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AUTHOR AND AUTHORITY IN THE WORK OF VLADIMIR SOROKIN

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The article traces the dynamics of Sorokin's art from *Ochered'* with its innovative poetics to the mature dystopian works *Den' oprichnika* and *Sakharnyi Kreml'*. Among other observations on Sorokin's style and his literary universe, the author focuses on allusions and references to Russian literature (from Andrei Platonov and Evgenii Zamiatin to Solzhenitsyn and Vasili Grossman), and draws analogies between Sorokin's works and Alexander Sokurov's films showing that the writer and the film director view post-Soviet Russia as history's end-game. The author also explains the structure of Sorokin's "dialogue" with Russian classical literature, and ways in which the writer represents concepts and images from Russian literature in his novels and screenplays (*Mishen'*, *Den' oprichnika*).

Key words: Russian literature; history; cinema; Vladimir Sorokin; innovative poetics; dystopian novel.

When the work of Vladimir Sorokin began to be published in the early 1990s, it was equated with the 'shock therapy' to which the country as a whole was subjected after the collapse of the Soviet Union [Porter 1994: 38-42]. Certainly, the style and thematics of Sorokin's prose were qualitatively different from anything that had been published in Russia before. By way of summary, the subject-matter of Sorokin's early works include murder, mayhem, indiscriminate slaughter, cannibalism, sexual deviance and abuse, coprophagy, mutilation, torture, sadism, masochism, sexual explicitness that often crosses over into pornography, all rendered in an idiom and style that becomes increasingly deranged before collapsing in on itself. In these works Sorokin challenged the reader's sensibilities – aesthetic, moral, linguistic and cultural – at the same time throwing down the gauntlet to the hallowed status of Russian literature itself.

Ochered' ('The Queue', 1985) remains a startlingly innovative work that consists of dialogue only, with no narrative or even named characters, that also distils the entire Soviet experience into one long, seemingly never-ending queue, and one that people join not knowing what is actually on sale (if anything). *Tridsataia liubov' Mariny* ('The Thirtieth Love of Marina', 1987) is an explicitly sexual journey of the eponymous Marina from abused adolescent to lesbian adult and finally to fully committed Communist, and is the first work of Russian literature where a male author depicts the female orgasm

(in detail). In *Serdtza chetyrekh* ('Four Stout Hearts', 1993) Sorokin parodies to grotesque excess the new post-Soviet gangster thriller genre, with multiple blood-spattered shoot-outs and gratuitous sexual encounters. The work bears the same title as a very popular Soviet romantic comedy film from 1940. The gruesome violence of Sorokin's text has nothing in common with the innocent charm of the 1940 film, but its extreme violence offers a pointed and subversive commentary to the artificial innocence on parade in the film.

I would argue that it is this work that marks the 'later' period of Sorokin's work. The four central characters of *Serdtza chetyrekh* are people set apart and above from their environment, they cheerfully remain untouched until the finale while inflicting mayhem all around. In these works published in the immediate aftermath of the collapse of the USSR Sorokin delights in the new-found freedoms. The human body is tortured and dismembered, language is mutilated, sex becomes grotesque, basic bodily functions given an importance not usually accorded to them in a literary text. Russian life and literature become not just parodies, but travesties of their former selves. Sorokin moves beyond merely challenging the reader to turn the page and read on amidst a morass of butchery, pornography, excreta and linguistic chaos. Seemingly paradoxically, he also embraces fully the Russian literary mission: literature is important because it tells the truth.

In *Serdtsa chetyrkh* Sorokin also assumes a social stance beloved of Russian writers. The novel's surface narrative may relate to the lawlessness and criminality of the early 1990s, but its title is a clear indication to a Russian reader that society accepted violence as the norm in Stalin's time. The 'norm', of course, is the daily lot of ordinary people, the excrement that is a literalized symbol of the lies and injustices the population is force-fed by authority. Sorokin's anti-Soviet stance is in full display in the novel of that name, *Norma* ('The Norm', 1994), which also contains allusions to the work of Vasilii Grossman and Andrei Platonov in its harrowing depiction of the destruction of people under the Soviet experiment, and to the poetry of Boris Pasternak and Anna Akhmatova. That is not to say that the literary canon is sacrosanct: in *Roman* ('Novel', 1994) he destabilizes and then deconstructs Russian literature's ethical identity.

