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THE DECONSTRUCTION OF REPRESENTATION IN VLADIMIR SOROKIN'S SHORT STORIES¹

The rise of *Conceptualism*

The mid-1970s represent an important moment in Russian literature as it sees the emergence of those “non-conformist artistic movements”² that will position themselves at the core of Russian postmodernism.³ *Conceptualism* and Metarealism are the two poles of a theoretical play between “convention . . . and freedom.”⁴ Metarealism plays on the word (*slovo*) liberated from its conventional context, and *Conceptualism* relates to conventionality as a new expression of the “concept”. Interpreted as “an idea attached to a reality to which it can never correspond,”⁵ the “concept” denies any correspondence between signified and signifier, thereby unmasking the arbitrary nature of signs, which acquire a virtual reality of their own. Such an independence of the sign takes the forms of ever new conventions and declares the fragmentation of the signifying unity into a myriad of empty stereotypes.⁶

The advancement of a new cultural paradigm is accompanied by the concomitant disintegration of the socialist system, starting with the Thaw after Stalin's death. This synchronic development of history and culture is responsible for the imminent end of the literature-centered world – a paradigm that posited the poetic word as the source of the ultimate state “cosmogony” – in favour of a series of discordant microcosms, in which the

1. For the production of this analysis, I am grateful to my supervisor, Professor Slobodanka M Vladiv-Glover, for her helpful and extended discussions as well as her editing of my manuscript.

2. Mikhail Epstein, “Theses on Metarealism and Conceptualism,” in M. Epstein, A. Genis and S. M. Vladiv-Glover, *Russian Postmodernism: New Perspectives on Post-Soviet Culture*, Slobodanka Vladiv-Glover, trans. and ed. (New York: Berghahn Books, 1999), p. 105.

3. Slobodanka Vladiv-Glover, “Heterogeneity and the Russian Post-Avant-Garde: The Excremental Poetics of Vladimir Sorokin,” *ibid.*, p. 278.

4. Epstein, “Theses on Metarealism and Conceptualism,” p. 105.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 106.

6. For a detailed discussion on the differences between Metarealism and Conceptualism, and the nature of those two artistic movements, compare Epstein “Theses on Metarealism and Conceptualism,” and Mikhail Epstein, “A Catalogue of New Poetries,” *ibid.*, pp. 105-17 and pp. 144-51.

loss of a logic of cause-and-effect cast the mind in total emptiness. Declaring that the epistemological apparatus turns on emptiness and arbitrariness implies holding out a concrete threat to the art of representation in its more traditional forms. Specifically, extracting materials from Soviet ideology and stripping its signifiers, i.e., Soviet cliché, from its invalidated signifieds, namely Soviet ideas of “truth,” reveals the split between the concept and its content.⁷ Since this game is played out entirely on a linguistic ground, it is not surprising that such a procedure is strongly reminiscent of the Futurist experimentation with language, alluding, in particular, to Shklovsky’s formulation of *zaum*, or “trans-sense language,” which as pure metonymy “pours forth” *ad inifintum* and *ad absurdum*. Hence, Epstein’s description of the conceptualists as the “second Russian avant-garde or post-avant-garde”⁸ points directly to their connection with the original Russian avant-garde, which first through the Futurists and then the Formalists created a new poetics of representation. Through an a-logical narration, the new generation of writers, emerging out of the “underground,”⁹ shaped a world out of *nonsense*, where the never ceasing sequence of parodies, arranged in an *ad absurdum* progression, projects man’s knowledge of the world at the limit of “reason” and language. This new “absurd” model of conceptualisation of the world offers the means for analysing the many brakes and discontinuities which characterise Sorokin’s literary texts.

***Chelovek s toporom*,¹⁰ or The Man with an Axe**

The legacy of the first Russian avant-garde, alongside with the development of twentieth-century philosophical thought, gave birth to that peculiar epistemological view of the world that finds its fundamentals in the negation of any affirmation,¹¹ thereby defining itself as intrinsically apophatic. Theories such as Baudrillard’s concept of the *simulacra*,¹² spoke out for the pervading sense of emptiness, providing theoretical support for the overcoming of binaries, such as “real” and “not-real,” or “presence” and “absence”. In such a system, the former terms come to be united in their opposition against the latter: what is present is real, since what is absent is

7. Epstein, “A Catalogue of New Poetries,” p. 146.

8. Vladiv-Glover, “Heterogeneity and the Russian Post-Avant-Garde,” p. 278.

9. Compare S. M. Vladiv-Glover’s “Rediscovery of the Other,” where she quotes the *Novy mir* critic, Vladimir Potapov, who had coined the usage of the English term as distinct from the Russian term *podpol’e* which has different ideological connotations, *ibid.*, p.77, n. 11..

10. Lev Danilkin, “Serdce Sorokina,” *Afisha*, 8 (2002), p. 23.

11. Vladiv-Glover, “Heterogeneity and the Russian Post-Avant-Garde,” p. 280, where Vladiv-Glover refers to Mikhail Epstein’s writing on Ilya Kabakov’s “rubbish novel.”

