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It's all about Russia: the reception of contemporary[1] Russian literature in Sweden

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ABSTRACT

Based on a corpus of 377 reviews of 72 novels, this article analyzes how contemporary Russian literature is received and represented in Swedish reviews, in relation to both the Russian literary tradition, and to Russia. The results have been divided into three periods, 1994–2002, 2003–2011 and 2012–2020, and are organized around four themes: (1) contemporary Russian literature in Sweden; (2) contemporary Russian literature in general; (3) contemporary Russian literature in relation to the Russian literary tradition; and (4) contemporary Russian literature in relation to Russia. During the first period, the novels reviewed were described as a new post-Soviet literature portraying the shards of communist society. During the second period, there was a focus on social criticism, while at the same time the critics sensed new hope for Russian literature. The final period is seen as a resurgence of Russian literature, although in a new form. Vladimir Sorokin stands out as the central representative of contemporary Russian literature for the entire period analyzed. Furthermore, contemporary Russian literature is seen as increasingly relevant as Russia's authoritarian tendencies increase. Finally, Russian literature is seen in Sweden as a source of information about Russia, and as literature in which Russia is the main character.

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1. Introduction: Russian literature in Sweden

Sweden has a long tradition of translating and publishing Russian literature, and the renown of the Russian classics is indisputable. Novels by authors such as Fedor Dostoevskii and Lev Tolstoi are regularly being re-printed and re-translated by Swedish publishers, while contemporary Russian literature has attracted considerably less attention among Swedish readers. The same tendency can be observed in other Western countries, and it seems as if new generations of Russian authors have had difficulties reaching beyond Russia's borders. One possible explanation for this is the lack of modern-day Russian bestsellers. According to the Russian-American literary scholar Mikhail Epstein, a world bestseller is universal, in the sense that it can be understood by

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people regardless of linguistic and cultural background (2009). It is also characterized by 'clarity, transparency, clearly ordered sections, dense writing and an elastic plot', features that contemporary Russian literature lacks, according to Epstein (2009).

On average, 2.7 contemporary Russian novels (first editions) have been published per year in Sweden between 1994 and 2020.[2] Nonetheless, in a Swedish context, and particularly for those who read in translation, 'Russian literature' tends to signify what we know: specifically, literature available in translation. As a result of this partiality, Maria Tymoczko uses the word 'metonymic' to describe translations. That is, she understands translation as a form of representation in which parts or aspects of a source text come to stand for the whole (1999, p. 55). The same metaphor can also be applied on a higher level, which illustrates that translated literature represents parts of a literature and a culture: 'translation forms images of whole cultures and peoples, as well as of individual authors or texts, images that in turn come to function as reality' (1999, p. 18). Thus, Swedish publishers, translators and critics – agents in the literary system – create an image of Russian literature that, in the target culture, Sweden, is assumed to be a true representation.

Nonetheless, translation is not an innocent activity, and the Swedish selection of Russian literature for translation is not unbiased. Based on an analysis of the publication of Russian literature in Sweden between 1797 and 2010, Nils Håkanson found that the publication of Russian fiction in Swedish has been politicized since the late nineteenth century, and that there has been a preference for authors who, for various reasons, have come into conflict with the Russian (or Soviet) state (Håkanson, 2012, p. 148). Additionally, Håkanson notes that the publication of Russian literature in Sweden 'has repeatedly shown patterns of selection that have clear parallels in the changing Swedish perceptions of the source culture' (Håkanson, 2012, p. 148, my translation). That is, Swedish readers seem to prefer literature that suits their understanding of Russia.

Apart from being written by oppositional authors, a previous analysis indicates that contemporary Russian literature published in Sweden is often marketed in relation to events in Russian/Soviet society or history, and publishers' blurbs generally accentuate the foreign nature of the text (Podlevskikh Carlström, 2022a, pp. 60–61). Against this background, the aim of this article is to investigate how contemporary Russian literature is received and represented in Swedish reviews of contemporary Russian literature, both in relation to the Russian literary tradition, and in relation to the source culture, Russia.

With this research I hope to contribute to a greater understanding of the concept of contemporary Russian literature in Sweden, and of the Swedish reception of contemporary Russian literature.

2. Materials and methods

The materials analyzed in this article consist of 377 reviews for 72 contemporary Russian novels published in Sweden between 1994 and 2020. The review corpus is inclusive, which means that all reviews that fell within the corpus selection criteria have been included. The reviews included in the corpus are written by 218 critics and published in 69 Swedish media sources; they deal with 57 novels written by 35 authors and translated by 23 translators.[3] A dataset containing detailed information about the novels, review corpus, authors, translators and critics may be accessed online via the research data catalogue of the Swedish National Data Service (Podlevskikh Carlström, 2024).

