Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, (anti)modernist

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12 November 2010

For Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, modernism was a sinister force, especially in Russia, where it foretold "the most physically destructive revolution of the twentieth century". Richard Tempest explores Solzhenitsyn's overt and covert (dis)engagement with Russian and European modernism, arguing that he employed modernist means to achieve anti-modernist ends.

Dieu a tout fait de rien. Mais le rien perce.
Paul Valéry

The entire course of the world has known but one truth, the truth of God.
Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn

Ezra Pound surprisingly believed that “all good art is realism of one kind or another”. [1] No doubt the author of Ivan Denisovich would have agreed. In his literary and aesthetic tastes he was a bit of a Victorian, seemingly alien to the joys, provocations, and conceits of the arts of the modern. He rejects “the quasi-eschatological mythologeme of the End that became well established in Western culture starting in the late nineteenth century, as in the death of God (Nietzsche), the inevitable and imminent decline of Europe (Spengler), or the disappearance of the novel (Mandelshtam)”. [2] Generally appalled by the stridently iconoclastic character of Russian and European modernism he particularly disliked the claims of its practitioners, or at least the more forward-looking among them, to have superseded and surpassed 2000 years of cultural tradition. In one acerbic comment he wrote: “It was suggested that literature should start anew ‘on a blank sheet of paper’. (Indeed, some never went much beyond this stage.)” [3] He makes the same sarcastic point fictively. The Red Wheel features a symbolist groupie, languid, mannered Likonya, a “citizenship of the universe” given to batting her eyes and declaiming Nikolai Gumilev’s death-affirming verses. A fan of the constructivist stage director Vyacheslav Meyerhold and the decadent chansonnier Aleksandr Vertinsky (her catholic taste = bad

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taste), she is wont to say things like: “The cultural life of the nineteenth century was very humdrum.” [4] As a literary lampoon, Likonya belongs in the same category of comic characters as Aviette in Cancer Ward, the buxom SocRealist poetess who likes her tetrameters ideologically “progressive”, but also just a little bit sexy. [5]

Actually, among Solzhenitsyn’s artistic negations, socialist realism looms much larger than symbolism or even modernism as a whole. His fictional texts are dynamic confutations of the SocRealist “mode of literary production”, to use Terry Eagleton’s term; as well as case-specific confutations of the subgenres of SocRealist prose, e. g., the revolutionary novel, factory novel, kolkhoz novel, spy novel, science novel. Or even SocRealist erotica, if there ever was such a thing. The writer’s entire fictional and dramatic output is oriented against SocRealist practices; in the same way that Tolstoy’s fictions before 1881 are consistently anti-Romantic in their aesthetics, ethics, and formal values (although after his terrible existential crisis of that year he began writing works that were, in a sense, anti-Tolstoyan). “The whole point about realism – real realism – is that it needs no identifying prefix. Solzhenitsyn’s work demonstrates this for all time.” [6]

In contrast, it would be difficult to cite many extratextually polemical anti-modernist representations or themes in Solzhenitsyn’s prose. Here the pouting Likonya is something of an exception. Of course, most of his works are far removed from the modernist aesthetic, indeed implicitly hostile to it, and none more so than the two cycles of Miniatures (1958-1963; 1996-1999). These elegiac, meditative, at times mournful pieces anthropomorphize plants and animals, rue the industrial or totalitarian uglification of the countryside, but seldom feature individual characters or relationships. The Miniatures represent Solzhenitsyn’s divagation into the genre of the prose poem, artistic territory originally staked out by Ivan Turgenev and Mikhail Prishvin and since then explored by a succession of nature-loving authors. This kind of writing has always evoked a sympathetic response among Russian readers, although an English-speaking, non-nature-loving receptor might find the Miniatures a mite too maudlin, the artistic sensibility suffusing them redolent of, say, William Cowper. For here Solzhenitsyn’s archaizing tendencies are on full display. Forests, fields, rivers and lakes, historic churches and bell towers, villages nestling in the folds of a gently undulating landscape, the freshness of a spring morning, larches wanly shedding their needles in autumn, a puppy playing in the snow, a duckling squeaking for its mother. But when things Soviet, things industrial intrude into these bucolic, sacred spaces, the mood changes. The poetic/prose I shudders at the sight of an automobile, a rubber-pawed, smoke-spewing monster that is a ghastly replacement for a horse or a camel, “that two-humped swan”. [7] Death is a frequent subject: in “The Elm Log” a piece of firewood about to be sawed into pieces is likened to a man with his head on the execution block. One of the few Miniatures with an urban theme is “The City on the Neva”, an ekphrastic description of the Leningrad/St. Petersburg skyline that treats it as an instance of pure architectural form: beautiful but heartless.

Each cycle ends with a “Prayer”. In the first of these orisons, penned just after the publication of Ivan Denisovich, the writer offers thanks to God for allowing him “to send mankind a reflection of your rays”. [8] In the second, which he composed in old age, he begs the Lord to have mercy on “long-suffering Russia” and her “disordered people”. [9] The prayers are intensely personal statements of faith, as prayers usually are, but there is more to them than that. Personal, yes - but not private: these are published texts, after
They adumbrate a theodicean connection linking the Godhead to the tragic, sometimes squalid reality of communist and post-communist Russia, with the writer assuming, humbly or otherwise, a mediating artistic function between God and country.

