided missile,  
 Press the button—ker-zip!  
 And the car is in bits.  
 And I'll drink to its rest  
 On the dead men's chest (34 A)

An obvious parallel to this text is provided by the cycle of couplets about a little boy who finds a pistol, a machine-gun, a flamethrower, dynamite, a Messerschmidt, a Pershing 2, etc. A roughly similar 'happy monster', gleefully dispatching any person or object in his way, can be found in another parody, constructed on essentially the same model:

A cop shouts at me – 'You must pay me a fine!'  
 So I paid – and that's him, lying on that white line.  
 When the other cop saw, he reached for his pistol –  
 I karate-chopped him – learn some manners, you arsehole!

And now there's another cop waving his truncheon:  
 So I reached for a brick and in seconds I crunched him.  
 And the fourth of those bastards got into a tank:  
 A few dozen grenades, and they all drew a blank (37 C).

In general, destruction is the basic, organising idea in children's and adolescent comic folk poetry, and in this sense the tradition under consideration carries a certain alternative charge. For instance, destructiveness is realised in motifs and images of death / murder (annihilation) and of torture, in images of dismembered bodies, etc., found in many of these texts. We will not occupy ourselves with finding psychological and culturological explanations for this phenomenon:<sup>1</sup> we will confine ourselves to noting the fact. Beginning from the texts that circulate among the very youngest age groups, with their infantile cruelty, all the children's folklore of the stagnation period is literally shot through with fights, karate chops, explosions, shootings, and burnings: 'Oh young Shapoklyak she got snagged on a branch', 'Cheburashka is pushing up frogs in that pond', 'the hippo smiled so much it burst', 'the savages burnt down the dark forest', 'one more minute and the New Year tree will blow up', 'Chunga-Changa, your arse is full of dynamite,/Chunga-Changa, watch out! The fuse is alight', 'he'll wish me all the best for Execution Day and

<sup>1</sup> One possible explanation is that untimely death was actually less common in the late Soviet era, and life more prosperous and settled, compared with earlier decades, and that children and adults could now afford to laugh at disaster. [Editor].

then he'll probably give me a lead bullet between the eyes', 'come here quick! grasshopper with no dick', etc., etc. One could compile a whole register of the means of destruction that are found in the arsenal of the children's folklore tradition, with the most popular being the pistol, the machine-gun, and dynamite.

The deliberate, shocking 'anatomism' of sadistic verse's imagery ('winding blue guts round the axle', 'her blue eyes are dancing up on that tree', 'with a whistle the crowbar sank deep in his flesh', etc.) is abundantly represented in other school folklore texts too, where the dominant content is a relish for physiological detail, aimed at eliciting a reaction of disgust. See, for instance, these lines from a parody of the song *Winter* that is exceptionally popular among younger adolescents:

The ceiling's all bloody,  
The door's hanging loose  
And behind that left wall  
Hangs a corpse in a noose  
As you come in the house  
Bones to right and to left,  
Through the window-pane peeks  
A skeleton guest... (33)

There is an equally well-known poem:

What fun it is quite early in the morning  
To sit just as the day is dawning,  
To peel the skin off someone's skull  
And eat and eat until you are full,  
To drink it down with stinky slime  
And have a snack of bones with some quicklime...<sup>1</sup>

Several other texts could be added.

The attraction to themes of destruction – which fill children's and adolescents' folklore – is particularly clearly seen in texts of a parodic character; elements from the original text are replaced in folklore interpretations if not by something scabrous, then certainly by something cruel or by disgusting references to anatomy.

#### 4.

We have therefore arrived at another important factor (besides social and age orientation) that defines the specific nature of sadistic verse. We must bear in mind that, however paradoxical it may sound in relation to such distinctive material, this genre's ideas and themes are secondary to other forms of school and youth folklore, against the

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<sup>1</sup> Recorded in 1997 in St Petersburg, recited by Nadya Mirgorodskaya (born 1983).

background of which it arose and developed. As a rule, these verses appeared quite late – no earlier than the end of the 1970s – while the jokes, parodies, songs, and *chastushki* (whole genres and some specific texts) had already been circulating among adolescents for several decades. The new genre grew up on a well-prepared soil, and experienced a continuous influence from the contemporary folklore tradition.

