

## Drive of the Oprichnik: On Collectivity and Individuality in *Day of the Oprichnik*

Tine Roesen

Тяжкое дело государственное...<sup>1</sup>

Vladimir Sorokin, *Den' oprichnika*

IN *Den' oprichnika* (*Day of the Oprichnik*, 2006), Vladimir Sorokin created a fictional universe in the near future which is dominated, paradoxically, by the national ideology, religious prescriptions, power structures and, not least, cultural values, literary genres and linguistic style of sixteenth-century Russia. In this version of Russia's future—characterized by Maiia Kucherskaia as “kvass patriotism” (квасной патриотизм) taken to its logical conclusion<sup>2</sup>—Sergei Uvarov's famous nineteenth-century trinity of самодержавие, православие, народность (autocracy, Orthodoxy, nationality) seems finally to have been successfully implemented.<sup>3</sup> With one reservation: certain Chinese invasions into territory

1 “It is hard work to serve the state.” Vladimir Sorokin, 2006, *Den' oprichnika*, Moscow, p. 8. All subsequent quotations are from this edition, referred to as DO. Since the epigraph quote is omitted in the published English translation, the translation here is my own.

2 Maiia Kucherskaia, 2006, “V chuzhom piru pokhmel'e,” *Vedomosti* 8 (290), 2 March, <http://friday.vedomosti.ru/arts.shtml?2006/08/16/111096>, accessed 7 December 2012.

3 Cf. Dirk Uffelmann, 2009, “The Compliance with and Imposition of Social and Linguistic Norms in Sorokin's *Norma* and *Den' oprichnika*,” *From Poets to Padonki: Linguistic Authority and Norm Negotiation in Modern Russian Culture* (Slavica Bergensia 9), eds. I. Lunde & M. Paulsen, Bergen, pp. 143–67; p. 158. Marina Aptekman has analysed Sorokin's novel as a direct response to and a postmodern parody of Petr Krasnov's reactionary novel *Za Chertopolokhom* (*Behind the Thistle*, 1927, republished 2002): Marina Aptekman, 2009, “Forward to the Past, Or Two Radical Views on the Russian Nationalist Future: Pyotr Krasnov's *Behind the Thistle* and Vladimir Sorokin's *Day of an Oprichnik*,” *Slavic and East European Journal* 53 (2), pp. 241–60.

and language are actually threatening the Russian nation, and chiming better with former and recently revived (by Aleksandr Dugin and others) ideas of a Eurasian rather than Russian empire.

On top of this nationalist-Eurasian tension, the novel's neo-traditionalist "retro-future"<sup>4</sup> is characterized by several contradictions. Since electricity and other modern inventions have not been abandoned, a series of technical devices, as well as their science-fiction counterparts, clash with wooden houses, traditional cooking and historical clothing; moreover, sophisticated designer drugs are used in combination with old-fashioned bathhouse rituals, and the characteristic dog's head and broom of the oprichniks are to be found fastened to their hyper-tech Mercedes. The examples are numerous and add greatly to the novel's humorous effect. No less remarkable and humorous are the clashes between the (quasi-) old Russian language and the modern devices mentioned above, in the form of retro-modern words (мобило, пузырь вестевой, «мерин»<sup>5</sup>), as well as the comical but also horrifying incongruence of, on the one hand, the oprichniks' puristically prescribed, clean-mouthed speech and pious Orthodox prayers and, on the other, their callously violent acts.<sup>6</sup>

In this article, however, I will focus on yet another kind of contradiction in *Day of the Oprichnik*, one which is singularly rooted in the problematic individuality of the protagonist and first-person narrator,

- 
- 4 The term *retrobudushchee*, applied by Mark Lipovetsky to Sorokin's novel *Metel'* (*The Snowstorm*, 2010), is no less appropriate for the fictional universe of *Day of the Oprichnik*. Mark N. Lipovetsky, 2012, "Sovetskie i postsovetskie transformatsii siuzheta vnutrennei kolonizatsii," *Tam, vnutri: praktiki vnutrennei kolonizatsii v kul'turnoi istorii Rossii*, eds. A. Etkind, D. Uffelmann & Il'ia Kukulin, Moscow, pp. 809–45; p. 839.
- 5 "mobilov," "news bubble," "Mercedov." See for example ДО 5, 8, 13, and in translation: Vladimir Sorokin, 2011, *Day of the Oprichnik*, transl. J. Gambrell, New York, pp. 3, 6, 9. In the following, I will refer to Gambrell's translation as Eng. ДО.
- 6 Cf. Uffelmann on the "schizoid split between signifier and referent" (Uffelmann, 2009, p. 165) and Danilkin: Государственное регулирование речевой деятельности [...]—вог, собственно, главное фантастическое допущение «Опричника» и одновременно первейший источник комического в романе: опричники рьяно следят за соблюдением табу, которые нарушают здесь прежде всего враги России. "The state regulation of speech activity [...]—this is, in fact, the main fantastic postulation of "The Oprichnik" and at the same time the primary source of humour in the novel: the oprichniks keep zealous watch over the observance of taboos, which are violated first and foremost by Russia's enemies." Lev Danilkin, 2006, "Vladimir Sorokin: Den' oprichnika," <http://www.srkn.ru/criticism/ldanilkin.shtml>, accessed 26 October 2012.

the oprichnik Andrei Komiaga. My reading will be a combination of narratological, psychological and corporeal-symptomatological analyses. Thus, I will consider the question of collectivity versus individuality in relation to the narrative situation, to the protagonist's mind and behaviour and, not least, to the effects of their conflicting imperatives on both his mind and body.