Erich Auerbach observes that Russian realism “came into its own only during the nineteenth century and indeed only during the second half of it [and] is fundamentally related rather to Old-Christian than to modern occidental realism”, an evaluation that surely would have resonated with the author of the “Prayers”. In fact, ecclesiastics like cerebral Father Severyan (The Red Wheel) or lay Christians like gentle Alyosha the Baptrist (Ivan Denisovich) and ethereal Agnia (The First Circle) are not uncommon in Solzhenitsyn’s fictions, but as a rule religious values and notions are presented obliquely, even counteractively. In March 1917 two terrorist harpies, Agnessa and Adalia, wander the streets of revolutionary Petrograd, thrilling and shrilling at the sight of Nietzsche’s The Antichrist being openly sold on Nevsky Prospect, that central avenue in Russian literature.

Back to the Miniatures. Although many of these prose vignettes, particularly the effusive descriptions of the scenery of central and northern Russia so beloved of Solzhenitsyn, veer into sentimentality, they all touch upon themes explored in his purely fictional works: history, tyranny, prison, people in nature, people in confined spaces, the poetics of the body, the ethics of artistic creativity, and the presence or absence of God in the lives of human beings. The references to Soviet totalitarianism excepted, there is nothing here that would have startled or puzzled the very same Turgenev or Prishvin.

So generically, stylistically, the pieces are out of time (if not out of place). This makes them the most problematic of all of Solzhenitsyn’s creations. In our jaded, knowing, quotational culture the Miniatures positively tempt the informed reader to approach them tongue firmly in cheek or fingers rigidly crossed behind his back: to consume them as pastiche. And yet. The narrative/poetic voice is so ingenuous, the works so patently defenceless against a mocking reader-response that – perhaps – they are invulnerable to such sly postmodernist treatment. Perhaps.

But what about Solzhenitsyn’s (dis)engagement with modernism? He associates its practitioners with the radical left, rather than the radical right, D’Annunzio, Marinetti, Dali, Nolde, Hamsun, Brasillach, Céline, Wyndham Lewis, and Pound himself notwithstanding. (And let us not forget Russia’s own Merezhkovskii and Hippius, that symbolist/fascist tandem.) Modernism or “avant-gardism” was the art of “destruction” and played a sinister role, especially in Russia, where it “preceded and foretold the most physically destructive revolution of the twentieth century”. Moreover, it was not just the discourses of modernism but its very tropes that had catastrophic historical implications. The writer goes so far as to link the avantgardists’ stylistic experiments to the horrors of the national collapse of 1917: “Before erupting on the streets of Petrograd, this cataclysmic revolution erupted on the pages of the artistic and literary journals of the capital’s bohemian circles.” The guilt, perhaps the moral crime, is one of proleptic association. In effect, Solzhenitsyn accuses modernism of being teleologically complicit in the national collapse of 1917, if not of actually causing it.

The writer singles out the Futurists for special censure as the artistic enablers and collaborators of the new Bolshevik regime which in turn entrusted them with “power to
administrate over culture”, until culture and country – and the Futurists themselves – were engulfed by “a 70-year-long ice age”. [14] He may have been thinking of Yevgeny Zamyatin’s story “The Cave” (1920) with its depiction of revolutionary Petrograd as a land of glaciers and snow drifts and mammoths where terrified members of the former middle class revert to their inner and outer caveman. Solzhenitsyn has a particular disdain for Vladimir Mayakovsky, the most famous Russian Futurist of them all. In The First Circle Klara Makarygin, whose views on literature are the author’s, thinks of Mayakovsky not as cutting-edge and shocking, but boring, boring, boring! And as for that modernist fellow-traveller, the lavishly-moustachioed Maxim Gorky, Solzhenitsyn’s heroine finds him “so very right, but so very unalluring”. [15] She may have a point.

Yet, in the same novel the truth-seeking Innokenty Volodin is culturally intoxicated when he stumbles across a treasure trove of letters and journals from the Russian Silver Age. Those years of symbolist decadence and futurist scandal-mongering were, it turns out, a time of artistic vitality and achievement: “Early twentieth-century Russia, with its ideological battles, its dizzy proliferation of trends and movements, its unbridled imagination, and its anxious forebodings, looked out at Innokenty from these yellowing pages…” [16]

Things, it seems, are not that simple where the author’s attitude to modernism is concerned.

In a 1976 interview Solzhenitsyn was asked to list his most important literary influences. Predictably, he named Pushkin, as well as the later Tolstoy (whom he liked better than the creator of War and Peace and Anna Karenina), but also John Dos Passos, Marina Tsvetaeva, and Zamyatin. [17] Now, the last three are all luminaries of modernism. Even the Tolstoy of the post-Anna Karenina period was not only a (sceptical) witness to the early stages of that literary model but actually anticipated some of its techniques and treatments of the written word.

Solzhenitsyn’s take on Zamyatin is revealing:

I made him one of my teachers in matters of syntax... Once Zamyatin sketches a scene or a character, he avoids adding a single superfluous word, with so much remaining implicit that some readers may be left none the wiser. [...] But most of all I like the tightness of his syntax. [18]

These comments function on the plane of writerly pragmatics, but we may assume that Solzhenitsyn’s fondness for the author of We has a broader conceptual frame. After all, both men were scientists by education who were preoccupied by the modern cultural opposition between science and the arts; both mined mathematics as a rich source of symbols and referents; both reversed the Jacobsonian rule that (non-modernist) prose tends toward metonymy, by emphatically privileging metaphor in their narratives (though they also like synecdoches); both were political satirists of the first water who employed their comic gifts to ridicule and deconstruct the significant myth of communism and its sub-myths and constituent mythemes.

