The Latin Alphabet in Sorokin's Works

Martin Paulsen

> Вот вы, анохи мои свет-дорогие, думаете, ради чего Стену строили, ради чего огораживались, ради чего паспорта заграничные жгли, ради чего сословия ввели, ради чего умные машины на кириллицу переиначили?
>
> *Den' oprichnika*[1]

THE Latin alphabet has its own very visible place in the linguistic polyphony of Vladimir Sorokin's œuvre. While Sorokin's language has received considerable attention both in literary reviews and scholarly literature, there have so far been few attempts to establish an understanding of the significance of the Latin alphabet in his texts. In this article I shall analyse how Sorokin uses Latin script in his literary texts, using the short story "Concretные" ("The Concrete Ones," 2000) and the novel *Roman* (*A Novel*, 1985–89) as case studies.

Guided by state initiatives, the Russian language community has assigned special status to the Cyrillic alphabet, juridically as well as ideologically. First, Russian federal law requires not only Russian, but also all of the Russian Federation's other languages to be written in Cyrillic.[2] Second, there is a Russian national holiday on 24 May to commemorate the brothers Cyril and Methodius and their invention of the Cyrillic

---

1 "Now you, my dear Enochs, you're wondering, why was the Wall built, why are we fenced off, why did we burn our foreign passports, why are there different classes, why were intelligent machines changed to Cyrillic?" Vladimir Sorokin, 2006, *Den' oprichnika*, Moscow, p. 211; Eng. Vladimir Sorokin, 2006, *Day of the Oprichnik,* transl. J. Gambrell, New York, p. 180.

2 Lara Ryazanova-Clarke, 2006, "'The State Turning to Language': Power and Identity in Russian Language Policy Today," *Russian Language Journal* 56, pp. 37–55.

alphabet. Lara Ryazanova-Clarke has pointed out that an officially endorsed narrative of the creation of the Russian language is linked to the creation of the Cyrillic alphabet.[3] In addition, modern Russian society has often been described as a literature-centric society—a society where literature holds a special place in public discourse.[4] Thus, literature is important to Russian society, and the mere presence of Latin script in this literature challenges the established juridical and ideological order relating to the Russian language.

Despite this traditional identification of the Russian language with the Cyrillic alphabet,[5] the Latin alphabet has been visibly present in Russian literature since the eighteenth century, with the lengthy paragraphs of French dialogue in Lev Tolstoy's nineteenth-century classic *Voina i mir* (*War and Peace*, 1869) a well-known example.[6] The general isolation of the Soviet period resulted in foreign languages and the Latin alphabet exerting less influence,[7] but the fall of the Soviet Union and the growth of Western, predominately American cultural influence have revived the relevance of the Latin alphabet for the Russian language community, as have the development and spread of digital technology. At the same time, the use of Latin script has become something of a trademark for writers such as Sorokin and Viktor Pelevin. In the following, I will take a closer look at the possible implications of Latin script elements in Sorokin's texts, seen in the light of both Russian literary traditions and contemporary Russian language culture, and against the background of related tendencies in contemporary Russian literature.

---

3   Lara Ryazanova-Clarke, 2006, "'The Crystallization of Structures': Linguistic Culture in Putin's Russia,"*Landslide of the Norm: Language Culture in Post-Soviet Russia* (Slavica Bergensia 6), eds. I. Lunde & T. Roesen, Bergen, pp. 31–63; p. 50.

4   Maria Zalambani, 2011, "Literary Policies and Institutions," *The Cambridge Companion to Twentieth-Century Russian Literature*, eds. E. Dobrenko & M. Balina, Cambridge, pp. 251–68.

5   A.P. Vlasto, 1986, *A Linguistic History of Russia*, Oxford, p. 8.

6   In an analysis of the language of the novel, Viktor Vinogradov points out that Tolstoy was censured by contemporary literary critics for his widespread use of French. They complained that a few lines of French would have sufficed to establish the historical context of the early nineteenth century and that not all Russian readers would be able to understand. V.V. Vinogradov, 1939, "O iazyke Tolstogo (50-60-e gody)," *Literaturnoe nasledstvo—L.N. Tolstoi*, Moscow, pp. 117–220; p. 147.