The internal contradiction of Sorokin's early writings, its irrational core, lies in the fact that he denies the importance of literature by defacing the text and metaphorically spitting in the face of the author as guide and prophet. Yet Sorokin is also aware of his own status as writer, one who through his writings brings to the reader truths not otherwise perceived.

In a recent interview with *Der Spiegel* Sorokin claims that he remained stubbornly 'apolitical' until only a few years ago. 'As a storyteller, I was influenced by the Moscow underground, where it was common to be apolitical. [...] This was one of our favourite anecdotes: as German troops marched into Paris, Picasso sat there and drew an apple. That was our attitude – you must sit there and draw your apple, no matter what happens around you. I held fast to that principle until I was 50. Now the citizen in me has come to life' [Barry 2011].

Sorokin's 'new' civic-mindedness is clearly aimed at what he sees as the 'destruction' and 'collapse' of Russia under the current regime. At the age of 50 Sorokin decides that he must join the ranks of Russian writers who believe that their writings will change things. In the early 1990s, by way of contrast, Sorokin would claim, in an interview rather provocatively entitled 'Tekst kak narkotik', that his writings were simply 'words on paper' and that as such there could be no 'ethical aspect' to what he was writing [Sorokin 1992: 120].

Sorokin's engagement with Russian history can be traced to his most controversial work, *Goluboe salo* ('Blue Lard', 1999). Three years after its publication it was 'sued' in a Moscow court for its 'pornographic' content. That content was the graphic description of homosexual sex between Nikita Khrushchev and Iosif Stalin. Khrushchev's penetration of the *vozhd'* ('leader') is a metaphor for his

attack on Stalin's crimes and 'violations of socialist legality' in 1956. In *Goluboe salo* for the first time in Sorokin's writing pornography and explicit sex have a political significance.

The central premise of *Den' oprichnika* ('Day of the Oprichnik', 2006) is brilliant in its simplicity. In the near future, Russia is ruled by an oppressive autocrat whose main arm of government is the *oprichniki*, the secret police of Ivan the Terrible's time. Furthermore, the very title is reminiscent of another classic story of resistance to tyranny, Alexander Solzhenitsyn's *Odin den' Ivana Denisovicha* ('One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich', 1962). If in previous works Sorokin re-imagined and re-worked themes and motifs from Russian literature of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, in *Den' oprichnika* he self-consciously references the Dystopian traditions of Russian literature, most notably Evgenii Zamiatin's *My* ('We', 1921).

Sorokin's view of Russia's future is as bleak as Zamiatin's vision of the Soviet Union's, though much more violent. In 2028 Russia is surrounded by a Great Wall that separates it from Europe and China, and is ruled by a Sovereign (cf Zamiatin's 'Benefactor') after the Red and White Troubles of the Soviet and immediate post-Soviet past. Zamiatin's Single State was also instituted after a war that destroyed most of the population. The Sovereign's *oprichniki* very much resemble the Benefactor's Guardians in their ruthless persecution of sedition. There, however, the resemblance ends, because whereas Zamiatin's novel is narrated by the rebel engineer D-503, Sorokin's 'hero' is Danilo Khomiaga, a highly-placed *oprichnik*. If Zamiatin's Single State was ruled as a scientifically rational society guaranteeing 'mathematically infallible happiness', then Sorokin's rulers regard themselves as above the rest of the nation in their patriotic fervour; indeed, as Khomiaga muses, standing in the Kremlin's Uspenskii Cathedral clutching a candle, the Sovereign would not be able to reign without their support.

Sorokin posits a picture of Russia in 2028 that is essentially identical to that of Ivan the Terrible, despite new forms of communication and transport that enable the *oprichniki* to carry out their work with such efficiency, such as mobile telephones and Mercedes cars. As Stephen Kotkin has noted in a review of the English translation, the *oprichniki* resemble the 'siloviki' of modern Russia, who 'lord over not just the richest private citizens but also other parts of the state' [Kotkin: 2011]. As in today's Russia, anyone, no matter how rich and eminent, can become a victim of State 'justice', graphically exemplified in the novel's opening pages which see the execution of a rich merchant, the gang rape of his wife and the despatch of the children to an orphanage where they

will be raised as ‘honest citizens of a great country’ (28).