I should also mention Solzhenitsyn’s 1972 letter to the Swedish Academy in which he
nominated Vladimir Nabokov for the Nobel Prize for Literature, describing him as a master of “psychological observation”, “elaborate word play”, and “scintillating” formal compositions. Nabokov, he avers, is one of those rare authors who are “identifiable from a single paragraph” [19] – a point that applies equally well to Solzhenitsyn himself. Still, these encomiastic declarations tell us nothing about which of Nabokov’s fictions he liked and little about what it was that he liked about them. [20] The letter does hint, however, at an irreducible readerly response: one of keen, sensuous pleasure. It would be fair to conclude that our author simply relished Nabokov: writers can read other writers for enjoyment, after all. Especially when the enjoyment stems from the consumption of aesthetic meanings covering and beautifying things that are foreign, perhaps even wrong in one’s own book: “The pleasure of the text does not prefer one ideology to another.” [21]

As for Nabokov, he utterly failed to see any artistic merit in Solzhenitsyn’s fictions and even in *The Gulag Archipelago*, which he sniffily dismissed as “juicy journalesque”. [22] This might be classified as one of Nabokov’s crasser remarks, redolent of that peculiar streak of refined bad taste that occasionally surfaces in his fictions. [23] But then, in the Age of the Modern, great writers have been known to commit such lapses of critical judgment, the reason perhaps being that, as Barthes observes, “around 1850 […] classical writing […] disintegrated, and the whole of literature, from Flaubert to the present day, became the problematics of language.” [24] After that date, consensus across the culture(s) was no longer possible. Arguably, the only modern commentator who invariably showed impeccable taste in his evaluations of cultural figures and texts was Friedrich Nietzsche: but then, he was one of the authors of the Modern and, as such, the creator of a discourse that defined and articulated those very problematics of language.

Having conducted numerous textological trawls through Solzhenitsyn’s fictions, the only Nabokovian passage I can think of occurs in the (very) short story “What a Pity” (1965). The protagonist, whimsical Anna Modestovna, is a collector of raindrops:

The wavy patterns on her finger showed up more clearly through the drop, which acted as a magnifying glass.

Each drop was also a convex mirror. In this mirror, against a light background of cloudy sky, she could see dark shoulders in a coat, and a head in a woollen hat, and even the interwoven branches above her head. [25]


Clearly, the *Miniatures, Ivan Denisovich, The First Circle, Cancer Ward,* works which the Swedish Academy cited when it awarded their author the Nobel Prize “for the ethical force with which he has pursued the indispensable tradition of Russian literature”, [26] all possess that Old-Christian fictive quality identified by Auerbach. Solzhenitsyn directed his ethical force toward filling the culture’s moral and semantic voids with text, densely structured and, in later years, innovatively formatted. *The Red Wheel* is a sprawling family saga interspersed with representations of battles, descriptions of court and political life, mob scenes, surrealist screens, indented folk sayings, extracts from contemporary news reports, citations from official documents, private letters and
memoirs, and learned essays on a variety of historical topics. Or one might put it differently: it is a colossal collage of texts and tropes and topoi in which the family chapters are the mimetic glue holding together all these disparate, heterogeneous bits and pieces of diegesis.

The idea Solzhenitsyn wishes to put across in his epic is that in the early years of the last century the Russian masses and the country’s elites together took a series of wrong historical turns that led ineluctably to the tragedy of 1917. Although both sets of actors bear heavy guilt for the national catastrophe, that of the politicians and generals and artists was greater than that of the people: the exercise of power, whether material or cultural, bestows on those who wield it a national duty of care towards the state and its citizens. Solzhenitsyn’s views on this subject may be qualified as, to coin a phrase, common sense elitism. Be that as it may, with its epistemological uncertainties, indeterminacies of meaning, formal experiments, linguistic tricks, and structural disjunctions that grow ever more textually conspicuous as one Knot succeeds another, *The Red Wheel* would arguably satisfy most academic definitions of what is a modernist novel.

So here is one, by David Lodge, Booker Prize-winning novelist and literary theorist who certainly knows whereof he speaks:

First, it is experimental or innovatory in form, exhibiting marked deviations from existing modes of discourse, literary and non-literary. Next, it is much concerned with consciousness, and also with the subconscious or unconscious workings of the human mind. Hence the structure of external “objective” events essential to narrative art in traditional poetics is diminished in scope and scale, or presented selectively and obliquely, in order to make room for introspection, analysis, reflection and reverie. Frequently, therefore, a modern novel has no real “beginning”, since it plunges us into a flowing stream of experience with which we gradually familiarize ourselves by a process of inference and association; its ending is usually “open” or ambiguous, leaving the reader in doubt as to the characters’ final destiny. By way of compensation for the weakening of narrative structure and unity, other modes of aesthetic ordering become more prominent – such as allusion to or imitation of literary models, or mythical archetypes; or repetition-with-variation of motifs, images, symbols... Lastly, modern fiction eschews the straight chronological ordering of its material, and the use of a reliable, omniscient and intrusive narrator. [27]

“Experimental or innovatory”: check.

“Concerned with consciousness”: check. Especially of the political and cultural kind.

“The structure of external [...] events [...] is diminished”: check.

”Has no beginning [...]: check. Cf. *August 1914*, Knot I of *The Red Wheel*. At the beginning of the novel Sanya Lazhenitsyn, a character based in large part on Solzhenitsyn’s father but also reminiscent of the young Sanya Solzhenitsyn of the 1930s, goes off to war. These opening pages may be read as an extended series of citations from
the topographical prose of Pushkin, Lermontov, Tolstoy and Chekhov: as the hero travels westward across the southern steppe and the Caucasus looming majestically, sinistrally on the horizon, the expanse of Russia metatextually unfolds around him in every direction of the compass. Chapter two contains an analeptic digression. In August 1910, Sanya had made a pilgrimage to Tolstoy’s estate of Yasnaya Polyana in order to question him – challenge him – on the details of his teachings. And if Sanya is something of a portrait of the author in his teens, the sage of Yasnaya Polyana as depicted here cues us to another writer-prophet, the Solzhenitsyn of the 1970s and 1980s, who wrote the very novel in which Tolstoy makes his brief fictional appearance. In this sense, chapter two represents an instance of mediated authorial self-commentary, even self-referential irony; or at least prompts the reader to interpret it as such.