7   Larissa Ryazanova-Clarke & Terence Wade, 1999, *The Russian Language Today,* London, pp. 3–65.

Latin script in Russian literature

The language of contemporary Russian prose and poetry—and particularly the use of Latin script—has been the subject of several recent publications. An early example from poetry has been noted by Liudmila Zubova in her monograph on the language of contemporary Russian poetry. Aleksandr Levin's poem "V zerkale pressy" from 1987 reads as a parodic reaction by the poet to the many neologisms in perestroika Russian:

> Показывали разные девайсы и бутлегеры,
> кинсайзы, голопоптеры, невспейпоры и прочее.
> И Борис Нелокаevitch поклялся, что на родине
> такой же цукермаркерет народу возведёт![8]

The name of the Russian Federation's future president is transformed or vulgarized here, through both a reallocation and a transliteration of some of its morphemes. The effect, Zubova points out, is to lend a feeling of Americanization and to link the name to the vulgarized neologisms that abound in the rest of the stanza.[9]

In an article on the poetics of the generation of the 1990s in Russian poetry, Ilya Kukulin has pointed out that, in post-Soviet Russian poetry, English-language elements have become more visibly present as compared to preceding periods. The most characteristic devices within this new trend are the combination in single words of Russian and English language, and the combination of Cyrillic and Latin script. Kukulin uses examples from pop culture—such as the spelling of the name of the pop group "Zемфира" with the initial Latin "z" followed by Cyrillic letters—to show how this trend is also present in other areas of contemporary Russian culture.[10]

---

8   "In the mirror of the press"; "They demonstrated different devices and bootleggers,/ keen-sizes, holycopters, nous-papers and so on./And Boris Nelokaevitch swore that in his country/such a sugarmarkeret would uplift the people!" Quoted in Liudmila Zubova, 2010, *Iazyki sovremennoi poezii,* Moscow, p. 300. Unless otherwise stated, translations are my own.

9   Zubova, 2010, p. 301.

10 Il'ia Kukulin, 2001, "Proryv k nevozmozhnoi sviazi (Pokolenie 90-kh russkoi poezii: vozniknovenie novykh kanonov),"*Novoe Literaturnoe Obozrenie* 50, pp. 435–58; p. 444.

Kukulin mentions Dar'ia Sukhovei as one of the poets who uses this device most readily. Sukhovei has written about the phenomenon herself, in an article from 2003 on the new focus on graphical elements in contemporary Russian poetry. She points out that, in addition to a new aesthetic awareness in post-Soviet Russian literature, one of the important reasons for the new focus on the graphical elements of poetry is the shift to computers as the main medium for writing and distributing poetry. The mastering of new digital techniques of writing has raised the awareness of poets to the writing itself. Within this new trend, Latin script elements are linked to the introduction of computer-related terminology, to the influence of Anglophone consumer culture, and to the technical challenges presented by typing in Cyrillic on a computer, i.e. related to the design of the computer keyboard or to non-compatible encodings.[11]

The use of Latin script is also common in contemporary Russian prose. The most striking example of this is the widespread use of Latin script in the titles of contemporary Russian literary works. I have already mentioned Pelevin, whose use of Latin script in *Generation "П"* (*Homo Zapiens*, 1999) and *Shlem uzhasa* (*The Helmet of Horror*, 2005) clearly evokes a sense of Americanization/globalization and the spread of digital technology. In the earlier novel, not only does Pelevin use Latin use in the title, he also turns Tiutchev's famous lines "Umom Rossiiu ne poniat'" into a slogan by rendering it in Latin script. In *The Helmet of Horror*, the setting is a computer chat room, where the names of the users are in Latin script, as is customary for many Russian-language online chat fora. The writer Sergei Minaev made a name for himself with the novel *Духless* (*Soulless,* 2006), where the root of the title is given in Cyrillic and the suffix in Latin script. Another example is the young writer Valerii Pecheikin, whose two short stories published in the literary journal *Ural* are entitled "YouTube" and "ICQ." In both cases he uses Latin script not only in the titles, but also in the body of the text.