12. Jean Baudrillard, “The Precession of Simulacra,” in *Simulacra and Simulation*, Sheila Faria Glaser, trans. (Ann Arbor: Univ. of Michigan Press, 1994), pp. 3-42.

not real. Such a postulate carries with it enormous implications, the first and most important being that the only "present" and tangible, hence "real," thing is the image, infinitely replicable. In literary terms, the *simulacrum* is the text, beyond which nothing else exists. Accordingly, the negation of the principle of truth¹³ materialises in the privileging of the literary device (again, harking back to the Formalists' "art as device" or "technique"). Thus the new avant-garde, despite not having the benefits of a "grand narrative" such as the one which legitimated Modernism, serves the cause of postmodernist destabilization of widely accepted literary conventions and discourses.

At the textual level, this challenge to convention concretises in a series of textual techniques, of which Sorokin's texts utilise only one, albeit a very peculiar one. In the Russian cultural context of post-Communism, Sorokin takes upon himself the task of wiping the slate clean, as it were, of delivering a coup-de-grace to the literary conventions existing and persisting in Soviet culture. It is not socialist realism which becomes his prime target, but the convention of "realism" of the Russian 'classics' (Turgenev, Tolstoy, Goncharov) which were legitimated by the Soviet aesthetics and in some cases (such as that of Pushkin) raised to the status of a "cult" of Russian realism.

Sorokin's "revolutionary" technique of wiping out the "cult" value of the Russian "realist" canon has a well-established structure. A precise, careful and creative organization of diegesic space and information through the narration firstly lures the reader into a comfort zone of an established horizon of expectation. As the narrative develops, a point is reached where it fails to fulfil this expectation in a radical fashion, throwing the reader into deep bewilderment, and robbing him of the ability to interpret the text. Ultimately, this technique produces a consequential detachment or alienation from the text, rather than an involvement with it.

This technique is the core of Sorokin's deconstructive procedure, applied to the Russian "classical" canon. In a second moment, this "abstract" technique is deployed at several structural levels of the narrative. The most recognisable level is the thematic one. Characteristically, the narration starts by creating a traditional pattern, be it in a short story or a novel, which draws the reader into the narrated events. Once in this zone of comfort, the reader abandons herself to the "pleasure of the text." This is the crucial point at which the writer starts to introduce pieces of information that cannot be logically interpreted within the context of the set diegesic space. Incoherent events and messages startle the reader who is now no longer in the position of recognizing herself in the narration. As soon as the

13. Baudrillard, "The Precession of Simulacra," p. 6.

reader's attention is at its highest, a discontinuity is created through an incongruous detail, causing a turning point or break and the eventual implosion of the narrative. This brings about the collapse of the reader's traditional world of knowledge. The bipolar structure of this kind of "split" narration divides into the "model" text and the "killer" text, where the former has the function of setting up a model of "reality," while the latter has the function of unmasking the fallacy of such a representation.¹⁴

The technique of deconstructing the classical canon by means of a "split" narrative technique is first employed by Sorokin in his short stories but is subsequently unleashed on the genre of the novel. In his novel *Roman*, the textual structure is "slaughtered" along with the entire village populace who are murdered by the main character.¹⁵ The weapon used for the massacre is an "axe". This axe becomes an extended metaphor of the textual technique used to "murder" the text. It is "embodied" in or by the second part of the novel's narrative which through its absurd "reduction" of the first part, written in "classical" realist style, can be said to "cancel" out the beginning ("the origins") by means of textual and thematic violations. Sorokin, as author of this text which "kills" the text of the grand narrative of Russian realms, can thus be referred to as "the man with the axe."

The effectiveness of this technique of "deconstruction" (which contra Derrida's definition of the term here actually approaches the meaning of "destruction") on the thematic level of the text is matched by a deconstructive procedure which takes place on the linguistic level, on which Sorokin proves a master of the "concept of *play*."¹⁶ The violation of words occurs in the context of the Formalist technique of "defamiliarization"¹⁷ as well as the Derridean context of "tension between play and presence."¹⁸ Here, the postulate that "play is the disruption of presence"¹⁹ is exemplified in the extensive use of neologisms, which categorically affirm the validity of "absence" over and above that of "presence," making the "absent" the only signifying "presence". Accordingly, one is "present" at (and can "witness") the materialization of metaphors, which are "defamiliarized" within their

14. Konstantin Kustanovich, "Vladimir Georgevich Sorokin," in M. Balina and M. Lipovetsky, eds., *Russian Writers since 1980* (Detroit: Gale, 2004), p. 309.

15. Kustanovich, "Vladimir Georgevich Sorokin," p. 309.

16. Jacques Derrida, "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences," in *Writing and Difference*, Alan Bass, trans. (London: Routledge, and Kegan Paul, 1978), p. 289.

17. Viktor Shklovsky, "Art as a Technique," in L. T. Lemon and M. J. Reis, trans. and eds., *Russian Formalist Criticism: Four Essays* (Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1965), p. 13.

