

Literary Onomastics of Contemporary Slavic Novels

Anna M. Bojcun

This paper deals with contemporary onomastics in the novels of three writers, Alexander Solzhenitsyn, the noted Russian novelist; Michael Osadčyj, a young Ukrainian writer and Andrew C. Romanski, a Polish author.

Works of the authors which contain similar themes have been chosen for the analysis. The themes include the Soviet judicial system and life in Soviet prisons and hard labour camps in which each one of the three writers under discussion has at one time been imprisoned. The novels are: V pėrvom krėge (The First Circle) by Solzhenitsyn, Bilmo (The Cataract) by Osadčyj, and Wieżniowie nocy (Prisoners of Night) by Romanski.

The following functions of literary onomastics are examined: 1) The titles of the novels.

2) Names related to the characters in action
(couleur historique).

3) Names related to the place of action
(couleur locale).

4) Names related to the emotions, e.g., anger,

Bojcun 2

hate, irony (couleur emotiff).

The general investigation of stylistic functions follows the schema elaborated by Dr. Jaroslav Rudnyckyj in his study "Functions of Proper Names in Literary Work,"¹ but with the addition of allegorical meaning of titles.

Let us closely examine Solzhenitsyn's novel.

In a manner similar to Dante's Inferno, hell in this novel is used as a metaphor for the special prisons in which political prisoners were held. These prisons were scientific research centres, staffed with top calibre scientists who were, nevertheless, essentially prisoners. The very title of the book, The First Circle, immediately suggests that Solzhenitsyn will relate events of primary importance. I cite the words of the author:

I've lived fifty-two years, I've recovered from fatal illnesses, I've been married to pretty women, I've had sons, I've received academic prizes -- but never have I been so blessedly happy as I am today! Where have I landed? They won't be driving me out into icy water tomorrow! An ounce and a half of butter! Black bread -- out on the table! They don't forbid books! You can shave yourself! The guards don't beat the zeks. What kind of great day is this? Maybe I've died? Maybe this is a dream? Perhaps I'm in heaven?

Bojcun 3

"No, dear Sir," said Rubin, "you are, just as you previously were, in hell. But you have risen to its best and highest circle -- the first circle..."²

The appellation of the second book, The Cataract, is also explained by the author himself:

We are surrounded by lanterns. Only lanterns. They are cleverly placed along the path we were told to walk. The path is cleverly paved with light-reflecting cobble stones which, like a magnet, draw the eye... It somehow gets inside you and imprisons your being. It makes you feel exceedingly important and...empty... You can walk this illuminated path a year, two, then a lifetime...Suddenly I wanted to see what was beyond those lanterns...Only for a second, from the corner of my eye, but this act cost me dearly. Little people began scurrying around and focused on me the light from all the lanterns. It blinded me...I became powerless in the hellish trap...I began writing all kinds of words in the sand. No, only one word - individual. At first I wrote it in small letters. Then in capitals: INDIVIDUAL. I began to laugh, so hard that I cried like a small child...³

The paved road and the lanterns are used to symbolize the dogma of Communism and the doctrines that hold some people in bondage their entire life. Only those, who know how to look beyond the projectors - beyond the doctrines - are able to see the truth.

Romanski also mentions Dante. He says that the hell depicted by Dante is heaven compared to the concentration

Bojcun 4

camps in which only a few hundred Polish army officers out of more than ten thousand originally sent there, survived.

All three titles are metaphors through which each writer attempts to transmit his allegorical approach to the problems presented in the novel. Each author attempts to stir up the reader's emotion and to awaken his sympathy for those who suffer.

2. Names related to the character in action.

It is possible that antroponyms and toponyms, in combination with other names, can evoke in the reader a state of mind or an idea that the author wished to evoke. For example, let us take the adage, "All roads lead to Rome." Under the name Rome, one can understand every capital, or even every problem that can be approached by various ways or means. Therefore onomastics play an important role in every literary work. The author diligently selects names, which can express his thoughts and feelings, or which may portray events, problems, or characteristics of the main persons in the novel.

Bojcun 5

The names of leading characters have symbolic meanings in each of the three novels under discussion. Solzhenitsyn, for example, names his heroes thus: the main character's name is Neržin, from the word rža (rust). Thus the main character is one who does not rust but is always clean, dexterous and as sharp as a steel blade. Another character is a professor who is a brilliant philologist. He is given the name Rubin, from ruby, the precious stone.

A renowned mathematician who planned the dyke on the Dneiper river is called Čelnov, from the word čelo, meaning forehead in Old Church Slavonic. Thus he is characterized as a wise person. The head mechanic is called Doródin, and this name derives from the adjective doródnj, meaning portly or copulent. Solzhenitsyn calls the prisoner who destroyed his ballot paper, Xorobryj, which means brave. All the above-mentioned characters are individuals who are honest and upright and imprisoned for their belief in truth and veracity. They are also individualist in that they follow their own mind.

