Killing the Novel

The Conceptualization of Violence in Vladimir Sorokin's *Roman*

Stehn Aztlan Mortensen

– Or what, did the aesthetics in you rebel, so to speak?
– More the ethics than the aesthetics.[1]
Roman, Vladimir Sorokin

Contrary to its genteel image as cultured and therefore civilized, there is nothing proper about the Western literary canon. The tragedies of Sophocles and Shakespeare, epic poems like *The Iliad* and *The Tale of Igor's Campaign*, the futurist poetry of Marinetti, and the gory detective stories of Poe and Dostoevsky all converge around an aesthetics of violence. This blood-stained strain of literature also brings out the difficulty of juxtaposing ethics and aesthetics, or put differently: How, if at all, can we justify judging an artwork permeated by violence on its aesthetic merits alone?

The current chapter takes as its starting point the case of Russian postmodernist author Vladimir Sorokin (b. 1955) and

his conceptualist novel *Roman* from 1985–1989. How may a postmodernist approach to violence ultimately dismantle a text from within? Does this form of violence in literature disturb traditional mimetic models of fiction, and what, if any, is the relation between a work and its reader, given the polysemic nature of most literary communication?

Sorokin has repeatedly spoken out in favor of an aestheticism beyond the realm of ethics. His statements about works of art as being autonomous, self-contained systems of signs seem at first sight to make redundant most mimetic literary traditions aiming to reflect reality. However, we should also bear in mind that writers have historically operated under shifting mimetic paradigms: One could argue that the mimesis of realism was to portray the heart as a chunk of meat,[2] while modernism turned it into a formalist endeavor. Here, I wish to stress the postmodernist variation on mimesis, i.e., the simulacrum, which can be understood as a simulated hyperreality or truth in its own right, with no real basis in a prototype. While philosophers such as Gilles Deleuze and Jean Baudrillard have contributed to theories of the simulacrum, I would, in this context, like to turn our attention to Paul Ricœur, who developed a concept with similar potential. His theory of *productive reference*, sharing common ground with the simulacrum, is particularly well-tailored, I claim, to the logic at work in Sorokin's unconventional novel.

In his 1957 collection of essays *Literature and Evil,* George Bataille provides a theoretical grounding that lends itself to the recurring violence in Sorokin's writing, as well as his insistence on autonomy.[3] The suggestion that authors might well be culpable for the violence found in their writing does not mean, Bataille reminds us, that there are not persuasive reasons for engaging with literature that relishes in vice or partakes in Evil.[4] Sorokin's fiction is especially pertinent in this regard since his

writing is profuse with unbridled violence and meta-literary self-destruction.

Earlier in his career, when confronted with the extreme and, in the eyes of some, gratuitous violence of his fiction, Sorokin casually responded: "When people talk to me about the ethical aspect of an issue, asking how I can reproduce, say, pornographic or brutal literary elements, I don't understand such a question: for it's all just letters on a piece of paper."[5] No concessions, he claimed, should be made when giving way to fantasy: "I consider it sinful for writers to be afraid. One should be afraid for one's deeds, but literature is a person's fantasies, written down on paper, and nothing more."[6] This position lead him to conclude: "For me personally, literature is separate from life, my works are in no way tied to how I live, love, and believe."[7] He thus touted a sharp division between deeds and fantasies, as if literature had shed its mimetic reference to reality once and for all.[8]

One could counter that a depiction appears violent in virtue of its similitude to real-life violence, making its aesthetic forms phenomenologically dependent on real-world prototypes, and rendering absolute autonomy futile. Despite the metalinguistic posturing of Sorokin's fiction, his literary massacres must preserve its ties to reality in order to resonate with the reader at all, exposing *Roman* to an array of ethical considerations. Nevertheless, there are convincing alternative approaches to this common-sense logic. In what follows, I will discuss Ricœur's theory of productive reference, alongside Bataille's contention that literature's involvement with Evil is a mark of quality, offering alternative ways of rethinking questions of ethics, violence, and the preeminence of the mimetic paradigm. I will then turn to an analysis of Sorokin's novel itself, putting these theories into practice.

Bataille and the Evils of Literature

There are salient reasons for placing Sorokin in the category of so-called Evil writers. Author and critic Viktor Erofeev, for one, sees Sorokin as the "leading monster" of contemporary Russian literature: "Sorokin's texts resemble meat drained of blood and teaming [sic] with worms. The meal, prepared by a disappointed romantic revenging himself on the world ... provokes an emetic reflex on the reader's part, an aesthetic shock."[9] He places Sorokin in the tradition springing from Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du Mal,* pertinent in this context since it was that collection of poetry that inspired Georges Bataille to write *Literature and Evil* (1973). Bataille there turns the question of ethics in literature on its head, asking us instead to appreciate the ethical value of fiction that has the audacity to deal with Evil.[10]

On this exclusive list of audacious authors, Bataille includes Brontë, Baudelaire, Blake, Sade, Proust, and Kafka, to name the most prominent. One can see why Sorokin belongs in their company, not just based on the range of themes his writing engages with, but also because of how he pits different discourses and literary styles against each other to create an aesthetic cataclysm—an outpouring of destructive forces on paper: "Yes, a while back in the novel *Roman*, I brought together two styles, like two monsters, so they would devour each other and release an energy of annihilation and of language being cleansed, something I enjoyed immensely."[11]

Bataille operates with two opposing forms of Evil.[12] The first is a necessity ensuring that life runs smoothly; like hunger and pain, it has a purpose and drives you forward. The other, which is what primarily interests Bataille, pertains to the transgression of social taboos; this could, for example, be literature that explores phenomena like murder, incest, genocide, and torture, but not merely as a sadistic enterprise. A disinterested form of Evil must

transcend the subject, which is why a wicked act of personal gratification can never be truly Evil:

> Only literature could reveal the process of breaking the law – without which the law would have no end – *independently of the necessity to create order* ... Literature, like the infringement of moral laws, is dangerous. Being inorganic, it is irresponsible. Nothing rests on it. It can say everything[.][13]

In other words, literary communication is uniquely equipped to deal with transgressions and let them play out freely. Literature lends itself to anguish, suffering, and vice to be engaging, and can do so, in Bataille's opinion, unrestrained by issues of responsibility. Anguish, he says, will usually lead to Evil, e.g., by making a bad ending inevitable—Sorokin's novel is a case in point—creating *a tension* in the reader that shields literature from descending into boredom. Writers like Sorokin are, in this sense, culpable of creating Evil (be it a conscious choice or not). We will revisit Bataille's claims toward the end after we delve into the analysis of Sorokin's novel, but first, the question of "reality" needs to be addressed.

