On June 14-16 the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign hosted a conference on the life, works and cultural impact of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn. Eighteen scholars from the U. S., Russia, Britain and France took part. Also present were the writer’s wife, Mrs. Natalia Solzhenitsyn, and two of his sons, Ignat and Stephan. In a serendipitous coincidence, the event was immediately preceded by the announcement that Solzhenitsyn had been awarded the State Prize for 2007 and by Vladimir Putin’s visit — pilgrimage — to the writer’s home at Troitse-Lykovo near Moscow.

The event at Illinois was conceived as the second in a projected sequence of international gatherings dedicated to the study of Solzhenitsyn which began with the December 2003 Moscow conference «Александр Солженицын: проблемы художественного творчества». The conference title, “Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn As Writer, Myth-maker and Public Figure,” identified the key aspects of Solzhenitsyn’s status in the modern cultural consciousness. As the conference organizer, I felt that this triune formula would contextualize the discussion and encourage the participants to situate him in the intertexts and narratives of the postcommunist, postmodern age. My intention was to bring together leading Solzhenitsyn specialists who could offer a variety of perspectives on the writer’s Weben und Leben and discuss — or debate — their respective approaches. As well as discussing Solzhenitsyn’s writerly skills and techniques, conference participants were expected to look at his relation to Russian and European Modernism; Western political and social thought; and the current Putin nation-building project, especially in its nostalgic, retrospective dimension of re-textualizing Russia’s Soviet and imperial past. I might add that the conference was meant to be a forum for the expression of diverse, critical and even mutually incompatible views, rather than an occasion where succession of encomiums, however learned, would be ritually recited for the academic record.

It was also felt that there were special meanings to the institutional environment chosen for our gathering. After all, this intersection of different perspectives on the famous Russian writer would be enacted at a large (40,000 students), publicly funded, research-oriented place of higher learning located in the middle of America’s Middle West and ranked No 45 on the Shanghai Jiao Tong table of the world’s top 101 universities and No 48 on the Newsweek List of Top Global Universities.¹ (Over the years, Illinois professors have won nine Nobel Prizes in physics and medicine, though not, as yet, in the Slavic field.) The University of Illinois, therefore, displays a quality of geographical and cultural centredness, an appropriate feature in view of that fictive and biographical rootedness that has always defined the Solzhenitsyn phenomenon.

So, why Solzhenitsyn?

Over the years and centuries certain Russian writers, such as Pushkin, Tolstoy, Dostoevsky and Nabokov, have become the subject of dedicated disciplines within the larger field of literary scholarship. There are societies devoted to research into (and worship of) these luminaries; specialist publications; lavishly funded and lavishly attended meetings. As a figure of comparable artistic merit and far greater public
importance than any one of that canonical foursome, the author of *The Gulag Archipelago* certainly deserves such structured disciplinary treatment.

Despite his prominence in the discourses of Russian and Western culture, Solzhenitsyn has been severely — strangely — under-researched, notably as an imaginative writer. Popular attitudes towards him both in Russia and beyond are often stereotypical, even hidebound. In his homeland the author of *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* tends to be consigned to the position of living classic, a kind of monument to himself, an acknowledged contributor to the canon whose best years and novels and ideas are past. In the West, now that the old ideological confrontation with world communism has become moot, many view him as a member of a heterogeneous group of larger-than-life figures (Andrei Sakharov, Lech Walesa, Ronald Reagan\(^1\)) who in common, hero-worshipping parlance “brought down the Berlin wall” and having discharged their world-historical function of creative destruction, culturally just faded away.

Moreover, both in Russia and in the West Solzhenitsyn, a self-professed realist of the Tolstoy-Dostoevsky persuasion, has mostly been investigated from a perspective that Catherine Belsey terms “the commonsense view of literature.” This “assumes that valuable literary texts [...] tell truths — about the period that produced them, about the world in general, or about human nature.”\(^ii\) Or, indeed, about the person whose name appears on the cover of the books so studied. Yet in recent decades the humanities have undergone an exciting process of re-definition, generating new approaches to the analysis of cultural texts and products. I refer to the methodologies associated with post-structuralism, deconstructionism, Lacanian psychoanalysis and the study of gender. In the light — however obscure, or uncertain, or flickering — of these theories, the relationship between writer and reader, and between those two and the text is now seen as problematic, multivalent, discontinuous. Interestingly, Solzhenitsyn is fully aware of the claims and ambitions of the practitioners of modern literary scholarship. On occasion, he has explicitly denounced them. Moreover, his literary works may be read as assertions of the autonomy and dignity of the imaginative writer, extended fictive polemics against the belief, as prevalent in Russia as it is in the West, in the Death of the Author.

