

Porter, Robert

Aspects of alienation in Russian and other literature: borders and islands

In: *Dialogy o slovanských literaturách : tradice a perspektivy*. Dohnal, Josef (editor); Zelenka, Miloš (editor). 1. vyd. Brno: Masarykova univerzita, 2012, pp. 161-167

ISBN 9788021058507

Stable URL (handle): <https://hdl.handle.net/11222.digilib/132782>

Access Date: 28. 11. 2024

Version: 20220831

Terms of use: Digital Library of the Faculty of Arts, Masaryk University provides access to digitized documents strictly for personal use, unless otherwise specified.

ASPECTS OF ALIENATION IN RUSSIAN AND OTHER LITERATURE: BORDERS AND ISLANDS

Robert Porter (Bristol)

Абстракт:

Отчужденность – важная тема в русской и английской литературах. Она проявляется в русской литературе в формах границ и пределов, географических, лингвистических, психологических и культурных; изображение города тут тоже ко двору. Зиновий Зиник – русский писатель живущий в Лондоне и занимающийся вопросом эмиграции как литературный прием. Комедия его романов, рассказов и сочинений не маскирует серьезную сторону отчужденности. В английской литературе отчужденность часто вовлекает в себя лейтмотиф якобы необитаемого острова, где герой может найти – или потерять – себя. Эта тема ведет от Дефо вплоть до Голдинга.

Ключевые слова: отчужденность, эмиграция, граница, предел, остров, билингвистический каламбур, аутсайдер

At about 4 o'clock in the morning of Friday 9th December 2011 the British Prime Minister David Cameron, alone among the 27 leaders of the European Union, exercised his right of veto and dissented from French- and German-driven attempts to achieve greater fiscal integration within the Union. If you were a friend of David Cameron you were of the opinion that he was showing the bulldog spirit and fighting for the best interests of his country. If you opposed him you were sure that Britain was now left isolated and weakened. I was immediately reminded of passages in Karel Čapek's *War with the Newts*:

BRITAIN CLOSING THE DOOR TO NEWTS?

[...] the Government did not intend to permit a single Newt to be employed on the coast or in the territorial waters of the British Isles. The reasons for these measures [...] were, on the one hand the security of the British shores and, on the other, the continued validity of ancient laws and treaties on the abolition of the slave trade. (p. 106)

[...]

The British government [...] in a special Note to the government of the French Republic, stated that French militarized Newts had invaded the British half of the Channel and begun to lay mines there. [...] The French government thereupon declared that it could not tolerate a neighbouring country constructing submarine fortifications in the immediate vicinity of the French coasts [...] the dispute [should] be submitted, [...] to the adjudication of the International Court at the Hague [...] The British government replied that it could not and did not intend to subject the security of the British shores to any external adjudication [...] It seemed that neither country was any longer able to withdraw. (p. 169).

ANGLIE SE UZAVÍRÁ MLOKŮM?

[...] Vláda [...] nehodlá připustit, aby jediný Mlok byl zaměstnán na po-

Robert PORTER

břeží nebo ve svrchovaných vodách britských ostrovů. Důvodem k těmto opatřením [...] je jednak bezpečnost britských ostrovů, jednak platnost starých zákonů a smluv o potírání obchodu s otroky. (p. 112)

[...]

Naproti tomu britská vláda oznámila zvláštní nótou vládě Republiky francouzské, že francouzští militarizovaní Mloci pronikli na anglickou polovinu Kanálu a chystali se tam klást miny. [...] Nato francouzská vláda ohlásila, že nemůže nadále trpět, aby sousední stát stavěl podmořská opevnění v bezprostřední blízkosti břehů francouzských. [...] navrhuje, aby [...] byla sporná záležitost předložena haagskému smírčímu soudu. [...] Britská vláda odpověděla, že nemůže a nehodlá bezpečnost britských břehů podrobit žádnému zevnímu rozhodování [...] Zdálo se, že žádný z obou států nyní nemůže ustoupit.) (p. 170)

Two days later, during the evening of Sunday 11th December, I received an invitation from the Masaryk University in Brno to contribute to a *festschrift* for a Professor at that institution, a long-standing friend and colleague. Suddenly aware that the staff at the Masaryk University work the same unsocial hours as Europe's political masters and mindful of Britain's legendary insularity, how could I refuse? And the subject matter of my article would have to be „Aspects of alienation in Russian and other literature“.

