

**THE LIFE AND WORKS OF
VLADIMIR VOINOVICH:
THE SATIRIST AS EXILE**

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CONTENTS

ABSTRACT	v
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	vi
INTRODUCTION	1
1. THE LIFE AND EXTRAORDINARY ADVENTURES OF THE WRITER VLADIMIR VOINOVICH	4
The Biography of Vladimir Voinovich	5
Socialist Realism	13
‘Youth Prose’	17
‘Village Prose’	18
Urban Prose or <i>Byt</i>	21
Conflict in the Sixties	23
Reading Between the Lines	24
Socialist Realism in the Seventies	25
Voinovich and the Theory of Socialist Realism	27
Satire	31
2. THE IDEAL AND THE REALITY: EMERGING THEMES IN VOINOVICH’S PERIPHERAL WORKS UP TO 1980	39
The Countryside	41
The City	53
The Changing Face of Socialist Realism	56
The Hero	59
The Average and the Extraordinary	65
The Individual	69
Love, Sex and Marriage	75
The Power of the Word	87
Morality	94

3.	<i>THE LIFE AND EXTRAORDINARY ADVENTURES OF PRIVATE IVAN CHONKIN: THE STRUCTURE AND EXPOSURE OF THE ABSURD WORLD</i>	96
	THE ABSURD WORLD:	97
	Ritual Behaviour	100
	Ritual Language	104
	Specious Logic	114
	Rules Imperfectly Understood	116
	Socialist Realism	120
	THE REAL WORLD:	124
	Chonkin as Antidote to Socialist Realism	124
	Boots	126
	Mud	132
	Animals	132
	Scatology	133
	Dreams	135
4.	CHONKIN: UNIVERSAL HERO, UNIVERSAL FOOL	141
	NARRATIVE STYLE:	141
	The Anecdote	142
	The Narrator	145
	The Structural Development of the Text	163
	Characterisation	170
	The Characters	172
	CHONKIN'S LITERARY AND PRE-LITERARY PEDIGREE:	180
	The Fool	180
	The Natural Man	185

5 .	THE WRITER: THE INDIVIDUAL AND THE SYSTEM	191
	The Reluctant Émigré	191
	Totalitarianism Explored	194
	Parody and Prophecy	201
	The Hierarchy of Writers	212
	Stupid Galileo	216
	Return	217
	Correcting Versions of the Past	221
	Allegories	224
	New Satires	228
	Unveiling the Grand Design	230
6 .	THE SATIRIST AS EXILE	238
	States of Exile	238
	Individualism	239
	Finding a Voice	240
	Censorship	240
	THE WRITER:	241
	Satire and Dissidence	244
	How Chonkin Spoiled the Life of the Author	245
	Emigration	248
	REINTEGRATION:	250
	Settling Scores and Dealing with Criticism	252
	Engagement with Politics	255
	The Future of Russian Literature	257
	The Fool, Galileo and Voinovich	263
	The Future for Voinovich	265
	CONCLUSION	267

BIBLIOGRAPHY OF PRIMARY SOURCES	270
BIBLIOGRAPHY OF SECONDARY MATERIALS	284
SECONDARY MATERIALS PUBLISHED ANONYMOUSLY	298
BIBLIOGRAPHY OF BACKGROUND MATERIALS	299

APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW WITH VLADIMIR VOINOVICH, NOTTINGHAM, 19 MARCH 1996, R. FARMER	A1-A28
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APPENDIX B: Gurzheeva, L. B. and M. A. Skopina, 'Zolotoi ukol', <i>Russkii iazyk za rubezhom</i>, 1(1967), 76-80	B1-B4
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ABSTRACT

This study undertakes an examination of the life and works of the satirist Vladimir Voinovich, set in the context of satire in general, and in particular against the changing political, ideological and artistic background of the Soviet Union and the new Russia. It is demonstrated that in certain respects he is typical of his generation and in others an exception.

The analysis shows how Voinovich's work gradually diverged from the accepted norms of Socialist Realism, leading him into conflict with the state and into increasingly satirical modes of expression. It is suggested that every satirist is to some extent an exile, since detachment is required from the society which is the object of the satirical impulse. The notion is studied that Voinovich became firstly an ideological exile, and compounded this with a form of chronological exile by expressing himself satirically at the 'wrong' time, before consequently becoming also a geographical exile.

Detailed attention is paid to his novel *Zhizn' i neobychnyye prikliucheniia soldata Ivana Chonkina*, which proved to be a turning point in both his life and work. The hero of this novel has his pedigree in the Russian tradition of the plain-speaking fool *Ivanushka-durachok* who wins out in spite of circumstances, and it is suggested that he shares certain characteristics with his creator. The writing of *Chonkin* sealed Voinovich's fate as an emerging 'dissident', and after its unauthorised publication abroad, he was persuaded to leave the Soviet Union.

In emigration the question arose of how to engage relevantly with his readership in the rapidly changing Soviet Union. Despite the trauma of dislocation, Voinovich continued to write creatively in emigration and then in partial return to post-*glasnost*' Russia.

The new Russia provides fertile ground for satire, but the returning satirist faces the question, now and in the future, of what type of expression is appropriate in a nascent democracy which he instinctively wishes to protect and support, rather than censure. Voinovich's solutions are diverse, and sometimes unexpected.

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INTRODUCTION

Vladimir Voinovich is now in his mid-sixties and has been writing and publishing for four decades. In some ways he is typical of his generation, and in others he has chosen his own path. His life has been set in 'interesting times' which have spanned the period of the 'thaws' through the era of 'stagnation' and on to the momentous upheavals of *glasnost*' and *perestroika* with their aftermath.

Previous PhD theses have covered aspects of his work and of his life in the period up to *glasnost*',¹ and substantial studies by Robert Porter, Geoffrey Hosking and Karen Ryan-Hayes² have focused on certain periods and facets of his

¹ Carol Elizabeth Pearce, 'The Prose Works of Vladimir Voinovich', abstract in *DAI*, 43 (1982), 12A, 3933, University of Washington.

Sally Anne Perryman, 'Vladimir Vojnovič: The Evolution of a Satirical Soviet Writer', Ph.D, Vanderbilt University, 1981; abstract in *DAI*, 42.4 (October 1981), 1660-A, 8120213.

Karen Lee Ryan-Hayes, 'Soviet Satire After the Thaw: Tvardovskij, Solženicyn, Vojnovič and Iskander', Ph.D, University of Michigan, 1986; abstract in *DAI*, 47.3 (September 1986), 929-A, DA8612617.

Włodzimierz Rybarkiewicz, 'Scapegoat and Fool in Hašek, Brecht and Voinovich', Ph.D, University of Oregon, 1992; abstract in *DAI*, 53.9 (March 1993), 3205-A, DA9238955.

Sandra Mary Thomson, '*The Life and Adventures of Private Ivan Chonkin* by Vladimir Voinovich: A Commentary and Explication', Ph.D, University of British Columbia, Canada, 1981; abstract in *DAI*, 42.12 (June 1982), 5143-A.

² R. C. Porter, 'Thinking Differently', *Index on Censorship*, 5.4 (Winter 1976), 87-90.

R. C. Porter, 'Vladimir Voinovich and the Comedy of Innocence', *Forum for Modern Language Studies*, 26.2 (April 1980), 97-108.

Robert Porter, 'Animal Magic in Solzhenitsyn, Rasputin, and Voinovich', *Modern Languages Review*, 82.3 (1987), 675-684.

Robert Porter, *Four Contemporary Russian Writers* (Oxford: Berg, 1989), pp.87-128.

Robert Porter, *Russia's Alternative Prose* (Oxford: Berg, 1994).

Geoffrey A. Hosking, *Beyond Socialist Realism: Soviet Fiction Since 'Ivan Denisovich'* (London: Granada, 1980; NY: Holmes & Meier, 1980).

Geoffrey Hosking, 'Profile. Vladimir Voinovich', *Index on Censorship*, 9.4 (August 1980), 19-22.

Geoffrey Hosking, 'Vladimir Voinovich: Chonkin and After', *The Third Wave: Russian Literature in Emigration*, Conference of Russian Writers in Emigration, 14-16 May, 1981 at U.C.L.A., ed. by Olga Matich with Michael Heim (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1984), 147-152.

Karen Ryan-Hayes, 'Decoding the Dream in the Satirical Works of Vladimir Vojnovič', *Slavic and East European Journal*, 34.3 (Fall 1990), 289-307.

Karen Ryan-Hayes, 'Vojnovič's *Moskva 2042* as Literary Parody', *Russian Literature*, 36 (1994), 453--480.

Karen L. Ryan-Hayes, *Contemporary Russian Satire: A Genre Study* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp.193-238.

writing, as have articles in the Soviet and émigré press, but this is the first full-length examination of his literary career from its start in the late 1950s to the present day.

As an author adds to his oeuvre, so this illumines his preceding work in new ways, and recent developments in Voinovich's literary creativity have demonstrated an extrapolation from and clarification of the philosophy expressed in his earlier writing. His life and art could be presented as a case study in the development of a critically-thinking individual within, and then outside, a state insufficiently developed to accommodate this civic phenomenon. His democratic instincts have taken him along a trajectory from proletarian worker to realistic writer to satirist to dissident (despite himself), thence to exile and, finally, to returnee. To some extent he is representative of a general movement towards individualism and critical thinking within Soviet culture and society, his case revealing the inherent tensions with particular clarity because his wry detachment expressed itself proactively through satire. His life's work, despite being unfinished, can be read as a complete statement on the role of the individual within society.

The turning point in Voinovich's life and work was the novel *Zhizn' i neobychainye prikliucheniia soldata Ivana Chonkina*.³ This present study will first present Voinovich's early career against the setting of his literary and social background. It will then consider his work, apart from *Chonkin*, up to his emigration in 1980, dealing with it thematically in the context of when it was written. Chapters Three and Four will be devoted to *Chonkin*, analysing it thematically and structurally in close detail. It was in *Chonkin* that the author, in full creative flow, turned his pen from genial irony to satire, and *Chonkin* it was which brought him into direct conflict with the state. In this work the satirist revealed himself, creating a whole fictional absurd world in uncomfortably close parallel to the world of historical reality. The consequences of *Chonkin* were considerable,

³ 'Litso neprikosnovennoe: zhizn' i neobychainye prikliucheniia soldata Ivana Chonkina', part one in *Grani*, 72 (1969), 3-84.

Litso neprikosnovennoe: zhizn' i neobychainye prikliucheniia Ivana Chonkina (Frankfurt am Main: Possev Verlag, 1969) (Paris: YMCA Press, 1975).

Pretendent na prestol: novye prikliucheniia soldata Ivana Chonkina (Paris: YMCA Press, 1979).

both on a personal and literary level, and included Voinovich's emigration. The complete spectrum of Voinovich's work in emigration and return has not previously been researched. This will be addressed in the last two chapters, along with a consideration of the changing role of the Russian satirist in the turbulent years at the close of the millennium.

Appendix A provides the text of an interview granted by Voinovich to the present writer in March 1996. This is referred to where it gives information not available elsewhere in published form. A second appendix offers a document from the strange world of historical reality that underlies the absurd world in *Chonkin*.

In common with Anglo-American publishing practice, quotations will be given in English, with transliterated Russian where a linguistic point is being made. Page references from works by Voinovich will show sources in Russian and in English translation where appropriate, on the first occasion in detail and thereafter in abbreviated form. Unless otherwise indicated, where quotations are supplied from texts for which an English translation is cited, they will be assumed to be by the translator of that volume; where no English source is quoted, translations are my own. The Library of Congress transliteration system will be used except for certain names already familiar in an alternative form, such as Tolstoy. Any inaccuracies and mistakes in this study are my sole responsibility.

CHAPTER ONE:

THE LIFE AND EXTRAORDINARY ADVENTURES OF THE WRITER VLADIMIR VOINOVICH

The Biography of Vladimir Voinovich

Socialist Realism

‘Youth Prose’

‘Village Prose’

Urban Prose or *Byt*

Conflict in the Sixties

Reading Between the Lines

Socialist Realism in the Seventies

Voinovich and the Theory of Socialist Realism

Satire

Vladimir Nikolaevich Voinovich, born in 1932, began his literary career in the last days of Stalin's Soviet Union, enjoyed the ‘thaws’ of the Khrushchev period, was sufficiently troublesome to the Brezhnev regime to merit harassment leading to his departure to the West in 1980, returned a decade later to witness Gorbachev's *perestroika*, and now writes in Yeltsin's new Russia. His work, employing a variety of genres, styles and media, is characterised by his sense of individuality, his imperative to tell it as it is, and the satire which he has used to this end.

With which factors did he and his generation have to contend to achieve their goals? How do writer and state find themselves in positions of open, mutual hostility? What compels a writer to work in greater fear of retribution than hope of publication? How does an author in a controlling system maintain a sense of

personal integrity, and how relate to a readership? What influence does state censorship have on a writer, and how does he adjust to its absence? And how do his readers respond as he addresses them from an apparently affluent and safe distance, and then returns to claim his voice in a new society?

These questions may be addressed initially by an examination of Voinovich's life and works, contextualised by an assessment of the prevailing literary climate, including an overview of socialist realism's evolution and influence on 'youth prose', 'village prose' and *byt* or urban prose, and of its relationship to satire.

The Biography of Vladimir Voinovich¹

Vladimir Nikolaevich Voinovich was born on 26 September 1932 in the Central Asian city of Dushanbe, Tadzhikistan. The name Voinovich is of Serbian origin; his father was a journalist and translator of Serbian literature, and his mother Jewish, a maths teacher with a passion for reading. His family background was more cultured than proletarian, as evidenced by a smattering of well-known and intellectual relatives: his great-grandfather was founder of the Black Sea fleet; and relatives included the Serbian prose writer and dramatist Ivo Voinovich and the Serbian dissident intellectual Milovan Djilas. Voinovich's father was a Party member, whose commitment to Communism did not prevent his arrest for anti-Soviet agitation and propaganda in 1936, nor his death sentence in June 1937, a

¹ For fuller details of Voinovich's works see bibliography, and for details of his biography, see: V. Voinovich, 'I am a Realist', interview including translations of open letters, *Index on Censorship*, 2 (1975), 49-54;

V. Voinovich, 'Iz russkoi literatury ia ne uezzhal nikuda', interview by Tat'iana Bek, *Druzhba narodov*, 12 (1991), 245-261;

V. Voinovich, 'Kak eto delalos'', *Iskusstvo kino*, 8 (1989), 128-133;

'Voinovich o sebe', *The Third Wave: Russian Literature in Emigration*, Conference of Russian Writers in Emigration, 14-16 May, 1981 at U.C.L.A. ed. by Olga Matich with Michael Heim (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1984), 138-146;

'O sebe', foreword to *Zhizn' i neobychnyye prikliucheniia Ivana Chonkina: Litso neprikosnovennoe and Pretendent na prestol* (Moscow: Knizhnaia palata, 1990), pp.5-6;

V. Voinovich, 'Zamysel', *Znamia*, 10 (1994), 7-73; 11 (1994), 11-70;

Bernard Levin, 'The Tragedy of Comrade Voinovich', *The Times*, 23 December 1980, p.10;

Robert Porter, 'Vladimir Voinovich: The Joker', *Four Contemporary Russian Writers* (Oxford: Berg, 1989), pp.87-128.

sentence later commuted to five years hard labour. In 1941 he was released from prison, and in May took the young Vladimir to the Ukraine to live with his grandmother, leaving the boy's mother behind to finish her studies. In August of the same year the young Voinovich was evacuated to Stavropol', thence the following year to the Kuibyshevskaya oblast', as a result of which disruption he received very little education during the war, from which his father returned an invalid. From 1944 to 1945 he lived in the Vologodskaya oblast', where he worked as a herdsman on a *kolkhoz*. Returning to Zaporozh'e in the Ukraine in 1945, he trained in technical school as a locksmith and began work as a joiner. From 1951 to 1955 he served as an aircraft mechanic in the army in Poland and elsewhere, and began to write poems, one of which was published in a newspaper, a fact he discovered whilst browsing the available sheets in the army latrines.

Notwithstanding the lack of acclaim, Voinovich was pleased to have earned ten roubles for fifteen minutes' work. During his military service and early working life he continued his education at evening school, completing his fourth, sixth, seventh and tenth grades. Aspiring to an intellectual career, he tried acting and drawing without great success, before he turned to writing. As he lived in a country with a strongly influential literary tradition, and came from a family who were examples of well-read provincial intelligentsia, literature had proved the main influence in his interrupted education, although much of the contemporary writing had been compromised by being harnessed to the state apparatus.² He was uninspired by published Soviet writers of the time, and authors such as Platonov and Bulgakov were effectively unknown, so the strongest influence on his writing came from Gogol' and Chekhov and from translations of Hemingway and Salinger. His decision to become a writer began with a resolution to produce at least one poem a day for a year. He read Soviet poetry in the library to work out his own theory of production, one day writing eleven poems, some of which were published in a local Crimean newspaper.

In 1956 Khrushchev made his secret speech to the Twentieth Party Congress, heralding the second brief literary 'thaw' (the first having begun with the

² Appendix A, p.A3.

death of Stalin three years previously), and in the same year Voinovich applied for admission to the Gor'kii Literary Institute in Moscow. On being denied entry, he sent a telegram of protest in verse, and set off for Moscow regardless. Moving to the capital from the provinces presented problems, not least the difficulty of getting a residence permit, so initially he worked on the railways outside Moscow before finding employment as a carpenter on a building site, which brought with it the coveted permit. In 1957 he applied again to the Literary Institute, but was denied admission, he believes, because of his Jewish-sounding name. Rather unenthusiastically, from 1957 to 1959 he studied instead in a pedagogical institute, spending three months in 1958 in Kazakhstan where he began to write 'My zdes' zhivem', completing this upon his return to Moscow. By 1960 he was editing radio programmes, had written some fifty songs, some of which were published, and was married, sharing a room in a hostel with two other families.

His big break came with the song 'Chetyrnadtsat' minut do starta',³ written in 1960 to celebrate the return from space of the cosmonauts Nikolaev and Popovich. October of 1961 saw Khrushchev's vilification of Stalin at the Twenty-second Congress of the CPSU, heralding a further literary 'thaw', and in the same year Voinovich wrote 'Rasstoianie v polkilometra' and had 'My zdes' zhivem'⁴ published in *Novyi mir*, the pioneering journal which, under the editorship of Tvardovskii, was to express a preference in 1965 for 'contributors who mirror reality realistically' and for works 'that do not avoid new means of expression when this is warranted by the content'.⁵ To be published in *Novyi mir* meant immediate public attention, but for Voinovich this resulted in an almost instant polarisation of the critics into supporters and opponents.⁶ In 1962 Voinovich became a member of the Writers' Union and wrote 'Kem ia mog by stat'', published under the title 'Khochu byt' chestnym' in *Novyi mir* along with

³ 'Chetyrnadtsat' minut do starta', *Russkoe bogatstvo*, 1.5 (1994), 51.

⁴ 'My zdes' zhivem: povest'', *Novyi mir*, 1 (1961), 21-71.

⁵ Liudmila Kochler, 'Old Troubles of "The New World"', *Russian Review*, 32.2 (April 1973), 143-151 (p.147).

⁶ L. Anninskii, 'Ot prostoty do mudrosti', *Literaturnaia gazeta*, 27 May 1961, pp.2-3.

'Rasstoianie v polkilometra' in February 1963.⁷ 'Khochu byt' chestnym' was not well received on the grounds that it was not sufficiently inspiring and positive, causing a retrospective reevaluation of the ideological credentials of 'My zdes' zhivem'. Later a film script of 'Khochu byt' chestnym' was banned, but a play was successfully produced. In 1963 Voinovich began writing the first part of *Zhizn' i neobychnyye priklucheniia soldata Ivana Chonkina*, on which he was to work up to 1967, completing the second part by 1970.⁸ It was a measure of the amount of literary freedom at the time that *Novyi mir* optimistically announced its intention to publish the first part of *Chonkin* in 1963,⁹ but the political situation soon changed and 1965-1966 saw the arrest, trial and imprisonment of Siniavskii and Daniel. A petition of protest, signed by Voinovich and sixty or so other writers, brought a reprimand. In 1965, 'V kupe'¹⁰ was published, followed by 'Dva tovarishcha'¹¹ in 1967, of which a play was also staged. Ginzburg and Galanskov were tried in May 1968, and again Voinovich was reprimanded for his signature on a document of protest. This time retribution was more severe, with the banning of two film scripts and the suspension of his plays in fifty theatres on the improbable grounds that he was alleged to have smuggled diamonds from abroad. Relatively undeterred, he wrote 'Putem vzaimnoi perepiski'¹² and 'V krugu družei',¹³ both unlikely to be published in the Soviet Union at the time. In 1969 'Vladychitsa' appeared in *Nauka i religiia*,¹⁴ but Voinovich found himself severely compromised by the unauthorised publication in *Grani* of extracts from *Chonkin*, which had been circulating in *samizdat* and had found their way to Frankfurt without his knowledge.¹⁵ This time Voinovich's stories were removed from journals, reference cards were taken out of

⁷ 'Khochu byt' chestnym' and 'Rasstoianie v polkilometra', *Novyi mir*, 2 (1963), 150-197.

⁸ *Zhizn' i neobychnyye priklucheniia Ivana Chonkina: Litso neprikosnovennoe and Pretendent na prestol* (Moscow: Knizhnaia palata, 1990).

⁹ *Novyi mir*, 10 (1963), 286.

¹⁰ 'V kupe', *Novyi mir*, 2 (1965), 69-71.

¹¹ 'Dva tovarishcha', *Novyi mir*, 1 (1967), 85-152.

¹² 'Putem vzaimnoi perepiski: povest'', *Druzhbanarodov*, 1 (1989), 91-126; *Grani*, 28 (1973), 122-191.

¹³ 'V krugu družei', *Evropa i Amerika*, 1 (1991), 112-122, 143.

¹⁴ 'Vladychitsa', *Nauka i religiia*, 4 (1969), 84-91 and 5 (1969), 60-71.

¹⁵ 'Litso neprikosnovennoe: zhizn' i neobychnyye priklucheniia soldata Ivana Chonkina', *Grani*, 72 (1969) 3-84.

library catalogues, and plays based on 'Khochu byt' chestnym' and 'Dva tovarishcha' were withdrawn. On 4 November 1969 Solzhenitsyn was expelled from the Writers' Union, and Voinovich spoke out in his defence, bringing further displeasure from the authorities. In an attempt to bring him into line, the Writers' Union suggested that Voinovich should publish a letter in *Literaturnaia gazeta* denouncing the unauthorised publication of *Chonkin*, with the incentive that he might be allowed to publish again in the Soviet Union. Deprived of the means of making a living, and encouraged by friends not to be intransigent, Voinovich consented to publish a brief statement, but found when it appeared on 14 October 1970 that Viktor Il'in, a KGB general and Secretary of the Moscow branch of the Writers' Union, had amended the letter without his permission.¹⁶ Notwithstanding the letter, Voinovich was effectively a banned writer in the Soviet Union until 1972, although parts of *Chonkin* continued to appear in the West.

In 1972 he was offered the chance to return to the fold with the publication in the series *Plamennye revoliutsionery* of a novel about Vera Figner, *Stepen' Doveriia*,¹⁷ to which he also wrote a supplementary chapter, unpublished at the time, 'Literator Skurlatskii'.¹⁸ It should be remembered that whilst he was working on the novel about the 'ardent revolutionary' he was also working on the second and darker book of the *Chonkin* cycle; this is by any standards a feat of literary diversification. Also in 1972 a collection of his stories was selected for publication by the *Sovetskii pisatel'* publishing house,¹⁹ and it seemed that he might again be able to earn a living as a writer. However, a fresh source of conflict soon arose, and on 2 October 1973 Voinovich wrote an open letter protesting at the establishment of the new state copyright agency VAAP.²⁰ In 1973 'Putem vzaimnoi perepiski'²¹ was published in *Grani*, and in January 1974 Voinovich issued a

¹⁶ 'V redaktsiiu "Literaturnoi gazety"', *Literaturnaia gazeta*, 14 October 1970, p.4.

¹⁷ *Stepen' doveriia: povest' o Vere Figner*, *Plamennye revoliutsionery* (Moscow: Politizdat, 1972).

¹⁸ 'Literator Skurlatskii', *Nedelia* (20-28 February 1989), 14-15.

¹⁹ *Povesti* (Moscow: Sovetskii pisatel', 1972).

²⁰ 'Otkrytoe pis'mo predsedateliu VAAP tov. Pankinu', *Khochu byt' chestnym: povesti* (Moscow: Moskovskii rabochii, 1989) pp.296-298.

²¹ 'Putem vzaimnoi perepiski', *Grani*, 122-191.

further statement in support of Solzhenitsyn, which led to his own expulsion from the Writers' Union. At the time, Voinovich believed that he had been expelled on 20 February, but later found that the secret decision had been taken on 13 March 1974. At any rate, he was made a member of the International PEN Club on 21 February.

However difficult his situation, he continued to write, producing the autobiographical stories 'Diadia Volodia', 'Maior Dogadkin', 'Kapitan Kurasov' and 'Starshii leitenant Pavlenko'.²² In May 1975 he was called to a meeting at the 'Metropol' hotel with two KGB agents, where he believes an attempt was made to poison or drug him by means of doctored cigarettes, which events he documented immediately in 'Proisshestvie v "Metropole"',²³ published in Paris, where an edition of *Chonkin* ²⁴ appeared in the same year. In 1976 *Ivan'kiada*,²⁵ the documentary epic story of how he and his pregnant second wife struggled to move into an apartment rightfully theirs but coveted by an influential *apparatchik*, was published in the USA. On 10 October 1976 Voinovich wrote an open letter to the Ministry of Communications to protest about the disconnection of his telephone,²⁶ and further compounded his situation by publishing an appeal on behalf of Sakharov in *The New York Times* on 29 January 1977.²⁷

By now, there was clearly no possibility of reintegration into the Soviet literary scene, and Voinovich judged himself to be in personal danger. In February 1978 his elderly father was taken on foot to a police station where he was told that his son was missing, probably dead. His sick mother, upon hearing this report, fell ill and died two weeks later. In 1979 *Pretendent na prestol* was published in Paris,²⁸ as was the collection *Putem vzaimnoi perepiski*,²⁹ and on 28 January 1980

²² 'Diadia Volodia', 'Maior Dogadkin', 'Kapitan Kurasov', 'Starshii leitenant Pavlenko', *Putem vzaimnoi perepiski* (Paris: YMCA Press, 1979).

²³ 'Proisshestvie v "Metropole"', *Kontinent*, 5 (1975), 51-97.

²⁴ *Zhizn' i neobychnyye prikliucheniia Ivana Chonkina* (Paris: YMCA Press, 1975).

²⁵ *Ivan'kiada, ili rasskaz o vselenii pisatel'ia Voinovicha v novuiu kvartiru* (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1976).

²⁶ *Khochu byt' chestnym: povesti* (Moscow: Moskovskii rabochii, 1989), pp.300-303.

²⁷ 'Appeal on behalf of Sakharov', *New York Times*, 29 January 1977, section 1, p.A2.

²⁸ *Pretendent na prestol: novye prikliucheniia soldata Ivana Chonkina* (Paris: YMCA Press, 1979).

²⁹ *Putem vzaimnoi perepiski* (Paris: YMCA Press, 1979).

Voinovich wrote a further appeal in support of Sakharov,³⁰ who had been banished to Gor'kii. In March of the same year, Voinovich was warned of the possibility of 'an accident', and in April he was threatened with banishment from Moscow or imprisonment unless he left the country. He agreed to leave on condition that he be allowed to take his books and papers, and that the telephone be reconnected for his wife's parents to use after his departure.

On 5 August Voinovich suffered a series of heart attacks. His wife's mother, distressed at the thought of her daughter's emigration, fell ill and died in hospital on 21 August. His wife's father was informed of her death by telephone, fell whilst rushing to his daughter, and died on the same night. This induced a further heart attack in Voinovich, but he recovered to continue the bureaucratic wrangle for the necessary emigration documents, writing one last open letter of protest³¹ on 25 November before leaving the Soviet Union with his wife and daughter on the anniversary of Stalin's birthday, 21 December 1980. Their departure at the airport was not without complications, but eventually they left for Munich, where Voinovich had been elected to lecture at the Bavarian Academy of Fine Arts. On 16 June 1981 he was stripped of his Soviet citizenship in his absence, in response to which he wrote an open letter to Brezhnev,³² also in this year finishing 'Etiud'³³ which he had commenced in Sochi in 1979.

The year 1982 was spent at Princeton university, followed by a return to Munich to work on *Antisovetskii Sovetskii Soiuz*,³⁴ the written version of a documentary series of satirical broadcasts about life in the Soviet Union which Voinovich began making on *Radio Svoboda* in 1983. His next major publication was his anti-antiutopia *Moskva 2042* which appeared in 1987.³⁵ In the same year

³⁰ *Khochu byt' chestnym: povesti* (Moscow: Moskovskii rabochii, 1989), p.303.

³¹ 'Besstyzhie nagletsy!', *Novoe russkoe slovo*, 25 November 1980, p.1.

³² 'Gospodin Brezhnev', *Russkaia mysl'*, 31 July 1981, p.3; 'Brezhnev', *Khochu byt' chestnym: povesti*, pp.304.

³³ 'Etiud', *Novoe russkoe slovo*, 21 June 1981, p.3,5.

³⁴ *Antisovetskii Sovetskii Sovetskii Soiuz* (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1985).

³⁵ *Moskva 2042* (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1987).

he wrote *Shapka*³⁶ and entered into correspondence with Zalygin,³⁷ the new editor of *Novyi mir*, with a view to publishing 'Putem vzaimnoi perepiski', but to no avail. The following year *Shapka* and 'Skazka o glupom Galilee'³⁸ were published, and in 1989 Voinovich was able to make his first return visit to Moscow.

After this, most of his works became widely available, and in 1990 his citizenship was restored and a play³⁹ and film based on *Shapka* began a long and successful run. Voinovich also spent some time in Washington, USA, preparing materials for a planned continuation of the Chonkin story, and shortly after this an apartment in Moscow was restored to him by Gorbachev. He was now publishing allegorical tales and *publitsistika*, whilst working on a major book - *Zamysel*, a blend of autobiography, philosophy and strands of *Chonkin*. He maintained his home in Munich, but spent an increasing amount of time in Moscow trying to reestablish his right to a voice, and fielding frequent criticism for having emigrated in the first place and for subsequently failing to return completely. In 1993 he published 'Delo no. 34840',⁴⁰ an account of his investigations into the poisoning incident at the Metropol' hotel, and in 1994 'Zamysel'⁴¹ was published, on which further work is still in progress. A film of *Chonkin* was released in 1995,⁴² and *Argumenty i fakty* began publishing a serialisation of Voinovich's satirical sitcom 'Novye russkie'.⁴³

From an early age Voinovich was driven by a creative will to write, but it has also been his blessing or his curse to live in 'interesting times', times in which bureaucrats rather than men of letters had a measure of control over literary content

³⁶ *Shapka* (London: Overseas Publications Interchange Ltd., 1988).

³⁷ *Russkoe bogatstvo*, pp.257-264.

³⁸ 'Skazka o glupom Galilee', *Strana i mir*, 3 (1988), 139-142.

³⁹ 'Kot domashnii srednei pushistosti', Voinovich, V. and Gorin, Grigorii, *Teatr*, 5 (1990), 38-61.

⁴⁰ 'Delo no. 34840', *Znamia*, 12 (1993), 44-120; *Delo no. 34840* (Moscow: Tekst, 1994).

⁴¹ 'Zamysel', in *Znamia*, 10 (1994), 7-73; 11 (1994), 11-70; 'Zamysel', in *Maloe sobranie sochinenii*, 5 vols (Moscow: Fabula, 1995), 5, pp.5-246.

⁴² *Zhizn' i neobychnyye prikliucheniia soldata Ivana Chonkina*, Director Jiri Menzel. Portobello Pictures (1995).

⁴³ 'Novye russkie', incompletely serialised in *Argumenty i fakty*, 44 (1995), 8; 45 (1995), 8; 46 (1995), 8; 48 (1995), 8; 49 (1995), 11; 50 (1995), 11; 51 (1995), 8; 52 (1995), 8; 2 (1996), 8; 3 (1996), 8; 4 (1996), 8; 5 (1996), 8; 7 (1996), 8; 8 (1996), 8.

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and style, and in which non-compliance carried heavy consequences. As with any ideologically controlled culture, there were 'thaws' and 'freezes' dependent on the latest interpretation of dogma, and Voinovich's life and writing illustrate the difficulty of indefinitely maintaining creative versatility and integrity within such a system.

Socialist Realism

A period of freedom and variety was enjoyed by Soviet literature immediately after the Revolution, but this was to be short-lived.⁴⁴ Throughout the twenties an uneasy balance of power was maintained between the 'fellow travellers' (*poputchiki*) under the auspices of the All-Russian Union of Writers, and the proletarian writers grouped in the various Associations of Proletarian Writers, of which RAPP was the most aggressive. The end of the New Economic Policy in 1928 meant an end of any private publishing houses which might have rivalled the state publishers, and the same year saw state control of literature tighten as the Central Committee issued a directive stipulating suitable topics of address by their writers.

The thirties saw Stalin's grip on the Party apparatus strengthen to a point where the last elements of political freedom in the country had been eliminated. The rise of German fascism made Stalin more than ever conscious of the backwardness of Soviet technology, and he began to exert tremendous pressure to industrialize Russia. Increasing education of the masses meant a greater readership, and the Party saw the potential of literature to provide a moral imperative to inspire, or oblige, the common man to sacrifice material comforts to reach the goal. Morally uplifting literature within a constricted understanding of human nature and historical processes was required, and the Writers' Union would see that it was supplied.

In 1932 the literary monopoly by the state had been confirmed when the

⁴⁴ The section on socialist realism draws on the following work:

Nicholas Luker, *From Furmanov to Sholokhov: An Anthology of the Classics of Socialist Realism*, ed. by Luker (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1988), pp.12-35.

Central Committee dissolved all existing literary organisations to set up the Writers' Union. The chairman of the Organising Committee for its establishment, I. Gronsii, is thought to have been the first to use the term 'socialist realism' at this time,⁴⁵ and the concept was swiftly adopted and presented by Andrei Zhdanov at the First All-Union Congress of Soviet Writers in August 1934. He declared that 'under the guiding genius of our great leader and teacher, Comrade Stalin, the socialist system has finally and irrevocably triumphed in our country',⁴⁶ before turning to the still outstanding problem of 'overcoming the survivals of capitalism in the consciousness of people'. The solution he offered to this problem was the doctrine of Marx, as expressed in contemporary literature - 'the richest in ideas, the most advanced and the most revolutionary literature'.⁴⁷ He called on the 'engineers of human souls' to 'depict reality in its revolutionary development' and to remold and educate the 'toiling people in the spirit of socialism'.⁴⁸ Literature, according to Zhdanov, should be based on material realism, was required to catch up with the 'reality' which was Soviet life and should present a new form of revolutionary romanticism. Thus was set in train a process of control over literature's subject matter and style which was to cripple many authors by demanding of literature an unambiguous endorsement of the current ideology.

Socialist realism, as a development of Marxist-Leninist-Stalinist literary theory and criticism, should be seen in context. The philosophical outlook of Marxism, as outlined by Jeremy Hawthorn, was characterised by its monist view of reality, apparently relevant to all spheres of human life, and consequently able to comment on any field.⁴⁹ It interpreted history as the struggle for control of the material conditions which sustain life, making the social base into the primary

⁴⁵ Wolfgang Kasack, *Dictionary of Russian Literature Since 1917*, trans. by Marja Carlson and Jane T. Hodges (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), pp.388-390 (pp.388-389).

⁴⁶ Andrei Zhdanov, 'Soviet Literature - The Richest in Ideas. The Most Advanced Literature', in *Soviet Writers' Congress 1934 : the Debate on Socialist Realism and Modernism in the Soviet Union* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1977), p.15 (first published as *Pervyi vsesoiuznyi s'ezd sovetskikh pisatelei 1934. Stenograficheskii otchet*, Moskva: 1934).

⁴⁷ Zhdanov, p.17.

⁴⁸ Zhdanov, p.21.

⁴⁹ Jeremy Hawthorn, *A Concise Glossary of Contemporary Literary Theory* (London: Edward Arnold, 1992), pp.97-100.

reality of life and leaving the superstructure of philosophies and beliefs, including art and literature, which sprang from this base, in a position of secondary importance. The philosophy was active and interventionist, art was seen as a mirror of society, and writers were required to use the realist techniques of the nineteenth-century, but optimistically and educatively, not critically.

From 1934-1941 socialist realism dominated the content and style of Soviet literature. A correct piece of socialist realist work should contain a positive hero (*polozhitelnyi geroi*), the concepts of closeness to the people (*narodnost'*), a reflection of the class ideology (*klassovost'*), ideological content (*ideinost'*), Party spirit (*partiinnost'*), and should present 'reality' in the spirit of 'revolutionary romanticism'. The writer's task was to create heroes out of abstract ideals to inspire and lead the people into a purposeful future, and at his disposal were all the literary traditions of the nation: the ancient folk literature, inspirational writings of the old religion, and the classicism of the eighteenth century, tempered by the nineteenth-century satirical castigation of wrong-doers.

For all its restrictiveness, there nonetheless developed a tolerance level within the doctrine which allowed for shifts in the ideological climate, leaving much of the interpretation and self-censorship to the writer himself. Viktor Nekrasov, reflecting in the seventies on socialist realism, refers to Siniavskii's claim that great literature will only appear in a country where writing is forbidden.⁵⁰ Conceding the possible truth of this, he remembers as well the thousands of writers who pragmatically kept abreast of political developments in order to write publishable material. This, he claims, is how socialist realism was born: writers were not necessarily mendacious, but simply agreed to confine their activities within certain limits. It should also not be forgotten that some writers and artists were sincere in expressing their commitment to the Party through their work.⁵¹

The strong line laid down at the First Congress of the Soviet Writers' Union was relaxed briefly with the outbreak of war in the interests of producing propaganda, but in 1943 the Party again tightened its control. The most sterile years

⁵⁰ Viktor Nekrasov, 'Zapiski zevaki', *Kontinent*, 4 (1975), 13-172 (32).

⁵¹ Luker, p. 35.

came during the period of 'Zhdanovism', from 1946 to Stalin's death in 1953. This period began with the issuing of a decree by the Central Committee on the direction of post-war literature, an attack on two Leningrad journals for their alleged apoliticism, and the denunciations of Akhmatova and of Zoshchenko, who was accused of concentrating on the negative aspects of Soviet life.

After Stalin's death and after Khrushchev's secret speech to the Twentieth Party Congress in 1956, propagandist and optimistic writing was still called for, but journals began to make a politically endorsed appeal for sincerity in literature. Although the ideology of socialist realism remained strict, the form of writing and the content were not determined in advance, allowing a degree of freedom for the inventive writer. As information became more readily available, and as Soviet society tried to come to terms with its traumatic history, the sixties saw a hidden agenda developing in literature as it tackled moral questions of integrity and self-expression. But this was not essentially a turning away from socialist realism, but rather a change of emphasis to renewal and a return to the pure and purposeful path of socialism after the mistakes of the past.⁵² The community of writers, suffering a collective sense of guilt for its complicity in the rationalisation of the worst absurdities of the time, recognised the need for honesty, a quality which was welcomed in turn by a new generation of young writers. In spite of continuing censorship, literature began to restate values such as 'the uniqueness of the individual personality; the right of the conscience to question institutionalized morals and ethics; the dignity of introspection, of private thoughts and tastes; the recognition of a common humanity in art, independent of political and social systems'.⁵³

In 1957 *Doktor Zhivago* was published in the West, and by now *samizdat* had become an established feature, sometimes tolerated and sometimes repressed. Aleksander Solzhenitsyn responded to the call for sincerity by creating a new point of reference for 'telling the truth' in the form of *Odin den' Ivana Denisovicha*,

⁵² Geoffrey A. Hosking, *Beyond Socialist Realism: Soviet Fiction Since Ivan Denisovich* (London: Granada Publishing, 1980), 1-28.

⁵³ Deming Brown, *Soviet Russian Literature Since Stalin* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), p.374.

published in *Novyi mir* in 1962 with the personal authorisation of Khrushchev. An overwhelming public response probably led to Khrushchev's address to the Writers' Union in 1963, warning against 'bourgeois influences'. In 1964 Khrushchev was replaced by Brezhnev and February of 1966 brought the trial of Siniavskii and Daniel, prosecuted for spreading 'anti-Soviet propaganda'.

In spite of all these fluctuations in political climate, the doctrine of socialist realism remained essentially unchanged into the seventies,⁵⁴ enshrined in the statutes of the Writers' Union. Because it was inextricably linked to politics it admitted to no real discussion but, regardless of the ideological demands, new trends began to emerge in the depiction of contemporary Soviet reality: some writers identifying with the 'youth prose' movement; others with 'village prose' or *byt* literature; while Voinovich related to all three.

'Youth Prose'

'Youth prose', published largely by the journal *Iunost* in the sixties, presented changes in Soviet society through the eyes of the young, with a previously unknown degree of openness and detachment. Its voice was that of a generation aware of the compromises of the past, tainted with scepticism and anticipated disappointment, and unwilling to commit itself unreservedly to anything. Vasilii Aksenov in his story 'Zvezdnyi bilet',⁵⁵ and others such as Anatolii Gladilin, Andrei Bitov and Vladimir Maksimov, explored the theme of inter-generational conflict by dwelling on the psychological processes of reaching maturity, and by questioning the dogmas of the past. Their work was characterised by intimate first-person narration and dialogue which revealed the doubts, uncertainties and sometimes rage of their ironic heroes.

Before the death of Stalin literature had tended towards utopianism, attempting to justify the difficulties of the present by looking forward to a blissful

⁵⁴ *Kratkii slovar'-spravochnik agitatora i politinformatora* (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo politicheskoi literatury, 1977), p.239.

⁵⁵ V. Aksenov, 'Zvezdnyi bilet', *Sobranie sochinenii* (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1987), pp.185-347.

future with an optimism borrowed, 'in a mounting national debt, against the accounts of future generations' ideal circumstances of life'.⁵⁶ Rejecting the certainties of the past and the unreasonable deferral of gratification, the 'youth prose' writers expressed their rebellion in informal language, whilst commonly resolving questions of morality by the application of personally assimilated truths, rather than dogma. The end product was a new type of positive hero with a sense of identity and an understanding of the meaning of life which related more to personal integrity than political ideology. Much of Voinovich's work of the sixties and seventies, with its unassuming and questioning style, has a strong flavour of 'youth prose'.

'Village Prose'

'Village prose' emerged as the Soviet Union sought for moral values in order to come to terms with Stalinism and the subsequent reevaluation of history and society. As a result, literature reached back to nineteenth-century Slavophilism and its elevation of the Russian peasantry, in a reaction against the generalisations of Stalinist prose with its concentration on Revolutionary history. The 'village prose' writers sought in their semi-fictional sketches, short stories and novels to focus instead on those on the fringes of the Revolutionary action, or on those with links to pre-Revolutionary times through their traditions and their individuality. Their language often drew on folk expressions, and their narratives celebrated the moral qualities of the peasant by contrast with urban society, increasingly leading to a nationalistic quest for the sources of traditional Russian spirituality. The peasant was portrayed as a victim of urbanisation, poverty and bureaucracy, in danger of losing his native honesty and relationship with the soil. Solzhenitsyn's 'Matrenin dvor'⁵⁷ represents the prime example of such a work, and although his books were withdrawn from the libraries, the literary movement was carried on by others.

⁵⁶ George Gibian, 'Themes in Recent Soviet Russian Literature', *Slavic Review* 23 (September 1964), 420-432 (p.425).

⁵⁷ A. Solzhenitsyn, 'Matrenin Dvor', *Odin den' Ivana Denisovicha, Matrenin dvor* (Paris: YMCA Press, 1973), pp.123-161.

Some writers, such as Valentin Ovechkin, were openly critical of the government apparatus in its management of the countryside; others turned to satire to make their point; whilst many used their detailed knowledge of peasant life and cultural antiquity to make a reasoned plea for social reform.

Geoffrey Hosking contends that 'village prose' played a vital part in attempting to provide an answer to Tolstoy's question, 'By what do men live?' in both a material and spiritual sense.⁵⁸ The peasant heroes of 'village prose' who had so nobly preserved their links with the past were also those who, as every Soviet reader knew, had suffered the effects of famine, civil war, collectivisation, and requisitioning. Maybe these souls, who had preserved their crafts and spirituality intact down the centuries, could provide the missing sense of community, morality and purpose so longed for.

Under Stalin, the peasantry had often been portrayed as ideologically backward, in need of reeducation to conform to the glorious future for which it was destined. Khrushchev, in addition to trying to raise the peasants' living standards, attempted to give them a new image by introducing reforms offering more initiative, and by encouraging literature which would give them credit for their achievements. However, his reforms, imposed paternalistically from above, failed to produce the desired results, and Hosking suggests that the intelligentsia questioned whether this was not simply because the peasants were not allowed control of their lives.

By the early sixties, 'village prose' writers were being disciplined for overstepping the limits of social criticism, and by the early seventies, the conflict between 'village prose' and Marxist-Leninism in literature had reached its peak, voices in Soviet literary criticism arguing forcefully that the former was inadequate to address contemporary issues. E. Starikova reasoned that although it may be uninteresting and immoral to live without a grateful memory of the past, still 'one cannot live in the past alone and, since "village prose" is devoted to the past, its one-sidedness and limitations are perceived with increasing intensity'.⁵⁹ She argued

⁵⁸ Geoffrey A. Hosking, 'The Russian Peasant Rediscovered: "Village Prose" of the 1960s', *Slavic Review*, 32 (April 1973), 705-724 (p.705-707).

⁵⁹ E. Starikova, 'Sotsiologicheskii aspekt "derevenskoi prozy"', *Voprosy literatury*, 7 (1972), 11-35 (p.12).

that in view of the recent changes in village life the writers' insistence on illuminating the culture of the past failed to present the realities of the situation. The sub-text of this argument must surely be that 'village prose', by indulging in nostalgic contemplation of human values which transcend the Revolution, encouraged the reader to look backwards rather than to strive towards the future. Such writing may still have contained the ideal of *narodnost*', but it could scarcely claim to be motivated by *partiinnost*' or *ideinnost*'. Some writers responded to such criticism by setting their works in the Stalinist past, whilst others enthusiastically described improvements in the countryside, but such writing was in danger of being didactic at the expense of literary merit.

Granted that the concept of 'the people' as the focal point of society and socialist realism needed revision and that 'the theme of the people [. . .] had been profaned in literature';⁶⁰ 'village prose' answered the need of the reading public by turning from the theme of great historical events to consider the details of human life. What is more, it gave people an awareness of the past beyond that of the post-Revolutionary years, and provided a sense of tradition and rootedness in the native soil which had been undermined by the portrayal of the glorious sweep of history.

Robert Porter, writing of a group of 'village prose' writers, describes their peasant heroes as 'characters in a rural setting, who operate on intuition rather than reason, who are uneducated, ignorant, and/or hostile to the technological age [. . .] and yet who undoubtedly possess an implied moral superiority'.⁶¹ Whatever the shortcomings of these ideologically backward characters, their commitment and loyalty were of infinite political use to the authorities.

Galina Belaia points out retrospectively the dangers of the romanticised and unattainable world view presented in the sixties and seventies. In 'village prose' the order of the village was idealised: such an order and such communities never existed historically, the creation of this image being a reaction against the previous

⁶⁰ Galina Belaia, 'The Crisis of Soviet Artistic Mentality in the 1960s and 1970s', trans. by L. Milne, in *New Directions in Soviet Literature*, ed. by Sheelagh Duffin Graham (New York: St Martin's Press, 1992), pp.1-17 (p.3).

⁶¹ Robert Porter, 'Animal Magic in Solzhenitsyn, Rasputin, and Voynovich', *Modern Language Review*, 82.3 (1987), 675-684, (p.675).

literary norm.⁶² During the 'years of stagnation' this view of the world, emphasising personal dignity and human values in the face of overwhelming public interference, was welcomed by many, but in the light of events of the later eighties, argues Belaia, it must be seen as a backward looking view, over-romanticised and lacking in foundation. In its time, however, it presented a voice of challenge.

Urban Prose or *Byt*

Other writers such as Viktor Nekrasov, Daniil Granin and Vladimir Dudintsev turned their attention to the city in an attempt to focus on the issues of contemporary Soviet man in a more complex and challenging setting. Vasilii Shukshin highlighted the contrast between rural life and the drab urban routine by confronting the difficulties experienced by many peasants when moving to the city. Iurii Trifonov's 'Obmen'⁶³ broke new ground by illuminating the prosaic lives of tiny human beings in the gargantuan city, and returned the subject of their personal concerns to literature.

To many of the 'village prose' writers the city was seen as a threat to the organic, dynamic life of the countryside, and conflict between the two arenas was often the pivotal point of their work. But to the writers of *byt*, the city itself was organic and alive, providing fertile ground for the development of complex characters. However, the moral principles of the city, if portrayed faithfully, were far from conforming to the requirements of socialist realism, raising problems for writers and critics alike. The 'village prose' school described a world peopled by loyal, obedient, stoical but insufficiently Communist Russians, and the *byt* writers portrayed a society where ambiguity, alienation and temptation away from Communist morality had become real problems for their heroes. Given the sociological facts of Soviet urban existence it was perhaps inevitable that writers should dwell on the theme of immorality, and no less inevitable that the critics should take issue with this tendency. The critic N. N. Shneidman pointed out that

⁶² Belaia, p.5.

⁶³ Iurii Trifonov, 'Obmen', *Moskovskie povesti* (Moscow: Sovetskaia Rossiia, 1988), pp.5-60.

‘ethical values become increasingly important in the period of the alleged transition from socialism to communism, because a true Communist society can only be built on sound moral grounds by people selflessly dedicated to the cause of the revolution’.⁶⁴ The argument continues that an increase in material benefits leads to spiritual corruption, and the people deviate from the communist pathway, becoming ever more selfish and egotistical. So in spite of, or perhaps even because of, the achievements of the state in industry and education, urban Soviet man is changed for the worse. In this moral climate, where man is at peace neither with himself nor his society, the traditional ‘positive hero’ is an anomaly, and fails to engage with the realities of his time.

So it was that writers of urban literature were faced with the Sisyphean task of elevating the image of life in the Soviet city to meet the demands of the ideology, whilst being aware that their own and their readers’ experience would daily debase it.

Gibian, writing about the urban theme in Soviet Russian prose, distinguishes five dominant views of the city. Firstly the city may be seen as octopus, enveloping and overwhelming its citizens; or secondly it may be the setting and inspiration for dreamers on a quest of self-discovery. The heroes of such literature may be either sophisticated and ironic or child-like and lost, and the city takes on a life of its own as a dynamic organism, the embodiment of the passing of time. Gibian describes the city in this phase as ‘a catalyst in the characters’ working through their lyrical introspections’.⁶⁵ Thirdly it may be portrayed as a big village, to which vital, traditional characters have transferred their village culture, including the sustaining values of family and home. Fourthly, it may be the site of factories and research institutes where characters struggle to keep their individuality in a vast collective, striving to balance their public and private lives. Lastly, it may act as the locale of perennial ethical dilemmas, where writers tackle the minutiae of Soviet urban life and its pressures on their characters, who

⁶⁴ N. N. Shneidman, ‘Soviet Prose in the 1970’s: Evolution or Stagnation?’, *Canadian Slavonic Papers*, 20.1 (March 1978), 63-77 (p.76).

⁶⁵ George Gibian, ‘The Urban Theme in Recent Soviet Russian Prose: Notes Toward a Typology’, *Slavic Review*, 37 (March 1978), 40-50 (p.47).

may begin as morally neutral but are gradually corrupted, like Dmitriev in Trifonov's 'Obmen', until they become capable of despicable acts.

Whichever milieu the writer chose in these years, reality would have presented a monumental credibility gap when contrasted with the socialist realist image. Immediately after the Twentieth Party Congress, there inevitably arose a time of personal crisis for many artists and their appreciators, and a realisation that life would never again seem so simple. Yet in spite of the complex process of reassessment, the Party still demanded all the traditional features of socialist realism from its literary community, presenting a considerable challenge to its artistic integrity in demanding that the swollen foot of the ugly sister be crammed into Cinderella's dainty slipper.

Conflict in the Sixties

Although the protagonists in the ideological duel between writer and state had changed since the thirties, the parties were still as unevenly matched in the sixties: witness the fate of Siniavskii (Abram Terts), whose essay 'Chto takoe sotsialisticheskii realizm'⁶⁶ was published in the West in 1959, and whose work was used as evidence against him at his trial. In his essay, he at no point quarrels with the aim of striving for the creation of a Communist society, but he does maintain that if literature is to be used to serve a purpose, then an adequate form for the expression of that purpose should be found. He argues that the great nineteenth-century realist writers, whom the socialist realists purported to emulate, were aimless, self-doubting, anguished and sceptical. The attempt to blend the realist method and the romantic message had created an artificial style, essentially unartistic in form. He complains about the characters of Soviet fiction, that they 'torment themselves almost à la Dostoyevsky, grow sad almost à la Chekhov, arrange their family life almost à la Tolstoy, and yet at the same time vie with each other in shouting platitudes from the Soviet press: "Long live peace in the whole

⁶⁶ Abram Terts, 'Chto takoe sotsialisticheskii realizm', in *Fantasticheskii mir Abrama Terts'a* (New York: Inter-Language Literary Associates, 1967), pp.401-446; 'On Socialist Realism', trans. by George Dennis (New York: Pantheon Books, 1960).

world” and “Down with the warmongers.”” He concludes with a memorably dismissive formula: ‘This is neither classicism nor realism. It is semi-classical demi-art of a none too socialist demi-realism.’ (*‘Eto poluklassitsisticheskoe poluiskusstvo ne slishkom sotsialisticheskogo sovsem ne realizma.’*)⁶⁷ This mixture of styles, he concludes, has failed to coalesce into a meaningful whole, and an aiming for the fantastic, writers would be better returning to the classical style of the eighteenth century, if their writing must derive from anything. The only contemporary poet whom he considers to have created a style suitable to the times is Maiakovskii, with his use of fantastic imagery.

Even though Siniavskii did not argue with the goals of the Soviet state, his doubts about the form of its literature were soon to lead to his imprisonment; a warning to others of the reverence in which the pronouncements of the leaders of the Writers’ Union were to be held, and of their desire to maintain authority, and their fear when challenged by those with genuine literary credentials. Any writers experiencing doubts would be wise to make their work at least appear to conform to the rules of the prescribed form, leaving the Soviet readership to do that at which it has always excelled: reading between the lines.

Reading Between the Lines

The long-established understanding between writer and reader, the former using carefully coded words, and the latter exercising his art as interpreter, had long been a part of the *modus operandi* in the Soviet Union. With Russia’s rich literary heritage, at times open to and at times insulated from the West, with all the variegation of political conformity and dissent, with the often oppressive ideology of the tsars and the Party, writers of every persuasion had been obliged as part of their training to master the doublespeak of a censored literature. Everything written was produced in awareness of what had gone before, as well as of what might follow. Bakhtin’s interpretation of literature, as summarised by Tzvetan Todorov, emphasises the importance of the utterance’s ‘dialogism, that is, its intertextual

⁶⁷ Terts, (English) pp.94-95; (Russian) pp.443-444.

dimension'. He continues: 'all discourse is in dialogue with prior discourses on the same subject, as well as with discourses yet to come, whose reactions it foresees and anticipates'.⁶⁸ The implication is that the reader of any literature needs to channel as much creative energy into the reading of a text as the writer contributed to its writing. To read Soviet literature peculiar skills are necessary, since everything has been produced not only in dialogue with every other utterance, but also with an awareness of the retributive shadow of the censor's scissors, and of the power of the state to retaliate if its authority is challenged. Todorov continues Bakhtin's train of thought: 'The author is always partially unconscious with respect to his work, and the subject of understanding is obligated to enrich the meaning of the text; he is equally creative.'⁶⁹ Thus, the relationship of both writer and reader to socialist realism would include an awareness of the development of Russian literature, from the self-confident classical style of the eighteenth century through the sceptical realism of the nineteenth century; and would result in an assessment of socialist realism as distant from realism as from reality.

Socialist Realism in the Seventies

By the early seventies it was widely agreed that socialist realism could embrace almost any form of writing, providing its purpose was still served. In defence of this position A. Ovcharenko wrote that 'neither "forms of real life", not the romantic or conditional forms, fantasy, grotesque, or different kinds of deformations are contradictory to the method of socialist realism if they assist the writer in the recreation of a deeper, more subtle, and correct picture of reality which is in the process of continuous and complex transformation'.⁷⁰ So, providing that writers still presented a Marxist-Leninist perspective on life, they were free to experiment with the form of their writing.

⁶⁸ Tzvetan Todorov, *Mikhail Bakhtin: The Dialogical Principle*, trans. by Wlad Godzich (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), p.x.

⁶⁹ Todorov, p.109.

⁷⁰ N. N. Shneidman, pp.64-65, quoting A. Ovcharenko, *Sotsialisticheskaia literatura i sovremennyi literaturnyi protsess* (Moscow, 1973), p.165.

Love, faithfulness and infidelity, a theme of enduring interest to writers of all eras and cultures, had largely been displaced by early socialist realism in favour of social and political interests. Xenia Gasiorowska, considering the treatment of this theme in the sixties and seventies,⁷¹ quotes a character from a play which defines the formula for love in literature before the 'thaw' as 'physical attraction combined with a community of social and cultural interests'.⁷² This ironical assessment perhaps explains why the theme of conflict and infidelity spread through literature so widely by the end of the sixties. After decades of being offered only volumes of ideologically pure relationships, the readership must have welcomed this development. But the change in Soviet fiction was not just a change from the morally correct romance of the thirties to a more realistic approach to the dilemmas of love. It was a move above all towards the uncertain diversity of opinion which characterises the twentieth-century experience of humankind, and which allows the freedom to enjoy questions as well as answers. Gasiorowska concludes that 'there is a growing number of works in which characters are neither heroes nor villains, works with open-ended plots, unresolved conflicts, and unanswered questions'.⁷³

The theme of the passing of time also changed its focus in the writings of the sixties and seventies. Earlier Soviet literature had carried a strong sense of past and future, with the journey towards a bright Communist future representing a continuum on which the lives of its heroes gained meaning. The revelations of the late fifties about past realities disturbed this view, and the heroes of the new generation took increased responsibility for their lives, seeking meaning in the present, uncluttered by historical perspectives. So a new attitude towards time was born, and the individual began to see his lifetime as his own to spend as he chose, rather than as a tiny contribution to an over-arching central plan.

The freedom of writers to experiment in the sixties and seventies often led to a certain ambiguity of meaning, at times concealed by doublespeak, but at times

⁷¹ Xenia Gasiorowska, 'Two Decades of Love and Marriage in Soviet Fiction', *Russian Review*, 34. 1 (Jan 1975), 10-21.

⁷² Gasiorowska quotes A. Volodin, 'Fabrichnaia devchonka', *Teatr*, 9 (1956), 58.

⁷³ Gasiorowska, p.21.

resulting in conflict between state and writer. Iurii Mal'tsev, looking back over Soviet literature from the perspective of the seventies, writes of the dual nature of its artistic manifestation, divided between official and underground forms. This duality, coupled with a whole society's awareness of being in dialogue with 'prior discourses', he argues, is what led to such a deep and ineradicable scepticism throughout the whole stratum of thinking people. He points out the special historical reasons which made this problem, common to all cultures, particularly acute for the Soviet literary world, explaining that 'there has never before been such total control over all forms of creative activity, and no single society in the past has lived a double life to such a degree'. He continues with an analogy of Soviet society as a 'false, artificially maintained facade', behind which 'there seethes the secretly authentic, but "underground" life of the whole nation'.⁷⁴ This secret life, he notes, remains hidden to international observers, who assume that works by writers such as Solzhenitsyn, Siniavskii and Maksimov are isolated phenomena, not realising that they are 'an integral part of the whole culture' whose ideas are known to the whole of Soviet society. The post-Revolutionary experience, he claims, has produced an awareness of the complete bankruptcy of official doctrine, and the loud proclamation of absolute truths has led to wide-spread scepticism.⁷⁵ This analysis, published in the West in the mid 1970s, perhaps explains why the officially-held beliefs of a whole culture evaporated so rapidly at the end of the 1980s, since even those enforcing them had long since grown sceptical of their authenticity, and were using them to maintain their own positions of power. Perhaps it also throws light on the ease with which many of those in power were able to transfer allegiance to the new ideology of the market economy, regrouping to maintain the domination of their culture.

Voinovich and the Theory of Socialist Realism

In his creative evolution Voinovich was firstly an officially sanctioned

⁷⁴ Iurii Mal'tsev, *Vol'naia russkaia literatura* (Frankfurt/Main: Possev-Verlag, 1976), pp.409-410.

⁷⁵ Mal'tsev, p.411.

Soviet writer; secondly, a *samizdat* and *tamizdat* writer resident but unpublished in the Soviet Union; thirdly, an émigré writer, maintaining links with his readership across a geographical divide; and fourthly a returning writer spending a great proportion of his time in the new Russia. His working life as a young man equipped him well for his career as a Soviet writer, his largely proletarian pedigree with its blend of rural roots and urban experience giving him an insight into the lives and language of ordinary Soviet people, and a desire to reflect 'something', as yet undefined, in words. He claimed to have 'felt a great need to say something' in his youth, without knowing what that was'.⁷⁶ But in addition to those obstacles common to everyone attempting to liberate a work of literature from within, a further one remained: socialist realism.

Socialist realism initially occupied the role of guiding mentor in Voinovich's literary career, gradually becoming a tyrannical overseer as he sought to express more realistically what he had gleaned from life, before finally casting him out of Soviet society in an uncomprehending rage at his satirical gift.

Voinovich must have become aware of socialist realism in his youth as a consumer of art, but his active engagement with the phenomenon began with his early songs, poems and short stories, depicting the lives and dilemmas of Soviet citizens in various parts of the Soviet Union and in orbit above it.

He had already observed what were in effect two literary 'thaws' before he began writing seriously, and his first stories were published in the early sixties in the journal *Novyi Mir* during the third literary 'thaw' following the Twenty-second Congress of the CPSU in October 1961. It can have come as no great surprise to see further 'freezes' and 'thaws' during the sixties, as the CPSU manoeuvred to exploit both the literary 'liberals' and 'conservatives', maintaining its own power by unpredictably appearing to support first one and then the other. Rufus W. Mathewson, analysing the transience of the 'thaws', concludes that 'they were never correctly read as a liberal trend, but are better understood as the result of bureaucratic decisions to loosen the screws in order to increase the quantity, and

⁷⁶ Richard Lourie, 'Translator's Introduction' to Vladimir Voinovich, *In Plain Russian* (N.Y: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, Inc., 1979), pp.xi-xvi (p. xii). Quoted from Voinovich, 'I am a Realist', p.49.

elevate the quality of a failing literary “product”’.⁷⁷

Against this background, Voinovich produced work consonant with the current tenets of socialist realism, which at the time encouraged an increasingly humane approach to life. He himself testified that ‘the degree of freedom for literature in the Khrushchev period was sufficient for me personally’.⁷⁸

When Brezhnev replaced Khrushchev this no longer applied, and Voinovich expressed his opposition to growing state interference in literature by appearing in *samizdat* and *tamizdat* and by open letters and petitions in support of dissident writers, resulting in reprimands and warnings before his expulsion from the Writers’ Union in 1974 and his emigration in 1980. Well before this time, his view of the degree of artistic freedom necessary to the writer had changed radically, and he formulated his assessment of socialist realism with a well-worn joke, saying: ‘Socialist realism is praise of the present leadership in a form that is intelligible to them. I tried to work in that spirit of Socialist realism at the beginning because I didn’t know much about contemporary Western literature [. . .] But the more I wrote, the more I understood that I wasn’t interested in such heroes.’⁷⁹ Socialist realism’s demand for a ‘positive hero’ to be ‘a vigorous, fearless, self-sacrificing, optimistic and, above all, socially dedicated activist who serves the reader as an inspiration and model of Communist behaviour’⁸⁰ found little response in Voinovich’s heroes, described by him as ‘very natural people who fall into unnatural situations’.⁸¹

For Voinovich, educated in the thirties and forties, the positive hero of socialist realism must have been a familiar figure, and yet his non-academic education had shown him heroes and anti-heroes of a very different kind. Maybe some writers, passing straight from school to literary institutes, could preserve in

⁷⁷ Rufus W. Mathewson, Jr., *The Positive Hero in Russian Literature*, 2nd edn. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1975), p.257.

⁷⁸ ‘I am a Realist’, p.57.

⁷⁹ Christopher S. Wren, ‘Soviet Life and Adventures Of a Kicker of Sacred Cows’, *New York Times*, 27 April 1977, p.A2.

⁸⁰ Deming Brown, ‘Soviet Russian Fiction: Changes, Challenges and Frozen Propositions’, *Contemporary European Novelists*, ed. by Siegfried Mandel (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1968), pp.3-38 (p.17).

⁸¹ Wren, p.A2.

their minds the myth of the motivated and honest toiler on the soil or down the mine, but for a man who had spent years immersed in the real world of work, norms, plans and bureaucracy in both the countryside and the city such a myth would be more elusive. Having spent his early years in different rural environments before moving to Moscow, he had experienced the type of culture shock which struck him again more acutely on emigrating to Germany in 1980. Retrospectively he pointed out that the difficulties which emigration brings are as impossible to prepare for as the inhospitability of the capital to someone arriving fresh from the provinces.⁸² The city has none of the sense of community and closeness of village life and seems huge and intimidating, but it is enlivened by the promise of exciting possibilities if once the structure can be mastered. With his background, Voinovich was less inclined than many to idealise either village or city life along the lines of 'revolutionary romanticism'.

From a Western perspective, socialist realism as art might be compared with the romantic heroics of the comic book. But once it is defined not as entertainment but as a doctrine intended to reflect and affect the lives of ordinary people, and once those people realise their obligation to behave like comic-book heroes, the implications become socially oppressive. The purest form of socialist realism is almost pure romance, dealing with adventure, the quest, the youthful hero and his enemy, redemption and triumph. Northrop Frye puts it in context, describing romance as the 'nearest of all literary forms to the wish-fulfilment dream', for that reason fulfilling a socially paradoxical role. He continues: 'In every age the ruling social or intellectual class tends to project its ideals in some form of romance, where the virtuous heroes and beautiful heroines represent the ideals and the villains the threats to their ascendancy', before concluding that 'this is the general character of [...] revolutionary romance in contemporary Russia'.⁸³

Voinovich was well aware of the prescribed subjects and forms of socialist realism, but found it an unsuitable vehicle for the ideas he had to express, as his

⁸² 'Mechta Lenina nakonets sbylas'', *Literator*, 20 (1990), 7-8 (p.7).

⁸³ Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), p.186.

pen turned increasingly towards irony and satire.

Satire

Within the context of European literature, Arthur Pollard summarises satire as a mode of literature sure of its values, which proceeds from an agreed moral stance and invites the reader to identify and condemn vice. It deflates its target as it criticizes, inspiring laughter, ridicule, contempt, anger, or even hatred. The reader is persuaded to take pleasure at another's discomfort, and is manipulated into assuming a stance of moral superiority. The satirist poses as a guardian of ideals, claiming a shared awareness with the astute reader of the difference between how things are and how they ought to be. Wasting no opportunity in spotlighting the contradiction between appearance and reality, the satirist demonstrates the moral rectitude of his task by appearing detached and well-balanced, whilst selecting a target which will not be diminished by loss of topicality. And, of course, he also entertains.⁸⁴ But the comedy of satire is at its best when achieved by lightness of touch and by what is left unspoken, the satirist's task being to highlight the factors which undoubtedly exist but which are omitted from the portrayal of an ideal society. Frye writes that 'philosophies of life abstract from life, and an abstraction implies the leaving out of inconvenient data'⁸⁵, the satirist's task being to highlight just these data to comic effect. Leonard Feinberg suggests a more personal motivation for the satirist, suggesting that he attacks in others the weaknesses he perceives in himself, using the act of writing to solve an inner conflict.⁸⁶ It would certainly be true to say that effective satire requires an understanding in both writer and reader of the contradictions of the human condition.

When applied to the vices of mankind in general, satire has universal

⁸⁴ Arthur Pollard, *Satire*, ed. by John D. Jump, The Critical Idiom, 7 (London: Methuen, 1970).

⁸⁵ Frye, p.229.

⁸⁶ Leonard Feinberg, *Introduction to Satire: The Satirist: His Temperament, Motivation, and Influence* (Ames, Iowa: Iowa State U.P., 1967).

application, but when applied to a given society it becomes ‘an applied genre’⁸⁷ which crosses cultural boundaries imperfectly. Hence the satirist in geographical exile has to summon up every reserve of literary agility to connect with a native readership, particularly if he will write satire directed at the society of his homeland, and the more so if that society is in a state of flux. Satire demands the participation of writer and reader in a shared knowledge of circumstances, and works only if both join in recognition and condemnation of the opposition between appearance and substance.

Karen Ryan-Hayes, in her examination of contemporary Russian satire, considers the features of Russian satire which distinguish it from the Western satirical tradition.⁸⁸ Firstly, Russian and Soviet criticism tended to conflate satire and humour, diminishing satire’s status and relegating it to special sections of journals and newspapers. Secondly, its object was perceived by Soviet literary critics as reformatory and didactic within the social, political or moral fields of culture.⁸⁹ Furthermore, Kenneth Burke and Lev Loseff lend weight to the view that censorship exercised a positive effect on the development of particularly inventive satire,⁹⁰ providing both author and reader with a cathartic breaking of taboos and consequent coming to terms with a repressive authority.⁹¹ Ryan-Hayes demonstrates how parody of specific literary genres is used within Russian satire as a vehicle of ‘exposing, mocking or condemning aspects of contemporary Russian / Soviet society which an author considers pernicious or ridiculous’.⁹² This feature, far from giving such works ‘low’ literary status, makes them densely referential

⁸⁷ Petr Vail’ and Aleksander Genis, *Sovremennaia russkaia proza* (Ann Arbor: Ermitazh, 1982), p.53.

⁸⁸ Karen L. Ryan-Hayes, *Contemporary Russian Satire: A Genre Study*, Cambridge Studies in Russian Literature (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

⁸⁹ Ryan-Hayes, p.3.

⁹⁰ Kenneth Burke, *The Philosophy of Literary Form. Studies in Symbolic Action* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973), pp.231-232;

Lev Loseff, *On the Beneficence of Censorship: Aesopian Language in Modern Russian Literature* (Munich: Sagner, 1984).

⁹¹ Robert C. Elliott, *The Power of Satire: Magic, Ritual, Art* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1960);

M. M. Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. by Helene Iswolsky (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1968).

⁹² Ryan-Hayes, p.239.

and requires of the reader a knowledge of contemporary Russian culture and its supporting literary traditions.

D. J. Richards, writing on the impulses of wit and worship in modern Russian literature, recalls Zamiatin's claim that 'there are two ways of conquering the tragedy of life: religion or irony',⁹³ and builds on the idea that much of Russian literature is drawn towards mysticism but that there is another strand, perhaps more Western European in flavour, which conquers through satirical wit. Benedikt Sarnov illuminates another function of Russian satire, arguing that the satirist is not expected to present an objective picture and may even distort reality, but his aim is the same as that of the psychological novelist: to show his perception of the truth.⁹⁴ It is the distance between the ideal and reality which drives the humour of satire as it presupposes the ideal and reveals the opposite, provoking laughter by exposure of the incongruous. This is not necessarily a desire to turn the tragic into the funny but, according to Poel' Karp, is laughter through tears: the reply of the victims of tragedy to those who are cheerful.⁹⁵ Who better to explain the compelling attraction of satire in the Soviet setting than Bulgakov who, in his letter to Stalin, quoted Gogol', explaining that when he is engaging with contemporary themes 'the pen of the writer imperceptibly turns to satire'.⁹⁶

Eberhard Reissner, writing in the late seventies about contemporary Soviet satire, made the incontestable point that 'in the consciousness of the Russian people literature was always more than a means of entertainment.'⁹⁷ He lists three important satirical techniques, the first two of which are well established in world literature. The first involves setting 'the social phenomenon against which the satirical attack is directed' in 'a particular, distant, perspective'; the second involves relocating the object of attack 'to a distant point in time'. The third technique he

⁹³ D.J. Richards, 'Wit and Worship - Two Impulses in Modern Russian Literature', *Russian Literature Triquarterly*, 14 (Winter 1976), 7-19 (p.12).

