HOW SHAROV'S NOVELS ARE MADE: *THE REHEARSALS* AND *BEFORE & DURING*

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Those who succumb to the heavy pull of Vladimir Sharov's writing usually agree that it offers an experience unlike any other. This singularity is rarely described through the customary type of literary analogy (Sharov as a cross, say, between Gogol' and Platonov); instead, physical metaphors are deployed to convey the intellectual impact of Sharov's novels, which "turn the reader inside out" (Olshanskii) or, in the Russian idiom for losing one's sanity, "take your roof off" (Berdichevskaia 329). Lev Tolstoy, with whom Sharov's fiction is in frequent dialogue, would almost certainly have deemed it too cerebral and abstruse to possess the universality he demanded of art, yet responses by Sharov's readers suggest that these novels offer a model illustration of Tolstoy's criterion for true art: that it must "infect" the reader with feelings first experienced by the author (Tolstoy 30: 62–68). Indeed, these novels depend upon a chain of such moments of infection that links protagonists, narrators, author and reader. As Tolstoy also demanded of art, they do not seek the reader's entertainment or pleasure, though their immersive power and the unpredictability of their development may yield that sensation for many.

The reader responses cited above testify to the originality of Sharov's artistic achievement, but they are also one-sided. As Mark Lipovetsky has indicated, Sharov's fiction is a "strange hybrid between the playing-out [*razygryvanie*] and working-through [*prorabotka*] of historical trauma." Its distinctive and paradoxical quality is to allow readers both to re-experience trauma by "immersing our perception in what is *other* [*drugoe*]," in strangeness and madness, *and* to supply the necessary distance from which to contemplate this trauma and tragedy, to see them anew through the use of "estrangement" (*ostranenie*). Sharov's eccentric quasi-historical plots plunge the reader's consciousness into the "logic characteristic of catastrophe" while also allow-

I dedicate this essay to the memory of Vladimir Sharov, with whom I had the immense privilege of discussing the two novels considered here as I worked on their translation into English. My sincere thanks to Caryl Emerson and to the anonymous peer reviewers for comments and suggestions that proved very helpful in preparing the final version of this article.

ing the fiction to be read as allegory and, thereby, comprehended. Immersion somehow proves compatible with "critical distance" (Lipovetsky, "Peizazh pered" 186).

Lipovetsky's astute comments may be productively paired with the author's clearest statement of his own intentions, made in an interview with Elena Ivanitskaia in 2002. In Sharov's conception, his novels are indeed "catastrophe's children," and derive from a "common past" (implicitly, the Russian twentieth century). Rejecting as "nonsense" the frequent accusation that he writes "parahistorical" texts, Sharov makes a powerful case for the underlying realism of the baroque convolutions of his fiction:

> God judges us not only for our actions, but also for our intentions. I write the entirely real history of thoughts, intentions, beliefs. This is the country that existed. This is our own madness, our own absurd. Millions died in prisons and camps, simply from hunger, while we managed to persuade the world, and above all ourselves, that we were living in paradise. ("Absurd nashei zhizni")

Sharov's gambit is that Russian history itself is mad and convoluted, not his own representation of that past. The task of his writing, therefore, is to be true to the reality of that past and to the methods in its madness, although, as the above quotation makes clear, the kind of truth operative here is not that of historical realism as conventionally understood; rather, it might best be understood in the tradition of fantastical realism, or "realism in the higher sense," once advocated by Dostoevsky (27: 65).[1] The latter's claims to see "into the depths of the soul" (27: 65) beyond contingent, everyday phenomena and "the standard viewpoint" (29.1: 19) have their historiosophical counterpart in Sharov's attempts to see beyond the ideological clichés of "the [history] textbooks we were all given at school" to the deeper strata of the past (Sharov, "Kazhdyi moi roman"). These strata include both what the Soviet historians did not record—such as the words of preachers travelling from town to town, village to village, without pen or paper ("Kazhdyi moi roman")—and of the underlying "thoughts, intentions, beliefs" that could have given rise to any number of actual events, whether or not they materialized in historical "reality."

The purpose of this form of higher realism is clear and unites all Sharov's novels: greater comprehension of the past on the part of both author and reader. As Sharov himself often commented, he did not make the period he knew best as a trained historian, the Time of Troubles, the explicit focus of

1. In private conversation, Sharov expressed an ambivalent attitude towards Dostoevsky's writing, whereas his admiration and affection for the fiction of Tolstoy seemed unqualified. However, he was, in my view, deeply indebted, aesthetically and thematically, to Dostoevsky, as was apparent well before the explicit engagement with that author in his final novel, *The Kingdom of Agamemnon* (*Tsarstvo Agamemnona*, 2018), which is as much an idiosyncratic "sequel" to *The Brothers Karamazov* as his penultimate novel, *The Return to Egypt* (*Vozvrashchenie v Egipet*, 2013), is to Gogol''s *Dead Souls*.

his fiction. Instead, he wrote in order to understand, through the very process of writing, what he had not understood before (Sharov, "My ne sposobny"). The task of his reader is to share with him in that labour of concentration and stamina, symbolized in the novels themselves by the long hikes over marsh and plain undertaken by his characters.

The key question of artistic technique, however, remains: how does Sharov manage to offer the reader both immersion in the past and the distance from which to reflect on it? Lipovetsky indicates one vital element when he comments that Sharov's "sluggish [*medlitel'noe*] construction of the mechanism that generates historical trauma supplies the essential critical distance" ("Peizazh pered" 186). Control of pace is indeed a crucial instrument of Sharov's fiction, which only appears to be monolithic and homogenous in its absence of dialogue, its distinctive voice and its regularly shaped paragraphs. The slowness born of difficulty serves, in accordance with the classic account of defamiliarization (Shklovskii 13), to focus and renew the reader's attention towards that which is being "estranged" (usually, in Sharov, some variation of Russian messianism); and this sluggishness has its counterpart, as we will see, in passages of narrative acceleration where, as readers, we are made to share in the sinister inexorability, even automatism, of the consequences of this or that type of "madness."[2]