For details regarding the corpus selection criteria, see the dataset's Readme-file. The reviews have been scanned, transcribed and imported into NVivo – a software for qualitative data analysis – for close reading, thematical coding and analysis. The titles analyzed have been divided into the two segments highbrow and popular literature, based on a genre-based definition of popular literature suggested by Jerry Määttä (2006, p. 46).[4] The reason I find this division to be relevant is, firstly, that a previous analysis has shown that highbrow literature receives more media attention and that reviews of highbrow literature contain more translation criticism (Podlevskikh Carlström, 2022b). Secondly, the distribution of the published works between high and low prestige literature is an inherent part of the Swedish reception of Russian literature, and might serve as an explanation as to why certain authors are rather invisible.

In the analysis section (Section 4), I will refer to the reviews using the individual review numbers that can be found on worksheet B 'List of reviews' in the aforementioned dataset. The first time a novel is mentioned, it will be referred to using the title of the Swedish translation, followed by the title of the Russian source text and the title of the published English translation in brackets. If there is no published English translation, I will provide my own unitalicized English translation within quotation marks. Subsequent references use the Swedish title. All quotations from the primary material, as well as of secondary sources written in languages other than English, are provided in my English translation.

3. Theoretical concepts

Since the literary review is beyond the author's control, Gerard Genette (1997) did not include it in his original theory of the paratext. However, in a later framework especially developed for research within translation studies, Kathryn Batchelor sees reviews as part of the *epitext*, which is specifically the part of the paratext that is separated from the main text, as opposed to the *peritext*, which is placed in the same volume as the main text (2018, p. 142). The inclusion of reviews in the paratext is the result of Batchelor's more generous definition of the paratext, as 'a consciously crafted threshold for a text which has the potential to influence the way(s) in which the text is received' (Batchelor, 2018, p. 142). However, in this investigation, I do not perceive the reviews as thresholds for the individual texts, but rather as a body of texts containing information about a specific phenomenon, in this case contemporary Russian literature in Sweden. This is an example of what Batchelor refers to as the *metadiscursive* function of the paratext (Batchelor, 2018, p. 151).

As previously explained, this is not an analysis of contemporary Russian literature in general, but instead an analysis of how contemporary Russian literature is received and represented by Swedish critics. This makes it relevant to discuss the value of literary reviews in analyzing translation reception, as well as the role of the critic. In a previous publication (Podlevskikh Carlström, 2020b) I have discussed the fact that critics differ from general readers in several respects: while the critic reads in their line of work and often has a background in philology or literary studies, general readers are a heterogenous group who are not professionally oriented in their reading (Podlevskikh Carlström, 2020b, p. 147). Furthermore, the critic functions as a gatekeeper in the literary system, 'which means that their reading and assessment of a literary work may affect

how and by whom the work ultimately becomes read' (Podlevskikh Carlström, 2020b, p. 147). Similarly, Outi Paloposki has pointed out that journalistic translation criticism may be of great value for researchers, since it 'provides a wealth of information to the translation scholar on the ways translations are portrayed to the wider public' (2012, p. 185).

4. Analysis: contemporary Russian literature in Sweden

The first contemporary Russian novel to be translated into Swedish during the period of analysis was Evgenii Evtushenko's *Dö inte före din död: en rysk saga* (*Ne umirai prezhde smerti*; *Don't die before you're dead*), published in Sweden in 1994, which thus sets the first year of the analysis. Due to the large quantity of material, I have divided this section into three 9-year periods: 1994–2002, 2003–2011 and 2012–2020. The analysis will be organized around four themes that emerged during the close reading and thematic coding of the reviews: (1) contemporary Russian literature in Sweden; (2) contemporary Russian literature in general; (3) contemporary Russian literature in relation to the Russian literary tradition[5]; and finally, (4) contemporary Russian literature in relation to the source culture, Russia.

Importantly, the analysis performed below does not aim to analyze contemporary Russian literature in general, but rather how contemporary Russian literature was received and represented by Swedish critics during the period of analysis. Thus, the fact that some authors receive more attention than others is a reflection of the Swedish reception. For example, Vladimir Sorokin's six highbrow novels resulted in 92 reviews (24.4%), compared to Nik Perumov's 14 popular novels, which resulted in seven reviews (1.8%). In total, 47% of the editions published and 74% of the reviews analyzed pertain to highbrow literature, compared to the popular segment, which stands for 53% of editions published, and 26% of the reviews.

4.1. 1994–2002

During the first period, 14 contemporary novels were published in Swedish translation, of which seven have been classified as highbrow literature and seven as popular. For these novels 75 reviews have been analyzed, of which 47 (63%) deal with highbrow and 28 (37%) with popular novels. The popular novels were either police novels (5) or thrillers (3). Two popular authors are represented with more than one novel during this period: Aleksandra Marinina (4) and Andrei Konstantinov (2).