⁹⁴ B. Sarnov, 'Posleslovie', (Afterword to *Zhizn' . . .*) *Iunost*, 2 (1989), 73-74 (p.74).

⁹⁵ Poel' Karp, 'Za kogo Chonkin?' *Knizhnoe obozrenie*, 21 October 1988, p.6.

⁹⁶ M. A. Bulgakov quotes Gogol', *Avtorskaia ispoved'* in *Pis'ma: zhizneopisanie v dokumentakh*, Compilation and commentary by V. I. Losev, and V. V. Petelin (Moscow: Sovremennik, 1989), p.194.

⁹⁷ Eberhard Reissner, 'Contemporary Russian Satire', trans. by Susan MacRae, *Survey*, 23.3 (104), (1977-1978), 52-61 (p.52).

considers to be ‘wholly relevant and effective only under Soviet conditions’, since it involves a process whereby ‘instances of the perversion of social life and human relationships with which every Soviet citizen is familiar [. . .] become the biographical material of a hero whose disposition is calculated to win him the reader’s sympathy’.⁹⁸ This hero is not a ‘positive hero’; he neither represents, upholds nor profits from the political system; he is unprivileged or underprivileged, equipped only with the ‘native wit, practical ability and staying power’ to enable him to overcome problems without losing integrity and decency. The reader identifies with him, elements of his own experience are brought to mind, and he is stimulated into taking a critical view, thereby satisfying the satirist’s aim. This third device applies perfectly to more than one of Voinovich’s heroes and to Chonkin in particular, and has its roots in the character of *Ivan-durachok* of Russian folk literature.

The tradition of satire has been enjoyed in Russian and Soviet literature in varying degrees according to the ideological demands of the times. In the so-called ‘Golden Age’ of Soviet satire immediately after the Revolution, writers such as Maiakovskii, Zoshchenko, and Il’f and Petrov defined and developed Soviet satire in relation to the nineteenth-century classics of Gogol’ and Saltykov-Shchedrin. The fourth great satirist of the epoch, Bulgakov, was not published until the 1960s. With the advent of socialist realism, however, the age of the ‘positive hero’ came into the ascendancy and satire fell into official decline. It was considered retrospectively to have been appropriate under the tsarist regime as an expression of protest, but inappropriate when directed against the roots of Soviet society, although it might be allowed against individual aberrations from the socialist realist norm. Some argued that satirical laughter might be healthy and challenging, but in the end the debate found in favour of an optimistic brand of comedy, leaving little room for publication of anything but the most specifically directed satire.⁹⁹ Such satire should be used as an instrument of Communist education, as Sergei

⁹⁸ Reissner, p.53.

⁹⁹ Robert Russell, ‘Satire and Socialism: The Russian Debates 1925-1934’, *Forum for Modern Language Studies*, 30.4 (1994), 341-352.

Mikhalkov explained with painfully correct ideological rhetoric in 1962: 'We are all for the bright, incisive, meaningful kind which lashes out at negative elements still nestling here and there in the nooks and crannies of our new society, interfering with everything that is sound and life-giving.'¹⁰⁰ He lists those negative elements as swindlers and rascals, plunderers, ignoramuses, bigots and demagogues preaching morality, fools and numskulls, loafers, drunkards and hooligans, and callous bureaucratic officials.¹⁰¹ It was in just this ideological climate that Voinovich was attempting to develop his artistic potential, and in common with other writers, whether published or not, he soon found fertile soil within the 'virtual reality' of Soviet society for satirical comment. There was the requisite stability, to the point of stagnation, for satire to flourish; there were vices, power games and hypocrisy, and a gaping chasm between the ideal and reality.

Following Stalin's death, the brief interludes of 'thaw' produced a 'Silver Age' of Soviet satire, during which works of the twenties were reissued. But soon the 'period of stagnation' set in, bringing severe consequences for those who overstepped the mark, and stricter censorship which tested the ingenuity of writers and readers alike. Even during the 'thaws', according to V. Kapianidze, the 'inertia of silence' continued its dark work.¹⁰² Yet it was precisely under such circumstances that satire and comedy are at their most effective and apposite, as they 'displace, distort, subvert and dispel the familiar structures of reality, truth and history, replacing these rule-making systems with the rule-breaking laws of humor, at once the most humane and subversive of our impulses'.¹⁰³

Whereas Voinovich's early work was largely in harmony with socialist realism, as he began to come into conflict with the ideology, his writing became increasingly satirical, this being a mode which lends strength to the interrogation of any rigid structure. By a blend of parody and satire, he contrived to puncture the

¹⁰⁰ Sergei Mikhalkov, 'Satire, Instrument of Communist Education', *Soviet Review*, 3 (May 1962) 49-59 (p.50).

¹⁰¹ Mikhalkov, p.53.

¹⁰² V. Kapianidze, 'Sovetskaia satira. Chto eto?', *Grani*, 153 (1989), 308-311 (p.311).

¹⁰³ Malcolm Bradbury, 'Cosmic Misunderstandings', *New York Times Book Review*, 7 June 1987, pp.1,36-37 (p.1).

balloon of socialist realism, a task made easier by the rigidity of Soviet literary philosophy. Given that his first typewriter was an old machine lacking both question mark and exclamation mark,¹⁰⁴ it is unsurprising that he developed an understated style, Chekhovian in its integration of embedded questions, and critically descriptive of reality.

Voinovich was initially reluctant to call himself a satirist since his declared aim was simply to describe life, and he observed that his work was more successful when he wrote seriously, often being unaware that his readers would find it funny until he observed their reactions.¹⁰⁵ However, his subject matter, which frequently addresses that which is built on illusion and denies the instinct of the individual, lends itself to satire since, as he sees it, the satirist concentrates on 'the shady sides of life and on negative tendencies', emphasising existing problems and even going to extremes.¹⁰⁶ He describes satire as the most serious genre because it shows the border between the funny and the serious, the funniest situation of all being when people with no sense of humour construct a satirical reality stranger than any satirist could describe.¹⁰⁷ The Soviet satirist, claims Voinovich, does not need to exaggerate reality since the bureaucrats have already done this.¹⁰⁸ His evolving satirical stance may be observed passing from the lightest touches of irony to the hostile invective of some of his later pre-emigration works, subsiding at times into a more reflective tone after his reestablishment in the life of the new Russia.

The purpose of his satire, except at its most personally embittered moments, has been to provide the reader with a perspective which draws the sting and makes life in difficult circumstances bearable. As Wolfgang Kasack expresses the satirist's goal: when he is 'dealing with negative phenomena, the abolition or improvement of which appear impossible, then he at least wants to diminish their weight by

¹⁰⁴ 'Kak ia pisal gimn sovetskikh kosmonavtov', *Strana i mir*, 3.39 (1987), 138-144 (p.139).

¹⁰⁵ Appendix A, p.A6.

¹⁰⁶ 'Ia vse eti gody zhil nadezhdoi', interview by Benedikt Sarnov, *Iunost'*, 10 (1988), 81-83 (p.82).

¹⁰⁷ 'Ia vernulsia by . . .', interview by I. Rishina, in *Maloe sobranie sochinenii*, vol. 3 (Moscow: Fabula 1993), pp.525-539 (p.529).

¹⁰⁸ 'Na pyl'nykh tropinkakh dalekikh planet', interview by Viktor Matizen, *Sovetskii ekran*, 10 (1989), 28-29 (p.28).

teaching the reader to be able to laugh at them'.¹⁰⁹ At times, particularly during and since emigration, Voinovich has written unmediated by satire, but his work is generally more effective when he does not formulate his ideas positively.

Satire frequently uses the device of an outsider observing a society unfamiliar to himself but familiar to the reader, in which the narrator acts as provocateur. To achieve this effect the satirist must, to some extent, stand aside from his society and place himself in the position of exile from another world seeing everything as if for the first time. The Greeks maintain that the first experience of exile common to man is birth, the second exile is not to belong and the third is to forget the enormity of one's loss.¹¹⁰ Exile is in many ways a universal human experience, and it brings benefits as well as trials, allowing the exile to see things through fresh eyes and often acting as a spur to creativity. But for more than one Soviet satirist, this initial ideological distancing act threatened to become reality as the state took an interest in the disingenuously expressed opinions of the naive outsider, frequently deciding to interpose some geographical distance between writer, subject and reader in an attempt to rupture their lines of communication. So ideological exile could become geographical, whether internal or external, with all the attendant threats to language, topicality, rootedness and interconnectedness. Whilst the undaunted Solzhenitsyn in involuntary exile continued his mode of 'truth-telling' through absolute prophetic utterance, Voinovich's case was different. In consenting emigration he found himself enacting in real historical time and geographical space a metaphor of the satirist as exile - ideologically, geographically and chronologically out of step with the society he had left behind, but dependent upon it for a readership and for topical grist to his mill. What is more, a Soviet readership which appreciated and felt indebted to the outspokenness of a satirist in its midst inevitably lost a degree or two of fraternal warmth towards the same man pointing out the weakness of its response to the

¹⁰⁹ Wolfgang Kasack, 'Vladimir Voinovich and his Undesirable Satires', *Fiction and Drama in Eastern and Southeastern Europe: Evolution and Experiment in the Postwar Period*, ed. by Henrik Birnbaum and Thomas Eekman (Columbus, Ohio: Slavica, 1980), pp.259-276 (259).

¹¹⁰ William Gass in John Glad, ed., *Literature in Exile* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1990), p.4.

totalitarian machine from an enviable distance. To compound matters, the social, political and economic changes of the late eighties absorbed most of the potential readership's attention, leaving little to devote to the inaccessible writings of a satirist disengaged from contemporary Russian reality. Even since his partial return to Russia, Voinovich has been unable to engage in the same way as before with a society grown perhaps too unstable and uncertain of its values to support a robust satirical tradition.

Yet Voinovich has continued to write, driven by a quest for significance through text. In a country with such a long history of censorship, the intelligentsia has always had a keen appreciation of the potential immortality of the written word, whatever the changes in political climate. Chonkin as preserved in paper and ink became a guarantee of a lasting memorial to Voinovich, who reflected in 1975 with satisfaction on the fear inspired in the KGB by his 'little bow-legged soldier with the outdated bayonet', able to defend himself far more efficiently than any mere mortal writer.¹¹¹

Just before leaving Russia, he sent a letter to the authorities, reminding them that, whatever else they might do, they could not eject him from the canon of literature, and that 'the more you torment a writer, the longer his books shall live and outlive not only himself, but his persecutors as well'.¹¹² The satirist may consider his task to have been fulfilled if his books not only live after him, but also continue to generate the spontaneous democratic 'laughter, which in the end turns out to be one of the most dreadful enemies of totalitarianism'.¹¹³

¹¹¹ 'Proisshestvie v "Metropole"', p.94.

¹¹² Levin, p.10; trans. from 'Besstyzhie nagletsy!', 25 November 1980, p.1.

¹¹³ Review of 'Khochu byt' chestnym', *Znamia*, 5 (1990), 237.

CHAPTER TWO:

THE IDEAL AND THE REALITY: EMERGING THEMES IN VOINOVICH'S PERIPHERAL WORKS UP TO 1980

The Countryside

The City

The Changing Face of Socialist Realism

The Hero

The Average and the Extraordinary

The Individual

Love, Sex and Marriage

The Power of the Word

Morality

Voinovich first made his mark with the anthem of the cosmonauts 'Chetyrnadtsat' minut do starta'¹ which found favour at the very heart of the system in an era of euphoric romance between the Soviet people and the cosmos. Retrospectively its words provide an ironic premonition of the author's life. It speaks of preparations for distant travel, and of having a cigarette before departure - an unwittingly sinister presage of the Metropol' poisoning attempt. It anticipates the cosmic traveller leaving his footprints on the dusty paths of far-off silent places, knowing that his own planet awaits his return. Given Voinovich's initial sense of loss and inarticulateness in early emigration, and his eagerness to be received home again, these words too cast shadows. The cosmonauts' reflections end with the thought that their trail-blazing journey has allowed them to take a sideways glance at their native earth, an experience with which the satirist is familiar.

¹ 'Chetyrnadtsat' minut do starta', *Russkoe bogatstvo*, p.51. See also transcript of interview with Voinovich, Appendix A, pp.A24-25.

Yet even as it appeared that the sky was the limit in Voinovich's projected rise to fame and fortune, an editorial telephone call heralded the interference of the socialist realist monitoring system in his creativity. He had written the song for radio in 1960 in anticipation of imminent manned space flights, and production of a record was proposed.² But before this could be done the radio editor telephoned asking the author to change the words 'dusty paths' to 'new paths', since dusty might be construed as negative and untidy in a socialist realist universe. Voinovich objected that no caretakers existed to sweep the distant planets, and besides the word 'new' would imply erroneously that there had previously been old paths. After further argument the recording was cancelled. However, when two years later the cosmonauts Popovich and Nikolaev sang it in space and Khrushchev himself intoned it from the platform of the mausoleum, the words became instantly acceptable and the editor called Voinovich again to announce the immediate production of a record. To which the songwriter facetiously objected, asking that the word 'dusty' should first be changed, alarming the editor who reminded him exactly who had now sung the original words. Voinovich, provoking the editor, argued that surely the author has more right over the choice of words than the singer, whoever he may be, but in Soviet reality this was clearly not so, and the first seeds of conflict between him as an individual and the socialist realism system had been sown.

This tale, which may have grown in the telling, illustrates the dynamics of socialist realism in action: beginning with the original editorial objection, countered by Voinovich's refusal, and parried by the counter offensive of a system willing to grant primacy to the ideological over the commercial. But this purism was subverted eventually by the way that popular culture embraced the original version, forcing an accommodation and allowing the song to be adopted into official culture. These convoluted manoeuvrings provide a comic example of Voinovich's early relationship to socialist realism, and raise the chicken-and-egg question of whether it was his writing or an intractable political apparatus which made 'dissidence'

² 'Proisshestvie v "Metropole"', *Kontinent*, 5 (1975), 51-97, (78); 'Incident at the Metropole', trans. by David Chavchavadze, *Kontinent*, 2 (1992), 1-43, (27).

unavoidable for him.

Having succeeded in the medium of verse ('Chetyrnadtsat' minut do starta' had taken him all of fourteen minutes to write), Voinovich accepted the challenge of writing his first *povest'*, later comparing the writing of poetry to swimming within the banks of a river by contrast with prose writing, which resembles swimming in the uncharted waters of the ocean.³

His first story has a rural setting and the style of 'youth prose', but most of Voinovich's work defies classification as 'youth prose', 'village prose' or *byt*. since he chose never to identify himself with any one group, sometimes switching themes specifically to avoid being pigeon-holed by the literary critics.⁴ Yet certain themes are evident from the start, which reappear in later works and which are central to his thinking.

The Countryside

'My zdes' zhivem'⁵ presents the realities of village life, confronting its characters with problems of survival, either as a result of the natural environment or the encroachment of urban administration. The reader quickly becomes aware of the shortage of men in the countryside due to the general exodus to the cities, and also of the problems of migrants and moonlighters. The president of the *kolkhoz* is caught between the priorities of the *raion* and the workers, and Mother Russia's omnipresent mud sucks the characters into a quagmire of limited opportunities.

The hero Goshka is an honest country boy, but he is drawn by the magnet of the city and has aspirations towards an urban education. But when he receives his certificate of secondary education, it thrills him less than he expected, which, he observes, is the same with many things long sought after.

The theme of conflict between city and country values is stated in the initial dialogue between two girls, one of whom has lived in the city, and it is reinforced

³ 'Iz russkoi literatury ia ne uezzhal nikuda', p.246-247.

⁴ Appendix A, p.A25.

⁵ 'My zdes' zhivem: povest'', pp.21-71.

by the return of Arkasha from a glamorous life of travel in the army, complete with acquired sophistication and smart uniform. But the real trouble begins with the arrival of young Vadim from Moscow, an all-singing, all-piano-playing poet who has come to 'the people' to gain experience and inspiration for his writing. He is welcomed by the local cultural organiser, who shares his poetic aspirations. Vadim has romantic notions about the village and the steppe, but these are brutally dispelled by the reality of mud, harvesting, and the low cultural level and apathy of the villagers. To them he represents many things: the threat of authority; the intimidating superiority of a good education; the artificiality of a shallow man who takes refuge in poetry; and the interfering rootlessness of someone who does not know where he belongs. In the end his poetic talents prove ineffectual in helping 'the people' to live better, and he turns his creativity to self-pity, tale-telling and the destruction of relationships.

As far as the villagers can gather, the only difference between Moscow and Popovka is that the former has telephones and bathrooms: unnecessary luxuries for people who see all their friends every day and have a river to bathe in. They are firmly grounded in the earth which feeds them, and they know who they are and where they belong.⁶ The final show-down between the city-slicker and Anatolii, the country lad, takes place on the river bank where Vadim is bathing in an attempt to commune with nature and tone up his image. Anatolii argues powerfully that the difference between them lies in the fact that Vadim has come to the village to gain experience, but that he and Goshka live here.⁷ It is the difference between a life lived vicariously and an authentic one in a community of people willing to get their hands dirty providing real bread for those in the city. Shortly after this, Vadim abandons the village, unlamented and barely leaving a ripple.

Life returns to normal, and as an affirmation of his own place in the community, Goshka stops by the road sign announcing the name of his village and writes on it in chalk: 'We live here', signing his name. Hearing the sound of approaching vehicles, he deletes his signature but leaves his credo as a statement of

⁶ 'My zdes' zhivem', p.59.

⁷ 'My zdes' zhivem', p.67.

his individuality and unchallenged place in the universe. This *povest* does not offer a romantic, nor a truly socialist realist view of the countryside: the life is hard, the people apathetic and not entirely honest, the ideology has barely touched their lives, and yet all the values which characterise 'village prose' are present. The people live in community, and they have an authenticity and morality which reflect traditional values. At the same time, this is not exclusively 'village prose' since its style is very much that of 'youth prose' with minimal authorial interference and a gift for observing the characters' lives 'somewhat from the side'.⁸

The title 'My zdes' zhivem' could be seen as an affirmation by Voinovich, as well as by Goshka, of belonging at the heart of a community, aware of its shortcomings but nonetheless committed to it. The critic S. Dmitriev, however, expressed himself disappointed by the tone of the new author.⁹ He interpreted the presence of the village idiot in the opening scene as a symbol of the unattractive backwardness of village life. He argued that city and countryside are interdependent, and that the village could not possibly exist without the influence of Moscow. He sympathised with Vadim, whose motives are pure, even if his skills of adaptation are slight. Voinovich he saw as an admittedly talented writer who had over-reacted against the romanticism of some accounts of virgin-landers, and who had gone to the other extreme, deheroicising reality, and confining his characters unnecessarily.

Further criticism was voiced by N. Shamota, who reminded the artistic community, and Voinovich in particular, that the party called them to the same goal as art, 'towards the peaks of beauty',¹⁰ and added that in the portrayal of Soviet people, to omit to mention 'the constantly enriching links which bind them together, with society, with the world, is to omit too much'.¹¹

M. Gus responded at length, regretting that Voinovich's assessment of a human feat seems to consist of the sum of many little daily achievements, which

⁸ V. Kardin, "'Vechnye voprosy" - novye otvety', *Voprosy literatury*, 3 (1961), 25-48 (p.45).

⁹ S. Dmitriev, 'Delo bylo v Popovke', *Molodaia Gvardiia*, 4 (1962), 279-282.

¹⁰ N. Shamota, 'Vospitanie chuvstv', *Voprosy literatury*, 10 (1961), 39-59 (p.47).

¹¹ Shamota, p.59.

has the effect of deheroicising life and sidetracking literature away from the main highway. He broadened his attack to include other young writers who, he objected, all too often follow the path of pseudo-Chekhovian objectivity and insist on describing life as it is.¹²

So even in his first story Voinovich found his critics amongst the establishment ideologists, and his attempt to speak plainly about the realities of life in the Soviet countryside was met by the criticism that it is not the writer's job to show life as it is, but rather as it ought to be.

The writer and critic Tendriakov, however, was more positive in his assessment of Voinovich's work, and praised him for the freshness of his approach, wishing that he would 'intervene more actively in life, would show more clearly his social sympathies and antipathies, would defend that which he loves more strikingly and struggle more fiercely against that which he hates'.¹³ At the same time he added the cautious condition that the author should not be condemned for what he had not shown, but should be judged on his handling of the tasks which he set himself, providing that 'these tasks are consonant with the spirit of the times'.

Voinovich's next story set in the countryside is 'Rasstoianie v polkilometra', which introduces the reader, by its title, to its modest theme: the ordinariness of people's existence. It is half a kilometre from the village to the cemetery, a journey taking only seven minutes on foot. Ochkin, an ordinary man in an ordinary village, having lived an ordinary life, most of it in camps, has just died, face down in his soup. Having been born half a kilometre from his grave, he has done nothing to distinguish himself, and in effect has taken his whole life to travel as far as the cemetery.

As before, the village is overshadowed by the distant presence of Moscow, about which the villagers have many expectations, including the suspicion that everything there must be bigger and better. Ochkin's friends argue about the number of columns on the Bolshoi theatre, one of them reasoning that there must be

¹² M. Gus, 'Stolbovoi dorogoi zhizni . . .', *Oktiabr*, 12 (1961), 188-197, (p.191).

¹³ V. Tendriakov, 'Svezhii golos - est'!', *Literaturnaia gazeta*, 25 February 1961, p.3.

eight, since even their local House of Culture has six.¹⁴ Several people have contacts with the distant metropolis where beautiful bags and shoes may be purchased, and where an education may be acquired which enables one to call a heart attack a myocardial infarction.¹⁵ Yet, in spite of the mixed admiration and resentment which they feel for Moscow, the villagers have a firm sense of identity and community which supports them through the rituals of life and death which their city brothers, through their sophistication, have probably lost.

This sense of community is vital to 'village prose'. Hosking writes that 'one of the most intriguing aspects of the "village prose" of the 1960s has been evidence that Soviet writers are gripped by the [. . .] yearning for that sense of community which has been lost in the corrupt and impersonal urban world'.¹⁶ The theme of belonging, sometimes reluctantly, is dominant in all of Voinovich's stories of the countryside, and in 'Rasstoianie v polkilometra' the villagers' lives are united by their organic and natural environment: they live deep in mud, Ochkin dies face down in his pea soup, and Nikolai the carpenter and coffin-maker relates to the wood which he crafts as though to a dear friend. The grandiose theme of life and death does not inspire them with thoughts of a purposeful striving towards a bright future, but rather impresses them with the insignificance of everyone's unique contribution to life.

The smallness of Voinovich's theme incensed the critic Larisa Kriachko, who deplored the story's pessimism and lack of inspiration.¹⁷ She interpreted its purpose as wishing to portray the meaninglessness of life, and was perplexed that the author should show village life as stifling of talent. She acknowledged the demographic drift to the cities, but attributed this to the lack of responsibility given to the young in the running of the *kolkhoz*, and not in any way to the lack of facilities or opportunities in the countryside. Consequently she was outraged at

¹⁴ 'Rasstoianie v polkilometra', *Khochu byt' chestnym: povesti*, p.57; 'A Distance of Half a Kilometer', *In Plain Russian: Stories*, p.82.

¹⁵ 'Rasstoianie v polkilometra', p.61; 'A Distance of Half a Kilometer', p.88.

¹⁶ Hosking, 'The Russian Peasant Rediscovered', p.706.

¹⁷ Larisa Kriachko, 'Pozitsiia tvortsa i besplodie meshchanina', *Oktiabr'*, 5 (1964), 207-219, (pp.213-214).

Voinovich's insistence on showing the worst of village life, although his professed aim in writing was to show life as it is, with all its uncertainties and dilemmas.

He had been inspired to write 'Rasstoianie v polkilometra' by his experiences in the Vladimirskaja *oblast'*, where he was frequently struck by the strange 'brightness of the everyday tedium', and the sluggishness of rural life.¹⁸ But this personal knowledge did not entitle him, in the view of the critic A. Dymshits, to portray characters so similar to Solzhenitsyn's Matrena, - characters who do not perceptibly manifest any of the 'features of the new people of the village'.¹⁹

The community spirit of life in the countryside appears in all its ambiguity in 'Vladychitsa', which is a microcosmic allegory of a whole society, set in the rural North and concerning a people ruled by the Spirit of the sea and forest through his wife on earth, the Sovereign. Whenever the Sovereign dies, she is replaced by the most beautiful, agile and clever girl in the village: strange qualities for a shaman. The story begins as the village goes through the rituals of grieving for the recently departed Sovereign prior to a selection ceremony for her replacement. The young unmarried girls prepare themselves, with the exception of the heroine Man'ka who insists that she has no spirit within her save her own, and intends to marry Grin'ka, a decision incompatible with the calling of Sovereign. Inevitably, she is the one who is chosen, and becomes the wife of the spirit, to whom she must be faithful on pain of being buried alive and bringing terrible retribution on her people. She finds her relationship with the non-manifesting spirit distinctly unsatisfying, but is persuaded to commit herself publicly to the pretence of belief in her own authority, after which withdrawal from the myth would be all the harder. Her role as leader of the people develops, but even as her official status grows her private doubts are confirmed by the feelings which she and Grin'ka still share. He is banished, but Man'ka smuggles him into her home, where the village elder confronts her with accusations of the damage she may do to the villagers' faith. Grin'ka is expediently

¹⁸ 'Iz russkoi literatury ia ne uchezhal nikuda', p.247.

¹⁹ Al. Dymshits, 'Rasskazy o rasskazakh, zametki o povestiakh', *Ogonek*, 13 (1963), 30-31 (p.30).

murdered, and the story ends with a funeral procession identical to that at the start, with the exception that this time the Sovereign is buried alive, as the people one by one throw a handful of earth onto her body until a new burial mound is created. The next day they are summoned by the law enforcer to choose a new Sovereign. Not a single door opens, and no-one stirs, causing him to sit down in the dust and sob, 'Are we really going to live without faith now?'²⁰ At which dreadful threat a door is timidly opened.

The story is driven by an intense feeling of enforced mutual responsibility, since however flawed the community, even the outcast still belongs and is subject to the will of the communal body politic. Parts are written in a stylized imitation of traditional folkloric wedding poetry, consonant with the style of 'village prose', which contributed to making the work acceptable for publication in *Nauka i religiia*.

Throughout his development Voinovich has turned periodically to allegory to summarise the state of affairs in an abstract way. Like satire, allegory requires a common view to be shared by author and reader, and counts on the successful displacement or disguise of the self-evident truth in order to elude the censor, challenge the power of the state and reward the reader. Loseff describes allegory and Aesopian language as 'a special literary system, one whose structure allows interaction between author and reader at the same time that it conceals inadmissible content from the censor'.²¹ It is essential that author and reader are jointly in possession of the same information, and the carnivalesque devices of Aesopian language are best applied to the taboo or sacred elements of the theme of power, toppling 'sacred notions from the "lofty" to the vulgar "lowly"', thus effecting a comic catharsis.²² Loseff analyses the structure of Aesopian text as having firstly a surface level of articulated content; secondly a level of veiled allegorical content, and thirdly the deep content of socio-psychological cast. The reader does not necessarily analyse the text in this way, but may respond by simply celebrating it

²⁰ 'Vladychitsa', p.71.

²¹ Loseff, p.x.

²² Loseff, pp.219-221.

emotionally and experiencing a cathartic victory over authority.²³

‘Vladychitsa’, published in 1969, was Voinovich’s first attempt at allegory and contains the essence of his philosophy of the relationship between the people and the system, with the people getting the rulers they deserve because they collude with the cult of personality. Its Aesopian language provides a structure with Loseff’s required three levels: offering the reader a cathartic experience, although in this case the catharsis is in no way celebratory or comic. Its style and setting disguise its significance as a tale of a cult of personality enforcing conditions antipathetic to truth, which is dangerous to leadership and people alike. It was written within a decade of Khrushchev’s attack on Stalin at the Twenty-second Party Congress, and its allegorical form liberates the author to preach obliquely the complete exposure of the myth as the only path to freedom, whilst bemoaning the reluctance of the people to relinquish their dreams in favour of reality.

Voinovich’s next work, apart from *Chonkin*, to throw light on the theme of the countryside, is *Stepen’ doveriia*.²⁴ This long *povest’*, based on the life of the revolutionary Vera Figner (1852-1942), is written in two parts: the first narrated by Vera’s husband; and the second by an omniscient narrator. Most of the story takes place in the city, centre of power, learning and new ideas, but the heroine and her friends venture into the countryside to work among the people and influence their lives. Vera’s friend Betia proposes to go alone into the countryside and to commit suicide if necessary in order to open the peasants’ eyes to her beliefs.²⁵ She buys clothes to disguise her origins, but they are unable to transform her into a peasant, and the sophisticated creature sets off with her knapsack stuffed with tracts for the illiterate peasantry, and returns after two days sleeping rough, not even having mastered how to tell which way a river flows.²⁶ Disillusioned, she poisons herself a year later. Vera’s work as a teacher and medic among the people, influencing

²³ Loseff (with acknowledgement to Herbert Eagle for insight into levels of Aesopian text), pp.222-230.

²⁴ *Stepen’ doveriia* (Moscow: Politizdat, 1972).

²⁵ *Stepen’ doveriia*, p.166.

²⁶ *Stepen’ doveriia*, p.171.

them to reject corruption and religion, is more successful.²⁷ But the countryside is still seen as a difficult place for a revolutionary to work, since the people are steeped in traditions and values which go back centuries. This story, written under Khrushchev, makes an historical justification for the credo of 'village prose', demonstrating that the people are elementally timeless, and have stability in a world where ideologies can change with the political weather.

Voinovich's fourth work set in the countryside is 'Putem vzaimnoi perepiski'.²⁸ The hero, Ivan Altynnik, is a small-town soldier, used to an ordered way of life and completely unprepared for the shocks of country life which beset him when he travels to meet his penfriend, Liudmila. His journey passes through Moscow, where he quickly adapts from his status of visiting hick to a self-consciously easy familiarity with the ways of the metropolis.²⁹ However, this is not where his future lies, and soon he is on his way into the heart of the country where fate in the form of Liudmila and her brutal family await him. To the inhabitants of Kirzavod, Moscow is a distant irrelevance. Trains pass through their little town, but whence they come and whither they go is of little interest unless they come bearing marriageable young men.

When Altynnik arrives at Kirzavod station it is snowing and dangerously slippery underfoot. Liudmila, considerably older than expected, leads him to her home, where her mother awaits them in felt boots and night-shirt. After a generous application of vodka, Altynnik begins to relax and takes off his boots. In a later chapter it will become evident that boots for Private Ivan Chonkin represent far more than just footwear, since they express his personality and represent protection and security. The reader begins to fear for Altynnik. When he makes his first move towards gaining sexual experience with the frightful Liudmila he is rebuffed and, tired and disillusioned, he reaches for his boots. He manages to get one of them on, but when he sets to work on the second, Liudmila tears it from his hand and tosses

²⁷ *Stepen' doveriia*, p.210.

²⁸ 'Putem vzaimnoi perepiski', in *Khochu byt' chestnym: povesti*, pp.70-122; 'From an Exchange of Letters', *In Plain Russian: Stories*, pp.101-179.

²⁹ 'Putem vzaimnoi perepiski', p.73; 'From an Exchange of Letters', p.106.

it back under the table.³⁰ Changing her tactics she lures him towards the bedroom, and he follows her like a lamb to the slaughter with one boot on and one boot off, dangerously unprotected. When he wakes in the morning he is bootless, amnesic but almost certainly violated, and an easy target for the bullying brother Boris who soon appears in huge felt boots up to his knees. Before he knows it, Altynnik is a married man with a stamp in his service book for proof. There follows a ghastly celebration, gate-crashed by all the old women in the village, and the last thing he remembers on his wedding night is, of course, ‘someone pulling off his boots’.³¹ As he walks to the station the next morning, his feet slip and slide in the snow, and he treads carefully because he knows that if he falls ‘there’d be no getting back up’.³²

Thinking that he has escaped, he continues life in the army until he is discharged and is once more ensnared by Liudmila who abandons their baby with him in an attempt to make him take responsibility. Burdened and despairing, Altynnik walks down a hot road with his suitcase and son, until the baby messes its swaddling clothes, and the reluctant father is obliged to repair the damage. In a scene parallel to one in *Pretendent na prestol* he takes off his puttees and tries to swaddle his son just as Chonkin swaddles his foot as if it were a baby.³³

Years later, when the narrator catches up with Altynnik, now father of three, he watches the pregnant Liudmila beat her husband for drinking when his children have no shoes to wear. Altynnik may now have boots, but he has surrendered his right to mobility, has missed every opportunity of education and city life, and is stranded in a rural backwater with a vicious woman and unshod children.

The theme of footwear runs, largely unobserved by Voinovich, through much of his work.³⁴ In ‘My zdes’ zhivem’ the dancers at the village club are not

³⁰ ‘Putem vzaimnoi perepiski’, p.86; ‘From an Exchange of Letters’, p.125.

³¹ ‘Putem vzaimnoi perepiski’, p.102; ‘From an Exchange of Letters’, p.149.

³² ‘Putem vzaimnoi perepiski’, p.103; ‘From an Exchange of Letters’, p.150.

³³ *Zhizn’ i neobychnyye priklucheniia Ivana Chonkina*: (Moscow: Knizhnaia palata, 1990), p.520; *The Life and Extraordinary Adventures of Private Ivan Chonkin*, trans. by Richard Lourie (Paris: YMCA, 1975; London: Jonathan Cape, 1977), p.355.

³⁴ Appendix A, p.A25.

only characterised by their footwear, but it even seems as if their shoes are doing the dancing: Arkasha's box-calf boots squeaking 'carefully next to Lizka's slippers'.³⁵ When Goshka is persuaded to dance with San'ka, he goes through agonies because 'his tarpaulin boots seemed to him to be as big as boats', and he is afraid of stepping on her feet.³⁶ Later, when their relationship founders, he throws himself onto his bed without undressing, not even taking off his boots. In such a muddy village, this is the behaviour of a desperately unhappy man. In *Stepen' doveriia*, it is Betia's footwear which causes her most difficulty when she tries to assemble her outfit for incognito travelling: the normal peasant boots are much too big and she has to wear a child's boots, emphasising her naiveté.³⁷

Closely related to the theme of footwear is the motif of mud, which is a prominent feature of rural Russian life. 'My zdes' zhivem' is set in a village where mud is part of the rural economy; the girls dig up clay and Goshka transports it, vehicles slip around in it, the pig roots in it and the harvesters are engulfed in it. In 'Rasstoianie v polkilometra' even the jeep has difficulty negotiating the road to the cemetery because of the autumn mud, but the procession finally arrives and Ochkin's coffin is 'soon covered by the soaking wet clay, which kept sticking to the shovels'.³⁸

The treachery of the countryside is exemplified by the slipperiness of conditions underfoot in 'Putem vzaimnoi perepiski'. It is wet and icy as Altynnik makes his reluctant way to Liudmila's house;³⁹ he slips in the snowdrifts as he returns from the shop with Boris;⁴⁰ after the wedding he is pulled through the garden by his bride and nearly slips off the porch,⁴¹ making the village hags cackle at his discomfiture. This is a long way from the norms of socialist realism - or indeed of 'village prose' - which should depict a caring community bound together

³⁵ 'My zdes' zhivem', p.40.

³⁶ 'My zdes' zhivem', p.41.

³⁷ *Stepen' doveriia*, pp.167-168.

³⁸ 'Rasstoianie v polkilometra', p.69; 'A Distance of Half a Kilometer', p.99.

³⁹ 'Putem vzaimnoi perepiski', p.78; 'From an Exchange of Letters', p.113.

⁴⁰ 'Putem vzaimnoi perepiski', p.93; 'From an Exchange of Letters', p.136.

⁴¹ 'Putem vzaimnoi perepiski', p.101; 'From an Exchange of Letters', pp.148.

by love of the Russian earth. As Altynnik staggers to the station to abscond, the 'clay under the melted snow' makes him slip,⁴² but once back in his military environment there is no further mention of mud until his discharge. It is now high summer, so the mud has changed to dust, and it is into the dust that Liudmila drops her son;⁴³ it is dust again in which Altynnik sprawls as the policeman prevents his escape.⁴⁴ When the narrator sees him in later years he notices the dust on the streets of the little country town,⁴⁵ dust which waits only for the autumn to turn to constricting mud.

'Putem vzaimnoi perepiski' introduces another recurring theme in Voinovich's writing on the countryside: that of animals, although this is a theme developed more in the *Chonkin* novels. The first animal to be mentioned is the hapless dog, shot by Boris to try out his new rifle. A shadow of this dog haunts Altynnik as he vomits behind the bathhouse after his wedding, but it is chased away by his bride. Liudmila and Boris tell Altynnik proudly about their rich diet of rabbits, pork and cow's milk, but in reality all he is offered are mushroom *pirozhki*. However, he is taken to see the cow, in case his city upbringing on powdered milk has left him ignorant of the genuine article. The closing scene of the story contains an act of brutality against a calf with a rake tied to its tail, which is chased by a crowd of children.⁴⁶ This may be life as it is, but again it is a far cry from Zhdanov's 'revolutionary romanticism'.

In 'My zdes' zhivem' the animals which populate the *kolkhoz* feature briefly, the first scene opening with the village idiot, who once sold the *kolkhoz* cow to the gypsies for five kopeks, driving the herd across the bridge and treating the calf negligently as it gets its leg trapped. He sees it simply as a source of food, and the same sentiments are expressed by Tiul'kin as he watches the pig rooting for food, the quicker to grow fat and be killed.⁴⁷ A horse also puts in an appearance,

⁴² 'Putem vzaimnoi perepiski', p.103; 'From an Exchange of Letters', p.150.

⁴³ 'Putem vzaimnoi perepiski', p.113; 'From an Exchange of Letters', p.166.

⁴⁴ 'Putem vzaimnoi perepiski', p.117; 'From an Exchange of Letters', p.172.

⁴⁵ 'Putem vzaimnoi perepiski', p.120; 'From an Exchange of Letters', p.176.

⁴⁶ 'Putem vzaimnoi perepiski', p.120; 'From an Exchange of Letters', p.176.

⁴⁷ 'My zdes' zhivem', p.37.

bearing Lizka across the steppe to her lover. There is nothing significant in the choice or treatment of these animals by Voinovich, as they are simply part of the backdrop of *kolkhoz* existence, but the same trio play much more significant roles in the Chonkin novels.

The City

As has already been noted, in 'My zdes' zhivem' Moscow is glimpsed only through the eyes of Vadim - a poor ambassador for city life. He may be young and idealistic, but he is also selfish, spineless and unable to cope with the joys of honest toil apart from on paper. The reader is left with the impression that the life of the countryside is authentic, while the city represents artificiality and illusion.

Voinovich's first work to give a strong sense of the city is 'Kem ia mog by stat', which he describes as his manifesto and which had its title changed to 'Khochu byt' chestnym' to pass the censors. Its opening scene shows the hero Samokhin beginning his day,⁴⁸ woken not by the sun but by his alarm clock. It is raining and dark outside, and his inclination is to go back to sleep, but his life in the city is governed not by the elements but by the demands of an artificially imposed routine. As he lowers his feet to the floor and begins the process of transformation into 'contemporary man', he stares at the wall, aware of the unpleasant taste in his mouth and the pain in his chest. He is in poor physical condition, because his only exercise is lifting weights, and these are unappealingly covered with dust. His electric razor buzzes so loudly that it disturbs the man in the next flat, and when he leaves for work the streets are alive with a frightening number of people although it is still dark. For fifty kopeks he eats at a stand-up cafeteria with a fearsomely complicated coffee urn, and then goes to work in an environment choked with tobacco smoke. If this is 'contemporary man' then he is out of touch with nature, with his own body and with his environment. He contrasts strongly with the heroes of 'village prose' who rise and lie down with the sun, grow their own food, and

⁴⁸ 'Khochu byt' chestnym', *Khochu byt' chestnym*, pp.3-4; 'What I Might Have Been', *In Plain Russian: Stories*, pp.3-5.

toil in the fresh air. In the city the closest manifestation of nature is the presence of mud which swamps the building site, coating both the workmen's boots and the bureaucrats' shoes indiscriminately, but this is hardly enough to reunite urban man with his roots. Because the city is driven by five-year plans and a rapid programme of industrialisation, it makes impossible demands on the mere humans who effectively fuel it. Samokhin is pressured beyond endurance by the bureaucracy behind the construction industry, and the last element to be considered in any decision is the people who will have to build or live in the new flats. The city constricts its subjects, forcing upon them a layer of unreality which runs counter to all the evidence, an arrangement confirmed by the journalist who confects heroic phrases out of the prosaic reality of Samokhin's life. His rhetoric ensures that even when Samokhin refuses to hand over the building for which he is responsible until it is fit for habitation, his grand gesture is absorbed by an amorphous cushion of socialist realist interpretation, rendering it valueless to all but Samokhin himself. The seed is sown here of an idea later to be developed by Voinovich in 'Tribunal' and *Shapka* : that of the hero's embryonic dissent being expropriated by the media and transformed against his will, into either compliant heroism or full-blown dissidence.

'Dva tovarishcha', written in 1967, is an example of 'youth prose' which confronts urban life through the eyes of two young men growing up in a provincial city whose landscape itself plays an important part as a catalyst of the action. Stories about the countryside are set mostly around the home and the village shop, but the variety of settings which the city provides makes the plot more complex, and it is as if a third major character has come on the scene, as moody and confrontational as any adolescent youth. This is the location of institutions and, within them, corridors; the looming presence of the huge Wedding Palace which dwarfs all who walk by it; dark streets and crowded parks: claustrophobic apartments; a dance floor, a hairdresser's, a police station and an aerodrome; joy-riding and motor scooters: violence, love and betrayal. The two friends belong here and take their identity from the city, which mirrors their changing emotional

landscape by its spectrum of scenes. It provides them with a scale against which to measure the world, and although Grek, the local hooligan, might appear streetwise and tough to a village boy, no doubt to a Muscovite teenager he would be just a provincial lout. The two friends appear more sophisticated than their country cousins, more ironical as they confront the absurdities of regulated city life, and yet they are perfectly ordinary teenagers, making discoveries about themselves, assessing the failings of their parents, and establishing patterns for adult life. The city reflects their young lives: competitive, vibrant and full of promise, yet with a potential for danger and a 'dog eat dog' morality which is a far cry from the traditional values of the village.

In addition to works set in the city or the country, Voinovich also wrote his group of autobiographical sketches reflecting life in military establishments or construction site hostels - a sort of compromise between the two states.⁴⁹ The army provides the structure and organisation of an urban setting without any of the luxuries, but also without the demands of domestic relationships. It lifts many of the responsibilities so burdensome to urbanites and villagers alike, but offers just enough freedom for a degree of individualism to be developed by the very determined. In the same way as the village provides its characters with a framework of the organic community, and the city plays an active part in the lives of its characters, so the military establishment provides a structure against which to rebel. To each story, then, setting is crucial and dynamic, and as Voinovich moves from 'youth prose' to 'village prose' and *byt* he acknowledges the various palettes of colour which each genre offers. It is noticeable that in his writings of the sixties and seventies Voinovich's sympathies tend to be with the young and enthusiastic, though he shrewdly observes the behaviour of his older protagonists and is not without understanding for their dilemmas. His work keeps the flavour of 'youth prose' as long as is decently possible, and he evidently fears and guards against the slow process of moral corruption which might threaten with advancing years.

⁴⁹ 'Diadia Volodia', 'Maior Dogadkin', 'Kapitan Kurasov', 'Starshii leitenant Pavlenko', *Putem vzaimnoi perepiski* (Paris: YMCA Press, 1979).

The Changing Face of Socialist Realism

Voinovich, unable or unwilling to embrace the doctrine of socialist realism without reservation, accepted the limited freedoms which it permitted in his early creative years whilst formulating his own doctrines. Yet even when these were still embryonic, there was sufficient ambiguity in his writing to attract the attention of the critics.

Kriachko, responding to 'Khochu byt' chestnym', remarked that whilst faults in society might reasonably be exposed in order to keep a sense of credibility and realism, it is unhelpful to concentrate on them as Voinovich does. If protest is to be voiced, it should be active and directed against the enemies of society. Literature should provide the modern Soviet reader with inspiration, not abstraction, and the Communist view of life should be creative, constructive and optimistic.⁵⁰ Samokhin was dismissed by G. Brovman as an 'unremarkable figure, a man devoid of activity and initiative, a cold being, for whom social ideals are mysterious and incomprehensible'.⁵¹ A. Gorev declared that the story might be enough to reduce 'young innocent people to despair'.⁵²

Similarly, 'Dva tovarishcha' attracted criticism for its unfocused morality. The hero, Valerii, was deemed to be apathetic, betraying an old-fashioned weakness of character by forgiving his friend instead of confronting him.⁵³ Both friends were accused of 'spiritual childishness',⁵⁴ and Voinovich, it was claimed, had a deplorable penchant for making comparisons between characters which could misleadingly make the hero appear good by comparison with others, whereas a mere relative goodness cannot be excused for its squeamish patience in regard to surrounding evil.⁵⁵ It is interesting to note that Valerii's world is not nearly so

⁵⁰ Kriachko, pp.207,219.

⁵¹ G. Brovman, 'Pafos zhizneutverzheniia ili zhupel lakirovki?', *Voprosy literatury*, 12 (1963), 3-24 (p.10).

⁵² A. Gorev, 'Eto fal'sh'', *Trud*, 24 March 1963.

⁵³ L. Anninskii, 'Retsenziia', *Don*, 12 (1967), 178-179.

⁵⁴ N. Tolchenova, 'Po retseptam negativnoi skhemy', *Ogonek*, 27 (1969) 22-24, (p.22).

⁵⁵ V. Kondrat'ev, 'Neubeditel'nye sravneniia', *Molodaia gvardiia*, 9 (1967), 293-296.

absolute as the critics'. When he parts from his mother and grandmother at the station, the women begin to cry and he comments: 'I began to pretend that I was howling, although in fact I really wanted to howl. Or maybe, I really was howling, and only thought I was pretending'.⁵⁶ Thus Voinovich teasingly reminds the reader that reality may be Dostoevskian in its instability and that even those at the heart of events cannot always perceive it accurately.

In spite of the criticism, the very fact that 'Dva tovarishcha' was published indicates what Deming Brown calls 'the new humaneness of Soviet literature' at this time,⁵⁷ when a new generation of writers turned to problems of conscience and displayed an interest in the human psyche. Sexual infidelity was once more accepted as 'intrinsically interesting and self-justifying', and psychological problems and conflict between the generations were addressed. An interest in human inadequacies developed, along with a freedom to portray conflict 'without making moral judgments or coming up with pat solutions'. The importance of individuals was acknowledged apart from their function in society, and a new space for literary exploration came into being, since 'where the party has moved out of literature, the folk have moved in'.⁵⁸

Yet not even this degree of realism was sufficient for Voinovich, who turned the grimmest reality into fantasy in 'V krugu družei',⁵⁹ introduced in its subtitle as 'a not very reliable tale about a certain historic party'. This is a chapter originally written in 1967 as part of *Chonkin*, but withheld by Voinovich ostensibly because he hoped to have the novel published in the Soviet Union. It charts the night of 21 July 1941, the eve of war with Germany, in the company of Stalin and the *politburo*. The story opens with the popular myth of Stalin as father of the nation, always working and vigilant behind the lighted window in the Kremlin. His adoring people gather to watch him, but fail to realise that the figure in the window is a dummy 'so skilfully crafted that unless you actually touched it there was

⁵⁶ 'Dva tovarishcha', p.148.

⁵⁷ Deming Brown, 'Soviet Russian Fiction: Changes, Challenges and Frozen Propositions', p.35.

⁵⁸ Deming Brown, p.36.

⁵⁹ 'V krugu družei', *Putem vzaimnoi perepiski*, pp.165-190; 'A Circle of Friends', *In Plain Russian*, pp.180-208.

nothing to indicate that it wasn't alive',⁶⁰ complete with paste-on moustache and mechanically-smoking pipe. The real Koba is an ordinary man who hides in a secret room, clean-shaven and pipeless. This work does not even pretend to conform to socialist realism, observing instead with a satirical eye the moral contortions of the dictator, and finding him and his cronies to be a sorry sham.

*Ivan'kiada*⁶¹ is another work rich in fantasy, born out of an absurd reality. This is Voinovich's satirical account of a slice of his Soviet experience, in the parodic form of an heroic epic. The title first suggests the epic form, and this is confirmed by the structure of the book which is in short sections, like cantos. The story is a blend of documentary and fantasy, the elements treated on equal terms; and the fact that much of the data is composed of authentic eyewitness reports, diary entries and conversations lends a particular interest to what is a mundane subject, the fantasy embellishing the mundaneness still further. Voinovich's narrative voice opens the account by explaining that he was engaged in the writing of *Chonkin* when the events described took place, and that he was diverted from his task by the necessity of dealing with a long and absurd struggle for possession of an apartment, life imposing itself demandingly on art.

Voinovich is the hero of his own tale, and the villain is played by Sergei Sergeevich Ivan'ko, an *apparatchik* with connections in the KGB and the publishing industry. He is chairman of the board of Goskomizdat, is allegedly a writer (although he lacks evidence of literary aptitude), and he lives in the Moscow Writers' Housing Cooperative. He decides to enlarge his living space by tearing down a wall to annex a room in an adjoining flat to house his new toilet, brought as a trophy from America. The flat, however, has been promised to Voinovich and his pregnant wife, who contest Ivan'ko's decision, provoking a fascinating development of the rituals and double-speak of Soviet society. The story presents two dream sequences: one featuring a saucepan and the other a jewel-studded toilet, both of which are designed to diminish the characters to which they relate, and

⁶⁰ 'V krugu družei', p.166; 'A Circle of Friends', p.181.

⁶¹ 'Ivan'kiada, ili rasskaz o vselenii pisatelja Voinovicha v novuiu kvartiru, *Khochu byt' chestnym: povesti*, pp.123-210; *The Ivankiad or the Tale of the Writer Voinovich's Installation in His New Apartment*, trans. by David Lapeza (London: Penguin, 1979).

consequently the system of Soviet bureaucracy.⁶²

The critic Murikov in 1991 expressed his disgust that the writer of 'Chetyrnadtsat' minut do starta' should stoop so low as to write *Ivan'kiada*, marvelling that what must now be seen as 'the phony cosmic romance of the sixties' should be so easily transformed into 'the vulgar passions of the seventies'.⁶³

Ivan'kiada became a popular text in America where Ivan'ko lived after the events of the novel, and students of Soviet society and literature made something of a cult of both it and him. He was mobbed for his autograph like a celebrity,⁶⁴ this extra-textual afterword providing the final twist to a story which combined the American dream with Soviet reality to produce the inspired fantasy of 'an improbably blue, diamond-studded toilet'.⁶⁵

The Hero

The partial and temporary eclipse of the 'positive hero' may be discerned clearly in 'My zdes' zhivem', which presents Goshka, a hero who refuses to be manipulated, but who is pragmatically open to suggestions from his friend that he should cheat in his exams, since everyone does. Anatolii advises Goshka that the most useful topic to prepare for the exam is the difference between the positive and negative hero, which he defines simply as the difference between himself and Goshka. Goshka may not have any bad habits, but he timed his career poorly and is a negative character by comparison with Anatolii, who has bad habits aplenty, but was astute enough to be a good *komsomolets*, a virgin-lander, and a medal holder at the right moments.⁶⁶ This is a cynical analysis of the theory, presented through a fairly neutral character, and it allows the narrator to raise the question of the

⁶² Karen Ryan-Hayes, 'Decoding the Dream in the Satirical Works of Vladimir Vojnovič', *Slavic and East European Journal*, 34.3 (Fall 1990), 289-307.

⁶³ G. Murikov, 'Bez slez, bez zhizni, bez liubvi', *Sever*, 8 (1991), 143-149 (p.145).

⁶⁴ 'A vy znaete, kakoi on?', *Sovetskaia Bibliografiia*, 4 (1989), 43-55, (p.46).

⁶⁵ 'Ivan'kiada', p.183; *The Ivankiad*, p.89.

⁶⁶ 'My zdes' zhivem', pp.26-27.

arbitrariness of Soviet approval or disapproval, based more on public image than on inner worth.

Another moral dilemma arises, and Goshka has to forge a signature and circumvent the rules of the institute in order to sit his exam. That such ruses were necessary was well known, but it was not in the spirit of socialist realism to mention this, nor to present a hero sufficiently immoral to act in this way. The narrator also presents the cultural life of Goshka's village as stifled by apathy, with the unsuitable Borodavka forced into organising the club and writing anonymous articles for the wall newspaper simply because no-one else will contribute. Furthermore Goshka's conclusion upon passing his exam that things once achieved no longer hold any interest is a sorry attitude for someone supposed to be working towards a bright future.⁶⁷ When disappointed in love, far from confronting his rival or even his girlfriend, Goshka retires to bed in his boots, with a bottle of vodka to hand in a very Soviet gesture of masculine despair, and cries like a child.⁶⁸ The critic P. Glinkin seized on this weakness, calling on Belinskii to testify that tears for oneself are 'not a sign of depth and strength of feeling; a man is far more of a man who is able to weep at others' sufferings or even at imaginary sufferings'.⁶⁹ Goshka is at last moved to action by evidence of corruption in the community, but his overall image is not of a hero single-mindedly and selflessly dedicated to the future.

Samokhin of 'Khochu byt' chestnym' is another character sadly deficient in the qualities of the 'positive hero', his most striking characteristic being his reactivity to his surroundings. He sees himself as others do, is aware of his neighbour's disapproval, spends hours developing a strategic plan to circumvent the ridiculous system of distribution at work, is upset by his mother's disappointment in him, is manipulated by his girlfriend Klava, and appears to agree with everyone at work. It is not until he is asked to deny himself even the luxury of considering his work averagely good that he is spurred to action. This is perhaps

⁶⁷ 'My zdes' zhivem', p.50.

⁶⁸ 'My zdes' zhivem', p.65.

⁶⁹ P. Glinkin, 'Bez bozhestva, bez vdokhnoven'ia', *Neva*, 3 (1962), 175-181 (p.179).

what enraged the literary establishment most, as John Bayley points out in his article on Samokhin as a Soviet 'I' figure: 'the fact that the narrator did what he did, not for the cause or on Communist principle, but because he was an individual who had a mind of his own'.⁷⁰

The original title of the story, 'Kem ia mog by stat'' , is taken from a translation of a poem by the Australian Henry Lawson:

But you, my friend true-hearted -
 God keep our friendship green! -
 You know how I was parted
 From all I might have been.

The Russian translation used by Voinovich implies not so much the speaker's possible regret at having failed to achieve his potential, but rather his relief at maintaining his integrity and avoiding what he might have become.

Всю жизнь я лез из кожи,
 Чтобы не стать, о Боже,
 Тем, кем я мог бы стать. . .

Even at this early stage Voinovich was aware of the choices facing him, not simply those common to the human condition but also those peculiar to the Soviet scene. It is as if the two statements made in the titles 'We Live Here' and 'I Want to be Honest' were linked by a 'but', producing 'We live here, but I want to be honest'; an expression of the tension involved in living honestly in such a society. In line with Samokhin and with Chonkin - the ultimate honest fool who triumphs in the folk-tale variant of Soviet life - Voinovich appears to have chosen a policy of plain-speaking over politically expedient dissembling. According to Grigorii Svirskii, Voinovich's decision to be himself was entirely natural, since he was 'always warm-hearted, shy and trustworthy' and 'had a crystal-clear honesty about

⁷⁰ John Bayley, 'A Soviet "I"', *New York Times Book Review*, 7 October 1979, pp.32-33.

him'.⁷¹ Since Solzhenitsyn had already broken many taboos, writers of this era had to choose between actively acknowledging the validity of his prior discourse and thereby risking the censor's scissors and worse, or maintaining the socialist realist fiction. Voinovich, whose intimate, anecdotal style of writing effortlessly presents unsavoury truths, judged himself particularly suited by upbringing to a vocation of honesty, having been taught 'always to tell only the truth, to be principled without reservation'.⁷²

'Kem ia mog by stat'', almost a socialist realist work apart from the number and manner of the questions it raises, and described by Voinovich as being written completely in the spirit of socialist realism,⁷³ presents the dilemma of compromise in a society apparently controlled by ideology but actually driven by self-interest. Samokhin is tempted to compromise for his own comfort but resists, not for reasons of ideology but for his own self-respect. Deming Brown suggests that the story is an example of a 'production novel', the function of which was traditionally to 'demonstrate the therapeutic and educational value of work in forming the personality and social outlook of the individual'. However, he adds that at this phase in socialist realism the moral focus of the genre was broadening to allow for a less heroic hero.⁷⁴ Voinovich was left in no doubt by the critical reception of this work that the socialist realist artist was expected to be the conscience of the people, but he did not embrace the suggestions of the critic B. Brainina for alternative titles to this story, reading which gave her the sensation of falling into a dank cellar from a spacious new house. They were "The Diary of a Superfluous Man", "Everything in the Past", "I am a Failure", "A Nasty Story", and "There Is No-one To Whom I Can Stretch Out My Hand".⁷⁵ Undeterred, Voinovich was clearly already working to his own agenda of a proactive depiction of reality. He was inclined to believe in the dependability of experience and instinct over an artificially trained

⁷¹ Grigorii Svirskii, 'Vladimir Voinovich and Vladimir Kornilov', *A History of Post-war Soviet Writing*, trans. by Robert Dessaux and Michael Ulman (trans. of Svirskii, *Na lobnom meste*, London: 1975) (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1981), pp.377-385 (p.377).

⁷² 'Potomstvennyi dissident', interview by T. Kulikova, *Kuranty*, 10 April 1992, p.8.

⁷³ 'I am a Realist', p.51.

⁷⁴ Deming Brown, 'Soviet Russian Fiction: Changes, Challenges and Frozen Propositions', p.21.

⁷⁵ B. Brainina, 'Zhit', to est' sozidat', trudit'sia . . .', *Voprosy literatury*, 6 (1963), 21-40 (p.28).

intellect,⁷⁶ and after decades of experience as a writer he still maintained in the nineties that intuition ‘often guides the hand of the writer although he himself doesn’t understand the way’.⁷⁷

The theme of some of Voinovich’s later writing is to consider the different directions which his life might have taken, and this *povest*, whose original title evokes all the positive and negative potential of life, must have contributed to the formulation of his philosophy. Porter perceives Samokhin’s aim as maintaining ‘a sense of reality and identity. It is as if the moral question will take care of itself as long as the individual’s personality can remain intact’.⁷⁸ This is the real substance of the story. The narrator is prepared to play by the rules of a poorly organised society only until they challenge his own sense of personal worth, at which point he ceases to react and becomes proactive.

The critic Larisa Kriachko, whilst conceding the possible faults in the construction industry, lamented the passivity, tiredness, apathy, cruelty and blindness of Samokhin, and apparently failed to notice his self-redemption at the end.⁷⁹ Iu. Uziurov in a letter to *Izvestiia* leaped to the industry’s defence, asking whether Voinovich could possibly believe that building crews such as Samokhin’s would be ‘capable of erecting gigantic hydroelectric power stations, and building thousands of new housing blocks’.⁸⁰

Valerii, the hero of ‘Dva tovarishcha’, also casts light on Voinovich’s development of the hero. He is young, sceptical, noncommittal and rebellious. He feels dwarfed by his city, chooses his friends as a matter of convenience rather than of ideology, and slides into many situations by accident rather than by positive effort. In the early stages of the story he is ‘easily led’, but by the end, after a series of betrayals by his friend Tolik, he is able to act without reference to the approval of others. This is just the sort of hero not needed by socialist realism: a man who makes up his own mind based on experience of life rather than according to an

⁷⁶ Appendix A, p.A1.

⁷⁷ ‘Iz russkoi literatury ia ne uezhal nikuda’, p.256.

⁷⁸ Porter, *Four Contemporary Russian Writers*, p.90.

⁷⁹ Kriachko, ‘Pozitsiia tvortsa i besplodie meshchanina’, pp.207-209.

⁸⁰ Iu. Uziurov, ‘Kochka i tochka zreniia’, *Izvestiia*, 10 April 1963.

abstract theory.

The critic L. Anninskii judged the story to be poorly constructed, and the hero to be reactionary and apathetic. Valerii, he considered, shows no strength of character, and his indifference and tiredness are to be deplored.⁸¹ Voinovich's early attempts to explore the youthful search for integrity had raised the possibility that an individual may measure an ideal against reality and find it wanting: a view intensely threatening to the establishment. The story was also criticised by M. Sinel'nikov on the grounds that 'it is as if the author is playing with the reader, mocking his common sense and treating him to an 'originality' which turns out to be inverted banality'.⁸²

Ivan'kiada presents a further illuminating portrait of the Soviet 'hero' Ivan'ko and his anti-hero, Voinovich. In the foreword Voinovich the narrator reflects on the Marxist dogma which is used to explain everything in Soviet society. Marx is now apparently dead, for better or worse, but from the 'rosy mirage' which his portrait has left behind 'there arises [. . .] not a dogmatist, not an orthodox person, but a figure of a new type', none other than Ivan'ko, the 'hero' of the tale.⁸³ This new Soviet man is variously described as related to someone important, a friend of someone else, holding an important position, burdened with equipment for his flat, a good and kind man, a writer, a hack, and no more of a writer than a saucepan is, although, of course, a saucepan could certainly be admitted into the Writers' Union on the grounds that 'it was not untalented - at least, so far it hadn't written anything untalented'.⁸⁴

As the story progresses Ivan'ko is unmasked as a hypocritical abuser of his powers and privileges, a selfish manipulator of events, and an unprincipled schemer. Yet the narrator still refers to him as an example of Soviet man, and feigns astonishment at his unexpected twists and turns. At one point he comments that 'if this weren't a documented history taken straight from life, if it were a novel, written

⁸¹ L. Anninskii, 'Retsenziia', pp.178-179.

⁸² M. Sinel'nikov, 'Preodolenie', *Literaturnaia gazeta*, 4 October 1967, p.5.

⁸³ 'Ivan'kiada', p.125; *The Ivankiad*, p.9.

⁸⁴ 'Ivan'kiada', p.136; *The Ivankiad*, p.27.

according to the tenets of socialist realism, then there really would be a happy ending in the Regional Committee Office'.⁸⁵ In reply to the reader's potential accusation that the story is anti-Soviet, he justifies himself innocently: 'But, citizen judges, please note that it was not I who created this story but those very people I have listed here. I did everything in my power to keep it from happening this way.'⁸⁶ So, reality triumphs over the ideal, and evil almost triumphs over good. In conclusion, Voinovich presents Ivan'ko as a sort of Soviet Everyman, in step with the times, adapting to every opportunity, 'the humble drudge with the simple, unmemorable, greedy face. Gentle, smiling, obliging, efficient, ready to do you a good turn, flatter your self-esteem, he is present in every cell of society, breathing life into all these changes' with his 'wolfish grin'.⁸⁷

When such an unscrupulous representative of privileged Soviet society is deployed to represent the positive hero of socialist realism, the gulf existing between Soviet reality and Soviet literature is highlighted. The corollary is that only in the real world do real heroes exist: ordinary people inspired by individual ideals but beset at the same time by ordinary human weaknesses.

The Average and the Extraordinary

In Voinovich's philosophy, to be natural in an unnatural world is highly desirable, but in addition each individual has a unique potential to fulfil in a given field, whether that be playing the violin or playing skittles.⁸⁸ Many of Voinovich's minor characters are lazy and easily satisfied, happy to do the minimum required for a quiet life, and as personalities they are perfectly underwhelming. His heroes, on the other hand, whilst having human failings, are generally seen to be striving to meet their potential, sometimes by education or simply by pushing back the limits of what is generally expected.

⁸⁵ 'Ivan'kiada', p.181; *The Ivankiad*, p.86.

⁸⁶ 'Ivan'kiada', p.181; *The Ivankiad*, p.86.

⁸⁷ 'Ivan'kiada', p.204; *The Ivankiad*, pp.113-114.

⁸⁸ 'Zamysel', *Maloe sobranie sochinenii*, p.6.

As a member of the third generation of men in his family to be deprived of schooling by force of circumstances, Voinovich rarely presents education as a positive factor in his characters' successes.

Goshka, in 'My zdes' zhivem', seeks qualifications to lift himself out of the rut of village life, or at least to give himself a different perspective on it, but it is his decency and common sense which distinguish him as a hero. Education is seen as a mixed blessing, since it sometimes brings an inflated self-image and conflict, as with the teacher who corrects her husband's letters,⁸⁹ whereas the natural integrity of simple characters like Chonkin is highly prized in Voinovich's universe.

Although the Muscovite poet Vadim may be educated, he astonishes the villagers with his naive and untried enthusiasm for hundred-kilometre hikes, and with his belief in the usefulness of piano-playing and poetry when crops need harvesting. With his rarefied background he is easily bored, feels entitled to special treatment, and lacks the inner resources to cope without the props of civilisation. To ease his frustration, he attempts to convert San'ka to the idea that she too is specially gifted and deserves more than the village can offer. San'ka is perfectly content, but Vadim protests that the villagers are all ordinary, and that her extraordinary gift for singing is wasted in the countryside. She is unmoved, contending that she is just the same as everyone else, and that there are no extraordinary people.⁹⁰ The reader concludes that San'ka and Vadim are using different terms: for San'ka a person's worth is expressed by something other than qualifications or abilities, but for Vadim, who has little sense of self, education is to be used as proof to the ignorant of his hidden depths and extraordinary insight.

There is, then, little connection for Voinovich between education and authenticity. Vadim may have a good education, but then so does the search dog which has been on a course for a year and a half.⁹¹ The author seems to suggest that one moves from the poverty of the average into the ranks of the extraordinary by virtue of qualities such as self-belief, naturalness, and a responsible engagement

⁸⁹ 'My zdes' zhivem', p.23.

⁹⁰ 'My zdes' zhivem', p.61.

⁹¹ 'My zdes' zhivem', p.66.

with one's own destiny.

Perhaps the story in which Voinovich most clearly spells out his philosophy of the struggle against the purely average and barely adequate is 'Khochu byt' chestnym'. Samokhin knows that he is capable of far better than is asked of him, and is determined, at least once, to be all that he is capable of being, and might have been all along. His is a classic mid-life crisis: he suffers from an awareness that the trivia of life have made him satisfied with less than the best; that life does not last forever and that if he is to achieve his potential he must do so before it is too late. He cannot even look back to his youth as a time of resolution and strength, having usually taken the line of least resistance, but he is aware that he has latent qualities at his disposal and determines to animate them. He is forty-two, his mother considers him a failure, and with regard to his profession he says: 'My work is no better or no worse than any other, [. . .] I can't make a building any better than it was projected to be. But sometimes I am forced to make one worse than I can, and this I don't like'.⁹² All he wants is to be allowed to do a decent job and live a normal human life without being manipulated by a system which sets low average standards. He has twice before refused to hand over poor work, but the desire for a quiet life is growing stronger with age. Yet he is unwilling to deny the impulse to do something of which he need not be ashamed.⁹³ Klava insists that he is good, kind and talented but he retorts: 'I'm not the least bit talented. I'm just your ordinary man in the street.'⁹⁴ A journalist writes an article portraying Samokhin, against his will, as a socialist realist hero - an indication of the devaluing effects of rhetoric. The whole society works in a sub-standard way; even the teapots, designed by an engineer and offered for sale in the shops, have handles which break off.⁹⁵ Frustrated by further examples of poor workmanship, Samokhin resolves to take the initiative and to ring his boss Silaev, refusing to turn over the building. 'Let him learn that not everyone was like him, that there were still people

⁹² 'Khochu byt' chestnym', p.20; 'What I Might Have Been', p.27.

⁹³ 'Khochu byt' chestnym', p.28; 'What I Might Have Been', p.39.

⁹⁴ 'Khochu byt' chestnym', p.29; 'What I Might Have Been', p.41.

⁹⁵ 'Khochu byt' chestnym', p.32; 'What I Might Have Been', p.45.

who never went against their conscience. I nearly burst with a sense of my own nobility; I felt beautiful and brave.’⁹⁶ However, problems of communication intervene, and the day of the inspection arrives without Samokhin having committed himself to any course of action. The inspection committee gathers and the secretary types out the papers accepting the building before it has even been inspected. She is told to type ‘Building accepted with the rating of good’, but asks ‘what if the building was excellent?’ The answer to this is ‘Impossible. Rastrelli or Rossi, they used to build excellent. Now the best they can do is good’.⁹⁷ So progress marches historically backward in a state where rhetoric is more powerful than reality. The ambitious young student on the committee is scandalised by the standard of work, with doors not fitting and balcony railings coming away at a touch, but to the rest of the inspectors this is perfectly normal.⁹⁸

Suddenly Samokhin resolves that even if this is normal it is not acceptable, and refuses to sign the building over, although he knows that this will cost him his job. It will be worth it to be honest for once and to live without playing the rules of the game. He has one more conflict with the concept of the average before he leaves, arguing with his workers who refuse to carry an oxygen cylinder up the stairs because it is too heavy. He draws an historical comparison with the builders of the pyramids who lifted huge weights without cranes. Once more, to prove a point about what people are capable of if they stretch themselves, he carries the cylinder single-handed to the fourth floor.⁹⁹ The effort very nearly kills him, but as he lies in hospital he has no regrets. The ponderings of the ‘deheroicised’¹⁰⁰ construction worker in the hospital about the meaning of his life antagonised the critics, but for Voinovich they are evidence of integrity. Samokhin is far from believing that he has learned the meaning of life, but he has made a stand and drawn a little closer to what he might have been. Yet even here the averageness of society absorbs his protest, and through the journalist turns it into the action of a socialist

⁹⁶ ‘Khochu byt’ chestnym’, p.33; ‘What I Might Have Been’, p.47.

⁹⁷ ‘Khochu byt’ chestnym’, p.43; ‘What I Might Have Been’, p.61.

⁹⁸ ‘Khochu byt’ chestnym’, p.46; ‘What I Might Have Been’, p.65.

⁹⁹ ‘Khochu byt’ chestnym’, p.51; ‘What I Might Have Been’, pp.72.

¹⁰⁰ Dymshits, p.30.

realist hero, a noble construction worker prostrated by his own magnificent efforts.

In 'Dva tovarishcha' Valerii successfully seeks for his own identity and follows his chosen path away from literature to be a pilot. His father presents a less optimistic picture as a writer with aspirations, who has ended up writing sketches for the circus. His wife despises him for failing to realise his dream, and humiliates him in front of his son by reading from his novel, which has grown by seventeen pages in twelve years. He has aspired to climb out of the rut but has failed, possibly because he is in a relationship which saps all his creativity. So the philosophy is not fool-proof, and of the many called to be above average, it is a statistical impossibility for all to achieve their goal.¹⁰¹ What may be possible, however, is to alter the concept of what is to be regarded as average. This is where Voinovich's didactic brand of realism engages with a practical goal in a recognizably complex reality.

Of course, in the real world, this progression from the average towards the extraordinary may not be generally acknowledged. Voinovich, locked in combat with Ivan'ko in *Ivan'kiada*, is regarded as an idiot, and is described by his opponents as 'some Voinovich person, the husband of a pregnant woman'.¹⁰² For the individual, the choice to strive for one's potential sometimes has to function both as challenge and its own reward.

The Individual

The theme of individualism is closely connected with Voinovich's view of the hero in his work. A hero may manifest his individualism by his unwillingness to conform, by his choice of friendships, by his transparency before others, or by his appearance and unusual skills. The growth in awareness of individual psychology in the literature of the sixties and seventies has already been observed, and Bayley's interpretation of the importance of the individual in 'Khochu byt'

¹⁰¹ Except, of course, in the mythical American town of *Lake Wobegon*, 'where all the women are strong, all the men are good-looking, and all the children are above average'. Garrison Keillor, Public Broadcasting Service, USA. *Lake Wobegon Days*, (New York: Viking Penguin, 1985).

¹⁰² 'Ivan'kiada', p.165; *The Ivankiad*, p.66.

chestnym' has been noted. This development reflects not only the reality of Soviet society but also the preoccupation of many writers at this time, marginalized and isolated by the Union of Writers, and branded as dissidents for their views.

D. Pospelovsky points out the erroneousess of the word 'dissent' in its Western interpretation of a peculiarly Soviet phenomenon: 'The term presupposes a dialogue between a dominant and a dissenting opinion. There can be no question of such dialogue when 'dissidents' are dealt with administratively and when the official 'opinion' is an administrative compulsion allowing no individual interpretation or deviation.'¹⁰³ So the appellation 'dissident' is bestowed by the state on individuals whether or not they are willing to be categorised in this way.