“Its ending is usually ‘open’ or ambiguous”: check. Cf. April 1917, Knot IV of the Red Wheel. This last instalment of the epic is followed by a one-page “Calendar of the Revolution” [28] which covers subsequent events in the spring and summer of 1917, and then a section entitled “Cusp of the Narrative”, an “outline” [29] of the partially written or wholly unwritten subsequent sixteen Knots. Next come the titles (though not the texts) of five Epilogues, respectively dated 1928, 1931, 1937, 1941, 1945. The reader is referred to some final, finite narrative, the textualization of which has been deferred – indefinitely. After the “Cusp” the epic turns into an unrealized object of readerly reception. The Red Wheel becomes a prologue to The Gulag Archipelago, with Solzhenitsyn’s fictional magnum opus and what is his greatest work of non-fiction implicitly, intergenerically linked into a formal duology of writings – a single, circular, grand metatext composed over a period of decades that narrates and commemorates every important event in twentieth-century Russian history.

“Allusions to literary models”: check. Cf. August 1914, chapter two and, indeed, most of the fictional chapters in The Red Wheel where Tolstoy is a constant, polemically scripted presence. Occasionally this is direct, citational. August 1914, chapter fifty three shows a Russian corps commander, General Blagoveshchensky, a self-proclaimed military Tolstoyan (now, there’s a contradiction in terms!) who actually employs War and Peace as a field manual and refuses to march to the sound of cannons without the spontaneous reactive impulse of the soldierly masses he notionally commands. However, more often Solzhenitsyn prefers to conduct his argument with Tolstoy on the plane of fictive implication and intertextual intimation. His in-text engagement with Dostoevsky follows similar lines, but lacks that polemical edge: in November 1916 the character of Father Severyan, a thoughtful critic of Tolstoy’s religious teachings, is accompanied by discursive and artifactual markers that refer us to The Brothers Karamazov.

“Eschews the straight chronological ordering of its material, and the use of a reliable, omniscient and intrusive narrator”: check – especially in the case of The Red Wheel.

And here is another, shorter definition of modernism by Brian McHale, who relies on the concept of the dominant as developed by Iurii Tynianov and Roman Jacobson:

The dominant of modernist fiction is epistemological [author’s emphasis]. That is, modernist fiction deploys strategies which engage and foreground questions such as... “How can I interpret this world of which I am a part? And what am I in it?” Other typical modernist questions might be added: What is there to be known;
Who knows it?; How do they know it, and with what degree of certainty?; How is knowledge transmitted from one knower to another, and with what degree of reliability?; How does the object of knowledge change as it passes from knower to knower?; What are the limits of the knowable? [30]

Every one of these questions is posed – and some are answered – in The Red Wheel, although such epistemological dominants and sub-dominants are occasionally present in Solzhenitsyn’s earlier fictions as well.

“How does the object of knowledge change as it passes from knower to knower?” asks McHale. How, indeed. Solzhenitsyn’s most important fictions have a history of textual instability. He would re-write, rearrange, shuffle and reshuffle the component parts of his published or unpublished or semi-published works with ostentatious writerly abandon, as required by his authorial preferences or the exigencies of his political situation in Russia or abroad. This is true of The First Circle, of which there are two published versions, the shortened and “lightened” “medical” (1968) and the definitive “atomic” (1978); but most prominently of The Red Wheel. The Lenin chapters were brought out as a separate novel, Lenin in Zurich (1975), long before the entire epic appeared in print, while other sections were serialized in the émigré journal Vestnik russkogo khristianskogo dvizheniia as they were being written (1978-1988). As for the integral text, this exists in three published forms (four, if one counts the 1971 edition of August 1914): that of the Vermont Collected Works (1983-91); that of the Moscow edition of the same, which bears the mark of considerable revision and some excisions, particularly in the last two Knots (2006-09); and an abridged four-volume variant (2001) [31] intended “for those who would like to read [the entire work] but do not have the time”. [32]

It is not surprising that as a celebrated author of densely structured literary productions that are extant in multiple published redactions, Solzhenitsyn has been a boon to that honourable cohort of Russian literary scholars, the textologists. They have brought to the study of his works the diligence and attention to the minutest grammatical or stylistic detail of an earlier generation of pushkinisty. They have their work cut out for them.

In his lifetime, Solzhenitsyn’s extensive and repeated re-workings of some of his most famous productions functioned as de facto, extratextual reminders of a controlling, ontologically irreducible authorial presence in the text. A stance that is certainly at variance with – in fact, militantly opposed to – the modernist ideology which posits that “the author will be invisible and unobtrusive, above or behind but not in [author’s emphasis] his creation”. [33]

Now, where Solzhenitsyn’s reception of modern literature is concerned, his attitude to Joseph Brodsky, arguably the leading exponent of modernist sensibility in late twentieth-century Russian literature, is especially revealing. On one occasion, he wrote to Brodsky: “I never omit to read your poems, whichever Russian journal they appear in, and I never cease to admire your brilliant artistry. At times I fear that in some sense you are destroying poetry, although even this you accomplish with incomparable skill.” [34] This is damning with strong praise! Discussing Solzhenitsyn’s letter, the late Lev Loseff, a fine poet himself, makes a telling point: “The elders don’t understand their juniors and apprehend their speech not as text, but in large part as semiotic ‘noise’, philosophical
‘chaos’.” [35] He also offers this observation: “Solzhenitsyn, who hopes to be read by the masses, creates a language that in its artificiality bears comparison to that of the futurists. Brodsky, who imagines his reader as, at best, his own alter ego, uses as his point of departure the demotic speech of his contemporaries.” [36]

Loseff is right. There is a long-standing dichotomy within the modernist tradition between productions that are arcane and intricate, demand a sophisticated audience, and therefore preclude mass consumption: viz. James Joyce or Ezra Pound; and those that, however avant-garde or experimental, are democratically or fascistically or communistically accessible: viz. Magritte and Dali or the Italian and Russian Futurists.