The highbrow publications consist of one political novel, three portrayals of society or relationships, one postmodern allegory, one postmodern satire and one dystopian novel. Only one highbrow author is represented with more than one novel: Viktor Pelevin (2).

A central aspect discussed during the period is the lack of new Russian literature in Swedish translation. A review of Liudmila Petrushevskaia's *Tiden är natt* (*Vremja noch'*; *The Time: Night*) contains a reflection on what it means to read Russian literature:

> Reading the Russians. What do you think when you hear those words? Indisputable classics, set a hundred years ago, thick, written by men. A lot has happened in a hundred years. In reality, I mean. But finding an inside account of Russia that doesn't feel historical has been difficult. (#16)

Two other reviews express similar thoughts. While one critic finds that we have access to a large variety of Russian classics but 'virtually no contemporary literature' (#6; #8), another writes that translations from Russian almost completely 'dried out' after the collapse of the Soviet Union (#13; #17). Observing that dissident literature was still translated while the Iron Curtain remained, they suggest that the politics of Swedish publishing might be dictated by 'solidarity with the oppressed' (#13; #27). Similarly, another critic writes that a new post-communist literature has emerged in Russia, but that 'Western publishers have not been as interested in this Russian literary generation as in the previous ones' (#24). In a review of Liudmila Ulitskaia's *Sonetjka* (*Sonechka*; *Sonechka*), the critic agrees that Russian prose after the collapse of the Soviet Union seemed to be 'close to drowning' (#49). However, the review ends on a positive note: 'But the colors have brightened. This can also be seen in the few but important Swedish translations' (#49). A review of Konstantinov's *Baronens hemlighet* (*Zhurnalist*; 'The Journalist') also provides a positive view of the future, and suggests that there is 'much to do' for Swedish introducers and publishers of Russian literature (#24).

Between 1999 and 2001, the Finnish publishing house Söderströms and the Swedish publisher Norstedts collaborated to produce the book series Ny rysk prosa ('New Russian Prose'), in which five of the period's eight highbrow novels were published.[6] This book series was discussed and praised by several critics. For example, one critic finds that 'Norstedt's series of contemporary Russian literature is one of the highlights of the past year's publications […] the publication shows that good reading is not only based on good authors but also depends on committed publishing' (#41).

The theme of an emerging new literature in Russia is discussed by quite a few critics during this period. For example, Konstantinov's thrillers are seen as a sign of an emerging post-communist literature (#24) and 'something of a role model for a new genre in the Russian book market' (#6). Petrushevskaia is said to be one of the big names in contemporary Russian literature, and a portrayer of the everyday life of Russian women in contemporary and late communist Moscow (#23; #19).

Sorokin's *Blått fett* received much attention when published in Sweden, with the author being described as controversial (#75; #68). One critic finds the novel to be confusing, but eventually concludes that it 'primarily is a Russian book. Or anti-Russian' (#69). According to another critic, Sorokin does what he can to breathe life into Russian literature, but unfortunately, 'the avant-garde pretensions and provocative spirit get the upper hand and suffocate the literary zest' (#67).

The author from this period who is most clearly related by the critics to a new, post-Soviet literature is Pelevin, by whom two novels in Swedish translation were published during the period, *Omon Ra* (*Omon Ra*; *Omon Ra*) and *Insekternas liv* (*Zhizn' nasekomykh*; *Life of Insects*). He is, for example, described as a shooting star (#38), and as an author who speaks with the voice of today (#12).

One critic sees the collapse of the Soviet Union as a prerequisite for Pelevin's otherwise 'unreasonable' literature:

> This combination of the newly observed and the unfamiliar gives Pelevin room to write. What does this world really look like? This is the enduring question for a post-Soviet literature like Pelevin's. If the question does not give rise to an answer, it at least gives rise to a literature that refuses to become adult and omniscient. (#11)

Similarly, two other critics discuss Pelevin's writing in relation to his Soviet past. While one critic argues that Pelevin's strength as a satirist is a result of his background in a communist society where truths could only be spoken between the lines (#37), another instead sees the author as part of the Brezhnev generation: '[H]is experiences are Soviet, but his approach to them and his way of relating to them and treating them belongs to a different and later time, the time of disintegration. In this sense, his writing is truly post-Soviet' (#39).

In 2002, the author of historical crime fiction novels Boris Akunin was introduced to Swedish readers with *Vinterdrottningen* (*Azazel'*; *The Winter Queen*). The novel was described by critics as 'an escape into the past' (#77) and 'as far from the American crime fiction tradition as you can get' (#79).

During this first period, the critics were more inclined to discuss features of a new, post-Soviet literature than traces of the Russian literary tradition. Surprisingly, the only authors who were discussed during the period in relation to the literary tradition are Pelevin and Sorokin – who are also seen as the most important innovators of Russian literature. Sorokin, for example, is described as an obviously skilled author 'who balances two huge weights in his story: the Russian-Soviet literary tradition and Soviet history' (#75).