Voinovich began his writing career apolitically, and was gradually edged into the position of 'dissident' as his work became more satirical, and as he became more outspoken in his support of others. Speaking about the phenomenon of dissidence, he explains how sometimes people are branded dissidents by those who wish to underline their own compliance with the State. When a whole society behaves as if it has been hypnotised, it owes a debt of gratitude to those who stand up and disagree with the authorities, because it is just these people who preserve the honour and life of society. True 'dissidents', he suggests, are those who are hurt by the suffering of people they see. However, many take on the role simply for vanity, and to hear their name on foreign radio. Others attracted to the movement may be extremists prepared to sacrifice a great deal for the cause, but ready to abuse power should they get it.¹⁰⁴

However misleading the word 'dissident' may be, it reflects the circumstances of the times, when writers were forced out of *gosizdat* and into *samizdat* and *tamizdat* because of their work. Voinovich was not alone at the time in writing some works for publication at home, and others for the desk drawer or for publication abroad. It was natural, therefore, for the theme of the individual marching to the beat of a different drum to feature in his work. In the wake of

¹⁰³ D. Pospelovsky, 'From *Gosizdat* to *Samizdat* and *Tamizdat*', *Canadian Slavonic Papers*, 20.1 (March 1978), 44-62, (p.51).

¹⁰⁴ 'Iz russkoi literatury ia ne uezzhal nikuda' pp.248-249.

Stalin's death, the debate on literature had been brought sharply into focus by two essays: V. Pomerantsev's 'On Sincerity in Literature',¹⁰⁵ published in the Soviet Union and violently attacked by the critics, and Siniavsky's 'What is Socialist Realism?',¹⁰⁶ written in response and published in the USA.

Pomerantsev argued that great literature can only be produced by an author who is true to himself, motivated by sincerity, and free from ideological restraints. Edward Brown selects extracts to give the essence of Pomerantsev's article as follows: 'Sincerity is lacking in many novels and plays [. . .] People don't believe our writers because they varnish life [. . .] The habit of improving on reality has become deeply ingrained in Soviet writers. They have become their own best censors.'¹⁰⁷

Siniavsky, on the other hand, saw post-Stalinist socialist realism as a discredited form after the uses to which it had been put, and envisaged the future of Russian literature as an area far removed from reality: that of phantasmagoria.

Voinovich responded to both sides of the debate; writing documentary works infused with dreams and fantasy such as *Ivan'kiada* and phantasmagoric novels based on historical fact such as the *Chonkin* series, although the latter are scarcely more fantastic in content than the former, given the absurdities of Soviet reality.

But whether Voinovich concentrated on reality or the fantastic, his works all feature a new type of hero: an individual who in some way is a microcosm of his society, reflecting many of the dilemmas of the time. This psychological orientation towards the individual hero is achieved by a conversational narrative tone, sometimes in the first person, sometimes through a confiding narrator using the *skaz* technique, 'a sympathetic device, in which the narrator is not an alien individual disparaged by the author, but rather a surrogate for him'.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁵ V. Pomerantsev, 'Ob iskrennosti v literature', *Novyi mir*, 12 (1953), 218-245.

¹⁰⁶ Terts, *What is Socialist Realism?* (New York: Pantheon Books, Random House, 1960); 'Chto takoe socialisticheskii realizm', *Fantasticheskii mir Abrama Terts'a* (New York: Inter-Language Literary Associates, 1967), pp.401-446.

¹⁰⁷ Edward Brown, *Russian Literature Since the Revolution* (London: 1969), pp.241-242.

¹⁰⁸ Deming Brown, *Soviet Russian Literature Since Stalin*, p.149.

Voinovich's language employs the rhythms of everyday colloquial speech and slang, and his use of dialogue gives expression to the doubts and opinions of his protagonists. His heroes often stand out from the crowd by eccentricities in their choice of hobbies or clothing, features which are used by the author in their characterisation; and they are all distinguished by a strong sense of self.

The autobiographical sketch 'Diadia Volodia' is set in a workers' hostel in Moscow in 1953, where the young Voinovich, narrator of the tale, shares a room with seven other men, including diadia Volodia. The eponymous hero is set apart from the common herd by his liking for drink and drama, and his unusual ability to play the guitar, a skill which has cost him months of endeavour and is very limited in its application, but which is evidently part of his statement of identity. Samokhin of 'Kem ia mog by stat'' distinguishes himself from the rest of the workforce by his demonstrations of strength, bending a crowbar around his neck and carrying heavy weights unaided. The carpenter in 'Rasstoianie v polkilometra' has greater talents than he can exercise in Klimashovka, and to compensate he eccentrically names all the objects he crafts and converses with them.

Valerii of 'Dva tovarishcha' is another hero who refuses to be diverted by family or friends, and he states his individuality partially by his choice of clothing. Secondary characters in this story are also frequently distinguished by their clothing. Valerii is first seen as one of a group of naked men being examined for military service by a medical commission. The doctor is characterised only by her yellow rubber gloves, and the members of the commission by their clothes, teeth and hair. The oldest has seen thousands of naked men and is profoundly bored by the spectacle, while the young major optimistically sees the potential for heroic service behind every shivering figure.¹⁰⁹ The young men are stripped to their very essence, and the rest of the story makes frequent mention of characters' clothes as if they were symbols of a person's image, although the reality rarely lives up to the image. When Valerii emerges from the examination, his former friend Tolik is swallowing lighted cigarettes for the amusement of the crowd. Tolik is the height of sartorial outlandishness in yellow boots and a blue plastic mackintosh, with his red

¹⁰⁹ 'Dva tovarishcha', pp.85-86.

fringe sticking out from under his cap. When Tolik visits Valerii at home, he wears a suit and tie, which impresses Valerii's mother and grandmother, women who are always trying to control Valerii's eccentric and careless dress sense.¹¹⁰ His grandmother is dressed in apron and glasses, although one assumes this is not all.¹¹¹ On one occasion, Valerii threatens to go out in a skirt because his grandmother has hidden his trousers to keep him at home.¹¹² When his mother sets off on a mission to retrieve her son's papers after he has signed up without her permission, she dresses in a suit with a semi-transparent blouse, perhaps seeking to indicate her authority as mother whilst acknowledging her weak position as female supplicant.¹¹³ Lest the reader should miss the significance which the narrator jestingly gives to clothing, Tolik gives us a further clue when he is sparring verbally with Polia. She asks whether he considers dolphins to be intelligent beings, and he contends that they are not, since they do not wear swimming trunks.¹¹⁴ Commenting elsewhere on this dialogue, Voinovich regrets that some of his readers have complained that he makes his heroes appear stupid. His aim, on the contrary, is to show the natural reactions of natural people like Tolik, whose comment about the dolphins could be interpreted as stupid, but could also be seen as a paradox with a natural idea behind it, since if dolphins really were intelligent they might be expected to have developed some of the attributes of a material culture, such as swimming trunks.¹¹⁵

Clothing, then, like footwear, can be used to present an image to the world. This is sometimes misleading, and may conceal the lack or confusion of true personality, or may reveal features of an individual before his speech and actions confirm the reader's analysis. Characters who dress with inappropriate smartness or in showy uniforms or boots are often seen to betray an inner emptiness, while those who dress carelessly or inadequately may be those whose sense of self and

¹¹⁰ 'Dva tovarishcha', p.94.

¹¹¹ 'Dva tovarishcha', p.89.

¹¹² 'Dva tovarishcha', pp.118-119.

¹¹³ 'Dva tovarishcha', p.121.

¹¹⁴ 'Dva tovarishcha', p.101.

¹¹⁵ 'O sovremennosti i istorii', *Rossia*, 2 (1975), 228-235, (pp.231-232).

inner worth does not need bolstering by outward appearances.

Perhaps the most obvious example of this is Koba in 'V krugu družei', whose perception of reality is grossly distorted. When he hears of his friend's treachery he retreats to his secret room, discards his pipe and moustache, pulls off his boots and undoes his trousers.¹¹⁶ From great and feared genius he is transformed in the mirror into 'a pitiable moustacheless old man [...] Mechanically rubbing his scrawny knees, the old man was sitting on an iron bed, his pants at his ankles'.¹¹⁷ Confused by the reflection, Koba wonders if it is his father, himself or the hangman, and shoots it in a rage. When the cleaning lady calls the next morning she finds him slumped on the bed in a state of undress. Reports have it that she took his trousers off and tucked him up, but the narrator doubts the veracity of this:

Supporters of the pro-Kobaist line in our historical scholarship, while not denying the existence of the old woman, doubt that she actually removed Comrade Koba's pants, which they consider unremovable. These scholars point out that just as Comrade Koba was born in a generalissimo's uniform, he lived his life in it as well, without ever having once removed it. The adherents of the anti-Kobaist line, on the other hand, maintain that Comrade Koba was born naked but that his body was covered with thick fur. From a distance his contemporaries mistook this fur for a common soldier's overcoat or a generalissimo's uniform.¹¹⁸

This sequence of impressions, describing the great leader consecutively as pathetic old man, unassailable icon and wild animal, lead the reader to conclude that this is a figure entirely without essence: a mere shell whose status is formed by his uniform, and who is so unsure of his own identity that he shoots his own reflection.¹¹⁹

When a man is nothing naked and everything clothed, questions are raised about his identity.

On the other hand, Voinovich's heroes, from Valerii in his skirt to Chonkin

¹¹⁶ 'V krugu družei', p.186; 'A Circle of Friends', p.204.

¹¹⁷ 'V krugu družei', p.187; 'A Circle of Friends', p.205.

¹¹⁸ 'V krugu družei', p.190; 'A Circle of Friends', p.208.

¹¹⁹ 'V krugu družei', pp.188-189; 'A Circle of Friends', p.206.

in his holey boots, may be people whose dress-sense leaves much to be desired but who are distinguished from their fellows by their naked strength of character. This is not to say that they are unwavering in their individualism. Indeed many of them make mistakes and misjudgments, but in the end their integrity survives. Except perhaps for Altynnik, the hero of 'Putem vzaimnoi perepiski', who so lacks identity that he depends on others to supply it. To impress his penfriends he sends photographs of himself wearing someone else's badge, or even photos of students taken from the bulletin board. His letters are full of fantasies, and he judges other people entirely by their appearance: a dangerous principle, as he is to learn. Yet for all his weaknesses, Altynnik engages our sympathy because his punishment far outweighs the crimes of having an underdeveloped sense of self and a flimsy grasp of honesty.

Perhaps Vera Figner, alone among Voinovich's heroes and heroines, is characterised by an unwavering strength of will which makes no mistakes and perfectly understands its own destiny from the start. But she is a socialist realist heroine, a pure flame of resolution, unswayed by opposition or circumstances, and because of this rather saintly quality she fails to attract the reader's sympathy. If, instead of deliberately missing the point in order to make an ideologically sound work, Voinovich had developed the book to draw parallels with contemporary Soviet life, and if he had been allowed to use his chosen title for the work - 'Dereviannoe iabloko svobody', in reference to Vera Figner's eventual post-revolutionary experience of an all too-relative freedom, she might have been a more sympathetic and less idealised heroine.¹²⁰

Love, Sex and Marriage

This theme appears throughout Voinovich's work, from the opening scene of 'My zdes' zhivem' in which San'ka and Lizka discuss men and their attempts to ensnare them. Lizka is a pragmatic romantic, willing to be swept off her feet by anyone who will play the part of ardent lover and provide a home, and once she

¹²⁰ 'A vy znaete, kakoi on?', p.44.

attains her goal she slips happily into the role of weak woman and refuses to help lift the furniture.¹²¹ San'ka, on the other hand, is more single-minded in her affections, and although she is swayed for a while by Vadim's charms, her loyalties remain with Goshka.

The three men come to love with very different attitudes: Vadim has learned all his romantic notions from books, is unconvincing, and lacks follow-through; Arkasha is simply Lizka's pawn and status-symbol; and only Goshka is genuinely in love, and expresses his feelings with the gauche naturalness shared by many of Voinovich's heroes. Towards the end of the story, Anatolii says that he believes Goshka could have achieved some great exploit, but Goshka diffidently regrets that 'even with San'ka I couldn't be a man'.¹²² However, he has not lost hope of righting the relationship, and although his ability to shape his own destiny is as yet limited, he has formed the philosophy to carry it through when he is more mature. Although he aspires to romantic love, he still believes in individual responsibility, and saves Tiul'kin's wife from the punishment which justly falls on her husband, reasoning that she is not responsible for his wrongdoing.¹²³

'Diadia Volodia' shows a very different picture of man's attitude to woman, in which the hero, under the influence of alcohol, frequently pesters the girls in the hostel.¹²⁴ The manageress, a strong woman who will stand no nonsense, rebukes him rather as a mother might rebuke a child, and his response is in the same key. As the story progresses, it becomes clear that he responds to women either as maternal authority-figures or as toys to bolster his ego and satisfy his sexual demands. He brings girlfriends to the hostel and makes love to them in front of his room-mates: one is a toothless old crone and one is a 'princess' who loved him in his youth, but who sees him more realistically now.¹²⁵ Which all goes to prove, as far as he is concerned, that women cannot be trusted. He marries briefly, but his wife clearly fits into the category of maternal authority-figure, because after three

¹²¹ 'My zdes' zhivem', p.71.

¹²² 'My zdes' zhivem', p.70.

¹²³ 'My zdes' zhivem', p.69.

¹²⁴ 'Diadia Volodia', pp.199-200; 'Uncle Volodya' *In Plain Russian: Stories*, p.235.

¹²⁵ 'Diadia Volodia', p.206; 'Uncle Volodya', pp.241-242.

days he is back, incensed that she wanted some of his drinking money for other purposes.¹²⁶ When he dies it is the motherly hostel manageress who pays for most of his funeral wreath.

This pattern of men behaving badly, drinking heavily, and wanting to be by turns either indulged or controlled by women, is a painful reflection of parts of Soviet society; and Voinovich faithfully represents the stresses of a world with no privacy and, moreover, a demographic disadvantage to a woman in search of a good man.

‘Khochu byt’ chestnym’, with its rather more likeable hero, provides further evidence of this disturbed social pattern. Samokhin’s mother is manipulative, clearly disappointed in her son, and accomplished at inducing guilt in him.¹²⁷ For consolation, Samokhin dreams of his ideal woman Rosa, long dead, and imagines his life had she lived.¹²⁸ Meanwhile, ‘out of inertia’ he carries on a relationship with Klava, a middle-aged woman who gets her way by inspiring pity and guilt: an irresistible cocktail to a man of his background.¹²⁹ She is a romantic, always trying to apply the themes of her extensive reading to her relationship with Samokhin, but unfortunately he has not read the same books and fails to respond appropriately. When he finds she is pregnant he feels obliged to marry her, but is alarmed by the gulf between her and his imagined Rosa, but rationalises this emotion and thinks resignedly: ‘What was Klava guilty of? Of being worse than Rosa? But who knew what Klava was like at eighteen and what Rosa might have become if she’d lived and her life had turned out like Klava’s.’¹³⁰ To distract himself he goes out for the evening with the flirtatious Zoia from the cafeteria, but she too is soon sighing and talking of love, and he flees.¹³¹ Drink proves to be no more effective a solace.

After Samokhin’s collapse, Klava visits him faithfully in hospital and longs

¹²⁶ ‘Diadia Volodia’, p.209; ‘Uncle Volodya’, p.246.

¹²⁷ ‘Khochu byt’ chestnym’, pp.8-9; ‘What I Might Have Been’, pp.11-12.

¹²⁸ ‘Khochu byt’ chestnym’, p.20; ‘What I Might Have Been’, p.28.

¹²⁹ ‘Khochu byt’ chestnym’, p.27; ‘What I Might Have Been’, p.38.

¹³⁰ ‘Khochu byt’ chestnym’, p.40; ‘What I Might Have Been’, p.56.

¹³¹ ‘Khochu byt’ chestnym’, p.42; ‘What I Might Have Been’, p.59.

to care for him at home. He resists, but eventually concedes that reality is far removed from the ideal and muses: 'Maybe that's what real love is, changing someone's bedpan.'¹³² On this melancholy note he comes to terms with his mid-life crisis, and allows that although idealism may be applied to one's own integrity, this is inappropriate on behalf of other people. The voice of the author here preaches obliquely through his narrator, urging the reader to take responsibility for what can be changed, and never mind the rest. Once again, the hero forms a philosophy which will allow him expression in a culture discouraging of individualism, whose women are, as he perceives it, predatory and demanding. The only good woman, it seems, is a dead woman, because she alone allows a man his illusions.

Ochkin, of 'Rasstoianie v polkilometra' is another man living with a wife who might be his mother. She sends him out on an errand, scolds him when he returns, berating him for wasting good money on wine, then feeds him and goes out to work in the vegetable garden while he sits quietly with his soup.¹³³ Katia has always done the man's work around the house,¹³⁴ while he has spent his life avoiding it, preferring to live in work camps to working on the *kolkhoz* at home. Katia has become used to running her own domestic economy, and treats her husband's care as one more job. She is such an automatic nurturer that even when he is dead she covers his corpse with her coat.¹³⁵ The women in this story are workers and providers, while the men idly drink, gossip and look for someone to take care of them. Lekha, delayed by the funeral, complains inwardly that if he had managed to catch his train 'in three hours he'd have been home sitting at the table and his mother would be fussing over him, serving him good little things to eat'.¹³⁶

'V Kupe'¹³⁷ is a fragment in which the narrator shares a sleeping compartment with a woman on a train journey. His behaviour is above reproach,

¹³² 'Khochu byt' chestnym', p.53; 'What I Might Have Been', p.75.

¹³³ 'Rasstoianie v polkilometra', p.55; 'A Distance of Half a Kilometer', p.79.

¹³⁴ 'Rasstoianie v polkilometra', p.64; 'A Distance of Half a Kilometer', pp.91-92.

¹³⁵ 'Rasstoianie v polkilometra', p.65; 'A Distance of Half a Kilometer', p.94.

¹³⁶ 'Rasstoianie v polkilometra', p.68; 'A Distance of Half a Kilometer', p.99.

¹³⁷ 'V kupe', pp.69-71.

but she perceives him as predatory and dangerous and spends the night awake, with the light on and the door open, while he sleeps fitfully, dreaming of her ideal world in which shops, transport, even cities and planets would be sexually segregated. He regrets the energy she has wasted on the defence of her unassailed virtue, and the inconvenience she has caused him. She fits neither into the category of maternal type nor seductive manipulator, and therefore she is simply an illogical mystery to him, and he wastes little sympathy on her, even making fun of her with a suggestive comment: 'She had blue circles under her eyes. You might have thought that she had been up to God knows what all night.'¹³⁸ Whoever the narrator may be, he is more attuned to the potential comedy of the situation than to sympathy for his disturbed companion, and it seems that this alienation probably has something to do with the fact that she is not conforming to one of his stereotypes, and it is a psychology to which he cannot make the imaginative leap.

The hero of 'Dva tovarishcha' is a young man whose adolescence is complicated by the fearsomely restrictive matriarchy in which he lives. He says of his female relatives: 'I had no girlfriend. I only had my Mum and my grandma, who for their complete peace of mind wanted all the processes of my private life to take place before their eyes. At nineteen I came to realise that the restriction of one's personal liberty is a heavy burden, even if it is the result of someone's boundless love'.¹³⁹ It is only when he is kissed by Tat'iana that he is able to forget about his mother, grandmother and himself'.¹⁴⁰ Yet he does not pretend to understand about love: embarrassed by witnessing a scene in which his stepmother bullies and humiliates his father, he remembers a schoolfriend who cut his wrists for love, and is baffled.¹⁴¹ He cannot imagine feeling passionate love or hatred for anyone, and the best he can do is to say that he loves his mother and grandmother in spite of everything. He fails to understand why his father has chosen to live miserably with a woman who does not love him, especially since he loved his son and had got on

¹³⁸ 'V kupe', p.61.

¹³⁹ 'Dva tovarishcha', p.89.

¹⁴⁰ 'Dva tovarishcha', p.107.

¹⁴¹ 'Dva tovarishcha', p.134.

well with his first wife. This remains an unanswered question for him, but he begins to grasp at autonomy when he leaves home to join the army, fighting off the avalanche of food and warm cardigans which his mother and grandmother want to bestow on him.¹⁴² This is not so much the story of a grown man trying to relate to women as mother-figures or seductresses, but rather a tale of a boy trying to gain sufficient freedom to set his own agenda for relationships in the future.

Whilst writing 'Dva tovarishcha' Voinovich was also working on 'V krugu druzei', which makes no claims to psychological character development in its caricature of Stalin, but it is interesting to note in passing some of Koba's distorted attitudes to gender. He occasionally sleeps with his cleaning woman, but the manner of their intercourse is significant: it merely interrupts her work, not a word is ever exchanged, and he is unsure whether it is even the same woman each time.¹⁴³ When he suffers his nervous breakdown, she undresses him and tucks him up in bed in a travesty of nurture before exploiting their 'relationship' shamelessly: selling a note he has issued her entitling her to food, and buying a house and cow with the proceeds.¹⁴⁴ His memories of childhood include a sad mother and a father who used to abuse him physically.¹⁴⁵ He longs to take revenge on his father, and shoots the image in the mirror in a confused gesture of patricide, suicide and defence of the nation.¹⁴⁶ For amusement he cuts up pictures of industrial leaders and sticks parts of men and women together to make diverting images.¹⁴⁷ In the context of who this is - the great scientist and architect of souls - this has a particularly sinister ring. When Zhbanov is late because his wife is dying in hospital, Koba again shows a terrifying absence of proportion, complaining that 'some woman's whim means more to him than being with his friends'.¹⁴⁸ In his paranoia he has constructed a barren microcosm where men toady to him through

¹⁴² 'Dva tovarishcha', p.143.

¹⁴³ 'V krugu druzei', p.166; 'A Circle of Friends', p.182.

¹⁴⁴ 'V krugu druzei', pp.189-190; 'A Circle of Friends', pp.207-208.

¹⁴⁵ 'V krugu druzei', p.167; 'A Circle of Friends', p.183.

¹⁴⁶ 'V krugu druzei', p.188; 'A Circle of Friends', p.207.

¹⁴⁷ 'V krugu druzei', p.168; 'A Circle of Friends', p.184.

¹⁴⁸ 'V krugu druzei', p.169; 'A Circle of Friends', p.185.

words and actions, and women exist simply to clean his room and fulfil his sexual needs in silence. It would not occur to him that people might have relationships of mutual love and trust, and this attitude resonates with the horrors of the purges where families were torn apart in the middle of the night by impersonal figures in uniforms who knew best where people should be taken.

‘Vladychitsa’ and *Stepen’ doveriia* have leading heroines, but both Man’ka and Vera Figner are shallow and unconvincing characters compared with Voinovich’s heroes. Man’ka is an ordinary girl in love, living with a mother who rules the home in a system of licensed violence, threatening the drunken father with a beating himself if he will not beat his daughter into compliance. Man’ka marries the spirit according to custom, but this is no physical marriage and her desire for her lover eventually leads to her downfall.

Psychologically the story is unconvincing, although allegorically it draws powerful parallels with the shamanistic system of power exercised by the Soviets, which, as Hosking writes, in some respects resembled a religion. ‘It claimed to understand the whole of human nature and indeed, in the form of ‘dialectical materialism’, the whole of the universe. It was backed by rituals and ceremonials that were partially reminiscent of religious ones.’¹⁴⁹ Within this system, Voinovich suggests, power was not vested in the figure-head of the ideology, but rather in the circle of high priests that surrounded the leader: the political leaders and heads of the armed forces and security services. The Sovereign is simply a puppet, existing to provide a focus for the people, and if necessary, to be a sacrificial scapegoat. Given that every Soviet leader has been a man, why does Voinovich choose a woman for the role of Sovereign? If the spirit represents the teachings of Marx and Lenin, and the Sovereign their representative on earth, then the concept of the spirit having a wife is valid. But why not a female spirit and a male shaman? It is possible that Voinovich chose a female Sovereign to emphasise the qualities of naiveté and powerlessness which he wanted to attribute to the leadership.

When asked what quality he values most in women, Voinovich replied with

¹⁴⁹ Geoffrey A. Hosking, *A History of the Soviet Union* (revised edn.) (London: Fontana, 1990), p.221.

the word *pokladistost'*,¹⁵⁰ a term which embraces the ideas of amenability, adaptability and complaisance; and the femininity of the Sovereign perhaps indicates a view of women not unusual among men of his culture and generation. In the same way that male artists tend to idealise and spiritualise the female image, whilst women paint more realistically, from a position of inside knowledge, in Voinovich's work it would be true to say that the female characters are less convincing than his male figures. Mary Ellmann, writing of stereotypes in Western literature, lists the essential feminine characteristics as formlessness, passivity, instability, confinement, piety, materiality, spirituality, irrationality, and either compliancy as in the roles of whore, servant and mother, or incorrigibility as in the roles of shrew and witch.¹⁵¹ Applying this list to Voinovich's work, there are female characters which fit into all these stereotypes, but it is only Chonkin's Niura who transcends them and comes to life as a flesh-and-blood human being. Man'ka's two-dimensional portrayal makes it difficult for the reader to engage with her character, and this could be because 'Vladychitsa' is an allegory, but the same problem is encountered in *Stepen' doveriia*, in which a genuine historical character becomes an unconvincing socialist realist heroine, idealised and infallible with an almost religious sense of calling.

Vera Figner is young and pure; she demands a marriage of equality, and pursues her aims with a dedication which borders on the ruthless. Her husband, the bemused male narrator of the first part of the novel, follows her progress with hurt bewilderment, whilst the implied author enjoys a loftier understanding of the greatness of her vocation. Later the dullard husband disappears and an omniscient narrator takes over, elevating Vera's actions to the heights of a true socialist realist heroine. The reader has little access to the thoughts of this pure creature, glimpses no weakness or doubts with which to identify, and only once sees her afraid.¹⁵² Since most readers may be presumed not to enjoy the moral stature of a Vera Figner, this leaves a distance between reader and heroine which results in a sense of

¹⁵⁰ 'Liubliu zhizn' v epokhu reform', interview by Valerii Perevozchikov, *Sibirskaiia gazeta*, 36 (September 1993), 16.

¹⁵¹ Mary Ellmann, *Thinking about Women* (London: Virago, 1979), pp.56-145.

¹⁵² *Stepen' doveriia*, p.231.

watching a spectacle rather than a life.

Voinovich was overwhelmed by the amount of documentary material at his disposal for the writing of this book since Vera Figner had written seven tomes about herself, but he hit on the device of writing initially from the point of view of the husband in order to gain a little distance and to see his heroine from the side.¹⁵³ But satire is a feature which he deliberately suppresses in this novel, and it is as if the implied author takes the heroine as seriously as she takes herself. This is Voinovich apparently at his most compliant with the regime, trying to regain admittance to the world of *gosizdat*, whilst secretly nurturing *Pretendent na prestol*. He acknowledged this conflict later in emigration, saying: 'I decided to behave more cautiously and kept quiet for three years. I conducted myself loyally and did not sign any letters.' As a result *Stepen' doveriia* and a collection of stories were published, but this was a hollow victory since Voinovich 'did not want to write about ardent revolutionaries, but about bandy-legged Private Chonkin'.¹⁵⁴

It is perhaps in what is not said at the end of *Stepen' doveriia* that the real eloquence of the author is manifested: the story closes with Vera's death at the age of ninety in 1942, and the reader is aware that during a life spent in prison and exile, she has witnessed the Revolution, the First World War, famines, the rise of Stalinism, the purges, and the start of the Second World War. How many of her dreams, the reader wonders, could remain intact until her death?

Surely the most telling portrayal of the relationships and conflicts between men and women comes in 'Putem vzaimnoi perepiski', a tale of everyday country folk who brutally take possession of a naive urbanite who blunders into their matrimonial clutches. Young Altynnik is idealistic, and assumes that women will deal straightforwardly with him although he is not averse to deceiving them. In his first letter to Liudmila he claims that 'beauty and figure are qualities of a person that can be lost later in life, what I'm looking for is intelligence and character'.¹⁵⁵ What he is really looking for is sexual experience, because although he claims to be

¹⁵³ 'O sovremennosti i istorii', p.230.

¹⁵⁴ 'Voinovich o sebe', p.144.

¹⁵⁵ 'Putem vzaimnoi perepiski', p.72; 'From an Exchange of Letters', pp.103-104.

something of a connoisseur on the subject of women, his acquaintance with them has been limited to the epistolary form. Thinking aloud to the train conductor, he weighs up his chances of getting Liudmila into bed and wonders whether he would fare better with the lame girl further down the line who is more likely to 'take what comes or she might not even get that'.¹⁵⁶ When he sees Liudmila he realises that she has deceived him with her photograph, and the tables are turned as he finds himself in the position of young and vulnerable victim while she takes control on her own territory with her greater age and experience. Back at the house, she plies him with food and alcohol, and he becomes more optimistic: 'this was a real woman sitting in front of him, not some adolescent. She knew why people kiss and what you do after'.¹⁵⁷ But kissing is not what she has in mind: first she wants to share her thoughts on the subject of men, who would, apparently, all sell their own mothers for alcohol.¹⁵⁸ When the soldier attempts to move things towards a satisfactory conclusion, she responds passionately at first, pressing 'her breasts and knees up against Altinnik, shuddering and breathing heavily as if she were about to die from insane passion'.¹⁵⁹ Those breasts, traditionally a symbol of 'plenty, food, nutrition and, of course, desire'¹⁶⁰ are soon to become repellent to him, but the youth is as yet undeterred. Suddenly she ends the embrace as abruptly as she began it, claiming that 'all men are like dogs', and accusing him of trying to take advantage of her.¹⁶¹ At this, he speaks sternly to her about his time being limited and starts to put on his boots. Scared of her quarry evading her, she throws herself on him and steers him towards the bedroom. The scene resembles a romance between a cat and mouse, but poor Altynnik still thinks he has a chance, and does not make his escape. His fate is sealed. Unused to alcohol in the generous quantities of the village, he passes out and falls into the stereotype of drunken Soviet man about to be scolded, beaten or abused by Soviet woman. Although he

¹⁵⁶ 'Putem vzaimnoi perepiski', p.76; 'From an Exchange of Letters', p.110.

¹⁵⁷ 'Putem vzaimnoi perepiski', p.82; 'From an Exchange of Letters', p.119.

¹⁵⁸ 'Putem vzaimnoi perepiski', p.83; 'From an Exchange of Letters', p.121.

¹⁵⁹ 'Putem vzaimnoi perepiski', pp.84-85; 'From an Exchange of Letters', p.123.

¹⁶⁰ Bigas Luna, 'The Surreal Reign in Spain', *Guardian*, 11 July 1996, p.10.

¹⁶¹ 'Putem vzaimnoi perepiski', p.85; 'From an Exchange of Letters', pp.123-124.

remembers nothing the next morning, he gets his scolding and his next drink from Liudmila's mother, and the pattern is set.¹⁶² The oafish brother arrives with stories of a neighbouring wife-beater who has just died from drinking wood alcohol. These tales of Punch and Judy violence should alert Altynnik to the fact that life in the country is by no means so cosy as life in the army, but he is too inebriated to notice. The day continues with more vodka and beer, and hints from the family about marriage. Altynnik tries to joke his way out of it, but Liudmila reacts furiously with tears and bared breasts, and the drunken soldier promises to marry her although she seems more like a mother to him than a lover.¹⁶³ Yet what a brutal mother-figure she is, belying the 'official glorification of the Soviet family - with pedestaled maternity as its centerpiece' which constituted the official myth of the times.¹⁶⁴ The wedding is a mockery with Altynnik so intoxicated that he can barely stand, and the reception is marked by more alcohol and obscene dances. By the time Altynnik escapes from Kirzavod the sight of drink, mushroom *pirozhki* and his wife's bare breasts all make him equally nauseous. Safely back in the bosom of the army, he attempts to forget the whole nightmare, but the rapacious Liudmila tightens her grip with letters, threats, promises and more mushroom *pirozhki*. Her trump card is the baby she produces, and when this undeniable offering is reinforced by her revolting bared breast, so reminiscent of a *pirozhok*, and her hysterical tears, the combination induces nausea and total compliance from her husband who longs only to return home to his mother.¹⁶⁵

It is his fate never to escape from the shackles of marriage to a shrewish and fertile wife, endless children, miserable dependence on alcohol, and his mother-in-law's cooking. Liudmila had never desired an equal relationship with a man, nor even yet a nurturing relationship of a motherly wife to her younger husband. Instead, her 'wicked stepmother' methods and goals were bullying and

¹⁶² 'Putem vzaimnoi perepiski', pp.88-89; 'From an Exchange of Letters', p.130.

¹⁶³ 'Putem vzaimnoi perepiski', p.97; 'From an Exchange of Letters', p.141.

¹⁶⁴ Helena Goscilo, 'Mother as Mothra: Totalizing Narrative and Nurture in Petrushevskiaia', *A Plot of Her Own: The Female Protagonist in Russian Literature*, ed. by Sona Stephan Hoisington (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1995), pp.102-113 (p.113).

¹⁶⁵ 'Putem vzaimnoi perepiski', pp.116-119; 'From an Exchange of Letters', pp.171-175.

manipulation, using attributes which could be considered charms to terrorise Altynnik into submission in a horrible travesty of marriage, usurping his aspirations in favour of those of her teenage son. Hosking, commenting on this story, points out that the 'mixture of allure, cunning and brute force with which she ensnares her partner is in its own homely way reminiscent of the means used by the totalitarian state, and substitutes for love in holding the family together'.¹⁶⁶ Liudmila's household, with its dearth of adult males, its alcoholism, undisciplined behaviour and instability, could be seen as a microcosm of the Soviet state, with Liudmila at the helm: not as a weak woman being manipulated by men as in 'Vladychitsa', but as a powerful, incorrigible example of the shrew-witch stereotype, with her home-brew and magic mushrooms. Altynnik, showing many of the stereotypical qualities usually reserved for women, is formless, passive, compliant and irrational, and is violated by Liudmila as surely as ever woman was ravished. The disparity in their relative strength is compounded by the difference in their ages, and the child-like Altynnik is cruelly punished for his youthful dreams and deceptions in this horrible demythologisation of 'village prose' in which the traditional positive images of family life are inverted and negatively remythologized.

Or it is just possible to read the story differently, as D. Shtok attempts, suggesting that the reader's pity should be kept for Liudmila, who fell in love with Altynnik and cried quite naturally when he insulted her but did not force him to marry her, and who, at the end of the story, is left thrashing about like a fish on the ice, torn between work and home, with three small children and a shiftless husband.¹⁶⁷ This interpretation, making the blame for the marriage as mutual as the correspondence leading to it, is just feasible, but hardly less horrible for that.

Porter proposes a further reading which takes into account the impossibility of reaching any clear interpretation, and suggests that the story might even be seen as a 'good-natured parody of that recurrent motif in Russian literature of man

¹⁶⁶ Hosking, *Beyond Socialist Realism*, p.152.

¹⁶⁷ D. Shtok, 'Vybor puti', *Grani*, 32 (April-June 1976), 150-170 (p.161).

inviting his own punishment, and thus redeeming himself through suffering'.¹⁶⁸

The Power of the Word

Voinovich frequently exhorts the reader to take seriously the significance of words in human affairs, and to remember that what a person says or writes is able to change lives. Frequently, conversations mark the pivotal point of a story, and, even more often, letters bring about drastic changes for those who write or receive them. People's inner selves may be revealed or concealed by the words they choose, which sometimes illuminate and sometimes obscure the inner self. The most significant expression of identity is the signature, anticipating the moment when Chonkin signs his name on the cell wall, unable to think of anything more eloquent to write.¹⁶⁹ This has added significance in the context of the times in which an overheard conversation, letter, document of denunciation or signature could carry the power of life and death. Voinovich uses words in his plots sometimes portentously, sometimes humorously, in the many misunderstandings which complicate his characters' lives; but however they are used they are always handled with respect. After all, they are the stock in trade of the writer, and the more Voinovich wrote the more he became aware of the power of words to affect his own life, and the more he understood how fine is the line dividing life and art, reality and fantasy.

Reflecting in 1991, Voinovich recalled the evolution of his work from moralistic, traditional Soviet writing to humour, satire and the grotesque. He began as a realist in spite of warnings that he was writing too closely to life, and particularly enjoyed reading aloud to see when people laughed, since humour, he considers, is often simply a recognition of the truth by the reader. He did not deliberately become satirical; it was life which showed him satire, in events such as

¹⁶⁸ V. N. Voinovich, *Putem vzaimnoi perepiski*, ed. with Introduction and Notes by Robert Porter (London: Bristol Classical Press, 1996), p.xi.

¹⁶⁹ *Pretendent na prestol*, p.516; *Pretender to the Throne*, p.351.

those documented in *Ivan'kiada*.¹⁷⁰ Whilst his career may have begun with an interest in money and fame, his creative literary urge then developed to a point which eventually led to his emigration. Literature features prominently in his writing, those who read and write being divided into those who do so in a search for status, and those who are concerned with a philosophical understanding of the world around them.

Vadim the poet comes to Popovka ready to enrich people's lives with his muse, and is unimpressed by the cultural organiser's four sacks of collected essays: in a village where people move their lips whilst reading poetry silently, he feels his talent is wasted.¹⁷¹ Things are not much better in the nearby town where the couple who run the kindergarten have a large, well-stocked book cupboard, but are actually devious speculators.¹⁷² Literature does not always have the desired effect, and Voinovich takes the opportunity to stress the benefits of a natural and authentic existence over the falsity of a literary world-view with no experience behind it. The written word is nonetheless a powerful commitment, and when Goshka writes 'My zdes' zhivem' on the road sign he is making an important statement and is saying more than Vadim or than all Borodavka's sacks of literature. He may be too cautious to leave his signature, but he has made his mark on the world and has expressed a vital truth.

Samokhin is little influenced by formal literature, but the written word still plays a crucial part in his life. Letters from his mother and from his friend in Siberia have the power to change his world, and two of the women in his life are influenced by literature, although not for the better. Klava has countless books which she devours indiscriminately, and Samokhin comments that 'everything affected and artificial in her came from books'.¹⁷³ She talks in clichés, trying to mould Samokhin into the sort of romantic hero she reads about, and when she croons: 'I was thinking how good it is to know a man like you is always there by

¹⁷⁰ 'Iz russkoi literatury ia ne uezzhal nikuda', pp.245-247.

¹⁷¹ 'My zdes' zhivem', p.59.

¹⁷² 'My zdes' zhivem', p.62.

¹⁷³ 'Khochu byt' chestnym', p.27; 'What I Might Have Been', p.38.

my side', he responds with amazement: '*This* she says about *me*. Those books of hers do her no good.'¹⁷⁴ Zoia from the cafeteria also has a limited view of literature, collecting aphorisms into albums, so that when she has enough she will not need to read any more books.¹⁷⁵ Samokhin himself has little time for literature, which is not surprising in a world where brute force usually wins the day, and where one of the worst workers who cares only about food and money is nicknamed 'the Writer' simply because he is eccentric enough not to wear a hat in winter.¹⁷⁶ The journalist who writes an article on Samokhin is clearly working along the same romantic lines as Klava,¹⁷⁷ and once again it is down to the average man to seize the power of the written word to make sense of the world, and this Samokhin does by withholding his signature from the ready-typed inspection document. Here silence proves more eloquent than inappropriate words, and his gesture draws the sting from his confinement to the hospital bed while the journalist publishes fabrications about him.

The theme of literature runs through 'Dva tovarishcha' from start to finish. Valerii's father is an unsuccessful 'engineer of human souls', giving Valerii a realistic view of the trials of authorship. Tolik, on the other hand, sees writing as a passport to easy money since a poet earns a ruble per line.¹⁷⁸ Furthermore, literature can also be used to impress girls.¹⁷⁹ Valerii's grandmother reads the Bible, and Valerii likes the style, particularly the use of capital letters relating to God and Jesus, which he thinks would fit well into a narrative of his life.¹⁸⁰ His mother prefers Antoine de St. Exupéry, and weeps copiously as she reads *Le petit prince*.¹⁸¹ Trying to fail an exam, Valerii accidentally writes an excellent essay on flying, and is patronised by a teacher who writes horribly contrived poetry.¹⁸² In

174 'Khochu byt' chestnym', p.30; 'What I Might Have Been', p.42.

175 'Khochu byt' chestnym', p.41; 'What I Might Have Been', p.58.

176 'Khochu byt' chestnym', p.6; 'What I Might Have Been', p.8.

177 'Khochu byt' chestnym', p.52; 'What I Might Have Been', p.76.

178 'Dva tovarishcha', p.95.

179 'Dva tovarishcha', p.99.

180 'Dva tovarishcha', pp.117-118.

181 'Dva tovarishcha', p.93.

182 'Dva tovarishcha', pp.128-129.

the end, he has to resort to using German in an English exam to get the poor mark he needs to escape the institute which his mother has chosen for him. Listening to the radio in the park, Valerii hears someone reading Pushkin's *Mozart and Salieri* as if they were reading the news from TASS. This broadcast, presumably intended to be culturally enlightening, has the sorry effect of elevating the prosaic and political whilst debasing the literary.¹⁸³ When Valerii and Tolik meet at the end of the story, Tolik has become a 'genuine' poet complete with poetical stance and voice, and knowledge gained from reading 'do it yourself' guides to poetry writing.¹⁸⁴ He has also, incidentally, proved himself to be totally lacking in integrity, and the former friends part: Tolik waxing lyrical in farewell; Valerii waving noncommittally from his position of moral superiority.¹⁸⁵ In an absurd society literature may be wrongly interpreted as a token of integrity, and the honest but less articulate aviator who wants to serve his country is cast in the role of uninitiated philistine.

'V krugu druzei' is rich in satirical examples of ritual language used to flatter and deceive. Koba has built a society where no-one dares speak or write the truth, and consequently has no idea what anyone thinks, adding to his paranoia. When he has his 'conversation' with the repulsive figure in the mirror, his tormentor spells out to him the dilemma he has brought about:

Who's going to support you now? The people? They hate you. Your so-called comrades? Comrades, that's a laugh. A bunch of court flatterers and flunkies. They'd be the first to sell you out as soon as they got the chance. In the old days, at least jesters and saints were allowed to tell the truth. But who'll tell the truth now? You demanded lies; now you can choke on them. Everybody lies now - your newspapers, your public speakers, your spies, your informers.¹⁸⁶

This is a society where no-one dares to be honest, not even the jesters and saints who were once able to speak without fear to the tsar himself. This provides a

¹⁸³ 'Dva tovarishcha', p.135.

¹⁸⁴ 'Dva tovarishcha', p.151.

¹⁸⁵ 'Dva tovarishcha', p.152.

¹⁸⁶ 'V krugu druzei', p.187; 'A Circle of Friends', pp.205-206.

phenomenal challenge to ordinary, natural people who want to live instinctively, allowing their words to be an integrated and true reflection of their inner selves.

Close in theme to 'V krugu družei', 'Vladychitsa' begins with Man'ka debunking the rhetoric of the selection ceremony, before making sacrifices in the interests of her people's security of mind and becoming at the same time the manipulator and the manipulated. When all is lost, and she has been betrayed by those whom she thought to be her protectors, she briefly becomes articulate again and exposes the system as she faces certain death, before subsiding into silent acquiescence.

Stepen' doveriia presents literature in a slightly different light, since within the culture of the developing anti-tsarist revolution, literature was a means of educating the masses, and its dissemination was considered a most dangerous crime.¹⁸⁷ Written within a culture of censorship, about resistance to a previous culture of censorship now considered ideologically spurious, *Stepen' doveriia* provides a vehicle to raise questions about the freedom of the individual to choose what to read and write. The written word in Vera Figner's time was as dangerous as it was during the purges, and when an arrested person asked for pen and paper in the prison cell it was a sign of readiness to commit himself and others beyond the point of no return.¹⁸⁸

But the power of literature in all its ambivalence is perhaps best seen in 'Literator Skurlatskii',¹⁸⁹ a chapter expanding the story of the deluded Skurlatskii from *Stepen' doveriia*. The man of letters shows all the characteristics of an author apart from the fact that he is unable to write anything at all, and when he finds a letter from the revolutionaries in a style which his sleepy wife declares to be admirable, he sees his chance for fame and claims the authorship for himself. Never mind that this leads to his arrest and incarceration in an asylum: he has achieved his fantasy of being a great writer.

For Vera Figner, testifying at her trial, literature has failed society because

¹⁸⁷ *Stepen' doveriia*, pp.145-146.

¹⁸⁸ *Stepen' doveriia*, p.260.

¹⁸⁹ 'Literator Skurlatskii', pp.14-15.; 'Skurlatsky, Man of Letters', *In Plain Russian*, pp.209-227.

of censorship: she would not have chosen the path of violence if other options had been open to her, but ‘our press, as is well known, is not free, so to think about spreading ideas by means of the printed word is impossible’.¹⁹⁰

The spectre of the censor’s scissors also hangs over ‘Proisshestvie v “Metropole”’, in which Voinovich the narrator spars with KGB agents on the subject of literature and the options for publishing both in the Soviet Union and abroad. During the course of the conversation he spells out his attitude towards writers in the following way: ‘I say that struggling with a great writer is even more stupid than with a windmill. The more you attack him the higher you build the pedestal under him.’¹⁹¹ He claims that literature must not be treated as a commodity with short-term goals, and cannot be considered to belong to any particular regime, serving instead whoever claims it. Censorship acts against the very powers which impose it: a statement equally true for Vera Figner as for writers under Soviet power. Threats are powerless to prevent writers from expressing themselves, merely providing them with new material, and obstacles placed in his path, Voinovich claims, have only served to encourage his evolution from irony to satire.¹⁹² When the whole affair is over, he is left to reflect with satisfaction on the immortality of Chonkin, who will live on regardless of what may happen to his creator.

Ivan'kiada was written when life got in the way of art, and addresses the idea of literature as job, status symbol and way of playing the rules of the game for personal gain. The hapless Voinovich finds himself in competition with Ivan'ko, a man with more influence than literary talent. In a blend of fantasy and reality, the reader is admitted to the inner sanctum of the Writers’ Union, and witnesses scenes of breathtaking distortion and corruption. Much in this novel depends on the word: spoken or written, broken or binding, but binding only on those without power. By some uncharacteristic quirk of fate, the little man wins the fight against a powerful bureaucracy: a feat which he would not have accomplished if he had joined battle

¹⁹⁰ *Stepen' doveriia*, p.373.

¹⁹¹ ‘Proisshestvie v “Metropole”’, *Kontinent*, p.62; ‘Incident at the Metropole’, p.11.

¹⁹² ‘Proisshestvie v “Metropole”’, pp.82-83; ‘Incident at the Metropole’, pp.30-31.

with them on their own terms of doublespeak.

'Putem vzaimnoi perepiski', more than any other work, illustrates the dangers of the all-powerful word to trap and bind. Altynnik, who uses letter-writing to give free rein to his imagination, assumes Liudmila to be a good deal more honest than he is.¹⁹³ Having committed himself in his letter to intentions of matrimony, he sets in course a sequence of events which he is powerless to arrest. Alcohol, that muddler of thoughts and words, plays its part, and after his wedding 'he has no recollection of their setting the paper in front of him, placing his fingers around the pen, and guiding his hand'.¹⁹⁴ However hard he may try to forget, his signature has bound him to Liudmila in a way which disregards the total absence of mutual feeling, and the ties are further reinforced by the torrent of words which she sends through the mail to him, and finally to his major, to force him to accept his responsibilities.¹⁹⁵ Her brother's promises to secure his freedom will clearly not be honoured, and Altynnik's protests are by this stage purely for effect; he has no more control than a puppet, and resigns himself to his fate.

The crucial theme of the power of words to express the inner self is closely connected with the issue of integrity in Voinovich's work. The individual is faced with choices in life; to be himself, and like the fools and saints of old to speak the truth; or to play the game of doublespeak and to believe no-one's words, not even one's own. This is a powerful challenge at any time and in any culture, but perhaps even more so for a society where it had become second nature to present two different personae to the world: one for the street and another for the kitchen table. Literature, which has the power to use words for good or ill, is a two-edged sword in the hand of the writer, and its responsibilities, Voinovich argues, should not be taken lightly.

193 'Putem vzaimnoi perepiski', p.72; 'From an Exchange of Letters', p.104.

194 'Putem vzaimnoi perepiski', p.99; 'From an Exchange of Letters', p.145.

195 'Putem vzaimnoi perepiski', p.110; 'From an Exchange of Letters', p.162.

Morality

Woven into the fabric of all Voinovich's work of the sixties and seventies is a didactic theme: that of how people ought to live, facets of which have already been considered. 'My zdes' zhivem' emphasises the importance of living an authentic individual life, and of being honest in dealings with other people. 'Diadia Volodia' is a study in group dynamics which highlights the same need, and the other autobiographical sketches explore the phenomenon of 'the rules of the game' and how individualism may be preserved in a tightly regulated culture. 'Khochu byt' chestnym' is the story of an average man who is pushed into a corner once too often by the lazy pretences of his world, and who rebels just in time, insisting at least on the right to be himself, even if that self is unexceptional. 'Rasstoianie v polkilometra' is a modest account of one man's death, and a warning to take life's opportunities when they are presented, whilst 'V kupe' warns of the energy which may be wasted by taking fantasy too seriously. 'Dva tovarishcha' is a more overt search for a philosophy, dealing with friendship, betrayal, self-deceit and cowardice and the search for identity. 'V krugu družei' deals with deceit, flattery, betrayal and the power of lies to distort and destroy, and 'Vladychitsa' also shows the awful dangers of deceit and dissemblance with systems of power. *Stepen' doveriia* explores motives of courage and honour, exalts personal integrity, and deplores cowardice and duplicity. 'Proisshestvie v "Metropole"' and *Ivan'kiada* confront the theme of conflict between individual and state, and consider ways in which the individual may preserve his integrity and lay claim to immortality by remaining true to his calling. Finally, 'Putem vzaimnoi perepiski' is a moral tale about the dangers to the individual of being less than honest, and shows how the basically decent Altynnik is rendered vulnerable to an appalling fate by his one flaw - the tendency to trifle with words.

All these works seem designed to point the way through the moral maze to honest seekers for truth. If it were not for their sociological insight, colloquial charm and barbed wit, their didacticism could become burdensome to the reader,

particularly as so many of them are conveyed through intrusive narrators, sometimes in the first-person and often omniscient. This is a danger with which Voinovich comes to terms in his later work, but at this early stage he was almost thinking aloud as he formulated a moral code.

Later, in emigration, he commented on his policy of describing life as he sees it, saying: 'I am a describer. I'm not a teacher like Tolstoy or Solzhenitsyn. [...] My duty is to describe life as it is, not as seen through a lens.'¹⁹⁶ There is a thread of didacticism running through his work, since the satirist is in many ways a teacher, but any expression of this sort has been manifested in a different mode from Solzhenitsyn's. The year 1962 saw Solzhenitsyn's story of Ivan Denisovich's struggle for survival in a labour camp, the same year in which Voinovich's Samokhin strove to prove his integrity on the building site. For a writer to have spent time in camp endowed him with a certain status and authority within the literary community, and it was perhaps inevitable that Voinovich, like all the new literary talent of the period, should have had a heightened awareness of Solzhenitsyn's overshadowing presence and should have chosen to demonstrate his talents in ways which could not be compared with the writings of the cult figure. One of Voinovich's major themes has always been 'the struggle of the free personality against manipulation by society',¹⁹⁷ and this has applied equally to his place in Soviet society and later in the worlds of dissident and émigré literature. Writing up to 1980 in and for a culture where clear answers had always been provided to the questions which no-one had yet asked, Voinovich's plea was for a new view of reality, undistorted by preconceptions and ideological considerations: the vision of an individual person leading an authentically individual life.

¹⁹⁶ 'An Interview with Vladimir Voinovich. The Newly-exiled Russian Novelist is Interviewed in Paris by Richard Boston', interview by Richard Boston, *Quarto*, 1 (April 1981), 7-9 (p.7).

¹⁹⁷ Mary Ann Szporluk, 'Vladimir Voinovich: The Development of a New Satirical Voice', *Russian Literature Triquarterly*, 14 (Winter 1976). 99-121 (p.101).

CHAPTER THREE:
THE LIFE AND EXTRAORDINARY ADVENTURES
OF PRIVATE IVAN CHONKIN:
THE STRUCTURE AND EXPOSURE OF THE ABSURD WORLD

THE ABSURD WORLD:

Ritual Behaviour

Ritual Language

Specious Logic

Rules Imperfectly Understood

Socialist Realism

THE REAL WORLD:

Chonkin as Antidote to Socialist Realism

Boots

Mud

Animals

Scatology

Dreams

Vladimir Voinovich's novel *Zhizn' i neobychnyye prikliucheniia soldata Ivana Chonkina*, written as two two-part books, *Litso neprikosnovennoe* and *Pretendent na prestol*, follows the adventures of its hero through the summer and autumn of 1941. Through different literary modes and narrative voices it presents a progression of historical events simultaneously with the progression of Chonkin from humble soldier to mythical superhero. These themes are set against the background of the Soviet Union of 1941, an absurdly rigid world rendered

unyielding by virtue of its inflexible ideology. Between the mutually antipathetic totalitarian state and the individual, a 'clash of worlds' becomes evident.¹ The state is represented by the *apparatchiks*, bureaucrats and military top-brass, presided over by Stalin; and the world of the people is portrayed through characters motivated to sustain the lie through fear or simply fatalistic apathy. Socialist realism, when imposed on ordinary people leads to almost universal absurdity of behaviour, and constantly threatens and compromises their world of *byt* and *poshlost*'. The absurd world of this novel is common to any totalitarian state with an ideology, governed by a supreme dictator who frequently changes the rules in order to maintain control of the game. In the period of high Stalinism opposition was usually fatal, but Voinovich was writing in the less threatening but still sobering post-Stalinist era when the ideology was driven no longer by one dictator but by the agreement of the many parts of society. The novel challenges readers in such a world to grasp their own destiny and to act with independence and integrity.

Václav Havel in his essay 'The Power of the Powerless' focuses on this theme in relation to those living in post-totalitarian or post-dictatorial societies, and his analysis supplies a useful theoretical basis for Voinovich's satirical position.²

THE ABSURD WORLD:

Havel writes of a greengrocer who places in his window, among the carrots and onions, the slogan 'Workers of the World, Unite!' Is this because he is genuinely so enthusiastic about the concept that he cannot but advertise his support? Havel thinks this unlikely. A more plausible explanation is that failure to pay lip-service to the ideology would be interpreted as disloyalty, and the greengrocer is signalling his obedience and therefore his right to be left in peace. If he were asked to display a sign saying openly that he was afraid, he would suffer loss of dignity,

¹ Peter Petro, 'Hašek, Voinovich, and the Tradition of Anti-Militarist Satire', *Canadian Slavonic Papers*, 22.1 (March 1980), 116-121 (p.118).

² Václav Havel, 'The Power of the Powerless', in *The Power of the Powerless: Citizens against the State in Central-Eastern Europe*, by Václav Havel *et al.*, ed. by John Keane (London: Hutchinson, 1985), pp.23-96.

so his expression of loyalty must be assumed to illustrate a level of disinterested conviction. 'Thus the sign helps the greengrocer to conceal from himself the low foundations of his obedience, at the same time concealing the low foundations of power. It hides them behind the facade of something high. And that something is *ideology*.'³ Ideology, Havel argues, gives human beings the illusion of an identity, of dignity and morality, whilst depriving them of just those things. Its primary excusatory function is 'to provide people, both as victims and pillars of the post-totalitarian system, with the illusion that the system is in harmony with the human order and the order of the universe'.⁴ If the greengrocer were to stop displaying the slogan, whose semantic content is irrelevant, he would consciously be rejecting the ritual and breaking the rules of the game. He would soon find that:

by breaking the rules of the game, he has [. . .] exposed it as a mere game. [. . .] He has said that the emperor is naked. And because the emperor is in fact naked, something extremely dangerous has happened: by his action, the greengrocer has addressed the world. [. . .] He has shown everyone that it is possible to live within the truth. Living within the lie can constitute the system only if it is universal. [. . .] There are no terms whatsoever on which it can coexist with living within the truth, and therefore everyone who steps out of line *denies it in principle and threatens it in its entirety*.⁵

This, very simply, is the essence of Havel's argument; that citizens declare their loyalty to a regime by means of rituals, supporting the game by living according to its rules. Readers of *Chonkin* will recall many such rituals of behaviour: abuse of language; specious logic; rules imperfectly understood but slavishly adhered to; and the exalted tones of socialist realism depicting what are, in truth, grubby and ordinary lives. These rituals establish for the reader the structure of the absurd world, and many are willingly adopted by the characters in the interests of security. Miroslav Kusý, writing in the same volume as Havel, crystallises the inherent contradiction of a world whose values are dictated by an ideology, the spirit of

³ Havel, p.28.

⁴ Havel, p.29.

⁵ Havel, pp.39-40.

which is forgotten, but the letter of which is enforced rigidly in an atmosphere of terror and moral rectitude. He describes it as the ideology of 'as if', saying that those who police it 'behave *as if* the ideological kingdom of real socialism existed [. . .] *as if* they had, in all earnestness, convinced the nation of its existence; the nation behaves *as if* it believed it, *as if* it were convinced that it lived in accordance with this ideologically real socialism. This *as if* is a silent agreement between the two partners'.⁶ The world of 'as if' infiltrates all life in *Chonkin*, even affecting the animal and vegetable world. The personalities of those who operate the apparatus of absurdity are composed of official attitudes; they have moulded themselves to fit comfortably into the system, suffer no pangs of conscience and embrace the task of stifling all spontaneity. As the narrator reminds the reader: 'To control the spontaneous is, of course, a difficult matter, but many people have made a habit of doing it.'⁷ Other characters are less snugly integrated into the absurd world: the petty and unwilling bureaucrats; the *kolkhoz* workers; the lower ranks of military and civilian life. Sometimes those who administer the world of 'as if' fall prey to doubts and face the consequences: indeed, even those who appear to believe in the pantomime can fall victim. The only character to be promoted to a position of honour in the absurd world is Chonkin himself who, all unawares, rises from common deserter to mythical hero, but his integrity is untouchable by either Stalin or Hitler simply because he does not exist, or at least not in the way that they imagine.

Violetta Iverni emphasises how important it is for the players in Voinovich's absurd world to understand the rules of the game, since 'in the country where the action of this book takes place, there exist certain unwritten laws, which we

⁶ Miroslav Kusý, 'Chartism and 'Real Socialism'', in *The Power of the Powerless : Citizens against the State in Central-Eastern Europe*, pp.152-177 (p.164).

⁷ L, p.139; Ch, p.105. ?

The system of references to primary sources in chapters 3 and 4 is as follows: each reference indicates page number of English translation first, followed by page number of Russian text. The editions used are:

L = *The Life and Extraordinary Adventures of Private Ivan Chonkin*, trans. by Richard Lourie (Paris: YMCA, 1975)

Thr = *Pretender to the Throne*, trans. by Richard Lourie (Paris: YMCA, 1975)

Ch = *Zhizn' i neobychainye prikliucheniia soldata Ivana Chonkina* (Moscow: Knizhnaia palata, 1990)

Pr = *Pretendent na prestol* (Moscow: Knizhnaia palata, 1990).

henceforth [. . .] will call the Rules of the Game. These rules by no means exist in a state of calm or balanced straightforward movement, but execute unexpected leaps and pirouettes, demanding from the citizens an extremely peculiar apparatus of perception'.⁸ This apparatus Chonkin does not possess and so he is excluded from the game, as is Niura to a large extent. Everyone else, whether enforcers or players, not only knows the rules of the game but tries to keep up with its leaps and pirouettes. The pretence runs deep; everyone is aware that everyone else is involved, and only Chonkin's behaviour suggests, in all innocence and with unswerving loyalty, that he has noticed that the Emperor should get himself some clothes.

Ritual Behaviour

By common consent the correct adapted behaviour to be displayed in the absurd world is to be at all times ideologically above reproach, but this need in no wise correspond to the players' thoughts and feelings. The army, of course, is a major observer of rituals, one of which Chonkin violates early on in his career as sentry. Recalling that he is 'forbidden to eat, drink, smoke, laugh, sing, talk or relieve himself' he walks back to the tail of the aeroplane he is guarding and breaks one of the rules. Nothing happens.⁹ Realising that a transgression unobserved brings no consequences, before long he is breaking all the rules in the book, having first assured himself of the safety of the aeroplane. He is willing to risk his life to fulfil his duty, but rationalises the method of putting orders into practice.

The army's rituals are exposed as nonsensical, nowhere more strikingly than in the attempt to capture Chonkin. A whole regiment is deployed for the attack, but each action is a travesty, a ritual devoid of rhyme or reason. The soldiers fail to light the petrol bombs, the camouflage uniform is for the wrong season and hence of the wrong colour, and General Drynov, who has managed to kill or maim many of his men in field exercises by the use of live ammunition, on this occasion only

⁸ Violetta Iverni, 'Komediia nesovmestnosti', *Kontinent*, 5 (1975), 427-454 (p.435).

⁹ L, p.40; Ch, p.35.

manages to execute one member of the security forces, and accidentally to kill one horse. He subsequently decorates and then arrests the hero of the hour, and remembering, just in time, his role as educator, attempts to make sense of this ludicrous sequence of events for the benefit of his men. They are far from convinced, but since the incident has been observed by so many, an explanation must be provided to fit the scene into an ideological framework.¹⁰

This sensitive issue of being observed is involved when Borisov, in conversation with Golubev, inadvertently strikes the bust of Stalin. The action is involuntary, but the fact that it has been observed is highly significant to both players who behave as if hypnotised while they work out the consequences. Golubev 'hadn't wanted to see it, but he had seen it, he had! And now what was there to do? Pretend he hadn't noticed? But what if Borisov ran and confessed, then Borisov would be out of trouble and he, Golubev, would catch it for not reporting Borisov in the first place. And if he did report it, they'd be glad to lock him up just because he'd seen what he'd seen'.¹¹ This element to the game means that people are bound to each other by ties of guilt without anything significant having passed between them. Golubev and Borisov, by a mixture of doublespeak and conciliatory gesture, work out a position of mutual agreement that neither of them will mention what has happened, but the incident is used by Borisov, the 'guilty' party, to gain ascendancy over Golubev, the 'innocent' observer, who runs for consolation as usual to the vodka bottle.

This artificially created tension also exists within families. First Secretary Revkin becomes troubled shortly after the disappearance of Captain Miliaga and his department, but cannot identify the source of his unease. He is, in fact, missing the structure which holds his world together, but he does not yet realise this and simply becomes distracted. His wife Aglaia, a monstrously inhumane woman in charge of a children's home, inquires if he is having 'unwholesome thoughts'. In response to his hesitant affirmative reply she recommends him to make a clean breast of it to the Party, helps him to pack his suitcase and moves into another bed for the night 'out

¹⁰ L, pp.298-315; Ch, pp.217-229.

¹¹ L, p.58; Ch, p.48.

of ideological considerations'. On the subject of their son she reassures him, saying: 'Don't you worry. I'll raise him to be a true Bolshevik. He'll even forget what your name was.'¹² So Revkin, guilty only of having temporarily lost his positive outlook on life, is betrayed by his vigilant wife whose remedy will leave her and their son ideologically unsullied. How careful the citizens of this absurd world must be to conceal even their most secret thoughts from their 'loved ones' when responsibilities to the State are taken so seriously.

Ermolkin, the newspaper editor, tells Niura that he would be willing to cut his own son's throat if the Party ordered it, and he is fixed in her imagination as a child murderer although he is merely an inadequate man who has long since lost touch with both his son and with reality.¹³ The reader never knows whether he really would be prepared to kill his son for the Party, or whether his now mature son would be willing to let him, but by making the offer in the hearing of a witness he has adopted a posture which sets himself above reproach. He has played the game so long that he believes in the danger of any false move, even if unobserved. When he commits his one editorial error and is transfixed with horror, his wife cannot understand what the fuss is about because the article in question seems no more nonsensical to her than any other. The incident is based on fact, and in Ermolkin's case his spelling mistake has changed the meaning of the sentence, making Stalin's instructions into the 'gelding' (*merinom*) of wisdom rather than the 'criterion' (*merilom*) of wisdom, as intended. Ermolkin's wife has no difficulty interpreting this in an ideologically wholesome way, as she has read many similarly ludicrous statements before, and indeed no-one else is likely to notice it for the same reason. Ermolkin sees it, however, as dereliction of duty, misprint most foul, and no more than he deserves for leaving his post and going home to visit his family. Terrified and repentant, he tries to write his self-denunciation, but is professionally incapable of writing about a real event. To Luzhin, the interrogator, listening to Ermolkin's pleas to be arrested, this confession is a huge joke, which he does not even trouble himself to read. As a shrewd player of the game himself,

¹² L, pp.235-236; Ch, pp.172-173.

¹³ Thr, p.72; Pr, p.285.

he knows that Ermolkin is so paralysed by fear that he presents no danger to the system.¹⁴

Perhaps the character most practised at adopting poses is Gladyshev, the village 'scientist'. Gladyshev's duplicity is evident even without narratorial intervention, but sometimes the narrator cannot resist. On the occasion of the first (spontaneous) meeting assembled upon the declaration of war with Germany, Gladyshev impresses Chonkin with a brief exposition of the theory of evolution 'in order to demonstrate his own erudition'.¹⁵ During the course of the second meeting (conducted in a spirit of controlled spontaneity) Chonkin refutes Gladyshev's argument, annoying the scientist who spits 'just at the wrong moment too, for the crowd now broke into applause. Catching hold of himself, the breeder quickly began to applaud as well, gazing in devotion at the speaker so that his spitting would not be construed as having anything to do with the speech'.¹⁶ This ritual of applauding at the 'right' moment cannot fail to remind the reader of occasions when none dared be first to stop the tumultuous applause in the presence of Stalin, and the measure of Gladyshev's applause becomes clear in the closing scene of the story when he applauds the German soldier.¹⁷ He is pragmatically willing to applaud anyone offering security, but when threatened with the possibility of having to commit himself under interrogation he disappears from the scene, apparently in the most final way possible.¹⁸ This chameleon of the Soviet scene is also sadly exposed when he discovers the body of the missing gelding Osoaviakhim with a note declaring his allegiance to Communism. Gladyshev momentarily perceives the real world as more bizarre than the absurd, and crosses himself for the first time in many years.¹⁹ This is not one of the required rituals, and it is as well that it is dusk and that he is alone.

Another character riding a wave of ritual behaviour to fame and fortune is

¹⁴ Thr, pp.72-108; Pr, pp.285-314.

¹⁵ L, p.131; Ch, p.99.

¹⁶ L, p.148; Ch, p.111.

¹⁷ Thr, p.358; Pr, p.522.

¹⁸ Thr, p.113; Pr, p.318.

¹⁹ L, p.316; Ch, p.230.

Liushka, the heroic milkmaid, who milks cows by all four teats at once to increase milk production. On the outbreak of war she delivers a rousing speech to the *kolkhoz* workers, speaking touchingly of the burden borne for all by Comrade Stalin, and bringing 'her handkerchief to her eyes several times'.²⁰ However, her true priorities are betrayed when, just as she is exhorting the workers to sacrifice everything for the cause, she turns aside to chide the photographer for taking her picture from the wrong angle.

Perhaps the most orchestrated ritual of all is Chonkin's trial, which is produced as theatre, with a cast list, stage, directors and rehearsals.²¹ The proceedings follow the formula of dissident trials of the sixties and seventies rather than a typical trial of the war years, and it seems that no-one is in control of this ritual, least of all the prosecutor. The defendant is only semi-conscious throughout, and his contribution to the production is minimal: it is as if a pre-determined performance is being played out and Chonkin is guilty simply because a scapegoat must be found.

Such rituals of behaviour compose a telling picture of the absurd world, but a more pervasive indicator is perhaps the theme of the use and abuse of language .

Ritual Language

Language is a constant source of danger to those in the absurd world, threatening to expose their inner thoughts and betray their motives. The everyday language of the time had become impoverished by the liquidation of whole classes of society; the merchants, clergy and rich peasants whose style of language had become a badge of ideological unsoundness. Socialist realism had established a set of accepted modes of expression, based on the democratisation of language and drawing heavily on the use of euphemisms to describe certain aspects of Soviet life. The narrator alerts the reader to the ironies of a society which is not all that it seems

²⁰ L, p.169; Pr, p.126.

²¹ Thr, pp.293-320; Pr, pp.467-490.

to be by ironical use and repetition of euphemisms and by using unexpected words to express what is totally predictable to the reader with a shared experience of the culture. Viktor Shklovskii in his essay 'Iskusstvo, kak priem', first published in 1917, addressed the subject of defamiliarisation, which gives the reader a new way of seeing things because they are presented in a new way or with unexpected words.²² This technique can only be used in a context of familiarity so that the novelty of new expression can benefit from contrast with the expected. What better environment for a writer to practise this than in the predictable and prescribed language of socialist realism? The citizens of Chonkin's world have become inured to the daily incantations and can produce the correct responses unthinkingly. Habitualisation, Shklovskii maintained, devours natural human responses and invalidates lives which become as if they had never been lived. He argued that 'art exists that one may recover the sensation of life; it exists to make one feel things, to make the stone *stony*'.²³ This is what the narrator aims for by describing a patently shabby world either in the inappropriately glowing rhetoric of socialist realism or in some other unexpected form: colloquial speech or new ironic euphemisms. This fosters in the reader a heightened sensitivity to the nuances of language used by both the narrator and the characters, and a corresponding awareness of where language and reality fail to match up. The resulting lack of agreement can be both comic, as absurd ideas are fitted into the established ritual-speak of socialist realism, and terrifying, as characters of integrity express the truth in new ways. Henri Bergson analyses the comic effect in his essay on laughter, maintaining that language becomes comic when it becomes mechanical. This may manifest itself in a variety of ways: by repetition; by inversion of meaning; by meaning two self-contradictory things; and by exaggeration.²⁴ These techniques are employed in *Chonkin* to produce a blend of comedy, irony and satire; each contributing to an awareness of the importance of language in the absurd world. Language identifies

²² Viktor Borisovich Shklovskii, 'Iskusstvo, kak priem', *O teorii prozy*, (Moscow: Federatsiia, 1929), pp.7-23; Victor Shklovsky, 'Art as Technique', trans. by Lee T. Lemon and Marion J. Reis in *Modern Criticism and Theory*, ed. by David Lodge (London: Longman, 1988), pp.16-30.

²³ Shklovsky, trans. Lemon and Reis p.20.

²⁴ Henri Bergson, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*, trans. by Cloudesley Brereton and Fred Rothwell (London: Macmillan, 1935), pp.67-103.

people and may be used in evidence, which is what makes the reader tremble listening to Chonkin's blithe pronouncements.

In spite of the apparent simplicity of life in Krasnoe, the reader soon becomes aware of the respect paid to the web of ideological state interference which influences every move which the villagers make. Chonkin talks to a little girl who declares her love for Stalin to be greater than her love for her parents, and although he too loves Stalin in his way he is perplexed by what he instinctively perceives to be an almost unconscious deceit practised in the interests of survival.²⁵ Of course, when the young grow up they become less ingenuous in their deceit, but the motivation is the same. The narrator's definition of a meeting as 'an arrangement whereby a large number of people gather together, some to say what they really do not think, some not to say what they really do' exposes a whole congregation of articulate adults which has conspired together to play the game.²⁶ Even those incarcerated in prison, with little more to lose, maintain the fiction. The professor, reproaching a fellow-prisoner for theft, reasons that such behaviour is unacceptable since Vasia was born 'in a new society where the social basis for crime has been forever liquidated'.²⁷ Given that they are both in prison probably for no reason there is a certain illogicality in his support of the system.

The village itself reveals a curious ritual of language. Krasnoe (red) used to be called Griaznoe (dirty) before Soviet power came and transformed mud to heroic proletarian red, in defiance of all the evidence. The village has something to live up to: a name to inspire heroic striving towards a bright future, although this name is more of a magic spell than a reality. The ideology states that the village should be a socialist paradise, that the workers should be politically aware and that life should correspond to the image portrayed in the newspaper, but in reality it is still knee-deep in mud. The ideology exerts its stranglehold in the corridors of various institutions where Niura meets the victims of the system: the 'negligent' woman who has lost her ration cards; the 'invalid of the ideological war' and the 'straw-

²⁵ L, p.69; Ch, p.55.

²⁶ L, p.145; Ch, p.109.