18. Derrida, "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences," p. 292.

19. *Ibid.*

usual, “translated” or “meta”²⁰-meaning and projected onto the concrete world.²¹ Entire paragraphs are thus constructed by newly-created and hitherto non-signifying words. When multi-faceted connotation replaces monolithic denotation, the system of signification *per se* collapses, in the sense that it opens itself to infinity, and, consequently, to nothingness.

A prose, like Sorokin's, that feeds on emptiness, often evokes a sense of inquietude. However, in Barthes' terms,²² the real “*jouissance*”²³ of reading resides precisely in this anguish, when the reader is forced to creatively reconstruct his own “reality” out of the unsettling experience of a read text:

Text of bliss: the text that imposes a state of loss, the text that discomforts (perhaps to the point of a certain boredom), unsettles the reader's historical, cultural, psychological assumptions, the consistency of his tastes, values, memories, brings to a crisis his relation with language.²⁴

Thus the breaches and discontinuities introduced in Sorokin's texts empty the script of fixed significations, but fill the mind with an infinity of possible meanings. Herein lies the ultimate “healing” function of Sorokin's technique which could be called “shock therapy.”²⁵

20. Epstein, “Theses on Metarealism and Conceptualism,” p.106.

21. Examples of this peculiar literary *manoeuvre* of “defamiliarization” are countless, especially in Sorokin's early prose. Language is extrapolated from its usual context of signification, be it either denotative or connotative, and projected into an opposite direction. In the novel *Norma*, the “olkloristic” saying of “eating shit” is actualized in real action; similarly, in the short story “Proezdom,” the equally vulgar saying of “to give a shit about something,” i.e., not to value something, translates into a minor party official peripheral leader perpetrating the action in front of an astound subordinate.

22. Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, Richard Miller, trans. (New York: Hill and Wang, 1975), p. 14.

23. *Ibid.*, p. vi. An introductory explanation by Richard Howard of the difference in French between *plaisir* and *jouissance*, which in English can only be equated by the dichotomy pleasure/bliss, is the only direct citation of the original term. In the translated version the term *jouissance* never appears. It is replaced on all occasions by “bliss”.

24. *Ibid.*

25. The term “shock therapy” has been used by Robert Porter to refer mainly to Aleshkovsky's opus, and marginally to Sorokin's. In regards to Aleshkovsky, Porter claims that the custom of using obscene language, in particular in his most popular works “Nikolai Nikolaevich” and “Maskirovka,” pursues the affirmation of life through the rehabilitation of the “living language” (Russia's Alternative Prose [Oxford: Berg, 1994], p. 33). As such, Aleshkovsky's works are predominately political, as they reaffirm the individual as the real hero against the empty simulacra of the Soviet icons; accordingly, the first person narrative is the most suitable to serve the purpose, and it becomes very popular during this time. By contrast, Sorokin distances himself from his works and lets the language take the center stage. As noted by Porter, the link to the Avant-guardist language experimentations is quite

“Otkrytie sezona”: A sample analysis

The short story “Otkrytie sezona,” which translates into English as “Open Season,” is part of the collection *Pervy subbotnik*, published in Russia by AdMarginem in 2001.²⁶ Despite their late publication, the texts belonging to the collection were all written between 1979 and 1984, when Conceptualism was at its *apex* and the avant-garde had its existence in the “underground” of Soviet culture.

It is around these years that Sorokin actually wrote his major works, giving birth to a myriad of different text types: short stories, novels, and scenography. Each piece of his *opus* can be regarded as highly representative of his literary style that makes large usage of the narrative device which we have called “shock therapy.”

The short story selected for this “case study” is included in a collection that is noteworthy for its usage of socialist realism as a model of writing, the aesthetics of which could be considered a national constant epitomizing the official canon, familiar to every Soviet reader. The standard of socialist realist prose is recreated in this collection, in passages typically praising the system, and lauding its achievements. The apparent loyal adherence to socialist realist narration, together with realistic and reliable descriptions of scenes, accomplishes the task of making the reader comfortable within a well-known pattern of reading. Only subsequently does the *climax* in each story turn this pattern into a parody and, eventually, into total chaos. Unimaginable aberrations and brutalities will break the reader’s peace of mind and will make him aware of the horrors of life. Regardless of the golden veil through which life was presented, the consciousness of the most unspeakable drives will eventually turn life into a nightmare.

The plot of the story “Open Season” is, in typical socialist realist style, quite linear. A series of small and insignificant events are described in chronological sequence. Another literary model – that of the traditional novella – inspires the opening *in medias res* – there is no introduction to the events or background to the characters. The reader is immediately brought face-to-face with the two main characters, the young Sergei and the more mature Kuz’ma Egorych. The two men, the reader gathers, are making their way through a swamp in search of prey on a day out hunting.