This interest among contemporary Russian writers in the graphical character of the language and the relationship between Cyrillic and Latin script sets the tone for our investigation of Sorokin's use of Latin script elements in his literary texts.

---

11 Dar'ia Sukhovei, 2003, "Krugi komp'iuternogo raia (Semantika graficheskikh priemov v tekstakh poeticheskogo pokoleniia 1990–2000-kh godov)," *Novoe Literaturnoe Obozrenie* 62, pp. 212–41.

Dirk Uffelmann has drawn attention to Sorokin's general interest in language. In fact, Uffelmann points out, in *Norma* (*The Norm*, 1979–83), one of Sorokin's earlier works, "the political, social and linguistic norm is itself the 'protagonist' […]."[12] Similarly, in 1990 Lev Rubinshtein claimed that: единственная драма, занимающая Сорокина,—это язык (главным образом литературный язык), его состояние и движение во времени.[13] This interest in language is particularly evident in some of Sorokin's later works. In his contribution to this volume, Uffelmann identifies a special group of texts: the novel *Goluboe salo* (*Blue Lard*, 1999), and the short stories "Concretные" and "Ю" ("Iu"), both from the collection *Pir* (*The Feast*, 2000). These three texts stand out as particular examples of Sorokinesque newspeak, where Latin script is one of the elements in the creation of a nonsensical language based on technological terminology and elements from different languages. Due to the striking presence of Chinese language components, Uffelmann dubs them Sorokin's "Chinese texts." While the language of these texts is markedly different from the rest of Sorokin's œuvre, Latin script appears in works from different parts of his literary career.

In a monograph devoted to Sorokin's œuvre, Maksim Marusenkov has analysed the use of what he defines as *zaum'* in Sorokin's texts. A term from a Futurist manifesto of the late pre-revolutionary era, *zaum'* refers to an idiosyncratic, transrational language which is difficult or impossible to comprehend.[14] By turning to *zaum'*, the author relates his writing to the pre-revolutionary tradition of experiments in incomprehensible poetry, and, more importantly, challenges the relationship between language and reality, between the "letters on the paper" and the physical world.[15] Marusenkov identifies several different types of *zaum'* in Sorokin's texts—phonetic, morphological, syntactic and suprasyntactic.

---

12   Dirk Uffelmann, 2006, "*Lëd tronulsia*: The Overlapping Periods in Vladimir Sorokin's Work from the Materialization of Metaphors to Fantastic Substantialism," *Landslide of the Norm: Language Culture in Post-Soviet Russia*, eds. I. Lunde & T. Roesen, Bergen, pp. 100–25; p. 102.

13   "The only drama of interest to Sorokin is language (mainly the literary language), its state and motion in time." Quoted in M.P. Marusenkov, 2012, *Absurdopediia russkoi zhizni Vladimira Sorokina: zaum', grotesk i absurd*, St Petersburg, p. 117; see also K.V. Kustanovich, 2004, "Vladimir Georgievich Sorokin," *Russian Writers since 1980*, eds. M. Balina & M. Lipovetsky, Detroit, Mich., pp. 301–15.