In subsequent years the interaction between sadistic verse, which was rapidly increasing in popularity and in number of texts, and other genres of school folklore was manifested differently. On the level of text-formation, as well as the above-noted influence of other genres on the formation of these verses, we can also speak of a reverse process: the sharp rise in popularity enjoyed by ‘sadistic’ themes as a result of the dissemination of sadistic verse led to a whole wave of adolescent folk poetry with that kind of content.<sup>1</sup> Above all, there were quatrains in *chastushka* measure:<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The influence of sadistic verse on mass adolescent poetry, which folklorists have discussed more than once, is detectable even today, although sadistic verse itself has declined in popularity. And this influence manifests itself not only in works that circulate as folklore, but also in one-off texts authored by groups. We will give a poem composed in 2002 by year 8 pupils at a school in St Petersburg (maintaining the punctuation and spelling of the original):

From the collection ‘About Valera’  
 ‘The Death of Valera’  
 Once upon a time Valera died  
 And the world rejoiced  
 And some kind person  
 Flushed his body down the bog  
 And on Valera’s grave  
 For ages merry Stas brayed with laughter  
 And on Valera he wrote  
 ‘The guy’s just a qu\*\*r’  
 And then Ildar turned up,  
 For ages he kicked that coffin  
 And then he got the body out  
 Tied it up in a seaman’s knot  
 And then Ksyusha turned up too  
 Tore the ears of the corpse  
 Cut off his leg and out his eye  
 And Stas tore off the rest  
 In his obituary they wrote:  
 ‘We were looking forward  
 We really wanted  
 Him to die dead quick.’

It is quite obvious that the authors of this cruel opus were not aiming at the rhythm and style of sadistic verse. Nonetheless, traces of the genre’s influence are quite visible, and are relatively frequent: the repetition of ‘for ages’ in describing the consequences of the hero’s death; the lines ‘and some kind person / flushed his body down the bog’, cf. ‘Kindly old auntie she pressed on the flush/The boy was swept down to the stinking mush’; and the motif of body deformation (‘tied it up in a seaman’s knot’).

<sup>2</sup> A *chastushka* is a four-line verse form, with a wide range of applications, from the lyrical to the comical, the elevated to the scabrous. In its comic manifestations, it is comparable to the limerick in English. Its metre is markedly different from the ‘sadistic verse’. [Editor].

How the kids do love those mafia games:  
 They whacked teacher with a gun,  
 And bombed their school to smithereens,  
 They'd never had such fun! [Trykova 1997: 96]

This tendency should not be made into an absolute: sadistic verse does not have the initial role in triggering all the texts and genre variations of school folklore that are based on 'dark' themes and a 'dark' aesthetic. As has been said, deliberate 'cynicism' and a passion for themes of violence, death, injury, etc. are common to children's humorous folklore of the last quarter of the twentieth century generally. For instance, it is more than doubtful whether jokes of the 'warning to a child' type ('Mashenka, you know you shouldn't eat unwashed fruit! And anyway, leave that rubbish tip alone, for God's sake!'), jokes based on imitating sounds ('Daddy, hey, don't turn that saw on —I'm sitting here-ere-ere-ere-ere!') and punning jokes about Stirlitz ('Stirlitz was walking down the Blumenstrasse, eyes dull and fixed. It was Professor Pleischner's eyes he had on the plate in front of him...') originated, as M.Yu Novitskaya suggests, under the direct influence of sadistic verse (see [Novitskaya 1992: 119]).

For one reason or another, the 'sadistic' theme has become firmly associated with one particular genre in the minds both of the bearers of the tradition and of 'outside observers' (teachers, journalists, researchers, etc.). This inevitably had an impact on the genre field of school folklore, and among other results it has led children to count any short poetic forms with a 'sadistic' theme as examples of sadistic verse—particularly when such verses are being collected or when collectors ask children to record them. Like a magnet, cycles of sadistic verses have attracted satellite texts in other metres (including older texts as well as those that have arisen under the influence of sadistic verse); and the same generic 'brand' is automatically applied to these verses too. This has happened to the song refrain that has been 'transformed' into the rhyme ('The old girl didn't suffer long/ From the high-voltage burn'), and also to Grigoriev's famous 'electrician Petrov' [see Belousov 1999] and to a whole series of other texts. According to O.Yu. Trykova, for instance, children performed a 'suitable' fragment of the song 'On the deck, the sailors...' as a sadistic verse:

I strangled my mother  
 And chopped up my dad,  
 I drowned my young sister  
 On a tip that smelled bad... [Trykova 1997: 96]

A similar reconceptualization of genres has occurred with many other works that are more contemporary to sadistic verse in the time they arose. All this has inevitably led to a blurring of the initially exceptionally clear boundaries of the genre.