Bringing to life how a strict medieval rule is re-established by force in the 2020s, the novel is to a great extent about the *imposition* of social and linguistic norms,<sup>7</sup> norms that contemporary readers recognize from ideologies and state initiatives in present-day Russia, but which are here taken to the extreme. The future oprichniks, Ivan the Terrible's terror-guard revived to serve the *Gosudar'* (His Majesty), are central to the imposition of these norms, and the brotherhood's customs and rituals—linguistic, social and other—represent no less than the ideal collective of the novel's society. These customs and rituals confine and define Komiaga, as a character and as a narrator. However, since he narrates from *within* the terror-guard elite, the novel is not only one of Sorokin's perpetrator texts;<sup>8</sup> it is also an experiment in modern (novelistic) textual representation of a pre-modern ritualized collectivity. As I will show, Komiaga is to a large extent, but not completely, submerged in the collective. Throughout the narrative we are allowed several glimpses of his individuality, of his singular body and mind—as distinct from the collective body he is representing. As in Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's *Odin den' Ivana Denisovicha* (*One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, 1962), whose title Sorokin's novel refers to, we are presented with an individual, personal perspective on a typical day within the fences of an authoritarian regime. Not only do the glimpses of Komiaga's personality somewhat relieve the situation for the reader, who finds him/herself in the company of a torturer, they also give us a hint of the costs the individual has to pay in this kind of regime, even if s/he is not primarily a victim. It seems that the perpetrator Komiaga may in fact have something in common with the prisoner Ivan Denisovich, and that he may be driven by other forces in addition to those defined from above.

7 Uffelmann, 2009, pp. 154–55.

8 Cf. Dirk Uffelmann's terminology and definition of "Tätertexte" and "Opfertexte," Dirk Uffelmann, 2006, "Lød 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* (Slavica Bergensia 6), eds. I. Lunde & T. Roesen, Bergen, pp. 100–25; p. 109.

*Collectivity*

Komiaga's day has its routines, its fixed routes and its structure, as outlined by his job in the oprichnina and dominated by the collective acts, mottos and genres of the oprichniks. Repeated greetings and battle cries include: Слово и дело (Work and Word!); Гойда (Hail!); Горе дому сему! (Woe to this house!); Гойда! Чистка! (Hail! Purge!); Выметай! Выметай! (Sweep them out! Sweep them out!).<sup>9</sup> Moreover, the deeds of the oprichniks are often summed up by Komiaga in proverbs that literally describe these deeds, but simultaneously justify them by invoking an axiomatic level: Круто Государь наш за столбовых взялся. Ну, и правильно. Снявши голову, по волосам не плачут. Взаяся за гуж—не говори, что не дюж. А коли замахнулся—руби! (DO 18).<sup>10</sup>

Several levels of authority endorse the oprichniks' mottos, proverbs and acts: their boss Batia, the supreme ruler His Majesty and the Orthodox Church. The latter authority is firmly established, when the oprichniks end their working day with church and prayer, materializing yet another proverb: Конец—делу венец. Сделал дело—молись смело. (DO 36)<sup>11</sup> Komiaga, moreover, calls upon his faith when repeatedly concluding his reflections, as well as the whole narrative, with the affirmation: И слава Бору (And thank God).<sup>12</sup>

Apart from modelling his protagonist's speech after the prescribed language norm,<sup>13</sup> and having him perform fixed rituals and adhere to a

9 See for example DO 19, 25, 35, 182, 201–02; Eng. DO 15, 19, 28, 155, 170–71.

10 "His Majesty is tough with the nobility. All right and proper. When you've lost your head, you don't fret about your hair. In for a penny, in for a pound. If you raise the axe, let it fall!" Eng. DO 14. The last proverb is an autocitation from *Roman (A Novel, 1985–89)*, in which the metaphor is materialized repeatedly.

11 "All's well that ends well. When work is done—we pray in the sun." Eng. DO 28.