In his published comments on his own works Solzhenitsyn at times seems to embrace certain aspects of modernism, such as its aesthetic of ellipsis and discontinuity. On one occasion, whilst in the midst of writing The Red Wheel, he noted: “These days, I try to throw out every superfluous word. If there’s any way I can do without a word, I throw it out.” [37] Remarks such as this call to mind his appreciation of Zamyatin. Granted, Solzhenitsyn’s traditionalist statements probably outweigh his endorsements of some representatives or some elements of the modernist paradigm. In one of his interviews he mentions an international literary conference that took place in Leningrad in 1963 at which the death of the novel was proclaimed, to the horror of all reading Russia, or at least of the author himself: “And I had The First Circle already written and was working on Cancer Ward.” [38] Mind you, Solzhenitsyn always professed to dislike the term “novel”: “Odious word! surely we could find a better one?” he exclaims with heart-felt philological indignation. [39]

In a conversation I had with him in 2005 he explained his position thus: “‘Novel’ means a love story, a love intrigue. When this word is applied to the genre of large-scale works that are very long and have different formats and orientations, it narrows our understanding of them.” [40] Note that he refers to readerly “understanding” of long works, such as The Red Wheel: where the business of conceptualizing the fictional text is concerned, Solzhenitsyn privileges the epistemological position of the reader over typological or nomenclatural correctitude. A position that is very much in keeping with the modernist one, notwithstanding his strictures against the word “novel”. 

All this goes to show that Solzhenitsyn’s archaizing impulse coexisted with an interest in experimentation that actually grew stronger and more pronounced in his middle and later years, after he emerged from the literary underground and became an established – though never establishment - writer. Of the three chapters (44, 61, 90) in the final version of The First Circle that were composed in 1967-68, two stand apart from the rest of that novel stylistically and look forward to the formal innovations in The Red Wheel. In chapter 44 Volodin visits an ecologically devastated Russian village that is nightmarishly refracted and fractured through his urban, defamiliarizing perceptions. Chapter 61 describes another out-of-Moscow excursion, this time to the city of Tver, where the hero seeks out his uncle, Avenir, a degraded nobleman living in ungenteeel poverty with his humble-born, warm-hearted wife. They inhabit a shabby wooden cabin which, like Matryona’s house in the eponymous story, constitutes an ark-like, rickety place of refuge from the horrors of the twentieth century. Behind the house is a lovingly tended garden. We are never given an actual picture-in-words description of this blooming, leafy space, even though in the Miniatures, for example, Solzhenitsyn demonstrates that he positively
enjoys constructing verdant verbal landscapes. Instead, the narrator states the garden’s exact geometrical dimensions (300 square metres) and matter-of-factly lists the species of plants that grow there (catalogue prose is among Solzhenitsyn’s favourite devices). What might have been an island of colour and life among the novel’s succession of grey cityscapes, officescapes, and prisonscapes is instead scripted as a horticultural gesture of defiance. Avenir literally – literarily – *cultivates his garden* as part of a life-long privacy project, his endeavour to separate himself spatially and mentally from the Soviet terror state he abhors. His garden, then, is a materialized metaphor.

Inside the house things are just as interesting. For years and decades Avenir has been collecting old copies of Soviet newspapers in an effort to keep the historical record straight, placing them in elaborately designed vertical and horizontal arrangements in every room and corner of his home:

The swatches of yellowed newspaper hung up out of the sun and dust were just a noncriminal way of preserving the most interesting news from times past. [...] He couldn’t mark them, but he knew by heart what he could find in any one of them. They were hung up in such a way that the interesting bits could be got at without undoing a whole bundle every time. [41]

These faded sheets, discrete, dated units of Newspeak that are continuous historically but discontinuous materially transform Avenir’s ramshackle cabin into a fragile labyrinth of occult texts externalized and extended into physical space, as in a Borges story.

Any analysis of Solzhenitsyn’s poetics must account for where he stands in relation to his nineteenth-century predecessors Dostoevsky and Tolstoy. The author of *Ivan Denisovich* had his own take on this issue, and a pretty thoughtful one it is:

I have a very great feeling of respect and kinship to both of them, although in different ways. I am closer to Tolstoy in the form of the narrative, of the delivery of material, the variety of characters and circumstances. But I am closer to Dostoyevsky in my understanding of the spiritual interpretation of history. [42]

