In Solzhenitsyn's *V kruge pervom* (*The First Circle*, 1968), the young diplomat Innokentii Volodin engages in conversation with the budding writer Galakhov on the role of literature and the status of the writer in society. In a speech since regarded as reflecting Solzhenitsyn's own credo, Volodin explains: "After all, a writer is a mentor to others, this has surely always been understood? A great writer is, sorry for my audacity, as I lower my voice, something of a second government. That is why no regime has ever loved great writers, only insignificant ones".¹

Solzhenitsyn famously stood up to the Soviet authorities in the 1960s and 1970s before his exile in 1974, accusing them of peddling "the lie as a form of existence" and "the continuing basis of life", and thus of undermining and destroying bonds between people.² As in the nineteenth century, the writer was the nation's moral guide and teacher, reminding it of fundamental truths and immutable values.

When the work of Vladimir Sorokin began to be published in the early 1990s, it was equated with the ‘shock therapy’ to which the economy and country as a whole were subjected after the collapse of the Soviet Union.³ Certainly, the style and themes of Sorokin's prose were qualitatively different from anything that had been published in Russia before. By way of summary, the subject-matter of Sorokin's early works include murder, mayhem, indiscriminate slaughter, cannibalism, sexual deviance and abuse, coprophagy, mutilation, torture, sadism, masochism, sexual explicitness that often crosses over into pornography, all rendered in an idiom and style that becomes increasingly deranged and nonsensical before the narrative and the text either ends abruptly, or collapses in on itself. In these works Sorokin challenged the reader's sensibilities – aesthetic, moral, linguistic and cultural – at the same time throwing down the gauntlet to the hallowed status of Russian literature itself. Sorokin was declaring the death of Russian literature as a moral force in a

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society where the ruled were tyrannised by the rulers, where the political structure of the country was divided into masters and lackeys, despots and playthings, the cynical and the duped. That structure, it was assumed, had been swept away with the new ‘democratic’ government and civic norms that emerged from the chaos of 1991; literature could become as ‘normal’ as in Western Europe, where there are different markets for different genres, and literature is for enjoyment and perhaps personal uplift, but no longer needed as a ‘second government’.

This is not to suggest that Vladimir Sorokin is a Solzhenitsyn for a new age. Sorokin remains a writer addressing first and foremost his fellow-countrymen, cruelly and vividly dissecting the falseness and hypocrisies of the previous regime, but does not assume the self-acclaimed status as spokesman for his generation, nor is he elevated by his admirers into some latter-day prophet. Sorokin remains a writer of fiction, whose creative trajectory demonstrates evolution from the abstract to the specific, from satire to engagement, and from a rationalist discourse on totalitarianism to a fatalistic, perhaps irrational, embrace of the finality of Russian history.

_Ochered’_ (The Queue, 1985) remains a startlingly innovative work that consists of dialogue only, with no narrative or even named characters, that also distils the entire Soviet experience into one long, seemingly never-ending queue, and one that people join not knowing what is actually on sale (if anything). _Tridsataia liubov’ Mariny_ (The Thirtieth Love of Marina, 1987) is an explicitly sexual journey of the eponymous Marina from abused adolescent to lesbian adult and finally to fully committed Communist, and is the first work of Russian literature where a male author depicts the female orgasm (in detail). In _Serdtsa chetyrekh_ (Four Stout Hearts, 1993) Sorokin parodies to grotesque excess the new post-Soviet gangster thriller genre, with multiple blood-spattered shoot-outs and gratuitous sexual encounters. The work bears the same title as a very popular Soviet romantic comedy film from 1940. The gruesome violence of Sorokin’s text has nothing in common with the innocent charm of the 1940 film, but its extreme violence offers a pointed and subversive commentary to the artificial innocence on parade in the film.

I would argue that it is this work that marks the ‘later’ period of Sorokin’s work. The four central characters of _Serdtsa chetyrekh_ are people set apart from and above their environment; they cheerfully remain untouched until the finale while inflicting mayhem all around. In these works published in the immediate aftermath of the collapse of the USSR Sorokin delights in the newfound freedoms. The human body is tortured and dismembered, language is mutilated, sex becomes grotesque, basic bodily functions given an importance not usually accorded to them in a literary text. Russian life and literature