12 DO 14, 43, 120, 164, 175, 185, 190, 223; Eng. DO 10, 35, 103, 141, 149, 158, 162, 191.

13 Злобой и скрежетом зубовным исходят либералы после знаменитого 37-го Указа Государева об уголовной ответственности с неперменным публичным телесным наказанием за нецензурную брань в общественных и частных местах. (DO 80) "Our liberals are dripping with anger and grinding their teeth after His Majesty's famous Decree 37, which criminalized obscene language in public and private, and made obligatory public corporal punishment the sentence." Eng. DO 66. Apparently, the job of the oprichniks is not considered difficult enough to allow them the outlet of profanities: Палачам и армейским старшинам в России ругаться по-матерному разрешено. Сделал Государь наш для них исключение ввиду тяжелой профессии. "Executioners and army elders in Russia are allowed to curse. His Majesty exempted them in recognition of their difficult professions." DO 147; Eng. DO 125.

traditional Russian lifestyle and its maxims, Sorokin even lets Komiaga enjoy the normative genres of the neo-traditional culture, as defined by His Majesty and enforced by *Kul'turnaia Palata* (the Culture Chamber) and *Slovesnaia Palata* (the Literary Chamber).<sup>14</sup> Thus, tears well up in his eyes when he listens to a traditional Russian song about the steppe, *Oi, ty step' shirokaia*,<sup>15</sup> just as they do at the sight of the beautiful, white Kremlin, the heart of the Russian land.<sup>16</sup> Likewise, he takes an honest interest in the (exaggeratedly “kvass-patriotic”) novelties of Russian literature<sup>17</sup> and consults Vasilii Surikov's *Boiarynia Morozova* (1887) in the Tretyakov Gallery when his spirits are low,<sup>18</sup> while shunning Aleksandr Afanas'ev's obscene *Russkie zavetnye skazki* (*Bawdy Russian Tales*, nineteenth century)<sup>19</sup> and deriding postmodernist performances by underground and exiled artists who spread their, in his view, abominable poison on Western “teleradio” channels.<sup>20</sup>

Embodying the ideal collective, the oprichnina of 2028 is also an exclusive brotherhood, into which the individual is lifted, in which he almost dissolves, and without which, should he be excluded, he would be a cripple:

В опричнину не уходят. Ее не выбирают. Она тебя выбирает. Или, точнее, как говорит сам Батя, когда подопьет-понюхает: «В опричнину вносит, как волной». Ох, как вносит! Так внесет, что голова закружится, кровушка в жилах закипит, в очах сполохи

14 DO 60, 103; Eng. DO 51, 89.

15 “Oy, the steppe is broad and wide.” Звонит песня так, что слезы наворачиваются. “The song resounds, and I can feel tears welling up.” DO 16; Eng. DO 12.

16 Чуден Кремль при ясной погоде! [...] Слезы повернулись... “The Kremlin is glorious in clear weather! [...] Tears well up in my eyes...” DO 107–08; Eng. DO 93–94. The motif of the white Kremlin is later expanded in *Sakharnyi Kremli'* (*Sugar Kremlin*, 2008), where Komiaga's contemporaries enjoy licking sweet white sugar models of the main symbol of state power.

17 DO 104–06; Eng. DO 88–91. Examples of such book titles are: *Bereza belaia* (White Birch), *Ottsy nashi* (Our Fathers), *Pokorenie tundry* (The Taming of the Tundra), *Rossiiia—rodina moia* (Russia—My Motherland).

18 DO 144–45; Eng. DO 123.

19 DO 32; Eng. DO 25.

20 DO 78–81; 142–45; Eng. DO 65–67; 121–23. Interestingly enough, even though Komiaga's derision actually echoes the protests of *Idushchie vmeste* (*Walking Together*) against Sorokin's books in 2002, Sorokin has not included himself among the post-modernists parodied in these passages.

красные замелькают. Но и вынести может волна та. Вынесет в одночасье, *бесповоротно*. Вот это—хуже смерти. Из опричнины выпасть—все одно, что обе ноги потерять. Всю жизнь потом не ходить, а ползать придется... (ДО 42)<sup>21</sup>

The total integration of the oprichnina as a collective has two significant and remarkable culminations during the day in question. In the first common climax, the oprichniki are of one *mind*, when the trip they experience when using a sophisticated goldfish drug takes the shape of a jointly hallucinated, seven-headed dragon, Gorynych.<sup>22</sup> Afterwards Komiaga concludes: Рыбки—коллективное дело, в одиночку их пользоваться—дураком быть. (ДО 99)<sup>23</sup> In the second climax, the oprichniki are of one *body*, when they line up in Batia's bathhouse, linked together by anal penetration, to form the гусеница опричная:<sup>24</sup>

Мудро, ох мудро придумал Батя с гусеницей. До нее все по парам разбивались, отчего уже тень разброда опасного на опричнину ложилась. Теперь же парному наслаждению предел положен. Вместе трудимся, вместе и наслаждаемся. (ДО 203)<sup>25</sup>

Komiaga obviously enjoys being at one with the collective during these ecstasies.

21 "You don't join the oprichnina. You don't choose it. It chooses you. Or, more precisely, as Batya himself says when he's had a bit to drink and snort: 'The oprichnina pulls you in like a wave.' Oh, how it pulls you in! It pulls you in so fast that your head spins, the blood in your veins boils, you see red stars. But that wave can carry you out as well. It can carry you out in a minute, *irrevocably*. This is worse than death. Falling out of the oprichnina is like losing both your legs. For the rest of your life you won't be able to walk, only to crawl..." Eng. ДО 34–35. This description of the oprichnina echoes what is commonly known to be the esprit de corps of the FSB or *siloviki* in contemporary Russia.