The *oprichniki* are (literally) men ‘set apart’, they answer only to the Sovereign and with his blessing hold the power of life or death over everyone else. They are similar to the fair-haired, blue-eyed tribe in *Trilogiia Led* (‘Ice Trilogy’, 2004-05) who form the chosen elite of a totalitarian state (some may even see a reference to the physical features of Vladimir Putin). Russia’s power structure is strictly vertical, and when anyone of importance loses favour or protection, no mercy is shown. As they perform sexually grotesque and masochistic rituals they reference the dance of the *oprichniki* in Eisenstein’s film *Ivan Groznyi* (‘Ivan the Terrible’, 1944-46): ‘Гойда! Гойда! Жги! Жги! Жги!’ (217). In *Trilogiia* ordinary humans are simply ‘meat’ to be destroyed over the decades in their search for greater meaning. In Sorokin’s Russia of the future, just in the actual Russia of the present, people do not matter, they are playthings in the lifestyle of those who have chosen themselves to be in power.

Den’ oprichnika offers a vision of Russian history not as cyclical – a return to autocratic tyranny – but rather as terminal. The work shows that Sorokin has evolved from *laissez faire* apoliticism to a more aware and conscious stance that lies squarely in the Russian tradition. Sorokin finds himself in glorious company: Lev Tolstoi angered the government and Church with his outraged attack on the corruption of the criminal justice system in *Voskresen’e* (‘Resurrection’, 1899), and Alexander Solzhenitsyn was arrested and deported from the Soviet Union in 1974 after the publication abroad of the first volume of *Arkipelag GULag* (‘The Gulag Archipelago’, 3 vols, 1973-76). With his equation of the government of 2028 and that of Ivan the Terrible, is Sorokin claiming his lineage, as the great dissident Russian writer of the twenty-first century?

Sorokin has foregrounded an aspect of Russian life that is consistent from the time of Ivan the Terrible to the present day: the individual has no rights, he is not bound to society by any moral or collective bonds, he is alone and at the mercy of the state. Nadezhda Mandel’shtam articulated this ‘sickness’ as the essence of the Soviet state: The loss of ‘self’ leads either to self-effacement (as in my case) or to blatant individualism with its extremes of egocentrism and self-assertiveness. The outward signs may differ, but it is the same sickness: the atrophy of true personality. And the cause is the same in both cases, namely, the severing of all social bonds. The question is: how did it happen? We saw it come about in front of our very eyes. All intermediate social links, such as the family, one’s circle of friends, class, society itself – each abruptly disappeared, leaving every one of us to stand alone before the mysterious

force embodied in the State, with its powers of life and death. In ordinary parlance, this was summed up in the word ‘Lubianka’ [Mandel’shtam 1976: 18-19].

By drawing a parallel between two historical periods as united by a common form of government, Sorokin affirms the finality of Russian history. Violence was the dominant feature of Ivan the Terrible’s reign, just as it was in the Soviet period, and for Sorokin it also defines the present regime. Violence derives from a feeling of strength and power over others, and the ‘new’ Russia flexes its muscles before the rest of the world. The Russia of *Den’ oprichnika* and *Sakharnyi Kreml’* is cut off from the rest of the world by the Great Russian Wall, it is simultaneously a fortress and a prison.

Sorokin’s writing not only abolishes past taboos and demolishes all notions of authority, it also does not offer any renewal or regeneration. It is the end of things. Doctor Garin in *Metel’* (‘The Snowstorm’, 2010) does not reach his destination and does not succeed in vaccinating the local population from a deadly epidemic, so we are left to wonder whether the epidemic will spread and destroy civilization as a whole. Roman in *Roman* kills everyone and at the same time kills Russian literature. The ‘stout-hearted four’ all die, achieving nothing but their own grisly deaths. All of European history is ultimately reduced to one historically irrefutable fact: a month in Dachau is ontologically very different from a month in the country à la Turgenev. For Sorokin, this is where European history comes to an end.

