

Gold in the gullet

'A mesmerizing mad rant of a novel'

VICTORIA NELSON

TELLURIA
VLADIMIR SOROKIN

Translated by Max Lawton
336pp. NYRB Classics. Paperback, £15.99
(US \$18.95).



VLADIMIR PUTIN'S full-scale invasion of Ukraine this year has thrown into sharp relief the prescient speculative fictions of the Russian writer Vladimir Sorokin. Putin's shadow falls heavily across his novel *Day of the Oprichnik* (2006; 2010 in English translation), a brutal satire of a Russia of the 2020s ruled by a new Ivan the Terrible, obsessed with national purity and the expansionist vision of "Eurasianism", a quasi-mystical strand of nativist political philosophy that the current Russian president has enthusiastically embraced.

That novel and the later *Telluria* (2013), which now appears in Max Lawton's translation, are two instalments in a series of fictions imagining a fantastical Russian future that have earned Sorokin literary prominence as well as considerable harassment from Putin's thugs over the years. *Their Four Hearts* (1994) also appeared in English earlier this year, in a handsomely illustrated edition, and six more translations are in the works. Arriving at his second home in Berlin only days before the invasion, the author immediately denounced the actions of the autocrat whose imperialist objectives he so accurately foretold.

"Shocking" is an adjective often applied to Sorokin's works, permeated as they are with excruciating scenes of violence and explicit, often ugly sex that some literary critics in Russia have joined the Putinistas in decrying. *Blue Lard* (1999; forthcoming in another translation by Lawton) features clones of Stalin and Khrushchev engaging in murder, cannibalism and sex with each other. *Day of the Oprichnik*

Victoria Nelson's novel *Neighbor George* was published last year

juxtaposes the salacious morale-building group sex of the tsar's palace guard with vivid accounts of rape and murder. *Telluria* also has its share of unpleasant sex and violence, if not quite so extreme.

Surface sensationalism can distract us from the fact that Sorokin is a moralist in the misanthropic spirit of Swift, attacking his era's social and political life through the medium of fantastical tales set in speculative futures. The subversion of totalitarianism is hardwired into every word he writes, but in a provocatively improper way. Sorokin uses porn to take on Putin - and Stalin, and Khrushchev, and all the other tyrants who populate his works. Beneath this licentiousness lurks a puritan who believes the acts these creatures and their minions commit cannot, as the saying goes, be wrapped in clean linen. His sex scenes do not titillate: some repulse, others make us laugh. In contrast to the sober real-world literalism of writers such as Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, Sorokin also employs absurdism and parody in a way that sabotages any neat connection of the dots between our world and his invented one. He does not write simple allegories in the mode of *Animal Farm*.

Telluria is set sixty years after *Day of the Oprichnik*, in the 2080s, the same period as that of its relatively gentle predecessor *The Blizzard* (2010; 2015 in translation), and features the same Swiftian trappings: rebellious tiny men, stolid giants, three-storey carts drawn by enormous horses. Car engines are now fuelled by potatoes. Sorokin fleshes out this "Post-Post-Soviet" era with glimpses of a complicated history stretching back to the twentieth century. The Wall, erected by the second Ivan the Terrible to protect his people from the decadent West, now lies in ruins and the old nations have been replaced with a patchwork of duchies and city-states. Their wildly different political philosophies, however, have been co-opted by the entrepreneurial capitalism powering sales of the popular but costly drug tellurium.

The novel plays out in a succession of fractured fairy tales. Instead of the frog princesses and flying swan maidens of Sorokin's favourite folklorist, Aleksander Afanasiev, *Telluria* gives us a nightmare bestiary of genetically engineered zoomorphs - women with lynx heads, men with dog and bear heads, centaurs. There are sentient objects too: living fur, a tiny pterodactyl earring that snaps its beak, even a diversely shaped harem of "enserfed" vibrators who flee the attentions of an insatiable princess to avoid being sent to the dreaded "milking labs".