22 ДО 91–98; Eng. ДО 77–83.

23 "Fish are a collective affair; only an idiot uses them alone." Eng. ДО 85.

24 "oprichnik *caterpillar*" ДО 201; Eng. ДО 170.

25 "Wisely, oh so wisely, Batya arranged everything with the *caterpillar*. Before it, everyone broke off in pairs, and the shadow of dangerous disorder lay across the oprichnina. Now there's a limit to the pleasures of the steam. We work together, and take our pleasure together." Eng. ДО 173.

*The carnival collective*

Before tracing the individual Komiaga amidst this collective mind and body, I would like to briefly discuss its character in terms of carnival. Significantly, the oprichnik brotherhood, with its collective rituals and blind obedience to His Majesty, has a foil, a gender-balancing caricature double, in the protégées of the *Gosudarynia* (Her Highness), a group of carnival-like freaks and clowns dancing, singing and calling out to their “Mamo” when Komiaga comes to visit.<sup>26</sup> This serves to underline, I believe, that the rituals of the oprichniks may be read through a post-Bakhtinian, carnivalistic prism.<sup>27</sup> Their raids and killings, bathhouse visits, meals and parties are full of grotesque bodies and orifices, obscene jokes and acts, even the occasional reversal of roles (when the mute and deaf servants whip and manhandle the *inner* oprichniks in Batia’s bathhouse after the evening repast<sup>28</sup>). In fact, Mikhail Bakhtin briefly mentioned the carnivalistic traits of the historic Oprichnina in his book on Rabelais:

Не порывая со звоном колоколов, Грозный не мог обойтись и без звона шутовских бубенчиков; даже во внешней стороне организации опричнины были элементы карнавальных форм (вплоть до такого, например, карнавального атрибута, как *метла*), внутренний же быт опричнины (ее жизнь и пиры в Александровской слободе) носил резко выраженный карнавальный и по-площадному экстерриториальный характер.<sup>29</sup>

26 DO 170–71; Eng. DO 145–46.

27 The carnivalistic nature of Sorokin’s oprichnina has been noticed by several reviewers and scholars, see for example Aptekman, 2009, p. 253.

28 DO 187–94; Eng. DO 160–65.

29 Mikhail Bakhtin, 2010, “Tvorchestvo Fransua Rable i narodnaia kul’tura srednevekov’ia i Renessansa,” *Sobranie sochinenii*, vol. 4(2), Moscow, pp. 7–508; p. 290. “While not breaking with the tradition of church bells, Ivan could not do without the jingle of the fools’ bells; even the outward attributes of the *opritchina* [sic] had some carnival elements, for instance, the broom. The *opritchniks*’ inner way of life and the banquets in the *Alexandrovskaya Sloboda* had a distinct grotesque aspect, as well as an extraterritorial character, similar to the freedom of the marketplace.” Mikhail Bakhtin, 1968, *Rabelais and His World*, transl. H. Iswolsky, Cambridge, Mass., London, p. 270.

Moreover, a folk-carnivalistic atmosphere similar to Sorokin's version surrounds the oprichniks when they are depicted dancing and singing in Sergei Eisenstein's film *Ivan Groznyi* (*Ivan the Terrible*, part 2, 1946), as well as when they are seen installing sadistic market-place amusements in Pavel Lungin's recent film *Tsar* (*The Tsar*, 2009).

Despite the merry laughter accompanying the actions of Sorokin's oprichnina, it is not so much a liberating carnival, such as the Bakhtinian carnival has often been understood, as it is repressive. In an existential rather than historical sense, the ritualistic life of Sorokin's oprichnina may be regarded as a carnival corresponding to the darker readings of Bakhtin, by the so-called carnival revisionists.<sup>30</sup> Thus, Konstantin Isupov has read Bakhtin's carnival concept as essentially tragic, since the human being is forgotten in it,<sup>31</sup> and Boris Groys has discussed Bakhtin's carnival laughter as being born out of the belief that the people are something bigger than the individual, a belief in the truth of totalitarianism.<sup>32</sup> According to Groys, Bakhtin remained blind to these potentials for abuse. Mikhail Ryklin, on the contrary, has suggested that Bakhtin was in fact satirical and Aesopian in his book on Rabelais, that he was suspicious of carnival ecstasy and alert to the parallels between carnival and Stalinist Terror.<sup>33</sup>

If we regard the oprichnina brotherhood as a totalitarian carnival, with roles and functions defined and imposed from above, and no individual or human identity beyond these roles, it becomes clear that while they may on some level enjoy their collective trips and copulations and laugh their merry laughter, they are, as individuals, tragically caught in a

30 Caryl Emerson, 1997, *The First Hundred Years of Mikhail Bakhtin*, Princeton, N.J., p. 180.

31 Бахтинская концепция карнавала, при всей ее бесспорной привлекательности и обаянии, трагична по своей сути, в ней человек забыт. "Bakhtin's concept of carnival, for all its indisputable attractiveness and fascination, is essentially tragic, for the human being is forgotten in it." Konstantin Isupov, 1991, "Mikhail Bakhtin i Aleksandr Meier," *M.M. Bakhtin i filofskaia kul'tura XX veka: problemy Bakhtinologii* 2, ed. K.G. Isupov, St Petersburg, pp. 60–121; p. 66. English translation from Emerson, 1997, p. 186.

