

ABSTRACT FOR PH.D. DISSERTATION

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RECEPTION OF 19<sup>TH</sup>-CENTURY NOVELS IN VLADIMIR  
SOROKIN'S *DOSTOEVSKY-TRIP AND ROMAN*



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## **Subject and Background of the Research**

The subject of my research is formed by the analyses of the works *Dostoevsky-trip* and *Roman* by one of the most significant representatives of Russian postmodernism, Vladimir Sorokin, in comparison with novels of certain 19<sup>th</sup>-century authors (Gogol, Goncharov, Dostoevsky and Tolstoy). The dissertation consists of two major parts: a chapter presenting theoretical foundations and chapters offering literary interpretation, in which the possibilities of interpretations of Sorokin's works in relation with 19<sup>th</sup>-century realism are shown.

As Sorokin's texts are considered to be part of the postmodernism, yet the works of the above mentioned 19<sup>th</sup>-century authors compose part of the realist text corpus, the dissertation is started with a historical and theoretical outline of these eras. During the course of the overviewing process, the fact emerged that the problem does not simply boil down to the significant correlations between 19<sup>th</sup>-century literature and postmodernism, since the mentioned literary historical eras correlate with other cultural periods as well (for example, Antiquity and its genres, such as the Socratic dialogue and the menippaea, as well as the Middle Ages and its "novel of laughter"). Hence, it is clear that these paradigms cannot be discussed in isolation from other epochs, but rather as the parts of a greater literary and cultural historical process.

Within the framework of the understanding of this wider perspective, the theoretical chapters of the dissertation comprise not merely a simple introduction: they also give an independent approach method for the process of how a postmodern author's realism reception can be revealed.

The dissertation initiates from the following fact: although "postmodernism" is a new term that is used exclusively considering the contemporary social cultural atmosphere, we must consider that, even in the earlier eras of human history, there already existed certain skeptical minds inclined to relativism, who tended to question any generally accepted postulates, beliefs and concepts. Artists of this mentality already created such texts in which we can easily detect postmodern footprints. In my interpretation, the specificity of the contemporary era rests on the fact that relativism and eclecticism, previously placed on the periphery, nowadays have become dominant factors.

For that reason, it is justified to return to artworks of much earlier eras during the interpretation of postmodern works. This approach makes it possible that 19<sup>th</sup>-century realist novels can be understood as the antecedents of Russian postmodernism. My approach contradicts the typical tendency represented by the majority of contemporary Russian literary

scholars, who state that the correlation between the Russian postmodernism and the 19<sup>th</sup>-century classics can be interpreted in terms of the former deconstructing or invalidating the latter. This approach originates from Victor Erofeev's famous article *Soviet Literature: In Memoriam* published in 1990. In his study, Erofeev describes that the classics, as well as the socialist realist works, cannot be regarded as real literature, since the task of real literature can only be considered as it operates as literature and does not fulfill any social, ideological or moral roles. Erofeev and his followers start from the idea that the 19<sup>th</sup>-century Russian realism can be characterized as the so-called "moralizing monogism", as the certain flagrant "forefinger". In addition, another approach emerged whose representatives discover not the preachy monologism, but rather the polyphony and dialogism in the works of Pushkin, Lermontov, Gogol, Turgenev, Dostoevsky and Tolstoy. In this spirit, my dissertation argues that postmodern pluralism and skepticism cannot be contradicted to 19<sup>th</sup>-century realism.

In my view, the postmodern novel can be considered the "realist" description of the contemporary era: the main attributes of reality of this disrupted world became inconsistency, paradox and chaos. For the people of the postmodern era, all these phenomena became part of everyday reality. The intertextual structure of the texts can be interpreted as a strategy reflecting on the fragmentation of the personality; in this sense, the mimetic character can be found in postmodernism as well.

## Perspective and Method

Among 19<sup>th</sup>-century Russian novels, we can encounter a number of works, which (if we accept Bakhtin's carnivalesque theory) can be considered as carnivalistic novels, and they can also be characterized by some postmodernist features. In my dissertation, I examine how the carnivalesque and polyphony continue to exist and gain new meaning in the postmodern novels. In my view, the carnivalesque and the polyphony theories apply as literary historical connecting elements between the 19<sup>th</sup>-century and postmodern literature.