Ricœur and Fiction as a Productive Reference to Unreality

Returning first to his claim to absolute autonomy, suffice it to say that Sorokin may have been hasty in giving writers *carte blanche*. To follow Bataille, one could say that interesting writers are culpable until proven innocent. Nevertheless, it is equally problematic to charge violent literature with being ethically reprehensible *per se*.[14] The tension, as noted earlier, between the autonomy of art and ethical standards for literature is largely dependent on the mimetic congruence between real-world violence

and its literary representation. Another way to conceptualize this issue would be to elevate art above moral authority: Dostoevsky's Rodion *Roman*ovich Raskolnikov burying his ax in the skull of the pawnbroker could simply be an aesthetic device and hence not very violent at all. As a fantasy, it would be nothing but a formal experiment, which neither exists nor answers to anything outside of itself.

A more relativistic position would state that the farther removed from reality the artwork appears to be, the less its author is answerable for its ethical shortcomings, making literature into a field of negotiation. This stance sees literature as based on real phenomena, which have been so heavily reconceptualized that they verge on becoming qualitatively new altogether. According to this logic, the extent to which a book may lay claim to novelty—abandoning the real world in a pact with the imaginary—would instead determine its degree of ethical autonomy.[15]

What makes Sorokin's *Roman* interesting is precisely its frail yet operative referentiality, which is key to its meta-discursive playfulness. Paul Ricœur, whose theory is heavily indebted to Russian formalism, can help clear the way for a theory of postmodernist literature that threatens to undo itself.

As groundbreaking formal experiments emerged with the advent of modernism, the formalists rose to the challenge, launching a more nuanced theory of aesthetic autonomy, tailored to the newly emerging literary trends. Roman Jakobson proposed that the poetic function of language comes to the fore when words acquire "a weight and value of their own instead of referring indifferently to reality."[16] He proposes the idea of the *split reference* as guaranteed by the poetic function found in almost all communication, one that becomes especially dominant in literature. A split reference is facilitated by the emergence of the double-sensed message (in, for example, phonic equivalence), ensuring a split of both the addresser and the addressee.

In *The Rule of Metaphor,* Ricœur criticizes the modern-day tendency to speak only of the destruction of reference.[17] He opts instead for Jacobson's split reference. In "The Function of Fiction in Shaping Reality" (1979), Ricœur expands on how fiction, due to its ambiguous qualities, not only reproduces reality, but shapes it through what he calls *productive reference.* Ricœur distinguishes between image as fiction and image as replica. A replica, like a photograph, has a model and is another mode of givenness of the same reality (absent and present). Fiction, on the other hand, is not based on any given model. Much like the simulacrum, it refers to no original; rather, it is an image of unreality: "In that sense, the non-existence of the object of the fiction is the true form of unreality. ... The phenomenology of fiction has its starting point in this lack of symmetry between the nothingness of unreality and the nothingness of absence."[18]

Instead of referring to reality by simply reproducing it, literature makes reference in a *productive* manner; it *re*describes and thus reinvents reality.[19] Fictions may, therefore, discover and invent, even increase and augment reality. When reading literature, we are offered depictions, which is not the same as having an image; these aesthetic forms are evoked and displayed by language, a sort of "seeing-as." As a reader, you can enter the domain of unreality, the *epoché* of the real, in order "to suspend meaning in the neutralized atmosphere" called fiction.[20] Productive reference, he claims, is the great paradox of fiction, where literature has the power to conjure up a world through an image that has no existing referent in reality.[21]

Sorokin's ideal writer shares common ground with Ricœur's theory: "The good writer distinguishes himself from a literary craftsman in that he creates his own 'worlds' and renders them habitable, while a graphomaniac simply uses 'other worlds.'"[22] He similarly seems to relish in the polysemy of the world and concept of "Roman," in the way it both breaks and forges a bond

with reality, simultaneously embodying and disavowing its allegorical and mimetic anchoring.

Sorokin and the Corporealized Text

The material and corporeal quality of literature is vital to Sorokin's conceptualist project, which subverts an ideology of aesthetics by turning it against itself. His *oeuvre,* at times, displays an obsession with the body. True to Baumgarten's motivation for coining the term, Sorokin emphasizes literature's aesthetic, i.e., sensing, qualities, favoring an aesthetic change of emphasis—from the purely symbolically mediated to the sensuous experience of art: "I am constantly working with the liminal zones where the body invades the text. ... I enjoy the moment when literature becomes corporeal and non-literary."[23]

Sorokin contends that the Russian classics contain an excess of spirit, while the body has been systematically redacted, a legacy he is working to rectify.[24] One example can be found in his maximalist novel *Blue Lard,* in which the bodies and styles of famous Russian authors are reproduced in the form of clones, among them Soviet writer Andrei Platonov. In *Blue Lard,* the clone of Platonov writes a story about an engineer who keeps the train moving by throwing, instead of coal, the chopped-up "corpses of the enemies of the revolution" into the furnace.[25] Similarly, in *The Blizzard,* the protagonist goes to bed with a miller's wife who is morbidly obese; as they make love, she keeps addressing him like her little baby.[26] True to Bataille's concept of transgressive art—which explores aesthetically that which is unmentionable, shocking, and offensive to a given society—Sorokin notoriously flirts with abhorrence and taboo when reinserting the body, often excessively, into Russian literature. He reminds us of the hypersexualized, incestuous, smelly, violent,

and brutalized bodies that this tradition, in his mind, has attempted to repress. In its quest for the divine, he seems to imply that the body has somehow been lost, be it in the Christian search for God in the image of man, or in the Soviet veneration of the workers' steel-like bodies striving to ensure the advent of true Communism. Dostoevsky's and Gorky's heroes, therefore, in his eyes fall short of being even remotely realistic.