32 Boris Groys, 1989, "Mezhdru Stalinyim i Dionisom," *Sintaksis* 25, Paris, pp. 92–97, and Boris Groys, 1997, "Totalitarizm Karnavala," *Bakhtinskii sbornik* 3, eds. V.L. Makhlin et al, Moscow, pp. 76–80.

33 Mikhail Ryklin, 1990, "Tela terrora (tezisy k logike nasiliia)," *Bakhtinskii sbornik* 1, eds. D. Kujundzić & V.L. Makhlin, Moscow, pp. 60–76.



limiting premodern regime which defines their every word, act, reaction and vision. Komiaga knows that there is no way out: По-другому *теперь* нельзя. [...] Это—слова *известные*. Их всегда наши говорят. Сложилось так. In one word: Положено так. (DO 23, 29)<sup>34</sup> However, although by the end of the day Komiaga is barely alive from driving around completing his tasks and, not least, from being forced into performing obligatory collective rituals, he has in fact allowed us small glimpses of his (weak) individuality.

### *Individuality*

As observed by Andreas Tretner, Komiaga's reporting of his day, more particularly of his acts of violence, demonstrates how he explicitly defends the existing rule of violence, and how he armours himself with self-imposed insensitivity.<sup>35</sup> Most remarkably, Komiaga repeatedly and insistently reminds himself of the importance of the collective deeds. He does this in incantations such as: Важное дело. Нужное дело. Хорошее дело,<sup>36</sup> by invoking the power of the state through its mere adjective государственное,<sup>37</sup> or by concluding categorically: Надо служить делу великому.<sup>38</sup>

Komiaga succeeds quite well in this armouring and carries out his obligations without fault. Nevertheless, he sometimes actually struggles to represent and express the imposed cultural norm, and it is this aspect of his narratorial and psychological subjection to the social and linguistic norms that I will now focus on. It is my claim that this discreet struggle opens up small cracks in the pre-modern, medieval fence of the narrative.

Komiaga's individual struggle sometimes reveals itself in the form of a debilitating obtuseness, caused by *overidentification* with the cul-

34 "That's the way it always goes *nowadays*. [...] These are *famous* words. We always say them. That's the *custom*." "That's the way it's usually done." Eng. DO 17–18, p. 22, emphasis in the original.

35 "Panzerung, selbstverordnete Fühllosigkeit." Andreas Tretner, 2007, "Komjagas Klöten: *Der Tag des Opritschniks* aus der Nahsicht des Übersetzers," *Kultura* 2, pp. 12–14; p. 13.

36 "Important work. Necessary work. Good work." DO 31; Eng. DO 24.

37 Дело это нужное, государственное; [...] важное это дело, государственное. "It's necessary business, state business." "[...] it's an important affair, an affair of state." DO 102, 107; Eng. DO 87, 93.

38 "We have to serve the great ideal." DO 223; Eng. DO 191.

tural norms he represents and imposes. For example, a certain birch poem—which adheres thematically to the “kvass patriotism,” but is also recognisable to the reader as a parody of Sergei Esenin (1895–1925)—represents a poetic, metaphoric liberty that Komiaga decides he cannot allow. His (to modern readers comic) resistance to figurative speech lays bare the extent of his internalization of the ruling norm of literalness:

Березе раскровили бок—  
топор зазубренный.  
По лезвию стекает сок,  
Зовет к заутрени.

Поэт из новых. Ничего, с настроением... Одно не понятно — почему сок березовый зовет к заутрени? К заутрени звон колокольный звать должен. (DO 156)<sup>39</sup>

In another instance, during the censoring of a theatre show, Komiaga over-identifies with the greater wisdom (by definition) of his superiors in the hierarchy. This leads to an exaggerated minimalization of himself and of his erudition, again with comic effect, given the vulgar nature of the idea that so humbles him: somebody from the inner circle adeptly analyses exactly what must be done to act about oil pipes and sending farts in the direction of the West.

Вот что значит—Внутреннего Круга человек! Сразу в корень зрит! Бздёхом-то русским можно и города европейские отапливать! Задумались все. И я на свой ум попенял: не докумекал до очевидной вещи. С другой стороны—гуманитарий я по образованию... (do 68)<sup>40</sup>

39 “The birch bark’s been bled/With a jagged axe blade,/Down, down the sap runs, Calling to matins.//One of the new poets. Not bad, it creates a certain mood . . . One thing I don’t get, though: how does birch sap call to matins? Church bells should call to matins.” Eng. DO 133.

40 “Now that’s a member of the Inner Circle for you! He sees right to the bottom of things! You can heat European cities with Russian farts! Everyone grows thoughtful. I blame my brain: I didn’t catch on to an obvious thing! But then, my education was in the humanities . . .” Eng. DO 57.