²⁷ Thr, p.284; Pr, p.460.

petitioner'; and the reader concludes that this most ordinary of villages has been transformed by its glorious name into a potential hell.²⁸ The name fits neither the muddy reality nor the nature of the people inhabiting this microcosm at the centre of the 'clash of worlds', and as the tale unfolds ordinary people react to the stimuli of Soviet life, compromising themselves when expedient. The denunciation of one's fellows could hardly be a more horrible abuse of language, and yet this is a theme which permeates the very fabric of life. When considering the informers who betray others to save themselves it should, of course, not be forgotten that 'they lived at a time when denunciation was judged not as a foul and filthy deed, but as the proper way for a loyal citizen to behave'.²⁹ But the tragic irony is that 'without informers, the Machine of repression might have quietly rusted away from disuse somewhere in the remote depths of the empire. Instead it rolled on, swallowing up ploughmen and poets, gardeners and blacksmiths'.³⁰ Some of the foulest acts of betrayal may be interpreted as the loyal duty of concerned citizens when measured by the standards of the absurd world. Grigorii Svirskii, writing of Voinovich's portrayal of 'Its Excellency the Working Class' says: 'The rottenness goes deep [. . .] People's very souls have been blighted and deadened.'³¹ Voinovich does not blame the ordinary people who have been harmed in this way, since the little child who loved Stalin was merely imitating acquired sounds of identification rather as a young creature learns instinctive strategies of self-preservation. But some of the *apparatchiks* who parade through the novel are fully aware, responsible adults, proud of their ability to use rituals to their own advantage.

Perhaps the arch-*apparatchik* of all is Figurin, whose wife proclaims proudly that he is devoted to his work above his family, and that he can always spot an enemy of the people. Ordinary people can perceive nothing special about him and call him Idiot Idiotovich, but he produces some Kafkaesque 'bold and original

²⁸ Thr, pp.65-67; Pr, pp.279-280.

²⁹ Ilya Kartushin and Zamira Ibrahimova, 'Matryona's Crime', in *The Best Of Ogonyok*, ed. by Vitaly Korotich and Cathy Porter (London: Heinemann, 1990), pp.209-222 (p.221).

³⁰ Kartushin and Ibrahimova, p.221.

³¹ Grigorii Svirskii, *A History of Post-War Soviet Writing*, trans. by Robert Dessaix and Michael Ulman (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1981), p.379.

theories' about suspicion and guilt.³² His undeniable abilities are also displayed when, briefing Chonkin for the trial, he hears the defendant's story and translates it deftly into ideological language of a much more sinister register.³³

Another hero of the Revolution, although perhaps more sinned against than sinning, is First Secretary Revkin. In his attempt to find out where the missing administrative department has gone, he sends his chauffeur to the market to see what the old women are saying, since they are more likely to know what is happening than anyone in his position.³⁴ The narrator frequently uses old women to speak the truth, since they are too set in their ways to play the usual games and yet are not considered a serious threat by the apparatus. The *apparatchiks* themselves, however, are hampered by doublethink and doublespeak so much that they find it hard to understand, and even harder to express the simplest truth. Hearing that the entire personnel of the Institution has gone to arrest a certain Chonkin, Revkin makes enquiries leading to the colossal misunderstanding over whether the deserter is accompanied by a gang (*banda*) or a woman (*baba*), thus setting in train a course of dramatic events.³⁵ When Revkin is inevitably arrested as a weak link in the chain, he writes a ridiculous confession, confident that its absurdity will be noticed by his superiors. However, after a few minor amendments it is accepted and Revkin, diagnosed as suffering from paranoid schizophrenia, is taken away to share a cell with Senior Lieutenant Kuriatnikov's cow.³⁶

Ermolkin, the editor, is another player fluent in ritual language; indeed, he is incapable of normal speech. He is a master of socialist realist hyperbole which comes so naturally to him that, when editing an article about gold prospectors, he is reduced to calling gold 'ordinary gold' as opposed to black gold (oil and coal), or white gold (cotton).³⁷ As an example of this type of rhetoric, appendix B offers an instructive article from the Moscow University journal *Russkii iazik za rubezhom*

³² Thr, p.203; Pr, p.391.

³³ Thr, pp.297-299; Pr, pp.470-472.

³⁴ L, p.238; Ch, p.174.

³⁵ L, p.239; Ch, p.175.

³⁶ Thr, pp.259-262; Pr, pp.439-441.

³⁷ Thr, p.69; Pr, p.282.

for the uninitiated foreign reader, listing no fewer than six 'colours' of gold; nearly a score of 'blue' items, referring to water, air and gas, and a series of 'green' terms, mostly relating to Soviet man's 'green friend' - the forest.³⁸ The rhetoric of Ermolkin's newspaper reflects his cloistered view of life, and when he decides to visit his home one day he is amazed to find a world outside where ragged profiteers abuse him for being a Communist. What he had expected was 'a society of cheerful, rosy-cheeked people whose sole concern was to bring in unprecedented harvests, forge more steel and pig iron, conquer the wilderness, and, while doing all that, sing joyful songs about their fabulously happy life'.³⁹ As a disseminator of propaganda he has effectively brain-washed himself and does not realise that no-one actually reads his paper. In his attempts to appear above reproach he uses the name of Stalin like a talisman, always ensuring that it appears no less than twelve times in the lead editorial. In this he is not alone. The old shoe-maker, Moisei Solomonovich Stalin, uses the leader's name like a charm and reasons that if anyone is guilty of abusing *a* Stalin, even if not *the* Stalin they will reap terrible rewards.

Evpraksein, the prosecutor, is a man on whom the mantle of *apparatchik* sits uneasily. Whilst he appears to be a monster, this is only a mask to hide the fact that he is basically a good man and a liberal thinker. The fear of discovery makes him quite incorruptible, and he only reveals his true self when drunk. This weakness keeps him on a constant see-saw of emotion; lurching from veracious inebriation to sober terror of the consequences, returning to work ever more zealous to prove his loyalty, the strain of which sends him running back to the bottle. As state prosecutor at Chonkin's trial, he is aware that the soldier is innocent and, in his cups, the night before the trial resolves to save him, but in the morning he is sober and sets off to do his duty in the court, reasoning that if he does not someone else will. At the appointed time he stands up to speak, his whole body in revolt at the internal conflict between integrity and fear. Soon he gives way to fear and, carried away by his own eloquence, he begins to believe his own words, delivering

³⁸ Appendix B, pp.B1-B4.

³⁹ Thr, p.76; Pr, p.288.

a speech which is a triumph of absurdity.⁴⁰ He is a man practised at manipulating language, and knows how to summon up the most effective ritual phrases for the right occasion, but in so doing he loses his integrity and is condemned out of his own mouth.

Balashov, one of Chonkin's comrades in the army, is also a master of ritual language, answering Iartsev's political questions 'in a loud expressive voice without using a single word of his own'.⁴¹ The ability to use jargon may guarantee immunity from misinterpretation, but it does not rate highly in terms of holding the attention of the listeners, and the 'familiar word patterns' of Kilin's speech at the outbreak of war serve only to still the weeping of the crowd, and to distract his own mind from the enormity of events.⁴²

Gladyshev, that expert of ritual behaviour, also practises the art of ritual speech to demonstrate his political correctness and erudition. He writes a letter on Chonkin's behalf, containing the necessary phrase 'raised in the spirit of wholehearted devotion to our Party, People, and to the person of the Great Genius Com. Stalin, J. V.' before rather clumsily adding a request for rations and a new uniform.⁴³ His outhouse door ostentatiously displays a sign reading 'WATER CLOSET' in large black English letters,⁴⁴ but his education has been acquired in isolation, inspired by the bogus teachings of Lysenko and Michurin and gleaned from a box of ancient brochures and incomplete sets of journals.⁴⁵ His life's work has been devoted, so far unsuccessfully, to producing a hybrid potato and tomato plant named '*put' k sotsialismu*' and identified by the rousing acronym '*puks*', a word reminiscent of the childish Russian word 'to fart'.⁴⁶ The narrator further deflates Gladyshev's linguistic pretensions by revealing that he has renamed his unlovely wife Aphrodite, and their son he has called Hercules.⁴⁷

⁴⁰ Thr, p.313; Pr, p.484.

⁴¹ L, p.26; Ch, p.25.

⁴² L, p.146; Ch, p.110.

⁴³ L, pp.71-72; Ch, pp.57.

⁴⁴ L, p.63; Ch, p.51.

⁴⁵ L, p.116; Ch, p.89.

⁴⁶ L, p.65; Ch, p.52.

⁴⁷ L, p.110; Ch, p.85.

At the belated 'funeral of Captain Miliaga', splendid rituals of language accompany the monumental pretence. A poem in honour of the occasion has been composed, which Figurin approves as containing nothing anti-Soviet, although upon reflection he decides that absolutely anything might turn out to be anti-Soviet.⁴⁸ Present at the ceremony are the Two Thinkers who demonstrate their skill in gamesmanship when the crowd disperses and spies mingle among them, listening to conversations and provoking discussion if there is nothing to hear. They parry the questions of the spy allocated to them, and send him packing in a duet of virtuoso ritual language, explaining that although Miliaga has perished, hundreds or rather thousands of new fighters will spring up to replace him.⁴⁹ The two thinkers are quite cynical in their use of the rituals of language and behaviour, and there is no hint of self-deception or moral crisis in their manipulation of the rules: they realise the cost of making a wrong move and take extraordinary measures to stay ahead of the game.

Zapiataev, whom Chonkin meets in prison, has made an art-form of ritual language.⁵⁰ His aim, when at liberty, had been the overthrow of the Soviet regime, and to this end he had used the language of political correctness. Born into a distinguished family, as a young man he had waged a war of attrition against the state armed with nothing but a pencil, a lethal weapon given the boundless trust of the apparatus in informers and its readiness to act on denunciations. His activities escalated, and soon he was destroying every talented person who came to his attention, until he was intercepted and taken to Luzhin. He expected to be punished, instead of which Luzhin congratulated him for his heroism, invited him to struggle with him on behalf of the state, rewarded him 'materially' and sent him back to work. Soon he was carving out for himself an impressive career, hampered only by the language which he had learned as a child. He set out to master the language of comradeship among the workers, contracting and distorting words, self-taught because of the complete absence of courses or textbooks. At the pinnacle of his

⁴⁸ Thr, p.213; Pr, p.399.

⁴⁹ Thr, pp.241-242; Pr, pp.432-435.

⁵⁰ Thr, pp.14-31; Pr, pp.240-254.

career, with an exemplary record for rooting out spies, wreckers and saboteurs, he got drunk at a party and in an unguarded moment was tempted to invite his comrades to stop pretending, but instead did something almost as stupid and recited some Virgil in Latin, betraying his bourgeois origins. That very night he 'became' a Latin spy, and was cast into prison with a broken nose and missing teeth.⁵¹ He had relied upon the myopia of the system to achieve his own ends since, after all, who would dare to ignore a denunciation? Hosking sets out the dynamic of the era, explaining that for many people the purges opened up 'dizzy opportunities. A simple *donos* (denunciation) sufficed, no matter how absurd, for no party or NKVD official would run the risk of being accused of lack of vigilance'. He writes of the probable need to fulfil a plan for arrests and concludes that 'everyone was driven ineluctably on, the interrogators as well as the interrogated'.⁵² In the *Chonkin* epic, the apparatus is so hypnotised by its own might that it is powerless to resist Zapiataev's suggestions, or any other fabrications. Truth becomes so distorted that usually the only man to believe the stories of heroic exploits and crushing defeats is Stalin. But not even he believes that the German tanks turned and fled in the face of General Drynov's puny and disorganised defence, saving Moscow.⁵³ He is proved wrong, though. In a world where the Russians and Germans are equally enslaved by their own 'verbal sorcerer's spell',⁵⁴ the story is not only possible but true.

Captain Miliaga represents a unique case in the parade of ritual language abusers, particularly in his last hours on earth.⁵⁵ This outstanding example of Soviet rectitude has led a blameless life, careful neither to excel nor to lag behind in his work; he loves his country and he hopes to survive the next 'triumph of legality' in the Institution.⁵⁶ Perplexed that his absence is unremarked when he is captured by Chonkin and Niura, he resolves to escape. Regaining his liberty, he is reduced

⁵¹ Thr, pp.14-31; Pr, pp.240-254.

⁵² Hosking, *A History of the Soviet Union*, p.198.

⁵³ Thr, p.326; Pr, p.495.

⁵⁴ John B. Dunlop, 'Vladimir Voinovich's *Pretender to the Throne*', *Russian Literature and American Critics*, ed. by Kenneth N. Bronstrom (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1984), pp.23-33 (p.25).

⁵⁵ L, pp.281-298; Ch, pp.205-217.

⁵⁶ L, p.232; Ch, p.170.

to tearful indecision, but fortified by the prospect of revenge he sets off purposefully. However, things do not go smoothly and he is rather forcefully detained by the regiment lying in wait for Chonkin with the result that he becomes concussed. In his confusion he reaches the startling but erroneous conclusion that his captors are German, a belief confirmed by the fact that they are not in normal Russian uniforms and that, assuming him to be German, they attempt to interrogate him in that language. The quick-witted Miliaga makes some hasty calculations, and remembers the sentence with which he always used to begin his interrogations: 'A sincere confession can improve your fate.'⁵⁷ He knows that this is nonsense but hopes that he may fare better at the hands of the Germans than his own victims have fared under his questioning. Deciding to cooperate fully, he endeavours to persuade his interrogator in a travesty of schoolboy German that he is a model worker in the Gestapo, ruthless slayer of Communists, sworn enemy of Stalin, and fanatical supporter of Hitler. As the pantomime progresses, Miliaga stumbles through his 'confession' to the amazement and grudging admiration of the young interrogator, in a language which only two Russians with a poor grasp of German could possibly understand. Even when it begins to dawn on Miliaga that he may be in Russian custody, his muddled brain cannot switch off the deceit in time, and his tongue continues to babble praise of Hitler even as he realises that he will deservedly be shot. As he is dragged away to execution he recognises that he is dying from nothing more than a misunderstanding, and that he will be deprived needlessly of a comfortable old age in which he might have been revered as an example of patriotism by the young.⁵⁸ So perishes Captain Miliaga, a man who has so trained his mind to deceive that he is quite unable to control the circumlocutions which it performs even when this will cost him his life.

As has been seen, the motives behind the abuse of language are varied, and the results of both efficient and improper use of such rituals may range from highly successful to catastrophic for the characters concerned, but one thing is true in all cases: the use of ritual language conceals the truth and thereby strengthens the

⁵⁷ L, p.284; Ch, p.207.

⁵⁸ L, p.298; Ch, p.217.

world of 'as if'.

Specious Logic

A further exposure of the absurd world is achieved through the specious logic which many of the characters adopt to justify their position or give meaning to their lives. Figurin's musings on the nature of guilt and innocence are reflected throughout the book in the minds of those whose logic is rooted in the world of 'as if'. It is evident in the grotesque court of law where Chonkin's defence lawyer agrees with the prosecution's case and cannot bring himself to defend his client.⁵⁹ The assumption is made that if a man is in the dock he must be guilty because, as the prosecutor says, it would be absurd to arrest people for nothing. Ales Adamovich points out that the Russian people were 'victims of the phrase "They wouldn't arrest people for nothing!" and the illusion that those who tortured and slaughtered our people before and after the war did so more "humanely" and with more justification than did the invaders from the west'.⁶⁰ This sort of distorted logic turns innocent people into enemies of the State, and loyal workers into wreckers. The logic came directly from Stalin who in 1937 argued that 'the wrecker must enjoy occasional successes in his job, for that is the only way he can keep our trust and carry on with his wrecking work'.⁶¹ Olga Matich was not exaggerating when she wrote that 'Soviet life is irrational and has surpassed man's ability to imagine terror, corruption and human stupidity'.⁶²

Chonkin, unable to succumb to the logic of the era, muses on why and from whom he is guarding a wrecked plane in a village where no-one locks their doors, although he does not realise that this in turn is a fiction designed by Niura to lure him into her hut.⁶³

⁵⁹ Thr, p.318; Pr, p.488.

⁶⁰ Ales Adamovich, 'Look about You!', in *The Best Of Ogonyok*, pp.7-14 (p.9).

⁶¹ Yury Tyurin, 'On One Side, and on the Other...', in *The Best Of Ogonyok*, pp.24-25 (p.25).

⁶² Olga Matich, 'Is There A Russian Literature Beyond Politics?', in *The Third Wave: Russian Literature in Emigration*, pp.180-187 (p.185).

⁶³ L, p.50; Ch, p.42.

When war breaks out, the people gather spontaneously in front of the *kolkhoz* office, assuming that there will be an announcement and speech-making. However, the *partorg* and the chairman are in confusion, since spontaneity must be controlled and the people must be dispersed in order for a spontaneous meeting to be called in the approved fashion. This is duly done, to the bemusement of everyone concerned, dispersed and dispersers. The two men charged with the operation are used to following orders unquestioningly, but this manoeuvre causes even them to think. The analogy springs to Taldykin's mind that it must be similar to the sport of chasing a woman, and that the bosses gain pleasure from overcoming the resistance of their subjects.⁶⁴ On the whole their reasoning seems valid, as life in a pyramid structure is always fraught with frustrations particularly if the pyramid is constantly reconfiguring itself. Those in the middle may gain some satisfaction from enforcing peculiar rules over those beneath them, just as those one degree higher have done to them. Much of the logic exhibited in the absurd world is of this type: characters strive to gain status from a spurious source of authority because their own lives are unstable and insecure.

Gladyshev, as usual, can furnish an example. In the pursuit of his scientific endeavours he has come to the attention of the district newspaper, and as a result of this an agricultural academician has sent him a letter, pointing out the unscientific nature of his experiments. The fact that the letter has been typed on official stationery and signed by the academician himself gives the breeder an overwhelming sense of his own importance and he has it framed and displayed on the wall to impress his neighbours.⁶⁵

Much of the spurious logic operating in the absurd world derives from the fact that many of the rules of existence are imperfectly understood. When, in spite of making no sense, they are slavishly followed, the result is inevitably a devastating illogicality which the perpetrators hope will appear as logic to the master logician who is doubtless watching their every move.

⁶⁴ L, pp.144-145; Ch, pp.108-109.

⁶⁵ L, pp.65-66; Ch, pp.53.

Rules Imperfectly Understood

One of the problems facing those in the absurd world is the inability to tell in advance what is important and what is trivial. This can often only be seen in retrospect, and there are many surprises. A whole department can disappear and nobody notice, but other tiny details are seized upon and inflated with terrible results. This overkill is evident in the almost epic drama of Luzhin's operation to evacuate Krasnoe, rendered ridiculous by the resistance and escape of the Civil War invalid on his castors;⁶⁶ and in the strength of the infantry unit sent to arrest Chonkin and Niura, made foolish by their failure to light their petrol bombs. Similarly, disproportionate attention or else complete lack of attention is paid to detail in the custom of appointing bureaucrats in Revkin's Bureau to direct something they know nothing about. If, by any chance, they were found to have some skill or knowledge, they would immediately be transferred to another area, maximising confusion and guaranteeing obedience to the Party line.⁶⁷ Another glaring example of missing the point occurs in the account of the heroic *kolkhoznik* who built a heavy bomber at his own expense. No-one at the meeting dares inquire where he found the considerable resources necessary for the project; instead, he is held up as an example to emulate.⁶⁸ When ominous rumours circulate in the area about a certain gang, the newspaper runs a lengthy campaign designed to distract the population, but nobody reads the newspaper in any case, knowing that in general rumours are more reliable.⁶⁹

Much of the humour in *Chonkin* is grounded in the fact that the people applying the ideology have an imperfect grasp of what they are supposed to be doing and why, and consequently behave inappropriately. With the stimulus of terror at the thought of what a mistake might lead to, the *apparatchiks* often appear to be acting like puppets with their strings attached to the wrong parts of their

⁶⁶ Thr, pp.278-279; Pr, pp.454-455.

⁶⁷ Thr, p.137; Pr, p.338.

⁶⁸ Thr, p.142; Pr, p.342.

⁶⁹ L, pp.240-245; Ch, pp.176-179.

anatomy and nothing at all stimulating their brains. Bergson comments that ‘any arrangement of acts and events is comic which gives us, in a single combination, the illusion of life and the distinct impression of a mechanical arrangement’.⁷⁰ The *apparatchiks* act like automata, trying to abide by the rules of the game but never quite sure what the rules are or whether they have changed while they were not watching. The reader first becomes aware of this when Master Sergeant Peskov, having just tormented Chonkin mercilessly, suddenly realises that if Chonkin is being taken somewhere by aeroplane he has probably become important. This throws him into confusion and makes him realise that life in a hierarchy is no fun if society is constantly shifting in a confusing pattern of unexpected promotions, demotions, disappearances, rehabilitations, and right and wrong views. This power structure, manipulated by the inscrutable setter and changer of the rules, leads to a society in which the world of appearances becomes more important than reality. Like Havel’s greengrocer, people exert themselves to appear correct while trying to keep a low profile. This heightened instinct of self-preservation leads to some absurd scenarios, which Voinovich exploits with free flights of riotous fancy. The party of men sent to arrest Chonkin are arrested by him, and what is more, work so successfully under his supervision that a report is sent to Stalin about the *kolkhoz* thriving as a result of their labours.⁷¹ Chonkin, a logical son of the Russian earth, sees nothing wrong in using what others might see as slave labour to solve his temporary food crisis. Only the chairman of the farm feels uneasy at the way that events might be interpreted, but he is appeased by the approval which greets his increased production figures. Chonkin is decorated for heroism one moment, and the very next the decoration is removed and he is arrested.⁷² The reader witnesses the carefully-engineered and solemn spectacle of ‘Miliaga’s funeral’ which collapses in disarray when the coffin is dropped, and the crowd suspects that what is being buried is not Miliaga but a horse, or possibly a live man, or even a live

⁷⁰ Bergson, p.69.

⁷¹ L, p.259; Ch, p.189.

⁷² L, pp.312-313; Ch, pp.227-228.

horse.⁷³ At the scheduled sitting to hear personal cases, an embezzler and a rapist receive a reprimand, while a man who made a comment expressing surprise at the outbreak of war is expelled from the Party, loses his job, and dies in a paroxysm of terror and rage in front of his accusers. Golubev, realising that his turn is next, gives in his Party card before it is confiscated and has to be forced to take it back so that it can be taken from him again.⁷⁴ The hapless Ermolkin tries to hand himself over to the authorities but is sent away by Filippov, and when he begs Luzhin to arrest him he is told to go away and keep on writing about upsurges in labour.⁷⁵ A schoolboy who uses his slingshot against his teacher but misses and hits a portrait of Stalin instead, disappears, presumed liquidated. To have injured his teacher would not have merited this punishment.⁷⁶ The catalogue of absurdity could continue, but sufficient has been noted to demonstrate the rigidity of the rules which paralyse the players, making them into a comic manifestation of a tragic process of denaturalisation. This rigidity has filtered down through every level of society from its creator, Stalin, who is perceived through the eyes of his fearful subjects in roles as varied as avenging angel and sugar-daddy.

The narrator grants some glimpses into the mind of the leader, showing him to have an integrity of sorts, born of a conviction of his own greatness and historical calling. He is a coarse and manipulative tyrant, and knows it, but is utterly convinced of his clarity of vision. In *Pretendent na prestol* Stalin is surrounded by men he does not trust and in his paranoia he seeks for someone to blame for his country's position, settling upon Prince Golitsyn, a fiction invented by the apparatus to appease him. He is pathetically touched by what he takes to be the spontaneous and sincere roars of greeting from his generals, and becomes attached to Drynov because he agrees with everything Stalin says. When Drynov tells him the story of the brave soldier Chonkin, Stalin, unaware that this is one and the same person as Prince Golitsyn, is enchanted, and dreams that night of

⁷³ Thr, pp.242-247; Pr, pp.424-428.

⁷⁴ Thr, pp.146-160; Pr, pp.345-358.

⁷⁵ Thr, pp.106-108; Pr, pp.312-314.

⁷⁶ L, pp.58-59; Ch, pp.48.

Chonkin, a tall blond epic hero defeating the forces of Nazi Germany. At the same time, further west, Hitler also dreams of Prince Golitsyn, a tall blond epic hero, rallying the forces of Russia to greet him gratefully.⁷⁷ Both men are sentimental self-deceivers, but so effective is their deception that their subjects believe in their infallibility and omnipotence, or at least behave 'as if' they do. In the novel Stalin is, in a way, a victim of his own deception because his paranoia makes him rigid in his beliefs and therefore vulnerable to others' duplicity. Alexandr Chakovskii, analysing Stalin's state of mind before the outbreak of war and laying out the reasons for his calculated inactivity, writes that 'the most perfect calculation, when turned into dogma, loses its original sense. In that case all the new facts that come to light, if they contradict to any degree the decision taken previously, are rejected out of hand in irritation'.⁷⁸ This rigidity of reason and refusal to countenance new information are what characterise absurdity. The word 'absurd', with its root in '*surdus*', meaning deaf or dull, indicates a closing down of the senses to an awareness of what is real; and this came to typify Stalin's relationship with the world. Because of his tyranny Stalin is omnipresent throughout the novel and constantly pervades everyone's thinking. His portrait in the interrogation room bears the inscription 'We must organise a merciless struggle against everyone', whilst at the same time he appears to wink conspiratorially at Chonkin.⁷⁹ His very name strikes terror into the heart of Svintsov, who is so confused during his interrogation of the old shoe-maker that he cannot even remember Stalin's patronymic. Yet he inspires devotion too, especially in those less diffident about their own ideological purity. The offensive Gladyshev proposes an emblematic toast to the genius of Comrade Stalin in vodka brewed from excrement and sugar.⁸⁰ Liushka speaks touchingly of his concern for the people, and Butylko fantasises about the great man watching him on the film of 'Miliaga's funeral', and bestowing on him great riches: a luxury apartment with a swimming pool and parrots, a

⁷⁷ Thr, p.334; Pr, p.502.

⁷⁸ Aleksandr Chakovsky, quoted in M. Crouch and R. Porter, *Understanding Soviet Politics through Literature: A Book of Readings* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1984), pp.43-54 (p.53).

⁷⁹ Thr, p.31; Pr, p.255.

⁸⁰ L, pp.118-119; Ch, pp.90-91.

reception at the Kremlin, and the Stalin Prize.⁸¹ His subjects develop an extraordinary degree of sensitivity to his name and his person, horribly aware that to speak of him in a way open to misinterpretation is worse than not to speak of him at all. The artist Shuteinikov, who has been commissioned to paint a portrait of Miliaga for the funeral, is distressed to find that it keeps looking like Comrade Stalin. Figurin, who is in charge of the arrangements, is even more distressed and begs the artist to change it, even if it looks nothing like Miliaga. 'The important thing is that he doesn't look like the person he looks like now.'⁸² All this absurdity has historical verisimilitude: Voinovich himself recalls copying pictures of Lenin and Stalin from a book as a child, and tearing them up in terror when he was told that he should first have sought special permission.⁸³

Socialist Realism

Socialist realism, bolstering the world of 'as if', inevitably becomes a target for Voinovich's wit in this work. Adopting a stance opposed to Zhdanov in his call for 'reality in its revolutionary development', Voinovich insists on his duty to 'describe life as it is'. Thus grandiose historical schemes are set incongruously against the background of Chonkin and Niura's turbulent sexual activities.⁸⁴ When war is declared, Chonkin does not hear of it straight away because he, the inviolable sentry, is busy reading fragments of newspaper in the outhouse.⁸⁵ The fact that the newspaper is in pieces and therefore completely nonsensical may be the narrator's way of reminding the reader of the role of censorship in this society. By juxtaposing the high moral tone of socialist realism and the basic bodily functions of the characters, with an additional reminder of the censor's scissors, the narrator debunks the doctrine and brings the reader back to reality. After Kilin's rousing

⁸¹ Thr, p.243; Pr, p.425.

⁸² Thr, p.209; Pr, p.396.

⁸³ 'Russkaia literatura vsegda edina', interview by Kabanov, *Rossiskaia gazeta*, 16 February 1991, p.3.

⁸⁴ L, pp.81-95; Ch, pp.64-74.

⁸⁵ L, pp.125-128; Ch, pp.95-97.

speech to rally the *kolkhozniks* to the war effort, where are the comrades to be found? Fighting like a hydra over a sack of soap and matches outside the village shop.⁸⁶ They are soon reassembled to listen to the irresistible speech by Liushka, whose followers have ridden on the tails of her success to such an extent that no-one is left to milk the cows.⁸⁷ As soon as she leaves, the villagers return to their squabbling over Baba Dunia's sack of goods and only the innocent Chonkin remains moved by Liushka's words. Yet he is far from being a hero of socialist realism. On the contrary, his very passivity and pragmatism betray him as an ordinary human being. During his first night in prison Chonkin muses on how uncomfortable it is to sleep wrapped in his soldier's overcoat, unimpressed by prize-winning lyrics about the romance of sleeping wrapped in a wet, singed coat full of bullet-holes.⁸⁸ Even the narrator complains about his hero and longs for the sort of hero 'the newspapers are always praising and publishers pay good money for', maybe a general or an active worker-hero.⁸⁹ But Chonkin learned long ago in the army that it is best not to hurry to obey orders since they may be changed at any minute, he is always prepared for the unexpected, and is surrounded by the petty disappointments of life. When he walks out on Niura to spend the night under the aeroplane, he listens to the radio announcements for a while and then under the stars somebody starts to play the accordion and someone else to sing. This is the sort of scene (lone sentry sleeping under the stars wrapped in overcoat listening to honest workers whiling away the evening after toil with the native music of the Motherland), which under socialist realism would inspire the inevitable response of heroic nostalgia, but the narrator ruthlessly deflates the scene. Chonkin is cold, disgruntled and feels abandoned by the army. The song is about a hooligan, a woman screams obscenities over it, and the accordion player cannot find the right buttons in the dark. As the music falls silent, Chonkin's thoughts are not inspirational, and he watches his neighbours answering the call of nature before he

⁸⁶ L, pp.158-160; Ch, pp.118-119.

⁸⁷ L, pp.165-167; Ch, pp.123-124.

⁸⁸ Thr, p.11; Pr, p.237-238.

⁸⁹ Thr, p.92; Pr, p.93-94 in Paris: YMCA, 1975 version.

falls asleep to dream of betraying his Motherland and eating roast Stalin from a tray.⁹⁰ When Voinovich presents a general, the sort of hero whom he would ostensibly like to write about, it is the inhuman General Drynov who rose to his position by denouncing his own commander and orders one or other of his scouts shot for being over-zealous. He is indifferent which one is shot, and counters the Colonel's plea for clemency on account of the scout's children with the comment that the children themselves will not be harmed.⁹¹ He may present himself as heroic, but the narrator exposes him as a shallow bully. His military operation may have all the right ingredients for the performance of exploits, but once its target and its practical shortcomings become clear the spectacle is not elevating. In fact, one of the narrator's strategies for deflating the picture of socialist realism is to show the reader behind the scenes of what are essentially self-conscious spectacles for the benefit of the leader. Khudobchenko, betraying his old friend, glances up at the ceiling as he announces his intention to put the Party before friendship, sure that somewhere 'there was some sort of eye which saw everything and some sort of ear which heard everything'.⁹² The people live as if under the lens of a microscope which may reveal not only their actions, but their innermost thoughts. As Kilin prepares the ground for Liushka to give her speech, he berates the *kolkhozniks* for having no consciousness, and begs them to move into a closer group with arms linked to give an inspiring appearance whilst still allowing for applause.⁹³ The suspicion is planted that maybe all those socialist realist paintings in which flushed and happy workers link arms around a cornucopia of Soviet bounty are simply portrayals of discontented *kolkhozniks* positioned to restrain each other from running off to raid the village store.

This theme of appearance as opposed to reality alerts the reader to watch for the truth behind every artifice, and gives the lie to the doctrine of socialist realism where the sometimes unappealing truth is reinterpreted in a positive way. The

⁹⁰ L, pp.94-107; Ch, pp.73-83.

⁹¹ L, p.280; Ch, pp.204-205.

⁹² Thr, p.195; Pr, p.385.

⁹³ L, p.168; Ch, p.125.

words of the song of the Soviet airforce state: 'We were born to turn the fairy tale into reality', but what has actually happened, suggests the narrator, is that reality has been turned into a nightmarish fairy tale, as in the parodic versions of the song, in which Kafka, not the fairy tale (*skazka*), has been turned into reality.

Voinovich's deflation of socialist realism, together with his interpretation of the use of 'positive satire', approved for the improvement and education of the people, made this work highly controversial and resulted in its non-publication in Russia until the era of *glasnost*'. The prescribed topics for Soviet satire were bureaucratism, drunkenness, hooliganism and speculation. Apart from attacks on characters like Baba Dunia hoarding goods at a time of national crisis, Voinovich turns his satire instead against the principles of socialism, Stalinism, the military, collective agriculture and the security apparatus. Positive heroes and *partiinnost*' are conspicuous by their absence, but nevertheless Voinovich manages to veil the horror by humour, and to remain positive about humankind in all its *poshlost*'. Having lived in a society where, pragmatically speaking, moral weakness may be more expedient than strength, when speaking about his novel he is at pains to point out that as a satirist he shows the shady side of life, and that although he pokes fun he is not mocking the soldiers, the people nor their exploits. His targets are Stalin and false and inflated heroes. He states his belief that in the face of all the 'sacred cows' and symbols of Stalinshchina, 'in fact there is only one thing sacred, and that is human life', each person's unique opportunity to express himself honestly.⁹⁴

In spite of the absurdities it portrays, this work is essentially positive, although it makes clear that personal integrity is not easily attained. Believing that the Party and literary bureaucrats dealing with his case 'defended the interests of the state and Marxist ideology [. . .] only as a gesture',⁹⁵ it was Voinovich's purpose to start from 'the naive assumption that people should be who they really are and should say what they really think'.⁹⁶ These are tests of innocence, of which many

⁹⁴ 'O moem neputevom bludnom syne', interview by I.Khurgina, *Iunost*, 1 (1990), 76-78 (pp.76-77).

⁹⁵ 'Voinovich o sebe', in *The Third Wave*, pp.138-146 (p.144).

⁹⁶ Geoffrey Hosking, 'Profile. Vladimir Voinovich', *Index on Censorship*, 9.4 (August 1980), 19-22 (p.22).

of the characters are no more aware than is Chonkin. Having carefully measured out the boundaries of the absurd world, and having exposed it by a farcical burlesque, the narrator counters it by the depiction of a sparsely populated real world, opposed to the absurd world in language, behaviour, logic and reality. Of course, many characters sit uneasily on the fence between the two worlds, the character most firmly rooted in reality being Chonkin himself, who by his good-natured integrity constantly and inadvertently trips up those playing the game.

THE REAL WORLD:

Chonkin as Antidote to Socialist Realism

Abram Terts points to the importance of the central 'positive hero' in socialist realism, arguing that 'as soon as the literary character becomes fully purposeful and conscious of his purposefulness, he can enter that privileged caste which is universally respected and called 'positive heroes'. This is the Holy of Holies of socialist realism, its cornerstone and main achievement. The positive hero is not simply a good man. He is a hero illuminated by the light of the most ideal of all ideals'.⁹⁷ Chonkin, that apology for a hero, is definitely not this socialist realist ideal.⁹⁸ Hosking, whilst acknowledging that Chonkin has some positive characteristics, agrees that he is 'not a positive hero in the Socialist Realist or any other sense - the author explicitly disavows any intention of creating such a figure. Chonkin has no conscious beliefs, nor is he goal-directed, active or determined. On the whole things happen to him rather than the other way around'.⁹⁹ The reader is struck by Chonkin's unawareness of how he should fit in with the game; he simply is, and by his existence challenges the posturings of everyone else. His passivity makes him vulnerable but at the same time preserves him from danger; and his complete inability to pretend means that he keeps his integrity intact. According to

⁹⁷ Abram Tertz, *What is Socialist Realism?* , p.48.

⁹⁸ Thr, p.39; Pr, p.261.

⁹⁹ Geoffrey A. Hosking, 'Vladimir Voinovich: Chonkin and After' in *The Third Wave* , pp.147-152 (p.147).

Hosking he is 'ordinary humanity in a world become inhuman'.¹⁰⁰ Chonkin is a stranger to the rituals of language and behaviour, making him a lone, mythical figure simply by virtue of his normal humanity in a world where distorted values have become the norm. None of the other characters except Niura enjoys integrity, since they are all to some extent living on an ideological bridge spanning both worlds, supported by pillars 'built on a very unstable foundation' which hold 'only as long as people are willing to live within the lie'.¹⁰¹ By contrast Chonkin is an icon of purity and innocence at the still centre of the storm. Unwittingly he confronts and challenges all who come into contact with him: Stalin and Hitler; the army; the judicial system; and all the villagers. All roads lead to Chonkin and everybody must encounter him even if he is not directly on their route, as is certainly true for General Guderian. Having encountered him, their sense of conflict is heightened. As Porter puts it: 'there seems to be a contrast between the *authority* of spontaneous human response which persists in confounding the system, and the naked *power* of the system, which operates without any authority, through a rigid hierarchy and a gradation of threats and sanctions'.¹⁰² Chonkin's spontaneity confounds the values of socialist realism, and the power of the system is impotent in the face of it.

There are various motifs which the narrator uses to bring his readers back to earth when they are in danger of soaring away automatically on the elevating currents of idealism and socialist realism. One such is his preoccupation with boots and mud. It is as if he wants the reader's feet planted squarely on *terra firma*, or even not so firm, but muddy and elemental. Closely linked with this muddy refrain is the recurring theme of excrement, both animal and human, which the narrator uses for two purposes: either to show the naturalness of characters by the ease with which they relate to their bodily functions; or to show their distorted values by their obsession with excrement.

¹⁰⁰ Hosking, 'Vladimir Voinovich: Chonkin and After', p.148.

¹⁰¹ Havel, p.35.

¹⁰² R. C. Porter, 'Vladimir Voinovich and the Comedy of Innocence', *Forum for Modern Language Studies*, 26.2 (April 1980), 97-108 (pp.105-106).

Boots

When footwear is comfortable it is noticed hardly at all, but uncomfortable shoes can quickly become an organising factor in a day's perambulations. In rural Russia, deep in spring and then autumn mud, footwear takes on considerable importance. It enables or hinders characters' mobility, affects their comfort, may represent status or rank, and the narrator often refers to footwear almost as a metaphor of its wearer's state of being, frequently mentioning no other clothing. It is a technique among actors to begin the construction of characters by their footwear as this is felt to reveal much about a person. Chonkin's first appearance is as the dishevelled character with whom the reader soon becomes familiar, 'his puttees slipping', being berated by Peskov and Captain Zavgorodnii of the long-unpolished and dusty boots. Zavgorodnii orders Chonkin to march at parade step, laughing at the spectacle of his unwinding puttees which are sure to trip him up.¹⁰³ Later Chonkin features as the butt of one of Iartsev's pranks, resulting in his toes being burnt.¹⁰⁴ If the comfort of feet is any indicator of a man's wellbeing, this is a soldier less than at ease with his role. The narrator recounts that Chonkin is shortly due to be demobilised and has been counting on setting aside a new uniform and 'two sets of foot cloths' for the occasion, but with his unexpected posting to Krasnoe he misses this opportunity and for the rest of the story he repeatedly repairs his boots in an endeavour to nurse them through to the end of his tour of duty. The narrator frequently draws attention to Chonkin's nurturing relationship with his boots, and shows how they reward his care. When he is unfortunate enough to have breakfast with Gladyshev and subsequently rushes outside to vomit, he carefully stands 'so as not to splatter his boots'.¹⁰⁵ The next day, waking and feeling the need to relieve himself, he waits as long as possible before 'jamming his feet into his boots' and dashing outside.¹⁰⁶ Later, he mends his boots

¹⁰³ L, p.16; Ch, p.17.

¹⁰⁴ L, p.25; Ch, p.24.

¹⁰⁵ L, p.119; Ch, p.91.

¹⁰⁶ L, p.120; Ch, p.92.

in readiness for war,¹⁰⁷ and sallies forth to defend his aeroplane regardless of the fact that his feet stick in the mud and he can feel 'the water ooze into his bad right boot'.¹⁰⁸ It is as if his boots are an extension of his persona, accompanying him through the tribulations of life, either helping or hindering him. They handicap him in his search for Miliaga, as he complains to Niura: 'My boots are lousy. No sense in sloshing through the mud in them for nothing'.¹⁰⁹ When his great battle approaches, he laces them hastily and goes out to defend the Motherland without putting on his puttees.¹¹⁰ Once he is imprisoned and immobile, his boots take on a low profile, but they are glimpsed when he is beaten during interrogation by Luzhin, who himself appears to run around inhumanly on castors. As he is punched on the chin, Chonkin flies backwards into the wall and falls to the ground, 'his ragged boots spread wide apart'.¹¹¹ The narrator's decision to describe his hero's downfall by the position of his boots strengthens the impression that Chonkin and his boots are one, and that their ragged disarray symbolises his condition at the mercy of the state machine. After his trial, Chonkin lies asleep in prison awaiting execution, and dreams of the road to hell. As his subconscious mind wrestles with the imminent possibility of shuffling off this mortal coil, something else is uncoiling around him:

He was barefoot except for his puttees, which kept unwinding and crawling away like snakes: he thought about wrapping them back up, but one glance showed him it would be pointless; like two mourning bands fringing the road, the puttees trailed off into infinity. Deciding to rid himself altogether of his puttees, he bent over and began unwinding them from the top, but [...] they fell coiled into the dust and crawled wriggling away.¹¹²

His puttees seem to have taken on an existence of their own and are suggestive of

¹⁰⁷ L, p.170; Ch, p.126.

¹⁰⁸ L, p.216; Ch, p.158.

¹⁰⁹ L, p.273; Ch, p.199.

¹¹⁰ L, p.301; Ch, p.219.

¹¹¹ Thr, p.183; Pr, p.374.

¹¹² Thr, p.347; Pr, p.513.

death, described as snakes and mourning bands. This dream could be interpreted as Chonkin watching himself (in the form of his puttees) facing inevitable death, and grieving over the loss of his life as it retreats from him, leaving him barefoot and vulnerable on the road to the hereafter.

Chonkin's boots are later reunited with him, thanks to his rescue by the Germans, and he hides in a forest, rewinding his puttees before making his escape from the absurd world. He is disturbed by Svintsov, rifle in hand. Tossing aside his puttee, Chonkin prepares to use his boot in self-defence, although 'a boot is no grenade, of course, and not much of a weapon against a rifle'. Disarming Svintsov, he returns to his task. 'One end of the puttee was quite wet but the other was all right. Wringing out the wet end, he applied the dry end to his foot, and began to swaddle it like a child.'¹¹³ This careful attention to his footwear signals Chonkin's preparation for battle or flight, and the verb *pelenat'*, 'to swaddle', suggests a search for security and comfort. Finally he is satisfied, and even though his security is imperfect he has done all he can to prepare himself for an unknown future, accompanied only by his footwear with its potential to comfort, defend against aggressors and the weather, and seal his identity.

Other characters are frequently introduced by their footwear, as if it holds a vital clue to their identity. Gladyshev wears worn calf-skin boots with cavalry jodhpurs, hinting at faded glories and aspirations.¹¹⁴ When he attempts to shoot Chonkin over the damage to his plants, Chonkin attempts a reconciliation with his neighbour by the mediation of his boots. Tentatively approaching Gladyshev, he touches the tip of his boot to the tip of his friend's, but the latter is in no wise mollified.¹¹⁵ Perhaps Chonkin had hoped that the touching of their boots, like the touching of their souls, would effect a reconciliation.

The old bootmaker is saved from the clutches of the Institution because not only does he bear the name of Stalin, but because Dzhugashvili senior was a shoemaker, therefore cementing the connection between the two men in the mind of

¹¹³ Thr, p.355; Pr, p.520, trans. mine.

¹¹⁴ L, p.66; Ch, p.53.

¹¹⁵ L, p.192; Ch, p.141.

Miliaga.¹¹⁶

Miliaga himself wears box-calf boots, indicative of a certain status, but this does not help him as they cut ‘two winding furrows across the chaff-strewn dirt’ on his way to execution.¹¹⁷ In his relations with Kapa, the secretary and German spy, the reader learns something of his attitude to women through his attitude towards her footwear. Kapa reflects that he ‘had never been interested in her physical beauty. That savage, he used to throw her down on the couch, not even letting her take off her boots’.¹¹⁸ On another occasion Miliaga entreats her to walk the seven kilometres to Krasnoe to investigate the disappearance of the Institution’s staff. She protests about the distance and the mud, but the Captain tells her to put on her rubber boots. When she is still unable to go because her husband has locked her up, Miliaga saddles the stray gelding and rides there instead, presumably to save his box-calf boots.¹¹⁹

Niura, who wears her father’s old boots which are so big that she has to hold them up,¹²⁰ is often preoccupied with footwear, living as she does next to one of the muddiest vegetable patches in Russia. On the occasion of ‘Miliaga’s funeral’, she has been out unsuccessfully searching for new galoshes.¹²¹ That very night, she dreams of walking through a field with Chonkin and meeting Luzhin who is ‘wearing only underpants, and galoshes on his bare feet’.¹²² This unusual attire alerts her and the reader to his sinister behaviour as he tries to persuade Niura to accept a counterfeit Chonkin in place of the real one.

The prosecutor, Evpraksein, several times drives his wife outside barefoot to be shot, although presumably wearing boots himself on these occasions. Fate avenges her on one occasion as he steps in a ‘little pile of excrement’ as she evades him and locks him out for the night.¹²³ She is barefoot because these ritual mock-

¹¹⁶ L, pp.198-210; Ch, pp.146-154.

¹¹⁷ L, p.298; Ch, p.217.

¹¹⁸ Thr, p.270; Pr, p.405.

¹¹⁹ L, p.231; Ch, p.169.

¹²⁰ L, p.213; Ch, p.156.

¹²¹ Thr, p.233; Pr, p.416-417.

¹²² Thr, p.274; Pr, p.451.

¹²³ Thr, p.65; Pr, p.279.

executions take place at night, and her state of undress makes her appear particularly vulnerable. On the night of his suicide, his wife notices that uncharacteristically 'he did not rant and holler; on the contrary, he made an effort to be quiet, he removed his boots and foot cloths in the front hall, walked barefoot to his desk, turned on his lamp, and sat down to write'.¹²⁴ Thus the executioner prepares himself to meet death in the same vulnerable position that his wife has taken on many occasions as he has tried to expiate his guilt. Having written his suicide note, he puts his boots on again and goes outside with his gun to ponder the futility of his life. When he is ready he rests 'his left boot tip on the back of his right boot'. The narrator continues: 'It took some effort to push off his boot; then, hopping on one foot, he unwound his foot cloth and tossed it aside. The wind snatched it up and bore it whirling away.'¹²⁵ Again, the loss of a boot symbolises vulnerability, and the whisking away of a foot cloth signals the passing of life. When his body is found, the spectators notice that there 'was a boot on one foot, the other was bare'.¹²⁶ Throughout his life Evpraksein has appeared as a man divided within himself: speaking the truth when drunk but lying when sober; secretly kind-hearted but publicly ruthless; a friend when inebriated but an enemy at work. The undignified appearance which he presents in death sums up the dual nature of his life as the narrator again uses footwear as a reflection of a character's inner reality.

Ermolkin, consumed with guilt over his type-setting error, daily awaits the Black Maria at work, and is preoccupied with the anticipated sound of leather boots 'stomping down the corridor'.¹²⁷

Golubev, when he is eventually cast into prison, remembers what he has been told about prison customs and makes his presence felt as a leader by demanding the towel. Catching it in midair, he 'flung it to his feet, and began wiping his boots on it'.¹²⁸ Thus he affirms his dominance, and his future as 'the

¹²⁴ Thr, p.335; Pr, p.504.

¹²⁵ Thr, p.339; Pr, p.506.

¹²⁶ Thr, p.341; Pr, p.508.

¹²⁷ Thr, p.90; Pr, p.300.

¹²⁸ Thr, p.286; Pr, p.46.

Chairman' of the cell is assured.

The hydra which is the citizens of Krasnoe fighting over Baba Dunia's sack is seen primarily in terms of its many legs, with a few breasts thrown in for good measure. As the chairman and the *partorg* watch, they see that 'two feet in canvas boots belonging to two widely spread legs were struggling to get back into the pile. A third leg, visible through ripped pants, was sticking straight up like an antenna; this leg had been tattooed from ankle to knee in blue ink, which had faded in time and which read: "Right leg"'.¹²⁹ This undignified view of the villagers emphasises the monstrous nature of the pandemonium into which they have been absorbed. Another crowd scene, observed by Niura as she walks the corridors of the Institution, again shows people in terms of their clothing, and in particular, their footwear. She passes the petitioners 'in ragged quilt jackets, rags, bast sandals, sandals made of rope and tires, some with galoshes on their bare feet and some completely barefooted'.¹³⁰ These are the downtrodden of the absurd world, and as such are not power-dressers. However, even the legless Zhikin who travels round on a board and casters, is able to outrun most two-legged individuals and uses his board to good effect in escaping from Luzhin's roundup.¹³¹ As a final example of footwear indicating power or vulnerability, the reader may consider the devotion inspired by Stalin's boots. Stalin is suspicious of Beria, and questions him concerning his relations with Hitler and Himmler. Mortified, Beria 'fell to his knees, embraced Stalin's boot, pressed it to his heart, then pressed his cheek to it'.¹³² What further proof of loyalty could be needed? Stalin is moved, and a tear glistens on his cheek. The son of the bootmaker has received the homage which he believes is his due.

¹²⁹ L, p.159; Ch, pp.118-119.

¹³⁰ Thr, p.66; Pr, p.279.

¹³¹ Thr, pp.278-279; Pr, pp.454-456.

¹³² Thr, p.270; Pr, p.448.

Mud

In spite of Griaznoe's new, heroic name the mud is still there: in fact, throughout the story it constantly causes people to fall over, acting as a leveller by depriving both good and bad of their dignity. It bogs down the truck sent to arrest Chonkin; it camouflages the battalion attacking the plane as they crawl through it; and it hinders Miliaga as he tries to escape from Chonkin, and Chonkin as he tries to apprehend Miliaga. Mud is everywhere: on the people, the vehicles, the animals, especially on Bor'ka who wanders freely around Niura's home, smeared from head to foot with mud and dung. The reader's first sighting of Niura is face-down in a furrow of earth and manure.¹³³ She remains close to the earth throughout the story, as does Chonkin, who is first seen being ordered repeatedly to drop to the floor by his sergeant.¹³⁴ They are often to be seen working on the vegetable patch, but unlike Gladyshev they are growing edible vegetables.

Animals

Until Chonkin's arrival, Niura's closest friends had been her cow Krasavka and Bor'ka the hog. She is touchingly honest about her feelings for Bor'ka, explaining that her affection was born of loneliness and the need to care for him when he was only three days old. She explains to the jealous Chonkin that Bor'ka has the power to make her feel better since 'he's a living soul, after all'.¹³⁵ Chonkin should be able to understand this since he too has always had a close relationship with animals. He has worked with horses since his youth, and 'he even liked talking with horses better than with people, because if you say the wrong thing to a person you can get yourself in hot water, but no matter what you say to a horse it'll accept it'.¹³⁶ In a world where truth is at a premium, animals represent

¹³³ L, p.4, Ch, p.9.

¹³⁴ L, p.14; Ch, p.16.

¹³⁵ L, p.91; Ch, p.71.

¹³⁶ L, p.38; Ch, pp.33-34.

honesty and a natural sympathy hard to find among humans. People rooted in the absurd world do not always understand this view of animals and respond to them with hostility and fear. The reader thinks of Gladyshev, incensed by Krasavka's inclination to eat his plants, of the awe with which he regards Osoaviakhim the gelding, of the fear which the gelding of the type-setting error inspires in the newspaper editor, of the guinea-pig which prophesies his death, and the horse which brings it about. Animals feature in many of Chonkin's dreams, sometimes as friendly forces, and sometimes threatening, but always reminding the reader that he is a man in touch with nature.

Another feature of Chonkin's character which reinforces his image as natural man rather than socialist realist hero, is his comfortable relationship with his own sexuality and bodily functions. Early on in his relationship with Niura, while Hitler is planning his invasion, Chonkin is described as a 'hungry beast' in his sexual appetite for Niura who is exhausted by his demands and is 'shedding hair like a cat'.¹³⁷ This description of their relationship, far from debasing them, allies them with the natural world rather than with the absurd world where two tyrants are making plans to destroy each other. It also serves to reduce the machinations of the leaders, by a process of semantic gravitation. Joseph Bentley describes how this satirical function works: 'the presence of the elements with low connotation creates a gravitational pressure pulling the high elements downward and thereby functions satirically. The reverse movement does not occur'. Furthermore 'when extremes of high and low are merged, the high elements will descend toward the level of the low elements'.¹³⁸ Thus, the unfolding of world events appears less elevated by its juxtaposition with Chonkin and Niura's furious sexual antics; rather than their activity being raised to the importance of international power struggles.

Scatology

¹³⁷ L, p.82; Ch, p.64.

¹³⁸ Joseph Bentley, 'Semantic Gravitation: An Essay on Satiric Reduction', *Modern Language Quarterly*, 30 (March 1969), 3-19 (p.7).

In addition to being enjoyably active sexually, Chonkin is also frequently to be seen relieving himself in the outhouse, or even on the porch if that is as far as he gets, and for this reason he misses the news about the outbreak of war with Germany. By diverting the reader's attention to the activities of one man answering the call of nature, the narrator effectively deflates the grandiose schemes of nations. He explains:

Chonkin did not learn about what had happened immediately because he was sitting in the outhouse, in no hurry to leave. Chonkin's time had not been apportioned and allotted for any noble purpose; it was only for living and for him to contemplate the flow of life without drawing any conclusions: simply to eat, drink, sleep, and to answer the calls of nature, not only in those moments determined by the regulations on guard and garrison duty, but as the needs arose.¹³⁹

The many occasions on which Chonkin is observed unselfconsciously relieving himself are used by the narrator to show a character completely comfortable with his own body. By contrast, Gladyshev the 'scientist' has an unusual and unnatural obsession with the products of such functions. When he relieves himself, it is in an outhouse specially labelled to state its purpose. Under the guise of science, he fills his home with pots full of excrement, but is intolerant of his baby son's tendency to wet himself.¹⁴⁰ He believes that excrement could become the new wonder vitamin, having its natural smell removed before being used as a source of food until people become accustomed to it. He suggests that this idea belongs to the 'future exploits of science', and proposes a toast to Stalin in a glass of his powerful homebrew. The reader is already aware that not all that is in Gladyshev's kitchen is food, but Chonkin is not, and as the scientist proudly reveals the ingredients of this beverage to be 'a kilo of sugar to a kilo of shit', Chonkin's reaction may not be that of a rational 'scientist' but it is perfectly natural; he runs outside and is violently sick. The juxtaposition of the ideas of 'excrement' with 'science' and 'Stalin' works

¹³⁹ L, p.125; Ch, p.95.

¹⁴⁰ L, p.114; Ch, p.88.

wonderfully well to reduce Gladyshev and his endeavours and, of course, Stalin, to a less than elevated position. Chonkin acts as a foil to Gladyshev: he knows that excrement exists in little heaps all around the village, Bor'ka walks around covered in it, and he himself enjoys sitting in the outhouse, but he is not prepared to raise it to a position of scientific endeavour, or nutrition. This may be one of the rules of Gladyshev's game, but to Chonkin it stinks, and he is not above saying so. The narrator illustrates here that many things are interpreted in the eye of the beholder and that what may be excrement to one man may be food to another, depending on whether that man lives in the real or the absurd world. The reader has seen this already in relation to mud and to animals, but it is with the metaphor of excrement that it is shown most clearly how the world of 'as if' can distort what is unremarkable by making it into a myth. The parallels with Stalin and his entire society, buttressed by socialist realism, are there to be drawn, and if further help were needed the narrator is ready to supply countless examples of satiric reduction.

Dreams

According to Ryan-Hayes, the dream, as used in contemporary Russian satire, does little to develop characterisation, support the narrative structure or explicate theme, as was the case in nineteenth-century literature; but it serves instead to strengthen satire and polemic.¹⁴¹ Because the dream's place within a narrative is indirect, she suggests, it makes social and political criticism acceptable, and since it is purportedly involuntary, the satirist is able to distance himself from the ridicule which is expressed through it. Furthermore, the satirical effect of the dream is strengthened when its symbolic significance is decoded. The images of Voinovich's dream passages are drawn from folklore, literature, mythology and popular guides to dream interpretation, making any definitive interpretation impossible, but allowing analysis on multiple levels, as Ryan-Hayes demonstrates in detail.

In *Chonkin*, dreams are a device by which the narrator allows access to the hero's mind to show how he subconsciously works out the dilemmas of the absurd

¹⁴¹ Ryan-Hayes, 'Decoding the Dream in the Satirical Works of Vladimir Voinovič', p.289.

world. The dream sequences are motivated realistically within the text, and are usually introduced through the device of false awakening. They have their source in the deficiencies of Soviet society, and act as an indirect enrichment of the portrayal of reality.¹⁴² In addition, they serve to lift the narrative out of space and time, and to generalise its satirical meaning.¹⁴³

One of Chonkin's preoccupations is the fear of saying things which might cause trouble. When he speaks it is the truth, but he is not eloquent and realises the advantages of a judicious silence at times. In an early scene, he is provoked into asking a politically sensitive question about Stalin's two wives and immediately regrets it. As he rides away he firmly resolves 'that from there on in he would never ask another question, and that way keep himself from getting into a mess so bad there'd be no getting out'.¹⁴⁴ This theme of silence, voluntary or involuntary, occurs in nearly all his dreams, indicating the demands that absurd language rituals make on an honest but inarticulate man. The theme of animals and the earth is also emphasised, as is the importance of political correctness, and the violence of retribution for any deviation.

Chonkin's first recorded dream, on the night when he first sleeps with Niura, illustrates his anxiety about having abandoned his post. The narrator introduces the dream misleadingly, implying that Chonkin is still awake, but the reader soon realises that this is an illusion. The dream involves a horse towing his aeroplane away, Niura waving invitingly at him, Iartsev turning into an insect, Comrade Stalin in a dress, and finally a terror as his mouth, ears and eyes are filled with dust, depriving him of his senses and his ability to speak, see or hear.¹⁴⁵ Chonkin awakes in a panic which is only resolved when he has taken down part of the garden fence, rolled the aeroplane into the vegetable patch, and replaced the fence.

Chonkin's next dream concerns Plechevoi's allegations about Niura's

¹⁴² Kasack, 'Vladimir Voinovich and his Undesirable Satires', p.267.

¹⁴³ Reissner, 'Contemporary Russian Satire', p.60.

¹⁴⁴ L, p.30; Ch, p.28.

¹⁴⁵ L, p.55; Ch, p.45.

former intimate relationship with Bor'ka. It is Plechevoi who seems to awaken him from sleep and leads him by the hand into the dreamworld in which people appear to be talking, dancing and playing the accordion, but there is not a single sound. When Chonkin speaks nothing can be heard, and he hears Plechevoi's voice, but not in the usual way; it seems to have taken some alternative route to his brain. But when they are ushered in to Niura's wedding, all is noise and bustle, and Niura sits radiant next to her groom, looking defiantly at Chonkin because he never offered her marriage. Chonkin bows politely and greets everyone as custom demands, before joining the feast. The other guests are all pink and plump with little eyes, and eat without the use of silverware. The dreamer joins in, becoming inebriated so that when he is asked questions he answers willingly. Suddenly he realises that he is betraying classified military secrets and the man next to him is noting it all down in a book, which he then swallows. As in life Chonkin regrets having opened his mouth, but it is too late and he is drawn into the rituals of the wedding feast. As the bride and groom kiss, he realises with a chill of horror that the groom is none other than Bor'ka and that all the guests are pigs. He shouts out in anger but 'his words brought no more reply than if they had fallen into a deep well'. His fellow-guests scoff at his claims to be human and demand that he should grunt with them, 'cheerfully, from the bottom of your heart, so that you really enjoy it'. Chonkin pretends, but Plechevoi is not deceived. This sort of behaviour is already familiar to Chonkin from his political education classes, where appearing to believe sincerely is more important than actual adherence to the ideology. He grunts again, eventually experiencing real delight in the exercise, which is brought to a rapid halt by the appearance on trays of humans ready for consumption. He realises that his words are responsible for this, and Iartsev confirms his fears. The last tray to be borne in carries Stalin, who grins 'slyly to himself behind his mustache'.¹⁴⁶ The dream illustrates Chonkin's fears at this point of the story: of inappropriate speech; of Niura's unfaithfulness; of not fulfilling his military and political duty; and the awful fear of being made to speak and behave in an unnatural way.

Gladyshev, also following a false awakening, dreams of talking to

¹⁴⁶ L, p.107; Ch, p.83.

Osoaviakhim the gelding about evolution, during which conversation he receives a startling scientific revelation: that horses did not evolve into men for the simple reason that they do not have fingers. The last laugh is enjoyed by the narrator who leaves a horse-shoe on Gladyshev's porch the next morning, making the 'scientist' turn cold with horror at the thought that maybe the encounter was real.¹⁴⁷

Chonkin dreams again on the night that Miliaga escapes from his custody. In his dream his prisoner is trying to escape and when Chonkin orders him to stop, he is 'amazed at not being able to hear his own voice'. Later he dreams of his mother bringing laundry up from the river (where the reader remembers she drowned), and she smiles at him, takes him in her arms and sings him a lullaby. As they embrace, men spring from the bushes trying to wrest him from his mother's arms, and she screams. He also tries to cry out but is mute, and he wakes in a panic to find that his prisoner has fled.¹⁴⁸ This dream gives an insight into the weight of responsibility which Chonkin feels for guarding the prisoners; his longing for the warmth and love of a childhood which he never knew; and his fear of being inarticulate in a world where men in military uniforms may threaten his safety at any moment.

When Chonkin arrives in cell thirty-four he dreams of Niura's feather bed, his passion is aroused, and he has a close encounter with the prisoner next to him who does not welcome his somnambulistic advances. He falls asleep again and again transgresses, although this time his affection is returned. This dreaming probably shows nothing more nor less than the natural inclinations of a man missing home.¹⁴⁹

At his trial Chonkin is desperately tired from endless interrogation, and as the prosecutor gets into his stride the accused is overcome by sleep and dreams that he is again full of life and hope and just embarking on his relationship with Niura. The smile which this brings to his lips is interpreted as insolence, and he wakes with a start. As the trial continues, he fights with sleep and in a mixed state of

¹⁴⁷ L, p.178; Ch, p.132.

¹⁴⁸ L, pp.267-270; Ch, pp.195-197.

¹⁴⁹ Thr, pp.12-13; Pr, pp.238-239.

dream and waking he watches as the prosecutor, judges and spectators turn into animals, wood goblins and monsters. He is asleep when he is accused of being pretender to the throne of the tsars, but is woken by the sudden silence. As he drifts off to sleep again he dreams of swimming with Niura in a brook. She is a water nymph and they both breathe freely underwater as they talk together. Inspired by the background drone of ritual language, Chonkin's dream takes the form of making up 'devil talk' with Niura, but once again articulation brings disappointment and the stream which was carrying them along divides and they are separated. He wakes to cries of 'Death sentence' in the courtroom, and all he is able to say in his defence is 'Please forgive me' before he is taken away.¹⁵⁰ His dream has again revealed his powerlessness in the face of ritual language and his consequent fear of it, mingled with his fear of separation from Niura.

Chonkin is not alone in his fear of speech: many people in the absurd world are afraid to speak the truth and it is rare for a character to experience real emancipation. One who does is the glum and taciturn Aphrodite who, after years of patient endurance, eventually refuses to live any longer in a house full of excrement. She turns venomously on her husband before running from the house shouting that her name is not Aphrodite, but Fros'ka. She was born Fros'ka, and she insists loud and long on this name as she runs through the village, 'shouting with frenzied delight, as if she had just suddenly regained the gift of speech after years of being mute'.¹⁵¹

The final dream worlds to which the narrator gives access are those of Stalin and Hitler after they are told about the exploits of Chonkin and Golitsyn, unaware that these two men are one and the same. Stalin is impressed by Chonkin's heroism, particularly since the sentry stayed at his post in spite of his boots wearing through.¹⁵² Hitler too is moved by the image of the Russian prince, ready to help his people cast off 'the yoke of Communist slavery', and to welcome the German

¹⁵⁰ Thr, pp.309-317; Pr, pp.481-488.

¹⁵¹ L, p.120; Ch, p.92.

¹⁵² Thr, p.332; Pr, p.500.

troops 'with bread and salt'.¹⁵³ They simultaneously decide to save him and as they fall asleep they each dream about Chonkin: Stalin's dream, like a socialist realist film, shows Chonkin as an epic hero meting out justice to the enemies of Russia; while Hitler's dream portrays the same figure leading an army of peasants to freedom under the Führer's liberating control.¹⁵⁴ The rigidly stylised dreams of the two dictators show the almost identically absurd worlds over which they hold sway, and the self-deceit which permeates their illusions about themselves and their subjects. Theirs is a cartoon world peopled by heroes and villains, whole-hearted loyalists or black-hearted traitors.

By making the reader privy to the dreams of his characters, the narrator of *Chonkin* reveals their hopes and fears and gives insight into their motivations. The narrative further exposes the absurd world as inhuman, ritualistic and driven by specious logic and rules. The real world, as seen through the eyes of the little soldier, by contrast appears rational, earthy and sane.

¹⁵³ Thr, p.320; Pr, pp.490-491.

¹⁵⁴ Thr, p.334; Pr, p.502.

CHAPTER FOUR:

CHONKIN: UNIVERSAL HERO, UNIVERSAL FOOL

NARRATIVE STYLE:

The Anecdote

The Narrator

The Structural Development of the Text

Characterisation

The Characters

CHONKIN'S LITERARY AND PRE-LITERARY PEDIGREE:

The Fool

The Natural Man

NARRATIVE STYLE:

Throughout the construction and exposure of the absurd world the narrator has played an active part. He has revealed to the reader his characters' minds; has considerably pointed out things which might otherwise be missed; has modestly withdrawn from the scene on occasions and spoken directly in others. He has almost unrestricted access to the world he introduces in confiding and intimate tone; he is a raconteur whose familiarity of address forms a bond as he tells his tale. Voinovich calls this work a *roman-anekdot*, and it is indeed a work of sufficient length, characterisation and plot to be called a novel, whilst at the same time being anecdotal in form and containing much of the paraphernalia of the anecdote: puns, jokes and secret details.

The Anecdote

The anecdote is defined as 'the narrative of a detached incident, or of a single event, told as being in itself interesting or striking' and as 'secret, private or hitherto unpublished narratives or details of history' in *A New English Dictionary*¹ and as 'a short, entertaining story about an amusing or unusual event' in the Russian *Slovar' sovremennogo russkogo literaturnogo iazyka*.² For a French view of the phenomenon, the Robert *Dictionnaire alphabétique et analogique de la langue française*³ quotes Voltaire: 'anecdotes are an enclosed field where one may glean after the vast harvest of history; they are little details, long hidden'.

Chonkin is set very firmly in history, 'just before the start of the war'.⁴ As the story unfolds fictional events are interwoven with historical facts: Operation Barbarossa; the bombing of Kiev; Stalin's speech quoted in *Pravda* on 3rd July 1941 in an edition bearing his photograph; his hideaway in the metro; Hitler's planned invasion of Moscow, and his almost inexplicable failure to achieve his goal. These events give a sense of authenticity to the story and lend authority to the narrator's anecdotal digressions. However, he insists from the start that he will not be held accountable for any incorrect details since it all happened so long ago that there are practically no eyewitnesses left, and certainly no reliable ones. Furthermore, he confesses to having added 'a little something of my own as well', and advises the reader that if 'the story seems uninteresting to you, or boring, or even foolish, then just spit and forget I ever started telling it'.⁵ But after this modest devaluing of the tale, the mention of certain memorable dates and the promise of previously unpublished but politically sensitive details of history seize the reader's attention; and the life-expectancy of the text is guaranteed at least beyond the first few pages. After all, the anecdote in Russian culture has long been a convenient

¹ *The English Oxford Dictionary*, 2nd edn, vol.1 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), p.454.

² *Slovar' sovremennogo russkogo literaturnogo iazyka*, vol.1 (Moscow / Leningrad: Akademiia nauk SSSR, 1950), p.139.

³ Robert, Paul, *Dictionnaire alphabétique et analogique de la langue française*, ed. A. Rey and J. Rey-Debove, new edn, vol.1 (Paris: Société du Nouveau Littre, 1977), p.152.

⁴ L, p.3; Ch, p.8.

⁵ L, p.3; Ch, p.8.

way of expressing absurd truths whilst camouflaging the teller behind the mask of simple raconteur, bearing no responsibility for the content. But to begin at the beginning.

Have you heard the one about the soldier sent to guard a plane, who was completely forgotten by his regiment for months? Or the one about the boy who aimed at his teacher with his slingshot, hit a portrait of Stalin by mistake, and consequently disappeared from the face of the earth? And do you remember the scientist who tried to grow a hybrid potato-tomato plant, and ended up with tomato roots and potato leaves? And what about the little girl who told the soldier she loved Stalin more than her mother or father? And the Member of the Academy doing ten years in camp for trying to foul up the Kremlin chimes to 'give the whole country the wrong time'?⁶ And did you hear about the woman who raised a hog like a little baby, and then her lover tried to shoot it because he was jealous; he even thought she had been sleeping with it? And the scientist with the hybrid plant told his friend that 'the French firm Coty manufactures the most subtle perfumes from shit'. And he was so excited about the magical properties of shit that he made vodka from equal quantities of sugar and shit and proposed a toast to Stalin. And did you hear the one about the sentry who was guarding this aeroplane when he heard a mosquito and thought it was an enemy plane coming to attack?⁷ And he was so ignorant that he didn't know that man was supposed to have evolved from monkeys, and thought we probably came from cows or horses. Or what about the meeting where everyone got together to hear about the war, and then they were all sent away again to be called to a meeting to tell them all about the war, but only when they'd been told to come! And did you ever read the novel about the man who went through the Revolution and the Civil War and 'ended up not only without arms and legs but blinded in both eyes as well, and who, chained to his bed by pain, found the strength and courage in himself to serve his people and write that book'.⁸ And did you hear the one about the old Jewish bootmaker who was beaten

⁶ L, p.79; Ch, p.62.

⁷ L, pp.127-128; Ch, p.97.

⁸ L, p.149; Ch, p.112.

up and had his dentures broken, but when Miliaga found out his surname he nearly had a fit and escorted him off the premises like an honoured guest with a special document for the dentist? And can you guess what his name was? Stalin! And how about the sentry who singlehandedly arrested seven men sent to arrest him? And when the Captain came from the Institution to find out where they had all gone, he got arrested too, and the funny thing was that no-one noticed they were missing. The only person who thought it strange was a man trying to get himself arrested who couldn't find anyone to confess to! And do you know the one about the General who used live ammunition in field exercises, so that only the 'good' soldiers who knew how to entrench themselves would survive? They put him in charge of trying to capture the sentry with the aeroplane, and he diverted a whole regiment from the front and had them using petrol bombs but no-one told them to light them so none of them exploded and the sentry held them off for ages. In the same exercise the General had a Russian soldier interrogated in German, and the poor man was so confused that he tried to talk German too and ended up being shot as a traitor. When they finally captured the sentry, the General decorated him for heroism and then arrested him straightaway for being a traitor to the Motherland. And have you heard the one about the man who started reciting Virgil at a party, and was arrested as a Latin spy? Or the newspaper editor who never went home for years, and when he did something went wrong at work and he spent ages trying to get himself arrested before they came to get him? And what about the postmistress who got the sack for having lived with a traitor, and ran round the village, delighted, telling everyone she had been sacked for love?⁹ And did you hear about the man who was on trial for making a politically naive remark, and got so angry that he simply dropped dead? And the man who was next in line decided the same thing wasn't going to happen to him so he gave his Party card in before they even asked for it, and then they had to try and make him take it back so that they could confiscate it. And how about the 'funeral' with the fake widow and son, and the horse's remains in the coffin, and the concussed newspaper editor who thought he was maybe dead, or maybe a horse, and who very soon was kicked to death by a

⁹ Thr, p.120; Pr, p.324.

horse? And what about the German spy who had to be intercepted, so they arrested someone else instead and the spy turned out to be the secretary of the man leading the investigation? And do you know the real reason why the German tanks which were about to take Moscow suddenly changed direction and went the other way? It was to rescue a Russian soldier called Chonkin, because Hitler thought he was actually Prince Golitsyn, and that he had been trying to lead an uprising against the Russian government. So they turned right round and went to liberate him, and by the time they got back on the road to Moscow it was too late.

Many of these anecdotes fulfil the necessary requirements in that they are gossipy, extraordinary, amusing, and supply 'little known details' of history. They range from light comic in tone to tragic ironic and amplify the main anecdote about the course of history being changed by one bow-legged, lop-eared sentry, giving impetus to each other as they build up a picture of life in the absurd world. They recount events which could only occur under Soviet power, and 'the anecdotal quality and the truly comic element of the situations are born out of the normal adaptation (of the characters) to the abnormalities of the circumstances'.¹⁰ The historical facts of the era provide a stable backdrop for these fictional events which not only embellish history but interpret it. The narrator, like a confiding friend, takes the reader backwards and even forwards through time, pointing out details and building a bond of intimacy by ironies mutually understood.

