Studying of third wave's émigré literature: Gorenshtein's case

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Abstract. Fridrikh Gorenshtein is considered one of the most prominent Russian prose writers of the 2nd half of the 20th century. His novella "House with Tower", and the novels "Atonement", "Place", "Psalm", and others are in focus. These works are analyzed in the context of the third wave emigrant's literature and late Soviet literature. The article argues that Gorenshtein raised the most important issues of the spiritual and intellectual life in Russia in post-Soviet era. The Holocaust theme is one of the most important in his oeuvre.

By the end of the 80's of the XX century Russian literature was united for the first time since 1917. All three waves of the emigration were being published in the literary periodicals and publishing-houses, and merged into a single stream with the domestic product. The third wave of emigration began with the now-forgotten Valerii Tarsis (1906-83), who went abroad in 1966. Before that, the Russian first and second waves of literary emigration (respectively, following the October Revolution and World War II) had boasted some of the greatest names in Russian literature of twentieth century, including Vladimir Nabokov, Ivan Bunin, Vladislav Khodasevich, Evgenii Zamiatin and Mark Aldanov. The third wave would similarly displace the best Russian writers, including two Nobel Prize winners Aleksander Solzhenitsyn and, in the future, Iosif Brodskii, from their native soil.

My aim is to demonstrate Gorenshtein's significant and enduring influence, and thus to broaden public acknowledgement of his contributions during the Soviet and early post-Soviet periods.

Fridrikh Naumovich Gorenshtein was born on the 18th of March, 1932 in Kiev. Gorenshtein's youth was marked at first by the tragic consequences of Stalinism, and then by the experience of the World War II and the Holocaust. In 1935 his father, a professor of political economy, wrote a research report on the inefficiency of the collective farm system. As a consequence he was arrested and disappeared forever. The future writer spent much of his childhood in orphanages, and the image of the child whose father has been repressed is one which is constant in his work. Gorenshtein was barely nine years old when German forces invaded the USSR. He was evacuated to Orenburg region with his mother who died very soon after that. Based on his recollections of childhood, the novella "*Dom s bashenkoi*" ("House with Tower", 1964) remains his only work to be published in the Soviet Union before his emigration. He was to wait another quarter of a century before the Soviet readership would become reacquainted with his work.

Gorenshtein worked at a variety of jobs in Ukraine, including construction worker and mining engineer (he studied at the Mining Institute at Dnepropetrovsk from 1950 to 1955), before studying to become a screen writer in Moscow. He wrote seventeen screenplays, five of which were developed into films (including Andrei Tarkovsky's "*Solaris*", 1972, and Nikita Mikhalkov's "*Raba lyubvi*" ("Slave of Love", 1975). For many years screenplays remained his sole literary output, but he was to comment later on the benefit of being a screen writer,

"As a professional screen writer I have separated prose from literature. Trifonov is a good prose writer and has written some screenplays, but they are of little interest. Because he wrote them as prose. Here there is a different rhythm; here you have to feel the rhythm of the cinema. Of course, the fact that I have been trained in the cinema is a great help to me in my prose writing, because here there is a visual image. Lev Tolstoi had no cinematic training, yet many of his works require almost no work to be adapted as a screenplay... It is my idea that the screenplay stands even further away from prose than drama, although by its form the screenplay should be closer. In the screenplay there is the rhythm of montage. You have to feel montage"[1].

Gorenshtein worked as a satirist in *Literaturnaia gazeta*, and his philosophical novella "*Stupeni*" ("Steps") was published in the *Metropole* almanac. Gorenshtein subsequently regretted his participation in the *Metropole* project, not because it laid him open to official reprimand and possible material hardship, but because he felt out of place in a book written and edited by "men of the sixties" (*shestidesiatniki*), whose ideas and aesthetic principles he did not share. He began sending his works to the West for publication in 1977, and in 1980 he emigrated. In his novel "*Psalm*" ("The Psalm", written in 1974-75, published in French in 1984) he writes, "Man's true homeland is not the land he inhabits but the nation to which he belongs. There is no Russian, Jewish, English, Turkish or whatever else land. All the land is the Lord's one, and the true right to this or

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that piece of land is not given by historical conquest or historical resettlement, but by the fact of its centuries-old custodianship [2].

Fridrikh Gorenshtein lived in Berlin until his death on the 2nd of March, 2002.

