

Vladimir Sharov

title

Before and During

Novel. Novy Mir. St. Petersburg 1993/ Arsis. Moscow 2009. 426 pages

Foreign rights: Italy, France, UK

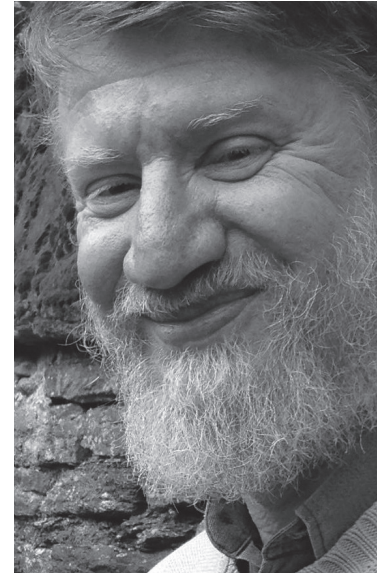
This novel remains Sharov's best and definitely his most scandalous book. It contains many themes and motifs that recur throughout his oeuvre, making this novel a comprehensive introduction to the strange world of his fiction.

Madame de Staël (1766-1817), a famous opponent of Napoleon who visited Russia in 1812 during her exile, appears as a central character of modern Russian history. The novel tells the story of the three lives of de Staël, who is able to give birth to herself thanks to an ancient Hebrew recipe. Over the course of her lives, she inspires Nikolai Fedorov's philosophy of the resurrection of all dead; becomes the mother and later the mistress of Stalin (the very name 'Stalin' derives from de Staël); and takes a number of lovers, Fedorov, Skriabin, and Trotsky to name a few, who get their powers as future statesmen, thinkers and revolutionaries directly through and from sexual contact with her. Especially, revolutionaries.

However, Sharov's heroes interpret the revolution in a particular way: as an eschatological event that serves to bring Russia, along with all humanity, to the Last Judgment and the Second Coming. Fedorov remains the central figure in this construction, as in his philosophy Sharov locates a quasi-rationalized justification of the revolutionary Apocalypse by the following resurrection of all the dead. However, Sharov is not mocking these theories, although his novels are full of intellectual humor, and his reworkings of well-known facts and ideas are frequently hilarious. Tellingly, *Before & During* ends with an epic snowfall, which is interpreted as a Biblical flood (this explains the novel's title: before and during the Flood). The Alzheimer ward of the Psychiatric Institute, where the action of the novel takes place, is refashioned as a new Ark. Needless to say, de Staël and Fedorov are there among the patients.

In *Before & During*, it is de Staël's passionate sexuality that drives the plot and emerges as the engine of history. In Sharov's representation, there is nothing repressed about this sexuality: it gloriously breaks all taboos and consumes young and old with equal power and pleasure. In this respect, *Before & During* is probably the most feminist version of Russian history in the entire twentieth-century fictional cannon.

(from the review by Lipovetsky)

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