14   Marusenkov, 2012, p. 71.

15   Marusenkov, 2012, pp. 112–13.

Among the elements of this *zaum'* are instances of Latin script, as used in the "Chinese" texts. Marusenkov classifies this as phonetic *zaum'*, where "letters are combined in such a way as to form unfamiliar words."[16]

The use of Latin script in loanwords has a long prehistory in Russian literature. In Sorokin's texts it appears at various levels: in titles as well as running text—and it does so both as transliterations of Russian words and letters and as foreign words and phrases. Several texts have titles wholly or partly in Latin letters, e.g. the plays *Hochzeitsreise* (1994–95) and *Dostoevsky-Trip* (1997), and the short stories "Сонсетные" and "Зеркало" ("The Mirror") in the collection *The Feast*. Some texts abound with Latin script (e.g. "Сонсетные" and "Ю"), but more often the texts have some passages with a considerable proportion of Latin script but where Cyrillic is still predominant (e.g. the early novels *Roman/A Novel* and *Tridtsataia liubov' Mariny* (*Marina's Thirtieth Love*, 1982–84), the prose piece *Mesiats v Dakhau* (*A Month in Dachau*, 1990), the novel *Blue Lard*, and the recent play *Zanos* (*Kickback*, 2009). There are also texts without any Latin script elements at all, e.g. the early novel *Ochered'* (*The Queue*, 1983) and the more recent short story "Chernaia loshad' s belym glazom" ("A Black Horse with a White Eye," 2005). In general there seems to be a correspondence between the fictional universe of the texts and the use of Latin script. Latin script is used more frequently in texts where the action takes place outside Russia ("A Month in Dachau"), is set in a contemporary or futuristic environment ("Сонсетные"), or takes place in a urban setting (*Kickback*), than in texts where the action takes place in a rural, exclusively Russian and historical setting ("A Black Horse with a White Eye"). Thus, as a general and preliminary observation, we can note that, in keeping with his linguistically polyphonic approach, Sorokin uses Latin script as one of the devices that conjure up the literary universes of his different texts. Another example of the same approach is the active use of dialect speech in texts set in the Russian countryside (e.g. "A Black Horse with a White Eye" and "Otkrytie sezona" ("Opening of the season," from *Pervyi subbotnik* (*The First Saturday Workday*, 1979–84)).

The use of the Latin alphabet is obviously closely related to the presence of foreign words. While its use is more readily expected with foreign words, the use of Latin script for Russian words stands out as a clear violation of the established norms of the Russian language community.

16 Marusenkov, 2012, pp. 74, 133.

Still, in Sorokin's texts the relationship between Latin and Cyrillic script is not a straightforward one, as we shall see in the following analysis of "Сопсретные" and *Roman/A Novel*.

Сопсретные

The short story "Сопсретные" is as much a play as it is a story, following the three main characters "Коля," "Маша," and "Mashenka" to a restaurant for an orgy, all in Sorokin's now well-known, grotesque manner.[17] The restaurant setting, the violent orgy, the young main characters and the linguistic experiment are reminiscent of Anthony Burgess's classic 1962 novel *A Clockwork Orange*. The short story consists of three different textual levels: the narrator's voice, the dialogue that dominates throughout the text, and excerpts from classical novels in the orgy session towards the end. These levels are all set apart graphically with the use of different fonts, font sizes and typefaces. Linguistically the story is a mix of Russian, Chinese, English, Japanese and German. This linguistic mixture predominates in the direct speech, while the narrator's voice is primarily in standard Russian. At the end of the short story there is a glossary of Chinese words.[18] But most importantly for this study, the short story is a mix of Cyrillic and Latin script. While the coherent use of graphical devices assists understanding of the relationship between the different levels of the text, the linguistic and scriptural mixture makes it a difficult read—a fact that evokes the notion of *zaum'* described by Marusenkov—but with some help from the glossary it is possible to follow the development of the short story, even if some concepts still remain unintelligible. Already the beginning of the story reveals the character of the text:

> *Коля*. Ни цзяо шэньмэ?
> *Маша*. Маша.
> *Mashenka*. Mashenka.