Still, although several of the conference participants, myself included, were interested in measuring Solzhenitsyn’s productions against these post-World War II, post-Saussurian takes on meaning, none of us was prepared to adopt what Richard Rorty has called a "textualist" approach, where "bare, unmediated reality" is dismissed in favor of the obsessive and exclusive study of cultural texts and practices.\(^iii\) In fact, even those among us who felt that the analysis of Solzhenitsyn’s works should refer to such newer disciplinary perspectives acknowledged the centrality to his self-definition as a writer of a belief in absolute, extra-textual, extra-systemic meanings and moral determinants: the truth v. the lie; beauty v. ugliness; justice v. injustice; human dignity v. the dehumanization of the self. Several of those who spoke at Illinois were critical of aspects of Solzhenitsyn’s artistic or socio-political productions, or of his authorial project, but they too recognized that these ethically defined binary oppositions constitute the organizing elements of his writerly doctrine. Finally, the premise of all the scholars who came to discuss and debate at Illinois was that Solzhenitsyn’s reputation ultimately rests

\(^{1}\) The scientist, the working man, the actor, the writer — a sequence that seems to be, in socio-cultural terms, wonderfully representative and complete, like one of those friezes or frescos in the Moscow Metro.
not on his polemical writings or his declared attitudes to the politicians who have ruled Russia with varying degrees of competence since 1985 or 1991 or 2000, but on his novels and stories, as well as his monumental history of the Soviet camp system, *The Gulag Archipelago*.

With the conference due to start in the afternoon hours of June 14, that morning the hardier or more adventurous souls among the participants braved jet lag and 95 degree heat (35-градусная жара) to undertake a trip to Springfield, the state capital. The highlight of this excursion was a visit to the Lincoln Museum. This is the meticulously restored house, containing many of the original furnishings, in which Abraham Lincoln and his family lived for a number of years before his elevation to the presidency. At the reception area in the museum complex an elderly Park Service employee delighted the Russian scholars in the group by greeting them in the language of Pushkin and Solzhenitsyn: as he explained, he had studied it on his own, out of pure love of learning — thereby exhibiting those very qualities of self-reliance and self-improvement which distinguish so many of Solzhenitsyn’s fictional heroes.

The sight of the photographs of Lincoln displayed at the museum shaped my introductory remarks at the opening of the conference later that day. I ventured to compare the rugged, grave features of America’s sixteenth president, so redolent of personal and historical suffering, with Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn’s own luminous features to which perhaps only a Rublev or an El Greco might do justice. In her keynote address, which followed, Natalia Solzhenitsyn described in fluent English her husband’s artistic and public activities since his return to Russia in 1994 and commented on the definitive edition of his Collected Works now being published in Moscow. The audience who came to hear Mrs. Solzhenitsyn numbered in the hundreds and included, in addition to University of Illinois faculty and students, townspeople, members of the local Russian community, and representatives of the media.

The first conference panel, “The Crosstextual Journey of Gleb Nerzhin,” actually preceded the official opening and Mrs. Solzhenitsyn’s speech, having been envisaged as a kind of scholarly *soupçon* of the scholarly things to come. Alexis Klimoff (Алексей Климов) (Vassar College), the doyen of Solzhenitsyn studies in the United States, compared the “cheerfully ironic” narration in *Love the Revolution*, the novel Solzhenitsyn (un)completed in Riazan in 1958, with the “tragic and guilt-laced” tonality of his epic, mnemonic poem *Dorozhen’ka*, written at the Marfino sharashka and Ekibastuz labour camp in 1948-1952. Michael Nicholson (University College, Oxford) identified *Dorozhen’ka* and the plays of early fifties (Solzhenitsyn’s “paramount genre” at the time) as the “prerequisites” for *The First Circle*, and made a connection between these works and Solzhenitsyn’s little-known essay “Proterevshi glaza” (1954). My own paper looked at *The First Circle* as metaphorical bestiary and pandemonium, with reference to the author’s endeavour to reverse the Modernist fragmentation of text and reality by relating the human body and its spaces to stable moral, political and historical meanings. The chekists, prison guards, snoops and party hacks that torment the elite minds in the sharashka are elaborately coded as both subhuman and satanic; stamped with the mark of the Beast/beasts for all (fictive) time.