The Russian national emblem is the two-headed eagle, where one head looks east the other west. In the twenty-first century Sorokin’s Russian eagle definitively turns away from the West and looks East. Towards China. In *Den’ oprichnika* China is Russia’s major geo-political rival as the author seemingly grants the wishes of the ruling classes in Russia to denigrate and destroy America and Europe. In *Metel’* Garin does not reach his goal because of the continuing snowstorm, and is rescued from freezing to death by Chinamen. In Alexander Zel’dovich’s film *Mishen’* (‘Target’, 2011), co-scripted by Sorokin, Russian customs officials reap financial rewards as a transit country for huge tracks travelling between Europe and China (also a major theme in *Den’ oprichnika*)¹.

With the increasing prevalence of Chinese words and phrases in Sorokin’s texts, it becomes clear that the Chinese influence for Sorokin is assuming greater significance, though not necessarily positive. China offers the opportunity both for corruption and power-play: Russian border guards in *Mishen’* struggle to keep out the masses of illegal Chinese immigrants trying to cross the border in a parody of a computer shoot-‘em-up game. The USA barely gets a mention in Sorokin’s works. But as ever with

Sorokin, it remains unclear whether he is affirming the importance of the East to Russia's economic and political future, or poking fun at his government's derision of all things American.

Mishen' provides an interesting development on Sorokin's picture of Russia in the near future. Although there are no *oprichniki*, and we do not know who or which party is in power, the Russia of 2020 is stable, its population content with a constant diet of mind-numbingly banal TV shows. There are, as in *Serdtsa chetyrekh*, four main characters who travel to a former military site in the Altai where cosmic particles have been collected and which apparently prevent people from growing old. Their dream therefore is never-ending youth, and to conquer death itself. But on their return to Moscow, seemingly rejuvenated, their individual personalities come to the fore, and they rebel against their everyday, monotonous existence. But tragedy awaits them all. Russia does not allow its citizens freedom of will, or to transgress beyond the permissible.

Sorokin works within a clearly-defined Russian eschatological tradition which declares the end of all things, without delineating a beginning of anything new. The mindset of finality is one he shares with several prominent Russian cultural commentators. The satirist Evgenii Popov writes from the stance of the disempowered, the once hallowed status of the Russian writer who now struggles to make ends meet, and his recent works are laced with bitter irony and lacerating satire. Though not aimed specifically at the government of the day, Popov's ire is directed at policies that have pauperized whole swathes of the population. Popov's writings reflect the end of the old regime, but do not embrace the new. The film-maker Alexander Sokurov avoids direct social commentary but shows a similar concern for the end of things. In films such as *Mat' i syn* ('Mother and Son', 1997) and *Russkii kovcheg* ('Russian Ark', 2003) his camera moves slowly across faces and paintings, the cinematic gaze focused on the beauty of the natural world and of artistic achievement. *Mat' i syn* and its companion piece *Otets i syn* ('Father and Son', 2003) are about the end of things: a dying mother is looked after in her last moments by her son; a father and son take leave of each other as the son prepares to leave for army service, thus symbolically leaving behind his childhood. Beauty is corrupted by history, however, and Sokurov's films *Molokh* (1999), *Telets* (2000) and *Solntse* (2004) are about the men who changed history for the worst: Lenin, Hitler and Emperor Hirohito, respectively. These are studies not of power or men taking critical decisions that fundamentally affect the course of twentieth century history, but rather of men in their vulnerable, personal moments, human beings rather than historical characters. For

Sorokin the 'end' is usually accompanied by violence or catastrophe, Sokurov allows the viewer to contemplate the end of beauty and art more sedately. But both these very different artists view post-Soviet society not as a new beginning for Russia, but rather as the end of the world they once knew.

Sorokin's ferocious onslaught against current political power in Russia continues unabated in *Sakharnyi Kreml'* ('The Sugary Kremlin', 2008), where Russia in the near future is still governed in the manner of Ivan the Terrible. The Sovereign showers gifts on his people ('the children of Russia') from out of the sky as a symbol of his munificence. These gifts are in the form of sugar models of the Kremlin, which, in order to demonstrate loyalty, the population must lick. Such physical participation as an affirmation of political obedience is the modern counterpart of the Soviet government's encouragement of 'the norm' in *Norma*. The key difference is that whereas the Soviet government peddled filth and everyone had to swallow it, the 'new' government bestows gifts that the population is meant to find palatable, though the falseness of these gifts is evident. Whether it be shit or sugar, Sorokin's literalization of the motifs of governance and control remains the dominant narrative strategy.