The most important theoretical foundation of my dissertation relies on the following concepts: the mimesis as interpreted by E. Auerbach; the carnivalesque, polyphony and dialogue theories of M. Bakhtin; the antecedents of Russian postmodernism by N. Benevolenskaya; the deconstruction theory by J. Derrida; H.-G. Gadamer's terms „game” and „holiday”; G. Genette's hypertext and J. Kristeva's intertextuality concept; J. Lotman's theory of culture and explosion; J.-F. Lyotard's theory of the crisis of the grand narratives; B.

McHale's term of "reversed postmodern dialogism" and W. Schmid's description of "oscillation".

## Theoretical Chapters

In the *Realism. Introduction* chapter, an overview of the concept and the history of realism, and the tightly linked mimesis is provided, and two exceptional theories are discussed. These theories are not exactly realism theories, yet they changed the tradition of realist works' interpretation, as they revealed a new perspective: the dialogical nature of the realist novels (*Mimesis* by Auerbach and Bakhtin's polyphony theory).

The main features of the postmodern (as characteristic forms, poetical strategies and tools) are discussed in the *Postmodern. Introduction* chapter, and an outline shows how the postmodern and post-structural theories influenced the concepts of language, and the relation of literature to "reality", connected with the question of how postmodern literature relates to the "classics" (in this case, 19<sup>th</sup>-century novels).

In the *Mimesis and postmodern. The realist reading of the postmodern novels* subchapter (which links the two chapters noted above), I attempt to prove the validity of the realist reading of the postmodern novels. The following two additional chapters place the Russian postmodern into a wider context (the context of the Western postmodern and natural sciences) and applies this broader definition of the cultural context to examine the relation of the postmodern to the "experienced reality" as part of a major picture.

In the *Relation of Russian postmodern and realism* chapter, the different realist trends are connected to each other and to postmodernism. The trend of new realism is emphasized and discussed separately.

In the *Carnival, polyphony and postmodernism 1. and 2.* chapters, the correlation of Bakhtin's previously mentioned theories and postmodernism is supported with the help of various literary theoretical concepts and theories (for example, Gadamer's, Lyotard's, Genette's and Ihab Hassan's theories).

## Chapters of Literary Interpretation

The chapters of *Literary Interpretation* begin with an introductory part which briefly shows Sorokin's oeuvre and attempts to locate it within the framework of Russian contemporary literature.

In this part of the first major chapter, the analysis of the play *Dostoevsky-trip* is given in comparison with the novel *Idiot*. Its terminological background lies in Peeter Torop's scandal concept, Lotman's theory of culture and explosion, and Bakhtin's carnivalesque theory.

In the second major chapter, the intertexts in the novel *Roman* taken from Gogol, Goncharov, Dostoevsky and Tolstoy are listed, and an examination is followed as far as reaching the young symbolists. The interpretation focuses especially on the following intertexts: *Nevsky Prospect* by Gogol, *A Common Story* by Goncharov and *Crime and Punishment* by Dostoevsky, in the form of an excursus offering a reading of *30th Love of Marina* from the perspective of Tolstoy's works.

## Results

- 1) In the process of the interpretation of *Dostoevsky-trip*, it has been stated that Sorokin creates scandalous situations and levels similarly to Dostoevsky, clearly recognizing their elements and significance, and presenting them to show how the world could work (suggested by Dostoevsky) and how, in fact, it is unable to operate. Sorokin's scandal is not a development initiating point: instead, it is the proof for the impossibility of development; *Dostoevsky-trip* emphasizes that if the scandal cannot be realized on the individual's level, it will not be realized on the other levels, either.
- 2) In general, it can be stated regarding Sorokin's variation of the carnivalesque that the intonations are shifted. Instead of the “merry relativity”, there remains the “relativity”. The “scandal” is present but without the final point, without the place of self-recognition and initiating point of development. In the carnivalistic behavior of the characters, cheering can be detected, but without self-irony; the sarcasm appears on a different level and from an external point of view. The (carnivalistic) behavior freed from norms can be found, but it lacks the deeper experience of life and excludes the emergence of hidden aspects of human nature: the text suggests that there is nothing to emerge: there is only emptiness behind the breaking of norms and beyond them.
- 3) Sorokin in all three above-mentioned works reverses the “classical” concept of redemption and resurrection. In the first case, the only possible option for redemption is to achieve it via narcotics (*Dostoevsky-trip*); the *Roman* and the *30th love of Marina* show salvation on the characters' perspective level, virtually realized, although it happens not for the sake of saving humanity, but in the name of some “inferior” truth (which appears to be a major narrative as well). In this case, an ideology decides on what can be regarded as negative and positive world views or who can have the right