Panel II, “Solzhenitsyn’s Moral Concerns,” which brought together scholars whose academic orientation was primarily philosophical, was one of the highlights of the conference. Daniel Mahoney (Assumption College) defined the nature of Solzhenitsyn’s
engagement with issues of political philosophy. He noted the writer’s rejection of the post-Enlightenment tradition of secular anthropocentrism and pointed out that this “refusal to sever freedom from an order of truth sets him apart from every radically modern articulation of human liberty.” Edward Ericson (Calvin College) discussed Solzhenitsyn’s relationship with Father Alexander Schmemann, whose three essays of the early 1970s inaugurated the Christian analysis of the writer’s worldview, paying special attention to Schmemann’s later, private denunciation of Solzhenitsyn in his Journals for making an “idol” of Russia. The reason for Schmemann’s change of mind, Professor Ericson suggested, was “extratextual considerations sparked by a number of visits between the two men”, with the speaker dilating knowledgeably on the dynamics of Solzhenitsyn’s friendships and enmities. James Pontusso (Hampden-Sydney College) contrasted Solzhenitsyn’s moral philosophy, particularly his concept of virtue, with the de Man—Foucault—Derrida—Rorty line that morality or knowledge cannot be defined outside the semiotic parameters of a given culture, a view he traced back to “the tragically brilliant” Martin Heidegger. In the question-and-answer session that followed Stephan Solzhenitsyn stated that to describe Solzhenitsyn as a Christian writer is a misnomer, since this definition disenfranchises a whole set of actual or potential readers. I made the further point that some of Solzhenitsyn’s most sympathetic characters, such as Cancer Ward’s Oleg Kostoglotov, are atheists, while his religiously constituted heroes (Matrena, Varsonofiev) are more often than not heterodox in the extreme.

If the second panel was an all-American, all-philosophical affair, Panel III, “The Red Wheel As Literature, History, Myth,” brought together a group of literary scholars from Russia. Svetlana Sheshunova (Dubna International University) examined the connection between Solzhenitsyn’s historical epic and the mythology and folk demonology of the Eastern and Southern Slavs. She further analysed the opposition, foreshadowed in Love the Revolution and The First Circle, and central to The Red Wheel, of the Cross and the Wheel, which operates on a variety of symbolical and metaphorical levels in all three works. Aleksandr Urmanov (Blagoveschensk State Pedagogical University) adduced the conflation of class, political, professional, regional and cultural sociolects and lexicons characteristic of the 1917 period to propose that “лексические процессы, отраженные в Красном Колесе, фиксируют отсутствие целости народного сознания”. In a witty and provocative presentation, Pavel Spiwakowsky (Pushkin Institute) interpreted the mystical scene of the last temptation of Lenin by Parvus in November 1916 as a set of elaborately crafted realized metaphors «что предвосхищает поэтику современной русской литературы, которую часто недостаточно точно называют постмодернисткой». He went on to argue that in this sense, if no other, Vladimir Sorokin's scandalously famous story "A Month in Dachau" («Месяц в Дахау») displays a connection to The Red Wheel, a statement that puzzled some attendees, annoyed others, and delighted several more.

The second day of the proceedings concluded with a round table on "The Literary Contexts of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn," chaired by Ignat Solzhenitsyn, at which a mixture of visiting Russian and Illinois faculty expounded on the details of the writer’s literary technique, from Love the Revolution and his camp-period plays to the works that made his reputation. In particular, Michael Finke (University of Illinois) compared the representation of institutional medical practices in Solzhenitsyn and Chekhov and traced the textual vectors of the medical gaze in the works of the two writers. He also discussed
the challenges facing American students in their engagement with Solzhenitsyn's novels and stories.