In turn, however, this contrast between slowness and speed is itself only a subset of the broader dichotomy around which, I would like to suggest, Sharov's novels are structured, namely that of density and difficulty on the one hand, and lucidity and even transparency on the other. The convolutions of content and narrative organization that disorientate readers of Sharov have as their unacknowledged counterweight a search for clarity that is being conducted within those same novels at the level of language, style and metaphor.[3] Moreover, this is a structuring contrast in terms of theme as well as form, offering a portal to many of the mutually dependent thematic oppositions that are sustained and never resolved, notably that between good and evil. Indeed, these aesthetic and thematic opposites often fuse, leading to a further level of complication. As we will see, the "lightning path" of revolution can be associated with a retardation of intellect and personality, while the novels themselves are structured in such a way that the lucidity that is achieved at the end

2. Following Sharov's death, the same pattern was described in slightly different terms by his friend and fellow author, Mikhail Shishkin, in his extensive and eloquent essay-memoir *The Runner and the Ship*. After the "awkward, rambling" (*nelovko*, *putano*) preliminaries, "the reader sets off with the characters in search of salvation, of God." This search "very quickly turns into a frantic chase, which leaves you gasping for breath. From this point onwards it's impossible to put the book down" (Shishkin).

3. This duality resonates with the subtitle of Lipovetsky's article: "'Simplicity' and 'complexity' in contemporary literature'" ("Peizazh pered"); there, however, Lipovetsky is interested in categorizing post-Soviet authors at one or other pole, not both simultaneously.

serves to send us back to the complexity from which they began, in an echo of the historical cycles Sharov so powerfully describes, whereby apparent clarity of purpose leads to the most catastrophic and entangled of outcomes. For the reader, hard-won critical distance leads back to immersion.

The analysis that follows will seek to demonstrate these patterns in two fundamental works in Sharov's corpus, *The Rehearsals* (1986–88, pub. 1992) and *Before & During* (1988–91, pub. 1993), his second and third novels respectively. I will treat the two works in reverse chronological order, for one principal reason: *Before & During* contains, early on, a remarkable eight-page scene about authorship that aptly embodies the dichotomy of density and lucidity and the desired movement between the two. But first, some preliminary contextualization is needed.

Before & During

The frame narrator of *Before & During*, Alësha, is a "seasoned journalist" for the Soviet press (we are in the mid-1960s) and the author of popular "little books about Lenin" (*Before & During* 9, 10; *Do i vo vremia* 8, 9).[4] In these books he "couldn't help making [the Bolsheviks] out to be soft and tender" (9; 8), having associated them since earliest childhood with the sweet smells emanating from the "Bolshevik" cake factory opposite his home on Pravda Street—a humorous foreshadowing of the novel's serious and ambivalent treatment of the naïve enchantments of childhood and childish simplifications that are never outgrown. Alësha's career had just entered an unexpected midlife ascent—symbolized by offers to contribute to the prestigious series *Lives of Remarkable People*—when he slipped on ice and suffered a brain injury that caused periodic blackouts from which he would emerge far away from his Moscow home. It was in this period that Alësha, precisely because of his fits of amnesia, felt that his life "had begun to close in on itself, to turn backwards," that "memory had become the centre of my world." He sets out "to preserve the memory of those whom only I had known or, at any rate, whom only I was prepared to remember" (14–15; 13–14) and models his initiative on a practice he first learned about in childhood from tales of Ivan the Terrible, who preserved the names of his murdered victims in his Memorial Book of the Disgraced (*sinodik opal'nykh*). Alësha's motivations, needless to say, are quite different from those of Ivan: he is moved by the unjust, unfulfilled fates of those he knew and loved, those who died with a sense of being "hard done by, cheated, disgraced" (19; 18). As such, he anticipates the fixations of a later character, Nikolai Fëdorov, the nineteenth-century philosopher who becomes co-protagonist of the last two-thirds of the novel.

4. Throughout this article, the page references in parenthesis to *Before & During* and *The Rehearsals* will give the published English translation first, with transliteration adapted for this article; the corresponding pages in the Russian originals, *Do i vo vremia* and *Repetitsii*, are then cited after the semi-colon.

Eventually, Alësha will commit himself to hospital, and specifically to a dementia ward that had previously been a boarding-school for children of high-ranking Soviet functionaries, some of whom are still there. In the ward, he will find a new task for his Memorial Book: to record and even redeem the lives of his fellow, geriatric inmates. More directly, this task will be a last-ditch effort, from the depths of Alësha's own despair and sense of apocalyptic foreboding, to challenge God's alleged conviction that human beings "were the source of all evil, that we were incorrigible": "if I learned to love my neighbours on the ward it would mean that He was wrong, that we were not so bad, that we could still be saved. I knew that if I managed to commit them all to paper, or even just a few, even just one (like the righteous Lot in Sodom), if I managed to at least make a start, then this disaster, which I could almost touch, would be stayed" (104; 106). The inmates will indeed respond to his offers, queuing up at the foot of his bed to "empt[y] out on me whole sackfuls of life" (106; 109), but we do not read their stories; instead Alësha's narrative will be commandeered by one of the "old-timers" in the ward, Ifraimov, who compels Alësha to listen over many nights to a seemingly endless fantastical story linking the French and Russian revolutions.

At the cusp of these two stages in Alësha's life, just before he enters the ward, comes an entry in the Memorial Book devoted to another (presumably unpublished) writer. Occupying a symbolic transitional position in the novel, it functions as a *mise-en-abyme* that prepares us, and arguably even instructs us, in how to read the rest of *Before & During*—and Sharov's fiction in general.

The entry is devoted to Semën Evgen'evich Kochin, a Gulag returnee whom everyone treated "like a child" (55; 55) and with whom Alësha spent much of his own childhood from the age of about five: they lived in the same communal flat and Alësha would go to Kochin's room while all the other adults were at work. This section has been preceded and prepared by a particularly extravagant entry devoted, in contravention of Alësha's own criteria, to none other than Lev Tolstoy, whom Alësha had first learned about from Kochin.[5] If the dozen pages devoted to Tolstoy foreground the interdependence of the themes of good and evil (Tolstoy as a "very good man" bent on moral self-perfection, whose goodness came, however, at the cost of "crippling the lives of those closest to him" (47; 45)), then the entry on Kochin foregrounds the themes of authorship and readership, while also subsuming the ethical questions raised in the previous section.

