The Genre Specifics of Eugene Vodolazkin's Novel *The Aviator*

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My paper examines the nature of genre in *The Aviator*, a novel by the Russian author Eugene Vodolazkin, born in 1962. An already established scholar of medieval literature, Vodolazkin announced his foray into fiction with the publication in 2013 of the international best-seller *Laurus*, a novel for which he received a number of literary awards. *The Aviator,* published in 2016, confirmed his success as fiction writer. The novel's plotline follows the fate of Innokenty Platonov, a Soviet citizen who in 1999 comes to life from a deep freeze in a Moscow hospital, the result of a medical experiment ordered by Stalin in the 1920s. Following the advice of his attending physician, Dr. Geiger, he begins keeping a diary as an aid to restoring his memory. Thawed after eight decades into the contemporary Russian society with computers, animal cloning, and relentless TV shows, Platonov compares himself to Robinson Crusoe, shipwrecked in an unfamiliar and bizarre world. Gradually, the narrative in Platonov's diary, compiled from his impressionistic recollections about his past and new life, redefines his identity for himself and for the characters around him.

According to Bakhtin, genre significantly determines the subject of a literary work (180). Muireann Maguire argues that the genre of *The Aviator* is "institutional Gothic," defined as "Gothic plots set in mental asylums, hospital wards, and other places of involuntary confinement," which prove "an important structural and metafictional element in their novels" (420). Therefore, "Vodolazkin's *Aviator* re-sites traditional European Gothic plots in analogous Soviet and post-Soviet institutional settings, including the clinic, the prison camp, and the mental asylum" (420). This formulation, however, could place Chekhov's *Ward Number Six,* and Solzhenitsyn's A *Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* and *The Cancer Ward* into the category of institutional gothic. A further problem may be that the major purpose of the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Gothic literature was to entertain the readers, an aspect alien to Chekhov's story and Vodolazkin's and Solzhenitsyn's novels. In teasing out greater complexity than Maguire affords, I argue that in *The Aviator*, the writer fuses a variety of genres, such as diary,

memoir, fantastic, mystery and historical fiction, in order to provide a narrative identity to the novel's central character, Innokenty Platonov.

Vodlolazkin constructs an uncanny diary genre—Platonov's notes are dated only by the day of the week, without indication of the month or the year. The novel consists of two parts. Part One is monological, constituted of Platonov's notes about his stay in the hospital, his talks with Dr. Geiger and the meetings with Anastasia. In Part Two, Platonov's text is juxtaposed with Geiger's and Anastasia's thoughts about him, creating a dialogized heteroglossia in a polyphonic narrative. By the end of the diary, the days of the week are not recorded at all, and empty brackets separate the various notes without indication of the characters writing them. Platonov documents the occurrences of events in broken sequences of years with place indicators instead of days and months. As, for instance, "January 1939. A railway station" (360), and "1958. A summer morning on the Fontanka River" (361), both of which come before "1923. March" (370). Such temporal form articulates Vodolazkin's idea, expressed by Platonov, that occurrences in a man's personal history, his perception of details, impressions, and ambiance are more meaningful than the events in world history:

> That discussion, though, is an event of personal history, and world history is but a small part—a prelude or something—of that. It is clear that under circumstances like that Waterloo will be forgotten, even though a good discussion never will. (360)

Vodolazkin's use of *ostranenie* technique (defamiliarization, alienation effect, making it strange) provides new insights into familiar historical events. For Platonov it "should touch on what occupies no place in history but remains in the heart forever" (320). His notes, complemented by Geiger's and Nastya's recollections, are an effort to pass their experience to the future generations, including his unborn daughter. Dr. Geiger records:

> Our cooperative writing is, if you will, an attempt to convey experience to descendants. The same thing mankind has been working on throughout history. It's just that our experience is, let's put it, unusual. That irritated me in the beginning, but I'm okay with it now. (357)

Dr. Geiger initially dislikes the alienation of history from affairs of the heart, but he grows to accept it.

In a related passage, Paul Ricoeur introduces the idea of narrative identity in the following context:

> The fragile *offshoot* issuing from the union of history and fiction is the assignment to an individual or a community of a specific identity that we can call their narrative identity. Here "identity" is taken in the sense of a practical category. To state the identity of an individual or a community is to answer the question, "Who did this?" "Who is the agent, the author?" (246)

Innoknenty's identity resides in the historical context of pre-Communist Russia, the Stalinist purges, and a Russia at the beginning of the twenty-first century. The most conspicuous historical episode is his experience in Solovki. The fantastic plot of Stalin's experiment to deep-freeze prison camp inmates, as a test for his own resurrection in the future and, consequently, his physical immortality, brings to a contemporary reader a new interest in the Gulag and the horrors of Stalinism. Prior to publishing *The Aviator*, Vodolazkin published in 2011 a book with narratives by Solovki inhabitants—monks and inmates. The writer regards the place as the embodiment of light and darkness and a metaphysical manifestation of the Devil:

> Соловки – это в высшей степени метафизическое место. Это не только метафизика света, но и метафизика тьмы, потому что дьявол – это такое же метафизическое существо, как и Бог. И имеет вполне реальные проявления.
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> [Solovki is a metaphysical place in the highest degree. It is not only the metaphysics of light but also the metaphysics of darkness, because the Devil, like God, is a metaphysical being. And it has very real manifestations.] My translation.[1]

This explanation by the novel's author constitutes the key to the reading of *The Aviator*, where the evil is embodied by Soviet states agents (vicious executioners and camp guards), plainly anti-human, driven by their unconscious drives and the slogans triggering it into violence. The issue then is the Soviet-induced unconscious which, in *The Aviator* is fed by the violence inherent in the Soviet system from its very inception. Innokenty remembers: "The guard enters, he has a stick. He beats you—on the head, on the shoulders. You slip from the shelf and hit your head on the floor, shrieking wildly" (188). In Innokenty's recollections the episodes of

[1] https://www.ng.ru/ng_exlibris/2016-11-03/2_persona_863.html

violence are associated with sensory memories—smell, sounds, colors, a kind of prison camp synesthesia, conditioned by a body's total mobilization of its senses to survive the total assault of an uncontrollable and unconditionally evil environment: "There were smells, too. Of squashed bedbugs. Of unwashed bodies […] the overall smell of despair, the color and sound of despair…" (174).