It is characteristic that the majority of researchers have confidently and unquestioningly agreed to include quite independent, and formally and genetically varied, texts under the rubric of sadistic verse on the sole basis of their being performed as such; sometimes they have included such material even without data of that kind, purely ‘by their own will’ and motivated by a similarity of themes and topics. Thus, O.Yu. Trykova interprets the texts of well-known parodies as sadistic verses, such as:

The water quietly ebbs and flows<sup>1</sup>  
 In the bowl of our new toilet:  
 Vasya the plumber is no more,  
 But don’t let that thought spoil it!

The researcher then draws the conclusion that ‘As usual with reworkings and parodies, the “sadistic verse” retains the first line of the original—which makes the text recognisable—and also preserves the rhythm, metre, and some individual phrases. But a directly opposite content is fitted into it, one based on comic lowering with a clear element of ‘black humour’ [Trykova 1997: 99]. All this, except the passage about the ‘clear element of black humour’, is indeed relevant to parodic texts – but not at all to sadistic verse. And the rhyme *vodolaza*–*unitaza*, found in a well-known sadistic verse (‘A little boy playing at being the plumber / Boldly descended the toilet last summer’) is an indication not of the work’s genre, but only of the fact that texts from various genres of school folklore often employ a shared palette of motifs and artistic devices, which can sometimes lead to confusion in identifying genres.

E.M. Neyolov views as sadistic verse the famous parody:

Little Tanya’s really wailing,<sup>2</sup>  
 A ball is bouncing on her head:  
 Dad’s little game turned out a failure:  
 The ball was made of purest lead [Neyolov 1996: 101]

And M.Yu. Novitskaya gives an example of a verse that is composed ‘not in the standard four-line dactylic, but in *chastushka* rhythm’:

In the bonfire is a skewer,  
 Yum, a smell of roasting meat!  
 Our pretty girls are now one fewer:  
 Natasha always was so sweet [Novitskaya 1992: 117]

<sup>1</sup> The original plays on line from a famous song, with lyrics translated from the French by L. Ginzburg, set to music by D. Tukhmanov (1977), ‘Vo frantsuzskoi storone’ [In the French land...]. [Editor].

<sup>2</sup> The original plays on a poem by the famous Soviet children’s writer Agniya Barto (from the cycle ‘Toys’). [Editor].

The phrase ‘fresh meat’ occurs in one sadistic verse:

The children are having a Red Indian battle:  
Knives, spears and tomahawks tinkle and rattle.  
Alas for poor Stas, he got in the way:  
But the cats ate fresh meat for the rest of the day (37)

But otherwise, both the parodies given (particularly the verse about Natasha, whose literary original<sup>1</sup> is unlikely to be familiar to adolescents) might be taken as being *chastushki*, in view of their poetic measure; and it is precisely that rhythmic model, for a variety of reasons, that has indeed proved most productive in giving rise to thematic analogies with sadistic verse and which therefore has a strong claim to being counted as a second ‘sadistic’ form alongside the canonical one. But if *chastushki* again, or, say, cruel romances, were to be included by some local tradition in the repertory of songs that are regularly sung at weddings, it would be correct to treat them as wedding songs only in the context of that ceremony: outside that context, as texts, they would remain *chastushki* or cruel romances, and it would hardly make sense to comment on the specific features of the poetics of wedding songs without making a distinction between wedding songs as such and ‘birds of passage’.