The final day of the conference began with Panel IV, "Solzhenitsyn's Histories and Histories of Solzhenitsyn." Nadezhda Levitskaya (Левитская), the bibliographer and living institutional memory of the Russian Social Fund (Российский Общественный Фонд), gave a fascinating account of her clandestine activities in the 1960s as one of Solzhenitsyn's "invisible allies" («невидимки»), his heroic helpers commemorated in the eponymous Fifth Supplement (Пятое дополнение) to The Oak and the Calf. Liudmila Saraskina (Российский государственный институт искусствоведения), who is completing an authorised biography of the writer, employed her presentational skills, honed in numerous TV appearances, to offer a memorably emotional, even theatrical explication of Solzhenitsyn's childhood literary experiments. Being one of those select few scholars who have been granted access to his private archive, she was in a position to offer unique insights into Solzhenitsyn the infant littérateur in 1920s Rostov. In her forthcoming book Dr. Saraskina shows the links between these early essais de plume and Solzhenitsyn's most famous works, a connection she adumbrated in her presentation, whetting the scholarly appetite of her audience.

The participants in Panel V, "Solzhenitsyn's Fictive Structures and Strategies," looked at the details of Solzhenitsyn's writerly craft. Mikhail Golubkov (Moscow State University) examined the reader-writer dynamic in Solzhenitsyn's fictions, emphasising their «синкретизм как творческая доминанта», которая «определяет специфику художественности его произведений». More controversially, Professor Golubkov proposed that Solzhenitsyn's public behaviour, rather than being essentially spontaneous, is in effect an ingeniously crafted performance meant to teach and impress by example. The writer's cultural image is the result of «целенаправленная работа … идущая на протяжении всей творческой жизни. Georges Nivat (Université de Genève), perhaps the best-known name in Solzhenitsyn studies, offered a close reading of the interplay of narrative, authorial and historical time in The Red Wheel, characterising the epic as «гениальная неудача». This stark formula, he conceded, might seem "sacrilegious to admirers of the work or too lauditory to those who despise it." Evgeniia Ivanova (Institute for World Literature) recounted and analyzed the succession of fictive blows inflicted by Solzhenitsyn upon the official narratives of the October Revolution from One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich to The Gulag Archipelago and The Red Wheel.

The last day of the conference concluded with the second round table, "The Public Contexts of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn," chaired by Stephan Solzhenitsyn. Among those who spoke was Victor Levenstein, a survivor of Stalin's camps and one of the authors of the Butyrky Prison song, written in the spring of 1945 and quoted at the end of Volume I of the Gulag Archipelago:

Трижды на день ходим за баландою,
Коротаем в песнях вечера
И иглой тюремной контрабандною
Шьем себе в дорогу сидора. iv

Mr. Levenstein described the song's history and shared his reminiscences of Solzhenitsyn, whom he first met at Ekibastuz in the early 1950s. Harriet Murav (University of Illinois) offered a critical reading of Two Hundred Years Together, in
which, she argued, the author categorically and topologically others the Jewish populations of the Russian/Soviet Empire. She based her conclusion on a comparison of Dostoevsky's and Solzhenitsyn's respective attitudes to universality. In her interpretation, while the former saw universality as a defining trait of the Russian people, and the Russian people as the most universal of all peoples, the latter feels that at the turn of the twentieth century Russian intellectuals fell prey to a "narrowly Jewish" universality, with fatal political consequences for both Russians and Jews. The ensuing discussion was lively but correct.

At the evening reception which marked the formal closing of the proceedings, the participants mingled with University of Illinois faculty and students late into the night, conversing in a multitude of languages on a multitude of subjects. In a moving gesture that became a musical coda to the conference, Victor Levenstein gave an a cappela performance of the entire Butyrky Prison song (The Gulag Archipelago contains only the first two verses).

The conference generated extensive media interest, with телеканал PTP dispatching its Washington correspondent to Urbana-Champaign for the duration of the event. His interview with Natalia Solzhenitsyn, as well as several of the non-Russian participants, was shown in a special report on the Вести недели news program for June 17, 2007.

I might add that Slavic Review, the premier U. S. journal in the discipline, will bring out a special issue dedicated to the conference. This is slated to appear in the summer of 2009.

Further information about this event, including the texts of the papers, the webcast of Mrs. Solzhenitsyn's keynote address, the texts of her interviews in the American media, and the RTR news report may be found on the conference website at http://www.reec.uiuc.edu/events/fisher.html.

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