Elsewhere he refers to the “polyphonism” of his prose works. Now, if Solzhenitsyn is a polyphonic writer in the narrow sense employed by Julia Kristeva (cf. “The Novel as Polylogue”; 1972), then he is *ipso facto* a modernist: she holds that only modernists are polyphonic. But even on the most creative deconstructionist reading the author of *Ivan Denisovich* cannot possibly qualify as a practitioner of *écriture féminine*, which for Kristeva is the essential polyphonic medium, although she adduces some male writers, such as Joyce and Bataille, as self-transgendered authorial purveyors of these sorts of womanly texts. Solzhenitsyn, though, happens to be one of the most masculine writers in Russian literature, like his poetic bugbear, Mayakovsky, or the guitar bard Vladimir Vysotsky whom he originally disliked but learned to appreciate after he settled in Vermont. [43] [44] Of course, Solzhenitsyn never read Kristeva (nor would he have wanted to!), and he uses the term “polyphonic” in a loosely Bakhtinian sense – in fact, not unlike Bakhtin himself, who never bothered to define it and actually broadened its meaning alarmingly in the course of his researches, so that eventually it came to cover
pretty much every novel ever written. For Solzhenitsyn, the term is merely an indicator of diegetic complexity and multilayeredness. He means to say that his narratives contain a plurality of distinct, discrete voices and consciousnesses, some of which are antagonistic to each other and to the author’s: in one of the essays in the Literary Collection he coins the term “polyphony of ideas”. [45]

Like Dostoevsky, Solzhenitsyn not only allows his characters to speak their piece, but makes sure they put forward their best philosophical, ideological, or personal case: a multivocality constructed around “pairs of powerful arguments”. [46] Thus his representation of Lenin (The Red Wheel) who – in a manner of speaking – is a single extended stretch of interior/exterior monologue, his angry rants revealing a powerful mind married to an almost poetic lust for destruction; or the patriotic socialist Obodovsky (The Red Wheel), a skilled engineer committed to building a strong, though not necessarily democratic, Russia; or the “ethical socialist” Shulubin (Cancer Ward), an old communist who invents a quasi-Fabian, gradualist philosophy of political altruism; or the “technological elitist” Gerasimovitch (The First Circle), a passionate believer in government by those fit to govern who almost succeeds in bringing the author’s alter ego Gleb Nerzhin over to the “elitist” side. The novelist Galakhov (The First Circle) earnestly explains to Volodin what makes an honest socialist realist tick, while a thinly disguised Aleksei Tolstoy (“Apricot Jam”) cleverly justifies his decision to place his talents in the service of Stalin’s regime. And the list goes on.

Again like Dostoevsky, Solzhenitsyn even arranges for characters that are generally or particularly in the wrong to give voice to the (extratextual) truth, as happens with the vainglorious revolutionary Sasha Lenartovich (The Red Wheel) who is unimpressed, even repulsed by Lenin’s public persona; cynical Colonel Yakonov (The First Circle) who inwardly mocks the scientific ignorance of his Stalinist colleagues; or snobbish, meretricious Sologdin (The First Circle) who offers a critique of Marxist doctrine that shows intriguing similarities to Karl Popper’s The Poverty of Historicism and The Open Society and Its Enemies.

There are, however, important differences between Solzhenitsyn’s and Dostoevsky’s use of multivocality. Works like The First Circle and Cancer Ward are monologic and therefore more like Tolstoy’s; in fact, usually more so than Tolstoy’s. It is possible, even advisable to immerse oneself in the sexually paranoid world of the Kreutzer Sonata without sharing its author’s moral, religious or aesthetic beliefs, indeed whilst actively disagreeing with them. Some of Solzhenitsyn’s shorter works excepted, with him this is generally not the case. The informed receptors of Dostoevsky’s fictions are able to pick and choose among the various characters and their existential/moral/philosophical positions or even individual statements: as a reader of The Possessed, the young Joseph Goebbels, a fanatic in the making, was enthralled by Shatov’s declaration that far from obeying the dictates of science and reason, all nations are controlled by “an insatiable desire to go on until the end, while at the same time denying that there is an end”. [47] It is equally easy to imagine the future Nazi propaganda minister identifying with Kirillov’s man-god project or grooving to Stavrogin’s pranks and crimes. Solzhenitsyn’s author-centric discourse resists such a high degree of proactive involvement in the text by the receptor. Just try reading The First Circle as a laudatory portrayal of Stalin, or The Red Wheel as an heroic depiction of Lenin’s march to revolution!
The issue we must confront is: why does Solzhenitsynian multivocality fail to generate a dialogic discourse?

My answer is this. To start with, Solzhenitsyn’s narrators, whether first- or third-person, normally have a great deal more textual authority than Dostoevsky’s. Their voices are privileged; assertive; they lay down the diegetic law and are usually the source of an overarching, organizing, integrating unitary message that is present, on some narrative plane or other, at many given points in the work. Next, in those large stretches of text that are in the form of free indirect speech the narrator often ironizes a particular (unsympathetic) character’s stance; “spins it”, in a manner of speaking. In this way, the individual personalities and presences to which the narrative voice is opposed constantly undergo in-text subversion, sometimes sabotage, even if their voices are articulate, knowledgeable, informed, and intellectually on message. In The Red Wheel this happens to Lenin, Parvus, and General von François, to name just a few of the dozens of characters subjected to such sceptical, sometimes hostile treatment. In Solzhenitsyn, the implied author is all over the text!

A clearer parallel with Dostoevsky (as well as Andrei Bely and Joseph Conrad) is Solzhenitsyn’s fascination with revolutionists as psychological and cultural types. This is evident in The Red Wheel, with its portraits of Stolypin’s assassin Dmitry Bogrov; the two terrorist aunties raving to Veronika Lenartovich about the suicide bombers and regicides that had made their youth such bliss; Veronika’s Bolshevik brother Sasha, a revolutionary hero in his own mind; or the saturnine anarcho-communist Zhora who brutally takes Varya Matveeva’s virginity at the beginning of August 1914. Revolutionary sub-types like the naively fellow-travelling Sonya Arkhangorodsky also receive fictive attention throughout the four Knots. And Solzhenitsyn shows a Dostoevskian delight in lampooning half-baked ideological speech, usually of the Soviet hack variety, as in his portrayal of Rakhmankul Shamsetdinov, the comic lecturer on Marxism-Leninism in The First Circle, while The Red Wheel contains a gallery of revolutionary orators who are as logorrheic as they are politically extreme.