The Narrator

A narrator implies a narratee and therefore a relationship between text and reader. The narrator of *Chonkin* communicates directly at times, often colloquially, and also indirectly by presenting a selected view of the world. He sets the scene by giving the date of his tale, thus planting the 'seed of truth', the presentation of actual conditions as a basis for satire and anecdote.¹¹ The main story line is

¹⁰ R. R., 'Roman-anekdot', *Grani*, 97 (1975), 277-278.

¹¹ Karen Ryan-Hayes, *Soviet Satire after the Thaw: Tvardovskij, Solženicyn, Vojnovič and Iskander*, Ph.D, University of Michigan, 1986, p.37.

established as the heroic rescue of Moscow from the ravages of Hitler's army with Chonkin as the unwitting hero, and the subsidiary storylines branch out from this. The narrator sometimes focalises the story through the voices of different characters, but also appears as an external narrator: omniscient and non-participatory, with a panoramic view of past, present and future. He sometimes addresses the reader directly, interpreting a given scene, although often he leaves the conclusion to the narratee. Often he mixes these styles, *diegesis* and *mimesis* or 'telling' and 'showing' in the parlance of Anglo-American criticism of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan summarises these forms thus: "Telling" [. . .] is a presentation mediated by the narrator who, instead of directly and dramatically exhibiting events and conversations, talks about them, sums them up', whereas "showing" is the supposedly direct presentation of events and conversations, the narrator seeming to disappear (as in drama) and the reader being left to draw his own conclusions from what he "sees" and "hears".¹²

As the plot of *Chonkin* progresses and the tone becomes ever darker, the narrator becomes by degrees more didactic, allowing less freedom of interpretation and insisting on the ideological norms on which the work stands. Although he is omniscient he refrains from telling everything out of consideration for the plot, but guides the reader by norms,¹³ or 'a general system of viewing the world conceptually'.¹⁴ This device conveys the authority of the narrator-focaliser's ideology, and guides the reader to view the other characters through the prism of his narration. He addresses the narratee directly in a confiding tone to seek agreement, and uses some of his characters as normative agents, thus challenging the motivations guiding other personae. Chonkin is the obvious example here of a normative agent, but Niura also has a part to play. When Chonkin first starts to help her harvest her potatoes, Niura is impressed by his skill, and by her commendation she sets the norm of the virtue of country over city life. Chonkin confirms that in

¹² Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, *Narrative Fiction (Contemporary Poetics)* (London: Routledge, 1990), p.107.

¹³ Rimmon-Kenan, p.81.

¹⁴ Boris Uspensky, *A Poetics of Composition* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973), p.8.

the city, people are taught only to 'live off the fat of the countryside', and Niura agrees.¹⁵ Hence the narrator establishes the norm that productive country living is worthwhile, while bureaucrats and *apparatchiks* contribute no more to the common good than Gladyshev with his non-productive hybrids. So, even when silent, the narrator steers the work, deciding what the reader should see and occasionally drawing a veil over scenes which he considers too distressing, like an Intourist guide hurrying his charges from site to site. He is the 'teller in the tale', as argued by Rimmon-Kenan, 'at least in the sense that any utterance or record of an utterance presupposes someone who has uttered it. Even when a narrative text presents passages of pure dialogue, [. . .] there is in addition to the speakers or writers of this discourse a 'higher' narratorial authority responsible for 'quoting' the dialogue'.¹⁶ Passages such as chapter thirteen of the second part of *Pretendent na prestol* are delivered almost entirely through direct speech without comment, but chapter sixty of the same part consists entirely of the direct address of narrator to narratee, reinterpreting history in the light of events on the road to Moscow.

The narrator uses other devices to validate the ideological viewpoint in this work, since the purpose of satire is 'the exposure of folly and the castigation of vice',¹⁷ but cautiously since it should be remembered that Voinovich's targets were not those approved by the Soviet state.

To consider these devices in more detail, it may prove helpful to arrange them around part of the structure of Ryan-Hayes' Ph.D, in which she examines the narration of four Soviet satirists, including Voinovich. The examples quoted will in some cases be different from hers, as may be the reasons for arriving at them, but the structure which bears the weight of the argument is hers.

Several instances of false logic have been cited, including the dispersal of the spontaneous meeting in order to convene an officially sanctioned gathering of the same people. The 'logic' of this is presented by the narrator without comment, although it is clear from the snippets of overheard conversation that there is a

¹⁵ L, p.43; Ch, p.37.

¹⁶ Rimmon-Kenan, p.88.

¹⁷ A. Melville Clark, *Studies in Literary Modes* (1946), p.32, quoted by Arthur Pollard, *Satire*, p.4.

strangely distorted intelligence at work. Well before the end of the scene, the reader has drawn conclusions about the quality of this logic and at the last minute the narrator steps in to confirm this view, saying that the conveners of the meeting were right and that 'without some resistance the victor has no pleasure in his victory.' Thus he conjures gleefully with the power of irony, using the socialist realist vocabulary of victory in the context of the bosses' mindless manipulation of the masses: the very people who are supposed to emerge victorious in the struggle. Obtuse indeed would be the reader who failed to observe that such victory is no victory at all.

Reductio ad absurdum is another device frequently used to ridicule the posturings of the absurd world, and ranges from Gladyshev buying vegetables because his wonder-plant produces nothing edible to Khudobchenko weeping with self-pity because he has lost the friend whom he has just betrayed.¹⁸ The whole community of spurious 'scientists' is a sitting target, ably represented by Gladyshev with his elevated pretensions: his family with their classical Greek names; his boring erudition; his scientific theories which include the acquisition of energy from cockroaches and excrement, and his grateful reception of official scientific scorn because it comes on headed notepaper.

Bentley, writing on the satiric techniques and strategies used in Aldous Huxley's novels, notes the use of satiric reduction or downward simile, which works by creating 'an area of tension between elements with widely contrasting connotations'.¹⁹ This technique is adopted by Voinovich's narrator, who, aware of the supremacy of the socialist realist hero, presents instead a bowlegged, red-eared hero, with the excuse that all the good heroes had been used up. This is almost plausible, but the justification becomes increasingly ridiculous as he explains the emotional adjustment he had to make to such a hero: 'after all, the hero of your book is like your own child [. . .] Maybe some other people's children are a little better, a little smarter, but still you love your own more just because he's your

¹⁸ Thr, pp.196-197; Pr, pp.385-386.

¹⁹ Bentley, p.6.

own'.²⁰ To compare the birth of a literary hero to the birth of a real but unattractive child is ludicrous simply because there is almost no resemblance between such a hero and a real person, and the comparison serves to reduce the theory rather than to elevate bowlegged babies. Other examples include the juxtaposition of Stalin's speech about the enemy 'finding their graves on the field of battle' with Chonkin's perfectly literal interpretation of it;²¹ the account of German troops massing on the Soviet border occurring simultaneously with a bird's eye view of Chonkin in bed wishing he did not have to get up to answer a call of nature;²² and the description of the Stakhanovite Liushka, so busy being a propaganda visual aid that the cows are left unmilked.

Puns are impossible to appreciate in translation, but a Russian reader would enjoy the name of Gladyshev's plant, *puks*, and the names of many characters which illustrate either their personality or the opposite. Miliaga, whose name suggests a kindly person is variously presented as 'the terror of the district'²³ and the man who 'smiled when he said hello, he smiled while interrogating prisoners, he smiled when others were sobbing; in brief, he was constantly smiling'.²⁴

Combining disparate categories of words gives a diminishing and satiric effect to the items with higher connotation, and Voinovich's narrator uses this device, for example, when eavesdropping on a conversation about 'the mysteries of the universe, the dark powers, the scientific means of predicting earthquakes, and how to have sex with a hen'.²⁵ In the safe, foggy world of tearoom talk, stupid people are allowed their say along with the 'wise', and over the vodka and cucumbers even Golubev feels able to be truthful with his friend the prosecutor.

Anti-climax is a further device, often instigated by Chonkin as his simple thought patterns wrestle with the complexities of Soviet logic and come up with alternatives. He suggests to Gladyshev that it might be easier to grow his hybrid

²⁰ L, p.21; Ch, p.21.

²¹ L, pp.183-184; Ch, p.135.

²² L, pp.120-122; Ch, pp.92-94.

²³ L, p.298; Ch, p.217.

²⁴ L, p.197; Ch, p.145.

²⁵ Thr, p.128; Pr, p.330.

with tomatoes on the bottom and potatoes on the top,²⁶ and surmises that if winter were hot and summer cold then 'summer would be called winter and winter would be called summer'.²⁷ In a literary culture used to elevated themes this creates a sharp contrast with the usual thoughts of the socialist realist hero. It is not only Chonkin who is prosaic in his thinking. Sergeant Svintsov, pillar of the Institution, can think and speak with astonishing baseness. Trying to seduce Kapa, he argues at length with complete lack of eloquence before tempting her with the perfectly resistible offer of 'a length of real crepe de chine. So besides all the pleasure, you'll get a dress out of it too.'²⁸ Again 'the tension accumulated during the build up of suspense must be released in laughter'.²⁹

The use of stance figures, such as Gladyshev, is another effective satiric device. Gladyshev is an ordinary Russian peasant, self-educated to a dangerous level of ignorance, with pretensions to classical erudition, hopelessly confused about the link between patriotism and the science of excrement and with a strangely religious iconostasis of photographs in his home. Finding the note affixed to the hoof of the dead gelding he crosses himself in astonishment, a pose not entirely consonant with his usual stance, but the reader eventually learns the flexibility of his ideology depending on who is watching, Russian or Nazi.

The Soviet satirist had a particularly difficult task since ridicule or criticism of the State were treasonable offences. A fine balance had to be achieved between deceiving the censors but communicating effectively with the reader. Voinovich, although ostensibly hoping to have this work published in the Soviet Union, chose ridicule over subtle irony. This blunt satire and slapstick humour were fitting to the time only because Solzhenitsyn had already cleared the ground. Of course very little of Solzhenitsyn's work had been published in the Soviet Union, and Voinovich was burning his boats as far as publication at home was concerned, but in the underworld of literature he was in tune with the mood of the age and expected his

²⁶ L, p.67; Ch, p.54.

²⁷ L, p.27; Ch, p.25.

²⁸ L, p.196; Ch, p.144.

²⁹ Feinberg, p.156.

reader to discern what he was about. There is little danger of the reader misunderstanding his stance, but nevertheless there is a certain amount of interpretative effort required, which, though minimal, forms a bond between reader and narrator, cemented by the narrator's confiding tone. Part of the narrator's arsenal includes sarcasm, wielded against the endlessly vulnerable Gladyshev who, 'like many a scientific genius' had to keep his discoveries to himself until Chonkin turned up to listen.³⁰ The comedy in this eulogy lies in the statement being 'so false, foolish, illogical, inappropriate, inadequate or extravagant'³¹ that it immediately collapses.

Sometimes the narrator uses praise for blame, praising negative qualities to expose the perversity of society's values. Soviet literature was expected to be positive and to heap praise on the worthy, so by seeming to praise what is inhuman the narrator intensifies the collapse of this expectation. Having longed for a real hero, he presents one in the form of General Drynov, explaining that in the war against the White Finns 'his talents for commanding were revealed in all their brilliance'. This sounds like praise until he adds that 'on the other hand, of all possible decisions, he invariably made the most stupid one'.³² He uses live ammunition to train his men, having 'no use for soldiers who did not know how to entrench themselves', the narrator adding that Drynov 'himself was very fond of being well entrenched', a fact born out by his heroic leadership of the attack on Chonkin from 'his dugout, three floors down, following the action through a periscope'.³³

Miliaga is presented positively as he rhapsodises on the peculiar beauties of the Russian countryside, before the narrator slyly observes that he 'had never been in any other country, yet, because of his innate patriotism, he was convinced that there was no vegetation worthy of attention anywhere else'.³⁴

Similarly, the narrator appears to be in sympathy with Revkin's wife as she

³⁰ L, p.66; Ch, p.53.

³¹ Max Eastman, *Enjoyment of Laughter* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1937), p.205.

³² L, p.278; Ch, p.203.

³³ L, p.304; Ch, p.221.

³⁴ L, p.232; Ch, p.170.

questions her husband on his 'unwholesome thoughts', but he leaves it to the reader to conclude that such behaviour is not fitting for a human being, let alone the manager of a children's home. By contrast, the narrator treats himself to a technique of blame for praise, disparaging himself so that the reader may reinterpret this information in the light of the standards of the absurd world.

The attentive reader will observe many ironies of circumstance in the text, but a few examples drawn from the preparations for the attack on Chonkin will illustrate the point. The narrator makes clear the nature of the exercise and the target of its attack, and the fact that the battle is likely to be unequal. Yet although the regiment is at an advantage, their preparation is a parody of a real military operation. They have the wrong camouflage, few arms and little ammunition, they omit to finalise details and they are ill-informed about the location and numbers of their target. Bukashev, writing a moving letter to his mother, fantasises the sort of battle in which he may lose his life, before drifting off into a reverie about his father, who was arrested and testified against himself that he had tried to put a furnace out of commission, although Bukashev cannot see the logic in this for a man who had far greater opportunities for sabotage. Because these thoughts are projected through Bukashev the ludicrous logic is emphasised, since no-one who was not completely gullible could ever believe such a story. Finally he is distracted by Drynov's explosively noisy tirade at a sentry who may have revealed the regiment's location by smoking.³⁵

Voinovich uses the juxtaposition of base and elevated objects to reduce many of the 'sacred cows' of Soviet life. By twice juxtaposing Chonkin's need to relieve himself with momentous historical events the narrator reduces the rhetoric which surrounds the military exploits of the two armies. By tipping a tear-stained Miliaga into the mud as he makes his great escape the narrator questions his heroism. By transforming the guests in Chonkin's dream into swine he sheds light on the activities of people who pretend to be friendly but in fact write down everything their fellow-guests say for future reference. By presenting Baba Dunia as an example of the product of collective agriculture he focuses more realistically

³⁵ L, p.295; Ch, p.215.

on the situation than does the photograph of the happy workers taken at Liushka's meeting. By revealing Aphrodite as one of the ugliest and dirtiest women on Russian soil, and named Fros'ka to boot, he exposes Gladyshev's erudition for the self-delusion that it is. By broadcasting Stalin's speech through Chonkin's perceptions, complete with introductory gurglings, a strong Georgian accent, a nonsensical message and singing apparently in a feminine voice at the end, he comments more on the leader of the Soviet empire than he does on Chonkin.³⁶ Daniel Rancour-Laferriere interprets the suggestion that Stalin may be a castrato as a device employed by Voinovich to mobilise hostility against him for his failure to protect the Soviet Union from a hostile Germany.³⁷ Whatever the reason, the confusion in Chonkin's mind does little to elevate Stalin in the reader's perception. Conversely, the narrator's portrayal of the bowlegged and scruffy Chonkin, known as 'that smelly soldier [. . .] that rides the horse',³⁸ does not debase Chonkin, but rather parodies socialist realism, whose every hero is an example of perfect manhood.

Although the narrator intrudes into the text with increasing frequency as an omniscient self-conscious voice, he also focalises the story through different characters: sometimes to set a norm; sometimes to illuminate a character better; and sometimes ironically, demanding that the reader reinterpret the ideology established through the focalisation. Chonkin is a man of few words, but his thoughts are often transparent, and when the reader experiences through him the pride of his new position as sentry, followed by the sinking feeling as he realises its drawbacks and the sudden lifting of his spirits as he sets eyes on Niura, the hero's system of values becomes clear. The narrator then reveals Niura's perceptions of Chonkin, before focalising the mutual seduction scene through both of them: Chonkin worried about his responsibilities but increasingly mellowed by homebrew; and Niura hastening to cut up the sausage rather than wasting time with cans.³⁹ When

³⁶ L, pp.183-184; Ch, pp.135-136.

³⁷ Daniel Rancour-Laferriere, 'From Incompetence to Satire: Voinovich's Image of Stalin as Castrated Leader of the Soviet Union in 1941', *Slavic Review*, 50.1 (Spring 1991), 36-47.

³⁸ L, p.20; Ch, p.20.

³⁹ L, p.51; Ch, p.42.

they are defeated by the might of General Drynov's regiment and Chonkin lies concussed on the ground, the reader watches Niura weeping over her love until he opens his eyes, when the focalisation switches back to him and his emotions of confusion, pride at being decorated, incredulity at being arrested, and pity for Niura.⁴⁰ Much of the rest of the tale is focalised through the suppliant Niura, with Chonkin largely passive in prison.

Perhaps an unusual focalisation comes through the key animals in the story who play an important part, presenting the values of instinctive reactions. Niura's lonely life is brightened by her relationship with Krasavka who relates to her 'on a person-to-person basis', and with Bor'ka who utters a 'squeal of joy' when Niura returns from the post office.⁴¹ When the befuddled Chonkin hits Bor'ka, there follows a touching scene of reconciliation, focalised so thoroughly through the hog that it is even put into speech.⁴² These examples remind the reader of the innate value of the natural kingdom, especially when contrasted with the unnatural world of the bureaucrats which Niura so painfully explores, 'that endless corridor lit by a perpetual twilight, always damp and cold as if night never replaced day there, nor one season another'.⁴³ Niura and all natural creatures, it is implied, belong in the fresh air of the village where the mud comes and goes with the seasons, where day follows night and where warmth and affection are shared by humans and animals.

Even the *apparatchiks* are allowed a voice by the narrator-focaliser, who gives an insight into the mind of Filippov, 'a man who knew his own worth';⁴⁴ Luzhin, who experiences 'amazement, joy, delight' at the success of his enquiries about Chonkin;⁴⁵ and Opalikov who feels 'nothing but shame' at his wife's behaviour.⁴⁶ The narrator also focalises through people in the village who bridge the gap between Chonkin as normative agent and the *apparatchiks*. Golubev's

⁴⁰ L, pp.311-315; Ch, pp.226-229.

⁴¹ L, pp.46-47; Ch, pp.39.

⁴² L, p.109; Ch, p.84.

⁴³ Thr, p.67; Pr, p.280.

⁴⁴ Thr, p.134; Pr, p.335.

⁴⁵ Thr, p.124; Pr, p.327.

⁴⁶ L, pp.179-181; Ch, pp.132-134.

painful and premature adjustment to life in the camps is revealed, as is his happy realisation that 'even in there people live', and a lot better than he does in 'freedom'.⁴⁷ The reader relishes with Plechevoi the confusion he creates in Chonkin's jealous mind as he 'explains' Niura's past relationship with Bor'ka, and shares Ermolkin's confusion on his first excursion into the town after years in the newspaper office. Thus the narrator takes the reader back and forth in his focalisation, often using the very words which people feel able or unable to speak as a guide to their feelings.

Contemporary literature rarely employs an omniscient, self-conscious narrator in the eighteenth-century tradition, but Voinovich has a special purpose for using such a narrator at times in *Chonkin*. He intrudes into the narrative to achieve satirical effects by clarifying an ideological norm, and his presence becomes more intrusive as the satire moves from a gentle tone to a bitter and ironic one.

As well as addressing the reader directly the narrator sometimes uses the voice of neutral omniscience. He occupies a position of narrative privilege, knowing what is happening simultaneously with the main action, and even knowing more about his characters' past than they remember. He protests that he is simply trying to report the facts, apologises for inaccuracies, and exhorts the reader to forget the story if he finds it uninteresting.

He draws the reader immediately into a focalisation of the story through Niura, intruding again in chapter three to introduce himself as the author responsible for this 'hero' and laying out the facts of Chonkin's birth and childhood, 'of which [Chonkin] had no recollection at all'.⁴⁸ He frequently makes asides, where necessary taking the reader into the past to clarify present events, rearranging the narrative order of the story, and interrupting himself to put 'everything in its proper order'.⁴⁹ He loses patience with his characters' convoluted conversations and finishes them himself,⁵⁰ yet sometimes he inconspicuously

⁴⁷ L, p.81; Ch, p.64.

⁴⁸ L, p.22; Ch, p.22.

⁴⁹ L, p.134; Ch, p.101.

⁵⁰ L, p.144; Ch, p.108.

makes his presence felt simply by setting the scene, as in the account of the seven men in grey sent to arrest Chonkin, which reads like the stage directions for a Western, the men walking in line down the village street before hitting the dirt.⁵¹ The dispatch of the infantry unit sent to their rescue accelerates the action, while the narrator decelerates events in Niura's hut and even digresses back in time to show how Chonkin arrived at his system of securing and feeding his prisoners.⁵² To strengthen the artifice that the narrator is recalling events from the perspective of the distant future, he recounts what witnesses would later testify.⁵³ When Miliaga dies before the firing squad the observers pity him for being such a fool, a view which the narrator confirms. He continues to muse on what might have happened if the Captain had got his bearings more quickly, and even sketches out a hypothetical future for him.⁵⁴

Early in *Pretendent na prestol*, he assumes that his audience is already familiar with Chonkin who 'himself was hardly a giant, as the reader, no doubt, remembers'.⁵⁵ He demonstrates his omniscience when Chonkin is observed in Filippov's interrogation room. A painted window separates him from the outside world where Niura waits in the square. Neither can see the other, although they can both be seen by a crow in a tree and by the reader through the considerate eye of the narrator. The reader's thoughts join Chonkin's for a while as he ponders the meaning of the universe before being brought back to reality by an increasingly brutal interrogation which the narrator interrupts, 'fearing to offend the reader's sense of decency'.⁵⁶ While Chonkin trembles on his stool with the muzzle of a revolver pressed against his face, the narrator decelerates the action by presenting a digression on the recent fashion for using indecent words in literature, before returning to the grotesque scene in which Filippov finally presents Chonkin with an apple in return for his signature on a statement accepting guilt for absolutely

⁵¹ L, pp.223-224; Ch, pp.163-164.

⁵² L, pp.246-258; Ch, pp.180-189.

⁵³ L, p.247; Ch, p.181.

⁵⁴ L, p.298; Ch, p.217.

⁵⁵ Thr, p.14; Pr, p.240.

⁵⁶ Thr, p.36; Pr, p.258.

everything. This unedifying scene leaves the narrator with a problem. Chonkin's fellow-prisoners are disillusioned with his unheroic reaction to interrogation, and so, the narrator fears, is the reader. To solve this dilemma he considers abandoning the story, claiming that 'the author is at a loss. The hand freezes above the paper, the ink dries, the pen will not write'.⁵⁷ However, he reluctantly continues, trusting that his hero will eventually perform some great exploit. Little does the reader guess that this will involve the salvation of Moscow, nor does Chonkin ever realise what he has done, but the narrator sees all and guides the story onwards.

Much of this second volume does not concern Chonkin, languishing in his cell, but focuses on Niura and the *apparatchiks* who bedevil her existence. The reader witnesses her cruel treatment at the hands of Borisov and Evpraksein, a scene focalised through the admirably uncomprehending Niura.⁵⁸ Evpraksein's inhumanity is outrageous, but the narrator explains with ironic sympathy the pressure under which the prosecutor labours, directing his satire in part against Evpraksein, but perhaps more against the system which has created him. Similarly, the narrator presents a picture of the editor Ermolkin which, whilst doing justice to his astonishing narrow-mindedness, explains the reasons for his mental paralysis.⁵⁹ When Ermolkin makes his ultimately fatal error the narrator declares himself unable to continue.⁶⁰ In fact, it will pass unnoticed by everyone but Ermolkin himself, but in deference to his panic the narrator recounts all his attempts to track down and destroy every incriminating newspaper.⁶¹

Meanwhile Chonkin is still sitting passively in his cell, unwittingly affecting the course of history, and the narrator pauses to complain about his disturbing influence. He has tried to be free of Chonkin, and has even tried to adopt a new hero, maybe a general, or 'maybe some worker-hero, merciless in daily life and active in his factory'.⁶² But to no avail. However he tries, he can only write about

⁵⁷ Thr, p.40; Pr, p.43 in Paris: YMCA, 1975 version.

⁵⁸ Thr, p.58; Pr, p.273.

⁵⁹ Thr, p.84; Pr, p.295.

⁶⁰ Thr, p.86; Pr, p.296.

⁶¹ Thr, p.89; Pr, p.299.

⁶² Thr, p.92; Pr, pp.93-94 in Paris: YMCA 1975 version.

Chonkin. Hereafter the plot becomes more complicated and the narrator intrudes more often to guide the reader through time and space. He begins to comment in the form of footnotes, and uses phrases like 'it should be noted that [. . .]', 'it should not be thought that [. . .]', and 'people say (though this is hard to believe) that [. . .]'.⁶³ He changes focalisation more than previously, recounting Zinaida's interrogation first through the observations of her husband, then through Filippov and Zinaida herself in an action replay to ascertain the true facts.⁶⁴ As the story becomes more grotesque, violent and absurd, the narrator's comments become more didactic, not steering but sometimes dragging the reader reluctantly from scene to scene, as in the closed meeting for the hearing of Personal Cases.⁶⁵ At times he gives vent to unbridled sarcasm, and as he intrudes further into the text the reader is constantly confronted by the controlling consciousness which even comments on a coincidence, 'the sort of coincidence which occurs only in novels and in life'.⁶⁶ On the night when the village is evacuated, the narrator manipulates the reader's expectations by hinting that something is about to happen, deliberately destroying the satisfaction of reader detective work.

Eventually he even turns his venom against his readers, who no longer enjoy their earlier beguilingly confidential relationship with the story teller, but are challenged on their own integrity and casually accused of collusion with the Right People.⁶⁷ The narrator withdraws still further in his presentation of Chonkin's trial, staged as a theatrical production with a programme explaining the cast. His focalisation and sympathy are all with Chonkin and the reader is treated to a drama without comment, as proof positive of all that the narrator has warned of previously. He returns to the reader in his analysis of the historical salvation of Moscow, but his tone is formal and his anger almost spent. He concludes: 'Having fulfilled the mission entrusted him from above, the author will now modestly step

⁶³ Thr, p.99; Pr, p.307; Thr, p.120; Pr, p.325; Thr, p.121; Pr, p.325.

⁶⁴ Thr, pp.114-117; Pr, pp.319-322.

⁶⁵ Thr, pp.141-156; Pr, pp.341-354.

⁶⁶ Thr, p.227; Pr, p.411.

⁶⁷ Thr, p.287; Pr, p.462.

aside.’⁶⁸ The winding-up of the tale is executed neutrally, and the reader is left to interpret it in the light of previous narratorial guidance.

This development from gentle irony to satire may be explained by the incident at the Metropol’ hotel, when Voinovich was threatened with possible fatal consequences if he failed to stop work on *Pretendent na prestol*. He recalls replying to the agents that the KGB was applying strength where it was not needed, and argues that a writer ‘cannot be convinced by the use of threats alone’. Comparing the first and second parts of *Chonkin.*, he claims that the first part was written in his own style, ‘ironic but genial’, before adding: ‘But when I heard what malicious nonsense the secretary of the Writers’ Union was saying about my intentions I switched, against my will, from genial irony to pointed satire.’⁶⁹

Even when the narrator is not commenting directly on the action, he still has many means at his disposal for guiding the reader. One device is the stream of consciousness used to demonstrate the internal thoughts and conflicts of characters through their own words, even though they may be out of sympathy with the narrator’s ideological norms. An example of this is seen in Filippov, whose inner thoughts are revealed as he walks through the streets of Dolgov, unaware that he is about to be arrested.⁷⁰ Thanks to earlier training from the narrator, the reader observes him from a position of ideological advantage as the first doubts about the rightness of the system begin to dawn in Filippov’s mind. The position of ironic observer is a gift from the narrator to the reader, bestowing ‘superiority, freedom, amusement’, whilst leaving Filippov in the state of archetypal victim of irony: ‘trapped and submerged in time and matter, blind, contingent, limited, and unfree - and confidently unaware that this is his predicament’.⁷¹

The narrator is able to shift rapidly from one ideological viewpoint to another as he records conversations, often with the additional dimension of characters’ thoughts failing to coincide with their words. Sometimes he shows a

⁶⁸ Thr, p.324; Pr, p.494.

⁶⁹ ‘Proisshestvie v “Metropole”’, trans. mine, 83-84.

⁷⁰ Thr, pp.165-171; Pr, pp.353-367.

⁷¹ D. C. Muecke, *Irony*, ed. by John D. Jump, The Critical Idiom, 13 (London: Methuen, 1970), pp.37-38.

character's view of something followed by his own, and the sharp contrast may help to strengthen the satirical force of the passage. E. M. Forster maintains that what is important is a writer's ability to 'bounce the reader into accepting what he says', and argues that a shifting viewpoint may help to accomplish this.⁷² A striking example of the concurrent thought device occurs during the conversation between Borisov and Golubev after the inadvertent striking of Stalin's bust. Whilst they talk about the 'political significance of visual-aid campaigns', their minds are spinning with possible options, resulting in a calculated decision to remain silent about the incident.⁷³ Iartsev provides an early example of Forster's 'bouncing' device. When Chonkin puts his question about Stalin's two wives, Iartsev explodes with 'fury and fear', crying, 'What did you say? You're not getting me mixed up in this'. Realising that 'that was the wrong thing to have said' he stops talking altogether.⁷⁴ The narrator's brief interpretative comment lends satirical depth to the text and confirms that Iartsev is motivated not by honest indignation but by a desire to be seen to be correct.

The narrator makes frequent use of characters' direct speech, but because of the impoverishment of language at the time and the number of politically correct clichés in use, they frequently condemn themselves out of their own mouths without his help. Having alerted the reader to the hypocrisy of the absurd world, he is able to parade a series of characters through the text to demonstrate this hypothesis, without confirming or denying a satirical reading of their speeches. The occasion when the two thinkers repel the spy is quoted verbatim with no narratorial intrusion, but everyone involved, the thinkers, the spy and the reader, is perfectly aware of the game and of what is at stake. Similarly, the story of the two thinkers' miraculous skull elongation is presented without comment as if the reader were listening to their conversation and reading the newspaper article over their shoulders.⁷⁵

⁷² E. M. Forster, *Aspects of the Novel* (London: 1958), pp.78-79.

⁷³ L, p.59; Ch, p.48.

⁷⁴ L, p.29; Ch, p.27.

⁷⁵ Thr, pp.250-256; Pr, pp.431-436.

Sometimes the narrator deliberately appears not to understand 'the rules of the game', and sometimes he passes this role to a simple-minded 'naif' within a dialogue, dramatising the contrast between the connoisseur's understanding of the absurd world and the natural amazement of an uninitiated person. Bakhtin comments on this popular eighteenth-century device of 'not understanding', which he suggests 'takes on great organising potential when an exposure of vulgar conventionality is involved'.⁷⁶ Chonkin himself fulfils the role of uncomprehending spectator on many occasions, acting as normative agent in situations such as the memorable breakfast at Gladyshev's. He is the perfect stooge to Gladyshev's 'scientist', politely asking questions to give Gladyshev the momentum to explain his revolting theories in full.⁷⁷

The narrator makes use of quasi-direct discourse on occasions, allowing his voice to be influenced by the character's, so that even as he narrates the reader seems to hear the voice of Chonkin telling of his love of horses or of Kilin giving his rousing speech constructed of hackneyed patriotic phrases.⁷⁸ Sometimes, however, he will interrupt a section of quasi-direct discourse to slip in a parenthetical aside in his own voice, as he does in his account of that same meeting.

It has already been noted that the narrator travels freely through time and space as he surveys the plot, observing his characters and addressing the reader from a position of ironic superiority. Explaining the meaning of the Institution, he jumps forward in time to welcome the reader from the future, who (hopefully) will not be familiar with the workings of an establishment which works on the principle of 'beat your own so that outsiders will fear you'.⁷⁹ However, he is afraid that anyone on this planet will know all too well what is signified, so to create an effect of *ostranenie* or 'making strange' he greets 'readers from distant galaxies, unfamiliar with our earthly customs', and explains to them the situation in 'the bygone times described by the author'.

⁷⁶ M. M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, ed. by Michael Holquist, trans. by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), p.164.

⁷⁷ L, pp.117-118; Ch, pp.90-91.

⁷⁸ L, p.38; Ch, pp.33-34; L, pp.145-151; Ch, pp.109-113.

⁷⁹ L, p.194; Ch, p.143.

The narrator, reviewing the Stalinist years with the benefit of hindsight, also has recourse to many easily recognisable euphemisms. For example, speaking of Chonkin's childhood, he recalls that 'at a time known to all, a search for *kulaks* began in the village. Although not a single one could be found, it was mandatory to find some if only to set an example'.⁸⁰ Similarly, the long explanation about the Institution, called the Right Place, served by the Right People (but 'Right for whom and for what?'), would be grimly recognisable to any Russian, and the reference serves to build a bond of understanding between narrator and reader.⁸¹ Sometimes the characters use euphemisms to conceal their true motives, like Golubev who, approached by Chonkin with a flask of homebrew, is perplexed because the latter does not seem to understand the form of words necessary to present a bribe as a disinterested act of friendship.⁸²

Both the narrator and the characters who act as normative agents speak a colloquial brand of Russian, which promotes familiarity with the reader, encouraging agreement with a point of view simply expressed. The very colloquialism seems to indicate honesty and unaffectedness, but also serves another purpose by satirically exaggerating socialist realism's insistence on simplicity of language and therefore accessibility to the masses. The inevitable result of this policy was the over-simplification and weakening of literary language to the point of making it appear primitive and implausible. The narrator, by using extremely colloquial language on occasions, ridicules this particular feature of socialist realism.

Because of the many rituals of language of the Soviet era, there is irony to be exploited in the mixing of 'correct' and 'incorrect' stylistic levels. Gladyshev's letter with its mixture of rhetoric and blunt request provides one example, and the stylistic levels of Chonkin and Gladyshev are sharply contrasted again on the occasion of the toast in the latter's execrable homebrew, when Chonkin offers 'to our meeting' in reply to Gladyshev's verbose toast. The use of ritual language often

⁸⁰ L, p.22; Ch, p.22.

⁸¹ L, pp.193-195; Ch, pp.142-143.

⁸² L, p.253; Ch, p.185.

signals hypocrisy, as in the political training meeting, where the good student Balashov gives his answer 'without using a single word of his own', and the other soldiers only pretend to be listening.

Ritual language achieves the level of parody on occasions, as the narrator shows the inappropriateness of propaganda to real life. This is clearly seen in Peskov's letter to his sweetheart, when, inspired by the power he has been able to wield over Chonkin, he writes in glowing ritual terms of the fine position he holds in the army. However, when the tables are turned, and his superiors speak to him as he spoke to Chonkin, he continues his letter in solitary confinement in far less pompous style, ending it in a fit of name-calling, which better suits his emotional state.⁸³

The Structural Development of the Text

An examination has been made of the diversity of devices used to achieve satirical effects in *Chonkin*, and also on the development of the tone from light comic through ironic to satirical as the work progresses. When considering the development of the text with reference to the different satirical modes employed, the application of Northrop Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism* is particularly helpful to an analysis of the shifts which take place.

If one were to write a synopsis of the plot of *Chonkin* and were then to apply a code to the chapters, representing the different fictional modes and the predominating imagery, a pattern would begin to emerge. A consistent background of satire would be observed, but superimposed on this are other modes. The first part of the novel carries a large proportion of romance, albeit sometimes in the form of parody. In the second part the romantic element lessens perceptibly, and tragic overtones begin to appear in the plot, curiously woven together with a dark comedy. The third and fourth parts have hints of romance and the mythical, particularly towards the end, but the main thing which is noticeable is the escalation

⁸³ L, pp.30-37; Ch, pp.28-33.

of demonic imagery, characterised by violence and the grotesque.

Frye begins his first essay by referring to Aristotle's postulation in *Poetics* that 'the differences in works of fiction [. . .] are caused by the different elevations of the characters in them'.⁸⁴ From this position Frye argues that fictions 'may be classified, not morally, but by the hero's power of action, which may be greater than ours, less, or roughly the same'. Taking Chonkin as the hero of the work, it is evident that he is iconic, lacking the depth normally expected of a literary hero, almost like a negative photographic image of the socialist realist hero. His iconic quality comes partly from his position as challenger of the *status quo* and normative agent for the narrator, and partly from his unwillingness to articulate his thoughts. He is a hero observed through his actions and his few words, and his thought processes do not bear close examination or detailed analysis. Frye gives five categories of hero, drawing from different fictional modes, and at different stages of the story Chonkin could be said to belong to all of them. At least in the eyes of Stalin and Hitler he is a mythical hero: by his powers of unwitting, almost supernatural action he is a parody of the romantic hero; if the potato harvest is taken into consideration he is a leader of men in the high mimetic mode; in the low mimetic mode he makes a painfully human apology for a hero, and finally he is the powerless, frustrated hero of the ironic mode.

The story opens in the mode of romantic comedy, idyllic and pastoral, with an idealised picture of rural life as an escape from society. For Chonkin Krasnoe presents an escape from the army, and in spite of all its deficiencies it offers him the chance of a genuine idyll with his love. The village may be a parody of the romantic pastoral scene, but for the hero, or perhaps because of him, the negation of the idyll is transformed into something which recreates the spirit of the original. The romantic garden, symbol of fertility and water, could be applied to Niura's village, particularly since muddy Krasnoe, whose archaic meaning was beautiful, has been somehow transformed in reality into a beautiful place by the presence of Chonkin and his postmistress.⁸⁵ The simple life of the country is singularly suited to the

⁸⁴ Frye, p.33.

⁸⁵ Observation by Marietta Turian, 1994.

hero, and he lives there successfully and happily for a while. Establishing that literary works may be thematic or fictional in emphasis,⁸⁶ Frye argues that thematic literature will show the poet writing as an individual and will therefore often take the form of educational satire, whereas fiction will usually manifest either the 'comic' tendency to integrate the hero with society, as when Chonkin is happily integrated into Niura's garden world, or the 'tragic' tendency to isolate him from society, fulfilled in part by Chonkin's imprisonment. Within the world of romance with its nomadic heroes who are aware of two worlds at once, sits an ironically static Chonkin. However, passive though he may be, the world undeniably comes to Chonkin, and Krasnoe and Dolgov become the epicentre of world events simply because of his presence. The romantic hero is also, according to Frye, expected to receive revelation through female grace, and Chonkin could be said to gain an extra dimension to his life through the faithful companionship of Niura, although she is hardly a stereotypical figure of romantic femininity. The imagery of the romantic world usually includes government by divine or spiritual paternal figures, often with magical powers such as Stalin is perceived to have by his subjects. Its animals are characterised by the faithful hound, of whom Bor'ka could be a parody.

Frye next turns his discussion to the cyclical movement of both nature and literature, both through the seasons and through the literary modes.⁸⁷ He assigns to each mode a season: to comedy, spring; to romance, summer; to tragedy, autumn; and to irony and satire, winter.

The normal plot structure of comedy is that 'a young man wants a young woman, that his desire is resisted by some opposition, usually paternal, and that near the end of the play some twist in the plot enables the hero to have his will'.⁸⁸ At which point the original society of the play is usurped by a new society which crystallises around the hero. There are undoubtedly obstacles to Chonkin's happiness, but as yet there is no comic resolution to *Pretendent na prestol*. However, some connection may be made with the comic form by the manner in

⁸⁶ Frye, p.53.

⁸⁷ Frye, pp.161-162.

⁸⁸ Frye, p.163.

which satirical comedy generally draws the emphasis away from a relatively neutral hero on to the blocking characters, such as Gladyshev and the Institution, whose actions appear comic by repetition. In comedy the 'character of the successful hero is so often left undeveloped: his real life begins at the end of the play', and at the end of the action the sham Utopia will be overcome by the resolution of the comedy.⁸⁹ This presents two problems of application: could Chonkin still act as a normative agent if his character were more fully rounded; and how will the author overcome the restraints he has set? There is no way within the historical context that a new, free society could crystallise around Chonkin, and the resolution of this comedy would be a long time coming. Chonkin himself would be a sexagenarian before Gorbachev ushered in his reforms, rather too old for a comic hero. Unless perhaps he himself were to disguise himself as one of the coup leaders of 1991 and sabotage the forces of reaction from within. Or maybe more in his style of unwitting exploits, he could be the unsung tractor driver on the road to Moscow who inadvertently misdirected the tanks off the tarmac and into the muddy fields. But a more plausible way for Chonkin to be fitted into a comic ending would be within one of the two most ironic forms of comedy: where the hero does not transform his society but runs away; or where he is close to catastrophic overthrow throughout the action and wakes from the nightmare just in time.

It has been noted that much of the romance in *Chonkin* is in the form of parody, but some of it is close to true romance, defined by Frye as requiring adventure, 'the element that gives literary form to the romance, the quest'.⁹⁰ Frye maintains that there are three stages to the quest: the perilous journey and minor adventures; the struggle or battle in which the hero, or his enemy, or both, die; and the exaltation of the hero. The conflict takes place in the real world, but the hero and his enemy are characterised by opposite poles of the natural world. The enemy is associated with winter, with darkness, confusion, sterility, moribund life, and old age. Many of these characteristics apply to the Institution and its servitors, its hours of work, and even its buildings. The hero, on the other hand, is associated with

⁸⁹ Frye, p.169.

⁹⁰ Frye, p.186-187.

spring (when Chonkin is first seen), with dawn (when he is often active) with order (arguably the domestic order he brings to Niura's home), with fertility (Niura's pregnancy), with vigour (his sexual appetite and capacity for work), and with youth.

The cause of conflict in romance is often as follows: the land is ruled by a helpless old king, and is laid waste by a monster who is slain by the hero. The victims are then released from the belly of the beast. There are obvious parallels here with the story of Chonkin, although they may leave the reader rather confused as to who is the hero. One interpretation works like this: the land is ruled by a helpless old king, Stalin, and it is laid waste by the monster, Hitler. Chonkin is seen as an enemy of the people, on the side of Hitler, and his 'big iron bird' with 'big green wings stretched out wide' is the dragon.⁹¹ At the point of conflict, the heroic General Drynov, dragon-slayer to the king, is confused by the markings on the plane, which he takes to be a 'typical enemy trick'.⁹² The plane is clearly a magical enemy as it is 'moved by some unknown force', namely Niura. The General slays the dragon with his cannon (or thinks he does), and the dragon's victims (the seven men in grey from the Institution) are led to freedom from within its belly (Niura's cellar). The General is rewarded and exalted by the old king, Stalin, when they meet in the palace in the metro. A second interpretation is as follows: the land is ruled by a helpless old king, Stalin, and is laid waste by the Institution which seems to be obeying him, but is in fact swallowing up all his loyal subjects. Chonkin himself is consumed in this carnage. The dragon-killer Hitler arrives, and lays waste the Institution by his tanks and his faithful spy Hans. As a result Chonkin is released from the belly of the Institution and Guderian is presumably exalted by Hitler for rescuing the prince. Whichever interpretation is chosen, the reader meets the recurring theme of the hero maintaining 'the integrity of the innocent world against the assault of experience'.⁹³ As comedy strengthens, the theme of adventure fades in romance and a development takes place towards

⁹¹ L, p.4; Ch, pp.8-9.

⁹² L, p.306; Ch, p.223.

⁹³ Frye, p.201.

contemplative, rather than active adventure. Again, the application is ironical, but Chonkin's adventurings are entirely contemplative within the walls of cell thirty-four, and are so passive that even he does not realise that he is achieving exploits.

Irony and satire Frye characterises as a parody of romance, producing a world with clear moral norms in which absurdity is a just target of attack. Defining the difference between irony and satire, Frye describes satire as 'militant irony: its moral norms are relatively clear, and it assumes standards against which the grotesque and absurd are measured'.⁹⁴ He explains further that 'satire is irony which is structurally close to the comic: the comic struggle of two societies, one normal and the other absurd, is reflected in its double focus of morality and fantasy. Irony with little satire is the non-heroic residue of tragedy, centering on a theme of puzzled defeat'.⁹⁵ He includes in the equation the fact that in irony the narrator suppresses his attitude, leaving the reader unsure of both the narrator's attitude and his own. From this it is clear that *Chonkin* is much closer to satire than irony. The extreme of ironic comedy begins in what may be called the satire of the low norm which 'takes for granted a world which is full of anomalies, injustices, follies, and crimes, and yet is permanent and undisplaceable. Its principle is that anyone who wishes to keep his balance in such a world must learn first of all to keep his eyes open and his mouth shut'.⁹⁶ This rapidly becomes Chonkin's policy for survival once he realises that whatever he says will be wrong. As satire attacks the absurd society, the unobtrusive, inconspicuous 'hero' contrasts starkly with his society: a sort of fragile giant-killer. He is an almost invisible enemy of the system, unheroic in the accepted sense of the word, but effective as a normative agent.

As comedy moves toward purer satire, the comedy of escape emerges which takes its literary form in the picaresque novel, with the hero running away from an intransigent society to a more congenial one. The sources and values of societal conventions are held up for ridicule, often observed by an outsider who does not accept the absurdities' assumptions. Chonkin fulfils the role of this

⁹⁴ Frye, p.223.

⁹⁵ Frye, p.224.

⁹⁶ Frye, p.226.

outsider, catapulted into Krasnoe, but not taken in by any of the villagers' posturings. In its attempt to prevent any group of conventions from becoming dominant, this particular type of satire fulfils the function of breaking up the 'stereotypes, fossilized beliefs, superstitious terrors, crank theories, pedantic dogmatisms, oppressive fashions, and all other things that impede the free movement [. . .] of society'.⁹⁷ It rejoices in reducing the accepted to the absurd, and even the narrator parodies himself, inviting the reader to watch him at work as he deliberately digresses from the point.

The comedy of the high norm uses shifting perspective to present a ridiculous view of an absurd society, as when the narrator of *Chonkin* makes reference to excretion and copulation to level humanity. As irony turns toward tragedy, satire recedes, revealing the inevitable turning of the wheel of fortune, concluding at its most tragic with the horrors of unrelieved bondage, prison and the mob. Underpinning this chilling scene is the assumption that the rulers' lust for power is strong enough to last for ever, and that there will not even be relief in death. Golubev's words of cheer to the prosecutor, comforting him with the thought that 'they can kill us, but they can't make us immortal, and that's their weakness' makes the reader realise that the satire of *Chonkin* has not fully plumbed the depths of tragic irony.⁹⁸

The beginning of *Chonkin*, then, can be seen as satirical comedy with much parodying of romantic norms, before becoming ever more darkly ironic in tone, with an escalating degree of tragedy. Satire runs consistently throughout, and given the tragic tone of the ending and the historical constraints on the plot, Frye's observation that 'an extraordinary number of great satires are fragmentary, unfinished, or anonymous' seems to be true.⁹⁹

⁹⁷ Frye, p.233.

⁹⁸ Thr, p.131; Pr, p.333.

⁹⁹ Frye, p.234.

Characterisation

In examining Voinovich's techniques of characterisation in *Chonkin* it is important to remember that his intention was not to satirise the common man, but rather the 'false and inflated heroes' of the absurd world.¹⁰⁰ This casts light on why some of the players are apparently underdeveloped to the point of caricature.

Rimmon-Kenan, exploring the art of narrative fiction, offers guidelines as to how the reader reconstructs character from a text: by the actions and incidents which attach to a character; by personality traits, which may be mentioned in the text, may be generalised, and may even be at variance with the text; by the use of repetition, similarity to or contrast with others, and by implication. The sum total of these effects creates an impression of character around a given proper name.¹⁰¹ She then investigates different classifications of character, mentioning E. M. Forster's theory of 'flat' characters: those indicative of humours, caricatures or types, which do not develop throughout a narrative, but 'are constructed around a single idea or quality' and therefore 'can be expressed in one sentence'.¹⁰²

The problem when applying any analysis of characterisation to a satirical work is that many of the characters are, of necessity, exaggerated and close to caricature. Yet, in order to hold the reader's attention and sympathy, they are rarely quite two-dimensional. Whilst a few minor characters in *Chonkin* are completely lacking in depth, such as the entirely interchangeable men in grey suits, even the blackest of villains have characters tempered by some tiny, mitigating spark of humanity; and conversely Chonkin's heroism is far from classically pure. On the other hand, neither does this satire present any truly 'round' characters, so the work might be better served by the theory of character expressed by Joseph Ewen, and summarised by Rimmon-Kenan.¹⁰³

Ewen expresses the classification of characters as points along a continuum,

¹⁰⁰ 'O moem neputevom bludnom syne', pp.76-78.

¹⁰¹ Rimmon-Kenan, pp.34-40

¹⁰² Forster, p.93.

¹⁰³ Joseph Ewen, 'The Theory of Character in Narrative Fiction' (in Hebrew) *Hasifrut*, 3 (1971), 1-30 (p.7). Joseph Ewen, *Character in Narrative* (in Hebrew) (Tel Aviv: 1980), pp.33-44.

with a pole at either end and several different axes functioning simultaneously. On the axis of complexity, he shows at one pole an undeveloped character constructed around a single trait, or else around a very dominant trait with a few secondary ones. At the opposite pole he sees a complex character, the very opposite of a caricature or type, explored in depth. On the axis of development he describes the two poles as, respectively, static and developed; allowing characters either to remain unchanged throughout a narrative, or to develop and be moulded by experience. On the axis of penetration into the inner life the poles divide to reveal at one extreme characters who are seen only from the outside, and at the other extreme characters whose consciousness is presented from within. Rimmon-Kenan goes on to show ways in which these axes of characterisation may be developed by an author to feed the reader with indicators of character. The devices which may be used fall into two categories: direct definition and indirect presentation. Direct definition, that is, the use of an adjective, abstract noun, noun or part of speech, is used infrequently in twentieth-century literature, since the presence of an authoritative narrator is rare. Whilst Voinovich's narrator uses a seemingly authoritative satirical voice, he challenges even himself by suggesting his own unreliability. Although, in eighteenth-century literary style, he uses the device of an authoritative voice to guide the reader, yet sometimes the guidance itself is heavily ironical, and his presentation and shifting point of view demand energetic interpretation by the reader even when 'direct definition' is used.

Ewen argues that indirect presentation, that is, the displaying and exemplification of a character trait, leaves the reader considerable work to do in inferring the qualities of character intended by the author. Indirect presentation may include the use of action, habitual or occasional, not forgetting acts of omission and contemplated but unfulfilled actions. Action combined with speech may also convey character, by interpreting events. The character's external appearance, whether physical or sartorial, may also indicate an impression of character. The surrounding environment, whether physical or human, adds another dimension by providing a context. The author may also introduce purely textual links of analogy,

including such disparate elements as a character's name or the landscape of the action. It is also possible to juxtapose characters to make similarities or differences more apparent. All these techniques, Rimmon-Kenan suggests, contribute to an 'overview of a character, allowing the author to manipulate the text whilst the reader is at liberty to indulge hunches and intuitions.¹⁰⁴

The Characters

Those characters which are no more than two-dimensional *apparatchiks* have already been considered. Because of their nature as servants of the system, Voinovich affords little space to the development of their characters and spares little sympathy for their colourless, lonely lives. But beyond their ranks the reader discovers a grey area of petty or unwilling bureaucrats, with a foothold in both the absurd and the real world. These are perhaps the most uncomfortable and burdened people in this society, who dare not admit their duplicity to themselves and who suffer from split personalities: one for official life, which in Soviet terms means the whole of one's visible life, and another for private life, which only emerges unguardedly through dreams or drunkenness. These characters develop gradually along the 'axis of complexity', maintaining the reader's interest in them.

There are five such characters which stand out in *Chonkin*: Evpraksein the prosecutor, occasionally betrayed by drink but happiest when governed by naked fear; Ermolkin the editor, compromised by his brief visit to his abandoned family but usually ruled by a fearful passion for work; Golubev the *kolkhoz* chairman, truthful only when in his cups but eventually more comfortable honest and drunk than dishonest and sober; Gladyshev the 'scientist' and great pretender; and finally Plechevoi, the detached and noncommittal village stirrer.

There seems to be a ranking in evidence here, in terms of integrity versus the level of distortion imposed by living in the world of *as if*. That is not to say that Gladyshev is morally superior to Evpraksein, but rather that he has developed strategies for protecting his own unadmirable personality, whereas Evpraksein

¹⁰⁴ Rimmon-Kenan, pp.59-70.

remains racked by fear and self-doubt. This ultimately leads to his suicide, while Gladyshev merely feigns suicide in order to preserve his life.

Evpraksein is an efficient prosecutor, but one whose character is painfully unsuited to his work. He is first seen dealing unsympathetically with the tearful Niura, and advising her to denounce Chonkin since fence-sitting is not allowed in these difficult times.¹⁰⁵ He cannot allow himself the slightest sympathy towards this loyal woman and her 'good man' Ivan, lest he should damage his public image of intransigent cruelty and reveal the natural kindness which haunts him whenever he is drunk. The juxtaposition of Evpraksein with the pleading Niura, quite unable to understand his official-speak, highlights his character, or at least his public persona. But the narrator, unwilling to let the reader categorise Evpraksein as simply a 'rat and a bastard', hastens to explain that this image is not the whole truth. To prove the point he immediately shows his subject in a scene of woeful inebriation, tormented by guilt, writing his resignation, and indulging in his usual ritual of 'executing' his wife.¹⁰⁶ When next seen he is drinking again, this time with the *kolkhoz* chairman, and is philosophising about the inevitability of punishment for all those in positions of authority, simply for existing. This truth he welcomes as a source of strength because, being sure of punishment in the end, he has no need to behave like a loyal dog, but can do and say what he likes like a real human being. This is brave talk but there is one snag: he is afraid. He is afraid of those above and below him, but he is no longer sufficiently afraid of his conscience to allow it any influence. Sobbing sentimentally, he is comforted by his friend who points out that there will always be a release in death. Thus fortified, he promises to defend his friend who is due to stand trial on the morrow, a decision which he, of course, overturns upon waking sober.¹⁰⁷ His struggle for integrity is all the more painful since the reader is aware that he is aware of his moral dilemma, and is daily disappointed in himself. Through the juxtaposition of action and speech the narrator shows a basically good man in an impossible situation, who talks bravely about

¹⁰⁵ Thr, pp.54-59; Pr, pp.270-273.

¹⁰⁶ Thr, pp.59-65; Pr, pp.274-279.

¹⁰⁷ Thr, pp.128-134; Pr, pp.330-335.

bold acts of omission, but who perpetrates horrible acts of commission when under pressure. Periodically he attempts to shoot his wife in an attempt to work out at home the awful judgment which he metes out daily at work, and he is not above passing sentence on others too, like Ermolkin, whom he unnecessarily sentences to fear for the rest of his life.¹⁰⁸ After prosecuting the oblivious Chonkin, he is aware that he has lost his humanity in the name of the Revolution, and resolves that even if he has failed as a human, he is not prepared to live as a cockroach. The reader follows the twistings of his mind as he tries to shoot himself, fails to pull the trigger, realises that it may not be so bad to live as a cockroach after all, and accidentally fires the gun. As he dies, he feels better than ever before, even though his last act, as all his previous ones, is one of vacillation and indecision.¹⁰⁹ His death in some way makes sense of his tragic life, since in death he came as close as he was able to integration of mind and body. So dies a man wishing to do good but causing only harm. With the narrator, the reader is inclined to pity him a little because of the overwhelming pressure of his life, torn between thought and speech, inaction and action. Perhaps he, of all the characters in the novel, came closest to publicly unmasking the lie, but failed in the end out of fear. It was out of fear that he accused Chonkin of far worse than even the absurd world had dreamed of, and the very conscience which might have saved him in fact made him fanatical in the execution of his duty. The narrator reveals everything about him to the reader: his thoughts, speech, secret actions and inactions, and calls for sympathy and understanding in the face of overwhelming evidence, rather as a lawyer might argue in favour of someone unmistakably guilty, rather as Evpraksein had intended to argue in court in his less sober moments. The narrator's concluding words on the suicide imply that maybe other prosecutors should consider just such an honourable step, since the fact that Evpraksein shot himself, even though unintentionally, in some measure redressed the balance of his brutal life.¹¹⁰

By contrast, Ermolkin the editor is single-minded and has so immersed

¹⁰⁸ Thr, pp.163-165; Pr, pp.361-363.

¹⁰⁹ Thr, pp.334-341; Pr, pp.502-508.

¹¹⁰ Thr, p.341; Pr, p.341 in Paris: YMCA, 1975 version.

himself in the propaganda he writes that he has convinced himself of its own truth, and assumes that everyone else shares his view. He is ludicrously detached from reality, having cut himself off from his family, preferring the company of his Linotype machines and his ruthless editing pencil. He thinks that he has been serving the 'motherland, Stalin, and the Party, but in fact, he was serving his own petty passion for crippling and maiming words until they were unrecognisable and for searching out and divining any possible political error'.¹¹¹ When this fact begins to dawn on him he resolves to start living a more natural life, but it is not long before his fateful editorial error tightens the grip of the absurd world on his loyalties. With renewed vigour he turns to serve the ideology which may destroy him if it discovers the moment of weakness in which he sought to elevate human values over the values of 'as if'. He is so absorbed by the importance of his mission that he is sure his error will be instantly exposed, unaware that no-one but him reads his newspaper. Twice he confesses to the authorities, who toy with him and send him away, aware that their control over him is already complete. During the course of this pantomime, the narrator informs the reader not only of Ermolkin's state of mind, but also of interrogator Luzhin's thoughts as he savours the amusement of setting Ermolkin free to live the rest of his life in terrified suspense.¹¹² Guilt and fear control Ermolkin as he rushes to condemn the hapless Shevchuk for no other reason than to prove his own correctness.¹¹³ Haunted by the spectre of the avenging gelding, he loses his grip on reason completely, and begs the prosecutor to shoot him in one of his ritual execution ceremonies. However, as the gun is aimed at him he is again overwhelmed by fear, and Evpraksein commutes the death sentence to one of 'fear for the rest of your natural life, your work to continue as usual'. Ermolkin lives on in terror for a brief while longer, before being dispatched by a horse which he mistakes for his mother. There is a grotesque logic at work here, in that a man who has rejected his real (and therefore dangerous) family should be killed by a horse, which he strongly associates with Stalin and

¹¹¹ Thr, p.84; Pr, p.295.

¹¹² Thr, pp.107-108; Pr, pp.313-314.

¹¹³ Thr, p.149; Pr, pp.348-349.

with his mother, and from whom he has long been expecting retribution.¹¹⁴ Thus the reader takes leave of a man less divided in himself than the prosecutor, and better suited by temperament to his job, but nonetheless aware of the gulf dividing the real world from the fantasy world of his newspaper. His proximity to his printing presses and his affection for the obsessive process of correction reflect his character, which is all the time driven by the awful machinery of the State. His character makes a brief foray along the axes of complexity and development as he considers a change of life-style, but almost immediately he returns to his starting point, paralysed by what he imagines to be the spectre of an avenging State, but which is in fact nothing more than his own fear. Choosing fear, he loses all human dignity and dies in bizarre and humiliating circumstances.

Golubev, the *kolkhoz* chairman, is from the beginning tormented by the tantalising prospect of freedom, but feels that arrest is inevitable regardless of his actions, and spends his life awaiting the worst, repeatedly implicating himself out of an unwarranted sense of guilt. He waits passively for someone else to send him to prison or to the front, longing for the awful burden of falsifying reports to be over. Occasionally he speaks out, usually under the influence of alcohol, and is appalled when he sobers up. However, these moments of honesty afford him relief, and even if the consequence should be a labour camp he feels only exhilaration at the prospect of being an honest man in captivity, rather than a dishonest man in the *kolkhoz* office. As his story progresses he becomes more liberated in speech and actions, testing the ground and experiencing growing confidence. When his personal case is heard he hands in his Party card before it is confiscated, unwilling to die of fear like Shevchuk.¹¹⁵ Finally, he gets gloriously and irresponsibly drunk at his post and is taken away to prison to start his new life in an elevated and triumphant mood, ready to lead the men in his cell with an honesty and forthrightness that he could never allow himself in the 'free' world.¹¹⁶ The reader has seen him develop from the resigned bureaucrat who welcomes the stray pilot at

¹¹⁴ Thr, p.250; Pr, p.431.

¹¹⁵ Thr, pp.158-159; Pr, pp.356-357.

¹¹⁶ Thr, pp.285-286; Pr, pp.460-461.

the start of the story, to the ferocious 'Chairman' of cell thirty-four. This is a man who makes his own 'happy ending' by taking responsibility for his life. This paradoxical theme of finding freedom in captivity is undoubtedly in dialogue with 'prior discourses', notably with the work of Solzhenitsyn who explores the idea of finding release in having nothing more to lose; and Voinovich may simply be blending his voice with 'the complex choir of other voices already in place', or he may be deliberately parodying Solzhenitsyn.

The noisome Gladyshev stereotypes himself as a learned man by a series of devices: his attempt to link himself with the 'scientific' activities of Lysenko; the Greek names which he bestows on his family; his ability to write; his proximity to Chonkin to appear the wiser by contrast; his imperfectly grasped scientific theories; his disdain for the squabbles of the villagers to conceal his own grasping nature; and his profound commitment to excrement.¹¹⁷ Gladyshev is always eager to appear above reproach ideologically, but this is far from being a sincere allegiance, and as soon as his harmony is threatened he disappears from the face of the earth.¹¹⁸ Occasionally a chink appears in his armour of scientific and ideological correctness, as when he inadvertently crosses himself having found the dead gelding with a note declaring its allegiance to Communism. His self-confidence is finally punctured by Chonkin's innocent questions and by Krasavka's attack on his experimental plants. After this close encounter with the real world Gladyshev becomes withdrawn and vindictive, denouncing Chonkin at his trial, and he is last seen, chameleon-like, applauding the Germans as they take over the village. Iverni draws parallels between Gladyshev and Stalin, pointing out their similar preoccupations and style of logic, marked only by a difference in scale between them, both in terms of strength of obsessions and power to indulge them.¹¹⁹ Gladyshev is a character willingly constrained by the system, yet manifests his individuality in bizarre but irreproachable ways, giving rise to the suspicion that his soul is untouchable. His rather unpleasant, self-interested character is able to

¹¹⁷ Thr. pp.62-72, pp.109-120; Pr, pp.51-58, pp.84-92.

¹¹⁸ Thr, p.113; Pr, pp.318-319.

¹¹⁹ Iverni, p.450.

function just as well under any ideology, and he has enough native wit to dance to any tune whilst keeping his private thoughts inviolate. During the course of the action he is confronted by dilemmas and challenges, but his instinctive reaction is always the same: self-interest in an acceptable disguise. His character does not develop significantly, although he does perform some interesting manoeuvres to stay on the fence. He is the sort of superficial creature which the system has created and which it deserves, a malleable player of the game, burdened by neither morality nor loyalty, the perfect subject of the totalitarian state.

Plechevoi is perhaps the freest of all those characters which parade their divided allegiances through the pages of *Chonkin*. With his guileless blue eyes he makes a talented *agent provocateur*, but he is a free agent with no axe to grind, stirring people up simply for his own amusement. He is guarded enough never to say anything ideologically dangerous, but within those limits he enjoys himself to the full. He is first seen teasing Niura cruelly about her funeral arrangements if the aeroplane had landed on her; he willingly supplies Chonkin with suspicions about Bor'ka's affectionate relationship with Niura, without even pretending reluctance to divulge such sensitive information; he encourages Chonkin to come and see Krasavka eating Gladyshev's plants, and sends him to defend her with shouts of good cheer; and he directs the party searching for Miliaga's corpse to the bones of a dead horse in return for a cigarette.¹²⁰ He seems ubiquitous, ready to maximise the potential drama of any situation, uniting the characteristics of an Iago and an unscrupulous journalist. He is never totally serious, and suggests that Ninka's baby, born during the evacuation of the village, should be called Enkavedim, in honour of the secret police.¹²¹ When challenged on his ideology he becomes evasive, parodying the absurd world but living life both full and free in the real world. Because others are preoccupied with balancing on the fence they do not perceive the nature of his challenge, and only waver a little as he dances past them. His detachment gives him strength, and he is the archetype of the sharp-witted

¹²⁰ L, p.7; Ch, p.11; L, p.86; Ch, p.67; L, p.187; Ch, p.137-138; Thr, pp.206-208; Pr, pp.393-395.

¹²¹ Thr, p.280; Pr, p.456.

Russian peasant who sees great movements of history come and go and continues to till the soil regardless.

Of the other characters presented by the narrator, it is noticeable that those *apparatchiks* who eventually fall foul of the system are those who were shown to have slight misgivings about their role in advance. For example, lieutenant Filippov, who terrorises Chonkin with a revolver, is seen walking through the streets of Dolgov immediately before his downfall, wistfully watching people leading ordinary, happy lives. The narrator reminds the reader never for one moment to think ‘that they, the iron knights, are beyond the reach of our sufferings or any understanding of them. No, a thousand times no! [. . .] And if those knights were jabbed in the rear end with a red-hot awl, I think it would be just as unpleasant for them as it would be for you and me. Well, perhaps a bit less’.¹²² The reader is prepared, then, for some suffering, but the narrator clearly wishes to prevent overwhelming sensations of sympathy for Filippov who feels excluded from the world of normal people and is caught unawares by a ‘terrible longing to be like them, straight and open, not to terrify others and not to be afraid himself’. He hastily banishes such impure thoughts, reminding himself that there is a job to be done and someone has to do it.¹²³ However, he is still troubled, and ‘in the depths of his soul, he suspected that what he did never needed to be done by anybody’. His aunt often challenges his views in a way which he knows he should not permit and, perhaps as a result, he shows unwarranted kindness to Niura when she follows him home. This kindness has no direct bearing on his arrest, but the reader feels instinctively that when an iron knight begins to show signs of weakness and to behave humanely, that somewhere in the metaphysical sphere wheels of retribution are set in motion. The narrator comments no further on Filippov’s fate, but it is significant that only *apparatchiks* who fall foul of their own apparatus are afforded such sympathetic treatment by him. Those characters which have become complete automata within the system are spared no sympathy but they survive, unlike those who experience moments of doubt and are consumed by their own

¹²² Thr, pp.165-166; Pr, pp.165-166 in Paris: YMCA, 1975 version.

¹²³ Thr, p.168; Pr, p.365.

kind with pessimistic inevitability. A character such as Figurin, constantly ruthless in the execution of his duty, is defined merely in terms of his actions and speech and no access is given to his inner thoughts which doubtless conform exactly to his behaviour.

In strong contrast to both the fence-sitters and the villains stands the 'hero', Ivan Chonkin. His characterisation is relatively slender since he is not a complex character; furthermore he speaks very little and is, indeed, hardly present at all in the second half of the work. Yet his character is, in essence, so different from those which surround him that he represents a monumental challenge to his society and to humanity as a whole, whilst commanding few of the normal attributes of a hero. A socialist realist hero he is not, although in the manner of such heroes he is sufficiently undeveloped as a character to be an almost symbolic expression of certain virtues. His roots are firmly planted in Russian art and literature, and his characterisation is in dialogue with the art of icon painting, *lubok* and the folk tale. His pedigree and ancestry as a hero will set the scene before a consideration of his role alongside the faithful Niura.

CHONKIN'S LITERARY AND PRE-LITERARY PEDIGREE:

Chonkin resonates with a host of earlier literary characters, including some of Chekhov's more powerless characters, Tolstoy's peasants who achieve virtue by living close to the earth, and Leskov's saintly characters who inhabit a dimension apart.

The Fool

Russian literature has for centuries been much occupied with the figure of the 'holy fool' and his search for truth and justice; from the days of Kievan Russia, with its mystical and ascetic Christian culture right up to the October revolution.¹²⁴

¹²⁴ Ewa M. Thompson, 'The Archetype of the Fool in Russian Literature', *Canadian Slavonic Papers*, 15.3 (Autumn 1973), 245-273.

The peculiar social characteristics of the culture and the philosophy of its writers have encouraged this preoccupation, and account for the flourishing of the religious pilgrim as a type, engaged in physical or spiritual journeyings in the search for truth. The 'holy fool' appears in such guises as Prince Myshkin in Dostoevsky's *Idiot*, as Pierre Bezukhov in Tolstoy's *Voina i mir*, and also as Doctor Zhivago. These heroes are characters which reflect their times, but share a common gnostic belief in the existence of certain spiritually enlightened beings and in the sacredness of life.¹²⁵ But Chonkin, as an archetype of the 'holy fool', probably resonates most with echoes of *Ivanushka-durachok*, the fool of Russian folk-tales and pre-revolutionary popular thought. Voinovich, in creating this *roman-anekdot*, was writing in an increasingly ironic mode, walking a fine line between satire and the romantic myths which lie just a little further round the literary circle.¹²⁶ So, many of the natural progressions of *Ivanushka-durachok* from ignominy to glory are interrupted by the narrator in order to emphasise the thwarting and restricting aspects of Soviet culture, which is intrinsically incapable of nurturing this true son of the Russian soil.

The Soviet scholars N. V. Novikov and E. M. Meletinskii provide complementary analyses of the tradition of the fool in the Russian fairy-story and folk-tale, which specify that *Ivanushka-durachok* is usually the under-achieving and simple youngest of three sons of a peasant family.¹²⁷ Alternatively, he may be of noble birth, displaying heroic deeds and great good looks.¹²⁸ Chonkin is, as far as he knows, an only child, born to a simple peasant woman in a village on the banks of the Volga. His father is commonly considered to be either Prince Golitsyn, or possibly a local herdsman. The circumstances of his childhood mean that he is unable to practise the peasant skills to which he is born, being confined instead to a children's home, wasting his time on useless arithmetic.¹²⁹

¹²⁵ Thompson, p.273.

¹²⁶ Frye, pp.238-239.

¹²⁷ N. V. Novikov, *Obrazy vostochnoslavianskoi vol'shebnoi skazki* (Leningrad: 1974), p.10.

¹²⁸ E. M. Meletinskii, *Geroi volshebnoi skazki: Proiskhozhdenie obraza* (Moscow: izd. Moskva, 1958), p.213.

¹²⁹ L, p.23; Ch, p.22.

Ivanushka-durachok, either through laziness, obedience to his dead father's wishes, or cunning, obtains his father's entire heritage, including a magic horse which ultimately wins him the hand of the princess.¹³⁰ This rapid social elevation is usually the result of magic powers and not of active social climbing, since the hero is generally naive and passive. He is either truly simple-minded and is fortunate enough to strike lucky, or else he is ingenuously cunning; but in either case it is magic which is the active force, and in the tradition of the peasant masses his only hope of elevation comes through supernatural events.¹³¹ Chonkin unwittingly gains his supposed father's name, Prince Golitsyn, which in a characteristically ironic twist wins him imprisonment and loses him the hand of his true love, Niura.¹³² This sudden and unexpected change of social status brought about by external forces may do nothing to gladden Chonkin's heart, yet to Stalin and Hitler he has been transmogrified from simple peasant into mythical hero.

Ivanushka-durachok, in another prototype, may manage to catch a thief, or a magic horse who brings a herd of horses with it, out of which he will be left with the shaggy little hunch-back pony which is endowed with magical powers.¹³³ Chonkin, trained as a stable-boy, has a very close relationship with horses, and his life is saved by the gelding Osoaviakhim, who is shot and killed by a bullet intended for him.¹³⁴

Ivanushka-durachok begins life with neither physical strength nor good looks, and is despised and ordered about by everyone, yet he attains happiness, physical strength and good looks through the help of magic animals.¹³⁵ Chonkin looks like a scarecrow in his uniform and is uncoordinated and bewildered, a frequent target for his bullying superiors.¹³⁶ However, in Krasnoe he attains a peak of physical strength, attractiveness (at least in the eyes of Niura), and happiness.

¹³⁰ Novikov, pp.107-110.

¹³¹ Meletinskii, pp.223-231.

¹³² L, p.315; Ch, p.229.

¹³³ Novikov, p.112.

¹³⁴ L, p.315; Ch, p.229.

¹³⁵ Novikov, p.79.

¹³⁶ L, pp.13-16; Ch, pp.15-17.

The open sesame to this state of affairs is his link with the Russian earth and his willingness to engage with Niura's allotment and her livestock.

The *Ivanushka-durachok* of the fairy-tales may not even be a fool at all, but rather a cleverly masked ideal hero, who succeeds in the end more than those whom his society considers clever.¹³⁷

Articles by Laura Beraha and Halimur Khan follow an analogous line to the above analysis to draw on Voinovich's use of Russian folklore in *Chonkin* and to interpret its plot and characterisation in the light of this tradition. Beraha describes Chonkin as a fixed fool, inert and immobile within an essentially picaresque plot.¹³⁸ Khan explains the function of folklore as a positive source of cultural values in the novel and concludes that the point of *Chonkin* possibly lies in the fact that its hero, 'drawing his strength from Russian folklore, survived the dehumanizing pressures of Soviet reality'.¹³⁹ It could indeed be argued that Chonkin is the only balanced person in an insane society, and just as the 'holy fool' of rural Russia challenged the materialistic standards of his world by his mere presence, so Chonkin challenges many of the assumptions of his society.