---

17   V.G. Sorokin, 2002a, "Concretnye," *Sobranie sochinenii,* vol. 3, Moscow, pp. 349–63.

18   I would like to point out two obvious differences between the language of two of Sorokin's "Chinese texts": "Concretnye" and *Blue Lard*. First, the glossary of "Concretnye" does actually make sense, and helps readers understand the short story. This is different from the situation in *Blue Lard*, where the glossary adds to the linguistic confusion created in the text. Second, while Chinese words are used for cursing in *Blue Lard*, in "Concretnye" the cursing is in Russian, but, as I have pointed out, with Latin spelling.

Коля. Коля. Concreтные, хотите по-правильно поиметь?
Маша. Смотря что.
Коля. Двинем в ецзунхуй. Потом поимеем sweet-балэйу. Я плюс-плюс-имею.
Маша. Не в takt. Минус-позит.
Mashenka. Малечик пропозирует govnero?[19]

We immediately notice that while the first two names are written in Cyrillic, Mashenka is written in Latin script. This is one of the few hints at the influence of digital technology on the language of Sorokin's text. In present-day Russia, names in Latin script are widely associated with blogs (such as those on the LiveJournal platform) and digital chat rooms, where one is obliged to provide nicknames in Latin script owing to technological constraints. This is used as a literary device by Pelevin in *The Helmet of Horror*.

The Latin script is present on several levels in the text. The title, for instance, is a blending of an English word, "concrete," written in Latin script, and the Russian adjectival suffix "-ный," written in Cyrillic. In this way it resonates with the Russian jargon expression "konkretnyi" ("solid," "respectable"), as in "konkretnyi paren'" (a "respectable guy"), and refers to the three main characters.

Throughout the story the scriptural blending is diverse and manifold, but even so some patterns can be detected. On a general level, there is a clear distinction between the language of the narrator and the excerpts from the classical literature on the one hand, which are kept almost exclusively in standard Russian, and the dialogue and realia of the literary universe, which make up a futuristic newspeak. The narrator deviates from the norms of standard Russian only when making direct reference to the realia of the futuristic literary universe: Переходят в trip-зал, садятся в trip-кресла, пристегиваются.[20]

---

19 "Kolia. What is your name?/Masha. Masha./Mashenka. Mashenka./Kolia. Kolia. Respectables, would you like to have some real stuff?/Masha. Depends what./Kolia. Let's go to etszunkhui. After let's have some sweet-baleiu. I have plus-plus./Masha. That's no good. Minus-positive./Mashenka. Is the boy proposing shit?" Sorokin, 2002a, p. 350. Note that the translation into coherent English partially destroys the estrangement effect from the Russian original.

20 "They proceed to the *trip*-hall, sit down in *trip*-chairs, and belt up." Sorokin, 2002a, p. 354. Emphasis added for words in Latin letters.

To the extent that the Latin script forms recognizable words, it predominantly refers to English, as in "food," "sweet" and "police," but there are also examples of German loan words, such as "Uhr." In addition, Latin script is used for the names of restaurants, bars and other commercial establishments, e.g. "COSMA-SHIVA," "Tsunami," "AQUARIUS." The latter are more difficult to relate to any specific language and should be considered internationalisms.

More uniquely to Sorokin's texts, Latin script is widely used in newly created blends and compounds. Such blends appear in the titles of works by contemporary authors such as Sergei Minaev's *Soulless* and Oksana Robski's *Про любOFF/ON* (*On Love-off/on*, 2010), but Sorokin also makes use of them in the running text of the play. On the one hand we have blends of Cyrillic and Latin such as "sladкий" ("sweet") and "музыкal"("musical"). Another example is "maлечик" ('boy'), inherited by Sorokin from Burgess's *A Clockwork Orange*. A linguistic blend is a word formed of two or more source words of which at least one is shortened and/or there is some overlap between the two words. This is a quite common phenomenon in many languages, such as "brunch" from "breakfast" and "lunch" in English.[21] The creation of blends mixing two scripts is a less common phenomenon, but the examples of the Russian pop groups "Zемфира" and "Мультфильм" show that it is well-known to the contemporary Russian language community. In Sorokin's text, some of these blends are creative blends where the semantic meanings of the English and Russian are played upon to create an effect of estrangement. The combination of the two Russian lexemes "музыка" (music) and "кал" (faeces) into музыкal ("musical") is an example of this. The use of Latin script for the latter lexeme gives an effect of estrangement and adds to the understanding of the word as pejorative, i.e. "shitty music."