In conceptualizing the body both in and of the text, Sorokin underscores the materiality of the novel itself. Words can here be understood as intrinsically dead (much like how Bataille sees literature as inherently "inorganic"), i.e., lacking a life and will of their own. As a result, Sorokin conjures up an ontological paradox when writing books on the destruction of books, what one might call a form of literary necromancy—writing in a manner that defiantly saturates the lifeless text with pulsating bodies. If the text constitutes pure inertia, a collection of inanimate words, the literary tradition, in turn, can be pictured as a massive graveyard: As soon as something has been written or read, the moment it was purportedly meant to capture has already faded into the past.[27] Life in the present can, thus, never be encapsulated in writing. A literary narrative becomes something close to a post-mortem portrait. In his writing, Sorokin nevertheless insists on making renewed attempts at corporealizing the text, continually endowing it with a veneer of vitality, as a counterweight to the inflation of spirituality that he finds prevalent in the Russian classics.

Roman and the Meta-Literary Aesthetics of Self-Destruction

Particularly striking is how Sorokin's authorship repeatedly stages its own destruction, as it does in *Manaraga,* which features a chef specializing in *haute cuisine* grilling using rare first

edition books instead of charcoal.[28] No novel pushes this question of the literary body further than *Roman* (1994), containing a split reference already in the title. It translates either as *A Novel, A Romance* or *Roman* (a first name).[29] The protagonist, Roman, returns to his native village after his studies in the big city. Upon discovering that his childhood sweetheart has found someone else, he instead marries a certain Tatiana. Then the story takes a grim turn. The last hundred pages or so consist of undiluted violence, where the couple murders the entire town with an ax. Roman then kills his bride before self-destructing in the very last sentence: "*Roman umer*"—"Roman/the romance/the novel is dead." The novel is thus sacrificed once and for all in an act of excessive violence. Like the advent of nihilism, *Roman* marks a point of no return. There is no way back to valuing the novel as genre according to the values of the past.

But what or who is actually being slain in this narrative? The characters themselves are killed, while conceptually, the novel also exerts a form of meta-violence on itself, enacting the ritualistic killing of what Henry James dubbed the monstrous nineteenth-century Russian novel, as Nariman Skakov points out.[30] The book starts with upward of 300 pages reminiscent of classical Russian novelistic prose, in the tradition of Turgenev, Tolstoy, and Dostoevsky. One could easily read *Roman* as a proclamation of literary autonomy: a staging of "the death of the novel" in a metaphorical act of violence where the book, as a genre, commits suicide and self-destructs.

On the very first page, hyperdiegetically, in the frame narrative, we are confronted with a subtle prolepsis: "Nothing in the world is more wonderful than an overgrown cemetery on the edge of a small village."[31] The novel and all the people it purports to embody are dead and buried before the main story even begins. The implicit author thereby accentuates the novel's inherent thematic friction between living and dead. The graveyard

is bustling with life, plants are clinging to the wooden crosses marking the graves, the birds are singing, the bees buzzing. Yet, much like the opening scene of David Lynch's *Blue Velvet,* death is lurking underneath the grass in the form of bones, ashes, and decaying bodies. The wooden cross reads ROMAN, the name of the deceased. The novel, along with its protagonist and his fateful romance, is in other words over before it ever begins, pronounced dead from the very outset.

Around halfway through the novel, Roman ends up in a skirmish in the woods with a wolf that he ultimately slays to save a moose calf. Both animals end up dead, Roman wounded. The incident leads to an exchange with his mentor, Kliugin, the village doctor who presses Roman as to why he interfered in the first place: Why not just let nature run its course? They are, after all, just animals, bound to eat one another, die, decay, and become new grass for yet another creature to feed on.[32] Kliugin dismisses Roman's Kantian argument claiming that every human is endowed with "moral autonomy," "virtue," and "compassion,"[33] supposedly having spurred him to save the moose calf from the wolf. He asks Roman to imagine what would happen if all laws were suddenly to be suspended: "[R]ivers of blood would flood the earth."[34]

Human culture (everything from the arts to great armies and state institutions), says Kliugin, has but one main function: to quell human bloodthirst. "– Bach, Beethoven, Raphael—it's all camouflage, a cap under which *libido, tanatos*, the thirst for murder is seething."[35] This passage not only foreshadows the violent events to come; in fact, Roman and Tatiana's whole relationship is borne out of this supposedly merciful killing. She is tasked with nursing his wounds, whereupon they fall in love, marry, and go on their honeymoon killing spree. The discussion also raises the question of the etiology of human violence, whether it is a product of Freudian drives, as Kliugin suggests, or rather, as

Roman would have it, a willed act contemplated by our rational faculties.[36] The novel leaves the issue unresolved, whereas the plot becomes increasingly preoccupied with violence and bloodshed.

This narrative arch reaches its climax in the nuptial massacre, where Roman and Tatiana put Kliugin's wedding presents to good use: a wooden bell, to Tatiana's liking, and an ax, wrapped in silk for Roman, engraved with the words: "Once raised—let it fall!"[37] The newlyweds take the inscription literally. With what begins as a playful game, their rampage soon progresses into a full-blown purge, reenacting a traumatic history of Russian bloodshed, e.g., under Ivan the Terrible and Stalin.[38] Wherever they go, she first signals with her bell, whereupon he runs amuck with his ax. After one family has been purged, she rings the bell again, he takes her hand, and they walk over to the next house. Together they take the lives of the entire village population, over 200 people in total, listing the names of each murdered victim.[39]

As the nuptial bloodshed progresses, Sorokin's style of writing shifts significantly, suddenly changing registers from the lively and witty prose of realism—which at times seems almost eerily predictable in its distillation of the Russian novelistic tradition—to an obsessional, mechanical, and indefatigably repetitive description of the countless murders. Every death is described in meticulous detail as they move from house to house, searching out every member of the household hiding on the property, begging for their lives, and crying out in pain as he kills them off after she rings the bell. The monotonous recounting of the murders is told in a disengaged voice, as if from the perspective of a morally disinterested bystander:

> Tatiana began ringing the little bell ... Roman hit Maria Tverdokhlebova in the back with his ax. Maria Tverdokhlebova fell on the hay and began to scream. Roman struck Maria Tverdokhlebova on the head with his ax. Maria Tverdokhlebova screamed.