Sergei and Kuz’ma are deeply involved in a general conversation which meanders around several topics: from the hunting season which had just started to birds’ migration, the landscape and its alterations, and beyond

noticeable; also, the connection with the conceptualist art and its pursue of the broadening of literary conventions justifies, on the one side, a formalist approach to Sorokin’s texts, which, on the other side, sheds a light on the humanity that breathes in his prose, which embraces man and his feelings into literature’s own self-redefinition.

26. Vladimir Sorokin, *Pervyi Subbotnik* (Moscow: AdMarginem, 2001).

that, to the more general topic of social behaviour and generational evolution.

Suddenly, a flock of birds flies away. The two hunters, instead of taking aim and shooting, comment on the fact that luckily not all the birds had actually migrated, and then continue with their "search".

Once the hunters reach what they consider to be the right spot, they stop and start an unusual hunting ritual. The young Sergei ties a tape recorder up to a tree and with a rope lifts it into the air; Vysotsky's music starts to resound all around the forest. Then the two get ready for their ambush: their behavior, quiet and attentive to every movement and every sign of a possible prey, reflects their intention. With the exception of the music, the scene is very realistic and immediately recognizable for the reader, who has no difficulty in "seeing" it and, therefore, understanding it.

At last, a movement catches their attention and a third figure enters the scene. With the music still playing in the background, the loud noise of a rifle resounds over the song. The new figure firstly staggers, and then falls on the ground. The two hunters go in search of their prey, which is ultimately revealed as a human being. They carefully check the body, and carry the corpse to a safe place under a tree. The scene closes with the two hunters undressing the body and disembowelling it, while debating about the best way of how to cook it.

(i) In compliance with the tradition

As can be seen from the story-line, except for the sharp twist at the very end, the recounting of events in "Otkrytie sezona" can be classified as belonging to several traditional types of narration. The first of these types of narration which is intertextually present in Sorokin's story is the traditional model of the "novella," the genre from which the more recent short story form evolved.

In their treatise, Clements and Gibaldi highlight a few characteristics of the Novella as a genre of the Renaissance.²⁷ Specifically, they make a compendium of principles that had to be followed in order for the narration to be recognized as such a genre,²⁸ and explain the significance of such narration for the times.

Sorokin appears to adopt some of these principles. In particular, there is a main theme that binds every story into a text as a totality – what

27. Robert J Clements and Joseph Gibaldi, *Anatomy of the Novella* (New York: New York Univ. Press, 1977).

28. Robert J Clements and Joseph Gibaldi, "The Renaissance Theory of the Novella," in Clements and Gibaldi, *Anatomy of the Novella*, pp. 1-27. The first chapter of this text helps in contextualizing the Novella in the Renaissance; it also analyses to what extent the then new genre conformed to the tradition and which novelty it brought forth.

Clements and Gibaldi call the *cornice*. The description of everyday activities of ordinary and less ordinary people during the Soviet Regime, perceived from different angles and from different perspectives, makes of each story in the collection a single piece in a much wider puzzle which represents the *chronotope*²⁹ of Soviet life. The title of the collection, *Pervyi subbotnik*, is also significant as it celebrates the “first working Saturday,” thus gathering all the characters of the short stories in a colossal celebration of the Soviet system of labor.

Starting from the *cornice*, the main theme that binds every story in the collection is represented by descriptions of the ordinary and less ordinary life during the Soviet regime. Despite being a classical concept, such an idea also resonates with the more recent Bakhtinian notion of *chronotope*, symbolically captured in the metaphor of the title: *Pervyi subbotnik*.

In line with the socialist realist model of narration, the intent of the sequence of narration in *Pervyi subbotnik* is didactic: the narration is leading the reader towards a more conscious understanding of reality, regardless of whether a superficial or a disenchanting interpretation of this reality is being considered.

Starting on a broader scale, a homogeneous frame-tale that holds together the collection, and a combined didascalical and recreational intent were the main focus of the writer of novellas in the Middle Age. Subsequently, on a structural level, the novella theory gained inspiration from Cicero’s poetics, who states in his *De Inventione* (58 BC) the five divisions of classical rhetoric: “*inventio, dispositio, elocutio, memoria* and *pronuncio*.”³⁰

Most productive for an analysis of Sorokin’s novella are Cicero’s concepts of *Inventio* and *Dispositio*.³¹ As far as *Inventio* is concerned, the short stories included in Sorokin’s collection all deal with old narrative themes, a sort of grand-gala of the Party, its structured organization, and its participants’ lives. As prescribed in Cicero’s rhetoric, the writer finds a new way to present facts as an interweaving of events called, by virtue of Propp’s

29. Tzvetan Todorov, *Mikhail Bakhtin: The Dialogic Principle*, Wlad Godzich, trans. (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1984 [1939]), p. 83. Todorov explains the Bakhtinian concept of *chronotope*, with a reference to the English version of the original Bakhtin text, “Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel,” p. 235.