In this fourth entry, the narrator remembers Kochin as a depressive who, after his return from the camps (his "crime" is not named) barely, if ever, left his strangely shaped room, which he imagines as an auditorium, with his bed

5. Kochin put together an outline of Tolstoy's life from his and his wife's correspondence: a model of the technique Kochin uses in his own writing.

as the "royal box" and his curtain as "the drop." He is not interested in life on the stage—that is to say, beyond his single window—because "He liked things to be complete and bounded: his world was as flat as a cinema screen, and he deliberately renounced the depth of the stage for the sharpness and clarity of the image" (55–56; 55–56).

The first place Kochin seeks such clarity is, paradoxically, in the shadow world of the curtains themselves—a metaphor, perhaps, for the shadow reality of the camps. At the beginning of the day Kochin tries to identify faces in the curtain's fabric ("if the faces were kind [but also "good": *dobrye*], his mood would instantly lift") and asks Alësha to do the same. Kochin "soon infected me with his passion" (56; 56), but their judgments differed and Kochin put a stop to it, prefiguring the novel's theme of the indistinguishability of good and evil (a theme that most often gathers in Sharov's fiction around the theme of the Revolution, the repressions and the camps).

Second and most important is the clarity Kochin wrests from apparent chaos and obscurity in his own literary compositions. These have a rather remarkable genesis:

> the entire window, if memory serves, was glued over with thin strips of paper covered in a dense scrawl [...] Kochin claimed that, taken together, the strips constituted an autobiographical novel which, thanks to the dearth of events in his life and, thereby, of cause and effect, was entirely made up of discrete thoughts and scenes.

On good days, Kochin would spend the mornings sketching an outline of the novel's development, determining the order in which he would read out the strips to his audience: "This was usually done in red pencil and was very reminiscent of diagrams showing the circulation of the blood"—an image that effectively allegorizes the tension, at once Tolstoyan and Dostoevskian, between freedom and determinism, schematism and "life" that underwrites Sharov's writing as much as that of Kochin, for whom "a novel is a creature which, like a human being, lives and breathes, develops and grows" (57; 57). As to why Kochin needed to stick the extracts to the window in the first place, several reasons are given:

> It all began, it seems, during the war, when, to protect them from bombings, window-panes were plastered over with paper ribbons in crisscross patterns. Kochin let his sister cut out several pages from his novel and started claiming that his writings were saving the world from destruction and disintegration. He also liked to say that his novel kept his sister and him warm and stopped them from freezing, that a novel should be tempered by the sun, that it should be transparent, and that until electricity was no longer required his work would not be done. (58; 58)

This eccentric mode of composition gestures, then, to the potentially redemptive role of writing, offering a parallel to the narrator's own task with his Memorial Book; and to its ability to confer human warmth in times of social alienation or upheaval (let us recall that the novel is set during the onset of the Brezhnev years and written at the very end of the Soviet period).

In its emphasis on translucency, this passage, and the fragment from which it comes, can also be read as a coded exploration of Sharov's own compositional principles, especially if we take seriously the parallel that these pages prompt between the cavernous room of the ex-prisoner Kochin (the largest in the communal apartment) and the cave so famously described by Plato. In Plato's parable, prisoners chained to one wall look at shadows dancing on another (a counterpart to the "cinema screen" of Kochin's mental world) and mistake them for the real objects whose shadow is created by a fire outside the cave. Viewed critically, this parallel might indicate a kind of mania on Kochin's part, symptomatic in turn of a broader national trait: a childish desire to replace the real with the illusory, and even, in a metaphysical sense, to face the wrong way. But the parallel is equally susceptible to positive evaluation: the source of truth that Plato's prisoners cannot see may be the same light that will pass through Kochin's fragments pasted to the window, if only they can be correctly arranged. In all his novels, Sharov himself is similarly engaged in rearranging fragments to catch the light that will illuminate the connections between them and make the whole cohere.[6]

The labour that achieving such translucency requires on the part of author and reader is given visual form in the paragraphs that follow the quotation given above. Here, we find a physical metaphor for the contortions and convolutions of Sharov's own novels. On his last visit to Kochin, who is now "chained to his bed" and terminally ill, Alësha is himself asked to "read" from the window according to Kochin's latest outline: "This was far from easy. His thought was encoded in arrows and figures; following its train required some elaborate contortions"; worst of all, the essence has to be retrieved from a fading palimpsest: "many of the scraps of paper had faded, nearly all of them had been glued on two or three layers thick, the letters showed through each other, one line was superimposed on another, and I kept losing my thread" (59; 59). The texts by Kochin that Alësha has saved, however, and now puts before the reader, show both lucidity and life, as well as a man-child humour that recalls now Daniil Kharms, now Sasha Sokolov. They are, in fact, prose poems, rather than parts of a novel, that draw on Sharov's own poems, his earliest published work, and thus take us back to the source of his creativity.[7] Indeed, some may be read as metaphors for the interdependence of opposites that is at the generative core of Sharov's fiction, with all its refracted fragments of reality: "A deep lake in the woods. Its bottom is decked with fallen trees. Fish move slowly among the branches. Amongst themselves, the trees call them birds" (62; 62).

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6. The most pronounced example of this comes in the *Return to Egypt*, a novel in letters that Sharov spent a great deal of time shuffling around in the process of composition.