Enid Welsford, in her book on the fool in his wider European context, categorises him into the following four groupings: 'there are those who get slapped, there are those who are none the worse for their slapping, there are those who adroitly change places with the slappers, and occasionally there are those who enquire, "What do slaps matter to the man whose body is of indiarubber, and whose mind is of quicksilver, and who can even - greatest triumph of all - persuade you for the moment that such indeed is your case?"'¹⁴⁰

The indiarubber fool deludes the public into thinking that pain is negligible, and simply because he looks at the world from outside, he exhibits a different kind of wisdom. In his position as a detached observer he highlights that great

¹³⁷ Novikov, p.114.

¹³⁸ Laura Beraha, 'The Fixed Fool: Raising and Resisting Picaresque Mobility in Vladimir Voinovich's *Čonkin* Novels', *Slavonic and East European Journal*, 40.3 (1996), 475-493.

¹³⁹ Halimur Khan, 'Folklore and Fairy-Tale Elements in Vladimir Voinovich's Novel *The Life and the Extraordinary Adventures of Private Ivan Chonkin*', *Slavonic and East European Journal*, 40.3 (1996), 494-518 (p.513).

¹⁴⁰ Enid Welsford, *The Fool: His Social and Literary History* (New York: Anchor, 1961), p.324.

contradiction of the human condition: the subjective impression that humanity plays an important role at the very heart of history, set against the objective realisation that individual lives are mere pinpricks in an infinite universe.¹⁴¹

At moments in the novel, Chonkin fits into each of the first three categories of fool in turn, but he must be disqualified from the final classification of the indiarubber fool since his mind can hardly be described as quicksilver. Yet there is a sense in which the quicksilver indiarubber fool is present in the work. It cannot be as Chonkin, nor as the flesh and blood author who, even though he did at times 'change places with his slappers' by the very fact of writing *Chonkin* and having it published, nonetheless was left 'the worse for his slapping'. But the indiarubber fool may be present in the form of the implied author-satirist as detached observer, that construct which readers derive from the text and which transcends the physical world of pain.

Voinovich's Chonkin challenges the ideology of his society and shows it to be flawed. But what he does in the hands of his literary creator is to change one ideal for another: he is a parody of the myth of the socialist realist hero and yet he manages to exist as some sort of ideal of humanity, the natural man in an unnatural world. Voinovich expresses the paradox of his hero thus: 'The heroes of fairy tales are our most popular heroes, and for that reason my hero is also named Ivan. [. . .] My heroes [. . .] are very natural people who fall into unnatural situations.'¹⁴² It is Chonkin's quality of being natural which saves him from being simply the butt of a vast historical joke. He may find himself pitted against the collective might of his society, but not only does he escape none the worse for his ordeal at the end of the story but even seems scarcely to have noticed the strenuous efforts of the army and the judicial system to destroy him. He completely fails to understand the army's view of him as a deserter, and assumes he must be fighting Germans when he is attacked. For fully half the novel he sits in jail, oblivious of the storm gathering around him. He even sleeps through most of his trial, effects a miraculously passive escape from prison, and not knowing where he is going or 'what his

¹⁴¹ Welsford, pp.318-327.

¹⁴² Wren, p.A2.

purpose' is, he walks away from the reader without a backward glance.¹⁴³ Even the most ambitious hero could scarcely wish to make such a powerful impression on the course of history as Chonkin. He is a fool who has been slapped but he has scarcely noticed it, and what is more he has been elastic enough to survive unharmed, having turned the tables on the slappers and provided the reader with hours of amusement at their expense, even if he himself has missed the joke.

The Natural Man

Voinovich, when asked about Chonkin, suggested that in whichever culture his hero might find himself, he would simply express his childlike surprise at its unjustifiably rigid rules. His stance is not opposed to a particular regime at a particular time but is simply the stance of the eccentric in any dogmatic society, the honest response of a wide-eyed fool in a world of puppet-automata. Voinovich's comments on the type of hero he prefers are as follow: 'My favourite hero is natural man. Regardless of his age, he looks at the world as if seeing it for the first time, and pronounces his opinions, not afraid that they may seem foolish to some people.' Voinovich illustrates this quality by elaborating on Andersen's story about the king's non-existent new clothes, which people claim to be able to see. He suggests that when people have pretended for a long time that the king has new clothes, they really start to see them, and resist the little boy's assertion that the king is naked. At this point, the new truth becomes a new dogma, and even after the king has got dressed a little boy whose ideas have not become ossified will be needed to break the spell. He continues:

'So, we have natural man in unnatural conditions. [. . .] The natural man does not hide the childlike in himself, and so sometimes he may look eccentric. [. . .] For many years I have been writing a novel about a simple Russian soldier Ivan Chonkin. In his own way he is an eccentric. [. . .] This is Ivanushka-durachok, who does everything out of place. This is a man, who, it seems, is needed by no-one, but who, it turns out, is vital to

¹⁴³ Thr, p.355; Pr, p.520.

everyone.¹⁴⁴

Thus, Chonkin's nature is revealed to be that of a curious child who will guilelessly ask questions about anything which does not seem sensible. As many know to their cost, there can be no more ruthlessly exposing voice in the world when pretence is being practised.

Chonkin lives simply and instinctively. Like Ivan Denisovich, and most of the heroes of the 'village prose' school, he is a 'simple Russian man'. As a soldier, he is considered undisciplined, sloppy and careless, but once he escapes the army he becomes a perfectly natural peasant: working the land; fathering a child; singing simple songs; negotiating deals with the *kolkhoz* chairman; mediating in disputes; and most strikingly of all, he becomes an outstandingly brave and efficient soldier. He is ready to die for his country, has never considered that his behaviour in defending his post could be misinterpreted, and is mildly flattered that the order for his arrest has been issued on official paper. He is surprised that his defence of the aeroplane arouses such amazement among his fellow-prisoners: he had simply been obeying orders, and had no idea that what he was doing was out of the ordinary.

When he is brought to trial, he can think of nothing to say in his own defence, reasoning that nothing he says will make any difference. The narrator argues eloquently on his behalf, but all Chonkin can murmur is 'Please forgive me'.¹⁴⁵ He is too modest to realise his own worth as a human being, and although he has lived with absolute integrity, he is not able to articulate the value of this. Lest the reader should fail to notice, and since Chonkin's own defence lawyer cannot bring himself to disagree with the prosecutor, the authoritative narrative voice acts as advocate on his behalf. The following passage demonstrates the substance of the novel's theme; that each person is unique and valuable, and has the responsibility to live life with integrity:

Chonkin said nothing. What could he say in his own defence? That he was still young and hadn't seen life yet, that he had not yet enjoyed enough food

¹⁴⁴ 'O sovremennosti i istorii', pp.231-233.

¹⁴⁵ Thr, p.319; Pr, p.490.

or water or freedom or love-making. He had no sense that he was a miracle unique in nature, that a whole world would die with him. Possessing a practical, unegotistical imagination, he knew for a fact that nothing around him would change with his disappearance. [. . .] It would have been easier on him had he seen Nyura even just once in all that time. She would have told him her news and he would have learned that his seed had taken hold in her, had sprouted, and something tadpole-like had begun its cycle of mysterious development in order finally to become a human creature, maybe bowlegged, maybe lop-eared, but resembling Chonkin.¹⁴⁶

Here the reader sees the very essence of Chonkin: he is simple, modest, and seemingly superfluous but, like Matrena in *Matrenin Dvor*, he is the very person who turns out to be 'vital to everyone'. When he departs, he leaves behind him the chaos caused by other people's misconceptions about him. He has been taken for a prince, a stable-lad, a deserter, drunk, hooligan or wrecker; an escaped convict, a White Army General, Stalin himself, the commander of German paratroops, Ivan the fool; saviour of Moscow; or pretender to the throne. Meanwhile Chonkin has simply been himself, without pretence, but with deadly effect to the system. He has not responded to the bullying of the absurd world, and has caused as much trouble languishing in jail as he did in freedom, and with as little intent. Even the narrator complains that he cannot be rid of him, and history develops around him and because of him, although completely beyond his control. What has he done, and who is he? In Hosking's words, 'in Stalin's Russia to be an ordinary human being is so unusual that the feat acquires the proportions of a myth or fairy tale'.¹⁴⁷ This is a commonly developed train of thought about that dark period of history, and Stalin's own daughter, remembering her stepbrother Iakov, a victim of his own father, wrote: 'What greater heroism than to be an honest and upright man in our day?'¹⁴⁸

Chonkin, in the tradition of *Ivanushka-durachok*, is an innocent in a duplicitous world; a gentle and caring human in a society dominated by rules; a

¹⁴⁶ Thr, p.319; Pr, pp.489-490.

¹⁴⁷ Hosking, in *The Third Wave*, p.148.

¹⁴⁸ Svetlana Alliluyeva, *20 Letters to A Friend*, trans. by Priscilla Johnson (London: World Books, 1968), (first publ. 1967) p.175.

naive dissolver of other people's stances; in short, a fool. As a device, he puts the 'sophistication' of a society into perspective; and by his literal-mindedness creates *ostranenie* for the reader jaded by overfamiliarity with reality. In his simplicity he responds to the sophisticated 'doublespeak' of the absurd world by taking everything at face value and behaving normally, not even understanding that there is a game to be played and rules to be observed. This device, wherein the hero fails to understand the rules of a society and lives by instinct, not even observing the moral contortions of others, has the potential to expose the accepted norms of an absurd agreement between the state and the people. Because of his lack of goals or beliefs, he is unheroic in the accepted sense, but by his presence he nullifies much that is taken for granted, and casts doubt on the invalid values dictated by a tyrant. This is a time-honoured tradition, both in religious literature as well as secular, since it illustrates the eternal truth that 'the foolish things of the world' have the power to confound the wise.¹⁴⁹

So it is that Chonkin, 'foolish' even by comparison with Gladyshev, brings to nought the plans of the armies of two totalitarian states and slips quietly offstage. He is not aware of what he has achieved, and does not realise that his liberation is as a result of the German plan to rescue him. Iverni points out that he acts without a sense of enmity towards those who attack him. He acts only according to common sense; never dreaming that he might be committing the most monstrous crimes, nor that he might be earning a hero's crown, and thereby brings into focus the fact that the rules of the Soviet game are inadequate to cope with common sense and loyal obedience. In short, at the time that she was writing, he would have been a candidate for speedy admission to a psychiatric hospital.¹⁵⁰

This tragic aptitude which Chonkin has for attracting events of major significance awakens the reader's sympathy for him, as the author intends. Voinovich labours the point that 'Chonkin is a passive figure, adventures come to him and stick to him all by themselves [. . .]. He is a more tragic figure than Svejik

¹⁴⁹ I Corinthians 1. 27-28.

¹⁵⁰ Iverni, p.453.

[. . .]. I count on sympathy for Chonkin'.¹⁵¹ He is slow, innocent, simple-hearted and has 'an instinctive moral awareness, unashamedly devoid of intellectual basis'.¹⁵² His ability to see things clearly because he is unblinkered by an impractical ideology, means that he, the fool, is the only character 'wise and strong enough to slay the villain' of imposed absurdity.¹⁵³ He is at times painfully literal-minded, and fails to understand what is obvious to others because ritual language has been used to distort the truth.

Niura shares Chonkin's literal-minded approach, and they both make frustrating material for their interrogators, comprehending neither doublethink nor sarcasm. Niura does not even understand Luzhin's attempts to trick her into denouncing the other villagers; so it is quite beyond her ability to collude.¹⁵⁴ Chonkin answers Luzhin's questions with transparent honesty until he realises that the truth is not what is required, and refuses to say anything further since he is bound to get the answers wrong.¹⁵⁵ In a society where everyone understands the system, Chonkin is a monument to simplicity and instinctive morality. In this he achieves heroic stature. His heroism may not be apparent to those around him, but in such a teleological society, he makes everyone else feel uneasy by his passivity, his tolerance, his pragmatism, and his ability to live in the present.

Niura does not have such a high profile in the novel as Chonkin, but her integrity is in the same mould as his. Her response to the bogus milk-maid Liushka's patriotic speech sending the men away to fight is forthright; she does not want her Vania to go to war.¹⁵⁶ At Miliaga's 'funeral' she demonstrates her humanity by crying with pity, and it is not she who appears foolish for having been duped by the sham, but the dupers themselves.¹⁵⁷ The portrayal of Chonkin and Niura and their mutual loyalty is far from sentimental, since they argue, disagree,

¹⁵¹ 'O moem neputevom bludnom syne', p.78.

¹⁵² Porter (1989), p.103.

¹⁵³ Szporluk, p.113.

¹⁵⁴ Thr, p.104, Pr, p.311.

¹⁵⁵ Thr, p.183; Pr, p.374.

¹⁵⁶ L, p.170; Ch, p.126.

¹⁵⁷ Thr, p.240; Pr, p.422.

and misunderstand each other; whilst at the same time being unswervingly faithful, and wishing only to be left in peace. Chonkin is the perfect fulfilment of the fool: the rubber-limbed turner of tables, and laughter of last laughs, who scarcely perceives the harm which others wish on him. Niura, however, hardly fits the same description. While Chonkin sits passively immured in jail, poor Niura pursues an endless quest for justice on his behalf, and is literally pushed, weeping, from office to office. Tears soak her pillow nightly, she is visited by horrible dreams about counterfeit Chonkins, she loses her job because of her association with him, her friends turn against her in judgment, and all the time her pregnancy makes her ever more tired and desperate. In the end, because she is unfortunate enough not to be at home when Chonkin calls on her after escaping from prison at the end of *Pretendent na prestol*, the reader can only assume that she is left to raise the child alone, while the bowlegged soldier walks off into the sunset.

CHAPTER FIVE:

THE WRITER: THE INDIVIDUAL AND THE SYSTEM

The Reluctant Émigré

Totalitarianism Explored

Parody and Prophecy

The Hierarchy of Writers

Stupid Galileo

Return

Correcting Versions of the Past

Allegories

New Satires

Unveiling the Grand Design

The Reluctant Émigré

On 21 December 1980 Voinovich left the Soviet Union with his wife and daughter to take up a new literary identity - that of émigré writer in Germany. His departure was reluctant, and his language, life experience, readers and relationships remained largely Russian. In spite of his new environment he kept his focus firmly fixed on the Soviet Union, anticipating the time when he could return there. Having emigrated towards the end of his fourth decade, he continued to write in Russian, initially giving little indication that his writing came from Germany or America; and although he was pleased to have appreciative readers of any nationality he took greater pleasure from thinking about his possible readership in Moscow.¹

The first few years of Voinovich's emigration were difficult creatively

¹ Voinovich in *The Third Wave*, p.273.

because he had been ill-prepared and felt in a state of shock.² These years yielded little writing, but there is a sense in which they were not wasted since they produced a crystallisation of his philosophy and a reckoning of what the satirical nature of his work had cost him, which later crept into his work in the form of a call for recognition of his sacrifice on the part of his readership.

The question of how he might develop his writing in emigration was put to Voinovich at a conference of émigré Russian writers in 1981. He responded that he was too old to adapt to Western ways, and judged that if he wrote about what he had lived through, his experiences would be of interest to everyone, since suffering is common to all and understood by all.³ Besides, displaced writers have left many of their books behind, and books written in emigration would reach readers in Russia in addition to being of interest to their host cultures providing they had broad application. He was confident that his Russian readership would grow, thanks to the poor quality of the books produced by the state publishing houses.⁴ In the same year he expressed doubts about ever being able to ‘become involved in Western life so deeply as to understand and write about it’.⁵

In early emigration he wrote little, but as he returned to his craft he was faced with decisions as to his choice of subject. Previously he had written largely from his own experiences, at first among the working people, then the intelligentsia, and finally in an arena of unresolved conflict with the system of Soviet power. For a few years after his departure the Soviet Union which he had satirised remained relatively stable, but soon *glasnost*’ and *perestroika* began to bring momentous changes. Whilst this development had been anticipated by Voinovich and cheered him as it heralded the possibility of a return to his homeland, nonetheless many years stretched ahead in which he had to seek to write with insight about a world in transition from which he was dislocated in time and space. His readers in Russia were living through exciting times, and he, as a writer,

² Appendix A, p.A1.

³ ‘Voinovich o sebe’ *The Third Wave*, p.146.

⁴ ‘Budushchee russkoi literatury v emigratsii’, *The Third Wave*, p.272.

⁵ ‘An interview with Vladimir Voinovich [. . .] by Richard Boston’, p.8.

faced the challenge of connecting with them from an historically hostile country in a changing ideological and material present. His claim on their attention was that he had served them in the past, often through *tamizdat* and *samizdat*, but how was he to maintain his aim as a satirical marksman when formerly stable targets were beginning to move about unpredictably and his readers were distracted? These questions did not arise immediately but straws were in the wind, and Voinovich, already battered by a life of conflict and enforced adaptation, had to summon up all his resourcefulness to meet the challenges of the eighties and nineties and to follow the driving imperative of his life: to write.

His first published work in emigration, started in Sochi in 1979 and completed in Stockdorf in 1981, was a fragment called 'Etiud', which opens with the device of the narrator waking in a strange place, unsure of where or who he is.⁶ At length it dawns on him that he must be Nabokov, and he feels pained and ashamed that he has written a work such as *Lolita* simply for fame and money. As an uprooted author he has attracted the attention he craves, and a circle of connoisseurs has grown up around him. But his wealth and fame do not fit the romantic image of the writer, who should traditionally be in debt to the discerning reader. Specialists have begun to feel discredited by having praised him, and are seeking a replacement to prove the impeccability of their taste. Returning suddenly to full consciousness, the narrator realises with relief that he is not Nabokov, but rather is a writer with a mission.

In this fragment Voinovich uses the device of the dream to polemicise with Nabokov,⁷ whilst considering one of the choices open to him in emigration - that of adapting his life and work wholesale to the demands of a Western market. Changing his language may not have been a realistic option, but *Chonkin* had by now proved very successful in translation, and in other particulars Voinovich could have adapted his writing to please a Western readership brought up on James Bond and ready to be fascinated by all things erotically and exotically Russian.

⁶ 'Etude', trans. by Liza Tucker, *Triquarterly of Northwestern University, Evanston, Illinois*, 55 (1982) 130-133. 'Etiud', *Russkoe bogatstvo, Vladimir Voinovich*, 1.5 (1994), 217-221.

⁷ Karen Ryan-Hayes, 'Decoding the Dream in the Satirical Works of Vladimir Vojnovič', *Slavic and East European Journal*, 34.3 (Fall 1990), 289-307 (p.303).

Addressing through his life the question which he had posed in the original title of his early story 'Kem ia mog by stat'', Voinovich had followed a route leading inexorably away from possible high office in the Writers' Union and from public acclaim and success in the Soviet Union. However, it might yet have been within his power to make an impression on the best-seller lists in an environment of Western market-driven censorship had he chosen his subject matter appropriately. Moving from a culture where the writer was considered to be the fount of all wisdom to one where books are largely for entertainment and where writing rarely pays the bills, Voinovich may initially have felt overwhelmed by the difficulties of reaching his Russian readership and surviving financially in an expensive country. Ultimately becoming another Nabokov was not the path which Voinovich chose, but it is possible that in this brief study of disorientation he was contemplating what life in emigration might become, and was arming himself in advance against the temptation of writing for fame and fortune alone.

Totalitarianism Explored

His next work, 'Fiktivnyi brak', published in Jerusalem in 1983, is a play set in Moscow, which shows no evidence of having been written in emigration.⁸ In the play Nadia and Otsebiakin, whose names respectively suggest hope and self-alienation, have just contracted a fictional marriage. Otsebiakin laments the economic situation and blames it on the system, alerting the reader to the joint function of these two characters as individuals trying to circumnavigate the system. They accept without question that no-one can survive by being law-abiding, and their marriage is simply a formality for mutual convenience. Otsebiakin was so nervous at the ceremony that he had difficulty signing his name, a reminder of how the written word may irrevocably commit the writer. Nadia is outspoken against the system, and Otsebiakin nervously counters her heresies with talk of the glories of the Revolution. His reason for contracting this 'marriage' is to manufacture a family to act as security so that he will be allowed to travel abroad. The system on which

⁸ 'Fiktivnyi brak', *Vremia i my*, 72 (1983), 228-244 (p.229).

he depends does not repay his trust, and whilst this offends his idealism he is prepared to play by the rules of the game. Nadia is probably more in tune with the thinking of the system, and believes that anyone could be induced to betray the Motherland for the right price. She would exchange a birch for a palm tree any day, and she cannot see the point of going abroad if not to defect. Her reason for 'marrying' is to teach her boyfriend to appreciate her, and she is curious to know why Otsebiakin did not marry properly and have a family if his aim was not to run away. When Nadia declares she is ready to go home to her boyfriend, Otsebiakin, confused between language and reality, refuses to let his 'wife' run around with a drunk. Frustrated, she threatens to denounce him to the security organs, but in the final analysis their shared fear unites them against the system which controls their lives.

As the play progresses it becomes evident that a damaged society has alienated Otsebiakin from himself. His claim to uniqueness is based on his unusual surname, but he misses the point that he has lost his identity and become a puppet. Nadia at least is capable of expressing the truth, but only in private. On an individual scale the dynamics of the populace and the system are seen at work: the former doing everything necessary to appear to conform to the demands of the latter, colluding, like Havel's greengrocer, with the very structure which destroys its authenticity and human dignity. So burdened are the people by this responsibility that their lives are sterile and wasted, apart from the occasional moment when they voice their true feelings in these intimate confessions of fear.

Until Voinovich was able to revisit Moscow in 1989, his writing fed mostly on his memories. Dislocated both from his readership and from the source of his inspiration, his writing became retrospective as he worked on *Antisovetskii Sovetskii Soiuz*, a collection broadcast on radio *Svoboda* of forty-three satirical documentary essays on the subjects of life, literature and politics in Soviet society.⁹ Whilst having their subject-matter firmly rooted in the Soviet Union, these broadcasts are clearly written in emigration, reviewing a past life with *ostranenie*. Voinovich explained in 1981 that he had aimed to show people themselves from

⁹ *Antisovetskii Sovetskii Soiuz*, (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1985).

another point of view, and that he was peculiarly qualified to do this, having had experience of many areas of Soviet life, and access to a wider literature than most listeners.¹⁰

In *Antisovetskii Sovetskii Soiuz* Voinovich writes about life 'as it is', or rather, as it was when he lived in the Soviet Union. An opening allegory of beetles living in a water-barrel and assuming it to be the whole world parallels the isolation of the Soviet people, establishing the theme of narrow-mindedness and mutual incomprehension between cultures.¹¹ The secret lives and acquired strategies of the people are gradually revealed - those which allow them as individuals to outwit whilst seemingly supporting the system. In common with the rest of mankind they are capable of thinking one thing, saying another, and doing a third.¹²

Many stories in the collection demonstrate some aspect of the anomalous Soviet way of life, wherein reality is distorted by the use of language. Propaganda is a target of his satire, as is the widespread and inappropriate use of euphemisms.¹³ Voinovich has been both praised and condemned as a kicker of 'sacred cows' and he enumerates some of the Soviet Union's many sacred words and symbols, noting that ideological needs often took precedence over practical meaning.¹⁴

In the years of *glasnost*, Voinovich notes, Soviet propaganda began to lose credibility as people turned cynically from the propaganda of the ideology to the new propaganda of Western goods. In the Soviet years expressions of gratitude by the populace to the system were mandatory although the yawning gulf between the rhetoric and the reality of their lives was evident.¹⁵ It was the system which controlled every aspect of living, not the leaders, who were as dispensable as anyone else.¹⁶ The whole fabric of the society was based on a pretence of

¹⁰ 'Antisovetskii Sovetskii Soiuz', *Oktiabr*, 7 (1991), 65-67.

¹¹ *Antisovetskii Sovetskii Soiuz*, pp.9-10.

¹² *Antisovetskii Sovetskii Soiuz*, pp.15-16.

¹³ *Antisovetskii Sovetskii Soiuz*, pp.25-30.

¹⁴ *Antisovetskii Sovetskii Soiuz*, pp.38-48.

¹⁵ *Antisovetskii Sovetskii Soiuz*, p.104.

¹⁶ *Antisovetskii Sovetskii Soiuz*, pp.119-125.

conformity, and nothing was what it seemed. Any opposition was dangerous folly, and those who took Marx-Lenin seriously were considered more dangerous than the purely passive, because sooner or later they would come to compare the theories with the reality.¹⁷ Writers were instructed to show their gratitude to the State by writing uplifting books about the people for the people. Such an obligation, Voinovich claims, turned writers into no more than clerks, unable to synthesise the spiritual values essential to any society.¹⁸ He considers the cases of specific writers and holds them up for praise or censure in the light of Pushkin's claim that genius and villainy are incompatible.¹⁹ Although not directly stating that a writer is what he writes and writes what he is, Voinovich's criticisms elsewhere of, for example Yevtushenko,²⁰ Nabokov²¹ and Solzhenitsyn²² and their works depend as much on the ideological stance of the writers as on the literary merits of their writing. Speaking for unappreciated and unpublished writers, for prophets not respected in their own country, Voinovich notes that there will always be free-spirited writers such as Grossman, and though they may not be published for decades, their works will not be destroyed.²³ On the subject of censorship Voinovich maintains that it is destructive of the artistic image. In Soviet literature the author provided the first line of censorship, backed up by the editors, who ensured that a work conformed to the ideological and artistic demands of Socialist Realism, the greatest censor of all being fear.²⁴ The thaw, when it came, was a turning-point, releasing the genie from the bottle and spawning a new generation of village writers, town writers and émigrés.²⁵ But in spite of such unlooked-for diversity Soviet literature carried on along its chosen path and at the point when Voinovich was writing, had approached the ideal after which it had been striving. It had a hierarchy of positive heroes and a

¹⁷ *Antisovetskii Sovetskii Soiuz*, p.148.

¹⁸ *Antisovetskii Sovetskii Soiuz*, pp.173-174.

¹⁹ *Antisovetskii Sovetskii Soiuz*, pp.190-193.

²⁰ 'Delo No. 34840', *Znamia*, pp.83, 89,114.

²¹ 'Etiud', (1981).

²² 'Iz russkoi literatury ia ne uezhal nikuda', pp.249-253.

²³ *Antisovetskii Sovetskii Soiuz*, p.200.

²⁴ *Antisovetskii Sovetskii Soiuz*, pp.211-216.

²⁵ *Antisovetskii Sovetskii Soiuz*, p.238.

hierarchy of writers enjoying a hierarchy of perks. Throughout *Antisovetskii Sovetskii Soiuz* Voinovich argues that literature may be used to proclaim the truth or to conceal it behind a mirage of lies and distortion. Soviet life as seen through his émigré eyes appears as a form of fantastic realism: a grim reality beamed through the lens of socialist realism, producing a society where everyone appears to be happy and strong whilst secretly harbouring degrees of doubt.

So for whom was this work written? At times Voinovich addresses the uninformed Westerner, at others the émigré Russian community, often as if the other were not present, and sometimes it seems that he is casting his words further afield to the Soviet Union itself, to an implied third reader - the community of writers which has remained in Moscow.²⁶

The answer lies partly in the gradual evolution of this collection. Far from writing it as a whole, Voinovich was responding to comments from listeners to radio *Svoboda*, whilst working under the pressure of broadcasting a regular column. Soviet listeners told him constantly that the West failed to understand them, but his perception was that it was they who did not understand themselves or their situation. This was not Voinovich's ideal, imaginary reader who understands everything,²⁷ but rather a naive Soviet figure, struggling to come to terms with an extraordinary life-experience. This was the primary object of his address, although it was also his aim to unravel the mystery of Soviet life for the Western reader when the collection was published as a whole.²⁸

For the outsider this work may provide an insight into the curious way of life of the Soviet people, but it is frequently in danger of becoming bitter and clangorous in tone. It seems unfairly loaded in favour of the omniscient narrator, who has constructed the whole in a manner which allows himself to win every argument and to insist on the listener's or reader's agreement. To some extent he is able to assume that listeners are in sympathy with his views by the very fact that they are tuned in to the broadcasts, but the anecdotal and conversational tone of

²⁶ Nancy Condee and Vladimir Padunov, 'The *Soiuz* on Trial: Voinovich as Magistrate and Stage Manager', *The Russian Review*, 46 (July 1987), 315-319.

²⁷ Appendix A, p.A4.

²⁸ Appendix A, pp.A4-5.

many episodes would perhaps be better suited to a dialogue with an independent and questioning interlocutor. The result of the monologic form is a somewhat one-sided venting of spleen as Voinovich peers incredulously over the rim of the water-barrel from a Western vantage-point. Some aspects of Soviet thinking have, however, crossed the boundaries of time and space and are still with him. For example, talking of other writers and their works, he apparently uses the very criterion for judgment which was later to cause him such grief at the hands of the critics, who maintained that his writing must be worthless and undeserving of consideration because he had emigrated. The view that a work of art cannot stand independently of its creator is born out of the strong ideological content of Soviet criticism, and concludes that a work should be judged largely on the political purity or otherwise of its creator. Voinovich, driven by an unbending demand for integrity in himself and others, may have adapted this view by changing political criteria for moral ones, but with an un-Western lack of tolerance may be seen applying it vehemently to some of his fellow-writers.

It should be remembered that at the time when Voinovich was broadcasting, many of the absurdities of which he spoke were still flourishing, but since topical satire is always in danger of losing some of its sense of immediacy, and since a retrospective stance rarely makes for durable art, he had eventually to move on to explore new and freer genres. Meanwhile, these essays allowed him to crystallise his memories with a degree of detachment, and to stretch his figurative limbs after nearly five decades of creative confinement in a barrel.

Having exorcised the demons of past rage and frustration, Voinovich left the documentary style of broadcasting and turned to the theatre, writing a drama published in 1985, the same year as *Antisovetskii Sovetskii Soiuz*. *Tribunal* is a play within a play, wherein an innocent theatregoer, Podoplekov, who is watching a production about a trial, finds himself in the dock, accused of anti-Soviet crimes. The language of the trial gradually changes Podoplekov's perception of himself, and he is not surprised to be branded a terrorist by the paternalistic court.²⁹ In this

²⁹ *Tribunal, sudebnaia komediia v trekh deistviiakh* (London: Overseas Publications Interchange Ltd. 1985), 1-96 (p.18).

shadow world even silence is dangerous: Podoplekov is accused of great cunning because he never expressed his hatred of the system out loud, and he is also assumed to have spread apathy in those around him so that they did not report him.³⁰ A bard provides commentary, explaining to Podoplekov's wife Larisa that the judge and witnesses are not intrinsically bad people, but that the system requires a victim to keep them in work. There are other characters who might be expected to help the beleaguered defendant: a scientist, a poet, and a writer, but Larisa's pleas are in vain. While she fights for her husband's freedom, Podoplekov himself is prepared to do anything in order to live, even to convict another innocent man, caring nothing for what people may think. That is, until he hears that his case has aroused interest among political leaders in the West, and with world attention focused on him, he self-consciously makes an impassioned speech.³¹ A new dissident is created by the media.

In this staged trial within a play within a play Voinovich creates a world in which nothing is real and everyone is playing a role. Language is a key issue, condemning, vindicating and creating a reality apart from actuality. In effect, it does not matter who is tried since everyone has done something wrong, or something that can be deemed to be wrong, given the misuse of language. On the brink of anonymous annihilation Podoplekov is offered a new role of dissident and martyr, and the mask which the court had tried to apply to him becomes his true face.³² His name, Podoplekov, suggestive of *podopleka*, meaning the real, as opposed to the ostensible, state of affairs, alerts the reader to the issue of reality for those whose very identity is compromised by an ideology. To begin with Podoplekov has a firm grasp of his own individuality, but by the time the trial is over he has lost all grip on reality and is as ready to be manipulated by the Western media as by Soviet rhetoric. Reality becomes fantasy, and everyone submits to the spurious logic of the trial, accepting that if the judge and jury do not condemn the defendant then someone else will; an argument with which Voinovich's readers will already be

³⁰ *Tribunal*, pp.42, 54.

³¹ *Tribunal*, p.96.

³² A. Danilov, 'Tribunal', *Volga*, 3 (1990), 185-186.

familiar.

The power of the press to change ordinary people into cult figures and to alter the course of their lives and creativity is a theme on which Voinovich comments extensively in interviews, but in *Tribunal* he sets it out clearly in literary form. The pressure of ‘positive’ media coverage presents dangers of unreality and inflation, but ‘negative’ press of talented writers, he maintains, should be ignored; history will vindicate their work in the end. Circumstances in the late part of the twentieth century have been so overwhelming for any Russian that a certain amount of reactivity may be expected, but Voinovich does not hesitate to point out the dangers of failing to be proactive. In *Tribunal* he sets out the logical conclusion of conceding to the slightest detail of ideological rhetoric. The minute that Podoplekov recognises the false authenticity of the court and begins to react to its accusations, he has given up his right to a disengaged position in the audience and has accepted his involvement in a travesty of justice with himself as victim. Whatever the outcome of the trial, it has no basis in reality, and whether he is destined for oblivion or glory he will still not go home to his real family and his real life. Whatever he says or does from this point on carries no weight: he has simply become the passive object of other people’s interpretations.

In these works of early emigration Voinovich explored the nature of totalitarianism, but the details of Soviet life soon began to change before his eyes, and his audience, with so much to look forward to, would not for long be interested in retrospective analysis. Somehow he had to find a new way of expressing universal truths irrespective of time and place, whilst having only one lifetime’s experiences to draw upon, and that having been spent largely in the Soviet Union.

Parody and Prophecy

This was Voinovich’s dilemma, and his solution in writing his next work, *Moskva 2042*, was to take as his hero an exiled Russian writer, and to send him to Moscow sixty years in the future, thus taking a very natural step towards ‘the

fantastic' in the form of '*nauchnaia fantastika*'. Todorov defines 'the fantastic' as involving a sensation of hesitation between the supernatural and the rational, a definition which both satisfies the senses of the reader and lends itself perfectly to any visit to Moscow.³³ Furthermore, he contends that in science fiction the initial data presented to the reader should be supernatural, and that the narrative movement consists in persuading the reader that such apparently marvellous elements are in fact 'natural' and are to some degree present and recognisable in normal life.³⁴ Voinovich's journey in time leads the reader down a path of recognition of the past. Communist history, even in the making, surely had an air of 'the fantastic' about it thanks to its packaging, and from an intersection in time and space in the Germany of 1982, the reader is persuaded that what he sees in the future, though initially marvellous, is no more than a familiar reflection of previous decades. This hesitation between 'the fantastic' and reality, each throwing light on the other, is arguably part of the non-optional reality for those who live in Russia, in large measure also constituting the country's fascination for the outsider, and this Voinovich manages to rediscover in *Moskva 2042*. Although the original source of the reflection is never overtly mentioned, any Russian used to reading between the lines could not fail to recognise a thinly-disguised mirror-image of Soviet Moscow, beginning in 1922 when the USSR was formed and Stalin became General Secretary, and proceeding through history to 1982. According to Voinovich this voyage is not utopian, nor even anti-utopian, but rather it reveals an anti-anti-utopia, since in Orwell's utopia everything works, but in totalitarianism there is chaos and nothing at all works.³⁵

The device of sending a writer into the future gave Voinovich new satirical possibilities by conjuring up sufficient *ostranenie* to breathe new life into an overworked subject. By viewing Moscow through the eyes of an outsider who, like him, is a writer, and by blending together the possible and the impossible, he mixes a cocktail of different elements: utopian idealism, the dystopian fantastic, and a

³³ Tzvetan Todorov, *The Fantastic*, trans. by Richard Howard (Cleveland: The Press of Case Western Reserve University, 1973), p.25.

³⁴ Todorov, p.172.

³⁵ 'Na pyl'nykh tropinkakh dalekikh planet', pp.28-29.

grinding empirical reality. The 'fantastic' highlights the inconsistencies of the society and draws out its essence. Realism grounds the work in detail and humour, absorbing the reader in recognition of the familiar and forestalling a purely allegorical interpretation. The play between illusion and reality, presented by a confused and perplexed narrator, leads the reader through a maze where elements of the old Soviet society are extrapolated to their natural conclusion. This is also what Evgenii Zamiatin conjured with in *My*, offering 'parody and prophecy' by exaggerating the present and projecting it on to the future.³⁶ Voinovich takes up the device, using the future as a mirror of the past in which reflections of Communist history can be clearly discerned, and by which he can interpret the past whilst warning of the dangers of the future.

The action of the novel is set in 1982, when the hero, Kartsev, a Russian writer living in exile in Germany, is nearly forty. He is beguiled into travelling sixty years into the future to Moscow, to write his impressions of how his homeland has developed. In his introduction he apologises for the loss of all the notes and documents which might provide proof of his journey through time, but he assures the reader that everything he is about to recount is absolutely true, witnessed with his own eyes, or maybe told him by somebody else who may or may not be trusted, or at least founded on something, or maybe nothing, and that all the characters in the story are drawn exclusively from himself.³⁷ Thus, as narrator and writer, he announces his intention of trifling with the reader, asserting his unreliability and thus avoiding the tiresome need either to tell the truth or to lie consistently. He throws further doubts on his own veracity by making it clear that he is easily befuddled by alcohol or fatigue, is readily manipulated by others, and is a moral chameleon. The novel narrowly qualifies as science fiction since it involves time travel, but while the author may have instigated this idea, the narrator denies it, and consequently the whole emphasis of this *nauchnaia fantastika* is heavily weighted towards *fantastika* rather than *nauka*.

³⁶ Evgenii Ivanovich Zamiatin, *Litsa* (New York: Chekhov Publishing House, 1955), p.119.

³⁷ *Moskva 2042* (Moscow: Vsia Moskva, 1990), pp.3-4; *Moscow 2042* , trans. by Richard Lourie (London: Picador, 1989), pp.3-4.

Before the flight, the readers are obliquely warned that they will be reading about themselves, and that science fiction is more likely to describe what already exists than what is to come. A little imagination may take them into the future, but they know not to expect any technical explanations from their Luddite and bibulous guide. The flight on a Lufthansa plane is as real as any other, and is organised with the minimum of fuss by a travel agent ; only the price of the journey is in the realm of the fantastic, but fortunately Kartsev is not paying.³⁸ For him the motivation for the journey is curiosity, but many others hope to gain from his experience. Not least among these is Sim Simich Karnavalov, an iconic exiled writer bearing more than a passing resemblance to Solzhenitsyn. Sim has ambitions to foil the passing of time by having himself and his retinue deep-frozen until he can return to Moscow triumphant on a white charger as tsar of all the Russias.³⁹ Embarrassingly for Kartsev, it seems that five years after returning to his own time he wrote a novel about his experiences in the Moscow of 2042, and the Editorial Commission of the future have read it and demand amendments, particularly insofar as it refers to the return of Sim Simich as tsar in its last pages.⁴⁰ Poor Kartsev, his mind still operating in 1982, is unacquainted with his future work, and finds their requests to censor it familiar, but impossible to comply with even should he agree.

As the story progresses, Kartsev frequently glimpses his own novel, sometimes reading things as they happen, sometimes seeing his own past and future entwined together, as life and art feed on each other, revolving around each other; the whole text occasionally disappearing into itself completely, only to emerge again a few chapters later. No-one, least of all Kartsev, is sure whether the characters he meets are real citizens of the future world, or simply the products of his own imagination. Consequently he has no idea whether his own creative efforts can do anything to change the course of history. Or whether indeed anyone can influence any events present or future, since even the supreme leader of this utopia has been swallowed up by his own cult of the personality. Initially a KGB careerist

³⁸ *Moskva 2042*, p.12; *Moscow 2042* , p.13.

³⁹ *Moskva 2042*, p.281; *Moscow 2042* , p.342.

⁴⁰ *Moskva 2042*, p.228; *Moscow 2042* , p.275.

from Kartsev's own time, who realised that the system was absurd but nevertheless believed in the ideal of Communism, he came to power determined to combat corruption, bureaucracy and inequality. To achieve this, he planned to keep a steady turnover of those in power, replacing them with younger men, which met with the agreement of those about to come to power, until having gained power they changed their minds. Having access to the elixir of life, the Genialissimus himself was guaranteed a long and youthful period in office, and spent his time creating Communism and watching over his people from a space-craft. Whilst he was absent on a supervisory voyage, his arch-rival executed a plan to strand him out in space and leave him there as a symbol, endowed with all the abstract power in the universe but totally powerless to connect with reality back on planet earth.⁴¹ The leader pretended to lead, and the people pretended to follow, but in reality the experiment was over. His only consolation in the end was knowing that he had extrapolated Communism to its ultimate conclusion, thereby rendering future generations immune to its charms.⁴² On the Russian level of reality, the reader sees behind this image the shadow of Stalin, tirelessly working at the lighted window in the Kremlin; and also of Gorbachev, swallowed up by the system he sought to change from within; and again of the unfortunate cosmonaut Krikalev, stranded on his space station watching the Soviet Union tear itself apart beneath him.

In the city of Moscow itself, nothing essential has changed by 2042, although the statues are plastic and have a different subject, St Basil's and the mausoleum have been sold to the Americans, and the street names reflect the literary genius of the Genialissimus. There are plans to be fulfilled, by 150% or 200%, there are cameras but no film, tape recorders but no tapes, literature classes but no books. No-one dies in Moskorep, because anyone old or sick or under sentence of death is immediately exiled to an outer ring where they can die less obviously.⁴³ Everyone knows everything, but pretends to know nothing; the renamed KGB is staffed almost exclusively by members of the CIA, and the CIA by the KGB, and

⁴¹ *Moskva 2042*, p.180; *Moscow 2042*, pp.215-216.

⁴² *Moskva 2042*, pp.327-330; *Moscow 2042*, pp.401-404.

⁴³ *Moskva 2042*, p.183; *Moscow 2042*, pp.220-221.

nearly everyone is a closet Simite anyway, so, as one of the KGB generals explains to our hero, 'nobody knows who he really is any more'.⁴⁴

In *Moskva 2042*, one of Moskorep's subjects describes the main feature of Communism as the erasing of the difference between primary and secondary matter.⁴⁵ This relationship between reality and illusion is presented in three main ways in the novel: firstly, in the citizens' alimentary, defecatory and sexual practices; secondly in their literature, or propaganda; and thirdly in the narrator's suggestion that creativity may have the power to change the future. In the literature of the new republic, dreams and illusion are indistinguishable from reality, just as for the ordinary citizen food (primary matter) and excrement (secondary matter) serve the same nutritional needs. This hesitation between primary and secondary, reality and illusion, the possible and the impossible, is what engages the reader in struggling to make sense of a bizarre world where the real and the fantastic are refracted through the prism of the familiar past.

As the novel moves towards its climax, playfully mixing parody and prophecy, illusion and reality, the reader is wearied by the presentiment that future and past are one, that a tired old joke is being played out again, and that nothing will ever change. Ryan-Hayes, commenting on *Moskva 2042*, notes that a prominent element of any dystopia is a prophetic tone, warning of the barely avertable inevitability of the future depicted.⁴⁶ It comes as no surprise, then, that Voinovich, reflecting on the novel in 1990, commented that the further the process of change in his homeland advanced the more the novel came to look like foreknowledge.⁴⁷ The new system in *Moskva 2042* is as grotesque as the old, but in unforeseen ways which yet do nothing to change the essence of the original model. The acronyms, uniforms and technology may have changed, but this is still the same society in search of a strong leader, welcoming illusion in place of reality, ready to rewrite history and transfer allegiance to anyone who can promise a

⁴⁴ *Moskva 2042*, pp.244-246; *Moscow 2042*, pp.296-297.

⁴⁵ *Moskva 2042*, p.237; *Moscow 2042*, p.287.

⁴⁶ Ryan-Hayes, *Contemporary Russian Satire: a Genre Study*, p.202.

⁴⁷ 'Ia ne vernus' v Rossiiu postoronnim', *Argumenty i fakty*, 43 (1990), 6-7 (p.6).

national identity, a ruthless rule, and a few sacks of hard currency thrown in. The recently thawed-out Sim Simich enters the city on his recently thawed-out horse and issues a dizzying flourish of mediaeval and Stalinesque ukazes as the servants of the old regime switch hats and take up power again.⁴⁸ The hands of the clock seem to spin backwards even as a new era is heralded in.

At this point the bemused Kartsev jumps on to the last 'iron bird' of Sim's empire and returns to Munich to record the novel 'just as it had happened' to him, unable to say 'which parts of it are primary and which are secondary'.⁴⁹ Even back in his own time he is besieged by interested parties asking him to censor the text in order to change future events, but he refuses on the grounds that his novel may be read by the future powers and that just maybe they will heed its warning and mend their ways. Of course this would cast doubts on his veracity, but this would be a small price to pay to make life easier for people.⁵⁰ And on that plaintive note the novel ends.

At the time of the failed coup of August 1991, for prophesying which Voinovich took ironical credit,⁵¹ it looked momentarily as if this forlorn hope might indeed come to pass, and in the euphoria of 'glasnost' triumphant' followers of Russian satire may have worried briefly about a dearth of material for the future, but alas, it was not to be. Talking about the coup in relation to *Moskva 2042*, Voinovich pointed out that his aim had never been to prophesy the future but simply to sound a warning, and he continued to warn that civil war could ensue and Yeltsin could become a dictator.⁵² From that time, Russian society rapidly became polarised, the unholy alliance between the old Communists and the church which Kartsev witnessed in the Moscow of 2042 was cemented, and a series of nationalists galloped on to the scene, lacking only white chargers to complete the picture.

By introducing the element of the fantastic Voinovich gave himself the

⁴⁸ *Moskva 2042*, pp.321-324; *Moscow 2042*, pp.394-397.

⁴⁹ *Moskva 2042*, p.346; *Moscow 2042*, p.423.

⁵⁰ *Moskva 2042*, p.347; *Moscow 2042*, p.424.

⁵¹ 'Velikaia avgustovskaia ne udalas', *Trud*, 31 August 1991, p.3.

⁵² 'Ia staralsia ne predskazyvat', a preduprezhdat', *Smena*, 14 April 1993, p.8.

freedom to use his own experience, presenting familiar themes to those sharing his culture and language, whilst making generalisations about humankind which could be appreciated by any reader. By extrapolating the trends of past and present to create a fantastic future with universal application, he also found a solution to his creative dilemma, whilst elaborating on the theme of the individual within the system with particular reference to the dilemmas of the writer. This he accomplished by simultaneously presenting two pairs of related but opposing worlds through one narrator, the exiled Russian writer. There is the world of Munich in 1982 and its opposite at the same time, Sim Simych's Russian estate in Canada; there is the Moscow of 2042 and its shadow, the Soviet Union of 1922 - 1982. These worlds show individuals in varying states of freedom, they also contain elements of the collective populace, and they demonstrate aspects of the powerful system at work. With their corresponding world-views, they create the tension in the novel between realism and the fantastic; the past and the future; the familiar and the marvellous. Each is presented to the reader through the time-travelling writer, and he it is who sets up the mechanism which suspends disbelief.

The four worlds which Kartsev encounters in the course of the novel are crucial to Voinovich's strategy in writing for Russians whilst being dislocated from the theatre of activity. Starting with the Germany of 1982, he shows a society grounded in reality, but showing evidence of some interference from the future fantastic. It is a place with none of the dynamics of totalitarianism, rejoicing rather in personal liberty and freedom of movement, in family relationships and friends, in civilised beer gardens, in money and shops in which to spend it. It is drawn from the author's own experience, and is readily recognisable to the Western reader, although the Russian reader of the time may more willingly have identified the West in Kartsev's dream of the utopian future, where beautiful girls in tennis skirts eat dates and ice cream under a sunny sky, where shelves groan under the weight of free sausage and bananas, and exotic birds sing from the palm trees.⁵³

Kartsev is summoned from the pleasant and stable Munich by the exiled

⁵³ *Moskva 2042*, pp.141-146; *Moscow 2042*, pp.167-172.

writer Karnavalov to his estate in the depths of Canada.⁵⁴ This world is a sort of free-floating phial of immutable essence of the motherland, and it is also a world looking for somewhere to happen in future time and space to complete the cycle of history. Sim Simych has constructed a microcosm almost the opposite of Kartsev's Munich: more Russian than Russia, a retrospective empire with the writer as quasi-tsar. Ryan-Hayes suggests that Voinovich's treatment of Karnavalov is modelled on Solzhenitsyn's portrait of Stalin, demonstrating that 'authoritarianism necessarily devolves into totalitarianism and that absolute power must corrupt those who wield it'.⁵⁵ For a writer to hold sway over the minds of a people may herald freedom or may bring the danger of a cult of personality. Karnavalov's isolated subjects are allowed no freedom of movement, there is a crippling ideology and capital punishment, sex is used pragmatically on state orders, the food is execrable and alcohol is forbidden. Flashbacks show Karnavalov from the very start of his career, resembling many of the great icons of the Soviet era - Lenin, Stalin, Dzerzhinskii and Solzhenitsyn - who were loved because they had faith in themselves and their beliefs, and wanted nothing for themselves, or at least nothing that most people want, according to Viktoriia Shokhina.⁵⁶ So in one fantastic character and his world Voinovich combines elements of the traditional view of totalitarianism and the writer, with additional hints on the Russian 'national character'. Shokhina, in her article on *Moskva 2042*, suggests that the Russian people are by nature particularly unsuited to democracy, preferring idol-worship, being passive, infantile and dependent. This, she suggests, may be why Orthodox Christianity was so easily wiped out in 1917, it being easier to worship idols than one God. And what, she asks, could better demonstrate this tendency than the serious proposal to replace the statue of Iron Felix with one of Solzhenitsyn?⁵⁷ And what could do more credit to Voinovich's prophetic powers than a report which

⁵⁴ *Moskva 2042*, pp.56-63; *Moscow 2042*, pp.65-73.

⁵⁵ Karen Ryan-Hayes, 'Vojnovič's *Moskva 2042* as Literary Parody', *Russian Literature*, 36 (1994), 453--480 (p.460).

⁵⁶ Viktoriia Shokhina, 'Vosemnadtsatoe briumera generala Bukasheva', *Oktiabr*, 3 (1992), 198-207 (p.200).

⁵⁷ Shokhina, p.201.

appeared in *Kommersant* in 1992? It stated that a certain Major- General Sterligov, addressing the Slavonic sobor, anathematised the ‘guzzling Communists, the sponging pluralists and [. . .] the Jews’,⁵⁸ as if in imitation of *Moskva 2042*’s Dzerzhin Gavrilovich.

The third and fourth arenas for the study of human life are the future Moskorep and its retro-image, the Moscow of the Soviet years, rarely mentioned overtly, but nonetheless present. In these two reflecting worlds, the topics which usually delight the satirist’s pen most - power, money and sex - exist in familiar forms, and, as might be expected, these natural impulses are subverted by the governing ideology. In 2042 society is governed by a system, all power being vested in the system and none in the individual. Power means access to privilege in the form of better housing, food and transport, the emblems of wealth are now plastic and excrement, and money is more or less meaningless in a world where *dostat*’ is far more significant than *kupit*’. Sex is as fulfilling and fun in 2042 as Zalkind might have wished when he presented it as a regrettable diversion from building the Revolution.⁵⁹ In Moskorep reproduction takes place under controlled conditions in an institute, and sexual provision is determined by status and has a manipulative function.⁶⁰ Kartsev finds out at first hand about the state control of what he had previously assumed to be an aspect of private life through his visit to the ‘palace of love’ or state experimental Order-of-Lenin brothel. Having filled in the necessary forms at reception, he is shown to a room by an elderly *dezhurnaia*. In the room are a narrow bed, a plastic bucket, some inspiring sayings, a poster of the Genialissimus with his clothing ever so slightly awry, and pictures of dedicated workers in the field of sexual culture. He waits impatiently for someone to come along and ‘satisfy his needs’, as the local jargon puts it, and is horrified to discover that, as an ordinary citizen of Moskorep, he is expected to satisfy his needs on a self-service basis - hence the plastic bucket.⁶¹ It is only his naiveté which has led

⁵⁸ Shokhina, p.201.

⁵⁹ Martin McCauley, *The Soviet Union: 1917-1991*, 2nd edn (Harlow, Essex: Longman Group UK Limited, 1993), p.131.

⁶⁰ *Moskva 2042*, pp.256-260,170; *Moscow 2042*, pp.312-317, 201.

⁶¹ *Moskva 2042*, pp.158-164; *Moscow 2042*, pp.187-193.

him to visit the brothel in the first place, since his status actually guarantees him the permanent sexual services of his minder, Iskrina.

Utopias have always been set either somewhere else on earth, or on another planet, or in another time, and this one is no different. Here is a world which is different and yet the same, a parody of the familiar which in the tradition of utopias recognises society's defects and targets the human nature which is at the root of any abuse of power, whilst making merry at the expense of its institutions. By accelerating history Voinovich has come up with an indictment of the past and present, and a warning for the future. There is much that is familiar in this bizarre image: human nature, geography and history, and the place of the individual within the system, which is supposedly 'served' by the writer who is himself struggling to serve the truth. Time travel and the elixir of life function as 'science' but the reader sees the fiction as essentially a satirical and allegorical comment on a familiar world.

The key to the pretence lies with the narrator, the writer, who has lived through the old Soviet Russia and transforms it into a vision of the future. He stands at the centre of four microcosms: he grew up under Soviet history; now he stands apart from it in his German habitat; he has close links with the émigré community; and he travels to the future Russia on his Lufthansa aeroplane. He is the little man tossed on the tides of history, the outsider who yet belongs, the opponent of all that is rigid; the adversarial 'fool' at court who argues the case for democracy. He calls into question whichever world he inhabits, and by his very presence exposes cant and hypocrisy. He is pursued through time by Sim's deep-frozen microcosm, which is capable of manifesting itself in any time and place as it struggles to find expression in the twenty-first century. The question Voinovich poses is whether the intervention of one satirist can change the course of history sufficiently to prevent a relapse towards empire and strong leadership. Writing elsewhere about the new Russia, Voinovich laments the fact that order and strength are often more attractive than democracy.⁶² Among Russians, he maintains, there has always been a tendency to link new ideas and movements with the name of a particular person, which tendency he calls *izmofreniia*. New prophets arise, to be

⁶² 'Idoly smutnogo vremeni', *Novoe vremia*, 3(1991), 46-47.

idolised and placed above criticism, unlike Western idols who come and go due to intense competition. Solzhenitsyn, whose hero Innokentii in *V krughe pervom* said: 'for a country to have a great writer [. . .] is like having another government',⁶³ had himself at that time become an icon and cult figure in exile, worshipped and protected by *Vestnik RSKKhD* and *Russkaia mysl'*.⁶⁴ This may not have been at his bidding or with his approval, the responsibility for any cult of the personality lying in three areas according to Voinovich: firstly, the Russian character's longing for a leader to solve all problems; secondly, the longing for a theory or '-ism' to do the same; and finally, the compulsion to try and transform an '-ism' into real life in the form of an unattainable utopia.⁶⁵ He argues that democracy is not the tyranny of the majority as Solzhenitsyn suggests, but rather the political diktat of the majority, involving the competition of the most energetic.⁶⁶

In *Moskva 2042* the narrator processes the images of four worlds to provide a universally relevant comment on totalitarianism. Whether Moscow reveres or abhors him hardly matters, for in the end it absorbs all that is different in him and sends him packing; his only hope is that those who read his account will heed his warning and take responsibility for the future. In a similar position to his narrator, Voinovich questions whether a rigid system and a willingly subservient populace will ever be able to tolerate the voice of the satirist, representing as it does a barometer of democracy.

The Hierarchy of Writers

In his next published work, *Shapka*, Voinovich returned to his Soviet experiences to present the theme of the writer in conflict with the system.⁶⁷ The

⁶³ Alexander Solzhenitsyn, *The First Circle*, trans. by Michael Guybon (London: William Collins and Harvill Press, 1968), p.436. This phrase is not included in the following edition: Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, *Sobranie Sochinenii*, 15 vols (Vermont, Paris: YMCA Press, 1978), 2, p.97.

⁶⁴ 'Iz russkoi literatury ia ne uezzhal nikuda', p.249.

⁶⁵ 'Iz russkoi literatury ia ne uezzhal nikuda', p.254.

⁶⁶ 'Idoly smutnogo vremeni', p.47.

⁶⁷ 'Shapka', in *Khochu byt' chestnym* (Moscow: Moskovskii Rabochii, 1989), pp.211-295; *The Fur Hat*, trans. by Susan Brownsberger (London: Jonathan Cape, 1990).

inspiration for this *povest*' is recorded in *Antisovetskii Sovetskii Soiuz*, in which two elderly writers are overheard gossiping about the latest events, including the decision of the Writers' Union to distribute fur hats to its members according to rank. One writer, offended at only being offered a rabbit fur hat, goes home and in spite of the pleas of his wife writes a letter of resignation to the Writers' Union, makes long (presumably bugged) phone calls to his friends expressing his outrage, and finally collapses into bed. In the morning he sees things differently, decides he is fortunate to live in liberal times, and does not submit the letter, which his wife has anyway destroyed.⁶⁸

There are obvious parallels between *Shapka* and Gogol's *Shinel*', and Voinovich initially prefixed the work with the words: 'This fur hat was made from Gogol's overcoat.' This, he explains, was an attempt to compare not himself, but the Writers' Union, with Gogol'. Akakii Akakievich, the clerk (*chinovnik*) made a coat according to his means, but the imaginative master stroke must go to the Writers' Union which hit upon the idea of making hats according to rank (*chin*).⁶⁹ However, Voinovich does not deny that in *Shapka* his writing resembles Gogol's in that each writer bases characters on himself, and the prototype for the 'hero' in *Shapka*, troubled by petty ambitions, is none other than himself.⁷⁰

While Voinovich was writing *Shapka* in 1987, the Soviet Union was entering a ferment of reform and reexamination of the past, from which the émigré writer was excluded. Many artistic achievements of the past were seeing daylight for the first time, and rising stars were jostling with desk-drawer writers in an attempt to catch the attention of a readership overwhelmed by a sudden wealth of material. Voinovich was not yet able to participate in these changes himself, and was thrown back on his experiences of Soviet life for the setting of *Shapka*, although the theme is universally applicable and particularly poignant for him at the time: that of a writer mortified by being deprived of the status he feels his due.

In line with much of Voinovich's later writing, the narrator of *Shapka* is a

⁶⁸ *Antisovetskii Sovetskii Soiuz*, pp.184-185.

⁶⁹ 'Ia vernulsia by . . .', p.8.

⁷⁰ 'Iz russkoi literatury ia ne uezzhal nikuda', p.258.

writer, as is the 'hero' - a certain Rakhlin who writes only about good and heroic people, hoping to present himself as a good person seeing only the good in life.⁷¹ His heroes' only adversaries are fire, flood and natural disaster, so he has no fears about censorship. His friend, the narrator of the *povest* , has become more cynical from experience, and doubts that such ideologically pure and courageous people really exist. Rakhlin respectfully asks for literary advice from the narrator, who is tired of reading about good people but does not have the heart to destroy the writer's confidence. The only visible blemish on Rakhlin's conformist character is that his daughter has married a Jew and emigrated to Israel, but in the economy of Soviet power this is compensated for by the fact that his wife's lover is a particularly influential general. Rakhlin works assiduously to a formula, and turns out quantities of books by comparison with some of his colleagues. He hears that his colleague Baranov is to receive a rabbit fur hat from the Writers' Union, where hats are being distributed according to the rank of individual writers.⁷² Initially he feigns indifference, but pride will not let him rest until he knows what sort of hat he is deemed to deserve. In the queue writers gossip about the allocation of furs, and mysteriously it seems that a good political record and slavish production of quantities of ideologically correct books are not enough to guarantee a quality hat. Sure enough, at his interview with the director from the security organs he is allocated a hat made of 'medium fluffy' domestic cat fur.⁷³ The rest of the story is devoted to Rakhlin's quest for the hat and the status which he feels he has earned. In the course of his struggle, the withholding of a suitable hat erodes his manhood, his work, his self-esteem, his identity, his sense of proportion and his sanity. Others explain that for a writer to conform passively is not sufficient to earn the approval of the system. Dynamic proactive promotion of the Communist ideology is required.⁷⁴ Disgusted, Rakhlin decides to write instead for a Western market, and becomes so outspoken that the West indeed begins to notice him and to give

⁷¹ 'Shapka', p.211; *The Fur Hat*, p.2.

⁷² 'Shapka', p.229; *The Fur Hat*, p.32.

⁷³ 'Shapka', p.243; *The Fur Hat*, p.46.

⁷⁴ 'Shapka', p.268; *The Fur Hat*, p.84.

him exposure as a leading dissident.⁷⁵ And like Podoplekov in *Tribunal* he finds his reality transformed by a foreign press with an imperfect understanding of the circumstances. Eventually, his rage at being thwarted leads to a fatal stroke, and although, through his wife's influence, a hat of the finest deerskin is delivered to his deathbed, this brings satisfaction only to him. He dies triumphantly with the fruits of victory in his hands, but it will not escape the reader's notice that although he is vindicated in his own eyes he is also dead.

Given that *Shapka* was written towards the end of the eighties after nearly a decade's absence from the scene by its author, it is interesting to note what a chord it struck with its Russian readership when it was published in Russia in 1989, being well accepted as a book and running successfully as a play for many years. Even the phrase 'medium fluffy domestic cat' (*kot domashnii, srednei pushistosti*) passed into common parlance, appearing, for example, in slightly altered form in *Izvestiia* of 2 March 1996, as *Lev domashnii, srednei pushistosti*, in reference to a tame lion.

Voinovich in his story captured the enduring essence of Soviet bureaucracy, and faithfully documented the twists and turns which are demanded of the individual in order to coax a response from the system. Whatever the political ideology and era, there is a distinctly Russian element evident within the dynamics of power, and Gogol' would have had no difficulty in identifying the setting. Further to this successful exercise of recognition, Voinovich demonstrates an exquisitely ironic self-awareness in this text; a further exploration of what he 'might have become' had he allowed himself to be consumed by chagrin at his lack of recognition. In 'Etiud' he had considered one of the options open to him as a writer in the West, and in *Shapka* he parodies what might have been had he either obediently followed the path of socialist realism or fully embraced the calling of dissident. Either way, his own frame of reference would have become irrelevant, and the individual would have been swallowed up within the system either of the Writers' Union or of the human rights movement.

⁷⁵ 'Shapka', p.275; *The Fur Hat*, p.96.

Stupid Galileo

The year after writing *Shapka*, whilst still in emigration, Voinovich wrote an allegory, 'Skazka o glupom Galilee', significant in that it deals with questions of exile and of failure to belong both in time and space.⁷⁶ Published in Germany in 1988, it is loosely connected with the historical figure of the astronomer Galileo. Voinovich sets the scene on a certain planet, in a certain state, in a certain kingdom, where people work hard, sow grain, smelt steel, dig coal, sing songs and attend meetings.⁷⁷ The last specification at least clearly indicates which state the author has in mind. But Galileo is immediately set apart from the mass of the people by shirking meetings to work in his observatory until he discovers that the earth is spherical and rotates on its axis around the sun. He is a man of non-conformist vision who speaks the truth and is believed by no-one, neither by his wife nor by the grand inquisitor whose conversation is reminiscent of that of the KGB agents in the Metropol' hotel. Doubts are cast on his sanity and on the relevance of his theory, and he is ostracised at work and socially. At length a personal case is called with all the usual ceremony and rhetoric, but Galileo refuses to recant.⁷⁸ Deprived of all he ever held dear, he then sits in prison for years and congratulates himself on being right until at length his wisdom is acknowledged and he is rehabilitated in his old age. Tottering down the street on his release, he sees a small boy playing with a globe and proudly introduces himself as the wise man who first revealed that the earth was not flat. The boy is unimpressed and sings a ditty about stupid Galileo who proved his foolishness by being the first to speak the truth rather than speaking it at the right time. Galileo bursts into tears, reflecting that 'his life had been in vain. Because, having discovered much that no-one knew before, it was only at the end of his life that he discovered the truth which other people grasp in childhood'.⁷⁹

The story of Galileo meshes with the history of Soviet dissident literature

⁷⁶ 'Skazka o glupom Galilee', pp.139-142.

⁷⁷ 'Skazka o glupom Galilee', p.139.

⁷⁸ 'Skazka o glupom Galilee', p.141.

⁷⁹ 'Skazka o glupom Galilee', p.142.

since the astronomer may not have been alone in his understanding: indeed the inquisitor and all the small boys on the planet may secretly have acknowledged the spherical shape of the earth, not admitting it for reasons of ideological expediency. Galileo's problem, like that of the Soviet dissident writer, lies in feeling honour bound to express the truth whether or not he is asked, when everyone else knows the same truth but is expert at keeping quiet. The cost to Galileo is that he is not vindicated until he has lost his youth, family and freedom, while everyone else lives with the uncomfortable truth whilst at liberty with their loved ones. What has been gained if all that was needed was to wait for the earth to rotate enough times for the 'right' time to come round, as it inevitably would?

'Skazka o glupom Galilee' was written in 1988, when Russia was feverishly catching up with previously hidden literature, when the West was exclaiming in delight over everything Russian, and when Voinovich himself, passed over by the fickle fashions of *glasnost*', was realising in emigration that having been right is poor compensation for a lifetime's conflict.

Like Galileo, Voinovich had suffered the consequences of speaking out first rather than at the fashionable time, saying what many others knew but chose not to express. In the late eighties things which had previously been unmentionable had suddenly become banalities, and writers by the score were pulling things out of desk drawers to be published and acclaimed. And he, Voinovich, having lost health, citizenship, home, relatives, pension, the right to a living and a voice, sat alone and largely ignored in emigration, suffering not only ideological and geographical exile but also the chronological exile of a man speaking ahead of his time.

Return

In 1989 Voinovich made his first return visit to Moscow, and in 1990 his citizenship was restored. At this time there was still great interest among the Russian intelligentsia and populace in the artistic works of the missing years of the

Soviet freezes, although readers were beginning to feel sated and were becoming distracted by the cares of the new market economy. The *Chonkin* books⁸⁰ and *Moskva 2042*⁸¹ were published in Moscow and there was a flurry of theatrical productions of Voinovich's works including *Shapka*, *Moskva 2042* and *Putem vzaimnoi perepiski*. Reaction was divided between those who welcomed the satirical piquancy of his writing, and those who were already weary of free speech and were beginning to long for stability and respect for the old institutions. Returning late to the scene of literary ferment, Voinovich was aware of the ambiguity of his choice to maintain a home and family in Germany when some had taken the opportunity to return completely, and others had never left. Swept along on a tide of debate, tossed from peaks of adulation to troughs of hostility, Voinovich entered the fray with an energy born of a decade's frustration, temporarily forsaking satire for an engagement with the political problems of his country. Meetings and *publitsistika* became the order of the day for many writers, and in tune with the mood of the time, which had seen little change from the days of Soviet criticism, people were judged largely in terms of their past utterances and their relative moral purity. This was a time when old hurts and grievances were brought into the open, when old scores were settled, and justifications were offered. At the same time there was a spirit of utopianism in the land, and a renewed willingness to heed prophetic voices. There was a feeling that the writer could justifiably be engaged in arenas other than writing, and it is hardly surprising, then, that many writers sought to become prophets, however questionable their credentials.

Gradually Voinovich effected his own rehabilitation, speaking with the voice of liberal reason, and reserving his satire for the extremist opponents of democracy. He moved from being a rebel with a cause, whose appeal lay mostly with the young, to being aligned with the moderates of his own generation, using his influence to oppose the army and totalitarianism. The 'people' and the

⁸⁰ *Zhizn' i neobychnyye prikliucheniia soldata Ivana Chonkina* (Moscow: Knizhnaia palata, 1990).

⁸¹ *Moskva 2042* (Moscow: Vsia Moskva, 1990).

intelligentsia welcomed him to their cause, although with the reservation that he must be grateful for their condescension because he still had a home in Germany and a past which was open to interpretation. At this time he penned many articles for the press, which without doubt reflected the mood of the time, but which lack the depth of thought or mastery of expression for them to be considered a very significant part of his oeuvre. In the next chapter, consideration will be given to Voinovich's expression of his political views, but for the purposes of gaining an overview of his work after 1980 just one piece of *publitsistika* will be considered here.

This is an article which appeared in *Izvestiia* in 1992 entitled 'Sila protiv nasiliia'.⁸² In this, Voinovich demands the reader's agreement immediately by writing in the first person plural, deploring our toleration of violence in the world, describing peace as a wooden house in which other people sit around lighting bonfires, while we say that it is not our business. He cites examples of irreconcilable conflict in the world, warning that all injustice will inevitably touch us personally: be it terrorism, the problem of refugees, our loss of heritage and environment, or the activities of fanaticism. The many evil forces which exist may be working independently, but together they will destroy our world.

To remedy this situation, he recommends a global system of defence against violence and the violation of human rights. He dismisses opposition to interference in internal affairs as politically-correct nonsense, stating that Saddam Hussein should be dealt with unequivocally. Critics may argue that violence should not be used against violence, but Voinovich, claiming to speak on our behalf, points to the difference between bandits and police, and laments the inability of the United Nations to police the bandits of the world. His solution is for the 'civilised' countries to unite in defining civilised behaviour, and together to act as 'adults' taking care of any unruly 'children' who fail to abide by that definition. Furthermore a powerful international court should put into effect political and economic sanctions. If such sanctions fail to act as correctives, the 'uncivilised' rebels should receive a warning, after which a task force would be sent in to disarm

⁸² 'Sila protiv nasiliia', *Izvestiia*, 4 June 1992, p.3.

the warring factions and to bring the killers to justice. After this the international body should have the option to take over the running of the troublesome country, which would be an admittedly expensive solution, but not as expensive as war and its consequences. Money and intellect should be rechannelled into preventing, not perpetrating war, and the world should unite to protect man, nature and life on earth.

In this article Voinovich demonstrates a simplistic and strong-armed approach to global politics, summoning up utopian solutions to complicated issues with impassioned rhetoric and an unwillingness to define terms as well as to take into account the effects of power on human nature. There is little doubt that this type of *publitsistika* held considerable appeal for readers at a point in history where old certainties had evaporated and where an increased exposure to world issues brought an increased sense of instability. And yet to encounter Voinovich the satirist wielding the pen in a manner reminiscent of the rhetoric of political propaganda is unnerving, the more so since he seems to be speaking from within the establishment. Jung wrote that 'we always require an outside point to stand on, in order to apply the lever of criticism'.⁸³ This is as true for satire as for psychology, and it is possible to observe a dramatic shift in Voinovich's stance in the above article. He takes his position as a defender of democracy at the heart of his nation, speaking on the people's behalf as a pure Russian with a superior experiential knowledge of the world outside her borders. His choice of the first person plural is a claim to belong and to be allowed a voice in the new Russia, and answers critics who denied him this status upon his first return visit to Russia in 1989. He had been particularly hurt by the comments of El'dar Riazanov, who was to have directed the film version of *Chonkin*, and who in an article had pigeon-holed Voinovich on the side of the rich and cruel, and himself on the side of the poor and noble.⁸⁴ In 'Sila protiv nasiliia' Voinovich leaps the gap from standing outside and applying the lever of criticism to the 'folly, vice, and insolence' of his

⁸³ C. G. Jung, *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*, ed. by Aniela Jaffé, trans. by R. and C. Winston (Glasgow: Collins, 1977), p.274.

⁸⁴ V. Voinovich, 'Otrezannyi lomot', *Ogonek*, 43 (1989), 7-8.

own country and its institutions, and instead turns from the inside out to castigate the wickedness of the rest of the world. His voice has become almost unrecognisable: instead of standing apart from society he claims to voice a collective impulse; the issues attracting his attention are no longer those of personal integrity but of global action; the non-conformist opponent of the system has become aligned with the new system of the democratic intelligentsia; the supporter of the free-thinking downtrodden individual has become the champion of a world police force. Furthermore, this didactic and prophetic stance has been acquired at the expense of his usual artistic craft. This is plain-speaking in a different mould from that of the fool, and whilst devotees of Voinovich the satirist may rub their eyes in disbelief, this choice of manner and subject was a deliberate decision by him and many other writers of the early 1990s to enter the political arena and engage directly with contemporary issues. The time for reading between the lines of books in plain paper covers had passed; for the moment many writers felt that Russia needed visionaries to explain the past, make sense of the present and give guidance for the future, and evidently Voinovich considered the times to be momentous enough to deserve unambiguous comment within readily accessible media. Warmly restating the above argument in an interview in 1996, Voinovich finished by conceding that the whole scheme could be classified as utopianism,⁸⁵ perhaps an indication of the change in political temperature brought about by four years of political disillusionment.