30. Clements and Gibaldi, *Anatomy of the Novella*, p. 13.

31. Roland Barthes, “Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narratives,” in *Image Music Text*, Stephen Heath, (trans. (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), pp. 86-88. In Barthes’s account of traditional rhetoric, he takes into consideration *Dispositio* and *Elocutio*, and leaves aside *Inventio*, as it concerns itself with content, i.e., *res*, and not with language, i.e., *verba* (p. 86 n). However true, it seems inevitable in the analysis of prose to refer to content level, since it can be considered the signified that corresponds to the signifier, constituted by the story.

pioneering work on structure analysis,³² the *plot*. In Sorokin's text, the novelty resides in the unconventional *plot* but the *inventio* is structured differently to the Renaissance novella. In the Renaissance novella, the innovative ways of chronicling events consisted mainly of complications and enlargements of the basic core of the subject. In Sorokin's version of the genre, the versatility and flexibility of the text is due to a twist in the *dénouement* which completely changes the significance of the set theme or conventional topic of the narrative.

The "classical" rules of *Dispositio* which apply to the Renaissance novella prescribe unity of action and a harmonious composition of events that allow the reader to follow the story without shifting his perspective haphazardly. Sorokin's text also conforms to this rule as it is written in a "realistic" sequential manner. Although the culmination (climax) of the story does create a gap in the general understanding, this gap cannot be ascribed to the abrupt shifts of topics, but rather to the incoherent outcomes of previously described actions. In other words, the delivered text is easy to follow as it is harmonious, but it is difficult to understand because it produces unexpected outcomes of the plot action.

The insistence of verisimilitude in the depiction of reality has its origins in the rhetoric of Cicero and Quintilian.³³ It is a device meant to more effectively persuade the reader of the reliability of the story. The fictitiousness of the story must be concealed, so that the reader can better identify him/herself with it. This is, evidently, the intention of Sorokin, whose contrives to immerse the reader deeply into the story before expelling him/her brutally and unpredictably. Thus the narration contains a very detailed description of places, as if they were photographed and impressed in the reader's mind as images or memory traces. The descriptions of the setting faithfully report the characters' journey as they move through woods, swamps and fields. The described behavior of the characters seems totally reliable and in perfect agreement with the presented situation, until the point of rupture, when the same reliable behavior starts to contrast with the situation.

Clearly then, Sorokin's narrative not only conforms to the structure of the novella genre, but also references in structural terms the highest authority on narrative in classic rhetoric. It can thus be inferred that Sorokin is attempting to endorse his narrative with the traditional standard and the classical "authority of the text."

32. Vladimir I. Propp, *Morphology of the Folktale*, Laurence Scott, trans. (Austin and London: Univ. of Texas Press, 1968).

33. Marcus F. Quintilianus in his major work *Institutio Oratoria* (95 A.D.) debates on the perfect orator, following the steps of Cicero, whom he praised as one of the founders of the more traditional art of presenting for an audience.

(ii) Structural analysis

In the following structural analysis of Sorokin's text, the basic model formulated by Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan has been adopted as a theoretical frame.³⁴

First, the setting is very important in order to define which *chronotope*³⁵ of reference is involved. The only real geographical place in which we infer at the very beginning of our story is something called the "Pannonian Plain." The region of Pannonia refers back to the time of the Roman Empire, when ancient tribes, the Pannonii, were conquered by Augustus in 35 BC and when their territory became a Roman province. Nowadays the term Pannonian Plain is used to refer to the particular land that formed when the Pannonian Sea dried out during the Pliocene. In both cases, the name for this place reminds the reader of an ancient and mythological time, rather than a contemporary location, and sets the basis for a double interpretation of the text. On the one hand, the swamps that characterize this place are ideal for hunting, and could be read as forming part of an appropriate place to promote the verisimilitude of the story. On the other hand, the allusion to ancient times, hidden in the place name Pannonia, establishes an authentic idyllic context. If the reader has a mind for geography, s/he can make the inference that the geo-physical place Pannonia is located somewhere between Hungary, Austria, and the former Yugoslavia. A new gap thus emerges in the story's structure: it is a gap between the region (setting) and the language (Russian) of the story, the "content" and the "expression". The appearance of pseudo-geographical places with hidden intertextual allusions continues as the narrative progresses. At some point, the village of "Korobka" is mentioned. The allusion to Gogol' and his novel *Dead Souls*³⁶ refers to the name of Mme Korobochka who uncovers the deception of the protagonist. Here, the allusion to a possible deception or duplicity in "reading" is more overt. Finally, a place called "Susaniny" is mentioned. Like all the previous place names in the narrative this name is real but out of context. For the Russian educated reader it invokes the name of Ivan Susanin, a Russian folk hero who, according to legend, saved the

34. Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, *Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002 [1983]).

35. Todorov, *Mikhail Bakhtin*, p. 83.

36. Nikolai Gogol', *Mertvye dushi* (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo Kudozhestvennaya literatura, 1960). This text was meant to be the first part of a trilogy about the social situation, in the manner of Dante's *Divine Comedy*, but the last two parts were never written. Through the use of the absurd and satire Gogol' delivers his critique on the ills of the social system in the post-Napoleonic Russia. Hence the reference to Gogol' and his major literary work becomes a hint to the reader to go beyond the surface and not to take anything at face value.