7. These have now been republished in the collection *Rama vody*.

To apply to Sharov's compositional method the terms introduced by Harry Walsh in his account of Sharov's treatment of myth (Walsh), the Kochin entry offers a microcosm of *Before & During* as a whole. Thus, in the macrocosm, palimpsests also play a formative role: the ward itself, for example, is a human palimpsest that has been added to at different times; "complete clarity was still a long way off" for Alësha in his own comprehension of its make-up (71; 72), and remains so for the reader throughout. Most importantly, Ifraimov's narration is superimposed on Alësha's while the recurring themes of memory and amnesia, guilt and salvation in all the narratives begin to layer themselves in the reader's mind, like the scraps of text on Kochin's window. Consequently, the different strata of the past accumulate as the novel proceeds: political history and myth (the French Revolution, the Russian Revolution, the search for heaven on earth, the parody of Communism in one country offered by the ward) is written over, but does not erase, biblical history and myths from both testaments (the Flood, the Ark, the Tower of Babel, the Apocalypse), in line with Sharov's maxim that all of Russian history and culture offers a "commentary" to Holy Scripture ("My ne sposobny"). For Sharov, as more recently for Yuri Slezkine (*The House of Government*), Russian history, and especially the apparently secular history of the Bolshevik revolution and its aftermath, is inexplicable outside the salvation myth of Christianity and the figure of Christ (whose significance in Sharov's fiction I discuss further below). The artistic challenge is to make these layers show through each other. To achieve this, Sharov employs additional techniques, absent from the Kochin entry, that allow him to effect the movement from obscurity to translucency, from immersion to "critical distance" over the span of densely written 300–600-page novels. Especially important here is his distinctive handling of plot, or rather plots.

According to Sharov himself, his process of composition involves the same oblique approach to the main narrative that is familiar to all readers of his fiction. Before reaching the "highway," or *magistral'*, to cite the term Sharov often used in public and private conversation, he and the reader must weave and wend their way, sometimes over a hundred pages or more, through various apparently loosely related passages (such as the Kochin entry). We might be tempted to describe these as Gogolesque digressions, especially in the light of Sharov's evident fascination with that writer, were it not for the fact that the contrasts between Sharov and Gogol' are as illuminating as the similarities.

The trope of the road, in all its compositional, existential and spiritual aspects, is of course no less central to the Gogolian universe (see Lotman) than it is to Sharov's; but the latter's novels are realizations of what the first part of *Dead Souls* only promises. In that volume the digressions take over the highway, as Chichikov loses more and more control over his linear plan for enrichment, just as his coachman loses control over the direction of his barouche. In Sharov, by contrast, the highway ultimately wins out over the

digressions, which in retrospect might be more accurately described as preludes. After this point, his novels begin to become clearer and the complexity lessens. In *The Rehearsals*, the trope of the *magistral'* finds literal expression in the Vladimirka highway that takes the actors to Siberian exile. In *Before & During*, it is eventually engaged a third of the way through the novel, when Ifraimov starts telling Alësha, apropos of nothing, about Madame de Staël (115; 118).

At first, the story of de Staël seems more obviously a digression than any previous section, and the narrator repeatedly shares with the reader his perplexity about its intrusion; yet it will prove to be the highway joined at various points by many other protagonists, since Madame de Staël, in Ifraimov's account, was able to prolong her life three times thanks to a mysterious compound whose "basic ingredient was the mandrake plant that helped [the biblical] Rachel conceive" (125; 128). The real de Staël, as Ifraimov himself reminds us (123; 126), did indeed visit Russia in 1812 and met Alexander I; in Sharov's novel, she settles there for good, registering "under the name Evgeniia Frantsevna Stal', a landowner in the province of Tambov" (126; 129). As a metaphor for the exchange of revolutionary ideas, for the influence of France on Russia and Enlightenment values on the Russian revolution, she represents a thoroughfare that is both intellectual and sexual. She "had a very powerful, analytical, almost masculine mind," according to Ifraimov (117; 120), but she also becomes the lover of numberless revolutionaries in the novel, be they intellectuals, artists or politicians, from Fëdorov to Stalin (to whom she had already given birth, in what might be regarded as the final metaphorical expression of the degeneration of revolutionary ideology). Through her own example, and as the "mother" of the Party (336; 342), de Staël represents continuity and West European civilization, where Fëdorov represents the attempt to stop history in the hope of redeeming the injustices of the past.

The most effective artistic means through which the opposition of de Staël and Fëdorov's worldviews is expressed is the contrast between narrative momentum and "sluggishness," a contrast that recurs in a different, but no less effective way, in *The Rehearsals* and that, in both cases, fundamentally shapes the novels' architecture. At the very center of *Before & During*, the pace of the writing slows to a deathly torpor, as night after night Fëdorov expounds his project for the transformation, or rather levelling, of life on earth: the razing of mountains, the filling of swamps, obliteration of cities, the restoration of the brotherhood of nations, the creation of "an extremely simple, easily comprehensible life" (162; 164), and above all the end of procreation that must precede the resurrection of the dead. While doing this, he hovers, night after night, over the palanquin in which de Staël is protecting herself from a plague and which serves here as a metaphor for a coffin, as well as her sexual inaccessibility in Fëdorov's virginal mind (though she des-

perately desires *him*). Obsessed with his own project, Fëdorov lapses into confusion and a kind of intellectual retardation, tormenting de Staël with his dogmatism. It is only by drugging him with opium and freeing his sexual urges that de Staël is able to shift him, and the novel, out of this torpor, and the highway proper begins, filled with speed, fertility and movement (most ecstatically in de Staël's later relationship with Scriabin, cast as a greater revolutionary than Lenin for his attempted and unfinished *Mysterium*).

In supplying the novel with its fateful direction, the highway shows the unusual extent to which Sharov's novels are end-oriented. The memorable culminations of Sharov's novels, however, are less conclusions of their plot than they are resolutions of the entanglements of identity, metaphor, myth and allegory that form the substrates of those plots. *Before & During* has an apparently open ending in terms of its plot but the entire final section, which returns us to the dementia ward and lasts a good fifty pages, brings other forms of clarity. Responding to the questions of the narrator, who serves at this point as the reader's intermediary, Ifraimov explains that the snowstorm raging outside the hospital is a biblical Flood (a metaphor for divine punishment, Revolution and Apocalypse); that the ward itself is an Ark on which only a few people will be saved (the Ark in turn being a metaphor for both the Christian Church and the "immortal" Party that is "like God and will last forever" [345; 350]); that Fëdorov is Noah and, like de Staël, still alive on the ward (they are, it turns out, an old couple whom Alësha has long been observing); and that the three idiot soldiers are their children (a metaphor for Fëdorov's anti-generative philosophy), whose "wives" are the Sisters who minister to them medically and sexually.