On the other hand we have compounds such as "proto-желе" ("proto-jelly"), "W-плетение" ("W-braiding") and "J-пластик" ("J-plastic"). Strictly speaking, compounds are words with more than one stem, such as "proto-желе," but the semantic load of the Latin letters in "W-плетение" and "J-пластика" allows us to talk of compounds in these cases as well.[22]

---

21   Stefan Th. Gries, 2004, "Shouldn't it be Breakfunch? A Quantitative Analysis of Blend Structure in English," *Linguistics* 42 (3), pp. 639–67; p. 639.

22   As is the case for "X-ray" in English, see Loretto Todd *&* Ian Hancock, 1986, *International English Usage*, Kent, p. 127.

Blending, where the combination of Latin and Cyrillic letters takes place within the framework of one word, challenges the understanding of two separate scripts. This challenge is less evident in the hyphenated compounds, where a hyphen separates the two scripts.

Importantly, the words mixing Latin and Cyrillic in "Сoncretные" are not standardized throughout the text, so that we observe both "yebi-вашу" and "yebi-vashu" ("Fuck you"), and we find three different variants of "хочу," "hochu" and "ночу" ("I want"). Interestingly, in the latter blend it is impossible to determine the boundaries between Latin and Cyrillic script, since the letter "o" looks the same in both alphabets. This contributes to the undermining of the boundaries between Cyrillic and Latin script in the text. Additionally, by allowing for several variants of the same words throughout the text, Sorokin questions another important part of current Russian language ideology: the idea that languages are fixed entities with a consistent spelling that can be found in dictionaries. This language ideology—the standard language ideology—is prevalent in all modern language communities, but has a particularly strong position in Russia.[23]

Last but not least, the Russian cursing in "Сoncretные" is exclusively in Latin script or in blends with Latin script: "govnero" ("shit"), "yebi-vashu," "мне рohию" ("I don't give a fuck"). Here, a striking effect is achieved by rendering a part of the Russian language which is widely considered to be genuinely or even particularly Russian in Latin script. In another of the "Chinese" texts, *Blue Lard*, the cursing was in Chinese. This can also be read as an example of the influence of digital technology on contemporary Russian. The use of specially designed programmes to detect and censor cursing in chat room communication and blogs has been topical in the contemporary Russian language community. Cursing in Latin script has been one of the ways of avoiding this technologically mediated censorship.

I would like to add another possible background for Sorokin's fascination with the combination of languages and scripts, one based on the ideological relationship between the two scripts. It is important to note that while some English and German words are rendered in Latin letters, the Chinese is always rendered in Cyrillic, not in Chinese char-

---

23 Martin Paulsen, 2009, *Hegemonic Language and Literature: Russian Metadiscourse on Language in the 1990s*, PhD thesis, University of Bergen.

acters or the Latin alphabet. I would suggest that this indicates an imbalance in the relationship between the different scripts. Today—not least thanks to the spread of digital technology and the Internet—Latin is the hegemonically dominant script that can be expected to be read by everyone globally. At the same time—in our digitally mediated culture—it is technically the most easily available script. So, when writing the short story, Sorokin knew that the Latin elements would be perceived as foreign, but they would still be readable, and available at the print shop. Meanwhile, the use of Cyrillic for Chinese words means that Sorokin establishes a clear distinction between the European languages on the one hand and Russian/Chinese on the other. The idea of an association between Russian and Chinese has preoccupied Sorokin for some time. In several interviews he has outlined the scenario of a spiritual or linguistic union between Russia and China.[24] Thus, while maintaining a certain accessibility for his text—both in terms of readability and production— he manages to create a striking newspeak that points towards a new future for the Russian language and the Cyrillic script. Paradoxically though it may seem to Russian purists, this is a linguistic situation in which the Cyrillic and Latin scripts are on a more equal footing.