Tsar Michail Romanov from Polish executioners by leading them into the depth of a forest from which they never re-emerged, thus allowing the Romanov dynasty to begin.³⁷ In contemporary Russian usage, *susanin* has become an ironic cliché that stands for somebody who leads others somewhere claiming to know the way, but who eventually proves not to know. Ultimately, it stands for no place.

The setting of Sorokin's narrative thus establishes connections to places of ancient times, which confers a mythological status on them, or places which have never been real but refer to the reader's cultural knowledge – what one might also call “the unconscious of the text.” The place names which are supposed to promote accuracy of setting descriptions and the “realism” of the narrative thus contrast sharply with the descriptions of woods, swamps and fields, which are meticulously and rigorously mimetic or “realistic”. Trees, such as birches, pines and oaks, are depicted with accuracy of detail: every landscape is like a neat photograph in which the reader can see him/herself walking, digging the boots in the mud, hearing the noise of the heavy steps on the wildly growing grass, looking at the sun filtering through the branches. However, this realistic portrait of places is subverted by the mythological references and literary allusions hidden in place names, thus creating the first of many discrepancies that characterise the structure of Sorokin's text.

In addition, some *topoi*, such as the peaceful sensation of the rustling of the grass and the breathing of the wind, which characterize the idyllic scene, are suddenly replaced by *tuman*, fog, that embraces everything, creating a sensation of obscurity and, subsequently, of mystery or the *uncanny*. This is reminiscent of the Italian poems of the fifteenth century, in which the setting was the outer mirror of an inner reality and the misty field symbolized the unconscious; in this symbolic setting, the knight had to face hidden monsters and overcome all sorts of hurdles. Like the setting in the Italian medieval poems, Sorokin's setting is an unknown place, where anything can happen at any time.

As already stated, the disposition of elements in the structure of Sorokin's narrative is quite linear and follows, with very few exceptions, a chronological order. Thus the story-time and the text-time almost coincide. However, when considering time in terms of order of events, it is noticeable that there are only a few *analepses*, all heterodiegetic³⁸: they provide information about places and people of the Soviet past and function as a vehicle through which the writer persuades the reader to interpret the story

37. The legend has been the basis of a libretto for Mikhail Glinka's opera *A Life for the Tsar*, first performed in 1836 at the Bol'shoi Theatre. The story line can be retrieved from www.vor.ru/Events/program13.html

38. Rimmon-Kenan, *Narrative Fiction*, pp. 46-51.

according to that particular parameter of reference. Such *analepses* are included in dialogues, without affecting the duration of the story-time which almost coincides with the text-time. In terms of duration, in fact, there are very brief descriptive pauses, usually limited to a couple of sentences; they describe the events when the characters are not engaged in dialogue, making the scene similar to a movie and conferring reliability on it. Accordingly, taking into account frequency, each event is described separately in the moment in which it occurs. This means that the writer is making the reader follow exactly what is happening, as if he/she were taking part in the events. Despite such a pseudo-cinematographic representation of events, this type of exposition could also be related to ancient chronicles, when syntax was more limited, and allowed less variation. However, what the structure of temporality in Sorokin's narrative demonstrates is that even with time, the writer is playing with the reader's understanding by keeping him/her involved in a recent and recognizable past, and simultaneously reminding him/her of a legendary past: reality and myth are thus merged into one virtual time.

Another allusion to classical models of the novella or myth is represented by the reference to the literary *topos* of the journey as a learning process.

The allegory of the journey has been used since ancient times to symbolize the detachment from what is familiar, and through the experience of the different, the reaching of a much clearer and much higher understanding of the self. In Medieval terms, the allegory usually consisted of a character who left home assisted by an elder or master, whose function was to direct the path of the young man towards the truth, assisting him in the unveiling of new meanings. This *topos* is prominent in *Divina Commedia*,³⁹ in which the journey of the young Dante, assisted by his master, Virgil, is

39. Dante Alighieri, *Divina Commedia*, annotata da G.L. Passerini (Firenze: Sansoni, 1988). Robert M. Durling, ed., *The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1995). The epic poem is composed of three *cantiche*, written between 1306 and 1321. It is widely recognised, both within the Italian context and world critics, as the masterpiece of Italian literature, from which the modern Italian language has developed into the current standard. The poem gives a vivid insight into the Medieval view of the world, mostly dictated by the overwhelming power of Christianity: the journey through the three realms of the dead leads the poet towards a better understanding of his self, and ultimately towards the salvation of his soul. Despite its apparently straightforward meaning, the text presents itself as a multiple allegory that allows a number of levels of interpretation; among these levels, the moral one seems to occupy an eminent position, and serves as the scope of reference for this analysis. For a general overview of the text, refer to en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Divine_Comedy. The full text can also be retrieved on line at www.liberliber.it/biblioteca/a/alighieri/la_divina_commedia.

the journey towards the salvation of the soul: the journey is endorsed with the meaning of ultimate freedom.