With the ending, then, the different "scraps" of the novel have been rendered translucent, as Kochin had hoped for his own novel. Glinting like facets in the reader's memory, they enable and even encourage us to review the entire novel with new understanding: to loop back to the beginning and see how the digressive preludes foreshadow and reflect the main themes, like mirrors on the side of the highway (Sharov's counterpart to Stendhal's image of the novel itself as a mirror on the side of the road). The protagonists, we now recognize, are themselves palimpsests: the Teacher figure (Tolstoy, Fëdorov, Lenin), the Messiah figure (Noah, Fëdorov, Scriabin, the narrator Alësha), the holy-foolish (Fëdorov, Tolstoy, Scriabin, Alësha).[8]

The common denominator for all these types is Christ, whose fundamental significance to Sharov's fiction and to his view of Russian history is also clarified in this final section. Forty pages before the end of *Before & During*, Sharov takes the unusual step, though one not unique in his corpus, of recy-

8. De Staël, too, is variously the Virgin Mary, the Sleeping Beauty and the Sarah who could not conceive from Abraham (330; 335), though in all cases ironically, as she is such only in Fëdorov's perception.

cling an entire passage from a previous work, in this case a four-page speech by a certain Il'in (no ideological relation to the actual philosopher Ivan Il'in) from the start of *The Rehearsals*. His interpretation of Christ's significance to the history of humanity elucidates the interdependence of good and evil that serves, throughout Sharov's fiction, as the thematic counterpart to the interdependence of formal contrasts.

Christ Himself is pure good, Il'in says, yet the example He set, paradoxically, served to erase the distinction between good and evil. His path, according to Il'in, is the path of miracle and mercy over labour and even justice, as encapsulated in the parable of the master who pays the same wage to the labourers in the vineyard, despite the fact that some have worked all day, and others just an hour, for "the last will be first" (313; 318). For the history of mankind before Christ this meant that:

> the purpose for which God created man, to whom it is given to do good and evil and who one day, so God believes, will reject evil and freely choose good, thereby proving the truth and goodness of God's world, must remain unfulfilled, and all that came after the birth of man—all that evil—was pointless, merely evil spawning evil. And the deeds of the righteous are also pointless, and God is alone, and above all good is not better than evil, for men have not chosen it. Either they didn't want it, or they ran out of time. So then, Christ stops. (315; 320)

Il'in's Christ is, as for Dostoevskii, an entirely beautiful man and moral ideal; yet the place He occupies in Il'in's conception of the history of human moral development is the exact opposite to that assumed by Dostoevskii. For the latter, Christ brought man the freedom to choose good over evil, and *The Brothers Karamzov* is constructed as a riposte to the Grand Inquisitor's contention that man should be relieved of the excessive burden of this choice. For Il'in, by contrast, the advent of Christ overrode the moral freedom and meaningful labor of the Jewish "faith of children," whose slowness Il'in contrasts with the "unnatural" speed of the Christian "faith of disciples" (316; 320).

Il'in's ideas are supported by Sharov's novels as a whole, which suggest that, though Christ may have come to a "stop," Russian history would keep returning to His model of moral revolution whenever (to cite a recurring image) the cup of sin began to overflow once more. "I'm reluctant to say this," continued Il'in, "but it would seem that when Christ appeared on earth, only one path remained in the place where He lived, in Israel: the revolutionary, lightning path of righteousness walked by the Son of God and His disciples" (313; 317). As Sharov's entire oeuvre suggests, the urge to expunge the past that Christ's example gave rise to in the "Third Rome" of Christian Russia, the urge to reject the past or "put a cross" on it (*stavit' krest*), to cite another frequently recurring phrase, is a false beginning that ensures further false beginnings in the future, whether in the life of a nation or an individual. In *Before & During*, it is embodied in Fëdorov, in whom Sharov joins the poles of stasis and constant revolution (the "lightning path").

Sharov's Fëdorov also embodies the overly literal pursuit of Christ's in-

junction to "Become as little children" (Matt. 18.3), being first perceived by de Staël as a "perfect child" and "boy" (135; 138), and speaking like "a broken toy" (170; 171). In the novel that cites this verse in its title (Sharov, *Bud'te kak deti*), this theme is fully elaborated as a commentary on a culture and country that refuses to grow out of its holy simplicity, being wedded to the association of adulthood with complexity and sin; and as a parallel to the history of the Bolshevik and all other revolutions, which are described as "the attempt once again to make a clean break between good and evil, to make the world as simple and clear as it was before the Fall" (*Bud'te kak deti*, 264).[9] Across Sharov's oeuvre, Christ, in his significance for Russian culture, serves as the fundamental symbol, even typographically, of the delusion that such a break is possible. Indeed in *The Rehearsals*, the astonishingly frequent repetition of Christ's name (Христос) allows its first letter (Х) to become a visual symbol both of the deletion of the past and, in its symmetry, of the oppositions sustained at all levels in Sharov's fiction.

In the light of this discussion, we can now turn to the apparently open ending of *Before & During* and see how it actually serves to reinforce the sense of complex cyclicality inherent in the novel's layering of epochs, locations and characters. By the last page, only Alësha, Fëdorov, de Staël and the Sisters have remained on the ward/Ark. Even the Old Bolsheviks have been turned out by Fëdorov, who no longer trusts them. When Alësha asks in the last lines of the novel, "What will happen to us now?," Ifraimov replies: "I don't know. For now, it looks as if we've been preserved as a memory of that life. If God decides to prolong it, we'll stay; if He begins from the beginning, we'll leave. Just like the others..." (348; 354). The three dots are an invitation to readers to use the "critical distance" they have acquired, and to see that these are false alternatives: Russian history will always "begin from the beginning," or at least try to do so. In the clash between Fëdorov's and de Staël's worldviews, there has been only one winner: de Staël wished desperately to keep the Old Bolsheviks on the Ark and ensure continuity, even by seducing them physically, but, thanks in large part to Fëdorov's ruses and dogmatic arguments, she fails. There is a fatefulness to these failures, with de Staël's high hopes over three or four pages being suddenly punctured in a single sentence (338–42), and it is a fatefulness to which everyone except de Staël is privy. Even Alësha, not known for his perspicacity, comments: "Looking in from the outside, I knew the outcome in advance and for a long time I was unable to understand why she couldn't see this either" (342; 348). The momentum that de Staël has brought to the novel thus proves ironically unproductive: de Staël, as Ifraimov told Alësha early on, wanted power for herself, but could never be more than the Revolution's midwife, while Russia seems destined to remain trapped within the paradigm of Fedorovian utopianism