So, Solzhenitsyn’s unacknowledged or half-acknowledged affinity with modernism may perhaps best be understood on the plane of reader response. Umberto Eco posits that the practices and discourses of the text and its receptor are distinct and autonomous: “Every act of reading is a difficult transaction between the competence of the reader (the reader’s world knowledge) and the kind of competence that a given text postulates in order to be read in an economic way.” The operative words here are “difficult” and “economic”. It follows that the critical reader’s reward for his onerous task of analysis and interpretation is the right to generate new textual meanings – fictive, aesthetic, cultural, even political – subject to certain specific analytical/ interpretative constraints, of course. Eco calls this procedure “moderate deconstructionism”. [48] Solzhenitsyn’s post-1968 fictions, with their high diegetic content, offer more opportunities in this regard than the novels and stories that first made him famous.

In these earlier works the relationship between text and receptor is hierarchical; the transactions between them perforce “economic”, to go back to Eco. The text imposes itself on the receptor, becoming not so much the object but the subject of his perception. Instead of consuming the story or novel, the enthralled, textually transfixed reader is consumed by it. Let us recall the traumatized astonishment of the Novy mir subscribers
in November 1962 when they began reading *Ivan Denisovich* and found themselves unwittingly - unwillingly - carried to the terrible world of the camp. Or consider *The First Circle*. What we have is an isochronous text: one can easily imagine some alert, sleepless soul taking three days and nights to plough through this 700-page narrative of the 72 hours in the life of Volodin, Nerzhin, and their families, friends and enemies. Here isochrony = insomnia. Indeed, Tvardovsky spent exactly 72 hours pouring over the novel - in its expurgated “medical” form - when he visited Solzhenityn in Riazan in May 1964, an event chronicled in *The Oak and the Calf*. If read through without pause, as was done on that occasion by the editor of *Novy mir*, for whom this was a deeply emotional, even wrenching experience, the text imposes ever-growing cognitive burdens on the ever-more tired receptor: by the time he reaches the chapters describing Volodin’s arrest he will be (productively) exhausted. The reader’s receptor-fatigue will distort his perceptions and responses and render the fictive world more and more bizarre and surreal as Volodin reaches the moment of maximum danger and Nerzhin is sent to a Siberian labour camp. This is suspension of disbelief with a vengeance!

In the prose works he wrote prior to *The Red Wheel*, Solzhenitsyn follows the Tolstoyan practice of constructing and depicting the characters as textual simulacra, artfully designed thinking, walking, talking, emoting approximations of real people. One difference, however, is that his characters’ moods and views are usually shaped by external factors rather than the operation of internal psychological mechanisms, as happens for example in *Anna Karenina*. But starting with *The Red Wheel* – or some sections of *The First Circle* – Solzhenitsyn’s narratives becomes terser, in places even schematic. He uses fewer and fewer words to drape his characters’ bones in fictive flesh. Increasingly, his heroes and villains are more voice and less body.

We thus observe an overall shift from predominantly mimetic (minimal-narrator) texts such as “Matryona’s Home”, *The First Circle*, and *Cancer Ward* to predominantly diegetic (maximal-narrator) texts, such as *The Red Wheel* and the “two-part stories” of the 1990’s. This is especially so in the case of *The Red Wheel*. That discontinuous, fissiparous saga marks the end of Solzhenitsyn’s decades-long antagonistic engagement with SocRealism and ushers in his re-orientation toward the practices of Russian and European modernism. In the last two Knots the presence of the fictional characters grows ever more sporadic, diegesis consistently trumps mimesis, and formal experimentation comes to the fore, even while the historical content remains as densely packed as ever. Eco’s dictum “a text is a machine for eliciting interpretations” [49] is eminently applicable here. The reader must work harder, but his rewards are commensurate, for he acquires new rights over the text, if not complete readerly sovereignty. *March 1917* is an amalgam of shifting, collapsing narratives that show the Revolution rampant and triumphant, a kaleidoscopic carnival of murderous joy and joyful murder, while *April 1917* depicts its aftermath in similarly fragmented fashion, as a nation-wide mock-Lenten, true-demonic celebration of evil by a people and a generation who know not what they have done.

On the whole, Solzhenitsyn’s representation of landscapes, public events, social rituals, physiognomies, physiologies, psychologies, gender realities, and institutions owes a great deal to Tolstoy. So does his use of elaborately designed set pieces – formal meals, social celebrations, religious rituals, battle scenes – which signpost important plot developments and show the characters assembling and interacting in accordance with a given cultural code. He also employs those Tolstoyan devices of defamiliarization,
whether figurative or periphrastic, and (less often) emotional eavesdropping: the technique of describing a sensation that, though immediately recognizable to the reader, is one that he may have never verbalized or even named. Take, for instance, the reference in The First Circle to “the shame you always feel when you step around a woman washing a floor…” [50] Passages like these have a quality of immediacy and freshness that can make us start in surprise.