Similarly, in a review of Pelevin's *Insekternas liv*, the critic senses a great seriousness and a world view rooted in mysticism, behind the ironies, fantasy, metafiction and postmodernism:

> […] and Viktor Pelevin appears, somewhat unexpectedly, as an exponent of the great Russian tradition in which literature is an obvious instrument for those who wrestle with the great questions of life and seek the truth about man and life. But certainly, in his own special way. (#39)

As indicated, contemporary Russian novels are regularly described as satires or allegories of communist or post-communist society. However, many of the novels published also actively deal with Russia's development or history. The aforementioned book series Ny rysk prosa clearly indicates that the purpose of publishing Russian literature in Swedish translation is twofold: 'The series wants to open the doors to the best Russian literature of the 1990s and the turn of the century, *while providing an insight into today's vibrant and conflict-ridden Russia*' (Petrusjevskaja, 1999, italics added). Analyzing the reviews, it becomes clear that the critics often seek to get a glimpse of either the Soviet past or the new Russian reality. For example, one critic finds that Pelevin's *Omon Ra* and Petrushevskaia's *Tiden är natt* are only remarkable 'as literary aftermaths of the dissolution of Communism' (#17; #12). Another critic describes *Omon Ra* as 'a highly satirical but also compassionate account of the nature of Soviet society as being built on loose sand' (#14), and *Tiden är natt* as 'a merciless picture of a society in complete decay' (#17). Pelevin's second novel, *Insekternas liv*, is described as 'an allegory or a satire of the post-communist Soviet empire with an infallible sense of pitch' (#37), and Sorokin's *Blått fett* as 'a futuristic novel about the Russian past' (#75).

The novel from this period that was discussed by most critics in relation to Russian society is Sadur's *Lustgården* (*Sad*; 'The Garden'). It is, for example, described as 'a novel about Russia after Perestroika' (#59) and as depicting 'a Russia in a very deep crisis' (#57). Not only highbrow but also popular novels are described in this sense.

When reviewing work by crime fiction authors Marinina and Konstantinov, several critics highlight descriptions of society as the most valuable aspect of the novels (#3; #4; #82; #84; #83). In a double review one critic suggests that Konstantinov's and Marinina's crime fiction novels 'paint the same picture of today's Russia – a corrupt, vodka-soaked hellhole plagued both by poverty and the mafia' (#6; #8).

4.2. 2003–2011

27 novels, of which 10 are classified as highbrow and 17 as popular, were published in Swedish translation between 2003 and 2011. 129 reviews pertaining to this period have been analyzed, of which 82 (64%) deal with highbrow and 47 (36%) with popular literature. Compared to the previous period, there is greater variation when it comes to the genres of popular literature: there are nine fantasy novels, six crime and thriller novels and two dystopias. Three popular authors are represented with more than one novel: Nik Perumov (8), Boris Akunin (4) and Dmitrii Glukhovskii (2). Of these, only Akunin and Boris Grigor'ev were also published during the previous period.

When it comes to highbrow literature, the publications consist of six portrayals of society, war, childhood or relationships, three postmodern sci-fi novels/dystopias and one psychological novel. Only one highbrow author is represented with more than one novel: Vladimir Sorokin (2). Sorokin and Ulitskaia are the only highbrow authors who were also published in Swedish during the previous period.

A few critics continue to discuss the availability of new Russian literature in Swedish; however, this topic has become less central. For example, when reviewing Ulitskaia's *En munter begravning* (*Veselye pokhorony*; *The Funeral Party*), published in Sweden in 2007, two critics say that more work by Ulitskaia needs to be made available for Swedish readers (#192; #194). One critic questions the Swedish publication of 'charming novels' such as *Sonetjka* and *En munter begravning* instead of Ulitskaia's more philosophical and controversial work. The reason for this is said to be that Swedish publishing houses think that such literature conveys an image of Russia that Swedish readers prefer:

> Russian literature is by nature a clown, joking and burlesque; she (yes, both literature and book are feminine in Russian) cries sentimentally under her makeup and occasionally delivers a profound exposition. (#192)

When reviewing Linor Goralik's *Valerij* (*Valerii*; 'Valerii'), two critics both complain about the lack of new Russian literature in Swedish translation and praise small publishers for introducing such literature to Swedish readers (#251; #250). Furthermore, in a review of Glukhovskii's dystopian novel *Metro 2033* (*Metro 2033; Metro 2033*), a critic is particularly positive about the fact that it is not only highbrow literature that is finding its way from Russia (#232).