for life. Sorokin shows that this is how the world operates: people, communities and societies apply certain ideologies above their experience of reality, which generally leads to the phenomenon that they do not view other people in unity with themselves, resulting in anti-human acts. On this point, the following phenomena become interconnected: Russian (critical) realism and Sorokin's postmodern novels via Auerbach's "multipersonal dialogue in consciousness" (*Mimesis*) and Bakhtin's dialogue theory. Sorokin's works continue the social critical attitude of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century realist works. In addition, these postmodern works constantly emphasize their own textuality: this does not mean that the reality beyond the texts does not exist for them, but it means that the postmodern perspective is especially sensitive for the language construct of our experience of reality.

- 4) We can also conclude that other major narratives are similarly deconstructed by Sorokin's works—the tradition of the Bildungsroman (and, in it, the concept of development); the utopian narratives of marriage, fulfilled love or the simple country life as the ways leading to happiness; the myth of "Saint Mother Russia" (via the Petersburg myth and Antichrist figure resembling Peter the Great)—and, by deconstructing the genre of crisis hagiography, they create their own negative type of crisis hagiography.

The dissertation includes a number of arguments that the deconstruction of these major narratives was already started by 19<sup>th</sup>-century literary texts, and it also points to the parallels in the case of the referred works' as intertexts. The breaklines below the visible surface are already present in 19<sup>th</sup>-century prose: in a closer view of the realist works, these breaklines can be seen coming from many directions, the only difference is that the modelled world (despite its broken nature) remains in one piece, unlike in Sorokin's works. Taking and applying all the poetical tools, motifs, systems and the developed models of the great 19<sup>th</sup>-century Russian works, Sorokin elevates the deconstruction started by them into a new dimension.

## **Works published in the topic of the dissertation**

1. Szorokin *Dostoevsky-tripje A félkegyelmű tükrében*. In: Kocsis Géza (szerk.) *In honorem Hetesi István 70: fiatal kutatók köszöntőtanulmányai*. ELTE BTK. Orosz Irodalom és Irodalomkutatás Doktori Program. Budapest. 2012. 163–182.
2. Рецепция Русского реалистического романа XIX века в «Романе» В. Сорокина. *Вестник Российской-Армянского Университета, гуманитарные и общественные науки*. Ереван. 2014/3. 98–107.
3. 'The Russian Literature Is Dead. Long Live the Literature!' *VIII. International Symposium. Contemporary Issues of Literary Criticism. Vol II*. Shota Rustaveli Institute of Georgian Literature, Tbilisi. 2014. 137–151.
4. Постмодерническая природа карнавала. In: Szvák Gyula (szerk.) *Alternatives, Turning Points and Regime Changes in Russian History and Culture: Materials of the First International Conference for Young Scholars of Russian Studies*. Russica Pannonicana. Budapest. 2015. 560–567.
5. Карнавал и постмодерн. *Филологические науки: вопросы теории и практики*. Грамота. Тамбов. 2015/2. 151–155.
6. Recenzió. Nonna Benyevolenszkaja monográfiájáról. Беневоленская Н. П. Русский литературный постмодернизм: Истоки и предпосылки (Orosz irodalmi posztmodern: Eredet és előzmények). *RECITI. HU*. 2015. 10. 18.
7. Recenzió. EWA M. THOMPSON: A birodalom trubadúrjai. Az orosz irodalom és a kolonializmus. *Helikon Irodalomtudományi Szemle*. Budapest. 2016/1. 134–135.
8. Recenzió. MOLNÁR ANGELIKA – FRESLI MIHÁLY. A szó feltámasztása. *Helikon Irodalomtudományi Szemle*. Budapest. 2017/1. 158–159.