> Roman hit Maria Tverdokhlebova on the head with his ax. Maria Tverdokhlebova stopped screaming. Roman hit Maria Tverdokhlebova on the head with his ax. Maria Tverdokhlebova didn't move. Roman wiped the ax with hay and walked over to the edge of the hayloft. Anna Tverdokhlebova began to groan. Roman walked over to Anna Tverdokhlebova. Anna Tverdokhlebova groaned and moved. Roman struck Anna Tverdokhlebova with his ax. Anna Tverdokhlebova stopped moving and groaning. Roman wiped the ax with hay and walked over to the edge of the hayloft.[40]

After this sudden shift in style, the narrative gradually transforms into a ritualistic enumeration of his every move, growing increasingly repetitive and poetic, becoming a kind of rhythmic, spasmodic incantation or curse, calling for the novel's demise. Sorokin's death chant could be read as the 'kenotic' emptying of the novel's semantic potential through the incessant repetition of the word "Roman" at the beginning of every sentence,[41] to the point where the term ceases to function as a genre, a romance, or even a name, draining it of referential value.

Instead, the novel, at this point, plays more on poetic sound patterns by the repetition of certain words *ad absurdum*: "Roman laughed. Roman touched. Roman bent. Roman touched. Roman groaned. Roman shook. Roman sucked. Roman shook. Roman pounded. Roman screamed. Roman crawled. Roman stopped."[42] The painstakingly long and elaborate killing of the realist and romantic novel in this way signals the poetization of prosaic language. The poetic insistence of the murderous chant intensifies toward the end, a deconstructive progression making for increasingly simple sentences; Roman dismembering the bodies of his victims coincides with Sorokin deconstructing the novel to the point where it can no longer sustain itself and ultimately unravels.

The sentences get shorter and shorter, while the obscene violence only builds in intensity. There is an explosive dynamic at work here, in which the narrative voice ceases to embody subjectivity, instead becoming a self-sufficient, automatic, and meaningless blabbering as Roman's engraved ax slashes the novel into ever tinier fragments. Fragments from foregoing sentences are repeated, taking one element and bringing it into the next sentence, conferring an oddly poetic quality to the otherwise matter-of-fact narration.

At the same time, the ethical qualms and neurotic ruminations of Dostoevsky's Raskolnikov are nowhere to be found. Roman eventually gathers the innards of their victims on the church floor and holds a black mass with blood and various body parts.[43] He then turns on Tatiana, whom he kills and cuts into pieces, using her body parts as props in an unholy church service while laughing, crying out, and touching himself ecstatically, before he finally devours the various dismembered body parts and kills himself.

Conceptually, the end result pertains to several meta-literary levels. Some critics have noted how *Roman* attempts to bore and exhaust the reader with endless amounts of useless information and trite clichés of Russian life, described in meticulous and overwhelming detail,[44] without actually propelling the plot forward. I would argue that Sorokin is, in fact, exerting violence on the reader, draining her of energy, before, toward the end, all the pent-up energy is released. The reader is ambushed, caught unawares, and then overwhelmed by a deluge of action as the killing spree ensues. This swift transition of styles does not, however, remedy a new kind of boredom, as the reader is now instead exhausted by the profusion of repetitive violence. Sorokin details the indefatigable violence exerted by Roman and Tatiana to the point where the repetitive acts of violence ironically have the exact same effect as the absence of plot-driven action had earlier:

It fatigues and exhausts the reader, leaving her exasperated. On a meta-literary level, true to his conceptualist leanings, Sorokin's book is violent from beginning to end, armed with the weapons of severe boredom and a sharp ax.

This meta-textual move to some extent challenges Bataille's claims about boredom being anathema to "evil" literature; as Sorokin clearly demonstrates, it is entirely possible to combine the two through the violent mistreatment of one's readers. This aesthetics of violence aimed at the reader, likewise, depends on a productive reference as detailed by Ricœur: The violence enacted in the plot could be read as a metaphor for the literary assault aimed at the reader.

Unlike Dostoevsky's nihilist murderer who finds God in a Siberian prison camp, there is no redemption to be had for Roman nor the novel after the horrific bloodbath, despite the fact that Roman is 33, the same age as Jesus at the time of his crucifixion. *Roman* leaves nothing behind but dead bodies, broken promises of everlasting love, and a genre that has expired once and for all: Skakov understands *Roman* as a bloody ritual ensuring the death of the novel through an act of exorcism, a literary attempt at laying the Russian realist novel to rest.[45,46] I would like to take this reading a step further: Sorokin, one could argue, depicts incarnation through a split reference. By highlighting the body in the simultaneous demise of Roman, a romance gone awry, and the death of the novel in a Christological death rite (the novel's *kenosis*), Sorokin deconstructs not only the spirit of the novel genre, as well as Roman's body. *Roman* becomes the *carnalization*—to use a term by Mark Lipovetsky—of an ontological impossibility, making lifeless literature appear to us in flesh and blood, only to have this undead monstrosity commit suicide in the most violent fashion imaginable.[47]

Roman hence underscores its affinity with the unreal world. It creates a narrative space where the ambiguity inherent in the

poetic function takes center stage. This productive, poetic reference, weakening its ties to reality and strengthening its self-reflexive aesthetics, complicates any argument for ethical responsibility. Sorokin may, therefore, not have been entirely wrong in claiming that the fantasy of fiction is more or less detached from life. It could be that the ambivalence itself, i.e., the split reference, is what ultimately dies in Sorokin's *Roman*. In light of this reading, how does *Roman* comport with Bataille's literary visions?

The Complicit Reader

Bataille calls *Literature and Evil* a warning. It is essential, he claims, that we confront the danger inherent in all literature, as it enables us to see the human perspective in all its overwhelming totality.[48] It can therefore be argued that transgression, the instance when the human confronts and taps into her darkest desires, is ostensibly a strategy of preservation, a way to reassert one's borders.[49] Literature, through its transgressions, forces us to face human imagination at its most violent. It is literature that makes it possible to perceive the worst in us and learn how to overcome it. It ultimately lets us face our fears and deal with the horrors within. While reading, "[t]he isolated being *loses himself* in something other than himself. What the 'other thing' represents is of no importance. It is a reality that transcends the common limitations. So unlimited is it that it is not even a thing: it is *nothing*."[50] Transgression is ironically also a moment of reckoning that allows man to reflect on his moral position, thereby reasserting his sense of moral sensibility.