9. On the theme of childhood and maturity in Sharov's novels see Ready 344–54.

that keeps continuity—and women—at bay. We end not with a denouement (*razviazka*) but with the suggestion of a new beginning (*zaviazka*), a new start to a familiar cycle, just as the actual beginning of the novel—Alësha's arrival in, loosely speaking, a madhouse (actually a geriatric/dementia ward)—is a conventional endpoint in Russian narratives of mental instability (Pushkin's "Queen of Spades", Gogol''s "Diary of a Madman," Dostoevsky's *The Idiot*, Chekhov's "Ward No. 6"). Our new-found clarity as readers thus points us back towards the entangled history of the past (and future).

The Rehearsals

In its striking method of composition, *The Rehearsals* offers a still sharper subversion of novelistic convention than *Before & During*. Boris Eikhenbaum's famous contrast between the short story and the novel relies on the former "accumulating all its weight towards the end," which should be like a missile striking its target with full force (Eikhenbaum 171). A novel, on the other hand, tends to end after the climax with an "epilogue" of one kind or another. The precise opposite happens in *The Rehearsals*, which begins with what can only be described as Sharov's answer to the second epilogue of *War and Peace*. Two pages into the novel, Sharov entrusts the same Il'in (whom the narrator of *The Rehearsals*, Serëzha, met in Kuibyshev in 1958) with a weighty interpretation of both Testaments lasting fifteen pages. Meanwhile, the end of *The Rehearsals* performs the function of the plot twist usually associated with the short story and, ostensibly at least, challenges the assumption of cyclicality maintained hitherto in the novel.

By this point we are in Siberia in the years of Stalin, nearly three centuries after the titular rehearsals began in the monastery of New Jerusalem at the behest of Patriarch Nikon. The rehearsals are mystery plays of a kind: attempts to re-enact the events of the Gospels in the hope of coaxing Christ's return to earth. Nobody is allowed to play Christ (the actors have to act around the space He would have occupied in any given scene) and, in His continued absence, all the other roles are handed down from generation to generation. Meanwhile, the Siberian village of Mosslands (Mshanniki), where the troupe has now been situated for many decades, has become part of the GULag, and the rehearsals themselves have been almost entirely overshadowed by the hatred that has developed on the part of those actors playing "Christians" (now Gulag guards) towards those playing "Jews" (now zeks). Indeed, the man playing Peter the Apostle (prison-camp chief) has decided to kill the "Jews" in the belief that this is what God wants from him.

The outcome is an apparently endless series of killing bouts, whose cyclicality is inscribed in the circular path around the prison camp along which the "Christians" pursue the "Jews" and whose necessity is accepted by both parties, since both are in the grip of the particular psychosis (Russia as Third Rome) that, through Nikon, has dominated the entire history of their "play"

down the centuries. On the very last pages, however, it seems that all the "Jews" have finally been killed, "even the three Jews the guards would reach last: Anna, Il'ia and their son Isaiah" (*The Rehearsals* 346; *Repetitsii* 320). Anna and Il'ia are indeed shot dead on the spot; Isaiah, however, spends the night beneath their cooling bodies and crawls out in the morning. The novel ends:

> He was walking along the path that he had always carried inside him, walking to the camp, to his home. There were only a few hundred metres left to the causeway, those metres that his mother and father had not managed to walk the day before, and he almost walked them, but right before the causeway he turned off to the side.
>
> From that moment on, he was no longer a Jew. A day later he entered a village on the bank of the Keti, where Maria Trifonovna Kobylina took him in and adopted him as her son.

The jolt that this ending yields is also a jolt of memory, for we met Isaiah Kobylin on the very first page of the novel: he was the man who supplied the manuscripts to the narrator on which the novel is based. Moreover, we were also told in the very first sentence that "In 1939 Isaiah Trifonovich Kobylin ceased to be a Jew, and the Jewish nation, of which he was the last, ended with him" (19; 5). Once again, the ending returns the reader to the beginning (and to the thickets of Il'in's theology) with a newfound clarity.

Between these first and last pages, we observe the same general progress observed in *Before & During* from density to lucidity. Il'in's biblical commentary is followed by several further preludes that, in retrospect, serve to hold mirrors to the main narrative. Directly after Il'in, we are introduced to one of the narrator's lecturers at university in Kuibyshev, the entertaining Kuchmii, "a decrepit octogenarian philosophy professor from Kiev known to the entire university as 'The Idealist'" (36; 23). Kuchmii's skepticism about the reality of humanity's past ("no more than phantoms and mirages wandering over deserted spaces" (37; 24)) seems facile until it eventually bleeds into the ostensible topic of Kuchmii's lecture course, Nikolai Gogol' (45–49; 31–34). Kuchmii is fascinated by the negative, demonic reality created by that author in his own writings and deriving, in Kuchmii's analysis, from Ukraine itself, "a place where two religions, Catholicism and Orthodoxy, had intertwined and intermingled for centuries," "where Christians killed Christians" (48; 33). Indeed, all Kuchmii's riffs on literature, history and even the work of the secret services provide parallels for the novel's "highway," when Christians will also kill Christians (playing "Jews") and when group identity will continue to impede, right until the last six lines of the novel, the emergence of individual personality, just as Kuchmii had warned us: "Humans, he would say, are blurred around the edges, amorphous, plastic, wax-like. As a consequence of time and their own weight, they quickly lose their shape, tangle and curdle, turning into a homogeneous, well-scrambled mass, which historians like to call a 'people' or 'nation'" (39; 25).