I have already referred to Solzhenitsyn’s Zamyatin-like fondness for mathematical allusions and symbols. This element in his prose was noted by none other than the writer himself: “Approached by art, every individual phenomenon becomes a ‘bundle of intersecting planes,’ to use a mathematical analogy: several planes of reality are unexpectedly seen to intersect at the chosen point.” [51]

These words may have been written in 1966 but they apply to all of Solzhenitsyn’s poetry, prose, and drama on multiple levels of form, structure and imagery. His productions are pronouncedly “mathematical”, “geometrical”. And once in a while those intersecting planes become narratively materialized. Take, for instance, this scene in March 1917, where Colonel Kutepov, a member of the monarchist resistance, narrowly escapes arrest by the new revolutionary authorities. The colonel is hiding in the corner of a drawing room connected to two enfilades which stand at right angles to each other.

Opposite each door was a large mirror, so that a person walking toward it could see himself from a distance. […]

In each mirror he saw a worker with a revolver in his hand running down a suite of rooms, drawing closer. The two workers were so much alike, of similar height and appearance and wearing the same black clothes and the same red rosette on the left side of the chest, so that at first he imagined that one was the reflection of the other; but then he realized this was impossible.

Then he understood that if he could see them from his corner, they should be able to see him as well. […]

But they did not see him. Probably they were enthralled by their own terrible appearance, since it was unlikely they were used to such large mirrors. Also, bright sunlight was streaming in through the windows. They reached the doors in unison, at the same instant, and barely turning their heads they saw each other with their drawn revolvers, both tired from running all the way to this empty room. […]

Without further ado, they turned round, also in unison, and hurriedly retraced their steps, and now the mirrors showed their backs which were also alike, but without the patch of red. [52]

The shape of the apartment and of its walls and doors and mirrors all have geometrical values, as do the routes followed by the twin custodians of revolutionary justice, so that the passage as a whole dialogically directs the reader to search it for coded meanings along those lines – and planes and squares and rectangles and cubes and parallelepipeds,
and on a different textual level, fictive vectors and scalars. There is so much fictive structure here: the clone-like similitude of appearance and motion and even self-perception of the two armed workers; the concordances between objects and their reflections; the symbolism of the black clothes and red rosettes; the proleptic intimations of Kutepov’s kidnapping by Soviet agents in Paris thirteen years later, in the course of which he died, either violently or of a heart attack.

Finally, the manner in which this writer codes his characters’ physical and moral selves is binary. Their bodies are refracted or marked through second-order signification, that is, onomastically, symbolically, metaphorically, metonymically. Each such semiotic alteration informs, shapes, or misshapes a character’s human worth or unworth; and is dual to a second imaginative sign that usually remains untextualized.

As we saw, Volodin’s Uncle Avenir (“future” in French) is literally, textually passé. His name is a counter-aptronym: he is the most analeptic character in The First Circle, for his thoughts and interests always focus on the past. Later we learn that the cretinous party secretary at Marfino, Stepanov, raises porkers at his suburban Moscow home: the ignoble pig farmer standing in implicit contrast to the noble gardener Avenir.

A different kind of dualized coding occurs in November 1916 where the arms of an economics lecturer pontificating about the political situation are compared to “gigantic pliers” or “wrenches”. [53] Clearly, these mechanized mitts are not the tools of his trade (to mix our metaphors). What we have here is a fictive déformation non professionelle that suggests the unarticulated image of a tooth or bolt that requires removal. But who or what is that tooth or bolt? And who should pull it out – and should it be so extracted? The passage positively prompts an imaginative reader-response: dialogism not on the macro- but micro-textual level.

To conclude. Solzhenitsyn’s vast literary and non-literary output may be read as a monumental attempt to reverse the modernist fragmentation and distortion of text and reality by relating the human body and the spaces it inhabits, constructs, and destroys to stable moral, political, cultural, and historical meanings. He is a wonderfully sophisticated, subtle, and aware artist whose achievement should in no way be underestimated or overlooked because of the controversy surrounding some of his political, social, or cultural views. His later fictions are, to a degree, as “readerly” as they are “writerly”, to use those famous Barthian terms. But all his works possess a formal, intertextual, and subtextual elegance that is often missed by receptors like Nabokov, culturally or ideologically primed to apprehend them as political docudramas or quasi-Tolstoyan exercises in the realist representation of life. So, if one approaches a Solzhenitsynian text as a dynamic subject of knowledge, rather than an empirical object passively triggering the reader’s suspension of disbelief, one may come up with interesting, even provocative conclusions. And mine is this: a self-proclaimed, dedicated anti-modernist, Solzhenitsyn learned to employ modernist means to achieve anti-modernist ends.

Footnotes


8. Ibid., 625.

9. Ibid., 634.

10. Solzhenitsyn did not intend for the first Prayer to become public; its release into samizdat took place "by accident" after his copyist allowed some of her contacts to read it.


13. Solzhenitsyn, "The Relentless Cult of Novelty".

14. Ibid.


16. Ibid., 439.


23. Although parallels may be discerned between Solzhenitsyn's masterpiece and the New Journalism of his contemporaries Tom Wolfe, Norman Mailer and co., this is not what Nabokov meant.


29. Ibid., 559.


32. Conversation with Natalia Solzhenitsyn.


35. Ibid.

36. Ibid.

37. Solzhenitsyn, Interview with Struve, 304.

38. Ibid., 301.


43. Conversation with Mrs. Natalia Solzhenitsyn.

44. In large part thanks to his sons, who were fans and urged him to listen to their recordings of Vysotsky. Nevertheless, while Solzhenitsyn appreciated his later songs, with their epic and folkloric elements, he was not as fond of the humorous ones and actively disliked those where the singer adopted the persona of a criminal. Among his favorite Vysotsky songs was "Wolf Hunt" (*Okhota na volkov*). (Conversation with Natalia Solzhenitsyn).


46. Ibid.


**Published 12 November 2010**

Original in English
First published in *New Literary Observer 103 (2010) (Russian version)*