It was while he was abroad that he wrote the novellas "Iakov Kasha" (1981), "Kucha" ("Pile"), "Ulitsa Krasnykh Zor'" ("Street of Red Dawns", 1985), "Poslednee leto na Volge" ("Last Summer on Volga"), and many novellas. Before his departure he managed to complete the novels "Mesto" ("Place", written in 1969-76), "Iskuplenie" ("Atonement", 1979), the novella "Zima 53-ego" ("Winter of '53rd", 1978) and the play "Spory o Dostoevskom" ("Arguments about Dostoevsky", 1973). The latter had been admitted to writing by him even before he got acquainted with the work of Mikhail Bakhtin. The action takes place during the editorial discussion of a manuscript which examines Dostoyevskii's religious views. The editorial board has to decide whether to publish it or not.

Gorenshtein succeeds in his works in exploring the issue of justice at an intense emotional level. The play "Spory o Dostoevskom" is not an exception, as the following quotation demonstrates, "Power and malice plunder their way through all corners of the planet, while mercy, virtue and spiritual frailty are explicitly or covertly presented as a sign of a sickly bodily weakness which is then universally ridiculed"[3]. If the first part of the play recounts the history of Dostoyevskii's reception in Russia, the second stands as a warning against the slyness of an artist's ideas which are then adopted as a weapon by the totalitarian state. It is a play based on paradoxes, and fundamentally about paradoxes – of the relationship of literature and totalitarianism, ambition and honour.

One of Gorenshtein's characteristic traits is the juxtaposition of male and female figures. In the novel "Psalm" ("Psalm") the women become a mere function of the boundless expanses of Russia, as it is up to them to produce new people to populate them. Taking away a child from a woman is akin to death. One of characters in the first part of the novel dies when her son Vasia is taken away from her, "After that Maria did not longer want to live, she died aged fifteen in the prison hospital on 23 February 1936, and was buried without a coffin"[4].

As with Dostoevsky, the writer with whom Gorenshtein most frequently crossed swords and whom he most resembled, man strives for justice, but his efforts did not lead to true triumph of any justice. This is because true justice is carried out only by the Higher Authority (an idea, of course, borrowed from Dostoyevskii). Higher justice is not dependent on the historical environment or arbitrarily intermingled circumstances. It is the measure by which all people and all countries will eventually be judged.

In "Psalm" ("Psalm") there is an allegory of the Final Judgement when Dan the Antichrist was sent by the will of God to the Godless and militant atheistic Soviet Union. It is not long before Dan the Antichrist realises that he is among pagans, when he sees various idols made from stone and metal and drawn on walls and

posters. Gorenshtein commented himself on the many religious and Biblical allusions in the novel, "Five parts, called parables, tell of the 'four punishments of Christ: famine, war, adultery and mental anguish; of some resolution; of the meaning of Evil which is partly elucidated at the end of the novel. So this is a novel about Evil? I would answer differently, using Goethe's words: it is about the damnation of Evil, a damnation which itself becomes evil. It is about how the sufferer becomes the source of suffering, the victim becomes the executioner"[5].

The novel was differently accepted by critics. In his preface to the Soviet edition in the journal "Oktiabr'", Viacheslav Ivanov writes, "The novel in great measure is constructed around the idea of carnal love as damnation, as the characters in the novel know virtually no other kind of love. In this, too, the novel, with all its Biblical stylistic subtleties which give the erotic scenes their originality, belongs to our time. Although none of them mentions Freud, over all the male characters hangs the damnation of the libido as the most insuperable force, one that subdues both the mythological Antichrist (and sometimes even appearing to be its personification) and simple mortals, especially women, whose psychology Gorenshtein is particularly skilful in reproducing. The nakedness of the female body, the violence done to it, a husband's savagery with his wife's lover – all this is described by Gorenshtein with a power that no doubt has been instilled in him by his reading of the Old Testament"[6].

Gorenshtein's characters live on the razor's edge of psychological health and ill-health, and this, as well as the cosmic scale of their passions, brings them close to the characters in Dostoevsky's works. We can also add that the female characters are the dominant ones in Gorenshtein's works, and that his men, in comparison to the women, are vapid and weak. Here there are two exceptions: Dan the Antichrist and the narrator himself.

Gorenshtein's female characters grow up early, for this is a time when mothers leave their children in order to save their lives. Without the company of grown-ups, the girls immediately acquire independence and an almost maternal feeling for their brothers. When Nina and Sasha Kukharensko are left alone in the train, Nina at once becomes a genuinely independent woman. In this she resembles Mariia in the preceding 'parable', who also travels by train to meet her destiny in the form of Dan the Antichrist.

One particularly characteristic episode happens when brother and sister Vasia and Mariia are walking through a dark alley at night, and, although they are startled by the nocturnal birds and inexplicable noises of the night, they feel no fear in their hearts. The narrator remarks, "But neither Mariia nor Vasia were afraid of the night. Wolves had long since been eradicated around here, and not many humans would be tempted to fall upon poverty-stricken children. Perhaps a mischievous type might, but in hungry times people could not be bothered to get up to such mischief, they lost their robbers' idealism and became too practical-minded to jump a rations commissar from behind or rob a grain store"[7].