At the same time, there are legitimate questions as to whether Sorokin's novel can rebuild a moral base at all. We certainly have the tension of two styles clashing, creating an awareness of the transgression, which is key to the dynamics Bataille lays out.

However, the difference between the inside and outside of the two clashing styles seems to dissolve as the novel unravels, to the point where violence no longer entails breaking the law. Instead, it begins to assert itself as the only operational principle, a destructive force that tears down all existing structures, without the prospect of reconstruction, akin to a nihilistic disintegration where "the highest values devalue themselves."[51] If that border is erased, Sorokin may perhaps be entering into a new genre, a dimension reminiscent of splatter movies: a place that knows no bounds, where violence is the rule rather than a transgression.

It nevertheless seems clear that Sorokin's *Roman* represents a journey into nothingness, a form of literature that unravels its very fabric and thereby undoes the basis of its own existence. It offers a form of literary communication which, according to Bataille, suspends the position of both reader and writer, who lose themselves in fascination, a form of Evil that Bataille calls *the silence of the will*: "If the contrary of will is fascination, if fascination is the destruction of will, to condemn behavior regulated by fascination on moral ground may be the only way of really liberating it from the will." Literature that puts Evil front and center, which Sorokin's *Roman* undoubtedly does, is not by default bereft of morality; rather, "it demands a 'hypermorality'."[52] That is why we must confront Evil in literature, for instance, in the guise of violence: "A rigorous morality results from complicity in the knowledge of Evil."[53] Fiction can, thus, be consigned an almost cathartic effect, fine-tuning the reader's moral sensibilities, beyond the bounds of teleological utility. Not entirely different from Aristotelian *pathos*, the Evil identified by Bataille in Kafka or Brontë, which I think can be re-found in Sorokin today, could be seen as a form of purification through putrefaction: "in the excessive violence of their work, Evil attains a form of purity."[54]

Both reader and writer are trapped in this ethical predicament. The writer is compelled to enter into the sphere of violence

so as to facilitate this purification. Likewise, the reader consents to embark on a journey into the heart of darkness, through the very act of reading, but at the price of witnessing and partaking in the transgression of unspeakable taboos. This is the devil's bargain that Sorokin's literature has to offer. As a result, an added effect is that the reader becomes almost numb and unresponsive to depictions of violence. The ethical outcome of normalizing violence and brutality is that Sorokin's novel presupposes a degree of self-debasement, a gesture saying: "Look what I was able to do to you. Stripping you of compassion and humanity was far easier than you would ever have thought."

Roman inevitably demands an act of transgression, a complicity on the part of the reader, who is compromised by the very act of reading the overt violence played out on every page. This is what sets Sorokin's *Roman* so clearly apart from its comparable predecessors: Whereas Dostoevsky's Raskolnikov hypnotizes the reader with his almost manic monologues to the point of justifying murder, Roman, conversely, through his monotony, bores the implicit reader and leaves the reader utterly disengaged, insidiously producing numbness and indifference in the face of violence. The mere act of someone willingly agreeing to being exposed, over such a sustained period of time, to this literary massacre, bereft of any counter-discourse, is what ultimately dulls the reader's sensibilities, potentially turning compassion into cruelty, horror into heartlessness.

Having discussed the ethical ramifications of violence in fiction, we can posit that literature, as an image of unreality, has the unique ability to spur a productive reimagining of the world, a feature that short-circuits calls for authorial responsibility. Sorokin's novel *Roman* demonstrates how literary violence may be exerted on several levels simultaneously— dethroning hegemonic discourses through a number of triggering motifs and themes, both meta-linguistically and conceptually. He thus

stages the embodiment and deconstruction of the novel both as genre and love story, implicitly violating and problematizing his own writing at every turn, turning the novel against itself. This gesture, aligning his literature with what Bataille sees as Evil, may enable the reader face her innermost horrors. The question is not whether violent fiction is immoral *per se,* but whether it can provide a narrative and linguistic space for the ethically dubious. This fascination with literature springs, perhaps, from an enticingly lifelike image of unreality, unlocking both the most violent and benevolent of all impulses—the imagination.

Notes

1. — Или что, в вас эстетика, так сказать, восстала? — Скорее этика, чем эстетика. [All translations, unless otherwise stated, are my own.]
2. An image I borrow from the influential Russian critic, Vissarion Belinsky, who helped propel writers such as Gogol and Dostoevsky into the public limelight. Vissarion Belinskii, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii: Tom X, Stat'i i retsenzii 1846–1848* (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo akademicheskii nauk SSSR, 1956), 26.
3. Due to the scope of this chapter, my discussion does not encompass the empirical effects violence in literature may have on its readers, nor do I go into the question of censorship, such as the contentious debate on trigger warnings.
4. "Evil" with a capital letter may run the risk of ontologizing the concept, but I have chosen to adhere to Bataille's rendering of "le Mal." Bataille defines Evil as the transgression of taboos and social laws; it transcends all subjective concerns, as opposed to bad deeds committed for personal gain.
5. Когда мне говорят об этической стороне дела: мол, как можно воспроизводить, скажем, элементы порно- или жесткой литературы, то мне непонятен такой вопрос: ведь все это лишь буквы на бумаге. Dmitrii Shamanskii, "Absurd (O tvorchestve Vladimira Sorokina)," *Ofitsial'nyi sait Vladimira*

Sorokina, February, 2002, http://www.srkn.ru/criticism/shamansky.shtml.