The dominant theme of the novel is the moral integrity of people in such inhuman conditions, the rescued remnants of "what makes a person a person" (149). In *The Aviator*, unlike in Solzhenitsyn's Gulag, the guards' brutality is not justified by the communist ideology. Vodolazkin does not believe in good or bad times or collective good and evil. He is firmly convinced that in any historical epoch, each individual is responsible for his moral decisions and actions:

> Основная борьба между добром и злом разворачивается не между людьми: она проходит в каждом человеческом сердце. Всякий раз человек внутренне выбирает, какую сторону ему принять
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> [The major battle between good and evil unfolds not between people: it is in each person's heart. Each time a man chooses inwardly what side he should take.] My translation.[2]

Innokenty shares Shalamov's thought that it is impossible to describe the dehumanization of many of the people who perished in the camps. Nevertheless, he thinks that "If power is to return to words, the indescribable must be described" (216). He contemplates how the same word can be used for describing beauty and horror. For instance, in the camp corpses found in the spring with eyes pecked out and ears gnawed off were called snowdrops. He also wonders how persons on opposite political sides could have the same last name. Voronin the executioner, a sadistic killer in Solovki, had the same name as Anastasia's father, professor Voronin. Nastya, whom Innokenty loves dearly in his new life, has the same name as her 93-year-old grandmother Anasatsia, Platonov's first love. Platonov's diary notes gradually unfold the story of his life which constitutes his narrative identity. He is simultaneously the writer and the reader of his biography. Ricoeur argues that the identity of a person is the identity of a

[2] https://www.ng.ru/ng_exlibris/2016-11-03/2_persona_863.html

character. Innokenty's attempt to answer the question "Who am I?" results in a disturbing discovery.

The plotline of the conflict between Zaretsky and Platonov, and the murder of Zartesky falls into the category of detective genre. Zaretsky, a snitch, denounced Anastasia's father without any particular motive, as he later admitted to Platonov. As a result, professor Voronin was executed while Platonov, charged with Zaretsky's murder, was sent to Solovki. Vodolazkin's nontrivial treatment of the detective plot contributes to Platonov's identity. The common confrontation of an intelligent and law–abiding investigator with a self-confessed murderer is replaced in *The Aviator* by the encounter of GPU agents with Platonov, who is charged with Zarertsky's murder without any evidence and sent to Solovki. The plotline adds to the authenticity of the historical setting and also provides an unexpected twist to the question "Who has done it?" And it is only in 1999 that Innokenty realizes that it was indeed himself who killed Zaretsky "with a statuette of Themis, the Goddess of Justice, on a March evening in 1923" (380). The realization comes to him when drawing Zaretsky's portrait where he showed Zaretsky as a human being deserving pity and compassion. If before the arrest Platonov viewed Zaretsky as a hideous maggot hated by Nastya because of her grandmother's stories, Platonov's drawing showed the ambivalence of Zaretsky's human nature and also convinced Nastya to almost forgive her grandfather's denouncer. Platonov cannot, however, forgive the executioner Voronin who survived, in 1999 was almost 100 years old, lived a sheltered life, and never repented. When they meet in Voronin's apartment—the victim and the victimizer, the only two witnesses still alive from the Solovki camp—Platonov could not think of any human trait in Voronin. Platonov's "anguishing remembrances" haunt him in his new life and the fact that he killed Zaretsky causes him mental anguish with deep pangs of conscience exhibited in the novel's confession sub-genre. Platonov's portrayal of Zaretsky as a tragic figure is the expression of his frank repentance, a constitutive element of a confession. His role of confessant cannot be achieved without a confessor. Although Nastya and Geiger figured out that Innokenty had killed Zaretsky, they did not discuss the fact with him. Seeking absolution, Platonov confesses to the priest that his repentance does not give him relief. The priest suggests that if asking forgiveness from God is not enough, he should probably ask forgiveness

from the man he killed. And so Platonov, servant of God, goes to the scene of the crime and then to the cemetery and repents to Zaretsky for his crime so as to restore God's Justice. But Vodolazkin does not tell us the effect of Innokenty's repentance. The absolution by the dead is never heard.

The Aviator is also a love story. After his rescue from the deep freeze, Innokenty falls in love with Nastya, who somehow resembles her grandmother Anastasia. He regards her as his first love, marries her and they expect a daughter. However, born in our time, Nastya is different from Anastasia. Platonov's quick aging brings a tragic touch to their love. His flight to Munich in the hopes of finding a treatment, his refusal to undergo a surgery with questionable results, and the damaged plane landing gear on his flight back to St. Petersburg create an open ending of the novel. The fantastic elements of the plot make possible a belief in Innokenty's second salvation. We may state in conclusion that Vodolzakin's fusion of genres in his novel conveys the complexity of Platonov's personality and indirectly of human nature.

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