Correcting Versions of the Past

In the light of the developments at the time, Voinovich's next literary endeavour comes as no surprise, this being 'Delo no. 34840', a dense documentary update of the Metropol' incident of 1975. The hero of this work is no fictional writer-narrator, but is Voinovich himself in the first person: a member of the intelligentsia waging war by the pen with an unscrupulous system which will stop at nothing to harm the health, work and reputation of its opponents. In the opening paragraph he compares himself to the character in a Jack London story who is

⁸⁵ Appendix A, p.A15.

stoned by his fellow-tribesmen for insisting that white men sail in iron vessels, because his companions know for a fact that iron does not float.⁸⁶ Similarly, Voinovich's allegations of poisoning by the KGB in 1975 have not been universally believed because his story seems too fantastic to be true. The document, set in the bohemian world of Moscow's intelligentsia in the seventies, restates Voinovich's horror of ritual language and his belief in the imperative of personal integrity, and expands and modifies the story told earlier in 'Proisshestvie v "Metropole"'. He states that two of his books have come true in real life, comparing the attack on Chonkin by the NKVD and the army with the attack on himself by the KGB and the generals and marshals. Similarly, he compares the censor's demands for Kartsev to delete Karnavalov in *Moskva 2042* to the demands made in the eighties to delete Solzhenitsyn, the present-day Karnavalov, from the national consciousness.⁸⁷ He writes of the responsibility of every writer to be true, condemning writers such as Yevtushenko for acting as servants of the totalitarian regime.⁸⁸ In 'Delo no. 34840' he speculates on the methods and motives of the KGB in his alleged poisoning, describing it as a terrorist act carried out on the direct orders of Andropov with the intention of reprogramming him and turning him into a zombie, as he supposes must have happened previously to writers like Sholokhov and Gor'kii.⁸⁹ He catalogues cases of opponents of the regime being harmed or killed both in the Soviet Union and abroad. The effect of the poisoning on his writing he describes in the following way: 'Before I was poisoned, it seemed to me that I was actively and successfully working on *Chonkin*, but for a long time after the incident at the "Metropol"' my work progressed significantly worse, I constantly lost the thread of the subject, I endlessly wrote and rewrote the same scenes, I was unable to settle on one version and in general I marked time for a lot longer than before.'⁹⁰ The result of the poisoning he describes thus: 'it must be admitted that in any case the KGB agents achieved what they set out to do. They

⁸⁶ 'Delo no. 34840', *Znamia*, p.44.

⁸⁷ 'Delo no. 34840', p.82.

⁸⁸ 'Delo no. 34840', p.83.

⁸⁹ 'Delo no. 34840', pp.85-86.

⁹⁰ 'Delo no. 34840', p.87.

wanted to prevent the completion of *Chonkin*, and one way or another they did prevent it. Eighteen years have passed since then, and the book is still not finished. Something has prevented me from finishing it. Although, I hope, no-one alien is living inside me, all the same I find that there is very little space for me inside of myself'.⁹¹ He recounts his struggle to gain access to his files, a struggle which took him all the way to Yeltsin before he was told that his records had allegedly been destroyed. His motivation in trying to expose the facts, apart from a desire to bring the KGB 'criminals' to justice, is that the affair has spoiled his reputation as an honest man.⁹² He concludes his account by telling how in May 1993, he attended a conference in Moscow entitled 'The KGB, Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow'. On recounting his experiences to the conference delegates, he was told that such poisonings intended to cause brain damage were not uncommon, and that he probably escaped lightly by realising what was happening and taking evasive action.⁹³ Reacting against the mood which asks forgiveness for those who made mistakes in the past, he finishes his account with a call for the criminals to be brought to justice, arguing that mercy can only be shown to them once they have been apprehended. In another source, he claims to have heard that the two agents were punished by their superiors, not for what they did, but for having attracted international attention.⁹⁴ And he warns that the same KGB who protected the totalitarian regime is now 'protecting' democracy, likening this to the Indian custom of keeping trained cobras at the bedsides of sleeping babies to guard their rest.⁹⁵

Critical response to 'Delo no. 34840' was largely unenthusiastic, although it was conceded that *Znamia* was politically justified in printing it. An article in *Literaturnaia gazeta* regretted the widespread retrospective attention paid to the KGB, saying that Voinovich's story is boring, his allegations of poisoning cannot be proven, and that such prosaic events cannot be made into a fable, serving only to

⁹¹ 'Delo no. 34840', p.87.

⁹² 'Delo no. 34840', p.97.

⁹³ 'Delo no. 34840', pp.117-118.

⁹⁴ 'Kak eto delalos'', p.133.

⁹⁵ 'Delo no. 34840', p.120.

agitate the writer and bore the reader.⁹⁶ Another critic, whilst not unsympathetic to Voinovich, contrasted the work unfavourably with *Chonkin*, noting that it is driven by revenge, which weakens the artistic effect and changes the author into a pamphleteer with an interest in petty details.⁹⁷ In the context of the times in which it was written, when past history was being reviewed and analysed, it is perhaps understandable that Voinovich should have felt compelled to tell the story in every detail, and it is conceivable that the withholding of it could have arrested his further creative development. The very real long-term hurt done to the writer is evidenced by his tone throughout, as he harangues the reader with phrases such as ‘to those who are interested in the truth I will say [. . .]’, as though anticipating disbelief.⁹⁸ Like *Antisovetskii Sovetskii Soiuz*, this work may be seen as an unavoidable expression of injured innocence and outrage at the murky dealings of the seventies, but the document itself seems to be proof that, by whatever means, the KGB did indeed temporarily change the course of his literary purpose.

Allegories

A cycle of political allegories followed a few years later, when Voinovich was already well on the way to rehabilitating himself into new Russian society. These stories, about the progress of a revolutionary ship towards a bright future, seek to interpret history, assess current trends and warn against extending them into the future. The first two ‘Skazochki o parokhode’⁹⁹ tell of a boat seized by pirates, and setting sail for the distant land of Limoniia. There are too many passengers, so many are thrown overboard along with their books. The map is also accidentally thrown out, but with the guidance of the magician Karla Marla there should be no problem. The journey is long and difficult, captains come and go, books are written which later fuel the boilers, songs are sung and different navigational strategies are

⁹⁶ P.B. ‘Komitet gosudarstvennoi besovshchiny’, *Literaturnaia gazeta*, 9 April 1994, p.4.

⁹⁷ N. Klimontovich, ‘Ot “romana-anekdota” k knige-dokumentu’, *Kommersant Daily* 1994, 2 April 1994, p.14.

⁹⁸ ‘Delo no. 34840’, p.70.

⁹⁹ ‘Skazochki o parokhode’, *Nedelia*, 2 (1990), 20-21.

tried. All to no avail, since nobody knows which way is back nor which is forward. However, with the arrival of the last captain *glasnost* breaks out, and although the passengers have no idea where they are going, they at least have the satisfaction of talking about the problem.

The second story parodies the rhetoric of the voyage, while 'Tret'ia skazka o parokhode' is a damning indictment of Russia in the early nineties as a country lacking the ideology to join the rest of the world in working for a living, instead seeking instant solutions to her economic problems.¹⁰⁰

To an outsider, or to certain liberal elements within Russia this satire must surely have been an amusing exercise of recognition, but to those lamenting the passing of the Soviet empire it must have smacked of treacherous blasphemy, particularly coming as it did from a writer choosing to spend much of his time in Germany: the country of the former enemy now donating hand-outs to the economically-stricken St. Petersburg.

The three tales reappeared in a volume of collected works in 1994, as did a number of other short pieces, some of them written some time previously and many of them allegorical or philosophical in nature. These include 'Skazka o nedovol'nom',¹⁰¹ the story of a difficult and ungrateful dissident seen through the eyes of the security organs, and 'My luchshe vsekh',¹⁰² reflections on the Soviet need to be better than the rest of humanity, even if that meant having to be best at being worst.

The volume also includes a short 'Roman': a story within a story of a narrator recounting the tragedy of a Russian émigré writer, his wife and her lover.¹⁰³ The lover is the writer's best friend, an artist, and the love triangle is unresolvable, since none can live without both the others. Finally they all poison themselves in an elegant ritual at the artist's studio. The narrator's publisher sends for him and points out with some embarrassment that he has already written and

¹⁰⁰ 'Tret'ia skazka o parokhode', (iz tsikla 'Skazki dedushki Volodi'), *Stolitsa*, 21 (1991), 57-63.

¹⁰¹ 'Skazka o nedovol'nom', *Maloe sobranie sochinenii*, vol. 4, p.417.

¹⁰² 'My luchshe vsekh', *Maloe sobranie sochinenii*, vol. 4, p.419.

¹⁰³ 'Roman', *Maloe sobranie sochinenii*, vol. 4, p.460.

published this story two and half years ago. It has taken a further two and half years to write again. The narrator is horrified, having no recollection of the story. He resolves to see his doctor, but in the morning decides not to bother because he has just had a brilliant new idea for a plot about a love triangle, which should only take a couple of years to write.

This brief tragedy expresses something of the fearful costliness of the writer's profession in terms of his total absorption in his work and his search for a new theme. Written in 1984, at a time when Voinovich was just beginning to work again after the initial shock of emigration, this story perhaps expresses something of the writer's fear of repeating himself as he searches in his past for unexploited memories to mine for plots. Combined with his conviction that the KGB had damaged his mental capacity in some way, this nightmare scenario of spending valuable years in aimless repetition must have seemed a haunting possibility.

In the same volume of collected works appear more short works written in the eighties: a short romance in the form of personal small advertisements;¹⁰⁴ and a selection of poems including a whimsical piece on the fickleness and tenacity of nostalgic historical memory.¹⁰⁵

In 1991, during the process of his self-rehabilitation into the Russian intelligentsia, Voinovich had published a short parable in both the *Guardian* and *Literaturnaia gazeta* entitled in Russian 'Tsob-tsobe'.¹⁰⁶ These are the words of command given to yoke oxen in Russia, and the parable tells of the breaking of these beasts and of their complete submissiveness so long as everything is orderly and predictable. Voinovich spells nothing out, but seems to be drawing parallels with human lives spent in docile service of the system. Life may be spent in peaceful response to the demands of the driver, providing everyone remains in their allotted place. However, as soon as any element within the system changes position, whether for good reasons or simply for the sake of it, chaos ensues and carts are overturned.

¹⁰⁴ 'Uspekhi', *Maloe sobranie sochinenii*, vol. 4, p.463.

¹⁰⁵ 'Chudo', *Maloe sobranie sochinenii*, vol. 4, pp.472-475.

¹⁰⁶ 'Tsob-tsobe', *Literaturnaia gazeta*, 5 June 1991, p.12; 'Left Hand, Right Hand', *Guardian*, 24 January 1991, p.23.

In the same edition of *Literaturnaia gazeta* Voinovich had also published 'Novaia skazka o golom korole'.¹⁰⁷ The theme of Hans Christian Andersen's story had appeared earlier in his thinking, when he warned against ideas becoming ossified by dogmatism.¹⁰⁸ In the later version the story applies to a king who has gone naked for seventy years while demonstrations have been held to affirm the magnificence of his clothes. The little boy should have learned to keep quiet like everyone else who had learned to express their opinions by opposite meaning - an art which became highly developed during the seventy-year reign. Reactionary writers hyped up the king's clothes, declaring them the best in the world, and were ignored. Progressive writers wrote exactly the same, and readers fell about laughing, and made copies of their books to circulate. Meanwhile, the king was beginning to suffer from the exposure, but nothing could be done lest people should realise that he had been naked before. At length came *glasnost*', but the people were too wise to speak the truth immediately. The king was cold and ill and wished that a small boy could be found who would tell the truth, but all the small boys had learned their lesson. So the king took matters into his own hands, shouting 'The king is naked'. Everyone fled in case they were called as witnesses, but eventually hundreds of small boys joined the chorus, and at last everyone really could say what they thought. The king was still naked because no suitably grand material could be found to clothe him, but it was no longer any fun to talk about his magnificent regalia. In fact, life had become boring; nothing had really changed, but an opportunity for satire had been lost.

This allegory is a fairly transparent rendering of the Soviet years, and reveals the satirist's enjoyment in shooting at protected and ridiculous targets. The rigidity of the belief structure fooled no-one, and the only real victim was the ideology itself: manifestly ill-equipped to deal with reality.

¹⁰⁷ 'Novaia skazka o golom korole', *Literaturnaia gazeta*, 5 June 1991, p.12.

¹⁰⁸ 'O sovremennosti i istorii', p.231.

New Satires

With the coming of *glasnost* the problem for the satirist lay in finding new targets since the old certainties had crumbled and the sacred cow had become an endangered species. For Voinovich himself the exercise was to involve a careful sifting of the life of the new Russians to ascertain which elements had evaporated under the new order, and which had remained constant. The stable factors in Russian life, the ones which Gogol would have recognised, could then become the targets of a new satire.

This path of exploration was to lead Voinovich back to satirical writing in the form of a serialised sitcom, 'Novye russkie', after a period of some five years during which he had been active primarily within the political arena. At the same time that his public profile had been engaged in analysing the politics of the past, present and future, he had also behind the scenes been working on 'Zamysel', a philosophical and biographical book reflecting his quest for self-knowledge. These complementary works, 'Novye russkie' and 'Zamysel', revealing respectively the outer and inner worlds of the writer, are a further demonstration of the versatility of a writer living in rapidly changing times and drawing on every possible source.

The opening scene of 'Novye russkie' is set at Sheremetevo-2, where an American by the name of Philip Philip arrives with the aim of marrying a certain Klava who has advertised her full-figured charms and her availability in a magazine. At the airport he has a chance meeting with Georgii Akulov, whose name, reminiscent of shark (*akula*) alerts the reader, but not the American, to his predatory potential. Akulov, the young president of a firm called 'New Russians', smilingly takes Philip Philip into his care, and it is through him that the visitor is exposed to the Russian view of the world. The ubiquitous television set provides a linking device to the plot: it is at the airport; on top of a coffin in a hearse; there are several in each flat, including one playing videos from Soviet times to soothe an old woman, disorientated by the subject matter of her daughter's Japanese set. In another flat a programme is being produced for television, showing six year-old

Dasha speaking in front of her approving parents of her ambition to become a wealthy prostitute.

As in *Moskva 2042*, Voinovich presents his hero as a traveller from another place. Unlike Kartsev, Philip has never lived in the old Russia, but he has studied enough Russian to have gathered preconceived ideas, and his wide-eyed approach to the new Russians with their equally naive misconceptions about the West provides the necessary *ostranenie* for successful satire. Voinovich maintained, speaking about 'Novye russkie', that life in the Russia of the mid-nineties was an even more fertile field for satire than in Soviet times. He likens the situation of the satirist in the new Russia to that of a writer on a cruise ship, used to observing the passengers and writing stories about them, but finding that the ship is the Titanic at the point of sinking. Story writing would be inappropriate, and must cede to reporting of events, hence the writing of *Novye russkie* which reports a situation in a constant state of flux. Like particles passing through a sieve, the trivia of life pass through, but the major elements remain, revealing how characters survive whatever the circumstances.¹⁰⁹ In an interview in 1995, Voinovich commented on the impossibility of writing adequately about contemporary life because it changes too fast, saying that only television is capable of grasping life today.¹¹⁰ The series was as contemporary as it is possible to be, and with life in a state of rapid transition Voinovich had sometimes to change the details even as the episodes went to press. However, some things remained unchanged, and these particularly Russian ways of expressing normal human vices and follies are the features which Voinovich sought to sift out and bring into focus for the reader's amusement. Details such as changes in life-style and fashion have been retained for superficial recognition and grounding, but more deep-seated tendencies are ruthlessly exposed and interrogated by the satirist. The reader sees deceit and corruption, xenophobia mingled with an obsessive Americanisation of life, institutionalised thuggery, a declining infrastructure, the same double-speak built on a new ideology, and the usual mutual

¹⁰⁹ Appendix A, p.A16.

¹¹⁰ 'Chonkin i Voinovich poshli po miru', interview by Irina Khmara, *Komsomol'skaia pravda*, 19 October 1995, p.4

incomprehension between the generations. Binding all these elements together is the television in every room, replacing the icon corner and the inspiring propaganda, heralding a new world and spreading abroad the gospel of self-gratification to each new Russian citizen. Only the old woman watching her own special time-warp documentary on the Ussuriisk tiger is unmoved by its clamour on behalf of Western condoms and confectionery.

Unveiling the Grand Design

Whilst charting the external lives of the new Russians, with whom he can hardly deny fraternity, in the satirical 'Novye russkie', Voinovich was also working on an exploration of his inner world in the autobiographical 'Zamysel', and the two works may, perhaps, be linked by a short story which successfully combines the satirical and the autobiographical. 'Zhizn' i perezhivaniia Vovy V',¹¹¹ published in *Andrei*, a men's magazine in 1995, begins with a lengthy preamble justifying the author's decision to write for a pornographic magazine and lamenting Russian prudishness. He claims to see nothing harmful in pornography, suggesting that it may prove educational for youngsters and may help them to avoid the hypocrisy of the older generation, who were damaged by their upbringing. He then introduces a series of five episodes in the sexual adventures of a certain young Vova V. who, unsurprisingly, shares many biographical details with Voinovich. The first stirrings of Vova's curiosity come at the age of ten, and continue with increasingly tantalising discoveries about girls, culminating in a promising relationship with a local woman whilst he, aged twenty, is on military service in Poland. Distributed, as the story is, among the pages of a pornographic magazine, and hinting throughout at a satisfactory culmination to Vova's researches, it is a masterly stroke of humorous subversion of the genre for Voinovich to end the tale by having his hero unexpectedly shipped back to Russia on the very eve of a carefully planned mutual seduction scene. The story works as satire and

¹¹¹ 'Zhizn' i perezhivaniia Vovy V', *Andrei: russkii zhurnal dlia muzhchin*, 6 (1995), 20-27, 124-128.

autobiography, failing dismally only in the area of its pornographic content which, considering its publication context, adds to its satirical success.

‘Zamysel’, a blend of similar elements but published in the rather more solid *Znamia* at the end of 1994, appeared also in the fifth volume of Voinovich’s collected works in 1995. This reflective work draws together the threads of his autobiography and philosophy with special reference to his hero Chonkin, and presents a picture of the writer beset by conflict in his relationship with the people he purports to represent and with the system, struggling with every fibre of his being to fulfil his destiny. As far back as 1984 he had written that ‘every individual should try to understand the *zamysel* which lies within him’,¹¹² and this theme of the grand design for each person’s potentiality had surfaced from time to time in interviews, and had remained with him in his private writing for more than a decade before coming to publication.¹¹³ Speaking to Tat’iana Bek in 1991, he described the work in progress as memoirs mixed with fantasy, a blend of the philosophical and literary, showing man as the design of God, God having placed a design for fulfilment in the mind of each person, demanding a response.¹¹⁴ Voinovich likens himself to God in relation to his fictional hero, and wonders whether Chonkin will follow the plan which he has for him, although he feels that neither he nor the soldier is willing to submit fully to the *zamysel* of their lives.

To date, only about one tenth of ‘Zamysel’ relates to Chonkin’s story, so this is not yet the third part of the *roman-anekdot*, and the soldier’s fate has not yet been settled. Speaking about ‘Zamysel’ in advance of its publication, Voinovich, having mentioned the frustration of shooting at moving targets in the rapidly changing new Russia, explained: ‘I have decided to abandon the ship of contemporaneity and to drown in the past. I am now writing some sort of strange kind of memoirs.’¹¹⁵ This many-faceted work does indeed contain memoirs, the strangeness of the project being in the inter-leaving of them with episodes of

¹¹² Hosking, in *The Third Wave*, p.151.

¹¹³ ‘Iz russkoi literatury ia ne uezzhal nikuda’, pp.245-261.

¹¹⁴ ‘Iz russkoi literatury ia ne uezzhal nikuda’, p.259.

¹¹⁵ ‘‘Intellektual’nyi peizazh - 92. Klad pod sosnoi’, *Moskovskie Novosti*, 5 January 1992, pp.22-23.

Chonkin's story, reflections on *zamyseľ* and other philosophical concerns, and accounts of Voinovich's health, in addition to a text within the text representing the memoirs of a female writer with a colourful past. It is made up of ninety-five fragments, the average length of which is two and a half pages in the volume of collected works. Some 17% of the material has previously been published elsewhere, although not always in exactly the same form. Nearly 70% of the book is written in the first person singular, confirming a trend in the writer's development. Before emigration, only 'V Kupe' and *Ivan'kiada* were written in the first person, but thereafter there was an increase in Voinovich's narrative voice and first-person expression, corresponding in the early nineties with a decrease in satirical content, and culminating in the rash of articles, *publitsistika* and 'Delo No. 34840'.

Voinovich prefaces 'Zamyseľ' by setting out his philosophy in relation to the title.¹¹⁶ Namely, that in the beginning was the word. The word was God in whatever sense the reader chooses. Whoever is behind creation, everyone carries his own *zamyseľ* in the form of an internalised riddle or enigma. Some people may not suspect its existence, and like grain in a sack, it may never sprout and grow. Some may believe in it, but misread it and make it their life's work to play the violin when they should have chosen skittles. The book has many layers, and is about the author, who initially allowed himself to develop passively, became bored, began to look into himself and solved the riddle of his *zamyseľ* as far as possible. It tells of how he tried to follow his calling and why he diverged from it, of what he wanted to say and to whom, of the *zamyseľ* which resulted in the soldier Chonkin, and of how this led to certain unpredictable turns of fate. The resulting circumstances influenced the development of a general and private *zamyseľ*, leading to this book, which Voinovich will continue to write for the rest of his life in an attempt to explain himself to others and others to himself. The work, he declares, is of no particular genre, parts of it being self-contained and other parts depending on each other, all of them having been written simultaneously and complementing each other. The book is not a river with a source and estuary, but a lake which may be

¹¹⁶ 'Zamyseľ', *Maloe sobranie sochinenii*, vol. 5, pp.6-7.

entered from any side. The start of the book may be transferred elsewhere, and the end is not planned. The last word written by the author in this life will become the last word in this book.

In line with this explanation, the book is like a mosaic, forming an effect when viewed overall which cannot be seen from close quarters. The author is masterly in juxtaposing episodes to maintain the tension of the text, interspersing mild musings with rapid action, and gentle satire with rage. The picture which is built up is of a genuine human life, full of normal inconsequentiality but feeling its way resolutely towards meaning, overcoming difficulties although sometimes overwhelmed by them, experiencing both triumphs and confusion, intuitions of enlightenment and moments of meaninglessness.

Approximately 7% of the text is devoted to the story of his heart attack in 1988 in the woods near Stockdorf, and his subsequent hospitalisation, treatment and awareness of mortality. This is material to the text since it was on the point of losing consciousness that Voinovich's *zamysel* came to him clearly.¹¹⁷

Much of the work consists of unchronological memoirs, approximately 19% covering his ancestry, family and childhood, including evacuation during the war. Another 34% cover his adult memories, firstly as a young man moving to Moscow in search of a career as a writer, leading to the events culminating in emigration, the isolation of emigration, and reflections on the Soviet Union and contemporary Russian life.

A further 18% of the mosaic is made up of correspondence, most of it being a fictitious subtext in the form of a manuscript purporting to come from a certain E. Barskaia - a woman with a lively recall of her interesting sexual history. She recounts her memoirs in graphic language with which Voinovich affects to take issue, but which she justifies on the grounds of art reflecting life.¹¹⁸ Her life has had its moments of excitement as well as tragedy, her writing is sexually frank, and the text adds light relief to the whole. Voinovich claims that her role in the book is to reveal all the secrets of his own soul, adding that sometimes it is easier for a male

¹¹⁷ 'Zamysel', p.8.

¹¹⁸ 'Zamysel', p.12.

writer to express himself through a female character because of the distance gained.¹¹⁹

The origins and development of Chonkin's tale occupy 11% of the work, but these chapters focus mainly on the peripheral characters and on Niura, barely including the soldier. This is perhaps unsurprising, since Chonkin, who has always been passive, in emigration has become quite mute.

Voinovich tells of the frustrations of trying to write about Chonkin in the years leading up to emigration since life was difficult, interruptions were frequent and there were always letters of protest to write. His first attempt to write about him was set in 1956 upon his release from camp. Chonkin sets off for Krasnoe and even gets within sight of Niura's hut, but he gets no further because Voinovich is constantly interrupted.¹²⁰

The writer tells of the conversation he overheard in 1958 which first inspired him to write the story of Vania and the postwoman.¹²¹ In this early version their passion lasts only one night before his squadron leaves, but she is sure that he will return.¹²² She hears nothing from him, and out of frustration she starts to make up letters and delivers them to herself. These letters become increasingly moving and heroic until she believes in them herself, and by the end of the war her Vania has become a Hero of the Soviet Union and a colonel. She goes regularly to the station with the other women to look for their men coming home, but eventually she receives a letter from herself informing her of the heroic death of her husband. She has a photo made of herself and Vania from a little snapshot which he left, and has him dressed in the appropriate uniform with his medals. It does not look much like either of them, but she is pleased.

This original story about the 'colonel's widow' was lost, but it yielded Niura. Her lover took longer to invent, but Voinovich remembered seeing a soldier in Poland who was being dragged along under a cart by the horse's reins. Later he

¹¹⁹ V. Voinovich in conversation with R. Farmer, 18 March 1996.

¹²⁰ 'Zamysel', pp.21,24.

¹²¹ 'Zamysel', p.46.

¹²² 'Zamysel', p.52.

saw the same soldier with a bandaged head driving the cart. His name was Chonkin.¹²³

Chonkin's next appearance in 'Zamysel' is in the forest, where he is hiding with Svintsov.¹²⁴ They are hungry, cold and unshaven, and in the distance they see tanks hurrying to rescue Chonkin. They come across a wild man who claims to be Golitsyn awaiting the end of Bolshevik rule. Chonkin and Svintsov live with him for a while in his den, Chonkin thinking that if Niura was here he would be perfectly happy for life. But one day he is captured by partisans and put in a detachment commanded by Revkin's widow.

The story of Aglaia Revkina's widowing is the last thread of the *roman-anekdot* to be told in this work.¹²⁵ It happens by her own hand as she destroys the Dolgov power station to foil the approaching German troops. Her husband lays the explosives for her, and with a cry of 'Your country will not forget you!' she blows up the power station, the Germans and Revkin, taking refuge herself under a table.

Apart from a few anecdotes, the remaining 10% of 'Zamysel' is devoted to fragments of Voinovich's philosophy, most of them no more than one page in length. He pronounces himself never to have been a believer, admits to experiencing fear in the face of death, but has no illusions about the world being unable to continue without him, having been aware of his own mortality since the age of nine, when fleeing from the Germans.¹²⁶ He believes that instinct and intuition are more reliable guides than intellect, a genius being an instinctive creature but an intellectual having a weak sense of instinct.¹²⁷ He describes life as being rather like travelling on a train with different classes of accommodation, going from nowhere to nowhere.¹²⁸ Some passengers fall overboard before their time, but the same fate awaits all, since all will grow weak eventually and fall from the train. Meanwhile the only thing to do is to eat, drink and be merry whilst battling for

¹²³ 'Zamysel', p.83.

¹²⁴ 'Zamysel', p.138.

¹²⁵ 'Zamysel', p.199.

¹²⁶ 'Zamysel', pp.40,83,84.

¹²⁷ 'Zamysel', p.97.

¹²⁸ 'Zamysel', p.185.

better places. This metaphor is surprisingly weak, since surely, even in the turbulent new Russia, it is unusual for all the passengers to fall overboard in the course of a journey.

Finally the last chapter of the book is reached, called 'Zhizn' posle zhizni', wherein Voinovich is discharged from hospital and undergoes a fantastic experience.¹²⁹ Thinking of the many roles he has fulfilled in his life, and rejoicing in being a normal man in normal clothes, he walks down the hospital corridor with his wife and finds himself confronted by Soviet customs officials in a sort of airport. They want to confiscate *Chonkin* from his suitcase, but he loses interest because he sees himself at a bus stop as a young child. He is with his parents, and friends, real and fictional, come to greet him. He is distracted by a series of apparitions of himself at different stages and in conflict with himself. But the one thing he is sure of is that he must become a writer. People from his life and characters from books continue to throng around the bus stop, and when the bus comes Voinovich sits behind the wheel and Chonkin takes up the reins. They take off from Sheremetevo, gaining height, and Voinovich declares that the time has come to put a full stop or a row of full stops since everybody's *zamysel* will continue to the end of their life.

Zolotonosov, in his review of 'Zamysel', suggests that in the same way as Lidiia Ginzburg saw Levin as Tolstoi minus his genius and his literary profession, so Chonkin must equal Vladimir Voinovich minus his literary profession. He asks what will become of Voinovich in a commercial world with no taboos to break, since all the fun of his satire and Chonkin's plain speaking was, consciously or not, in the game of hide and seek with the system. 130

If Chonkin equals Voinovich minus his literary profession, then Voinovich must surely equal Chonkin plus a literary profession: that is, an articulate Chonkin. It is indeed difficult to visualise a future in the new Russia for such a being. But Voinovich, whilst being true to the inner essence of Chonkin, resembles him only in the way that an adult resembles the child he once was, having learned many hard

¹²⁹ 'Zamysel', pp.239-246.

¹³⁰ Mikhail Zolotonosov, 'Voinovich - plius', *Moskovskie novosti*, 24 (1995), 18.

lessons in adaptability from the rapidly changing world he has inhabited.

Voinovich's own *zamysel* has always given him something to express, and in this work, still very much in progress, he has embarked on a journey of exploration of what began as a very ordinary Soviet life in 1932. He resists the temptation to organise his life retrospectively into a pattern and simply paints it as he remembers it, with all its inconsequentiality. He invites the reader to share in the sensation that events are always more random and complicated in their inception than the storyteller might wish, and that actions may have delayed repercussions in unforeseen times and places. His theme is that of an ordinary man living in extraordinary times, striving to respond naturally to unnatural happenings and to be true to his inner imperative: to write. The sense of mild confusion for both writer and reader is compounded by the inter-weaving of fictional and real-life characters, the latter being no more stable or predictable than the former due to the changes which time and circumstance bring. Voinovich himself passes through many phases in the course of the work, each one revealing different facets of his character, and he is able to look back on all these manifestations of himself with the equanimity of hindsight, rather as if browsing through old photographs of long-forgotten friends.

The process of creating 'Zamysel' and 'Novye russkie' continues against the background of an evolving society. Whether Voinovich's words will be read now or whether, like *Chonkin*, they will have to lie dormant before beginning their battle with time is a question which the years alone can answer. Whatever the answer, it is unlikely that Voinovich will stop writing, whether or not he has the present approval and appreciation of a readership or of the system.

CHAPTER SIX

THE SATIRIST AS EXILE

States of Exile

Individualism

Finding a Voice

Censorship

The Writer: Satire and Dissidence

How Chonkin Spoiled the Life of the Author

Emigration

REINTEGRATION:

Settling Scores and Dealing with Criticism

Engagement with Politics

The Future of Russian Literature

The Fool, Galileo and Voinovich

The Future for Voinovich

States of Exile

Every satirist is to some extent intrinsically an exile because he must stand aside from the official version of his society. The trajectory of Voinovich's career and life may be seen as a series of states of exile: ideological, chronological and physical. These phases developed as steps along a path which offered no real choice in the light of steps already taken. When the young Voinovich became a writer his highly developed sense of reality and of self caused an instinctive reaction against uncritical conformity, creating a state of tension between him and the

monologicistic ideological system. This led to a position of ideological alienation from the organising literary community, driving him into a cycle of ever more satirical expressions of reality, so chronologically incompatible with the ossified doctrine of socialist realism that the system eventually ceased to tolerate him and forced his departure. For a decade he worked in a state of ideological, chronological and physical exile before reintegrating himself into a Russia much changed in his absence.

Individualism

By profession and birth a self-made intellectual, but by experience a relatively uneducated worker, Voinovich, even had he wished to, could hardly have fitted snugly into any group, and perhaps his unique talent is due in part to his having to create a portable universe with its own frame of reference to accompany him through life. Much of his work deals with the struggle of hero or heroine to avoid disempowerment by being too thoroughly integrated into their given society, whether this be Samokhin's building site, the fantastic worlds of *Moskva 2042* and 'Vladychitsa', or the dissident culture which swallows up the heroes of *Tribunal* and *Shapka*. The universe which he inhabited in emigration is perhaps more cosmopolitan than that which Solzhenitsyn took into exile and it has served a different purpose, sustaining Voinovich's personal identity whereas Solzhenitsyn's has related more to his identity as an exiled Russian.

Voinovich's background has produced a deep regard for the ordinary people, whom he believes to be more likely guardians of honesty and self-respect than the intelligentsia, of whom he writes: 'I have never seen such mass hypocrisy, dissimulation and lying as I have come across among the intelligentsia'.¹ It has also resulted in a complex and individual world view from a man described by O. Grotte as having 'the hands of a worker, the head of a lion and the look of a thinker'.²

¹ 'Sovest' naroda?', *Kul'tura*, 12 December 1992, p.3.

² O. Grotte, 'Dissident ponevole', *Russkaia mysl'*, 27 February 1975, p.3.

Finding a Voice

Voinovich began his career at a time when a new sincerity in literature was officially demanded. Typically for the time and for a young engineer of souls, he began with poetry before turning to slightly sceptical anti-Romantic stories, whose distinguishing feature was that they raised uncomfortable questions, particularly about the place of the individual within society. It was the imperative to find a voice which drove Voinovich on, even when conflict with the establishment critics led to his gagging by the state.

In 'Zamysel' it becomes clear that at least part of Voinovich's aim in writing has been to express himself through his characters, a view confirmed by his statement that he is to some degree present in all of them, 'even in Bor'ka the hog'.³ Reflecting in 1975 on the start of his career, Voinovich spoke of feeling that he needed to find a voice, without being sure of what he wanted to express,⁴ and he describes literary talent as 'above all the ability to write the truth'.⁵ He describes his impulse for expression as a need 'to be myself, whatever', which he sees as 'the social duty of the writer', claiming that for a writer to 'disregard himself in favour of social interests [. . .] is harmful for the writer and unhelpful to society'.⁶ So here was a writer who, from the start, felt that his personal fulfilment and wider social commitment could only be served by expressing the truth, as he saw it, about himself and his place in society.

Censorship

Driven to express himself through the written word and the corresponding desire to be published, Voinovich inevitably had to come to terms with the long, inhibiting shadow of the censor's scissors and with the fear of being silenced.

³ 'Vsia sotssistema vyroslo na vtorichnom produkte', interview by Ol'ga Spirina, *Znamia iunosti*, 20 May 1992.

⁴ 'I am a Realist', p.49.

⁵ 'Tri portreta', *Voprosy literatury*, 4 (1993), 178-198 (p.187).

⁶ 'O sovremennosti i istorii', p.228.

Because a cloak of silence enveloped the past, whole generations of writers were unable to live and create fully since, as Anatolii Pristavkin expresses it, they were deprived of the oxygen of their heritage and ‘years were spent grasping things which should have been known from birth’.⁷

In an environment where momentous events were stifled by total silence and where to deny people their voice was the most efficient way of removing them, it is little wonder that Voinovich dwells in his work on the power of words and the fear of becoming mute. Even though an individual may shout out in protest, his cries, like Grinka’s in ‘Vladychitsa’, may be drowned by cheers of insincere adulation from the crowd. Even though he may speak the truth, like Samokhin in ‘Kem ia mog by stat’’, he may find himself reinvented by a socialist realist journalist. Or like Vera Figner he may live out his last years apparently vindicated but reduced to an ambiguous silence. Chonkin is tormented by dreams of having his mouth filled with dust,⁸ or of being struck dumb at the wedding of his true love,⁹ or of being snatched from his mother as a baby and unable to cry out.¹⁰ These scenes are surely inspired by the writer’s most awful nightmare, to be unpublished and unread, deprived of existence by the censor. Or perhaps even worse, to be so disorientated in exile by the loss of one’s internal censor that one’s work becomes tendentious and dull. Or of encountering censorship in the West every bit as severe as that in the Soviet Union, either because of market forces or because of the allegiances of the journals and publishing houses involved.¹¹

THE WRITER:

Voinovich felt that he had something to say about ‘life as it is’, and set about saying it with remarkable versatility, using many genres, eras and settings for his work, both factual and fantastic, believing that ‘a real writer, whether he writes

⁷ Anatolii Pristavkin, ‘My i oni’, *Nedelia*, 42(1988), 9.

⁸ L, p.55; Ch, p.45.

⁹ L, p.107; Ch, p.83.

¹⁰ L, pp.267-270; Ch, pp.195-197.

¹¹ ‘Iz russkoi literatury ia ne uezzhal nikuda’, pp.251-253.

about the past or the future, is always contemporary'.¹² In early emigration he claimed that a writer can only truly be a writer when 'his view of the world is uncommon, unique', and insisted that the writer 'should not and cannot serve any parties, groups, trends, ideologies, or even society or the people' but should serve the truth 'in the way he understands it', before drawing the sting of his didacticism by adding, with or without intended self-irony, that the writer may sometimes be mistaken.¹³

As a rule writers write about what they know, the newly-fledged writer drawing on previous experiences, and the old hand writing about being a writer. Initially Voinovich was writing whilst engaged in manual work, and his stories focused on people's lives in that environment. As his descriptions of life became more accurate and skilled, his work was criticised more harshly and consequently it became more satirical and more opposed to the ideological demands of the time. He felt he had no choice but to criticise Soviet reality because, reflecting on his father's time, he perceived the Stalinist terror as a direct result of people's failure to speak out. He would have preferred to signal his opposition to repression without becoming a dissident, since to be a writer requires the ability to see life from every side while dissidence requires total commitment without compromise.¹⁴ The tragedy of the satirist, as he sees it, is that he is often suspected of mockery whilst loving his country through tears and discomforting the reader by stripping away layers to reveal what is hidden beneath.¹⁵

As Voinovich's literary career progressed, the figure of the writer developed before diverging to become either an honest speaker of the truth in the tradition of Chonkin and the 'fool' such as Kartsev in *Moskva 2042*, or an exploiter of an honourable occupation such as Rakhlin in *Shapka*, the writer who writes not to enlighten but for self-aggrandisement, profit or advancement. Voinovich's early work had been written in relation to the prior discourses of others, but his later

¹² 'O sovremennosti i istorii', p.229.

¹³ 'I am not a Dissident', *New York Times*, 24 May 1981.

¹⁴ Appendix A, p.A10.

¹⁵ 'Vsia moia bol' ostalas' zdes'', *Knizhnoe obozrenie*, 24 March 1989, p.4.

work came to relate to his own prior discourses and to the way in which they had changed, or even spoiled, his life. Since emigration, the figure of the author has become ever more prominent, reflecting the reality of his life to the point where he becomes the hero of his own work in 'Zamysel'.

Before leaving the Soviet Union Voinovich in many ways played the role of outspoken 'fool' to his native culture, a difficult performance to maintain from a distance. Some sort of engagement between the 'fool' and his world is necessary in order to allow his barbed comments to reach their target and to allow the satirised society to react with the prerequisite slapping. In emigration Voinovich was not fully aware of every development in the Soviet Union and so had to choose allegorical, fantastic or future settings for his work in which satire could be directed towards general trends rather than towards specific developments. His work continued to preach a strong message of the responsibility of everyone and of the writer in particular to live authentically, paying no heed to the majority, and his documentary writings expressed an exorcism of his sense of grievance.

After his return to Russia, Voinovich's works in the early 1990s predictably and understandably reflected his reaction to criticism of his morality and motives. Since he felt compelled to justify himself not only as an artist but also as a politically correct figure, some of his creativity was inevitably dissipated, and the stress of trying to rehabilitate himself sapped energy which under happier circumstances might have been spent pursuing other goals.

The old Soviet tradition that the writer was in debt to the people and should write to inspire them may have been a transparently cynical ploy to harness the writer to the state ideology, but the myth survived, however much the machinery might have changed, and demands were made of returning writers to justify their past and to adopt clear political positions in the present. For the impartial satirist, whose cause is the castigation of the follies and vices of humanity, these demands were supremely irrelevant.

Satire and Dissidence

Voinovich claims to have been made into a satirist by criticism, and the greater part of his work has been in the satirical genre which exposes the 'border between the funny and the serious'.¹⁶ In 'Zamysel' he writes of the purpose planted within him to be a writer, and of how the circumstances of his life influenced the origin and development of that *zamysel* in the person of Chonkin, and of how *Chonkin* changed the course of his life.¹⁷ Willingly or unwillingly, he found himself branded a dissident because of his satire, and the theme of how dissidence with all its consequences may be thrust upon the individual is explored in 'Khochu byt' chestnym', *Tribunal* and *Shapka*. Viktor Nekrasov, writing about Voinovich's expulsion from the Writers' Union in 1977, summarised the process thus: 'The writer Voinovich had ceased to exist. The dissident Voinovich had appeared.'¹⁸ Voinovich saw dissidence as part of the territory for a writer in the Soviet Union, and remarked in the early years of his emigration that he did not consider himself to be a dissident in the political sense, but had found himself to be one simply 'because every writer is a dissident'.¹⁹ At the time, in his view, 'the boundaries of the possible in the framework of official Soviet literature are still cramped enough that if a writer fits into them, it means he's not good enough, and if he's really good enough, then, in the final analysis, he doesn't fit in'.²⁰ The situation during his last years in Russia he described as depressing and irritating, since in spite of feeling completely free to say and write what he wanted (although without a hope of publication), he had the mantle of hero thrust upon him by outside observers.²¹

¹⁶ 'Ja vernulsia by . . .', p.529.

¹⁷ In a UK lecture tour in March 1996, Voinovich spoke on 'How Chonkin Spoiled the Life of the Author'.

¹⁸ Viktor Nekrasov, 'Being Earnest Isn't Always Important', trans. by Hilary Sternberg, *Survey*, 23.3 (104) (1977-1978), 42-51, (p.48).

¹⁹ 'An Interview with Vladimir Voinovich [. . .] by Richard Boston', p.8.

²⁰ 'I am not a Dissident'.

²¹ 'Die Emigration ist immer eine Tragodie', interview by Werner Paul, *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 21 June 1986.

How Chonkin Spoiled the Life of the Author

Although Voinovich's message has remained constant, he could never be accused of lacking versatility in adapting his work to meet the challenges of a changing environment. During his career he has expressed himself through poetry, song, story, novel, documentary, allegory, film, theatre, television, radio and journalism, weaving together life and fiction in an inimitable blend. His life has had considerable influence on the subject matter of his fiction, and his fiction has similarly had an effect on the course of his life. The story of Chonkin led to his creator being forced into emigration, and even after the soldier walked off into the twilight at the end of his published story he continued to haunt the author.

Their relationship came to public attention upon their joint return to Moscow and the publication of the *Chonkin* novels there in 1990, and in 1989 Voinovich said of his hero that it was as if Chonkin had spent the intervening years of emigration in cold storage, it being 'only now that his fight with time begins'.²² Commenting on the ease with which he was able to work in Germany without the distractions of Moscow life, Voinovich divulged that he was working on a book about Chonkin's new life in America.²³ The next year he commented on the strange sensation of emerging into the Russian consciousness after an absence of two decades, having ceased his official Soviet existence in the early seventies.²⁴ When he left the Soviet Union in 1980 he was already well known in the West, *Chonkin* having been published in thirty countries. Yet the *roman-anekdot* was only now becoming widely known in Russia thanks to its publication in *Iunost* on the eve of the forty-fifth anniversary of victory in World War II. The war veterans and generals were outraged by it, but the democrats applauded. Voinovich argued that the generals had no moral right to defend the fallen against Chonkin, since he does not represent the whole nation but is simply one character, at the same time

²² 'Zavedomo lozhnye izmyshleniia', interview by Andrei Vasil'ev, *Moskovskie novosti*, 13 (1989), p.14.

²³ A. Shatalov, 'Stanet li Chonkin fermerom?', *Vecherniaia Moskva*, 7 April 1989, p.2.

²⁴ 'Ia vernulsia by', p.8.

universal and national, and incidentally bearing a close resemblance to his author.²⁵ In a later interview he volunteered that Chonkin was much closer to his creator than was Emma Bovary to Flaubert.²⁶

Continuing his defence of his hero he added that this was not the end of the story since he had always had an epic in mind, involving Chonkin's arrest at the end of the war and his displacement to the American-occupied part of Germany. From there he would be engaged as a labourer by an American farmer who would later die, bequeathing to Chonkin his widow's hand in marriage. The widow would also die, leaving him a rich man with fields, tractors, combine harvesters and his own private plane. He would eventually return with a trade delegation to the Russia of the nineties, where he would meet Niura. But they would both be old, he would have forgotten how to speak Russian without having learned to speak English, and even with his American jeans and his false teeth it would come to nothing.²⁷ Thus the archetypal 'Dick Whittington' tale of the young man marrying and gaining wealth and a flying ship is subverted and ends inconclusively.

In writing both *Chonkin* and *Moskva 2042* Voinovich was convinced of the proximity and mutual influence of life and fiction. His own biography was contained in *Chonkin*, and *Chonkin* it was that forced the direction of his life. If he had remained in the Soviet Union he would have chosen to continue Chonkin's life through arrest and imprisonment for being AWOL in Germany, followed by release and rehabilitation in 1956. However, finding himself in emigration on account of Chonkin, and meeting many Chonkins in Germany - simple Russian peasants blown there by the winds of chance, Voinovich decided that this should perhaps be Chonkin's new *zamysel*.²⁸

The next year, 1992, in another interview, Voinovich was less indulgent, wondering whether *Chonkin* would be understood at all by the next generation and

²⁵ 'Ia vernulsia by', p.528.

²⁶ 'Ia umeiu smeiat'sia', interview by S. Fonarov, *Kuranty*, 12 March 1994, p.8.

²⁷ 'Ia vernulsia by', p.536.

²⁸ 'Iz russkoi literatury ia ne uezzhal nikuda', p.260.

concluding that 'if Chonkin dies, it will serve him right'.²⁹

In 1993 Voinovich spoke again of the burden of Chonkin and their coinciding biographies, adding: 'he's older than me by thirteen years, but he's alive and well'.³⁰ He had planned to send his hero to Kolyma, but somehow he had ended up in Ohio, wealthy but inarticulate.

The next appearance of the soldier, or at least of his nearest and dearest, is in some new chapters of *Chonkin* which appeared in 1994.³¹ It is winter in Krasnoe, and Niura has a visitor. She hopes it is Chonkin, but instead it is her inadequate and verminous father, fleeing from his wife who has made their fortunes by volunteering with some relish to act as local executioner. Though heavily pregnant, Niura nurtures her father and continues her work of delivering the mail, but she falls on the ice and gives birth prematurely to a puny boy who dies after crying for three days and nights, thereby wiping out the last trace of her relationship with the soldier.³² Returning home from the hospital weak and distressed, Niura finds her father and a neighbour feasting on meat: they have slaughtered Bor'ka in her absence. In the ensuing fracas Niura injures her father and ends up tending his injuries, crying over him, over Bor'ka, over her fate. In the spring her father contemplates returning to his wife, but dies before he has the chance. These bleak chapters in which evil is rewarded by affluence, and virtue by the loss of everything precious, hold out little hope of a happy ending.

However, a romantic happy ending is just what Chonkin and Niura enjoy in another incarnation. In 1994 a film version of *Chonkin* came to fruition, Voinovich having first written a film script in 1967 for Mosfil'm.³³ An abortive attempt at filming *Chonkin* had been made in the late eighties with Riazanov,³⁴ and finally in 1990 Voinovich and the Czech director Menzel agreed on the making of the film

²⁹ 'Esli Chonkin pomret, tuda emu i doroga!', interview by S. Berestov, *Komsomol'skaia pravda*, 22 October 1992, p.4.

³⁰ 'Den' pered Rozhdestvom s Vladimirom Voinovichem', interview by Iu. Sokolov, *Izvestiia*, 16 January 1993, p.10.

³¹ 'Zhizn' i neobychnyye priklucheniia Ivana Chonkina: novye glavy iz romana', *Ogonek*, 6/7 (1994), 14-16.

³² 'Zhizn' i neobychnyye priklucheniia Ivana Chonkina: novye glavy iz romana', p.16.

³³ V. Iaroshevskii, 'Chekhi snimaiut "Chonkina"', *Ekho planety*, 31 (July-August 1993), 27-28.

³⁴ E. Riazanov, 'Posleslovie', *Iskusstvo Kino*, 1 (1989), 175.

with a Russian cast.³⁵ The location was a former Russian tank training ground in Czechoslovakia, Chonkin was played by a young actor still in training, and the joint Czech, British, French and Russian enterprise had a budget of \$2.5 million.³⁶ The film is less multi-layered than the novel, concentrating on the comic and anecdotal aspects of the original, and it finishes with a central European happy ending as Chonkin and Niura escape the wrath of the NKVD and fly off into the sunset. Critical reception has been mixed, some who had not been offended by the novel feeling uneasy about the film's light-hearted view of what is still a traumatic historical memory.³⁷ But for Chonkin himself this ending is probably as good as he might hope for.

Emigration

Russian émigré literature has a tradition of more than four centuries,³⁸ starting arguably with the 'correspondence' between Ivan the Terrible and Andrei Kurbskii. This century has seen three main waves of exile: the first in the twenties, many of whose members preserved elements of pre-Revolutionary Russia in hope of returning home; the second more economically-motivated wave after the Second World War; and the third culturally-driven wave in the seventies and eighties. Writers of whichever wave have had different views of their fate: some seeing their situation as exile and others as emigration; some regarding separation from Russia as the end of creative possibilities, and others, in spite of the initial loss of prestige, readership and an internal censor, using it as an opportunity to interpret between two worlds.³⁹

Joseph Brodskii, who added another language to his poetry in exile,

³⁵ E. Moeva, 'Bravyi soldat Chonkin na zemle bravogo soldata Shveika', *Literaturnaia gazeta*, 14 June 1993, p.8.

³⁶ 'Priklucheniia soldata Ivana Chonkina snimaiutsia na rodine soldata Shveika', interview by V. Enin, *Sankt-Peterburgskie vedomosti*, 30 June 1993, p.7.

³⁷ Zh. Vasil'eva, 'Mister Chonkin protiv NKVD', *Literaturnaia gazeta*, 1 March 1995, p.8.

³⁸ Glad, *Literature in Exile*, p.6.

³⁹ Raisa Orlova in *Literature in Exile*, p.112.

describes it as a new life set against old memories: not a rare experience in this century when displacement is commonplace. The nostalgia which the émigré feels may be a stimulus, the object of desire being less important than the desire itself.⁴⁰

The émigré writer Zinovii Zinik quotes Rousseau, saying that 'in order to write a real book about one's own country, first of all one must leave it'.⁴¹ He describes emigration as beginning internally with an awareness that one is not of one mind with others, and developing into the breaking of all ties, except personal ones, with one's country.⁴² As a literary device, he describes it in many ways: as the objectivisation of his own estrangement, as life after revolution, as dying, imprisonment, shipwreck, suicide and divorce.⁴³

Solzhenitsyn, who made few concessions to his geographical location in exile, was forthright in his condemnation of those who left voluntarily, claiming that this 'greatly diminishes the right of the one who has left to judge and influence the fate of the abandoned country. He has left - so he has cut himself off! He has freed himself from his responsibility . . . as well as from his right'.⁴⁴

In the light of these comments, it is interesting to note how Voinovich viewed his position during his years of emigration and partial return to the new Russia. The negative aspects of emigration for him included separation from the reader, lack of credibility with the local community, and the wish of some to see him fail.⁴⁵ But given that an author has all the experiences of the past from which to draw,⁴⁶ and given that he can be hindered equally by bad conditions or good, poverty or wealth, obscurity or fame, his feeling was that emigration could be an enriching experience, offering the writer 'the valuable opportunity of viewing his

⁴⁰ David M. Bethea, *Joseph Brodsky and the Creation of Exile*, (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1994).

⁴¹ Zinovii Zinik, 'Emigratsiia kak literaturnyi priem', *Sintaksis*, 11 (1983), 167-187 (p.167).

⁴² Zinik, pp.174-175.

⁴³ Zinik, p.179.

⁴⁴ A. Kazintsev, 'Novaia mifologiiia', *Nash sovremennik*, 5 (1989), 149-151 (p.150).

⁴⁵ 'Ia vse eti gody zhil nadezhdoi', p.83.

⁴⁶ 'Satiriker wider Willen', interview by Marie-Luise Bott, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 27 April 1988, p.16

homeland from the side'.⁴⁷ He considered that he had gained an understanding of the Soviet Union which he would otherwise have lacked, and although he had felt the separation from his readership he had not missed the state's interference in his life.⁴⁸

Furthermore, his feelings of loss were not confined to himself, since 'when a writer is forced to emigrate not only is he deprived of his homeland but his homeland is deprived of him, the writer'.⁴⁹ Post-*glasnost*', he regretted the delays imposed by the state on the return of citizenship to exiled artists, likening the problem to a drop of water reflecting the whole of *perestroika* as the country was deprived of its cultural heritage.⁵⁰ Whatever the problems of emigration, he achieved his most important goal, to develop what was within himself as a writer.⁵¹ He was accused by some of emigrating to save his skin, but countered that 'there can be no price too high to pay to save yourself'.⁵²

REINTEGRATION:

Voinovich's initial state of exile was ideological before it became geographical, and much of his life has been spent in chronological exile as he has expressed at inexpedient times the things which others knew but chose not to voice. Sometimes he wanted to belong but always felt alien, and even after returning to Russia he was struck by the realisation that he was more alien than ever, having little in common with other writers or with the aims of the politicians.⁵³

When return visits to Moscow became possible in the late 1980s, Voinovich gained access to the Russian press and was able to express his views on the past, present and future with the *ostranenie* of a detached observer. With the return of his

⁴⁷ Andrei Vasil'ev, 'Zavedomo lozhnye izmyshleniia', *Moskovskie novosti*, 26 March 1989, p.14.

⁴⁸ 'A vy znaete, kakoi on?', pp.48-49.

⁴⁹ 'Staraius' sokhranit' sebia', interview, *Teatr*, 8 (1989), 129-139 (p.129).

⁵⁰ 'Ia vernulsia by . . .', p.539.

⁵¹ 'Staraius' sokhranit' sebia', p.130.

⁵² 'Potomstvennyi dissident', p.8.

⁵³ Appendix A, p.A8.

citizenship in 1990 the possibility of reintegrating himself into the society of his address became real and desirable. After all, there is little role for a 'fool' who has become displaced from his own culture without having become integrated into his new surroundings. Living abroad he compared to living in retirement,⁵⁴ and without immediate engagement with a readership he would, like Chonkin, have had to be content simply to walk away into the dusk, alone and unsung. His satire had isolated him without diminishing his impulse to satirise.

Of course there were vices a-plenty to address in the West as in Russia, but he remained largely unable to communicate with his new culture whilst no longer feeling quite familiar with the old. Throughout his time in the West he claimed to have been in Russia in spirit, addressing his books to the Russian reader,⁵⁵ and he claimed that his commitment was always to Russia since he was more needed there than in the West.⁵⁶ He always maintained that physical separation from his readership was insignificant since a reader will seek out an author's work, copying it and learning it by heart if necessary.⁵⁷ In the Soviet Union the writer had enjoyed a special relationship with the reader since the profession of writer was respected and the author was seen as somehow close to God, practising a craft not open to everyone.⁵⁸ In the West, he noted with chagrin, a writer has little status, and in the new Russia it may be even less; but a writer needs readers so return was inevitable. However, it has not been uncomplicated since his family now has a life in Germany, and throughout his partial return he has spent much time travelling between his two homes. In 1992 he expressed the dilemma thus: 'I decided: once having started to live within this performance known as the 'Soviet Union', I must watch it through to the end, without leaving the theatre. All the same my return has not been complete. My life is torn apart.'⁵⁹

⁵⁴ 'Iz russkoi literatury ia ne uczzhal nikuda', p.258.

⁵⁵ 'Vsia sotssistema vyrosla na vtorichnom produkte'.

⁵⁶ 'Ia dushevno pripisan k Rossii', interview by G. Vasil'eva, *Izvestiia*, 8 June 1994, p.7.

⁵⁷ 'Tri portreta', p.190.

⁵⁸ Appendix A, p.A17.

⁵⁹ 'Ia vernulsia ne ves'', interview by Iuliia Tereshchenko, *Baltiiskaia gazeta*, 15 (June 1992), 7.

Settling Scores and Dealing with Criticism

Like Galileo in prison, Voinovich had in emigration enjoyed leisure to think about those responsible for his plight, and upon his return to Russia he wasted no time in naming names and calling for justice, quoting Pushkin's words that 'he whose conscience is not clear is to be pitied'.⁶⁰ He lamented the corruption of his entire generation by the terrible equation that 'it was impossible to be honest and to prosper',⁶¹ and he supposed that almost everyone carried some measure of guilt for acts committed or omitted, saying that 'one may have killed, another may have written denunciations, a third may have stood up for someone, and a fourth may simply have remained silent. Everyone has their own life, their fate and their degree of guilt'.⁶² The reader, reflecting with hindsight on Voinovich's early works, is again struck by the appositeness of linking the titles 'We Live Here' and 'I Want to be Honest' not with an 'and' but with a 'but', since history rendered the two conditions almost mutually exclusive.

Whilst expressing a degree of understanding for the actions of the ordinary people, he was more damning in his condemnation of the state apparatus, wishing to ban the KPSS from all access to power,⁶³ and saying that the state 'is guilty before those whom it expelled from its land. And it goes without saying that it is also guilty before those who live in the Soiuz now. And it should publicly apologise to the people'.⁶⁴

Voinovich was not alone in having scores to settle, and the critics had also been waiting their turn. In 1983 he had been branded by an indignant Soviet citizen 'one of the most abominable and talentless lampooners and slanderers of the Russian people, the author of the immoral story *The Unusual Adventures of Private Chonkin* ' (sic).⁶⁵ In the late 1980s, as *Chonkin* became available to a wider

⁶⁰ 'Kak eto delalos'', p.133.

⁶¹ 'Esli Chonkin pomret, tuda emu i doroga!', p.4.

⁶² 'Potomstvennyi dissident', p.8.

⁶³ 'U nas eshche v zapase chetyrjadtsat' minut', p.31.

⁶⁴ 'Ja ne vernus' v Rossiiu postoronnim', p.6.

⁶⁵ Snegov, 'Vykhodtsy iz Rossii, o strane sovetov', *Sovetskaia Rossiia*, 28 December 1983.

readership and Voinovich's profile rose, the press was divided on the merits of the work and on the wider question of those who had left without actually being expelled: some saying that they were welcome to return and join the democratic process; others maintaining that they had left for economic reasons and no longer deserved a hearing amongst those who had endured the difficulties of the later Communist years. Voinovich was frequently incensed by people's expectations that he should be grateful to have his citizenship and apartment restored,⁶⁶ and was insulted at being asked to pay to attend a conference of Russian émigrés in Moscow.⁶⁷ Sometimes he was able to turn the tables on the critics by promising to make them feature in his next works, but he was far from indifferent to their criticism.⁶⁸ In an interview in 1987 he stated that for a new writer objective criticism is necessary and helpful but for the established writer it is no longer relevant, and in any case it is not for him but for other critics to answer negative assessments of his work.⁶⁹

Not all the critics were united in their censure of Voinovich, N. Ivanova presenting a picture of complicated lives lived in difficult times by people not clearly divided into the categories of heroes and villains, those who left and those who stayed, those who spoke out and those who remained silent.⁷⁰

I. Vasiuchenko, writing in 1989, commented on the irritation betrayed by some critics towards foreign Slavonic scholars and Russian admirers of Voinovich who, they believe, praise him simply to spite those who made him leave.⁷¹ Vasiuchenko additionally quoted D. Urnov who had commented that Voinovich's reputation had actually risen in proportion to the criticism levelled against him, achieving the reverse effect of what was intended.⁷² This phenomenon was noted, incidentally, in *Shapka*, where the best hats go not to the uncriticised 'loyal'

⁶⁶ 'Otrezannyi lomot'', pp.7-8.

⁶⁷ 'Ei, uvazhaemyi', *Moskovskie novosti*, 4 August 1991, p.16.

⁶⁸ Appendix A, p.A6.

⁶⁹ 'Interv'iu s Vladimirom Voinovichem', interview by Aleksander Glezer, *Strelets*, 1 (1988), 24-30 (pp.24-25).

⁷⁰ N. Ivanova, 'Tragediia predannosti i ee komediia', *Ogonek*, 21 (1989), 9-11.

⁷¹ I. Vasiuchenko, 'Chtia vozhdia i armeiskii ustav', *Znamia*, 10 (1989), 214-216.

⁷² D. Urnov, 'Plokhaia proza', *Literaturnaia gazeta*, 8 February 1989, pp.4-5.

writers, but to those who have gained international recognition as a result of internal criticism.

Gennadii Murikov, musing in 1991 on the possibility that Voinovich had left the Soviet Union because of the circumstances of *Ivan'kiada*, supposed that he must have chosen to keep a home in Germany for similarly materialistic reasons, and invited the reader to consider whether this 'Voinovich, the passionate denouncer of Stalinism [. . .] and in general of the ideology of totalitarianism [. . .] thinks only of sausage and a new apartment and whether he is inclined to measure even the meaning of existence in terms of such vital blessings'.⁷³

Further censure came from S. Kulichkin, who, reviewing the wave of forgotten literature coming to light under *glasnost*, criticised Voinovich for suggesting that the people may have deserved the hardships they endured. Although it could be argued on Voinovich's behalf that the satire of *Chonkin* is directed far more against the administrators and bureaucrats than it is against the peasants, Kulichkin nevertheless demanded to know whether the people, deceived and ignorant, were really supposed to bear guilt for what happened, and asked where writers such as Voinovich were at the time. These writers, he alleged, want only to show the people how stupidly and badly they lived, targeting Russian chauvinism, the KGB, the state and the army in their writing. He added that Voinovich in *Chonkin* mocks the very same army which saved the world from the fascist plague and continues to defend the Motherland.⁷⁴

In some measure, the charge that Voinovich and others wanted to reproach people for the way they had lived was justified. Speaking in 1991 of his desire to participate in the new Russia, he claimed not to be so naive as to imagine that a book could convince people of how wrongly they had lived, but nevertheless he hoped that the message would eventually penetrate, like water wearing away a stone.⁷⁵

Much of Voinovich's work is concerned with the imperative to speak and

⁷³ Murikov, p.146.

⁷⁴ S. Kulichkin, 'Chisti pered nashim narodom', *V mire knig*, 8 (1989), 15-20 (p.15).

⁷⁵ 'Iz russkoi literatury ia ne uezzhal nikuda', p.258.

act truthfully, and his most successful characters have been able to do this without reference to others. But Voinovich does not share Chonkin's naiveté, and his reaction at this sensitive time was to answer any criticism by energetically demonstrating his side of the story. He admitted to having been occasionally mistaken but claimed never to have been deliberately dishonest, his chief complaint over the incident at the Metropol' being not simply the poisoning but the doubts which the improbability of the story raised about his veracity.⁷⁶

Eventually Voinovich's claim to be heard bore fruit. His official voice was restored to him when he was readmitted to the Writers' Union in 1992, with apologies from some members for past persecutions, and a wry comment from Chernichenko that at least the troubles of the Soviet years had given Voinovich invaluable material for his satire.⁷⁷

Engagement with Politics

Historically Russia has been given to long periods of stagnation broken by sweeping revolutionary movements within which the independent writer has held a position of respect, though fraught with political danger, as oracle, prophet, conscience of the people or social engineer. His influence has come precisely from his autonomy, as he expresses what he sees from the side without direct participation. Involvement with the power structures has earned him the epithet of 'court poet', and the satirist in particular has had most to lose by aligning himself with the state.

In the turbulent closing decade of the twentieth century the position of the Russian writer has changed dramatically as the censorship of the market place has replaced the censorship of the state and as society has found its own pluralist voice. At the same time political events in the old empire have invited at least comment if not active interference by the intelligentsia, and the borders between politics, journalism and literature have become blurred. It is little wonder then that writers,

⁷⁶ 'Delo no. 34840', *Znamia*, p.97.

⁷⁷ 'Pisatel'skii bilet nomer 06414', *Knizhnoe obozrenie*, 21 February 1992, p.2.

and particularly those who kept their counsel in emigration, have found it difficult to remain detached from the debate.

At the turn of the 1990s Voinovich spoke frequently of the irreversible process which was leading towards democracy,⁷⁸ that 'mode of natural existence' under which 'different social, national, class groups (as well as the individual) can have their own goals or none at all', creating 'the normal conditions for the development of society and the individual'.⁷⁹ Soon, however, the process of democratisation began to appear slightly less inevitable and Voinovich commented that it is easier 'to attract people to order and strength than to democracy' which is 'the competition of the most energetic' and which may need to be defended by tanks when moral pressure proves ineffectually slow.⁸⁰

By 1992 he felt the need, although not the desire, to take a direct part in the political drama, rather than trying to influence life 'purely by artistic means', since Russia was 'at a most critical historical moment'.⁸¹ He called above all for compromise,⁸² but his heart was not in the struggle as it was when his was one of the few voices broadcasting from abroad. 'Lots of people', he declared, 'are now saying what only we were saying at one time, and moreover they are saying it truthfully and with talent. Therefore I want to get back to my books.'⁸³ The following year he restated his belief that the artist should distance himself from involvement in politics, suggesting that if he had given the order to fire on the White House he would no longer feel able to write, and questioning whether Vaclav Havel would be able to write a good play whilst also being President.⁸⁴

By 1994 he was vacillating between concentrating on his writing and being drawn into politics in defence of the rights of Russians in independent republics, suggesting that writers should be invited to work in the Supreme Soviet since the

⁷⁸ 'Na pyl'nykh tropinkakh dalekikh planet', p.29.

⁷⁹ 'Iz russkoi literatury ia ne uezzhal nikuda', p.257.

⁸⁰ 'Idoly smutnogo vremeni', pp.46-47.

⁸¹ 'Potomstvennyi dissident', p.8.

⁸² 'U nas eshche v zapase chetyrnadtsat' minut', p.31.

⁸³ 'Vsia sotssistema vyrosla na vtorichnom produkte'.

⁸⁴ 'Ne doveriat' druz'iam pozornee, chem byt' imi obmanutym', interview by A. Borin, *Moskovskii obozrevatel*, 10 December 1993, pp.21-23.

individual can influence the whole.⁸⁵ With the start of the war in Chechnia he was again drawn into the political debate, stating that although he was 'not unconditionally opposed to the use of force', nevertheless it 'should be used in a measured way and intelligently against bearers of evil, and not against everyone'.⁸⁶

In an interview in 1996 he stated that political and artistic thought are incompatible since the politician is constrained by the consequences of decisions but the writer must be governed by moral principles, not by calculation or expediency.⁸⁷ Voinovich has continued to deny that any purpose can be served by involvement in politics,⁸⁸ saying that although at one time he had thought that writers should participate in politics because they still hold moral authority in some countries, in the end their reputations are sullied.⁸⁹ Yet he still stands by his utopian vision first expressed in 'Sila protiv nasiliia',⁹⁰ calling for universal laws enforced by an international security force.⁹¹

The Future of Russian Literature

The traditional Russian reverence for the literary classics and the study of patterns of history may be in part what made the Soviet experiment possible. Andrew Baruch Wachtel writes of the persistent Russian attitude to the past which views it as a means of understanding and prophesying the future, which in its utopian form makes an engaging subject.⁹² Perhaps it was the willingness of the Soviet people to defer gratification until the dawn of a bright future which allowed socialist realism to take so stubborn a hold on official artistic activity that it almost

⁸⁵ 'Nesekretnoe "delo" Vladimira Voinovicha', interview by O. Martinenko, *Moskovskie novosti*, 6 (1994), 52-53.

⁸⁶ 'Opiat' vlezli', *Moskovskie novosti*, 66 (1994), 5.

⁸⁷ Appendix A, p.A12.

⁸⁸ Appendix A, p.A13.

⁸⁹ Appendix A, p.A13.

⁹⁰ 'Sila protiv nasiliia', p.3.

⁹¹ Appendix A, p.A14.

⁹² Andrew Baruch Wachtel, *An Obsession with History* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1994).

stifled creativity, human values and a host of rich cultural traditions. Voinovich remains in no doubt about the moral worth of official Soviet literature, claiming that although it was supposed to educate the reader in principles and bravery, it taught people only how to betray each other. Looking to the future he expresses the hope, possibly utopian in the light of Baruch Wachtel's analysis, that if literature upholding human values is introduced it might lead to the moral healing of society.⁹³

With the advent of *glasnost*, Russian literature was for a while absorbed in analysing a recently discovered past apparently divided into black and white, good and evil, totalitarianism and dissidence. Socialist realist literature had always assumed a strong ideological position, and in the new environment many writers were initially unwilling to relinquish their moral and aesthetic positions to create literature for its own sake. However, as it became clear that a utopian future was an unlikely outcome for all but the most entrepreneurial minority, the readers' interest in ruminating on the past was rapidly transformed into an avid hunger for either hard facts or escapist fiction. In 1992 Zinik described the new Russia as 'allergic to everything which smacks even mildly of political ideology', adding that the new-found freedom of writers and intellectuals has resulted in them becoming 'morally as well as literally unemployed'.⁹⁴

At the same time, an opportunity had been created by *glasnost* for many works which had been effectively frozen to emerge and make their impact retrospectively, since there is a sense in which the influence of writing does not have to be experienced chronologically. Voinovich suggests that in literature 'there is no past tense. In it, if someone was once a poet, then he is still a poet'.⁹⁵

The critic Roman Arbitman, writing in the early 1990s about literature, makes claims about its ability in the dialogue between writer and reader to link disparate elements and to build bridges joining 'literature to politics, the past to the

⁹³ 'Kul'tura: lichnoe mnenie', *Nedel'ia*, 25 (1989), 22.

⁹⁴ Zinovii Zinik, 'Becoming Bulgakov', *The Times Literary Supplement*, 11 December 1992, p.21.

⁹⁵ 'Tri portreta', p.190.

present, the anecdote and fantasy to reality'.⁹⁶ Within this enduring relationship, suggests Aleksandr Ageev, the most fruitful but dangerous form of communication occurs when the writer challenges the reader by saying something new which the latter finds hard to believe.⁹⁷ Literature, he concludes, also provides release from fear by inspiring laughter, thereby freeing the reader from the subconscious ties of unthinking faith and from the power of the past.⁹⁸ In the light of these widely-accepted views of the written word, Voinovich is able to refute the damage which some claim is done to a writer and his work by exile, and to state that 'there is one Russian literature. It belongs to Russian culture, and in some cases to world culture'.⁹⁹

The role of the writer in Russian society has been an important one both historically and traditionally, since, as Zinik points out, the writer holds sway over tyrants and is regarded by the people as god-like and prophetic.¹⁰⁰ In post-*perestroika* Russia, Solzhenitsyn's suggested view of the writer as a second government is undoubtedly under threat,¹⁰¹ but even at the end of the eighties the critic Genrikh Mitin claimed that 'the Russian artist was always more than an artist, he was and remains the conscience of his nation'.¹⁰² Voinovich views conscience as a personal matter, but perhaps Salman Rushdie's definition that 'one of the things a writer is for is to say the unsayable, to speak the unspeakable, to ask difficult questions' would elicit his agreement.¹⁰³

What the future holds for Russian literature at the turn of the century has yet to be seen. Voinovich had looked forward to a flowering of literature under *perestroika*, but his expectations have so far been disappointed. He sees readers looking for lightweight books to distract and amuse them in difficult times, and

⁹⁶ Roman Arbitman, 'Otvety mogut byt' raznymi: po stranitsam zhurnala *Iskusstvo kino*', *Literaturnoe obozrenie*, 10 (1990), 60-65.

⁹⁷ Aleksandr Ageev, 'Prevratnosti dialoga', *Znamia*, 4 (1990), 213-222 (p.213).

⁹⁸ Ageev, p.216.

⁹⁹ 'Ia dushevno pripisan k Rossii', p.7.

¹⁰⁰ Zinovii Zinik, 'Samoderzhavie literatury', *Literaturnaia gazeta*, 16 June 1993, p.5.

¹⁰¹ Solzhenitsyn, *The First Circle*, p.436.

¹⁰² Genrikh Mitin, 'Khochu byt' chestnym?', *Teatr*, 8 (1989), 135-139 (p.139).