During the previous period, there seemed to be a concern among the critics for the general state of Russian literature. Now, in 2003, some critics claim that Tat'iana Tolstaia's *Därv* (*Kys'*; *The Slynx*) is a sign of the revival of the same (#103; #105). *Därv* is described as a grand novel (#103), and Tolstaia as Russia's 'first truly significant writer since the collapse of the Soviet Union' (#105). She is clearly seen as part of a new, post-Soviet tendency in Russian literature:

> With this tragicomic fable about the future, Tolstaia places herself at the center of a generation of noted Russian postmodernists who irreverently approach the legacy of the past with penetrating irony and breathtaking imagination. (#108)

Därv is related by many critics to social criticism, and one critic finds that 'the social criticism of post-Soviet Russia comes at the expense of the narrative flow' (#111). Another author who is related to social criticism to a high degree is Sorokin. He is the author who receives the most reviews in Swedish press during this period, and who is also given a number of epithets by Swedish critics. He is, for example, called 'the enfant terrible of Russian literature' (#203; #208; #170), 'a recognized provocateur and taboo breaker' (#231), 'perhaps Russia's best writer and critic of the regime' (#214), and 'a bubbling sci-fi author' (#215). Finally, one critic concludes that 'Reading Vladimir Sorokin is also a reminder that literature is important' (#164). Sorokin's *I det heliga Rysslands tjänst* (*Den' oprichnika*; *Day of the Oprichnik*) is *explicitly* discussed by as many as nine critics in relation to Putin's regime. For example, one critic writes that the novel is 'more than just a legitimate critique of the corruption and oppression in the service of the powerful Putin' (#202) and as 'a well-targeted attack on Vladimir Putin and the voluntary slaves who worship him' (#212).

Ulitskaia is another author who is clearly seen by Swedish critics as important for contemporary Russian literature. To exemplify, she is described as 'Russia's most widely read author today' (#193), 'the most famous contemporary author today' (#194), and 'one of the most significant names in the new Russian literature' (#199).

During this period, a few critics discuss the novels reviewed in relation to the literary tradition and the Russian classics. As indicated, Tolstaia's *Därv* was seen by some critics as a new beginning for Russian literature, but they do not agree as to whether the novel can be considered to be 'a Great Russian Novel' or not. One critic sees *Därv* as a hybrid or 'bastard', similar to work by Pelevin and Sorokin, and concludes that '[t]hose waiting for the resurrection of the "great Russian novel" will probably have to wait in vain' (#110). In contrast, other critics describe *Därv* as a sign of the impending resurrection of the Great Russian Novel (#103) and Tolstaia as a keeper of the literary tradition (#106).

Just as during the previous period, Sorokin is discussed in relation to the literary tradition. His *Is* is described as 'a novel deeply rooted in the Russian modernist tradition that began around the turn of the last century' (#167), and Sorokin is said to be a 'sharp storyteller from the Russian storytelling tradition' (#174). He is also related to the Russian tradition of social criticism:

> Sorokin carries on the fairy-tale tradition of his homeland: from Gogol's blooming absurdism, via Daniil Charm's surrealism and the Strugatskii brothers' dreaminess to his blunt, contemporary, sci-fi colleague Sergei Lukianenko. But above all, the strongly ironic social criticism Russia has so much of—regardless of social system. (#215)

Evidently, social criticism in this context is closely related to Russia, the source culture of the published translations, and Russia is also the topic of many reviews during this period. When reviewing Ulitskaia's *En munter begravning*, one critic suggests that Russian literature provides 'a way to see where Russia is heading' (#198). Similarly, Aleksei Kozyrev's *Minus en* (*Minus odin*; 'Minus One') is seen as 'a dark portrayal of today's Russia' and as describing 'a grim reality in a country near you and me' (#147). Finally, the aforementioned *Därv* by Tolstaia is described as a sharp satire of Russia

(#108), as an allegory of the former Eastern Bloc (#109), and as a novel in which the twentieth century politics of the Soviet Union are presented in a breakneck tour (#107).

References to Russian society are also common in reviews of popular literature. For example, Luk'ianenko *Nattens väktare* (*Nochnoi dozor*; 'Night Watch') is described as beginning with a bloody vampire story, '[b]ut it soon turns into a description of life in Moscow in the late 1990s, when there was still hope for a brighter future' (#158). On occasions, critics really try to relate contemporary literature to society: 'It is not easy to find a clear-cut metaphor for today's Russia in *Metro 2033*, but it can be concluded that in Glukhovskii's metro there is a dense darkness and that there is no way out' (#232). In a review of the sequel, *Metro 2034* (*Metro 2034; Metro 2034*), the critic finds it difficult not to see the project as a political allegory (#249).

4.3. 2012–2020

31 novels, of which 17 are highbrow and 14 popular, were published during this period. 173 reviews have been analyzed, of which 150 pertain to highbrow (87%) and 23 (13%) to popular literature.