One of Gorenstein's central concerns is the relationship of Jews to other nationalities, especially Russians. He takes pains not to elevate Jews above others, "Jews as individuals are just as bad as the rest of mankind. But as a construct of history, a Biblical phenomenon, these are people close to God, and man in his essence hates God, and therefore he hates Jews, and therefore many Jews as individuals hate themselves and their Biblical destiny"[8]. He goes on to say that the further people move away from God, the stronger is their hate, and the more natural is their anti-Semitism on a national basis.

Anti-Semitism is the natural language of the more backward, aggressive and at the same time weak people. In the novel "*Mesto*" ("Place") anti-Semitism is a kind of "political Esperanto" used in times of crisis to solve problems, a modern form of witch-hunt which reduces complex issues to a very low common denominator. Gorenstein's treatment of the Jewish theme is different from that of Vasilii Rozanov in the early decades of the twentieth century, and that of Vasilii Grossman following the World War II. The Jews are God's chosen people, as spoken by some of Gorenstein's characters, and the narrator himself. Dan the Antichrist's earthly journey is the dramatic destiny of a Jew who has lived his life in Russia and who has shared its four punishments of God in "*Psalm*". There are many other Biblical motives in the novel, with references to the Good Samaritan, Lot's daughters and Ruth, with whom the novel's optimism is ultimately tied.

The novel "*Iskuplenie*" takes place in 1946, in territory that during the War was occupied by the Germans. Sashen'ka is a character who holds the whole novel together. She is poor, like her mother, and her home was taken over by strangers. In the week before the New Year's Eve ball, she prepared herself by washing herself with a special ointment brought from Germany, rubbed perfume into her clothes and, for the first time in her life, applied lipstick and reddened her cheeks. Her moment of triumph came when everyone stopped to gaze on her in admiration, but it was also her moment of self-realization, and self-deprecation. She saw herself as poor and down-trodden, and for this she blamed her mother. To avenge herself for years of poverty and despair, Sashen'ka denounced her own mother to the authorities, as a result of which her mother is taken off to the Gulag.

Gorenstein writes about the sheer impossibility of a decent life in the conditions of totalitarian terror and all-pervasive suspicion. At the end of "*Iskuplenie*" Sashen'ka's mother returned from imprisonment and remarried, and a baby is born in a family who moved into their apartment. Finally, Sashen'ka herself gives birth to a little girl, whose father is an army officer of Jewish birth and whose own family has been wiped out during the German occupation. Efim Etkind writes, "F. Gorenstein writes about those people who are sometimes called 'little': such as his old women who, it would seem, can't stand each other. Kim in "*Winter of '53rd*" "who, like all Soviet bores, reveres Stalin, hates 'any cosmopolitan', condemns her 'traitor' father and holds authority in high esteem. Sashen'ka, who has a

pathological jealousy bordering on hatred of her own mother, and is prepared to kill her because of it. And these people, no matter how coarsened or perverted they are by the evil all around them, are lit up with love and become open to goodness"[9].

Gorenstein's women, therefore, struggle with their own destiny. They fight for their loved ones; they defend their own weaknesses, their vices, dubious passions and the principles that pander to those vices. This is something of a development in Gorenstein's treatment of female characters, for in his early works male characters predominate. They argue about Dostoevskii or fight for the Russian throne, and they commit adultery; it is only in his later works that the prospects for women's lives are given a full airing.

The novel "*Mesto*" is one of a few written by Gorenstein where the narrative is first-person, in the shape of the protagonist Gosha Tsvibyshev. The novel is of an epic scale (800 pages), and at its outset Gosha is wallowing in his own mediocrity, "I speak so much about the cat because this mute creature became involved in events and played a part in my life story. Once, when I went up in order to stroke it, as was my custom, it suddenly jumped up and drove its teeth into my fingers, at the same time as the claws on its hind paws made deep wounds in the palm of my hand. Dar'ia Pavlovna witnessed this and even cried out with fright. I left the room, holding my wounded hand outstretched. I poured triple-strength eau-de-cologne over the bleeding wound and wrapped a handkerchief round my hand. Apart from the pain I was seething with a sense of injury. Of course, it would be stupid to take offence at an animal, the people in the room would have laughed at me. But this was an old cat with much experience, and I do believe that she knew how to behave in order to live with people. In three years I do not recall her biting anyone, even though she had been beaten and kicked, her kittens taken away and her tail pulled." "That means that she sensed my hopelessness," I thought as I lay on my berth"[10].