¹⁰³ Barbie Dutter and Ian Black, 'Rushdie Comes out of Hiding', *Guardian Weekly*, 17 September 1995, p.9.

perceives the status of writers falling sharply with the decline in literary interest. With his eclectic background, Voinovich has a keen appreciation of the enduring value and influence of the written word, and an awareness that 'the longevity of verse depends not on the number of its readers, but on its quality'.¹⁰⁴ The status of writers in the new Russia contrasts sharply with their often undeservedly elevated position in Soviet times. Their status may not have been reflected in their remuneration, but they enjoyed special privileges and because they were seen as the conscience of the people they were consulted on every possible matter, expected to act as lawyer, judge, priest, psychiatrist, prophet and sexual expert. Now horizons are broader, travel is possible, churches are open, enlightenment is offered in many forms, and Western pulp fiction fills the shelves. The Russian people no longer look for answers in books, hence the sharp decline in interest in literature.¹⁰⁵ Furthermore, the life experiences of writers have become more international as they are able to select their influences from world literature rather than being restricted to sources made available by the state.¹⁰⁶ The role of the intelligentsia has also been diminished since, far from playing a significant role in society, the former Soviet intelligentsia has been unmasked and, according to Voinovich, is now regarded with contempt and pity, unable to compete in a commercial environment.¹⁰⁷

With *glasnost* the dynamic between the people, the state and the writer changed. The satirist was no longer necessarily diametrically opposed to the state and no longer spoke for certain elements of the people whilst trying to enlighten and chastise others. General satire of humankind still had a place in literature, but specifically political satire lost some of its piquancy with the granting of permission, depriving the progressive writer of his heroic international status and the reactionary writer of his splendid rewards, be they deer-skin hats or dachas. Censorship becomes commercially driven, and writers have to write what the readers want to read if they are to make a living.

¹⁰⁴ 'Tri portreta', p.188.

¹⁰⁵ Appendix A, p.A6.

¹⁰⁶ 'Lirik zhizni', interview by Ch. Shevelev, *Nezavisimaia gazeta*, 29 February 1996, p.7.

¹⁰⁷ Appendix A, p.A7.

In an article for the *Guardian* in 1992 Voinovich commented on the new market economy in Moscow, saying: 'Everyone is hugely greedy for the money and totally unwilling to earn it. People defend themselves against the customer offering them money as if he were an enemy.'¹⁰⁸ This may have been true of service industries, but in the field of literature different rules applied, and a new problem had arisen for the Russian satirist. In the past, readers had enjoyed satire because they felt superior to targeted elements of the system, but in the new Russia, with its philosophy of every man for himself, people ceased to identify clearly with a particular stratum of society. The changes which had taken place seemed irreversible, but Voinovich commented in 1989 that no parallels could be drawn with the Revolution, because in the new order people had become far more cynical. In 1917, with a new ideology and seemingly inexhaustible resources, the people were full of enthusiasm and were ready to kill millions if necessary, but in the new Russia economic reform became the driving force.¹⁰⁹ In an entrepreneurial society few enjoyed the leisure or the emotional and ideological security to read satire, since former divisions had melted away and a new polarisation was taking place based on different values. Furthermore, the popular targets of satire were no longer sacred cows, and political or religious leaders could be targeted without fear of retribution, at least for the time being. Other potential targets of satire, such as the Russian mafia, carry their own deterrents to the satirist.

Looking back on the Soviet years from the perspective of 1992 Voinovich wrote: 'I specialise in shooting at stationary targets. How good it was during the years of stagnation: you could choose any subject and describe it for a year, for two years - and it would not move from its place.'¹¹⁰ Life may have been simpler with forbidden static targets to shoot at, but the subtleties of Soviet satire, written to confuse the censor whilst being intelligible to an informed intellectual elite, were labour-intensive both for writer and reader and have found no place in a market-driven world of publishing.

¹⁰⁸ 'Have a Miserable Day', *Guardian*, 15 May 1992, p.19.

¹⁰⁹ 'Staraius' sokhranit' sebia', pp.132-133.

¹¹⁰ 'Intellektual'nyi peizazh - 92. Klad pod sosnoi', pp.22-23.

It has been a similar story for serious writers within the old ideological order. A younger author than Voinovich, Alexander Terekhov, having barely begun his career in the Soviet era but having been trained in the traditional role of influencing society, expressed his disorientation in similar terms to Voinovich, lamenting the lack of direction in new Russian literature and the improbability of ever being published in the remaining 'thick' literary journals: 'I am like an arrow that was let go, and then the target was taken away [. . .] We were flung in this direction. And it turned out, we weren't needed by anyone'.¹¹¹ Many writers of the *glasnost*' years, both new and old, had to adapt their writing to inform about the new order or to entertain a harassed and confused population adjusting to the demands of making their millions or merely making ends meet. This is perhaps why Voinovich, with his keen awareness of the contemporary reader, has turned both to philosophy in 'Zamysel' and to entertainment in 'Novye russkie', offering an explanation of current reality whilst simultaneously drawing its sting.

Voinovich acknowledged that certain groups of writers had lost or gained prominence with *perestroika*, leading to literary competitiveness. In his view the 'village prose' writers had found their supremacy challenged and had turned to nationalism and imperialistic ambition to compensate for their lost status.¹¹² For a while the works of the *shestidesiatniki* became fashionable, but Voinovich told of meeting Moscow school pupils who spoke of them slightly as an outdated homogeneous group of no relevance. In response he argued that although they are of a similar age they are yet different, and not all of them waited until the Twentieth Party Congress to have their eyes opened, his grandmother having made many things clear to him long before that.¹¹³ In the new literary environment criticism has also been levelled at the older generation of émigré writers for not having stayed to oppose the system in the Soviet Union, and their motives have been called into question.¹¹⁴

¹¹¹ D. Hoffman, 'Russia Sidelines its Writers', *Washington Post*, in *Guardian Weekly*, 5 November 1995, p.17.

¹¹² 'Iz russkoi literatury ia ne uezzhal nikuda', p.258.

¹¹³ 'Shestidesiatniki devianostykh', interview by M. Starush, *Rossia*, 3 (1992), 12.

¹¹⁴ Ivanova, p.11.

Voinovich describes Russian history as an overfull bus, from which people are pushed to make way for newcomers.¹¹⁵ Indeed the difficulty of finding space in the literary milieu was a widely-acknowledged problem for those who returned fully or partially, whose presence and works many would have dismissed as irrelevant to the processes of change in the new Russia. Even those who had stayed and whose writing had been obscured for decades found that, with the brief window of opportunity in the early years of *glasnost* when previously hidden works became available, their works were competing with those of new authors. The problem of finding room for writers of all generations was highlighted by Voinovich in relation to the 1994 Russian Booker Prize, for which he was a juror. When faced with works of equal quality, he admitted the difficulty of assessing them simply on their merits when he was also aware of the authors' age and status: at times he was tempted to give special support to the young, or to allow the elderly but previously unknown their moment of glory, whilst trying to avoid judging established writers more exactingly because of his higher expectations.¹¹⁶

The Fool, Galileo and Voinovich

The fool of the European tradition, that is the pure player and guardian of an honourable tradition of truth-sayers rather than the jester in the pay of the king, could be said to share some characteristics with Chonkin, Galileo and Voinovich. But only to a degree. The fool, as described by Welsford, may be able to ask: 'What do slaps matter to the man whose body is of indiarubber', but even the 'inviolable person' of the sentry is damaged by the battery of blows which he endures, even if he appears to shrug them off. Stupid Galileo in old age may have the moral victory, but he is broken, lonely and penniless. The conclusions which the reader draws from his tragedy are bitter and unmediated by any comment from Voinovich in the text. It is hard not to conclude that Galileo's recognition of futility can only be interpreted as the anguished cry of his author, a man with time no

¹¹⁵ 'Shestidesiatniki devianostykh', p.12.

¹¹⁶ 'Ia byl ves' v kolebaniakh', *Literaturnaia gazeta*, 11 January 1995, p.4.

longer on his side craving reintegration into the ferment of life and ideas in his native land. After all, an astronomer can while away his declining years in stargazing but a prophet unrespected in his own country can find few uses for his talents.

Voinovich, born into conditions which provided him with rich satirical material, has found to his cost that being slapped comes with the job, and although in the perspective of literary history *Chonkin* has been the means of turning the tables for Voinovich, on a personal level the writer has been damaged. Slaps may not matter to the indiarubber fool but to the flesh and blood writer, however great his initial self-confidence and versatility, they matter and they cost dear.

An additional complication for Voinovich lies in his partial return home. The fool knows the truth because, like the satirist, he stands aside from his society. As Voinovich has moved from the marginalisation of full-time emigration towards engagement with his society his writing has had to change. In order for Chonkin to claim his fairy-tale reward he emigrates to the West, where he gains much but loses the power to communicate with his beloved Niura. Voinovich has maintained communication with his beloved Russian reader but has had to summon up all his reserves of versatility to do so, and in the process has quelled his satirical impulse. It may be that once a satirist literally and emotionally returns home he identifies himself with the society which he formerly satirised and no longer keeps the necessary distance to practise that particular craft.

Ivan-durachok miraculously gets even with his enemies, but both Chonkin's and Voinovich's fates have been to find communication with their friends compromised by history, and their enemies metamorphosing to evade them. In the last decade the very power which Voinovich opposed has cunningly transmogrified itself into a system apparently willing to foster a nascent democracy, and as such it claims his support, not his censure.

The declared *zamysel* of Voinovich's life has been to be a writer, and this he has without question fulfilled wherever and whenever, whatever the circumstances. Yet the borderlands between life and literature, fact and fantasy in which the bow-

legged sentry, the star-gazer and the writer move are so fantastic that their meeting has irrevocably changed their lives. Chonkin, it seems, is doomed to an eternity of wandering down forking paths leading to Kolyma, Germany or Ohio but always away from his love in Krasnoe. And Voinovich, exiled for a decade on account of the little soldier yet quite unable to redeem him, returns home wondering whether his has been the fate of stupid Galileo, and thinking of how things might have been different. He may feel that he took the only choices open to him, but in 1993 he commented regretfully: 'If I was offered the chance to be born again and to choose the time and place, I would have liked to be born in America in the mid-thirties. I never wanted to live the life I have lived here.'¹¹⁷

Yet he has lived it according to his own *zamyсел*, and is faced now with yet another challenge in a commercial world with no more taboos to break nor targets at which to shoot.

The Future for Voinovich

Having lived through emigration, and after a laborious reintegration into the new Russia, Voinovich in 1992 expressed himself tired of fighting, and ready rather to 'write about the riddle of man, not society'.¹¹⁸ This change of focus was entirely natural since his lifetime's work of challenging his readers to maintain their individuality was now set within a society willing to accept any expression of personal identity. He was not alone in feeling the need for change, as writers at the opposite end of the spectrum who had maintained the socialist realist stance to the end also struggled 'to cope with the ruins of a universe once entirely populated by Good and Evil figures'.¹¹⁹ After decades of having been unpublishable in his homeland, it is depressing to note that one of Voinovich's most immediate problems under the new dispensation is not that of finding readers but that of

¹¹⁷ 'Liubliu zhizn' v epokhu reform', p.16.

¹¹⁸ Igor' Zolotusskii, 'Grustnye razgovory v pustoi kvartire', *Literaturnaia gazeta*, 22 April 1992, p.5.

¹¹⁹ John Lloyd, 'Aphrodite Bends Over Stalin', *London Review of Books*, 4 April 1996, pp.10-13 (p.10).

making a living and trying to limit pirated publications of his works.¹²⁰

On the question of whether it is still possible to be a satirist in the new Russia, he comments that there are even more grounds for satire than in Soviet times, since aspects of life which were hidden before have now been brought to light. But the new Russia offers fewer sacred cows to the satirist's kicks and blows than formerly, since to be a sacred cow a figure must be inviolable and surrounded by secrecy and mystery, and with the new freedom of the media such characters hardly exist.¹²¹ Thus the process of democratisation has given new themes with one hand, while taking them away with the other.

¹²⁰ 'Avtor v piratskom more', interview by Georgii Elin, *Literaturnaia gazeta*, 30 November 1994, p.6.

¹²¹ Appendix A, p.A9.

CONCLUSION

Voinovich's life has involved an almost constant process of challenge and adaptation, and his early circumstances were not such as to suggest for him a probable future career as an internationally renowned writer. At the age of ten months he narrowly escaped being eaten during the Ukrainian famine,¹²² by thirteen he had experienced separation from each of his parents in turn, had known real physical hardship and had moved five times within the Soviet Union. He received little formal education and from the ages of twelve to twenty-four he was engaged in manual work. However, he had been brought up with a love of literature, and in his late teens, whilst on military service, he began to write poetry whilst simultaneously catching up on his education. Subsequently denied entry to the Gor'kii Literary Institute, but undeterred, he moved to Moscow determined to seek recognition as a writer, and seized opportunities as they came along until his first work was published. Initial success in writing an inspirational Socialist Realist song might have seduced some into producing more of the same, but Voinovich had seen real life, had observed the disparity between the myth and reality, and chose instead to turn his pen to realism.

At this point his internalised state of ideological exile began to manifest itself in his work as he mentally distanced himself from his society the better to observe it objectively. His writing soon began to reflect an ironic awareness of the real state of affairs, and as his observations proved increasingly unacceptable to the literary establishment, he became progressively alienated from it and it from him. Unauthorised publication abroad of *Chonkin* in 1969 proved a turning point, forcing him into a state of chronological exile as he found himself held responsible for the untimely expression of satirical thoughts on the absurd world of Soviet bureaucracy. Threats to his life and family, stress and ill health then led to his geographical exile to a country whose language he did not speak.

At this juncture some might have given up and chosen a different path, or at least sought support through integration into a local Russian-speaking community.

¹²² 'Zamysel', p.29.

But this Voinovich did not do, and after a period of adjustment he again took up his pen and continued to write for his readers in Russia with remarkable versatility, working his way through a variety of genres and themes in an attempt to stay in touch with a changing reality.

With the possibility of return to Russia, he made repeated attempts to reintegrate and rehabilitate himself, suffering frequent setbacks. Now he commits himself to spending a considerable part of his life in transit between his family in Germany and his audience in Russia, still writing, and facing the contemporary challenges of a declining public interest in literature and the new censorship of the market place.

The intellectual, political and economic uncertainties of the era make the way ahead for Russian literature unclear, but it seems unlikely that the potential indifference of Russian readers in the nineties will succeed in deterring Voinovich from writing where the freezes of the Soviet years and the tribulations of emigration failed. The question arises, however, of exactly how Voinovich's writing will develop without the system of prohibitions provided by Communism, and what will become of him as a person and player in this new and different expanse.¹²³

Perhaps the answer lies in his recent reinvention of himself as a 'young artist' - a creator in a different genre.¹²⁴ His first visit to a gallery came at the age of twenty-four so exposure to the visual arts was minimal during his formative years, and painting signals a new departure for him. He still considers writing his

¹²³ Zolotonosov, p.18.

¹²⁴ Vladimir Voinovich, 'Osenniaia liubov'', exhibition brochure (Moscow: Vagrius, 1996).

Владимир Войнович - молодой художник. Ему недавно исполнилось только 64 года. В детстве, лет приблизительно сорок, он занимался литературой и достиг на этом поприще некоторых успехов. Его книги издавались много раз на разных языках и немалыми тиражами. Но он всегда чувствовал, что в нем пропадает другой талант. Недавно он этот талант в себе обнаружил к большой радости для себя и адекватному огорчению своих близких.

Близкие советовали ему зарыть новый талант в землю (им хватало и старого), но он этого делать не стал. В доме запахло красками, скипидаром и стало довольно тесно. Раньше было проще. Раньше все рукописи, плод сорокалетних усилий, легко умещались где-нибудь под кроватью, а книгам хватало места на полках. А тут - мольберт, кисти, куски картона, оргалита, холсты, подрамники, рамы, рамки, банки и краски на полотне, на брюках, на полу.

Свое новое увлечение наш живописец сравнивает с нахлынувшей внезапно любовью, которой, как установлено, покорны все возрасты.
München 1996 Москва 1996

‘primary profession’,¹²⁵ but his new enthusiasm for drawing and painting in the style of the *shestidesiatniki*, using whatever materials come to hand, allows for expression unmediated by the words which have cost him so dear throughout his career. In a conversation after an exhibition of his art works in November 1996 he remarked with some surprise that there had been little or no criticism of his paintings, such as he had come to expect with his writing.¹²⁶ This could possibly be because his pictorial art poses no threat to contemporary Russia, whereas his writing nearly always has; and perhaps the endlessly creative and versatile Voinovich has, like Chonkin, made his escape from the scene of battle without compromising his instinctive imperative to express himself.

¹²⁵ Fax to R. Farmer, trans. mine, 5 June 1997. ‘I have had another exhibition in Moscow, but now I am hoping to return to my primary profession (k osnovnoi professii), even if only for a short while.’

¹²⁶ Telephone conversation with R. Farmer, January 1997.

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This bibliography lists firstly works written by Vladimir Voinovich, then secondary materials relating to his work, and finally background materials. Each list is presented in alphabetical order and consists of works cited in this study, and of relevant works consulted but not cited.

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Zhizn’ i neobychnyye prikliucheniia soldata Ivana Chonkina, Director Jiri Menzel.

From a screenplay by Zdenek Sverek. Produced by Eric Abraham. Co-produced by Katya Krausova. Portobello Pictures in association with MK2 (France), Canal + (France), La Sept Cinéma (France), CNC (France), Fandango (Italy), Kable + and Studio 89/KF (Czech Republic), Trite (Russia), Channel Four (UK), and the European Co-production Fund (1995)

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INTERVIEW WITH VLADIMIR VOINOVICH**NOTTINGHAM, 19 MARCH 1996****R. FARMER**

Владимир Николаевич, как влияет на ваше творчество то, что раньше вы были не только писателем, но и перепробовали много других профессий? Ваша биография складывалась так, что вы были в гуще народа. Потом вы стали только писателем, и писателем живущим не только в России, но и в Германии, оторванным от той жизни, о которой вы писали. Как все эти обстоятельства отражались на развитии вашего творчества, и на вашем самоощущении как писателя?

Если говорить о моём жизненном опыте предыдущем до писательства, я бы сказал, в нём есть и положительные и отрицательные стороны, потому что, конечно, это очень важно для меня знать ту жизнь, о которой я пишу. Я узнал жизнь фактически всех слоёв советского общества, потому что начал жизнь с самого низа. Я работал в колхозе, был рабочим, солдатом - это самый нижний слой, и потом выше, выше, и кончая слоем чуть ли не самых высших по положению, но не по уровню, не по моральным качествам людей в Советском Союзе. Конечно, отрицательная сторона моего жизненного опыта состоит в том, что я фактически не получил никакого образования, и всё, что есть во мне, это самообразование. А оно не может быть полноценным, потому что есть очень много вещей, которые люди в школе изучали, а я не изучал, поэтому мне писать сначала было очень трудно. Сейчас в Замысле я пишу о том, что когда я приехал в Москву я совершенно ничего не знал. Я читал литературу, это всё-таки было моё образование, но когда я увидел, сколько люди знают о литературе, и не только о литературе, но по теории литературы, я просто испугался и думал, раз я ничего не знаю, то мне вообще в литературе, может быть, делать нечего. Но я решил продолжать. Так что мой жизненный опыт был, конечно, очень полезен. Что касается

моей жизни вне Советского Союза, то первые три года я пережил тяжёлый шок, потому что не ожидал отъезда, морально не готовился. Дело в том, что люди, которые готовились, которые думали «Вот, я уеду» они, может быть, это легче переживали, а я не думал, поэтому пережил шок. Но всё-таки, может быть сказалось то, что, во-первых мои предки были эмигранты, во-вторых, мои родители всегда путешествовали внутри Советского Союза. Я родился в Душанбе, потом жил на Украине, в разных частях России, в Крыму. И это сказалось на том, что в конце концов я понял, что могу жить везде и что я вообще, наверно, больше космополит, чем я раньше думал. А что касается отрыва такого как бы культурного, то его собственно и не было, потому что жизнь эмигрантов сегодняшних очень отличается от жизни эмигрантов двадцатых, тридцатых годов. Когда они покинули Россию, они её покинули навсегда и жили в полном отрыве от неё, в полной изоляции, у них информации достаточно не было о России, и кроме того, они покинули одну Россию, а потом стала уже другая Россия. А тут я Советский Союз покинул, но советская власть оставалась и советскую жизнь я знал довольно хорошо и мне этого хватало. Если бы советская власть осталась, то мне бы хватило на всю мою жизнь. И кроме того, железный занавес был уже не плотный, и приезжали люди, с которыми можно было общаться и какую-то переписку я всё-таки вёл, не официально, не по почте, а через кого-то. Всё-таки очень много людей ездили в Россию, они встречались с моими друзьями, а своим старшим детям и некоторым друзьям я звонил по телефону, так что какое-то общение было. Поэтому отрыв был не полный. И вот наступила незнакомая жизнь, в связи с перестройкой начались всякие перемены и даже некоторые сюрпризы, которые надо было бы видеть и вот я их, частично, видел.

Какие у вас литературные корни?

Какие у меня литературные корни? Вообще у меня в роду были

некоторые писатели, но я их не знал. Дело в том, что мой отец был журналист и также писатель, но писатель он был не состоявшийся, то есть он писал, а его никто не печатал. Но всё-таки иногда стихи какие-то его были напечатаны, также переводы некоторые с сербо-хорватского, так что семья была очень литературная. Мама моя была учителем математики, но она читала у нас больше всех, она читала больше отца, меня и сестры вместе взятых. Так что литература была важной частью нашей жизни, и даже может быть самой важной, потому что мы вообще жили очень много времени в провинции, и там у нас не было доступа к другим сферам культурным. Там, где я жил, не было художественной галереи, и я ни разу не видел выставки живописи до двадцати четырёх лет. В двадцать четыре года, когда я приехал в Москву, я пошёл в Третьяковскую галерею, и там первый раз увидел собрание живописи. Я никогда не слышал оперы, я никогда не видел балета, драматических спектаклей я видел несколько в своей жизни, в основном я смотрел фильмы, но литература занимала самое большое место в моей жизни. В некоторых местах, где мы жили, не было даже фильмов, значит оставалась только литература. Так что литература стала моим единственным образованием. Одно время я жил без родителей у тёти, но тётя моя была очень культурная женщина, её формальное образование не было значительным, но литература играла очень большую роль в её жизни, как и в моей. Я очень мало знаю про деда моего, но мой прадед был моряком, капитаном дальнего плавания, и его отец и его дед также были моряками. Мой дед тоже не получил образования, три поколения нашей семьи не получили настоящего образования: мой дед, мой отец и я, а вот дети мои уже получили. Вот что я знаю про моего деда. В детстве он заикался и поэтому отказался ходить в школу, и его родители чуть не выгнали из дому, и он работал на станции весовщиком, но при этом это всё-таки была интеллигентная семья. Бабушка моя, его жена, была учительницей в школе, и очевидно литература играла в их семье большую роль. И теперь немного о моих

родственников. Например, брат моего деда Драгомир написал книгу, «История сербского народа», то есть в его семье тоже была интеллигентная атмосфера. И в корнях ещё раньше был довольно дальний родственник, крупный писатель сербский, это Иво Войнович, прозаик и драматург. Вот такие корни.

И какие писатели влияли на развитие вашего творчества?

Я думаю, что для литературы всегда очень важно - чтоб были старшие живущие писатели, которые нравятся, которые могли бы быть примером, но дело в том, что когда моё поколение входило в литературу у нас таких писателей не было. Старшие писатели это были те, которых я не уважал, а о существовании таких писателей как Платонов или Булгаков - я просто не знал. Поэтому на некоторых влияла более или менее современная иностранная литература, например Хемингуей, Салинджер, особенно одна повесть «Над пропастью во ржи» оказала колоссальное влияние на молодое поколение. С одной стороны были авторы, которые подражали переводной литературе, подражали не только писателям но и переводчикам. А с другой стороны, я и другие учились у русской классики, и например моими главными учителями стали Гоголь и Чехов.

Вы, как Лев Толстой, писали о войне, и было бы интересно узнать, видите ли вы некоторое сходство вашего осмысления истории и его, и вашего изображения героя и его.

Ну, это трудно сказать. Вы знаете, что Толстой на меня тоже конечно влиял, но всё-таки я оказался ближе к другому направлению литературы. А что касается осмысления истории, то Толстой очень серьёзно подошёл к этой теме, а я пишу в комическо-сатирическом плане. То есть немного иной способ осмысления, хотя конечно Толстой где-то пишет, что насморк Наполеона влиял на ход событий,

и я тоже считаю, что ничтожные случаи в жизни руководителя могут влиять на огромные исторические события.

Меня интересует, изменился ли в годы эмиграции адрес ваших произведений? То есть, изменился ли тот круг читателей, которых вы имели в виду, для которых вы писали?

Нет, я бы сказал, пожалуй, что не изменился, потому что для меня читатель, которому я адресую свои книги, это просто воображаемый читатель, а не конкретный. Это читатель, который меня очень понимает, и гораздо лучше понимает, чем, например, мои конкретные друзья. И этот читатель постоянно находится в моём воображении, то есть он во мне и расстаться с ним невозможно.

А для кого вы писали *Антисоветский Советский Союз*?

Антисоветский Советский Союз рассчитан на другой адрес. Во-первых, я не писал специально *Антисоветский Советский Союз*. Когда я начал выступать по радио *Свобода*, постоянно говорили, что «на западе нас не понимают, нас не знают». А я видел, что советские люди сами себя не знают, сами себя не понимают. Они не знают, в какой стране они живут, и что значит всё то, что происходит вокруг них. Это не тот воображаемый читатель, который всё понимает, а как раз наоборот - очень наивный, простой советский человек, который ничего про себя не знает, но хочет знать. Вот, я бы сказал, для кого я писал. То есть сначала я адресовался к советскому читателю, но позже, когда я опубликовал книгу, я пытался объяснить это и западному читателю.

Вы - писатель-сатирик по преимуществу, но вы работаете в самых разных жанрах. Есть ли у вас какие-то особые пристрастия, и изменяются ли эти пристрастия с годами? Начнём с сатирика. Я всегда это звание неохотно принимал, потому

что я начинал с того, что описывал «жизнь как она есть». Многие люди, независимо от того, как они ко мне относились, хорошо или плохо, говорили: «Но это уж слишком, этого не может быть!», и я даже смягчал то, что я видел на самом деле в жизни. И иногда я эту действительность изображал более мягко, чем она существовала, чем я её знал. Поэтому я могу сказать, что сама действительность была сатирическая, и даже сейчас есть, и я её просто описываю как она есть. А людям почему-то кажется, что это сатира, что это гротеск. А позже, когда меня убедили, что я сатирик и я стал иногда даже пробовать быть сатириком, когда я пытался писать специально сатирически и смешно, у меня часто не получалось. У меня получалось только, когда я писал всерьёз. И иногда я даже не понимал, над чем люди смеялись.

Считаете ли вы необходимым для себя отвечать на некоторые обвинения критики вашими последующими произведениями, или в процессе творчества сегодня вы эти критические замечания не учитываете вовсе?

Я бы сказал, что я отвечаю на критику своеобразно. И часто эти критики становятся героями моих последующих произведений. Например, на вопрос генералов, откуда я беру героев, я просто ответил, что «это из жизни, я с вас пишу, это будут сатирические образы». Но поскольку эта критика часто принимает просто карательную форму, она не может оставлять меня равнодушным. И кроме того, когда я начал писать, когда я стал публиковаться, меня иногда просто удивляло, как люди воспринимают литературу, и продолжает удивлять до сих пор, и естественно это отражается на том, что я пишу.

Что вы думаете о сегодняшнем статусе писателя в России, и о роли писателей в сегодняшней переходной ситуации?

Это очень тяжёлый вопрос. Дело в том, что роль писателя в России, и может быть, особенно в Советской России, была сильно преувеличена жизнью и писатель занимал положение, которое он не должен занимать. Но это всегда было и в старой России, и в Советской России, писатель занимал такое положение - единственная как бы фигура, более свободная, чем другие. То есть писатель, во-первых, не ходил на службу, и это было важно для психологии. Кроме того, у писателя была репутация, ложная, незаслуженная им «совести народа», и поэтому многие люди обращались к писателю по всем вопросам. Некоторые приносили ему читать рукопись, жаловались на Советскую власть, другие приходили просто с вопросами. Писатель был и писатель, и судья, и адвокат, и священник, и психиатр, и пророк, и сексолог, и вообще кто угодно, все ходили и обращались к писателю за советом. Сейчас, когда всё открылось и стало относительно свободно, когда открылись церкви, открылась возможность поездки за границу, тогда люди стали понимать, что с некоторыми вопросами надо обращаться не к писателю, а к кому-то другому. Кроме того, интерес к литературе вообще резко упал. Раньше многие люди в книгах искали ответы на свои вопросы, а теперь они знают, что в книгах ответов на вопросы нет, и поэтому люди кинулись читать детективы, порнографию, в общем всякую дрянь, дребедень, которую раньше они не читали. Поэтому звание писателя сейчас ценится очень низко в России. Но и здесь тоже. Но в России может быть сейчас даже ниже, чем здесь.

Вас ни в какой степени не радует то, что происходит в литературной жизни в России сегодня?

Нет, этого я не могу сказать. Я думал, правду сказать, что эти изменения в России принесут большие перемены в литературе, и что эти перемены будут положительны. Я даже предполагал, что очень скоро появятся крупные писатели. Но пока что я этого не вижу. Есть неплохие писатели, но сказать чтобы был какой-то большой всплеск,

этого нет.

Каково, по-вашему, будущее литературы в России?

Я думаю, такое же, как здесь. Она будет как развлекательная литература, а неразвлекательная где-то на задворках. По-моему, в Англии самый главный писатель - Лэ Каррэ. И в России есть такие писатели, например Юлиан Семёнов, и всегда будут, но я лично не поклонник этой литературы. Это вот я думаю будет будущее литературы.

Каково ваше отношение к сегодняшней интеллигенции?

Мне её жалко. Раньше она играла значительную роль в обществе, а теперь когда в обществе происходят перемены, особенно на первом переходном этапе от социализма, люди испытывают к интеллигенции просто смесь таких чувств как презрение и жалость. Потому что вообще интеллигенция, не российская а именно советская, немножко обанкротилась. Люди рассчитывали, что интеллигенция - это возвышенные, честные люди, но эти люди, которые считались властителями дум, оказались никакими, они оказались просто мельче. А кроме того, сейчас появились так называемые люди дела, эти новые русские, нувориши эти, которые знают, где купить, почём продать. И оказывается, что интеллигенты этого не знают, не умеют, и никогда не научатся, и за что их уважать неизвестно.

Вы много сейчас читаете? Читаете современную литературу?

Я бы не сказал, что очень много.

У вас уже было ощущение внутренней эмиграции тогда, когда вы жили ещё постоянно в России?

Имею в виду то, что каждый сатирик, в некоторой степени является изгнанником, ввиду того, что он должен держаться в стороне от официальной версии общества.

Сначала, вас можно было бы считать идеологическим изгнанником, потом в годы эмиграции вы стали и географическим изгнанником, и почти всю творческую жизнь вы, как глупый Галилей, были хронологическим изгнанником. Правда ли?

Да, я думаю, что в общем это правда. Я могу сказать, что иногда мне в своё время хотелось не быть внутренним изгнанником, мне хотелось быть своим в обществе, в котором я существовал, но я ощущал всё время такую чуждость. И я бы даже сказал, что когда я уже вернулся из-за границы, мне очень захотелось быть там своим, но я понял, что я там такой же чужой, что я ещё больше чужой, чем был раньше. Сейчас я там совершенно чужой, я просто живу вне общества, практически, хотя в нём принимаю участие. Например, когда я приехал, через некоторое время я восстановил своё членство в Союзе писателей, но с тех пор там ни разу не был. Как-то я этих людей мало интересую, и они меня мало интересуют, я не живу общей литературной жизнью. Не считая каких-то там «тусовок», когда собираются по поводу издания какой-нибудь книги, бывает, что меня куда-то пригласят, и я прихожу, но и там я чувствую себя чужим. И как-то я имею с ними очень мало общего. Я даже отчасти больше принимаю участие в общественно-политической жизни, но тоже когда доходит до дела, когда я встречаюсь с политиками, например встречался недавно с Явлинским, с Гайдаром, когда доходит до сути, я чувствую, что мне их устремления также непонятны, как и мои им. Так, что всё-равно я оказался чужим, и это может быть будет одна из тем Замысла.

Вы писали, что сатирик, который не вызывает неудовольствия – это не сатирик. И дальше вы считаете, или считали своим делом беспокоить «священных коров». Продолжают ли существовать священные коровы в новой России?

Конечно, да. Нет, меньше, меньше, конечно, меньше. Частично их уже уничтожали, и я тоже постарался! Дело в том, что сейчас также как и в других странах для того, чтобы существовала священная корова, надо чтобы она была действительно неприкасаемая. Например, если взять Солженицына, то этого человека должны во-первых преследовать власти, - тогда возникает образ героя, потому что, когда его преследуют власти, вам неудобно его критиковать, и тогда о нём можно говорить только хорошо, и таким образом человек превращается в священную корову. А когда критиковать можно, тогда трудно создать такой образ. Поэтому возникают эти коровы, но сразу же уничтожаются. Например, Ельцин одно время для людей тоже стал священной коровой, на короткое время, когда он боролся с Горбачёвым, и говорил, что он противник привилегий, что он ходит в дешёвых ботинках, и так далее. Но этот образ быстро исчерпался, и теперь к нему совсем другое отношение. К Солженицыну такое отношение дольше всего держалось, но теперь тоже исчерпалось, потому что, для того чтобы человека воспринимали как священную корову, нужна ещё некоторая таинственность вокруг него. И вокруг Солженицына как раз и была такая таинственность. А когда он поехал в четырёх вагонах по стране и стал говорить о том, что он страдает за народ, но при этом едет в четырёх вагонах - это людей шокировало, потому что в России на это очень неодобрительно смотрят. В России если даже человек просто одет очень хорошо, то это уже шокирует, и если он ездит в дорогом автомобиле - то ему могут завидовать, но уважать его перестанут. Потом Солженицын стал выступать по телевидению и говорить о вещах, которые людям просто неинтересны. Он просто надоел, и перестал быть для них священной коровой. Но для некоторых, может быть ещё остаётся. Самые большие приверженцы Солженицына, это Лидия Корнеевна Чуковская, которая недавно умерла и её дочь Елена Цезаровна Чуковская. Я был недавно у Елены, и мы говорили об идеалах, и она спрашивала, почему я критически отзываюсь о Солженицыне. Я ответил, что Солженицын во-

первых, не является моим идеалом, и во-вторых для меня идеал не обязательно персонифицирован. И я даже не могу находить идеала ни в ком из своих современников.

Волей-неволей вы стали диссидентом. Вы сами выбрали для себя эту роль, или другие выбрали её для вас?

Можно сказать, другие, потому что во-первых, то, что я писал в начале своего пути более или менее совпадало с реальной ситуацией. Потом наступило время «оттепели», когда в литературе и вообще в общественной жизни стали позволять немножко больше. Но моё мастерство возрастало, по мере того как я писал, и чем больше это становилось похоже на жизнь, тем это становилось острее. Можно сравнить это с рисованием. Первые картинки у меня совсем не получались, они были расплывчатые, а с опытом становятся точнее, и также это было в писательстве. Когда я стал писать лучше, я стал писать острее. И поэтому, чем дальше шло время, тем меньше то, что я писал, было совместимо с реальностью, с идеологическими требованиями, которые существовали в Советском Союзе и которые шли совсем в другом направлении. Поэтому когда, например, в 64ом году свергли Хрущёва - стали закручивать гайки, то есть стали к литературе предъявлять опять старые требования в более жёсткой форме, и у меня возник конфликт, который не мог не выплеснуться наружу. Но он уже был, я уже писал *Чонкина*, что уже за два года до того было невозможно, а тут стало совершенно невозможно. И в то же время я не мог не писать то, что я хотел писать, поэтому этот конфликт в некотором смысле был неизбежен. То же касается моей общественной позиции. Я очень много думал о том, что было во время жизни моего отца например, и я смотрел на людей его поколения и видел, что сталинский террор произошёл потому, что люди это допустили. Потому что слишком много было трусов, слишком много конформистов. Я считал их виноватыми, и поэтому когда опять началось идеологическое наступление на людей, не

только на интеллигенцию а вообще на народ, я решил, что я должен сказать, что я с этим не согласен. Я не хотел быть диссидентом, выходить на площадь, но я должен сказать и показать, что я с этим не согласен и что я в этом участия не принимаю. Так что моё диссидентство было отчасти вынужденным и отчасти сознательным. Но очень трудно быть диссидентом, быть правозащитником, чтобы этим заниматься, надо отдаться этому полностью. А у меня была литература, и я никак не хотел менять профессию, вообще, я не хотел лишаться возможности быть писателем, а писатель, он должен мыслить, и представлять себе жизнь более объёмно и более, я бы сказал, пластически, чем политический деятель или правозащитник. Писатель должен видеть разные стороны жизни, и разные стороны человеческого характера, и многое оправдывать. Вообще, писатель должен быть обязательно компромиссным человеком, а диссидент должен быть без компромисса. Чехов однажды сказал о В. Г. Короленко, что он писал бы гораздо лучше, если б хоть раз изменил своей жене.

Как давнишний сторонник демократии, как вы представляете себе будущее России, особенно в связи с демократическим развитием?

Знаете, я вообще-то думаю так. Я так думал даже до того, как эти события наступили. Я просто считаю, что вообще мир становится очень тесным и очень зависимым, например даже большие и сильные страны, как например Америка, не могут сейчас жить в изоляции, только по своим собственным законам. Они должны считаться с существованием остального мира. Это явление нашего времени, потому что раньше, когда не было самолётов, компьютеров, атомных бомб, ракет, телевидения, всего этого не было, тогда каждая часть мира жила самостоятельно.

Например, для нас в России, Англия была чем-то неизвестным, и нам было всё равно, что там у вас творится, или что творится в Белфасте,

или что творится где-то в Африке или в Индии. Сейчас это уже не так, потому что мир связан более экономически, информационно, потому что, если что-то происходит, если здесь убивают шестнадцать детей (Dunblane), то в Москве в тот же день это всё люди видят. И наоборот, когда в Москве были октябрьские события 1993ого года и рядом со мной стреляли, у меня было ощущение, что это происходит где-то в Гватемале. То, что я видел по телевизору, было за несколько кварталов от меня, и я не мог себе представить, что это происходит рядом со мной. Мир стал настолько тесен, он должен подчиняться одним законам. И Россия также должна подчиняться общим законам, иначе она погибнет. Но не одна. Когда большой корабль тонет, лодки вокруг него тоже гибнут. Такая большая страна не может сама по себе погибнуть, значит, если она погибнет, она потащит других за собой. То есть я уверен, что мир будет проще только тогда, когда он станет однородным, когда весь мир будет подчиняться одним общим законам. И мир и Россия, значит, все к этому непременно или придут, или мир погибнет. Я имею в виду не только Россию, но и мусульманские страны, где идут сейчас ужасные войны и они всё больше разгораются, но человечество, я надеюсь, просто инстинктивно сможет найти какой-то компромисс.

Вы всё ещё уверены, что писателю надо выбрать: или оставаться писателем или сделаться политиком?

Я думаю, что политическое и художественное мышление несовместимы. Художник должен думать. Вот простой пример, я недавно выступал на съезде партии «Выбор России», и я говорил, что я руководствуюсь правилом - делай что должен и не думай о последствиях. А политик не имеет на это права, он должен всегда думать о последствиях. А писатель должен руководствоваться прежде всего моральными принципами, а не расчётом и не целесообразностью. Поэтому для политика моральные принципы могут быть более размытыми, чем для писателя. Я имею в виду опять

писателя как фигуру нравственную.

В старом русском понимании писатель существует до тех пор, пока он несовместим с политикой. Но иногда встречаются редкие писатели, чьё творчество переплетается с политикой, например Грэм Грин.

Можно ли активно участвовать в политических процессах и одновременно сохранять дистанцию от вредных влияний власти?

Или правда ли всегда что тот, кто у власти, само собой, втягивается в коррупцию?

В России, да, но я вообще думаю, что и здесь частично, но в России больше, к сожалению.

Прежде, вы пытались одним литературным творчеством определять своё отношение к жизни. А сейчас вы больше участвуете в политической жизни России. Какую роль, по-вашему, должен играть писатель в такое время?

Я думаю, никакой. Я не пытаюсь, а меня втягивают, и я не вижу никакой пользы от своего участия в политической жизни.

Какой представляется вам проблема национальных взаимоотношений? Что можно сделать?

Это очень трудный вопрос. Дело в том, что я одно время думал, что писатели должны в это вмешаться, потому что в таких странах как Россия, или Югославия, они ещё пользуются моральным авторитетом. Но я просто могу сказать, что национальные отношения настолько остры, что как только писатель, какой бы он ни был, его репутация сразу падает. Я приведу пример армянской поэтессы Сильвы Копутикан. Когда началась дикая вражда армян с азербайджанцами, она обратилась к армянам с призывом к национальной терпимости, и это вызвало неодобрение. А когда писатель выступает за своих, как например в случае Солженицына, когда он защищал русских - это

вызвало большую неприязнь и у украинцев и казаков. Для меня все равны и боль каждого народа, боль каждого человека одинаковы. И сейчас меня утешает, что многие русские выступают в поддержку чеченцев. И я считаю это очень положительным фактором. Я думаю, что именно писатели, люди искусства, которые имеют влияние на общество, должны думать об этом.

Какие проблемы современности вас как писателя больше всего волнуют?

Терроризм. И терроризм государственный, тот, что в Чечне, и ответный терроризм, который чеченцы проводят, и терроризм в Белфасте, и повсюду. Я написал такую статью однажды в газете «Известия», она называлась «Сила против насилия». Конечно мой голос слабый, но я считаю, что государства должны объединиться и должны противопоставить силу терроризму, потому что он распространяется и остановится бесконтрольным. Я также имею в виду и государственный терроризм, когда например Китай демонстрирует угрозу терроризма против Тайваня. И то, что Россия делает в Чечне, и события в Югославии. Что такое суверенитет? Каждая страна толкует по-своему, как ей выгодно. Что такое государственные границы? Какая независимость может быть? Кто может объявлять независимость? Это всё диктуется только сегодняшними политическими выгодами и западными лидерами. Например, Россия нападает на Чечню и никто не вмешивается - имеет право Чечня на независимость или нет? А это должно быть принципиальное решение. Многие говорят, Ельцин гарантия демократии, поэтому будем поддерживать Ельцина как он хочет вести эти внутренние дела. А этого не должно быть. Я считаю, что создание реального суда по военным преступлениям - это важный шаг. И было бы хорошо посадить на скамью подсудимых нашего министра Грачёва, это будет хороший прецедент. Кроме всего, надо объявить любую войну незаконной. Всякая война должна считаться преступным актом. В

начале войны суд должен решить, кто начал войну, и судить за это. И допустим, если какая-то страна начинает проводить действия, ведущие к войне, она должна получить предупреждение, и если бы мир был в этом смысле объединён, то конечно например Ирак даже не полез бы в Кувейт. Все эти насильственные действия производятся потому, что та сторона, которая их начинает, более или менее надеется на безнаказанность. А если она будет точно знать, что такой-то вопрос может быть решён только законом, только судом, и никаким насилием этого не добиться, тогда они будут думать. Это вот мне кажется важным.

Вы не являетесь безусловным противником употребления силы. В каких условиях вы бы считали употребление силы приемлемым?

Я считаю, что нужна международная организация, которая бы применяла силу ответственно и по решению, может быть, суда. И которая бы являлась международной силой полицейского характера, как армия или международная полиция, которая очень сильно вооружена, и которая может действовать не только против отдельных лиц но даже и против государств. Так же как внутри страны, когда полиция производит насильственные действия против преступников, она руководствуется законами, правилами и нормами, которые она не может переходить. К сожалению в межгосударственных отношениях эти законы настолько непонятны, расплывчаты, что их не существует. А международная организация могла бы разработать свод законов, которые бы были приемлемы для всех стран. Но это может быть утопия, я не знаю!

Вы писали, что вы специалист стрельбы по неподвижным мишеням, и что в застойные времена возможно было брать любой предмет и описывать его хоть год, хоть два - он с места не сдвинется. Можно ли быть сатириком в новой

России?

Можно, можно. Новая Россия ещё более смешная страна, чем была раньше. Поэтому в ней можно быть сатириком. В ней очень много смешного, и я говорю гораздо больше, чем раньше. Раньше там была советская власть смешная, но многие стороны жизни были скрыты, и многие характеры были скрыты, а теперь они раскрылись и сейчас в России действительно очень много смешного.

Советская власть была неподвижная, стабильная, а сейчас такая стабильность есть в русском обществе?

Нет, сейчас стабильности нет, к сожалению.

Как же можно быть сатириком если стабильности нет? Я имею в виду то, что в «Новых русских» новой сатирической мишенью является криминализация общества. Не трудно ли писателю прицеливаться, когда такой предмет всё время изменяется и сдвигается с места?

Я хочу привести пример. Вы плывёте на пароходе, наблюдаете жизнь, например, если это дальнейшее путешествие, вы видите какие отношения возникают между пассажирами, иногда романы, и вы можете описывать эти приключения спокойно, писать об этом рассказы, романы, что хотите. Но я говорю, что Россия сейчас как Титаник в момент крушения, и нельзя описывать крушение корабля, находясь на самом корабле. Можно вести репортаж и сообщать, что мы тонем и уже почти погрузились, но не более. В России сейчас примерно такая ситуация, и именно поэтому я избрал этот жанр телесериала, потому что мне показалось, что он наиболее отвечает действительности, это как бы художественный репортаж, но пока я пишу этот сериал какие-то положения, эпизоды изменяются, и то, что я сегодня писал, завтра это уже не так. Но в то же время интересно, когда работаешь в таком жанре, потому что всё просеивается как через сито, и мелкие вещи исчезают, а всё главное остаётся. Вот приблизительно так. И

Россия находится в такой пучине, в которой казалось бы нарушены все человеческие связи и люди проявляются по другому, а всё равно это те же самые характеры, и вот в этом движении начинаешь замечать, как такой характер выживает при любых поворотах.

Нужна ли «новым русским» старая литература?

Я не знаю, нужна ли им старая литература, которая их учила. Во-первых старая литература пыталась ответить на вопрос, есть ли Бог? А этим новым русским неинтересно знать, есть ли или нет, они уверены, что его нет. Сейчас можно ходить в церковь, ставить свечку, а дальше можно жить по своему закону. То есть, я бы ответил отрицательно на этот вопрос, нужна ли новым русским старая литература. Пожалуй, не нужна.

И когда вы говорите о старой литературе, вы имеете в виду классику?

Нет, я имею в виду вообще литературу старых понятий, например даже то, что я пишу сейчас, я считаю старой литературой.

Как чувствует себя русский писатель за границей и дома.
 Русский писатель чувствует себя неодинаково за границей и дома. Вот я расскажу, как чувствуют себя русские люди вообще, а не только писатели. В одном очерке, (я не помню, был ли он по-русски, если был, то вы его конечно читали), я рассказал о том, как русские люди садятся во Франкфурте в самолёт. Когда они проходят таможенный контроль, они такие робкие, они боятся, они несут с собой эти ящики, они боятся, что эти ящики у них отберут, их что-то спрашивают по-немецки, и они отвечают «Да, да, ja, да, да, да,» и всё, больше они сказать ничего не могут, или «Что, что?» Напряжённые такие. А потом они входят в самолёт, и моментально преображаются. Когда я покупал билет в Германии, когда проходил этот самый контроль, регистрацию, меня спрашивают, Rauchen oder nicht rauchen?

для курящих или нет? А я переспросил нарочно, «Какое это имеет значение, что я вам отвечу?» а он говорит «Как какое? Если вы не курите значит вы . . .» Я говорю, вы же для Аэрофлота регистрируете, вам надо знать, что для русских это не имеет никакого значения, и точно, я сажусь, садятся один с одной стороны, другой с другой, оба тут же закуривают, самолёт ещё на земле стоит а они уже закуривают, и стюардессы никак не реагируют, значит они чувствуют себя уже дома, где совершенно другие правила поведения. Поэтому правила поведения русского писателя внутри и за границей тоже разные, потому что внутри Советского Союза он ещё помнит или думает, что ещё так есть и он знает, что он очень важная фигура, он может ходить как очень важный человек, а когда он приезжает за границу, он начинает сразу же ходить очень скромно, как я! А в Москве, поскольку я живу уединённо, то я не веду себя как очень важный человек. Кроме того за время эмиграции я отвык от этого чувства, хотя раньше тоже чувствовал себя важным персонажем. В России, когда я ходил к врачу, то отношение ко мне было особенным, с уважением - известный писатель пришёл. А за границей, например в Америке, к моему ответу, что я писатель, отнеслись не более, чем к ответу чистильщика обуви. Этим я хочу подчеркнуть, что в России есть уважение к профессии писателя, что это профессия не каждому доступная, что это вообще что-то такое божественное, что писатель это человек близкий к Богу. А здесь на западе гораздо интереснее, если человек нотариус или зубной врач. В России зубной врач зарабатывает больше писателя, но он всё-таки к писателю относится с большим почтением. Потому что он знает, что это такая профессия, которой он не может заниматься, он знает, что каждый человек может быть более или менее зубным врачом, но не каждый человек может быть писателем.

А сейчас вопрос о Чонкине. Как вы сейчас относитесь к Чонкину? Правда ли, как писал Золотоносов, что Чонкин -

это Войнович минус литературная профессия?

Я этого не понимаю. Я читал статью, но я не понял, что он имеет в виду. Может быть, что это написано не профессиональным писателем, а просто натурально. Вот например, я сейчас рисую естественно, совершенно не зная никаких правил, и может быть он это имел в виду. Но всё-таки когда я писал *Чонкина*, я уже что-то соображал, у меня уже было представление, что я хочу написать. Конечно может быть, что Чонкин это такой натуральный герой.

Чонкин в какой-то степени похож на вас?

Я раньше даже отрицал, что он похож на меня. Но всё-таки я думаю что да, в какой-то степени похож. Во-первых я думаю, что я тоже натуральный человек, что я никогда не пытаюсь выдать себя за того, кем я не являюсь. Я стараюсь в жизни не фальшивить, а если и бывает иногда, что я чувствую, что веду себя не так, меня это начинает самого коробить. Хочу вспомнить один случай, в котором я раньше никогда не признавался. Когда была напечатана моя первая повесть, я был очень счастлив и горд, и в тот день в Ленинградской гостинице я встретил одного знакомого человека. После обычного разговора о делах мы попрощались. И я заметил, что я иду такой важной походкой, и, не оглядываясь, я почувствовал спиной его удивлённый взгляд. И мне это показалось настолько фальшиво, настолько противоестественно, что мне стало стыдно и надеюсь этого у меня больше никогда не повторялось. Поэтому я стараюсь на обыкновенные вещи реагировать адекватно, но я думаю, что в этом смысле у меня есть простодушие Чонкина, хотя я наверно в некотором смысле более интересный человек. А может быть нет. Наверно нет, кстати, потому что интересный человек, это необязательно более образованный.

Мой любимый рассказ у вас «Путём взаимной переписки».

Как он родился?

Замысел рассказа появился во время моей службы в армии, где было много солдат, которые переписываются таким образом. Значит, как у меня написано, девушки присылают письма в часть, первому попавшемуся, кому попадёт это письмо, и обычно почтальон приносит письма, кладёт их на стол, и кто хочет, берёт их. И находятся солдаты типа Алтынника, которые начинают отвечать на письма. И таких солдат много, это просто типичный человек, этот Иван Алтынник, он берёт много писем, он любит писать письма и поэтому он всем пишет, и в рассказе мной описано, как обычные девушки просят солдат прислать фотографии и солдаты тоже у них требуют фотографии. В каждой части существует доска отличников учебно-боевой и политической подготовки с фотографиями серьёзных солдат, со значками, в парадной форме. И ребята типа Алтынника срывают чужие фотографии, и посылают их в своих письмах, и вся эта переписка простое развлечение. Но иногда из переписки проистекает такая история, которую я описал в рассказе. Я попробовал себе представить, что бы могло случиться в результате такой переписки. Признаюсь вам, что хотя я и не женился по переписке, мы познакомились с первой женой в Московском общежитии, когда я работал на стройке, но мой первый брак - это типичный пример того, что получилось у Алтынника. Я раньше никому об этом не говорил.

Спасибо за доверие. А какой у вас любимый рассказ?

Любимый рассказ у меня тоже этот. Да, я этим рассказом очень дорожу, потому что мне кажется, что в нём я показал больше того, что я собирался. Поэтому мне даже приятно, что вы его отметили.

В годы эмиграции вы работали и в Германии и в США, но вы предпочли жить в Германии. Ощущаете ли вы себя прежде всего европейским писателем?

Пожалуй, да. Я не могу сказать, что я сам предпочёл это, потому что жить в Германии было предпочтением моей жены, а я бы, может быть,

предпочёл жить в Америке просто потому, что гораздо надёжнее материально, но, пожалуй, я себя ощущаю европейским писателем. Потому что американская ментальность нам довольно далека, я думаю англичанам тоже.

Вы о чём-нибудь жалеете в жизни? Об утраченных возможностях например?

Ну, как вам сказать? Нет, но конечно я бы хотел, чтобы во-первых моя жизнь сложилась более благополучно, чтобы я больше успел. Вот, например, моя книга *Замысел*, где пытаюсь познать себя, но к сожалению с опозданием. Я думаю, что если бы я себя лучше понял раньше в молодости, было бы лучше, и я всегда ощущал недостаток образования. Но в целом я не жалею. Я иногда считал, что моя жизнь могла бы сложиться более благополучно, если бы я не совершал каких-то поступков в Советском Союзе, но потом, когда я думал всерьёз, очевидно было, что всё равно большей частью это было неизбежно. То есть, я мог бы избежать каких-либо мелких неприятностей, но самых крупных неприятностей я избежать не мог. Поэтому в целом я не жалею. Но были случаи, которые могли бы изменить мою жизнь, например мой приезд в Америку, в Гарвард, где я выступал. Я был в таком взвинченном состоянии, я боялся выступить перед публикой, когда выходил и видел, что люди собрались, и мне всегда было неудобно перед ними, я думал, что они пришли услышать от меня что-то важное и у меня нет ничего важного им сказать. Поэтому я был очень напряжён, а после выступления за ужином я напился, и споил всех профессоров, которые были пьянее меня, потому что у них не было моей закалки. Я не знал о том, что они хотели меня пригласить на должность *writer in residence*, но когда они утром проснулись и посмотрели друг на друга, они больше про это не говорили. А я тогда, может быть, их предложение даже не принял бы, потому что я был беспечен и не думал, что мне это нужно. С другой стороны, я думаю, что вообще, может быть, очень обеспеченная жизнь

для писателя, это его гибель. Так например тот же Солженицын, он просто погиб как писатель, может быть, просто потому что его жизнь стала благополучнее.

Чем вы больше всего гордитесь?

Я ничем не горжусь. Я где-то написал что орган, который заведует гордостью, у меня атрофирован.

Над чем вы сейчас работаете?

Для меня главная книга это *Замысел*. У меня не очень получается, но я надеюсь, что как раз перед отъездом сюда, я что-то такое там сдвинул и может быть нашёл какой-то ключ, потому что это книга, в которой я хочу совместить всё, а это как-то не получается. Это для меня самая главная книга, это книга, в которой я каким-то образом хочу отразить себя всего извне, изнутри и со всеми своими литературными замыслами, вообще эта идея близка к безумной и насколько мне это удастся я не знаю. И ещё сериал *Новые русские*, где я хочу изобразить не себя, а современное российское общество. *Замысел*, это как будто мой внутренний мир с разных сторон, именно поэтому я ввёл в книгу эту Элизу Барскую, чтобы с её помощью выдать все тайны своей души но полностью в них не признаваться. А *Новые русские*, это более внешняя задача. Это две разные работы, и они должны в чём-то дополнять друг друга.

И вы всё ещё собираетесь писать статьи о политическом положении в журналах, когда возникнет необходимость?

Нет, специально я писать не собираюсь, но всё-таки иногда бывает необходимо, когда возникает какая-то идея.

Сколько часов в день вы работаете?

Бывает по-разному, иногда мало, но когда я уже втягиваюсь, когда работа находится в какой-то серединной стадии, когда уже видно

куда идёт дело, тогда я работаю с утра до ночи, просто я встаю утром, и сразу же сажусь за компьютер, и работаю до самой ночи, до одиннадцати часов, иногда позже, и засыпаю, уже заканчивая.

Я вспомнила, что вы обещали мне спеть песню, которую спел Хрущёв. Пожалуйста, можно сейчас?

Я написал около сорока песен, потом бросил, и эта песня была самой знаменитой, хотя у меня были и другие популярные песни.

(поёт)

Четырнадцать минут до старта

(Музыка Оскара Фельтсмана)

Заправлены в планшеты

Космические карты

И штурман уточняет

В последний раз маршрут. . .

Давайте-ка, ребята,

Закурим перед стартом,

У нас ещё в запасе

Четырнадцать минут.

ПРИПЕВ:

Я верю, друзья, караваны ракет

Помчат нас вперед от звезды до звезды.

На пыльных тропинках далеких планет

Останутся наши следы.

Давно нас ожидают

Далекие планеты,

Холодные планеты, безмолвные поля. . .

Но ни одна планета

Не ждет нас так как эта,

Планета голубая
По имени Земля.

ПРИПЕВ:

Быть может нам, ребята,
Припомнится когда-то,
Как мы к далеким звездам
Прокладывали путь,
Как первыми сумели
Достичь заветной цели
И на родную землю
Со стороны взглянуть.

ПРИПЕВ:

Я верю, друзья, караваны ракет
Помчат нас вперед от звезды до звезды.
На пыльных тропинках далеких планет
Останутся наши следы.

Дело в том, что когда я написал эту песню, в шестидесятом году, ещё никто в космос не летал, только собирались, и я её написал для радио. В то время на радио была так называемая музыкальная редакция, которая выпускала пластинки. И мне позвонила редакторша и сказала, что они хотят записать пластинку. Я согласился. То есть по радио уже пели, а пластинки ещё не было. Но она высказала одно пожелание, чтобы я изменил «пыльные тропинки» на «новые». Я говорю об этом, чтобы дать понять, что такое советская цензура, которая во всё вмешивается, чтобы не было негативных черт. Я старался объяснить, что это другие планеты, где ещё дворников нет, которые подметают, поэтому там пыль. А если изменить на «новые», то люди

будут думать, что там старые были, а там не было старых. Тогда она предложила изменить на «первые». На что я ответил, что это просто неинтересно, это скучно. Я доказывал, что слово «на пыльных» звучит поэтически. На что, в конце концов, она сказала, что тогда мы не можем взять. А через некоторое время Гагарин полетел в космос, а пластинки всё ещё не было, в шестьдесят втором году полетели космонавты Попович и Николаев. И они сначала спели это в космосе, а потом когда они прилетели, тогда Хрущёв спел это с трибуны Мавзолея, и как только это случилось, она на другой день позвонила и говорит: «Всё, мы завтра записываем вашу песню на пластинку.» Я говорю: «Да?» Она говорит: «Да.» Я говорю: «Вы знаете, у меня есть некоторое соображение.» Она говорит: «Какое?» Я говорю: «Я хочу изменить строчку.» — «Какую строчку?» Я говорю: «Там, знаете, есть строчка *на пыльных*. Я хочу её изменить и написать может быть *на новых*.» Она говорит: «Вы что? С ума сошли? Вы знаете кто эту песню пел?» Я говорю: «Я знаю, кто её пел, но я знаю, кто её написал, и хозяин тот, кто написал, а не тот, кто пел.» Она чуть с ума не сошла, но это я в шутку конечно говорил, поэтому я дал своё согласие, и пластинка была записана.

И правда ли, что один из космонавтов возражал против одной строчки песни от того, что он не курит?

Да, когда прилетели Попович и Николаев, Попович сказал, что у него есть претензия, «вот мы, космонавты, не курим». И тут уже я ничего не мог сделать, и стали петь её не «закурим перед стартом» а «споемте перед стартом». Вообще-то по-русски это звучит ужасно плохо, такие слова как споемте, пройдемте, даже над милиционерами, которые говорят «пройдемте» смеются. Но я ничего не мог изменить, они сами уже исправили и так они и пели. А я потом в другом месте встретился с Поповичем, и спросил его: «Вы знаете, что я вообще эту песню писал не про вас, а про тех, кто полетит на другие планеты, а вы ещё до других планет не долетели, я написал песню о людях, для

которых это будет простое дело, покурил, сел и полетел.» Но у нас вообще в Советском Союзе жизнь была такая, что каждый мог исправлять, вмешиваться в литературу независимо от того, знал он литературу, или не знал.

Вопрос о том, что пишет в самых разных жанрах.

Я стараюсь быть разнообразным, если я уже это сделал, то мне скучно продолжать этим заниматься. Так например эти песни. Когда-то я писал стихи, и мне какой-то человек сказал: «Ах, эти поэты-песеники, их все поэты ругают, говорят, что это вообще не поэзия, что это просто неинтересно», и я тоже ругал. И мне мой приятель говорит: «Ты ругаешь, потому что ты сам так написать не можешь.» Я сказал, что могу написать. Он говорит: «Не можешь. Докажи.» А я возразил: «Как я могу доказать?» Чтобы доказать, мне нужен композитор, потому что я музыку сочинять не собирался, а где я его возьму? А потом я работал на радио, написал несколько песен, и когда я услышал, что их поют везде, на каждом углу, мне сразу стало неинтересно, и я прекратил, перестал писать. Потом я написал повесть о деревне, потом рассказ о деревне, потом про меня стали говорить, что я в общем такой деревенский писатель, а мне надоело быть деревенским писателем, и я стал писать о городе. Короче говоря, я в разных жанрах и в разных видах.

Я заметила, что в Ваших описаниях внешности героя особую роль играет описание обуви. Эта деталь наружности героя, как мне показалось, всегда играет для Вас особую роль.

Так ли это?

Никогда не замечал. Но когда я впервые в 1960-ом году читал в литературном объединении «Магистраль» свою первую повесть «Мы здесь живём», дело дошло до описания одного из второстепенных персонажей - шабашника Валентина. Слушатели рассмеялись, когда я прочёл, что Валентин был в милицейских галифе и в белых тапочках. Я,

когда писал это, не думал, что это звучит смешно. Просто мне надо было, чтобы этот герой чем-то запомнился. Вот я и написал про тапочки. Может быть и в других случаях так.

APPENDIX B

Gurzheeva, L. B. and M. A. Skopina, 'Zolotoi ukol', *Russkii iazyk za rubezhom*,

1 (1967), 76-80



„ЗОЛОТОЙ УКОЛ“

Л. Б. ГУРЖЕЕВА,
М. А. СКОПИНА

Читая газеты, мы сталкиваемся с трудностями, преодолеть которые не всегда можно даже с помощью толкового словаря. Вот, например, как вы поймёте фразу, взятую нами из одной московской газеты: *Голубой городок будет открыт в мае 1966 года?* Возможно, вы представили себе дом отдыха или пансионат на берегу реки, здания которого имеют голубую окраску. Если так, то вы заблуждаетесь...

Голубой городок — это комплекс водно-спортивных сооружений. А если вы успешно справились с первым вопросом, то попробуйте догадаться, о чём идёт речь в заметке, по-

мещённой в «Комсомольской правде» от 7/VI-66 г., которая называется «Золотой укол». Может показаться, что это укол золотой иглой, сделанный врачом. Но это не так. Это... решающий укол рапиры, приносящий победу. Ну, а что такое *урожай голубых плантаций*? Не будем вас больше экзаменовать.

В современном русском языке, особенно в языке газет, радио, телевидения, каждодневно рождаются новые устойчивые словосочетания, которые выражают единое понятие. Эти сочетания весьма различны по своей лексико-грамматической структуре. Разные их типы всё больше привлекают внимание исследова-

телей современного русского языка¹. Они не успели ещё попасть в словари из-за своей новизны. Создание подобных устойчивых сочетаний объясняется стремлением журналистов к образности, что особенно необходимо в газете при подаче обычного информационного материала. Эти сочетания являются своеобразными перифразами, позволяющими избежать повторений в рамках небольшой газетной статьи. Так, вместо того, чтобы в газетной информации повторять одно и то же слово *пруды*, рассказывая о разведении рыбы, журналист предлагает своеобразный метафорический синоним *голубые плантации*, который возникает по аналогии со словосочетаниями *рисовые плантации*, *хлопковые плантации*...

«Плантация — это большая площадь земли, занятая под специальные технические или продовольственные культуры», — читаем мы в словаре.

Произошло расширение значения слова *плантация* до водного массива, на котором выращивается «урожай» — рыба.

Для конкретизации же слова *плантация* в новом для него употреблении даётся прилагательное *голубая*. Таким путём возникает большинство новых устойчивых сочетаний. Трудность при их переводе на первый взгляд не заметна, так как каждый из компонентов словосочетания может быть понятным, но при дословном переводе общий смысл остаётся неясным.

Запомните значение выражений:

Прилагательное + существительное *золото*, где слово *золото* указывает на ценность чего-либо, а прилагательное конкретизирует понятие.

<i>Чёрное золото</i> —	а) «нефть». Никто не мог предполагать, сколько <i>чёрного золота</i> на Дальнем Востоке ² .
	б) «каменный уголь». Стране нужно <i>чёрное золото</i> . Кузбасс занимает одно из первых мест по добыче <i>чёрного золота</i> .
<i>Белое золото</i> —	«хлопок». Среднеазиатские республики — основные поставщики <i>белого золота</i> .
<i>Речное золото</i> —	«ценные породы рыб».
<i>Мягкое золото</i>	} — «пушнина».
<i>Пушистое золото</i>	
	Основная продукция охоты в СССР — пушнина, так называемое <i>мягкое золото</i> .
<i>Зелёное золото</i> —	«лес». За навигацию плотоводы Иртыша доставят сюда миллион кубометров <i>зелёного золота</i> . Мы часто разбазариваем <i>зелёное золото</i> страны, варварски вырубая леса. <i>Зелёное золото родины</i> — название радиопередачи.

Прилагательное *золотой* + существительное, где слово *золотой* указывает на ценность чего-либо или на цвет.

<i>Золотой призёр</i> —	«участник соревнования, получивший золотую медаль». <i>Золотые призёры</i> чемпионата были тепло встречены болельщиками.
<i>Золотой урожай</i> —	а) «богатый урожай»; б) «завоевание большого количества золотых медалей на международных соревнованиях». В этом году ожидается <i>золотой урожай</i> .

¹ См. А. А. Брагина. От голубого неба до голубого экрана. «Русский язык в школе», 1966, № 3; Д. Н. Шмелёв. Лексико-семантические изменения в современном русском языке. «Русский язык в школе», 1966, № 3.

² Этот и все последующие примеры взяты из советских газет, радио и телепередач за 1965—1966-й год.

<i>Золотая пара</i> —	«конькобежцы-фигуристы, выступающие в парном катании, получившие золотые медали». О. Протопопов и Л. Белоусова — это поистине <i>золотая пара</i> .
<i>Золотой танец</i> —	«танец на коньках Протопопова и Белоусовой». <i>Золотой танец</i> — так называли выступление советской пары за границей.
<i>Золотой укол</i> —	«решающий укол рапиры на соревнованиях, который дал возможность получить золотую медаль». Иванова нанесла решающий удар Солдатовой... Это был поистине <i>золотой укол</i> . Ну, Танечка, сделай свой второй <i>золотой укол</i> !
<i>Золотое море</i> —	«поле пшеницы». Вокруг раскинулось огромное <i>золотое море</i> .

Прилагательное, обозначающее цвет, + существительное.

<i>Голубой континент</i> —	«водное пространство земного шара». « <i>Голубой континент</i> » — научно-популярный фильм.
<i>Голубая магистраль</i> —	«водные пути страны». Начался сплав леса по <i>голубым магистралям</i> страны.
<i>Голубые дорожки</i> —	«плавательные дорожки бассейна». На <i>голубых дорожках</i> .
<i>Голубые пути</i> —	«водные пути страны».
<i>Голубые тропы</i> —	«речные пути туристов». <i>Голубые тропы</i> . Всей семьёй по <i>голубым тропам</i> .
<i>Голубой стадион</i> —	«река, где проводится соревнование». Вот уже много лет Москва-река является <i>голубым стадионом</i> столицы. Учитесь плавать. Оставляйте за собою на <i>голубом стадионе</i> километр за километром.
<i>Голубой городок</i> —	«комплекс водно-спортивных сооружений». <i>Голубой городок</i> будет открыт в мае 1966 года.
<i>Голубые плантации</i> —	«пруды для разведения рыбы». Урожай <i>голубых плантаций</i> .
<i>Голубая трасса</i> —	«воздушная линия». По <i>голубым трассам</i> летят блестящие лайнеры.
<i>Голубой огонь</i> —	«газ, используемый как топливо». Краем <i>голубого огня</i> называют геологи саратовскую землю.
<i>Хозяева голубого огня</i> —	«люди, добывающие газ». « <i>Хозяева голубого огня</i> » — название статьи.
<i>Артерии голубого огня</i> —	«линии газопроводов». « <i>Артерии голубого огня</i> » — название статьи.
<i>Голубое топливо</i> —	«природный газ». Газовики любят голубой цвет, видимо, за то, что природный газ в народе с уважением называют <i>голубым топливом</i> .
<i>Голубая трасса</i> —	«линия строительства газопровода». <i>Голубая трасса</i> протянулась на несколько сот километров.

По аналогии с этими моделями:

<i>Голубой экран</i> —	«экран телевизора». Главной творческой задачей фестиваля станет поддержка тех, кто утверждает на <i>голубом экране</i> средствами нового самостоятельного искусства прогрессивные идеи. « <i>На голубом экране</i> » — название рубрики в газете. 70 новинок <i>голубого экрана</i> .
<i>Голубой огонёк</i> —	название телепередачи. « <i>Голубой огонёк</i> » — одна из любимых передач телезрителей. На « <i>Голубой огонёк</i> » пришли известные артисты и художники.
<i>Голубой экспресс</i> —	«поезд метро». В Ленинграде, Тбилиси, Харькове, Баку и других городах скоро будут проложены новые комфортабельные трассы <i>голубых экспрессов</i> .

<i>Белый уголь</i> —	«энергия, заключённая в водных ресурсах рек». Западная и Восточная Сибирь сказочно богаты <i>белым углём</i> .
<i>Белая олимпиада</i> —	«зимняя олимпиада».
<i>Белый экран</i> —	«экран кино» (по аналогии с голубым экраном телевизора). <i>Белый экран</i> появился ныне в самых отдалённых уголках республики.
<i>Зелёная улица</i> —	«обозначение свободного пути». Спартакиада шагает по стране, и всюду мы ей открыли <i>зелёную улицу</i> .
<i>Зелёный огонёк</i> —	«свободное такси». А вот и <i>зелёный огонёк</i> . Поедем.
<i>Зелёный океан</i> —	«лес».
<i>Зелёное море</i> —	<i>Зелёный океан</i> — так называют наше лесное богатство. «лесной массив, тайга».
	Под крылом самолета о чём-то поёт <i>зелёное море</i> тайги (из популярной песни).
<i>Зелёный друг</i> —	«лес».
	Берегите <i>зелёного друга</i> .
<i>Зелёный патруль</i> —	«люди, охраняющие леса».
	<i>Зелёный патруль</i> строго следит за сохранностью леса.
<i>Зелёное войско</i> —	«лесоводы».
	В наступлении <i>зелёное войско</i> .
<i>Зелёное поле</i> —	«футбольное поле».
	На <i>зелёном поле</i> разгорелась ожесточённая борьба между командами «Торпедо» и «Спартак».
	Дебютанты <i>зелёных полей</i> .

Прилагательное, обозначающее размер или значимость явления, + существительное.

<i>Малый экран</i> —	«экран телевизора».
	Подлинный телефильм — это не кино с поправками на <i>малый экран</i> и не театр на плёнке.
<i>Большой экран</i> —	«экран кино».
<i>Большой футбол</i> —	«международные встречи известных команд».

Порядковое числительное + существительное.

<i>Первая перчатка</i> —	«чемпион страны по боксу»
	« <i>Первая перчатка</i> » (название кинофильма).
<i>Первая ракетка</i> —	«чемпион страны по теннису».
<i>Первый эшелон</i> —	«первооткрыватели, зачинатели какого-то дела».
<i>Пятый океан</i> —	«воздушное пространство».
<i>Шестое чувство</i> —	«обострённая способность интуитивно воспринимать, угадывать что-либо».
<i>Седьмой континент</i> —	«океаны земного шара».
	Внимание человечества обращено на мировой океан, фантастически богатый и почти не изученный <i>седьмой континент</i> планеты.