Zinovy Zinik is a Russian writer, based in London, who has created a body of essays and fiction out of his situation as an outsider with strong insider tendencies. A recurrent theme in his *oeuvre* is „Emigration as a literary device“. His most successful work in Britain has been his novel *Руссофобка и фунгофил*, translated as *The Mushroom Picker*¹, which was serialised on BBC television in 1993. The pun in the title of this work (Rousseau/Russian) typifies his delight in bilingual word play and the manner in which the foreigner or outsider views his immediate geographical situation. In Zinik's works „Heathrow“ will generate thoughts on the Russian adjective *хитрый*, Harrods, where if you are rich enough you can buy anything, has the immigrant thinking of *заддость* (sic. double „d“); the great English poet John Milton will connote for the Russian the slang word for a policeman (*мильтон*). Hampstead, the fashionable and intellectual centre of London, has the Russian émigré thinking of *хам* and *стыд*. „Lager“, a type of beer more popular among younger drinkers than the traditional English „ale“, recalls the Russian for „camp“ – and not „pioneer camp“! British locations, whose names have lost all their connotations to their denizens, will become revitalised: Gravesend, Blackfriars, Seven Sisters (*Конец могилы, Черные монахи, Семь сестер*). Borders and closing doors become all important, while questions of belonging and identity abound. Looking at the world through the

¹ Зиник, З.: Руссофобка и фунгофил, Russian Roulette Press, London, 1984. The Mushroom Picker, Heinemann, London, 1987, translated from the Russian by M. Glenny.

Aspects of Alienation in Russian and Other Literature

eyes of an outsider is hardly new and perhaps Andrei Sinianskii took the device to its delightful extreme in his story *Пхенти*, where a vegetable from outer space crash-lands in the Soviet Union and struggles to pass itself off as a normal member of society while offering the reader grotesque descriptions of the world around him, recording for example his horror at the sight of the naked female form.

Living in London, but not infrequently teaching in the United States, in 2007 Zinik published – with typical perversity, in Moscow – a collection with the typically paradoxical title *У себя за границей*.² These essays, witty, erudite and perceptive, show a writer who is at once cosmopolitan and liberal. Alienated or insular he is not. His narratives and his observations, unlike Siniavskii's, are mostly rooted in the real world. Yet he is persistently conscious of his quasi-outsider status and his Russian roots. Like Nabokov before him, he has made every effort to assimilate.

The first item in the collection concerns Zinik's lengthy meeting with Anthony Burgess in Dublin in 1991, on Bloom's Day (16th June, the date on which Joyce's *Ulysses* takes place and, as the author informs us, is his, Zinik's, birthday). Burgess was an extraordinarily prolific polyglot who many feel did not gain the formal recognition he deserved. Stanley Kubrick's film of his novel *A Clockwork Orange* was, at the director's request, not shown publicly for many years as it was widely and – perhaps mistakenly – seen as responsible for a spate of violent attacks after its initial showing. Burgess was open to the charge of corrupting British youth; also he was a Catholic and also he lived largely abroad. He tells Zinik that for these reasons he will never be knighted, whereas Burgess tells Zinik that he, Zinik, one day will become a „Sir“. Zinik concludes:

Впервые в жизни я вовремя нашелся:

«Потому что», помлелдил я, нацеливаясь на парадокс, «потому что я не развращал молодое поколение. К тому же я – не католик. И я не живу за границей» (p. 20).

This first essay is set in Dublin, arguably the most literary city in the world. On a guided tour the visitor will be informed every few hundred yards of where James Joyce, Oscar Wilde and William Yeats were born, where they lived, studied and met their friends. Like Zinik, Joyce and Wilde became émigrés; and some 12 years of Yeats's early years were spent in England. Yet here we are on the very edge, the border, of Europe. By contrast, the final essay in *У себя за границей* centres on the Greenwich Meridian, near to where the author, we are informed, once lived. The Meridian runs in theory from the North to South Poles and in Greenwich, a London suburb overlooking the Thames, there is a strip of metal denoting its exact position. You can stand over it with one foot in the East

² Зиник, З.: *У себя за границей*, Три квадрата. Москва 2007.

Robert PORTER

and one in the West. Of course, we are still nowhere near Central Europe, with all its heightened perceptions of East and West Europe but Zinik somehow makes us aware of the divide that once was so real and has now dissolved, at least politically. The cultural and even psychological division may take longer to disappear, but globalisation generally and the works of Zinik (and a good many other writers from all sorts of backgrounds) in particular are hastening the process.