Bojcun 6

On the other hand, characters that are merely tools of the party and those that blindly follow the orders given by the regime, have laughable surnames in keeping with their servile nature. For instance, the chief of Stalin's personal secretariat is named Poskrebysev from the noun skrebók, a general term for tools with which dirty jobs are done, e.g., skrebníca is a horse comb.

Since the action of The First Circle takes place in the last years of the Stalin era, Solzhenitsyn gives the dictator several ironical names such as: The Greatest of the Great, The Wisest of Wise, The Plowman, The Master, The Tyrant and The Generalissimo.

The Cataract is a recent diary that came to the West in 1970. The diary deals with the persecution, trial and conviction of Ukrainian intellectuals in the 1960's. All names in the diary are real. Ironically, the two leading characters, Osadčyj, the prisoner, and Halkevych, the chief interrogator, have very meaningful surnames. Osadčyj's surname derives from the verb osidaty meaning "to settle," and Halkevych's name derives from the noun háлка which means

Bojcun 7

a "crow," or from the verb halyty meaning "to hurry." The inquisitor Halkeyč, in reality, both laughs loudly and hurries.

The author of Prisoners of Night gives his heroes significant surnames, using a technique similar to that used by Solzhenitsyn. The main character, the dedicated physician Wolski, has a surname which is derived from the Polish word wola, meaning willpower. Dr. Wolski works diligently in the prisoner of war camps amidst appalling hygienic conditions, and in so far as he is able, he brings relief to the men dying there. The Russian woman doctor's name is Sažanova. Her name is taken from the noun sažen', which refers to a unit of measure, the foot. She is mild in nature and small in stature.

There are many historical names which the three authors mention in their works, but only one figure is selected by all three as a symbol of imprisonment, namely, the figure of Catherine the Great, empress of Russia from 1762 to 1796. Here is what Solzhenitsyn says:

Bojcun 8

What can one say about this serviceable institution? It traces its origin back to the barracks in the time of Catherine the Great. In that cruel age, the Empress did not spare bricks for its fortified walls and vaulted ceilings.⁴

Romanski gives the Empress credit for prison soup, called balanda. I quote:

This word (balanda) meaning a meal in the prison, like the prison itself, dates from the time of Catherine the Great.⁵

Osadčyj offers more detailed characteristics of Catherine:

Catherine II knew how to love men, but she also knew how to hate them. How terrible is the hatred of an innocent woman. Twenty-five years in a 'stone sack.' My hunchbacked old man, how could you have survived it?...What aside from prison soup, fed your sick and helpless body? What heated your fragile legs and your lax mouth. Tell me what was Christ's suffering compared to yours? He died on a hilltop. He saw great distances before him. The sun shone on Him and He breathed fresh air. He died easily in His suffering, but you did not die. You lived and this was a suffering greater than Christ's.⁶

Osadčyj is referring to Petro Kal'nyševs'kyj (1698-1803), the last hetman of the Ukrainian Cossack State, Zaporozjan Sič, which was destroyed by Catherine the Great in 1775.

Bojcun 9

3. Names related to the place of action.

There are many toponyms and names of prisons and camps but most of them do not have a symbolic or stylistic function. Solzhenitsyn gives a long list of prisons in Moscow, which according to him are "evenly distributed throughout the capital, so situated that it is not far from any point in the city to one or another of them."⁷

The first is Marvino Special Prison, where the action of The First Circle takes place; Lefortovo Prison, where selected prisoners are brought to visit their relatives; Butryskaja Prison, some sections of which were rebuilt and redecorated for the visit of Mrs. Roosevelt; Taganka Prison, a prison for thieves; and finally Lobjanka Prison, the largest prison in Moscow. Lobjanka is also the most famous prison because it is there that political prisoners are usually incarcerated. There, there exists that passage, well known to the citizens of the USSR, and described by Solzhenitsyn as follows:

Through this passage for a third of a century all prisoners of the central prison had been led: Cadets,

Bojcun 10

Social Revolutionaries, Anarchists, Octobrists, Mensheviks, Bolsheviks, Sanikov, Jakubovič, Kutěpov, Rámzin, Sulgin, Buxárin, Rykón, Tunačevskyj, Professor Pletnev, Vavilov, Field Marshall Paulus, General Krásnov, world famous scientists and poets...First the criminals themselves, then their wives, then their daughters. The prisoners were led up to an equally famous desk, where each of them signed the thick book of 'Registered Lives' through a slot in a metal plate, without seeing the name above or below his own.⁸

Osadčyj mentions the transitional prisons in Lviv, Kiev, and Kharkiv, and also the hard labour camp (No. 11) in the Kazakhstanián village called Jatwas. Romanski describes a northern camp (No. 90) in the autonomous republic of Komi, where there are more prisoners than there are members of the Komi tribe.