Komiaga's over-identification with imposed norms and consequent self-minimizing reach their peak when he visits a kiosk and reflects on the regime's strict market control and its logic:

Хороша была идея отца Государева, упокойного Николая Платоновича, по ликвидации всех иноземных супермаркетов и замены их на русские ларьки. И чтобы в каждом ларьке—по две вещи, для выбора народного. Мудро это и глубоко. Ибо народ наш, богоносец, выбирать из двух должен, а не из трех и не из тридцати трех. Выбирая из двух, народ покой душевный обретает, уверенностью в завтрашнем дне напитывается, лишней суеты беспокойной избегает, а следовательно—*удовлетворяется*. А с таким народом, *удовлетворенным*, великие дела сотворить можно. (ДО 102-103)<sup>41</sup>

So far Komiaga finds everything fine and in the service of the common good. But then he has a thought of his own, and as a result his identification with the norm must necessarily take the form of self-minimizing:

Все хорошо в ларьке, токмо одного понять не в силах голова моя—отчего всех продуктов по паре, как тварей на Ноевом ковчеге, а сыр—один, «Российский»? Логика моя здесь бессильна. Ну, да не нашего ума это дело, а Государева. Государю из Кремля народ виднее, обозримей. Это мы тут ползаем, как воши, суетимся, верных путей не ведая. (ДО 103)<sup>42</sup>

41 "His Majesty's father, the late Nikolai Platonovich, had a good idea: liquidate all the foreign supermarkets and replace them with Russian kiosks. And put two types of each thing in every kiosk, so the people have a choice. A wise decision, profound. Because our God-bearing people should choose from two things, not from three or thirty-three. Choosing one of two creates spiritual calm, people are imbued with certainty in the future, superfluous fuss and bother is avoided, and consequently—*everyone is satisfied*. And when a people such as ours is *satisfied*, great deeds may be accomplished." Eng. DO 88, emphasis in original.

42 "Everything about the kiosk is fine; there's only one thing I can't wrap my head around. Why is it that all the goods are in pairs, like the beasts on Noah's Ark, but there's only one kind of cheese, Russian? My logic is helpless here. Well, this sort of thing isn't for us to decide, but for His Majesty. From the Kremlin His Majesty sees the people better, they're more visible. All of us down below crawl about like lice, hustling and bustling; we don't recognize the true path. But His Majesty sees everything, hears everything. He knows who needs what." Eng. DO 88.

Apart from mocking Uspenskii and Lotman's famous tract on Russian cultural binarities,<sup>43</sup> this passage, in which Komiaga counters his own doubts by asserting his preference not to have freedom of choice and thus expressing his love of the prison he is in, is reminiscent of certain passages in Fedor Gladkov's early Socialist-Realist novel *Tsement* (*Cement*, 1925), where the collective ideology is similarly represented in inner monologues. Just as Komiaga reduces himself to a louse, the protagonist of *Cement*, Gleb Chumalov, thinks of himself as an ant, his wife Dasha sees herself as a speck of dust, and, most memorably, the former Menshevik Sergei Ivagin insists on his own non-existence as an individual even after being excluded from the Party: Будет ли он восстановлен, или нет—это не изменит дела: его, Сергея Ивагина, как обособленной личности, нет. Есть только партия, и он—только ничтожная частица в ее великом организме.<sup>44</sup> In Gladkov's novel, which is very much about the imposition of new norms of socialist collectivity, individual characters thus paradoxically insist on their own lack of individuality, much to the same tragicomic effect as Sorokin's first-person, novelistic representation of an equally radical collectivity.<sup>45</sup> Another illuminating parallel to individual negotiations of Soviet-era collectivity and imposed norms may be found in historical diaries from Stalinist times. Many of these diarists, according to Jochen Hellbeck, did not "turn against the goals and values propagated by the state," but, on the contrary, "revealed an urge to write themselves into their social and political order."<sup>46</sup>

It should be clear from the above that Komiaga does not exactly assert his individuality, but he does single it out when he points to his own insignificance. Likewise, while he is obviously an integrated part of the collective body of oprichniks, as epitomized by the blissful "oprichnik

43 Cf. Uffelman, 2009, p. 157, fn 48.

44 "Whether he would be re-admitted or not made no difference; he, Serge Ivagin, as a personality did not exist. There was only the Party and he was an insignificant item in this great organism." Fedor Gladkov, 1958, "Tsement," *Sobranie sochinenii v vos'mi tomakh*, vol. 2, Moscow, p. 265; Feodor Gladkov, 1929, *Cement*, transl. A.S. Arthur & C. Ashleigh, London, p. 296.

45 In a similar vein, Aptekman has likened Komiaga's character to a typical Socialist-Realist positive hero (who, in turn, would often be presented as a Slavic folklore character, a *bogatyř*), and has pointed to his use of violence as ritualized actions rather than individual evil acts. Aptekman, 2009, pp. 251–52.

46 Jochen Hellbeck, 2006, *Revolution on My Mind: Writing a Diary under Stalin*, Cambridge, Mass., pp. 4–5. Thanks to Dirk Uffelman for pointing out this parallel.