The popular titles may be further divided into six fantasy novels, six dystopias, one thriller and one graphic novel. In this period, three authors are represented with more than one novel: Nik Perumov (6), Dmitrii Glukhovskii (2) and Andrej D'jakov (2). Among the popular authors, Perumov and Glukhovskii have also been published during earlier periods.

The highbrow segment consists of twelve portrayals of society, history, war and relationships, three postmodern dystopias and one epistolary novel. Three highbrow authors are represented with more than one title: Mikhail Shishkin (3), Vladimir Sorokin (3) and Liudmila Ulitskaia (2). Three of the highbrow authors have been published during the previously discussed periods: Sorokin, Babchenko and Ulitskaia.

As indicated above, discussions about the lack of Russian literature in Swedish translation were most common in the 1990s. Critics of later work instead highlight aspects that in some way break the norm, such as Russian fantasy and work by female authors (#232; #281). Interestingly, when reviewing Slavnikova's 2017 (*2017*; *2017*), a critic suggests that Swedes' expectations of Russian literature have been influenced by Pelevin and Sorokin:

> Each had their own style, but were united by sarcasm and a dystopian mix of fantasy, history and the future. Together with a strong wave of fantasy and science fiction, they have come to shape expectations of what is translated from Russian. (#294)

A few authors stand out as central during the period, receive many reviews in Swedish press and are described as being among the most important in today's Russian literature: the previously published Sorokin and Ulitskaia, together with Sergei Lebedev, Roman Senchin, Mikhail Shishkin and Ol'ga Slavnikova. *2017* was the first novel by Slavnikova translated into Swedish; however, during the same year, 2013, she was also the editor of a volume of short stories by a new generation of Russian authors (Slavnikova, 2013). This might have contributed to the fact that she is described as one of the big names in Russian literature (#296; #281; #298). Apart from being provocative, Sorokin is also seen as a skilled author during this period, and as 'a highbrow alternative to other Russian dystopian and sci-fi literature' (#300). In a review of *Tellurien* (*Telluriia*; *Telluria*), one critic

refers to him as 'perhaps Russia's best writer and critic of the regime' (#430). Another critic does not limit Sorokin's scope to Russia, but instead describes him as 'a world leader in writing social satire' (#522). Several critics discuss his use of sci-fi elements and surreal motifs in relation to his criticism of today's Russia (#337; #300; #311; #416). Such features connect him to the Soviet sci-fi tradition:

> In the Soviet Union—as in other East-European communist states—SF became a safety valve for the tightly controlled literature. […] Reintroducing the device as an obvious component of contemporary Russian literature ought to be clear enough as a snide comment on the developments in an increasingly repressive Russia. (#300)

An author who belongs to a different genre is Mikhail Shishkin. Swedish critics describe him as 'a unique voice in contemporary European fiction' (#384), as an author who provides 'a quieter rhythm' (#271), and 'who probably does not want to belong to any tradition or literary group at all' (#271). He is referred to by many critics as the most important author now living who writes in Russian (#387; #271; #260; #379). Shishkin's literature is to a high degree discussed in relation to social criticism, as well as to Russia's increasingly authoritarian tendencies. When reviewing *Venushår* (*Venerin volos*; *Maidenhair*), one critic discusses the importance of crises for literature: 'Without romanticizing, I believe that truly urgent literature is rarer in cultures or countries where security, freedom and secure prospects are the norm' (#379). Several critics refer to Shishkin as a critic of Putin and 'his criminal regime', often in relation to the fact that in 2013 Shishkin refused to represent Russia at an American bookfair (#264; #277; #269; #260; #387).

During this period, some of Ulitskaia's big and serious novels came out in Swedish translation. She is now described as one of Russia's most successful writers, and one critic relates her greatness to her portrayals of human destinies, 'which feel at once deeply original and strangely typical' (#480). Another critic compares her to the Belarusian author Svetlana Aleksievich: 'The diversity of voices, the obsession with how time is actually constructed, and the political passion are common denominators' (#439). The author is also described as a critic of Putin's regime (#441; #439). Apart from being seen as social criticism, Ulitskaia's work is – just like Shishkin's – discussed in relation to the importance of literature in an authoritarian society, and as a dynamic counter-image to a Russia associated with Putin (#488).

Maria Stepanova's *Minnen av minnet* (*Pamiati pamiati*; *In Memory of Memory*) is the first work by the author published in Swedish translation, and was praised by the critics. It is described as a 'an autobiographical family drama' (#538) and 'so much more than a family history' (#549). Her novel is seen as a strong debut 'that reminds us that Russia is not only a super power, but also a country with a rich contemporary literature' (#538).