These and the subsequent, more obviously pertinent preludes bring us, after seventy pages, to the main story of Patriarch Nikon, the French actor-director Jacques de Sertan and the peasants he will need to train in order to fulfill Nikon's extraordinary commission. Even here, however, there is a considerable stretch in which the protagonists' actions seem to move through treacle. Sertan is deeply reluctant to commit to the project, being rightly suspicious of Nikon, and is on the point of leaving Russia, only to find his efforts mired in red tape as he goes from one chancellery to another in Moscow. Often, over the following sixty or seventy pages, time itself seems to stop, just as it does when Fëdorov preaches over de Staël's palanquin/coffin in *Before & During*. The exact sequence of events becomes hard to follow, as does that of the auditioning process. But if there is incoherence here, it has a strong internal justification: our own thickening sense of disorientation aligns us with the despair and confusion of Sertan in New Jerusalem (the better to feel his own subsequent immersion when the rehearsals gain momentum and he himself becomes infected, at least to some extent, by Nikon's idea).

At this point, in other words, we ourselves are caught in the "tangle and curdle" of history and humanity, when roles have not yet been assigned and when present and future seem overdetermined and stifled by apocalyptic predictions for the future (notably, the end of the world in 1666) and by the various layers of the past. The latter include Sertan's years in Poland, to which he keeps returning in his mind because of an actress he left there; Nikon's childhood and youth; the various possible hypostases of the Messiah (Sertan, Nikon, Ruvim—a Jew killed by the Cossacks in Poland); the histories of the various monasteries Nikon has built, culminating in New Jerusalem (whose topographical equivalence to the "Holy Land" of Palestine sixteen hundred years ago Nikon is personally supervising). This "scrambled mass," to which the narrator also contributes formally with his frequent use of analepsis and prolepsis and with long sentences in which the subject of personal pronouns is often unclear on first reading, is one more representation of the "madness" of Russian history. Here, it gathers around a collective pathology and obsession—Russians as the chosen people—which, by virtue of its very insanity, somehow manages to pull others in, even the skeptical Sertan. When this mass will eventually disentangle itself, the "highway" will be just one of the various historical variations that that pathology permits.

A particular feature of *The Rehearsals* is the way in which Sharov uses variation in the length of individual sentences, as well as his more customary variation of pace, to draw out the fundamental contrast between stasis and movement within the main plot. Sharov's style requires fuller and separate analysis, but one substantial example will suffice here to illustrate the thickening of language at this transitional stage of the novel, as we gradually move out of the paralysis of alienation and uncertainty that overcomes Sertan in New Jerusalem, when words to do with stopping and slowing recur fre-

quently. The quotation that follows occurs when Sertan has been denied authorization to leave Russia (after the officials "suddenly stopped taking money from him, the whole process slowed right down" (119; 103)) and has been returned from Moscow to New Jerusalem under arrest. If the arrest, and the language around it, evokes stasis, the following sentence, through free indirect discourse, uses prolepsis to begin to move the novel out of its dead center, while retaining the type of syntax and sentence shape typical of this stage in the narrative:

> Later, after he had immersed himself once more in his work with the actors and it was all going surprisingly well, in fact almost too well—a miracle was the only thing you could call it, but more about that further below—and he had already got used to spending all his time with the actors, talking to all the twelve apostles day in day out, explaining Holy Scripture to them, guiding and correcting them when guidance was called for, after he had got used to their unquestioning obedience, to the fact that this was how it had to be, that to them he was untouchable, not only because he was in charge of them, but above all because he was teaching them, because he knew precisely what had to be done next, he suddenly realized that a teacher was exactly what he was to them, after all they knew neither the course nor sequence of the Gospel scenes without him, only he could tell them who should say what and when, and when they were shaken by the words of Christ or by their own words, the words with which they taught the people and answered Christ—and it was their own words that astonished them most: after all, you always know what you are capable of, but never what somebody else might say or do, and it was nothing less than a miracle when, repeating after Sertan, they said things that they would understand only later, after they had slowly turned them over in their minds—what remained in them each time was the fact that they had learnt and said all this by copying him, and they were still following his cue now. [And they didn't merely know all these things, they also knew that these things were right and they knew how to teach them to others.] (119–20; 103–4)

This entire sentence is, structurally, a micro-example of the principle of delay structuring the entire novel, with the beginning of the main clause held back for well over 100 words; of the confusion of time, place and even grammatical subject, the "scrambling" of human life, epitomized by the unpunctuated "what who and when"; and of the movement from slowness and irresolution (Sertan's, the peasants') to linear and fateful momentum, signalled by the "suddenly" that begins the main clause. Whilst entangling the reader in its sub-clauses and qualifications, the sentence generates its own momentum, suggesting the elusive, perhaps unconscious moment of "infection" for Sertan, the actors and the narrator.

Such sentences, of which there are a good number at this point, are, as it were, necessarily complex, their density arising organically from the material and its "madness": in this case the psychological convolutions by which Sertan came to inhabit his role of "teacher" and the peasants their roles as actors. They are not willfully obscure, nor are they composed for stylistic effect or aesthetic pleasure, though they certainly achieve emotional power, partly through accumulation and the immersive flow of words. Sharov liked to comment that he wrote "by ear," and we are conscious at all times of a speaking voice, its cadences, lexis and rhythms, a voice that itself helps clarify the

meaning and direction of sense. (Sharov's own rhythmical, almost liturgical readings of his own work offer further illumination).[10] The challenge he appeared to set himself, even in such passages, was not to exacerbate the complexity inherent in the material, but to elucidate.