*catarpillar*,” his individual, physical body also occasionally makes itself felt. In contrast to the strong, physically enhanced and invincible body of the oprichnina, his own body shows signs of fatigue and decay:

Гляжусь в зеркало. Лицо опухло слегка, воскрылия носа в синих прожилках, волосы всклокочены. На висках первая седина. Рановато для моего возраста. Но—служба наша такая, ничего не попишешь. Тяжкое дело государственное... (ДО 8)<sup>47</sup>

Similarly, his hangover announces its presence during the concert performance of a well-known Soviet song *Slyshu golos iz prekrasnogo daleka* (“I hear a voice arising, lovely in the distance”). As opposed to the programmed sentimentality that made Komiaga cry when he listened to the song about the steppe, or contemplated the Kremlin, here he explains his reaction in a way that (humorously) situates his individual, hurting body in the corps of purely ideologically-minded censors: Слезы наворачиваются. У меня, конечно, это *похмельное*. (ДО 63)<sup>48</sup>

The *truth* of Komiaga’s body—to use his own expression about his servant Fedka’s smell<sup>49</sup>—is that it is being worn out by the whole oprichnik carnival, culminating in a nightly drilling ceremony which he had hoped to avoid and which causes him to be carried home in a semi-unconscious state. Remarkably, in this state, he also reveals feelings, desires and dreams that go beyond those of the collective: he fantasizes about the splendour of Her Highness’ breast, about her White Fat (мамо наша Жира Белаго<sup>50</sup>), and, as he falls asleep, he is met by his own, familiar dream, not about a seven-headed dragon but about a single, beautiful white stallion (белый конь).<sup>51</sup>

47 “I look at myself in the mirror. My face is slightly puffy, the flare of my nostrils covered with blue veins; my hair is matted. The first touch of gray streaks my temples. A bit early for my age. But such is our job—nothing to be done about it. [It is hard work to serve the state.]” Eng. ДО 5.

48 “Tears well up in my eyes. It’s the *hangover*, of course.” Eng. ДО 54, emphasis in original.

49 От Федьки утром пахнет хуже, чем вечером. Это—*правда* его тела, и от нее никуда не денешься. “Fedka smells worse in the morning than in the evening. That’s the *truth* of his body, and there’s nothing to be done about it.” ДО 7; Eng. ДО 5, emphasis in original.

50 ДО 220; Eng. ДО 188.

51 ДО 223; Eng. ДО 191.

*Dream of the oprichnik*

The dream about the white stallion frames Komiaga's day, for it is from the same dream that he wakes up in the morning, just like so many other mornings, we are told:

Сон все тот же: иду по полю бескрайнему, русскому, за горизонт уходящему, вижу белого коня впереди, иду к нему, чую, что конь этот особый, всем коням конь, красавец, ведун, быстроног; поспеваю, а догнать не могу, убыстряю шаг, кричу, зову, понимаю вдруг, что в том коне—вся жизнь, вся судьба моя, вся удача, что нужен он мне как воздух, бегу, бегу, бегу за ним, а он все так же неспешно удаляется, ничего и никого не замечая, навсегда уходит, уходит от меня, уходит навеки, уходит бесповоротно, уходит, уходит, уходит... (ДО 5)<sup>52</sup>

The unique and essential stallion disappears, together with Komiaga's sense of poetic metaphors, throughout his business hours, although there is in fact one hint that it is potentially present whenever he lets his consciousness slip. During Komiaga's first assignment of the day, his obligatory rape of a disloyal nobleman's wife initially follows the verbal rhythm of the oprichnina greetings, mottos and sayings, but, as ejaculation draws near, and spurred by a stallion-with-no-rider metaphor to legitimize the need for duty and control, the rhythm gradually changes from trance-like and ritualistic to more gropingly hypnotic, much like his pursuit of the dream stallion. In other words, we are given another glimpse of Komiaga's disorientated, individual self in his orgasm:

Без этого дела *наезд* все одно, что конь без наездника... без узды... конь белый, конь... красивый... умный... замороженный... конь... нежный конь-огонь... сладкий... сахарный конек

52 "Always the same dream: I'm walking across an endless field, a Russian field. Ahead, beyond the receding horizon, I spy a white stallion; I walk toward him, I sense that this stallion is unique, the stallion of all stallions, dazzling, a sorcerer, fleet-footed; I make haste, but cannot overtake him, I quicken my pace, shout, call to him, and realize suddenly: this stallion contains—all life, my entire destiny, my good fortune, that I need him like the very air; and I run, run, run after him, but he recedes with ever measured pace, heeding no one or thing, he is leaving me, leaving forever more, everlastingly, irrevocably, leaving, leaving, leaving..." Eng. ДО 3, emphasis in original.