6. — Я считаю, что писателю грешно бояться. Бояться нужно за поступки, а литература – это фантазии человека, написанные на бумаге, и не более того. Andrei Zaitsev, "Vladimir Sorokin ne khochet byt' prorokom, kak Lev Tolstoy," *Nezavisimaia gazeta*, August 2, 2003, http://www.ng.ru/ng_religii/2003-07-02/6_sorokin.html.
7. — Лично для меня литература отделена от жизни, мои произведения никак не связаны с тем, как я живу, люблю и верю. Zaitsev, "Vladimir Sorokin."
8. I use the Greek term "fantasy" (*phantasia*) and the Latin "imagination" (*imaginatio*) interchangeably. In Plato's *Sophist, phantasia* is presented as an opinion or affect in relation to an impression (i.e., a sensing experience), while Aristotle in *De Anima* III defines it as that which facilitates that an image (appearance) appears to us. Significantly, Ricœur wishes to replace this mimetic paradigm by seeing imagination as reliant on *language* as opposed to perception. Plato, *Plato in Twelve Volumes*, vol. xii, trans. Harold North Fowler (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1921), 264a–d. Aristotle, *De Anima*, trans. Hugh Lawson-Tancred (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1986), 428a.
9. Viktor Erofeev, *The Penguin Book of New Russian Writing: Russia's* Fleur de Mal, (New York: Penguin, 1996), 28.
10. Bataille's theory was also colored by his Catholicism, e.g., the concept of transgression springing from ideas of sinfulness, as well as his anthropocentric Christian belief that animality is the root of human taboos since it purportedly threatens our humanity. Transgression is in this sense a means of conservation, a way of engaging our animal drives, but in a manner where we ultimately renounce our excessive otherness in order to reassert the contours of our humanity. Rebecca Roberts-Hughes, "Transgression and Conservation: Rereading George Bataille," *Journal for Cultural Research* 21, no. 2 (2016): 166.
11. — Да, когда-то в романе Роман я столкнул два стиля, как два чудовища, дабы они пожрали друг друга и выделилась та самая энергия аннигиляции и очищения языка, доставившая мне колоссальное удовольствие. Vladimir

Sorokin, "Mea culpa?," *Nezavisimaia gazeta, April* 14, 2005, http://www.ng.ru/ng_exlibris/2005-04-14/5_culpa.html.

12. "Georges Bataille à propos de son livre La littérature et le mal," May 21, 1958, video, https://www.ina.fr/video/I00016133/georges-bataille-a-propos-de-son-livre-la-litterature-et-le-mal-video.html.
13. George Bataille, *Literature and Evil*, trans. Alastair Hamilton (New York: Unizen Books, 1979), 12.
14. Literary works may serve different ends, such as laying bare the horrors of violence or evoking pity, like Aristotle's cathartic view on the function of tragedy.
15. It would also be problematic to ascribe ethical responsibilities to a work of art since the text is not an agent, and imbuing it with responsibility would not change it. The text can only be perceived differently. A purely pragmatist approach, like that of Charles Peirce, on the other hand, frames the question very differently, instead seeing the process of interpretation as an interaction between signs, i.e., an open-ended, holistic exchange, where, rather than literature copying the world around, the world could be thought to consist of tropes similar to those found in literature. Terrance King, "Mimesis, Binary Opposition and Peirce's Triadic Realism" in *Mimesis in Contemporary Theory: An Interdisciplinary Approach*, vol 2 (1991): 66.
16. The Russian formalists were charged with having a flimsy relation to mimetic art in their writings, in which they allegedly dismissed life altogether. Jakobson defended the approach, arguing not for the autonomy of art *per se*—literature is, he admits, "an integral part of the social structure"—but by insisting on the autonomy of the aesthetic function, in literary terms, the literariness/poeticity of writing *sui generis*, where poetic language, i.e., the message for its own sake, comes to dominate. Roman Jakobson, "What is Poetry?" in *Semiotics of Art: Prague School Contributions*, ed. Ladislav Matejka and Irwin R. Titunik (Cambridge MA & London: MIT Press, 1976).
17. Paul Ricœur, *The Rule of Metaphor*, trans. Robert Czerny, Kathleen McLaughlin and John Costello (London & New York: Routledge, 2004), 265.
18. Paul Ricœur, "The Function of Fiction in Shaping Reality," in *Man and World* 12, no. 2 (1979): 125–126.

19. Ricœur makes a shift from perception to language, offering a semantic theory of the imagination. When the imagination is put to work new meanings emerge in language, which in turn produce new images. The labor involved in writing, i.e., telling and construing a story, is to him a vital prerequisite for this process to happen, in contrast to Bataille, who considers literature to be the antithesis of work.
20. Ricœur, "The Function ...," 133–134. *Epoché* is here the suspension of judgment, or, in Husserlian terms, the bracketing of reality. Ricœur draws on Jean-Paul Sartre's phenomenological study *L'imaginaire* (1940), where the imagination is not that which makes mimetic reconfiguration possible, as Plato and Aristotle would have it, but rather an "irreal" space for the spontaneous, creative, non-thetic imaging of objects. Jean-Paul Sartre, *The Imaginary: A Phenomenological Psychology of the Imagination*, trans. Jonathan Webber (London & New York: Routledge, 2004), 149.
21. Ironically, Plato's *Sophist,* in proving that untruth can indeed be uttered, relies on the premise that non-being exists; yet it is not the opposite of being, merely different from it. On the same basis, Ricœur is able to posit a theory where an image of non-being/unreality (i.e., fiction) may intervene in reality and even change or augment it. Plato, *In Twelve* ..., 237a.
22. — Хороший писатель отличается от литературного ремесленника тем, что он создает собственные «миры» и их обживает, графоман же пользуется «чужими мирами». Zaitsev, "Vladimir Sorokin."
23. Sorokin 1996, quoted in Mark Lipovetsky 2013, "Fleshing/Flashing ...," 27.
24. "In Russian literature, there's generally been very little body. Spirituality has been in excess. When one reads Dostoevsky, it's impossible to feel the characters' bodies: how Prince Myshkin was built, what Nastasia Filippovna's bust looked like. I very much wanted to fill Russian literature with corporeality: the smell of sweat, muscles moving, body fluids, sperm, shit. As Artaud once said, 'where you can smell shit, there you can smell life'." Sorokin and Semenova 2004, 4 quoted in Lipovetsky, "Fleshing/Flashing Discourse," 26.