Two more authors during this period were often discussed in relation to features of contemporary Russian literature: Roman Senchin and Sergei Lebedev. Senchin, whose *Familjen Joltysjev* (*Eltyshevy*; 'The Eltyshevs') came out in Swedish translation in 2015, is, for example, described as an author who 'has recently established himself as one of the most prominent young writers in Russia' (#404). Another critic sees him as an author who has turned away from the postmodernist style of the 1990s and as 'a leading figure of the so-called "new realism" in Russian literature' (#402). Lebedev is referred to both as 'Russia's new star writer', and as an author who had to go into exile in order to continue writing (#500; #497). His *Vid glömskans rand* (*Predel zabveniia*;

Oblivion) is described as containing elements of magical realism, 'an infinitely sad and breathtakingly beautiful testimony in the tradition of Svetlana Alexievich' (#506).

During this period, the inclination to relate the reviewed novels to the Russian literary tradition is strong. One novel, Sorokin's *Snöstormen (Metel'*; *The Blizzard*), was discussed by practically all critics as a mix of dystopia or sci-fi and classical Russian literature, both with regard to style and themes. Shishkin and Ulitskaia are regularly described as heirs to the great Russian literary tradition. For example, in Shishkin's work, critics see signs of the tradition in his courage to be naïve (#264) and in his lyrical, passionate and romantic writing (#260). Another critic finds 'moods and traces from Tolstoi's *War and Peace*, from Chekhov's romantic dialogues, and maybe also Dostoevskii's psychologism and Gogol's colorfulness' (#271). Nevertheless, Shishkin is also seen as an innovator (#377; #386; #384). For example, one critic says that 'his novel *Venushår* manages to give new and original life to the great Russian novel' (#377). Another critic finds that 'Shishkin writes in dialogue with the Russian classics, with Chekhov and Tolstoi, but also with world literature' (#260). Similarly, Ulitskaia's novels are described by several critics as 'real Russian novels' and 'classic Russian novels' (#488). The author is also described as 'a worthy heir to the great Russian storytellers' (#481), and her novel *Jakobs stege (Lestnitsa Jakova*; *Jacob's Ladder)* as 'a novel of the classic Russian kind, where people are swarming around, all of whom become remarkably alive' (#476). Other authors who are read or discussed by critics in relation to the literary tradition and the classics are Slavnikova and Marina Stepnova (#349; #341; #288; #342).

As indicated above, many of the contemporary Russian novels published in Swedish translation actively deal with aspects of Russian society or history. For example, Sergei Lebedev's *Vid glömskans rand* and Guzel Jakhina's *Zulejcha öppnar ögonen* (*Zuleickha otkryvaet glaza*; *Zuleikha*) explore the legacy of the Soviet Union's Gulag camps. Naturally, such novels are to a great extent discussed in the reviews in relation to the topic they address. However, it is interesting to see how other novels too are read as primarily being about Russia. For example, DJ Stalingrad's (the pseudonym for Piotr Silaev) *Exodus* (*Iskhod*; 'Exodus') is reduced in one review to 'a book on Russians after the collapse of Communism in 1991' (#474), and Glukhovskii's *Metro 2035* (*Metro 2035*; *Metro 2035*) to 'a clever allegory for post-Soviet Russia' (#509). Slavnikova's *2017* is described as follows: 'While writing a novel about Krylov, love and money, she is also writing the story of the disintegration of Russian society' (#282). Another critic adds 'what 2017 is about, behind all these stories, is of course Russia. What is she and where is she going?' (#290). In the same way, Sorokin's *Snöstormen* is said to 'describe the eternal Russia' (#337) and to be about 'a madcap journey that can only end in disaster. That is, about Russian society' (#326). Finally, Sergei Minaev's thriller *Moskva, jag älskar dig inte* (*Moskva, ia ne liubliu tebia*; 'Moscow, I Don't Love You') is discussed by many critics in relation to social criticism and the developments in today's Russia (#371; #373; #375; #368). For example, one critic concludes that 'it is clear that everything is ultimately about Moscow, about Russia' (#371).

5. Discussion and conclusions

The Swedish image of contemporary Russian literature has undoubtedly evolved during the years analyzed. To begin with, the two most central topics during the first period, 1994–2002, were the lack of Russian literature in Swedish translation and the general

state of Russian literature after the collapse of the Soviet Union. The novels reviewed were to a high degree described as a new kind of post-Soviet literature portraying the shards of communist society – although occasionally in relation to the Russian literary tradition. Post-Soviet literature was a reckoning with the past, and the Soviet experience was seen as a prerequisite for writing – something that the most influential Russian author during the period, Pelevin, embodied to a high degree. At the end of this period the path that Russia would take with Putin was not yet clear, and literature dealt with the past rather than criticizing the present. Thus, there was still no strong tendency towards social criticism in the Swedish publication of contemporary Russian literature.