## 5.

It is not accidental that I have concentrated so much on the question of genre boundaries. Certainly, in the final analysis, the question of whether the satellite texts given above should or should not be counted as fully fledged examples of the genre, of whether they should be ‘included’ in the corpus of proper sadistic verse or whether they should be called some kind of ‘quasi’ sadistic verse, belongs to the field of scholarly casuistry. For me, it is only a question of principle to the extent that what is under discussion here is the factors defining the specific genre. In my opinion, the defining feature of sadistic verses is the fixed inventory of definite artistic principles, parameters, and devices employed in them, most of which have been noted individually by researchers but which have practically never hitherto been treated as a complex.<sup>2</sup> I am referring,

<sup>1</sup> The parody plays on two well-known lines by Esenin, ‘Khorosha byla Tanyusha/Krashe ne bylo u nas v sele’ (Tanyusha was a beauty/There was none fairer in the village). [Editor].

<sup>2</sup> As a rule, even when authors do pay attention to analysing the verses’ language, the formal poetic structure of the texts, the compositional models and other elements of the genre’s poetics, and also the psychological motivations of how it functions among children, they nonetheless concentrate on the content of sadistic verse. The only attempt so far to carry out a consistent structural analysis of sadistic verse without getting distracted by finding ideological factors, looking for intertextual links, establishing social and psychological interpretations, etc., has been that undertaken by A. Lyskov [Lyskov 2003].

among other things, to such features of the genre's poetics as the effort to be laconic and formulaic, the observation of the comic-book principle of changing the level depicted, the regular use of metonymy in depicting death, the limited palette of plot motifs and topic elements, the few set structural and compositional schemes, and various other indicators. It is worth noting separately that a far from minimal role among the particularities of the artistic structure of sadistic verse is played by the clear restriction of the formal poetic indicators: a common metre and rhyme scheme, similar syntactic constructions.

In our view, even the colossal popularity enjoyed by this folklore genre, and its truly fantastic productivity, are owing above all not to the 'counter-propagandist' or 'sharply satirical' nature of the verses, not to psychological requirements of a transitional age group that are satisfied by these cruel and amusing miniatures, but to the 'beautiful clarity' of its poetic system. Indirect evidence is provided by the enormous quantity of separate texts and whole cycles of quatrains that have been composed on the sadistic-verse model but that deal with current topics and are performed by amateurs or circulated only in a narrow locality among students or, still more indicatively, schoolchildren. These fantasias on the theme of sadistic verse employ the tradition's material to a varying extent: the strategies used range from simple reworking of particular verses to the creation of entirely original texts where all the laws of the genre are strictly (if, as we must assume, intuitively) obeyed. For instance, these sadistic verses about senior colleagues were composed by young lecturers at one of the St Petersburg humanities colleges in the middle of the 1990s:

Once Semyonova went to the woods at three,  
She knocked at a hut and dropped in for some tea.  
The cannibal living there did not soon forget  
The gingery lady just like Cousine Bette!

Our own Borodin once went out in the fog,  
Got lost in the mist and then stuck in a bog.  
He was supposed to be hunting, but it didn't go right:  
A big grizzly bear was in search of a bite!

At another university, in 1990, students knew of a whole cycle of such texts; we will quote as an example the verse about a lecturer in folklore:

Docent Anikeyev had a smoke by a picket,  
But then the Wood Boss appeared from a thicket,  
Quietly he muttered his terrible spell—  
The trained rat that resulted is still doing well.

O.Yu. Trykova gives an analogous school example:

The children were rolling hub-caps round the school –  
 And Mr Kubyshkin got squashed, poor old fool!  
 (Clarification by the performer, aged 12: ‘there was this  
 teacher at our school’)  
 [Trykova 1997: 98]

Examples could be multiplied of similar uses of the form of sadistic verse. Unlike a recording of new fixed themes or new verse variants in circulation, these facts only provide yet more evidence of the genre inertia of sadistic verse, rather than the vitality of sadistic verse in the folklore tradition. Sadistic verse has taken on a series of common points, thematic universals, humorous devices, and motifs of content from the child and adult folklore of the late-Soviet era, and created an original genre model: one that is exceptionally compact, internationally inclusive, and formally stable, and at the same time transparent, which makes it exceptionally attractive and convenient for the construction of more and more new texts. In my view, the most relevant and promising direction for future research into this genre, one of the most vivid creations of the twentieth-century urban folklore tradition, is to study the morphology of the sadistic verse and to describe the systematic regularity with which elements of its textual structure combine and interact.

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*Translated by Edmund Griffiths*