A Novel

While "Concretные" and *Blue Lard* display a somewhat futuristic character, the novel *Roman/A Novel* looks back at the history of Russian literature. This is also reflected in the use of Latin script, which is quite widespread in the dialogue between some of the main characters in the novel. The novel is modelled on the classical Russian nineteenth-century novel and evokes the lives of the Russian intelligentsia and gentry. This is demonstrated through the presence of foreign languages, which reflects the ideals of education and erudition among the gentry at the time the novel depicts: French, Latin, English, and German—all in Latin script. In some passages, entire dialogues are French, rendered in Latin script:

> — Mais, pourquoi pas?—спросил он.
> — Parce que cela contredit votre image de datchnik.
> — Vous me voulez dire que pour vous j'ai eté [sic!] toujours un datchnik? —Роман резко дернул повод влево.

24 Quoted in Marusenkov, 2012, p. 125.

— Pas toujours!— нервно рассмеялась она.

— Et quelles sont les circonstances qui vous ont obligés a [sic!] venir ici à cette époque de l'année?

— Ce [sic!] serait trop difficile vous expliquer,—она снова нервно рассмеялась, поигрывая стеком.

— Trop difficile?—переспросил Роман, уклоняясь от молодой сосновой ветки.

— Trop difficile!—звонко откликнулась она и вдруг неожиданно резко ударила стеком по лошадиной шее.[25]

Note that here, as in "Сoncretные," the Latin script is used for direct speech, and the narrator's voice is in standard Russian Cyrillic.

There are, however, several important differences in the way the Latin script is used in the "Chinese texts" and here in *Roman/A Novel.* Notwithstanding some typos, direct speech takes standard French as its point of departure.[26] Contrary to the "Chinese texts," where Latin is also used for Russian words, in *Roman/A Novel* the Latin is only used to render foreign language elements, such as the Latin names of biological phenomena, expressions in German and English, and dialogues in French.

Still, while the situation is not as radical as in the "Chinese texts," the number of instances of Latin script in *Roman/A Novel* is very high. Even if we grant that the average Russian reader of Sorokin is probably more educated than Russian readers in general, some of the Latin language quotes and the French dialogue will remain obscure to many readers of the novel. In ideological terms, the use of Latin script helps to set the foreign language elements apart from the Russian, and, since it is related to erudition—for example through the biological, scientific terms—it contributes to the creation of a notion of inferiority on the part of the Russian language. Knowledge of foreign languages and the presence of Latin script are associated with erudition. This inferiority in the Russian is underlined when the local schoolteacher and entomologist Nikolai Ivanovich Rukavitinov refers to a moth as Сосновый кокнопряд. A

---

25 Vladimir Sorokin, 2002b, "Roman," *Sobranie sochinenii v trekh tomakh,* vol. 2, Moscow, pp. 267–726; pp. 334–35.

26 There are, however, several typos, such as: "Je veus en prie!" instead of "Je vous en prie!" Sorokin, 2002b, p. 537.

проще говоря… Dendrolimus pini.[27] Through the reference to the Latin names of insects as more readily known than the Russian names, Sorokin's literary persona undermines the Russian language's standing. It is reduced to a less precise and useful language. Another example of the relationship between Russian and Latin terminology is found in this utterance from Rukavitinov: Это гвинейский рогач. А по-нашему Neolamprima adolphinae.[28] The local Russian is contrasted to the lingua franca of international science in the past—Latin. This, however, is not just about the relationship between Russian and the Latin language, but also about the Cyrillic and Latin alphabets. The different alphabets make the presence of a Latin term more foreign to a Russian text than it would be to an English or German text, and the effect of estrangement more profound. The underlying assumption in Rukavitinov's statements—when it is rendered in Latin letters in Sorokin's text—is that the Cyrillic script cannot provide the same precision as the Latin script.