During the second period, 2003–2011, the Swedish critics began to regain hope in a new Russian literature, although they still seemed to be waiting for the reappearance of what they called 'the Great Russian novel'. Social criticism was the most central topic during the period: as Russia's authoritarian tendencies increased, literature was seen as increasingly important, and the novels reviewed were read very much in relation to developments in society, and as portrayals or satires of Russian society. Sorokin was undoubtedly the most influential author of this period.

The final period, 2012–2020, was seen by Swedish critics as a resurgence of Russian literature, although in a new form. With authors such as Lebedev Shishkin, Stepanova and Ulitskaia, the Russian novel regained its large format and serious attitude, and was again seen as contributing something important to world literature. The tendency to read Russian literature in relation to political developments in Russia becomes even stronger during this period. Authors who criticized Putin received much attention in the Swedish media, and literature was seen as a counterbalance to negative images of Russia. Finally, the titles reviewed during this period were very much read as being about Russia, and as providing information about Russian society. The most important authors of the period were Shishkin, Sorokin and Ulitskaia.

I would like to comment specifically on the difference between the two segments, highbrow and popular literature. Firstly, as indicated above, editions belonging to highbrow literature receive far more reviews in the Swedish press than popular literature. While both segments are discussed during the second and third period in relation to social criticism and the source culture to a rather similar extent, it is far more common to relate highbrow publications to the Russian literary tradition. Naturally, this difference is sometimes directly related to the genre and subject matter. For example, Boris Akunin's historical crime fiction novels received 9.2% (35) of the reviews, but perhaps due to their historical setting and crime fiction plot, they were not discussed at all in relation to Russia and Russian literature.

Another conclusion that may be drawn based on the analysis is that, from a Swedish perspective, one author – Vladimir Sorokin – clearly stands out. As a matter of fact, Sorokin – who was published during all three periods – accounts for 24.4% (92) of all reviews included in the corpus. He is described as an important figure for a new Russian literature, and his novels are often related to the Russian tradition of literary criticism. He is seen as the most controversial and outspokenly oppositional author.

As explained in the introduction, Sweden has had a tradition of publishing Russian and Soviet authors who stand in opposition to state power since the late nineteenth century. Naturally, this makes social criticism a central theme for Russian literature in Sweden. Interestingly, during the 1990s, when Russia was relatively free, contemporary

Russian literature almost completely 'dried up' in Sweden, and critics discussed the general state of contemporary Russian literature. As Russia's authoritarian tendencies became more pronounced, the number of publications increased and Russian literature became seen as increasingly urgent.

The final conclusion I draw based on the analysis above deals with contemporary Russian literature in relation to the source culture, Russia. While authors in Russia have traditionally been expected to 'maintain a role of moral authority' (Bodin, 2009), Russian literature in Sweden nowadays seems to be expected to provide readers with transparent information about Russia. Interestingly, Russia is generally not described as the setting or background of the novels reviewed, but rather as their main character and as what the novels are about.

With the start of Russia's war on Ukraine in February 2022, Russian literature entered a new era. Now, practically all Russian authors who are translated into Swedish live in exile. Against this background I find it to be both important and highly interesting to continue to study the publication and reception of Russian literature in Sweden, and also, if possible, to compare the results to other Western countries.

Notes

1. In this article, *contemporary* Russian literature is defined as adult prose fiction published in Russia after 1991. Furthermore, *Russian* literature is here defined as literature originally written in Russian by Russian authors.
2. No contemporary Russian novels (published after 1991 in Russia) were published in Sweden before 1994.
3. 15 of the 72 novels did not receive any reviews in Swedish media.
4. The genre-based classification of popular literature in relation to my material has been described in greater detail in a previous article (Podlevskikh Carlström, 2022b).
5. The Russian literary tradition is here understood in relation to the Swedish target culture and the Swedish publication and reception of Russian literature. Thus, the Russian literary tradition is particularly associated with male-dominated high-prestige literature in Sweden, and in particular with the 19th century classics (Blomqvist, 1997, p. 75; Håkanson, 2012, p. 149; Podlevskikh Carlström, 2020a, p. 127). Moreover, as a result of the politicization of the selection, and the fact that it is mainly oppositional Russian authors who have been published in Sweden since the late 19th century (see Section 1), it is reasonable to assume that the Russian literary tradition in Sweden is also associated with social criticism.
6. The series Ny rysk prosa ('New Russian Prose') consists of six novels published between 1999 and 2001. However, one novel, *Manhålet* (*Laz*; *The Escape Hatch*) by Vladimir Makanin, was published in Russia in 1991, and has therefore not been included in this analysis of contemporary Russian literature.

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Data availability statement

A dataset containing detailed information about the novels, review corpus, authors, translators and critics may be accessed online via the research data catalogue of the Swedish National Data Service at https://doi.org/10.5878/2maz-cm70.

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