In Sorokin's text, we find all the characteristics of the journey as defined in the classical model: two characters, one young and one more experienced; events, such as the proceeding through places under the guide of the master who knows which is the better way; the setting, specifically the obscure place where the pupil has to face his daemons and through which he can reach enlightenment. The presence of these traditional elements intimates that the Sorokin's text, at least in form, conforms to the traditional genre of the voyage. Nevertheless, the certainty of this categorisation is undermined by some disrupting factors. To begin with, enlightenment is not the end-point of the journey of Sorokin's characters. As the place clears up and the characters gradually steps from swamps, to woods and finally to an open field, the process of their psychological illumination, which is meant to increase, recedes. For the reader, if not for the characters, the clearing of the place coincides with the highest point of confusion and the complete loss of reference. In the "classical" journey, the obscure is perspectiveless while the clearing regains spatial reference, indicating the completion of the physical and intellectual orientation of the hero. By contrast, in "Otkrytye sezona," the spatial references of the open fields are ineffectual since they do not point to anything. The *deictica* are empty words, leaving the reader and the characters in a place without spatial coordinates, so abandoning him/her in a no place. The last, but highly significant discrepancy is the generational gap between the master and the pupil. While in the traditional educational journey the pupil always regards the master with reverence since the latter commands a higher knowledge, in Sorokin's story the attitude of Sergei towards Kuz'ma is highly derisive: the young man mocks the old experienced hunter and is ultimately disrespectful of what was traditionally regarded as wisdom. Sergei, who represents the younger generation, thus represents the complete voiding of the master/pupil relationship that underpinned the development of culture in traditional societies. Rather than follow a master or a teacher of the older generation, the younger generation as represented in Sorokin's story has its own beliefs and overtly expresses its disdain for the eldest generation which is perceived as old-fashioned. Instead of the reverent look directed from the pupil to the master, the reader faces the sarcastic laugh of the former at the tradition of the latter.

Further discrepancies between form and content become apparent in Sorokin's narrative.

Since any story is an abstraction by definition, it can only be inferred through the text, its “observable signifier.”⁴⁰ When presented with events, we usually label and gather them, at the very basic level, in sequences of three: according to Bremond’s model of texts,⁴¹ these events correspond to Possibility, when a problem is presented; Process, when mechanisms of resolution take place; and Outcome, when either positive or negative results are stated. In Sorokin’s text the logical sequence of these stages is broken: the outcome does not correspond to the previous functions, or the process does not enact the problem presented. A concrete example will illustrate this point. In the scene culminating in the shooting of the prey (the man), the possibility is represented by the hunting scene, while the process is signified by the hunter setting the tape recorder and playing music, the outcome being the shooting. In this specific situation the second function seems to belong to a different trilogy or set of functions. Another instance is furnished by the possibility created by a flock of birds flying in the shooting range of the two hunters; the process is symbolized by the hunters having their rifles at the ready; however, the outcome does not correspond to the possibility or the process, for instead of shooting the birds, the hunters comment on bird migration. The entire plot is characterised by a discrepancy between process, possibility and outcome. We may thus ask: if the first function is the setting of an ambush on a hunting day, why does the process make clear reference to a human village and a human presence? Such a discrepancy in the logic of the three functions – possibility, process and outcome – creates a major interruption and interferes with the reader’s interpretation of the plot action.

Lastly, if we revert to a more general concept of “events” as actions or changes of status, we may notice that they are the main source of ‘gaps’ in the narrative as the text unfolds. In fact, events closely relate to the role of the reader in the text and the way he/she concretizes the story. As soon as the text provides information, the reader formulates hypothesis and, consequently, starts to look for constant confirmation of that hypothesis throughout the text, thus creating expectations. Such a process is usually triggered by another process, specifically Naturalization, which is the assimilation of information according to a *deja-vu* model, in other words, an already natural and legible model which becomes the frame of reference for the whole story. Such models of coherence partially belong to the intertextual competence of the reader, and partially refer to his/her general perception of the

40. Rimmon-Kenan, *Narrative Fiction*, p. 13.

41. Barthes, “Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narratives,” pp. 101-04. I extrapolated the concepts of Bremond’s model, in *Logique du récit* (1973), from the account that Barthes makes in his essay. The model is also illustrated in details in Rimmon-Kenan, *Narrative Fiction*, pp. 22-28.

world.⁴² Either these alternatives (or perhaps both) presuppose a “system of codes and subcodes,”⁴³ which constitutes an encyclopaedic world of knowledge; hence, they are very natural and so familiar that we usually do not notice them.

In this analysis of the Sorokin's story, the whole first part consists in the establishment of this coherence via the reassuring parameters of the conventional narration. Accordingly, this effect of coherence is achieved through a model of recounting which pays respect to the canon of realism. Nevertheless, as the narration proceeds, some gaps are created by missing information, which puzzles the reader.