без наездника... и без узды... бес узды... с бесом белым... с бесом сладким... с бесом сахарной узды... с бесом сахарной узды... с бесом сахарной узды... с бесом сахарной узды... даляко ли до пя-а-а-а-а-ааааазды-ы-ы-ы-ы-ы-ы-ы-ы-ы! (ДО 31)<sup>53</sup>

The horse motif is recurrent and central in Sorokin's oeuvre.<sup>54</sup> Not aspiring to any general interpretation in folkloristic, biblical or other terms, nor to the possibly more specific symbolism of the stallion in *Day of the Oprichnik*, I confine myself to suggesting that this horse represents Andrei Komiaga's individual, or *personal* drive, which may thus be clearly identified as separate from the imposed norms and the fixed rituals. As such, the dream stallion is directly opposed not only to the seven-headed dragon Gorynych<sup>55</sup> and to the *caterpillar* of interlinked oprichniks, but also to the kennel hounds that fuck (sic) the willing fox in the bard Artamosha's scandalous song about Her Highness,<sup>56</sup> as well as to the волки сопатые ("sniveling wolves"), the group of select oprichniks whom Batia blesses with his intoxicated night speech about Russia's mission<sup>57</sup>—and possibly

53 "Without this work, a *raid* is like a stallion without a rider... without reins... a white stallion, white knight, white stallion... beautiful... brilliant... bewitched stallion... a tender stallion-galleon... a sugar-sweet stallion with no rider... no reins... no reins... with a white fiend... a sweet fiend... a fiend of sugar reigns... no rider... no rain, no galleon-stallion, galloping and no reins, no sugar reins, no sugary rains... galleon, galloping where the white sugar fiend reigns and the distant sugar rains, faraway, the reins galloping, trotting, sugar reins, galloping, cantering, sugary, cantering to the sugary, to the canterer, how faaar to the sugary caaaantering cuuuuuunnnntttt!" Eng. ДО 24, emphasis in original.

54 The horse motif—and the eternal, unsuccessful chase connected to some of its incidences—is also one of the few links between *Day of the Oprichnik* and *The Snowstorm*, in which the related image of the endless Russian field is expanded. A possible intertext in both works is Aleksandr Malinin's song, "Belyi kon'" ("White stallion," words by Mikhail Gus'kov), which was popular in the late 1980s and early 90s. The song's refrain goes: Белый конь, белый конь, я тебя потерял./Белый конь от меня по степи ускакал./Белый конь, белый конь, потерял я коня./Только снег, белый снег укрывает меня. ("White stallion, white stallion, I have lost you./The white stallion galloped away from me across the steppe./White stallion, white stallion, I have lost the stallion./Only the snow, the white snow is covering me.") See [http://malinins.narod.ru/white\\_horse.html](http://malinins.narod.ru/white_horse.html), accessed 11 January 2013.

55 Significantly, the collective drug-vision dragon "straddles the wind like a dashing stallion" (Оседлали его да как лиха коня). ДО 95; Eng. ДО 80.

56 ДО 147–52; Eng. ДО 125–29.

57 ДО 211–13; Eng. ДО 179–81.

also to all the fresh dog's heads attached to the oprichnik Mercedovs.<sup>58</sup> Unlike all these animals, the stallion is unique, white and beautiful, as if of another world, and the vision of it is rendered by our narrator Komiaga in an exceptional, more modern and more poetic style.

The white stallion is the most remarkable expression of Komiaga's individual dream and drive, and of its impossibility given the monstrous regime he serves. Even Komiaga's surname seems to underscore this impossibility, since it resembles a blend of the words for work horse (*koniaga*) and for coma (*koma*)—an apt image of our hard-working hero, who, conscientiously and often drugged, keeps on performing his role in the totalitarian carnival. Supported by small glimpses of Komiaga's weak individuality throughout his account of the day, the image of the white stallion forces the cracks in the pre-modern narrative wide open and allows the incongruity between collective norm and individual dream to become a fundamental issue. And this particular incongruity plays an important part in establishing the dark carnival and dark humour in *Day of the Oprichnik*, alongside other more straightforwardly humorous contradictions.

Komiaga's individuality problem, moreover, lightens the reader's heavy burden of co-responsibility and makes us laugh at and maybe even pity, rather than fear, the oppressor and perpetrator whom Sorokin has given us as our guide through his infernal future Russia. Sorokin's novel thus succeeds in diagnosing dangerous backward-looking tendencies in contemporary Russia,<sup>59</sup> but because they are portrayed from within and from a personal perspective, in other words because the novel is a refined piece of modern literature, they are also exposed as ridiculous, and their spokesman as, to some extent, a victim of circumstance and of himself.

58 Possibly linking the dogs and the wolves, the dog's head attached to Komiaga's car this very morning is that of a wolfhound (волкодав, ДО 13; Eng. ДО 9). Moreover, one of the oprichniks searching the nobleman's house, while knocking on the oven, jokes that he is the grey wolf (серый волк) from the fairy tale (ДО 28; Eng. ДО 22).

59 According to the author himself, events in Russia seem, unfortunately, to have made some aspects of his dystopia come true, see transcript of roundtable discussion in this volume. See also Nikolai Aleksandrov, 2012, "Vladimir Sorokin: 'Grotesk stal nashim glavnym vozdukhom,'" *Colta.ru*, <http://www.colta.ru/docs/9285>, accessed 18 November 2012.