Soon after the rehearsals proper begin, Nikon is dethroned, and Sertan and the actors are exiled, though kept in one group—a clear indication that Nikon's and now Sertan's project, despite official disapproval, has higher sanction, signifying in turn that theirs is a shared, collective obsession. The two halves of the novel, in terms of both plot and style, are demarcated at this point by a most unusual and effective caesura: precisely halfway through the novel, just before the actors set out on the Vladimirka highway we are given a three-page list of the actors, arranged by family, and their corresponding parts from the Gospels.[11] This cast list is the result of the narrator's own sleuthing based on the official list of exiles, in which all information about the peasant actors' past had been completely effaced (182; 163). (It thus offers an estranging parallel for the identity shifts common throughout the Soviet period that is Sharov's most frequent fictional territory.) From this halfway point, the actors live only for their roles and future salvation. As such, their fate, and the novels' narrative become linear, and Sharov's language changes accordingly. There is no longer any need to slow the reader's comprehension with long sentences; we are no longer "estranged" from the plot. Rather the priority now is to emphasize the inexorable unspooling of the fate of Nikon and Sertan's project. By the time the pogroms begin—the repeated massacring of the "Jews" in the belief that this will be pleasing to God—the style gains a terrible clarity, its grim efficiency of expression reflecting the practical business of murder:

> Killing the Jews turned out to have been strangely, embarrassingly easy. The Christians had plenty of strength left in them, and they felt aggrieved that it was all over so quickly and with such little fuss. They had spent so long preparing for this moment, too scared to make a clean break with their past, with Sertan, and to begin their struggle with the God who had forgotten them, and they had imagined the death of the Jews quite differently. The Jews, in other words, had tricked them. Peter understood that he was to blame. (247; 225)

Conclusion

In both *Before & During* and *The Rehearsals*, the apparent progress from obscurity to clarity is, ultimately, a double move: it brings intellectual clarity to the reader, but bestows irony on the historical narrative that has been described. Madame de Staël, for all her local victories, loses the war of ideology with Fëdorov. In *The Rehearsals*, the release from uncertainty and the progress

10. See, for example, https://soundcloud.com/user117914560/vladimir-sharov-oxford-book (from 53:45). Accessed 5 July 2018.

11. For example: "Aleksashka Bludov (one of the seventy disciples of Christ), his wife Agafitsa (Mary, sister of Lazarus), his sons Yakushko (Simon of Cyrene) and Logvinko (one of the robbers crucified with Christ)" (185; 166).

along the highway of the plot come at the cost of accepting roles that have already been scripted, of a sense of righteousness and certainty that time and again proves unfounded. Indeed, part of the lucidity the novels confer is the awareness that simplicity is dangerous: for Sharov, unlike late Tolstoy, life and morality are by definition complex (see Sharov "Kazhdyi moi roman" and *Before & During* 129–30; 133–34) and to ignore that complexity is to fall for the enticements of the revolutionary impulse. After all, it is not the "highway" of history—the textbook version, the victors' version—that interests Sharov, but, as he has told Dmitrii Bykov, the "offshoots that were never developed" ("Sharov: Poslednii russkii kosmist"). Similarly, in his own novels, the highway sends us back to the offshoots, and lucidity returns us to complexity.

Only the very end of *The Rehearsals* seems us to take us out of the endless loop of failed messianism and violence, out of the dichotomies discussed in this article. But here too there is a further irony, a further level of reflection. The plot of *The Rehearsals* does not end with the escape that formally concludes the novel, but continues in its opening, where Kobylin, the boy who escaped, passes the story on to two young men: the narrator and his co-translator, Misha Berlin. Their own subsequent immersion in the story—especially visible in the case of Misha who, on his last night in Tomsk, unexpectedly visits the narrator to work through the last bit of text—recapitulates, in a further *mise-en-abyme*, the processes of infection and immersion that are replicated, in the macrocosm, by Sertan and the actors. Like *Before & During* (and like, for their different reasons, Kochin's novel and Scriabin's *Mysterium*), *The Rehearsals* is unfinished, both because it preserves the memory of people who felt "hard done by, cheated, disgraced," and because history's "rehearsals" are themselves ongoing.

One further recapitulation, this time showing the author's personal involvement in these processes, is to be found in the essay Sharov wrote about the making of *The Rehearsals* for the almanac *Tekst i traditsiia* in 2015, nearly three decades after the novel's composition (it is appended as an afterword to my English translation). Here, Sharov reminisces about the novel's slow, serendipitous gestation as he tried to fix up the family dacha near New Jerusalem, hearing stories about the "sacred land" on which he was idling, "in the place where someone else, three hundred years before, had built the City of God—the salvific city-temple—and, unlike you, had done rather well" (353). Then, one day, the head of the research institute where Sharov had once worked, and with whom he had fallen out, gave him the folder containing his entire bibliography for his unwritten research on the Schism. Sharov's account ends with a final illustration of the processes of immersion and infection—this time, the author's own:

> Freed from the hassles of the dacha, I had resumed my habit of making almost daily visits to the Historical-Archival Institute, and found myself calling up books from Kozlov's folder. I devoured one after the other.

Until then I had been simply unable to take in anything connected with New Jerusalem and the Holy Land, and I tried to push it all away from me at the first opportunity. I told myself that the Church of the Resurrection was just a mockup, just an imitation of the real thing, something like the VDNKh exhibition space in northern Moscow [...]

I went on telling myself these things and reassuring myself until one fine day I realised that I was resisting in vain: all this was already inside me. (358–59)

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Тезисы

Оливер Реди
Как Сделаны Романы Шарова: «Репетиции» и «До и во время»

Как указал Марк Липовецкий, Шаров «создает странный гибрид между разыгрыванием и проработкой исторической травмы». Отличительное и парадоксальное качество его романов состоит в том, чтобы позволить читателям заново пережить травму, и одновременно сохранять необходимое расстояние, с которого можно наблюдать эту травму и трагедию. Цель этой статьи—изучать, как два из важнейших романов Шарова («Репетиции» и «До и во время») добиваются этого мощного эффекта. В статье развивается тезис, что романы Шарова строятся на контрасте плотности и сложности, с одной стороны, и ясности и даже прозрачности, с другой, а параллельно, на контрасте между замедлением и ускорением повествования. Прихотливость содержания и нарратива противостоит, пусть и неочевидно, поиску ясности, который ведется в тех же самых текстах на уровне языка, стиля и метафоры. Более того, этот структурообразующий, как с точки зрения темы, так и формы, контраст актуализирует многие взаимозависимые тематические оппозиции, которые поддерживаются, но никогда не разрешаются в произведениях Владимира Шарова.