Sorokin's evolution from 'paper' to 'politics' can also be seen in his treatment of the motif of food. Very often, especially in the early short stories and novels, the human body is the food source, both the flesh and its excrement. Such details are intended above all to shock and repel the reader, and in *Mesiats v Dakhau* to damn totalitarianism, both Nazi and Soviet. Thus, when the author/narrator visits the notorious prison camp his account of cannibalism brings the two ideologies closer in a ferocious parody of a popular Soviet war poem: 'Жри меня, и я вернусь/только очень жри'².

The devouring of people by the totalitarian machine is an image Sorokin returns to time and again. The collection of short stories *Pir* ('The Feast', 2001) is built around cooking and eating, and the human body is again an absurd metaphor. But in post-Soviet Russia the human body becomes a commodity. In *Mishen'* the TV host Mitia pours his own blood into a wine glass and offers it up in front of a live audience to the politician and businessman who call for 'new blood' to regenerate the country. Rapacious consumption morphs into vampirism and becomes the abiding motif of Russia in 2020, a country where the super-rich have everything and want only to remain young and not lose their corporeal vitality.

Just as Russian history does not develop, neither does its literature. In *Den' oprichnika* the clairvoyant Praskov'ia Mamontovna cheerfully consigns Dostoevskii's *Idiot* ('The Idiot') and Tolstoi's *Anna*

Karenina to the flames, and at the end of *Mishen'* Zoia, the wife of Viktor, a government minister, throws herself under a train in despair at the collapse of her affair with Nikolai the border guard and amateur jockey (cf Vronskii). The final image from *Mishen'* is of a Russia in 2020 where the beggars and destitute invited to the table transform it into a debauch, and consciously and deliberately subvert and ruin all that they were supposed to celebrate. With its explicit reference to Luis Buñuel's 1961 film *Viridiana*, this final scene also encapsulates Sorokin's vision of the Russian soul as above all vindictive and destructive. Incapable of anything constructive, and deprived through centuries of pillage and violation of grace or munificence, it knows only brutality. The *narod* finally gets its vengeance.

The greatest irony of modern Russian literature is that the previously apolitical Vladimir Sorokin now waits for the likes of Khomiaga and Okhlop to arrest him and take him away to the Liubianka in the early hours, just as in the recent past. *Plus ça change...*

For the 'new' Vladimir Sorokin the empty irrationality of denial, as in his youthful 'words on paper', has now been replaced by the defiantly rational desire to resist the return of Ivan the Terrible, his *oprichniki* and the sugar-coated lies and criminality of the Kremlin³.

Notes

¹The director of *Mishen'*, Alexander Zel'dovich (whose previous film, the 2000 film *Moskva*, was also scripted by Sorokin), is positively gushing about the Chinese national character: 'But in general a very good feeling remains of China. The Chinese know what they're doing. They have, in contrast to us, a mission, they are developing. When you are there, then it becomes very noticeable – people have a sense of tomorrow. Maybe they can't see it, but it is there, that tomorrow. And they are creating it.' [Zel'dovich 2011: 30].

²The 1992 edition of *Mesiats v Dakhau* is the culmination of Sorokin's 'anti-book' phase, as it contains no publication details, or even page numbers.

³Maksim Marusenkov asserts that Sorokin 'is not only the central figure of Russian postmodern literature, but also the major writer of the absurd in Russian literature' [Marusenkov 2010: 20].

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АВТОР И ВЛАСТЬ В ТВОРЧЕСТВЕ ВЛАДИМИРА СОРОКИНА

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В статье рассматривается эволюция творчества Владимира Сорокина от ранней «Очереди» до недавно изданных романов «День опричника» и «Сахарный Кремль» – произведений, в которых наиболее ярко проявляются черты антиутопии. Автор статьи предлагает широкий спектр наблюдений над поэтикой, стилем, спецификой художественного мира Сорокина. В частности, указываются многочисленные аллюзии на произведения русской литературы (А.Платонов, Е.Замятин, А.Солженицын, В.Гроссман и др.), проводится сопоставление творчества Сорокина с кинотекстом А.Сокурова (взгляд на постсоветскую Россию как на конец истории), серьезное внимание уделяется диалогу с русской классической литературой в романах «Мишень» и «День опричника».

Ключевые слова: русская литература; история; кино; Владимир Сорокин; новаторство; поэтика; антиутопия.