25. трупы врагов революции. Vladimir Sorokin, *Goluboe salo* (Moscow: Ad Marginem, 2002), 59.
26. Vladimir Sorokin, *The Blizzard*, trans. Jamey Gambrell (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2015), 62.
27. See Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 128.
28. Vladimir Sorokin, *Manaraga* (Moscow: Izdateslstvo Corpus, 2017).
29. The book is dated 1985–89.
30. Nariman Skakov, "Word/Discourse in *Roman*," in *Vladimir Sorokin's Languages,* ed. Tine Roesen and Dirk Uffelmann (Bergen, Dept. of Foreign Languages: Slavica Bergensia, 2013), 51.
31. Нет на свете ничего прекрасней заросшего русского кладбища на краю небольшой деревни Vladimir Sorokin, *Roman* (Moscow: Tri kita, 1994), 3.
32. Sorokin, *Roman*, 175–179.
33. автономная мораль … добродетель … сострадание. This conception of human morality also corresponds to Sorokin's perception of traditional Russian literature.
34. … реки крови затопят землю.
35. Бах, Бетховен, Рафаэль, — все это ширмы, крышки, под которыми клокочет libido, tanatos, жажда убийства. [Grammatical and orthographic irregularities in this quote have been retained in the English translation.]
36. Dirk Uffelmann perceptively reads Kliugin's position as a typical example of Ivan Turgenev's distinction between will and representation, seeing it as reminiscent of Schopenhauer, noting also that Sorokin has called *Roman* a novel "written in a quasi-Turgenevian language." Dirk Uffelmann, *Vladimir Sorokin's Discourses: A Companion* (Boston, MA: Academic Studies Press, 2020), 62–63.
37. "Замахнулся – руби!" Sorokin, *Roman*, 321. Uffelmann, in opposition to what he dubs "plot-fixated studies," sees this slogan as a key textual trigger of violence, along with the "performative twists that motivate outbursts of violence, desecration or indecency in the early Sorokin." Uffelmann, *Vladimir Sorokin's Discourses*, 70.
38. Ellen Rutten proposes a related understanding of Sorokin's multimedia art, interpreting it as a catalyzing force for working

through Russia's collective Soviet trauma. See Ellen Rutten "Art as Therapy. Sorokin's Strifle with the Soviet Trauma across Media," in *Russian Literature* 55, no. 4 (2009). Meanwhile, Mark Lipovetsky, in his reading of violence in the works of Daniil Kharms, takes issue with interpreting the literary-performative violence in Kharms as an allegory of Stalinist terror, seeing this reading as reductive. Lipovetsky suggests that all these depictions of violence instead amount to an allegory of the act of creating art, of writing itself. Kharms's work tends to deconstruct itself and disappear into nothing, forever erasing whatever his texts were initially meant to represent. A similar dynamic seems to be at work in *Roman*, where Sorokin conceptually undermines his own work to the point where it ceases to function, exhausting the novel and highlighting the impossibility of writing novels altogether. Mark Lipovetsky, "A Substitute for Writing: Representation of Violence in *Incide*nts by Daniil Kharms," in *Times of Trouble: Violence in Russian Literature and Culture*, ed. Marcus Levitt and Tatyana Novikov (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2007).

39. In some editions of the book, Sorokin tagged on a conceptualist art work of sorts in the form of a list or index at the end containing the names of all his victims. Skakov makes a link to Ivan the Terrible's infamous mourning list, containing names of victims whose souls needed to be prayed for in the wake of the mandated massacres. Skakov, "Word/Discourse in *Roman*," 65.

40. Татьяна затрясла колокольчиком … Роман ударил Марию Твердохлебову топором по спине. Мария Твердохлебова упала на сено и закричала. Роман ударил Марию Твердохлебову топором по голове. Мария Твердохлебова кричала. Роман ударил Марию Твердохлебову топором по голове. Мария Твердохлебова перестала кричать. Роман ударил Марию Твердохлебову топором по голове. Мария Твердохлебова не двигалась. Роман вытер топором сеном и подошел к краю сеновала. Анна Твердохлебова застонала. Роман подошел к Анне Твердохлебовой. Анна Твердохлебова стонала и двигалась. Роман ударил Анну Твердохлебову топором по голове. Анна Твердохлебова перестала двигаться и стонать. Роман вытер топором сеном и подошел к краю сеновала. Sorokin, *Roman*, 358–359.

41. In the current case, the metaphorical *kenosis* in question refers to the emptying out of the god-like stature of the novel in Russian literature. For a comprehensive study of this trope in modern and contemporary Russian literature, where the trope more directly concerns the humiliated Christ figure, see Dirk Uffelmann, *Der erniedrigte Christus. Metaphern und Metonymien in der russischen Kultur und Literatur* (Köln: Böhlau, 2010).
42. Роман засмеялся. Роман коснулся. Роман наклонил. Роман потрогал. Роман застонал. Роман качнул. Роман обсосал. Роман качнул. Роман стукнул. Роман вскрикнул. Роман пополз. Роман остановился. Sorokin *Roman*, 396.
43. The black mass or sabbath motif is also important to Bataille's understanding of Evil in literature, especially in his reading of Michelet.
44. Lev Danilkin, "Modelirovanie diskursa (po romanu Vladimira Sorokina Roman)" in *Literaturovedenie XXI veka. Analiz teksta: metod i rezul'tat, edited by Olga M. Goncharova* (St. Petersburg: Rossiisky gosudarstvennyi pedagogichesky universitet imeni A.I. Gertsena, 1996), 155–59; Skakov, "Word/Discourse in *Roman*"; Uffelmann, *Vladimir Sorokin's Discourses,* 58–71.
45. Skakov, "Word/Discourse in *Roman*," 49.
46. Sorokin's attempt to bury the novel forever and wipe the slate clean to pave the way for new aesthetic endeavors in the future is *not* to say that his attempt has been unequivocally successful. However, in his own case, it has definitely been the case, given that he has struggled to write long cohesive novels after *Blue Lard*.
47. Lipovetsky, "Fleshing/Flashing …," 27.
48. Bataille's crudely anthropocentric view of animality concerning the human at the basis of this theory is another point of contention that should be further questioned before taking his analysis at face value: "What we are, hence all that we are, would be involved in the decision that sets us against the vague freedom of sexual contacts, against the natural and undefined life of 'beasts'." George Bataille, *The History of Eroticism: The Accursed Share volumes II–III*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Zone Books, 1991), 31.
49. Roberts-Hughes, "Transgression and Conservation."
50. Bataille, *Literature and Evil*, 13.

51. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, trans. by Walter Kaufman and Reginald John Hollingdale (New York: Vintage Books, 1968), §2.
52. Bataille, *Literature and Evil*, 41.
53. Bataille, *Literature and Evil*, 2.
54 Bataille, *Literature and Evil*, 61.

Bibliography

Aristotle. *De Anima* [On the Soul]. Translated by Hugh Lawson-Tancred. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1986.

Bataille, Georges. "Georges Bataille à propos de son livre *La littérature et le mal*." Interview by Pierre Dumayet, ina.fr, May 21, 1958, video, https://www.ina.fr/video/I00016133/georges-bataille-a-propos-de-son-livre-la-litterature-et-le-mal-video.html.

Bataille, Georges. *Literature and Evil*. Translated by Alastair Hamilton. New York: Unizen Books, 1979.

Bataille, Georges. *The History of Eroticism: The Accursed Share volumes II–III*. Translated by Robert Hurley. New York: Zone Books, 1991.

Belinskii, Vissarion. *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii: Tom X, Stat'i i retsenzii 1846–1848,* Moscow: Izdatel'stvo akademicheskii nauk SSSR, 1956.

Danilkin, Lev. "Modelirovanie diskursa (po romanu Vladimira Sorokina *Roman*)." In *Literaturovedenie XXI veka. Analiz teksta: metod i rezul'tat*, edited by Olga M. Goncharova, 155–59. St. Petersburg: Rossiisky gosudarstvennyi pedagogichesky universitet imeni A.I. Gertsena, 1996.

Erofeev, Viktor. *The Penguin Book of New Russian Writing: Russia's* Fleur de Mal, edited by Viktor Erofeev and Andrew Reynolds. New York: Penguin, 1996.

Jakobson, Roman. "What is Poetry?" In *Semiotics of Art: Prague School Contributions*, edited by Ladislav Matejka and Irwin R. Titunik, 164–175. Cambridge MA & London: MIT Press, 1976.

Kant, Immanuel. *Critique of Judgment* [*Kritik der Urteilskraft*]. Translated by James Creed Meredith, edited/revised by Nicholas Walker. Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 2007.

King, Terrance. "Mimesis, Binary Opposition and Peirce's Triadic Realism." In *Mimesis in Contemporary Theory: An Interdisciplinary Approach, vol 2: Mimesis, Semiosis and Power,* edited by R. Bogue, 65–76. Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 1991.

Lipovetsky, Mark. "A Substitute for Writing: Representation of Violence in *Incidents* by Daniil Kharms." In *Times of Trouble: Violence in Russian Literature and Culture,* edited by Marcus Levitt and Tatyana Novikov, 198–212. Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2007.

Lipovetsky, Mark. "Fleshing/Flashing Discourse: Sorokin's Master Trope." In *Vladimir Sorokin's Languages*, edited by Tine Roesen & Dirk Uffelmann, 25–47. Bergen, Dept. of Foreign Languages: Slavica Bergensia, 2013.

Nietzsche, Friedrich. *The Will to Power*. Translated by Walter Kaufman and Reginald John Hollingdale. New York: Vintage Books, 1968.

Plato. *Plato in Twelve Volumes*, vol. xii. Translated by Harold North Fowler. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1921.

Ricœur, Paul. "The Function of Fiction in Shaping Reality." *Man and World* 12, no. 2 (1979): 123–141.

Ricœur, Paul. *The Rule of Metaphor*. Translated by Robert Czerny, Kathleen McLaughlin, and John Costello. London & New York: Routledge, 2004.

Roberts-Hughes, Rebecca, "Transgression and Conservation: Rereading George Bataille." *Journal for Cultural Research* 21, no. 2 (2016): 157–168.

Rutten, Ellen. "Art as Therapy. Sorokin's Strifle with the Soviet Trauma across Media," in *Russian Literature* 55, no. 4 (2009): 539–559.

Sartre, Jean-Paul. *The Imaginary*: *A Phenomenological Psychology of the Imagination*. Translated by Jonathan Webber. London & New York: Routledge, 2004.

Shamanskii, Dmitrii. "Absurd (O tvorchestve Vladimira Sorokina)." *Ofitsial'nyi sait Vladimira Sorokina,* February, 2002. http://www.srkn.ru/criticism/shamansky.shtml.

Skakov, Nariman. "Word/Discourse in *Roman*." In *Vladimir Sorokin's Languages*, edited by Tine Roesen & Dirk Uffelmann,

48–67. Bergen, Dept. of Foreign Languages: Slavica Bergensia, 2013.
Sorokin, Vladimir. *Roman*. Moscow: Tri kita, 1994.
Sorokin, Vladimir. "Literatura ili kladbishche stilisticheskikh nakhodok." In *Postmodernisty o postkul'ture,* edited by Serafima Roll, 119–130. Moscow: LIA Ruslana Elinina, 1996.
Sorokin, Vladimir. *Goluboe salo*. Moscow: Ad Marginem, 2002.
Sorokin, Vladimir. "Mea culpa?" *Nezavisimaia gazeta*, April 14, 2005, http://www.ng.ru/ng_exlibris/2005-04-14/5_culpa.html.
Sorokin, Vladimir. *The Blizzard*. Translated by Jamey Gambrell. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2015.
Sorokin, Vladimir. *Manaraga*. Moscow: Izdateslstvo Corpus, 2017.
Uffelmann, Dirk. *Der erniedrigte Christus. Metaphern und Metonymien in der russischen Kultur und Literatur*. Köln: Böhlau, 2010.
Uffelmann, Dirk. *Vladimir Sorokin's Discourses: A Companion*. Boston, MA: Academic Studies Press, 2020.
Williams, Raymond. *Marxism and Literature*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977.
Zaitsev, Andrei. "Vladimir Sorokin ne khochet byt' prorokom, kak Lev Tolstoy." ["Vladimir Sorokin doesn't want to be a prophet like Lev Tolstoy."] *Nezavisimaia gazeta*, August 2, 2003, http://www.ng.ru/ng_religii/2003-07-02/6_sorokin.html.