The name of Russia and of the Russian people is frequently used in a figurative manner in the three novels. Thus it is appropriate to consider Russia as a geographical toponym. Solzhenitsyn sees the Russian people in a manner similar to the way Stalin, a Georgian, saw them:

In the thirties, for the sake of politics alone, he had resurrected the forgotten word ródina - homeland... Yet, with the years he himself actually came to enjoy pronouncing "Russia" and "ródina." He had come to

Bojcun 11

like the Russian people very much. These were the people who never betrayed him, who went hungry for so many years...who had calmly gone forth to war, to the camps, into all kinds of hardship, and had never rebelled. After the victory, Stalin had said with complete sincerity that the Russian people possess a clear mind, a staunch character and patience.⁹

Osadčyj gives an interesting comparison of the Russian and the Ukrainian character:

The Ukraine stares at the prisoner with large eyes! Then she hurriedly turns him away. The convoy of prisoners seems to paralyze her face. Ukraine is afraid of the prisoner. She tries to avoid him...

Russia is no match for Ukraine. Russia not only loves the prisoner, she also treats him with true respect...Russia does not spare for prisoners neither bread nor torture...¹⁰

Romanski concludes with the following:

The mission of today's Soviet Russia does not differ from the mission of the eighteenth-century Russia of Peter I, namely, to subordinate ancient and small nations of Europe; to conquer Asia; to push England away from the Asian continent; to master the world...¹¹

4. Names related to the emotions.

All three authors champion truth and justice. At some stage in their lives each of them had been the victim of an unconstitutional trial. Not surprisingly then, each

Bojcun 12

of their works contains a parody of the Soviet judicial procedure. Both Solzhenitsyn and Osadčyj call their trials a comedy, and their judges, comedians. Solzhenitsyn presents a trial of "a traitor prince." This work is a sophisticated satire and includes ridiculous imitation of Soviet life. Solzhenitsyn pretends that the defendant is Ihor, the hero of the epic poem known as "Lay of Ihor's Campaign." This poem which has an unknown author, is an account of a heroic campaign which Ihor Svjatoslavyč, a prince of Kievan Rus', made against the Polovci in 1185. Solzhenitsyn's irony is at its peak when he writes:

On the basis of the above, Olgovič, Ihor Svjatoslavyč, born 1151, a native of Kiev, ...serving in the position of troop commander with the rank of Prince, decorated with the order of Viking of the first degree, the Red Sun, and the medal of the Gold Shield, is accused of the following:

That he wilfully executed vile treason against his country, combined with sabotage, espionage, and collaboration over a period of many years with the Polovcjan Khan Končak...¹²

This is ironical because, for centuries, Prince Ihor, had been the symbol of the soldier committed to protecting and upholding the safety and honour of the Kievan Rus', his

Bojcun 13

country.

Osadčyj describes his trial thus:

A holy Inquisition. The Middle Ages threw it up on a high bank, unreachable and untouchable..The Judges judge. The Judges doze. The public is banned from the trials so that they will not prevent their dozing...

I object to the closed session of the court. The constitution of the USSR and the 20th clause of the code of criminal procedure guarantee that trials of this type must be open. The court stands contrary to the constitution and the code and that is why I consider this court not in session, decline to testify and am presenting an affidavit on the matter.

This was like lightning out of a clear sky. It jarred the sleepy judges...The prosecutor jumped up, as if he had been burned and threw the affidavit into the face of Vjačeslav Čornovol. "You are an enemy," he shouted, gasping with anger..."Take him out...Take him out immediately"....¹³

The second witness, Anatolia P., a young teacher, answers questions with innocent irony.

- Q. "Did you take anti-Soviet articles from Myxajlo Horyn'?"
- A. "No. I did not take any."
- Q. "But you did take an article on the Russification of Ukrainian schools from him?"
- A. "Yes, I took it. But is that an anti-Soviet article?"
- Q. "What do you mean by 'Is is anti-Soviet'? Didn't you read it?"
- A. "Yes, I read it! But it says what actually has happened."

Bojcun 14

Q. "What 'has happened'?"

A. "Well, I was doing my training in the Crimean province and the director of the school told us to teach Ukrainian in Russian."

Q. "What! Are you making fun of us?"

A. "If you don't believe me ask the director of the school."¹⁴

Osadčyj vividly describes the courage of the witnesses who testified at his trial and attempted to give credence to his claims, even at the risk of their own safety.