The novel is about how Tsvibyshev progresses from a state of self-doubt and self-denigration to find his own place in society. And that place is as a KGB official, and head of his own household. Even so, the only child in that household is not his, but rather the product of gang rape that his future wife suffered during a pogrom. Masha does not even know the name of the child's father. Tsvibyshev sits in his new chauffeur-driven "Volga" car and muses on how far he has come from a bed in a dormitory to his present status, but his place in life, the place he had so urgently aspired to, remains illusory. The child in his family is not his, he is not a father – his life is a sham.

Tsvibyshev as a character is, however, quite contrived. Gorenstein is perhaps too much at pains to make him realistic, but it is hard to believe that Gosha would be taken on by the KGB when he is not capable of doing the most elementary task, or of ringing the right person at the right time, or even messing up the monthly report sent from the library to the KGB. Tsvibyshev's abilities as a narrator able to reflect on historical and philosophical issues are also exaggerated. But

Tsvibyshev does possess one invaluable trait: he is sincere and open. He makes no effort to embellish his own virtues and actions. Rather, he delights in self-disparagement and self-mockery. He lays himself bare before the reader, his self-judgement is so harsh that he need not fear any other.

This is not to say that Tsvibyshev is a masochist. His sufferings cause him pain, pain brings more suffering, but certainly no pleasure. In his confessional narrative there is neither narcissism nor self-laceration, its aim is simply as a confession. Tsvibyshev is a man with an idea, and his humiliations are the wrong end of that idea, for he does see himself, in time-honoured Russian fashion, as a Napoleonic figure: 'Sooner or later the world will revolve around me, as it revolves around its own axis.'

Moreover, the repressed Tsvibyshev resembles more a character from a Chekhov novella. In his novella "Moi Chekhov oseni i zimy 1968 goda" ("My Chekhov in Autumn and Winter of 1968", 1980) Gorenstein writes,

"The first reaction to kindness and freedom of a man who has been crushed by injustice is not joy and gratitude, but injury and spite at the years spent in fear and in check. [...] Mankind's passive hostility is more dangerous than active hostility, the crimes of active hostility are bloody, but this hostility is active and, consequently, lethal. Passive hostility, though, is not as clearly expressed, it is bloodless and natural, but it is capable of waiting and vanquishes the human in man not with force, but with patience"[11].

Tsvibyshev's obsessions with the trappings of affluence – his liking for good food, for instance, are really an attempt to exorcise the memory of his own humble beginnings. He bemoans the money spent on everyday things, such as tickets for public transport or shoe repairs, he reads his savings accounts book as if it were gospel, and thinks of ways to avoid paying on a tramcar. Gorenstein draws a picture of the "little man" so beloved of classical Russian literature in the figure of Tsvibyshev, but subverts the stereotype. Tsvibyshev is far from the man who is poor but noble in spirit; rather, his poverty is demeaning and humiliating, and impels him to the most ignoble actions in his life.

Gorenstein's friend in emigration, the writer Boris Khazanov (whose original name was Gennadii Faibusovich), explained that, "We were once told that the October Revolution was the greatest event of our epoch. No. The central event of our epoch is Auschwitz. It has lent our age its name. The seventeenth century is called the Age of Reason; the eighteenth century-the Age of Enlightenment; the nineteenth century- the Age of Progress. And the twentieth century is the Age of Auschwitz. Adorno's statement, "After Auschwitz there is no more history," has become almost a proverb. But history carries on. It continues as if there had been no Auschwitz. It is as if Auschwitz is something faraway, alien, semi-real and of no concern to us. [...] That is what is terrifying"[12].

In his works, Gorenstein struggles against people, policies, opinions and states for which "there had been no Auschwitz." His authorial stance towards any character depends on how that character relates to Jews

in the wake of Auschwitz. For Gorenstein, the Eternal Jew is the Eternal Soul, and the geographical migration of the Jews is a metaphor for the migration of the Jewish soul in history. The Eternal Jew is always moving towards Jerusalem, his symbol of the unity of earthly and heavenly temples. For Gorenstein, the place taken by the Third Rome in Dostoevskii's philosophy is transformed into nostalgia for real Jerusalem. The Eternal Jew can never stop—a soul that has ceased moving it takes the material form of an ancient and decrepit old man; youth remains in movement, in eternal renewal. Yet Gorenstein's Jews are proud to live in History. Even if they wanted to, they cannot live outside of time or their circumstances. They remain tragically mortal, and their death neither changes nor stops the course of history, though there flows another history that started after the Holocaust.

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