This last essay is entitled *Двойная география*. It offers a discourse on the Yalta Agreement, which divided Europe so effectively for half a century and raises the question of childhood memories and present-day realities, of how the “inner cartography” (our „bio-graphy“) struggles to come to terms with or align itself with the actual geographical setting in which we find ourselves:

Мы стараемся совместить эту носталгическую географию, внутренний компас памяти, со странной, чуждой нам реальностью вокруг. Не является ли степень смещения этих двух географий мерой поэтизации действительности? (p. 284)

This glimpse into the promptings at the back of Zinik’s art give us a *raison d’être* for his interest in physical locations, locations which are often deliberate English stereotypes: the pub, the cricket ground, the Christmas office party, the cocktail party. Zinik negotiates these venues with great aplomb, unlike some of his hapless Russian heroes. His urban settings are generally relaxed and unthreatening, at least on the surface – English hypocrisy looms in the background and urbanity frequently conceals condescension, hostility and outright ignorance. Zinik avenges his Russians by occasionally packing uninitiated English characters off to confront Mother Russia in the raw.

Yet Zinik’s view of the city (East or West) is never really ominous. His prose marks a departure from the traditional Russian literary depiction of the city. Gogol’s and Dostoevsky’s Petersburg is beautiful but claustrophobic, irrational, evil and a symbol of Tsarist tyranny. In *Besy* the evil spills out into the provincial town. The motif of the ominous city runs right into the C20th with Bely’s *Петербург* and Bitov’s *Пушкинский дом*. Arguably, it is there in various works by Platonov. It becomes crystallised in Zamiatin’s *One State* with its confining Green Wall and the regimentation of its citizens. Would it be outlandish to suggest that Solzhenitsyn, Dovlatov, Vladimov and other writers on the “labour camp” theme continue the tradition, creating as they do evilly concentrated microcosms? However, as we have said, Zinik’s business is with negotiating boundaries, not escaping beyond the Green Wall or the barbed wire fence.

Zinik’s boundaries are multifarious and ubiquitous – geographical, psychological, linguistic, cultural. This means that his essays are of necessity based on free association and are curiously open-ended, with the author delighting in exploration rather than discovery. One item in *У себя за границей*

Aspects of Alienation in Russian and Other Literature

provides an excellent example of this free-wheeling, yet thoroughly coherent, approach. „Бисексуальная кабастика“ begins:

Лондон – страна невидимых границ. Мы знаем детские легенды о магической двери в стене, о другой стране за каменным забором дома. Но иногда стоит просто завернуть за угол, и попадаешь в другой мир. За углом на северо-восток от нашей центральной фешенебельной улицы района Хэмпстед (Hampstead) начинается застройка собесовских домов – субсидируемое жилье для малоимущих, где выросло настоящее пролетарское гетто, белое, причем. (p. 176)

The reader expects a politico-sociological piece on the housing problems of London, but quickly he is alerted to cultural not geographical borders. David Beckham is the proletarian ghetto's hero, but Beckham, like a good many Hollywood stars has fallen under the influence of Madonna, who has moved to London and has become intrigued with the cabbala, the ancient Jewish mystical interpretation of the Bible. In Zinik's view, sympathy in England for the Palestinians goes hand in hand with the interest in Judaism, just as in the 1960s sexual liberation ran parallel with an interest in Buddhism. „В этом мире никогда не ясно, где кончается география – противостояние Востока и Запада, и начинается порнография, где бисексуальность, а где – Каббала“ (p. 177). Zinik goes on to recount how the defecting writer Anatolii Kuznetsov blundered across a border into a military zone and had trouble explaining to the patrol that challenged him that he was just indulging in the harmless Russian pastime of looking for mushrooms. The sketch map he had with him hardly helped! (This is one of several true stories that have befallen Russian émigrés which Zinik recycles in his *Руссофобка и фунгофил* and other fiction. The Jews of London have had their own districts with invisible but definite borders and then Zinik draws us back to Hampstead and recalls its reputation as a meeting place for homosexuals, another marginalised minority.

This fascination with borders is well within the Russian literary tradition. In the nineteenth century there was the recurrent motif of the writer having to escape Russia in order taste freedom, if not to the West then to Russia's colonies, Pushkin's *Цыгане*, Lermontov's *Герой нашего времени*, Tolstoy's *Казачи*. The trend continued into the twentieth century with Mandelshtam's *Путешествие в Армению* or Paustovsky's *Бросок на юг*.