The first gap presents itself when a reaction that is expected in the light of a previous event is missing: the birds fly, but no one shoots. A second gap follows immediately, when evident signs of human activity trigger the hunting behaviour. Then, the excitement of the hunters and their attentive behaviour are coupled with an un-matching ritual, such as the lifting of the tape recorder into the air. The iterate pattern of either a presented situation clashing with the apparently subsequent characters' behaviour or a presented behaviour that collides with the apparently subsequent situation increases the reader's alienation as these clashes occur more frequently in the text. Lastly, the three functions – possibility, process, outcome – which culminate in the shooting of a man, lead to an explosion of horror (not the getting of wisdom), which denotes the *climax* of the story, where the reader, now completely alienated, cannot but ascribe what is presented to a world different from his/her own, ejected out of his/her zone of comfort and propelled beyond the horizon of expectation.

(iii) Reaching the *climax*: The overturning point.

As was demonstrated, recourse to traditional modes or genres of literary creation is the starting point of Sorokin's innovative technique of narration. Sorokin begins his texts by appearing to conform to the canon (both the Soviet canon and the European classical canon – Russian or otherwise), in both genre and structure. However, this is only a platform from which his process of deconstruction begins. There are, as indicated, progressive hints that suggest to the reader that s/he will be called upon to provide an entirely different interpretation, as s/he is forewarned about the unreliability of the narration. Amongst these signals, one seems to be preferred by Sorokin: a gesture has been iterated and attributed to both the master and the pupil, thus catching the reader's attention. Both characters, once they leave the wood, starts to walk through the field and come across

42. Compare Rimmon-Kenan, *Narrative Fiction*, pp. 118-30.

43. Umberto Eco, *The Role of the Reader: Explorations in the Semiotics of Texts* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1979), p. 39.

a spider's web. Both characters break the web, although in a different way: the old master bumps into it with his boot, thus breaking it almost unnoticeably, whereas the young pupil walks into it with his face and has to remove it with his hand. This simple and apparently insignificant spider web invokes an allusion to all manner of mythological symbols, including the "veil of Maya,"⁴⁴ which Arthur Schopenhauer thematized as a symbol of illusion, of what conceals the "truth" and prevents man from understanding the ultimate essence of "reality".⁴⁵ It is significant that the master breaks it with his foot, as his experience guarantees his awareness of what is "truth," whereas the pupil has to remove the "veil" in order to see what is beyond, plunging himself into the depths of the unconscious and facing its horrors. Although still entangled in a modernist view of "truth," such an image is also reminiscent of the postmodernist conception of the illusoriness of the sign and the primacy of the *simulacra*⁴⁶ over the "real". In the suggested equation, the *simulacra* are nothing more than the illusion of a "reality," analogous to Schopenhauer's "veil". The difference between the Modernist perception and the postmodern approach is in the possibility and outcome. In Modernism, the aim was to discover the ultimate "truth" through a journey of painful discovery of the self. In postmodernism, the discovery that "truth" does not exist forces the subject face to face with – not the self but the horror of absence.

Remarkably enough, the incident with the spider's web is placed roughly in the middle of the narrative, thus functioning as a turning point of the story. Up to this event, the story could still be regarded as a conventional pseudo-idyllic narrative using traditional modes of representation. The spider's web episode, on the other hand, becomes a catalysing event, after which gaps, incoherence, and brutality manifest themselves and invalidate the previous codes, leaving the reader in the emptiness of a nowhere, facing the horrors of absence just like the young hero.⁴⁷

In conclusion, deconstruction of traditional codes and narrative modes functions in Sorokin's texts as a point of rupture between art and life, since the story taken in its totality blatantly contradicts any pretence of reliability and reveals a new conception of reality. Thus instead of being underpinned by the certainty of a linear development of history, leading to progress and

44. Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, E. F. J. Payne, trans. (Indian Hills, CO: Falcon's Wing Press, 1958), 1: 352.

45. *Ibid.*, pp. 350-98.

46. Baudrillard, "The Precession of Simulacra," pp. 3-10.

47. This part of the analysis is in a preliminary stage, and a further investigation of Schopenhauer's thought is required before formulating a stronger point. The position of this specific event is of primary relevance in the story, as it represents the *fulcrum* of the narrative inversion. Therefore, it is advisable to leave the field open for an expansion.

ultimately Communist utopia, life in Sorokin's narrative appears as a chimaera, a monstrous truth that has as many faces as it has interpretants. Being potentially everything, it ultimately ends up being nothing or – *an absence*.

The postmodern threat against totalisation in the arts takes the form of a constant imperative for uncertainty. Nonetheless, this imperative must not be divorced from reason and order, since, according to logic, either the statement or the negation of the statement must be correct. The paradox of postmodernism relies specifically on the fact that it affirms what it denies⁴⁸: in promoting uncertainty, it does nothing more than creating another paradigm of interpretation; in destroying traditional structures, it does nothing more than replace them with new ones, less secure for the human subject, yet valid and applicable.

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48. Michael Roemer, *Telling Stories: Postmodernism and the Invalidation of the Traditional Narrative* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 1995), pp. 107-54.