At the same time, it is important to note that, in *Roman/A Novel*, Sorokin stays within the norms of standard Russian, using Latin letters for foreign words, but not for Russian words. By doing so he orients backwards, towards a literary tradition and towards the way in which the linguistic realities prevalent in a particular part of Russian society were depicted in the classical Russian literature of the nineteenth century.

Conclusion

In his texts Vladimir Sorokin negotiates the script actively, using capital letters, punctuation marks, italics, particular combinations of letters and Latin script as means of giving significance to the visuality or materiality of the script itself. Some of these scriptural devices are rather conventional in fiction literature, while others, such as the repetition of letters that cover several pages in *The Norm* or the total absence of letters over several pages in *The Queue*, are particular, if not unique, to Sorokin. All this, however, demonstrates Sorokin's interest in the script, and his willingness to test its ability to convey meaning. This interest of Sorokin's in the script reflects the tendency identified in post-Soviet Russian poetry by Sukhovei towards an interest in the visual or graphical elements of the

---

27 "Pine-tree Lappet. Or put more simply… Denrolimus pini." Sorokin, 2002b, p. 395.
28 "That is a New Guinea stag beetle. As we would have it, Neolamprima adolphinae." Sorokin, 2002b, p. 303.

text.[29] Marusenkov pointed out that some of Sorokin's *zaum'* is phonetic and similar to prose poetry that can be read aloud. I would argue that this is true only for a small part of Sorokin's texts, and that the linguistic experiments—as listed above, and as represented by the Latin script—are primarily of a graphical character.

I would also argue that this focus on the graphical character of the texts is only to be expected in contemporary Russia, a society where the literature-centric cultural inclinations of the late Soviet era have been challenged and topicalized. As Maria Zalambani points out, one of the key elements of the literature-centric culture was the "sacral value [of] the written word."[30] Based on an analysis of the literary institutions that maintained the literature-centric culture, Zalambani claims that the literature-centric situation broke down with the fall of the Soviet Union. I would suggest that the central norms of the literature-centric culture—those of the sacrality of the Word—have lived on in parts of Russian society, and that it is these norms that Sorokin is constantly challenging in his works.

As Lev Rubinshtein pointed out, Sorokin's interest in language is primarily an interest in the standard language (*literaturnyi iazyk*). An important feature of standard language—and the ideology that comes with it, especially in Russia—is an understanding of the prevalence of the written language over the spoken.[31] What Sorokin does, then, in using Latin script and other scriptural devices, is not so much to reflect on the technological changes that have taken place in Russian society, as to take on the ideological underpinnings of the Russian language community—the meaning of the written word and its sacral status.

The blending of scripts that Sorokin uses so widely in "Сoncretн����" contributes significantly to undermining the distinction between Cyrillic and Latin, and thereby the sacral status of the Cyrillic alphabet in the Russian language community. As has been shown by Zubova and Kukulin, this phenomenon is not unique to Sorokin, but what is unique is the extent to which he uses it. While it is known to be used in band names, titles and commercial ads, Sorokin uses it throughout the text as an integral part of the *language* of the literary universe of the story.

---

29 Sukhovei, 2003.
30 Zalambani, 2011, p. 252.
31 Paulsen, 2009, p. 76.

Finally, the relationship between the alphabets is different in the two texts analysed. In *Roman/A Novel*, the Latin alphabet clearly comes across as the more potent script among the educated gentry. In "Сoncretные," the presence of Chinese complicates matters. On the one hand, the Latin alphabet is associated with science and education. On the other hand, the rendering of Chinese in Cyrillic script, alongside the Russian, challenges the current understanding of the Latin alphabet as *primus inter pares* among the world's scripts. Thus, in "Сoncretные," Sorokin gives a version of a future language situation where the two scripts are on a more equal footing.