Sorokin employs his familiar device of multiple voices to deliver these stories, assigning a different character to narrate each of the fifty chapters. What these voices share is a propensity to hyperventilate in exalted but disturbingly hollow speech, ventriloquizing the fevered rhetoric of the delusional patriot who extols "a passionate, heroic government life" or the equally unreliable visions of utopias engendered by a drug trance: "Tellurium! Filling people with confidence in the past, present, and future! Confidence! Happiness! Joy! To the brim! To the point of overflow! 'Till the blood boils!". Steeped

in the Soviet agitprop of his youth, Sorokin the moralist is intent on attacking the corruption of language and thought, as much as violations of the social contract, by laying bare the inauthenticity of these self-deceiving declarations that go unchallenged in their context. Recognizing this unwritten subtext becomes a reader's main task in a novel that does not want us to believe a single word its characters say.

Ablly reproducing the tone as well as the substance of these ambiguous voices, Max Lawton's ambitious translation also strives admirably to create English equivalents for the host of slangy neologisms Sorokin has coined for his brave new feudal world. Even so, we non-Russian readers are bound to miss a wealth of insider allusions. A gifted mimic, Sorokin stuffs his works with quotations from, and allusions to, myriad sources, here - to name only a few - Mikhail Bulgakov's flying heroine Margarita, Samuel Taylor Coleridge's opium-infused pleasure dome, J. R. R. Tolkien's Sauron and a dark parody of Allen Ginsberg's "Howl". In the broken world of *Telluria*, these borrowings are deliberately and satirically diminished. The princess flies out into the world not to avenge injustice, but to engage in a sordid sexual encounter. The "worst minds" of his generation that the "Howl" narrator celebrates are not outcasts from a conformist society, but crazed acolytes caught up in the illusory ecstasy of a drugs trance.

The false promise of transcendence through drug-taking, a theme that runs through many of Sorokin's fictions, reaches its apotheosis here. Mined in the (fictional) duchy of Telluris in the (real-world) Altai mountains of Central Asia (a region where Sorokin loves to locate the paranormal), the mineral tellurium produces a fictional universally sought-after, mind-bending high. Much like the Gnostic spirits in the *Ice* trilogy (2002-06), who identify their kindred by beating the chests of humans with "ice hammers", it is delivered to users by a guild of "carpenters", who pound a drug-packed hollow nail into the shaven heads of their clients, with sometimes ecstatic and sometimes fatal results.

"Divine tellurium", an enthusiast proclaims, "gifts you with an entire world. A solid and plausible world, a living world." This shining utopian vision unites the fragmented feudal states of Eurasia, but the opiate of an entire continent doesn't deliver on its promises. Outside the temporary high, no one finds lasting happiness or conquers time, space and death. The novel's title is a metonym for a collective state of mind, the fever dream its characters inhabit.

All but one, perhaps. At the end, a simple peasant seems to have found a proper life after he flees his job as a driver for a capricious princess to forge a new existence in the woods. "We don't need nothin' superfluous - not ... [tellurium] nails nor war, and not money nor yer top brass", declares this sole irony-free voice among a cavalcade of dystopian rappers. "Bow down to nothin' but the sun. Caress nothin' but furry creatures. An' bicker with nothin' but birds of the forest. An' what else", he asks, "does a man need?" But hold on - is he on the level or is this just another parody, of a yokel with a simplistic notion of an idyllic utopia? Again like Swift, Sorokin does not pander to sentiment; he scatters his vignettes generously around a tantalizingly hollow centre that we long for him to fill while admiring him for resisting the temptation to do so.

Rainer Maria Rilke once described his eccentric fiction *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge* (1910) as a negative mould scarred by deep grooves of painful insight. But, he suggested hopefully, a positive casting from it might yet yield happiness, even "most perfect and most certain bliss". Minus its upbeat prediction, the metaphor fits *Telluria*. In one episode a despot punishes a famous ballad singer named Golden Throat for his increasingly critical political songs by having molten gold poured down his gullet, leaving the hapless singer's widow only a hardened yellow lump shaped by the contours of his throat. The hollow mould of Vladimir Sorokin's own golden throat gifts us the casting of this mesmerizing mad rant of a novel, a provocatively twisted nugget to make of what we will. ■

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