Let us indulge in some Zinik-style free association and, by contrast, note the very important motif of “the island” in English literature, far stronger than in Russian literature. In recent Russian writing this critic can only recall Valentin Rasputin's *Прощание с Матерой*, Vasilii Aksenov's *Остров Крым* and Vladimir Tendriakov's *На блаженном острове коммунизма*; these last two involve metaphorical, rather than literal, islands. Pace Shakespeare's fixation with shipwrecks and foreign shores, culminating in the magical island setting of

Robert PORTER

The Tempest, arguably, in English literature the “island motif” began with Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) and made its way via R. M. Ballantyne’s *The Coral Island* (1858), Robert Louis Stevenson’s *Treasure Island* (1881–2), J. M. Barrie’s play *The Admirable Crichton* (1902) through to William Golding’s *The Lord of the Flies* (1954). Just as Zinik raises questions of identity and isolation through his contemplation of borders, the „island“ works of English literature generate new and surprising social relationships and human qualities. *Robinson Crusoe* appeared when the novel as a genre was still very much in its infancy, yet it has proved seminal. Liberated from the developed world Crusoe becomes enterprising, self-reliant, diligent and inventive. At the same time, his world is perfectly rational (the footprint in the sand may terrify him at first, but it must have a logical, explanation) and his relationship with Man Friday involves mutual respect, education, honour and morality. The myth of the „noble savage“ was born and served as a refreshing foil to a Europe and America which were fast becoming industrialised, corrupting and destructive.

The Coral Island took up the adventure aspect of the island theme. Three boys, Ralph, Jack and Peterkin, are shipwrecked on a desert island and prove remarkably resourceful. Comradship triumphs as they encounter cannibals and a shark, among other dangers. There is also an overriding sense of freedom, freedom from school, civilisation and parents. They are eventually rescued and their friendship continues beyond the confines of the island. *Treasure Island*, like *Robinson Crusoe*, has become a worldwide classic, popularised in countless stage and screen versions. Ironically, the author never really took this work all that seriously. Adventure, pirates, hidden treasure and one of the most colourful villains in fiction anywhere – Long John Silver – recreate the motif of the island as a place of sheer entertainment and excitement. *Treasure Island* is an amoral work in which a one-legged, murderous, treacherous thief escapes with some loot and persistently manages to upstage the ostensible hero and narrator of the novel, the young Jim. It is remarkable that Stevenson, who was forever preoccupied with questions of good and evil (most poignantly in *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*), breaks with the island tradition established by Defoe and Ballantyne and makes wrongdoing not just attractive but even rewarded.

It is a sad fact that J. M. Barrie will forever be remembered exclusively for his play *Peter Pan* (1904). Captain Hook and his pirates certainly owe something to *Treasure Island*, but Barrie’s real contribution to the island theme in English literature was the play *The Admirable Crichton* (1902, film version 1957), which turned the desert island into a place of comedy and pulled social status and mores inside out. The piece is very much in the manner of P. G. Wodehouse and Oscar Wilde. Lord Loam and his three daughters and nephew are English aristocracy through and through, yet the father has advanced ideas and once a month insists on treating the servants as equals, much to the consternation of his relatives and

Aspects of Alienation in Russian and Other Literature

indeed the servants themselves, not least the butler, Crichton. The household becomes shipwrecked and within a couple of years Crichton has become the governor of their island home, while the erstwhile idle rich prove themselves to be industrious and practical – and more than happy to accept subservient roles. Crichton is all set to marry one of the daughters, Mary. On their return to London they all revert to their original arrangements. „You are the best man among us,“ Mary tells Crichton, to which he replies: „On an island, my lady, perhaps; but in England, no.“ To which she rejoins: „Then there is something wrong with England.“

If *The Admirable Crichton* employed the island theme for satirical and even absurdist goals, it was left to others to annihilate the notion of the desert island as a place where, at best, good might flourish (Ballantyne) or, at worst (Stevenson), provide nothing more than a „rattling good yarn“. H. G. Wells’s *The Island of Dr. Moreau* (1896), in which a mad scientist practises vivisection on animals and humans, has been widely recognised as an inspiration for Karel Capek’s *R.U.R.* The island as a place of thorough-going barbarity reaches its apotheosis in Golding’s *The Lord of the Flies*. The shipwrecked boys, the finest products of an expensive Western education, revert to savagery in what is a clear parody of Ballantyne’s idyll.

In English literature the island can liberate, educate and ennoble. It can also brutalise and pervert. The same might be said of borders and boundaries in Russian literature. Zinik’s fascination with bi-lingual puns and the cross-cultural connotations thrown up by foreign words may make for some fine comedy, but he will never lose sight of the seriousness of us all having to confront boundaries, of modern man as an eternal outsider striving to step over into something unfamiliar – be it dangerous or reassuring. Raskolnikov’s crime (*преступление*) would be more accurately translated as „transgression“, the stepping over of a boundary – the better to discover his true identity? The boundaries that he steps over are the island that Golding and others have created. Perhaps all the best writers are in some sense outsiders, forever encountering borders. Zinik appears to be one of very few Russian writers who, finding himself *за границей*, feels *у себя*.