Romanski describes the trial and sentencing of Shloma, a Hungarian Jew:

Q. "Are you a Communist?"

A. "Yes, I am a Communist. I have read Marx. I always tuned in to Moscow radio. My sister even embroidered the slogan 'Proletarians of the world unite' onto a red flag."

Q. "This is not important. Tell me what you know about Communism."

A. "That's why I came here to the USSR, namely, to find out about and see Communism."

The sentencing took place a few days later. "The case against you looks pretty bad," the judge said. "The interrogator found that you are a Trotskyist."¹⁵

Because of that discovery Shloma was sent north, sentenced to ten years in a hard labour camp and forever lost his citizenship.

Each of the writers attempts to show the shortcomings

Bojcun 15

of the Soviet judicial system. Solzhenitsyn uses Prince Ihor as a defendant to demonstrate the unpardonable treatment by the Soviet Government of its own soldiers who, when they returned home after having fought valiantly in the Second World War and after having been imprisoned by the Germans, were sentenced to twenty or more years in prison for treason, espionage or collaboration with the enemy.

Osadčyj shows how the trial prosecutors violate the Soviet constitution and how they assume the guilt of the defendant before it is even proved.

Romanski describes how Communists from other countries, who although they believed in the ideals of the Soviet system, were mistreated and ascribed crimes they not only never committed, but never heard of.

The use of the historical names Ihor Svjatoslavyč and Trotsky has a stylistic function. These names serve to point out the abnormalities of Soviet justice. Prince Ihor, for centuries a hero becomes a traitor. The Soviet people's court is an Inquisition, and an international Communist theorist, Leon Trotsky, becomes the enemy of Russian

Bojcun 16

chauvinistic Communism.

Each author attempts to show not only the unfairness of such judicial actions, but also their senselessness. This type of judicial persecution, they say, halts, or at least greatly hinders, the development and growth of individual work in all spheres of creativity, whether it be research, art, poetry or drama. Here, according to the writers, is where the nation and its people lose most.

Meanwhile, this type of judicial system gives immense powers to men who are short on principles and courage, to men who are prepared to use fake charges and unconstitutional convictions to further their personal, petty ambitions.

Dante's Divine Comedy was truly a summation of the Middle Ages, a protest against ecclesiastical corruption. The novels under consideration voice a similar protest. All three writers are protesting against the sufferings of innocent people and against the judicial corruption and violence which they see as inherent in the Soviet regime.

Bojcun 17

Conclusion

The main thing I have tried to show in this paper is that the names of characters play important roles in the three novels chosen for discussion. The authors usually give their positive characters good, sincere and meaningful names. Negative characters and those who lack individualistic qualities have funny, ironical or ridiculous names.

Historical names are treated differently by the authors. Often the writers see some historical name or personage as representative of the same idea, i.e., it evokes similar symbolic imagery in all three of them. Dante's Inferno is accepted by all of them as the ultimate linguistic function of the negative. Then there is the figure of Catherine the Great of Russia. Each author considers her to be a symbol of man's enslavement of other men.

The stylistic function of the toponym Russia and the Russian people differs from writer to writer. Solzhenitsyn, without doubt, a Russian patriot, gives to his nation only

Bojcun 18

the very best characteristics. This is in contrast to the non-Russian authors who focus on Russia's negative qualities. Osadčyj, a Ukrainian, sees Russia as a conqueror and chauvinist. Romanski, a Pole, speaks of Russian jingoism and imperialism.

On the basis of my investigation of 637 antroponyms and toponyms, of which only 123 were used in this study, it seems that each author's background, philosophy and nationality plays a part in his use of onomastics. He uses names according to his point of view, his emotions and his feelings.

Anna M. Bojcun

NOTES

¹Rudnyckyj, J.B.: 'Still und Formprobleme in der Literatur,' Heidelberg, 1959, pp. 378-383.

²Solzhenitsyn, A.: The First Circle, Transl. P. Whitney, Harper & Row, New York, 1968, p. 8.

³Osadčyj, M.: Bilmo, "Smoloskyp," Paris, 1970, p. 8.

⁴The First Circle, p. 327.

⁵Romanski, A.: Prisoners of Night, Orbis, London, 1956, p. 15.

⁶Bilmo, p. 40.

⁷The First Circle, p. 209.

⁸Ibid., p. 162.

⁹Ibid., p. 115.

¹⁰Bilmo, p. 87.

¹¹Prisoners of Night, p. 139.

¹²The First Circle, p. 303.

¹³Bilmo, pp. 64-65.

¹⁴Ibid., p. 66.

¹⁵Prisoners of Night, pp. 173-174.