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Holidays in Zurbagan: Grinlandia in Post-Soviet Fiction

In 2004 the Moscow publishing house Vagrius released a novel by Leonid Ostretsov entitled *Все золото мира или Отпуск в Зурбагане* [*All the Gold in the World, or Holidays in Zurbagan*],[1] signalling the re-appearance in Russian popular culture of Alexander Grin's imaginary country Grinlandia, in which the fictitious city of Zurbagan is situated. Ostretsov's fast-paced adventure novel involves thrilling pursuits and secret codes, pirates' gold and sacred relics, treasure hunts and mysterious beautiful women crossing the path of an innocent Russian tourist, an artist named Boris Serov. The most important feature that distinguishes Ostretsov's novel from many similar examples of its genre is that all these events take place in the region known as Grinlandia, an imaginary land invented by Aleksandr Stepanovich Grin (1880–1932), although the name itself was first used only after Grin's death by the Soviet critic Kornelii Zelinskii in 1934.[2] This re-appearance of Grinlandia in post-Soviet fiction is a phenomenon worthy of closer investigation, especially when we take into account the unusual marketing campaign adopted by Vagrius and based on received perceptions of the place of Grin and Grinlandia in Soviet (and post-Soviet) culture. This exemplifies how in the years since the fall of the Soviet Union many of the literary stereotypes that were rejected or destroyed have been resurrected, and specifically, how attitudes to the allegedly 'escapist' nature of Grin's works have changed over the decades.

After Grin's death in 1932, his works (with only a few exceptions) remained mainly out of print. The Stalinist 1940s had no time for Grinlandia, and in terms reflecting the official Party view, Grin's works were routinely criticized as being 'unpatriotic':

> у корабля, на котором Грин со своей командой отверженных отплыл от берегов своего отечества, нет никакого флага, он держит путь 'в никуда'

[1] Л. Острецов, *Все золото мира или Отпуск в Зурбагане*, (Москва: Вагриус, 2004).

[2] К. Зелинский, 'Жизнь и творчество А. С. Грина,' in А. Грин, *Фантастические новеллы*, (Москва: Художественная литература, 1934).

> (the ship on which Grin and his crew of outcasts have sailed away from the shores of his motherland has no national flag and is bound for 'nowhere')[3]

In the later years of Stalinism, Grin's works were excluded from the Soviet literary canon as the creation of a 'rootless cosmopolitan' who 'not only hates but also despises everything Russian, and feels aversion for his own people'.[4] Such comments reveal one of the main reasons why Grin's works were deemed unacceptable: his writing, which even pre-Revolutionary literary criticism had described as foreign and alien to the traditions of Russian literature, had come into sharp conflict with the Stalinist conception of patriotism.

The land in which the majority of Grin's stories are set exemplifies a unique literary experiment. Grin's world has little in common with the fantastic worlds of science-fiction, fantasy or social utopia, and critics still argue about its complicated generic nature.[5] Though the writer never drew an actual map of his land, his description of it was so precise that the prominent French scholar Claude Frioux was able to reconstruct a detailed graphical image of Grinlandia.[6] According to Grin, the large harbour towns of Grinlandia – such as Zurbagan, Liss and Gel′-Giu – are situated somewhere in the Pacific Ocean, between China and Australia. For instance, it is possible to travel overland from Moscow to Zurbagan, from which it might be argued that for Grin's characters (and for the writer himself) Zurbagan is no less (or more) real than Moscow. At the same time, as I have argued elsewhere, Zurbagan and the other towns were created as the quintessence of everything strange and seemingly alien to the routine landscapes of Grin's native

[3] Cited in В. Ковский, 'Настоящая, внутренняя жизнь… (Психологичекий романтизм Александра Грина)', in В. Ковский, *Реалисты и романтики. Из творческого опыта русской советской классики: Валерий Брюсов, Владимир Маяковский, Алексей Толстой, Александр Грин, Константин Паустовский* (Москва, Художественная литература, 1990), 323. Here and below all translations from Russian are mine – N.O.

[4] А. Тарасенков, 'О национальных традициях и буржуазном космополитизме', *Знамя*, № 1, 1950, 163.

[5] For example, see N. Luker, 'Alexander Grin's *Grinlandia*', in *Russian and Slavic Literature* (Cambridge: Slavica, 1976), 190–212; and Ю. Царькова, 'В уме своем я создал мир иной…' in *Парадигмы: Сборник работ молодых ученых*, под общей редакцией И. Фоменко (Тверь: Тверской государственный университет, 2000), 45–54.

[6] C. Frioux, Sur deux romans d'Alexsandr Grin, *Cahiers du Monde Russe et Soviétique*, III-4, October–December, 1962, 559.

Russia.[7] The creation of such a non-Russian literary space at a time when the campaign against 'cosmopolitanism' was reaching its zenith was an unaffordable luxury. According to Evgeny Dobrenko, by the 1930s the geography of the entire USSR had been turned into a utopian space of totalitarianism.[8] Actual maps of the country became highly-classified information, and the representation of the geographical, economic and cultural space of the USSR in the Soviet media was limited to a minimum. Verbal descriptions began to supplant visual images: as Dobrenko puts it,

> It turns out that it is not at all necessary to show a map: it is quite possible to *tell* it. […] It turns out that the map is not at all a visual image but a verbal sequence. […] In essence this descriptive strategy creates a certain virtual space, one that I call 'discursive space'.[9]

It would be naïve to suggest that an individual literary utopia might be allowed to co-exist with the utopia envisaged by the totalitarian state. There was no place for Grinlandia in the virtual 'discursive space' of the USSR: everything about it – its climate, culture and even economic system – was at odds with the defining features of Soviet (and especially Russian) reality. Worst of all, from the perspective of Soviet ideologists, was that it was a distinctly capitalist society, and that Grin outlined no prospect of a socialist revolution in his imaginary country. Such disjunctions with Stalinist ideology were more than enough for Grin to be posthumously proclaimed an enemy of the people (a title easily earned in those days) and to ensure that his works were for several decades denied any place in Soviet culture.

In the 1950s, however, when Party ideologues recognized the need for new ideas and ideals to take the place of Stalinism, and when there were calls for 'an injection of romanticism'[10] to revive Soviet life and culture, Grin's fiction was seen as a potential antidote to the drabness that characterized an exhausted

[7] N. Oryshchuk, ' "Given" versus "Chosen" Motherland: [The] Quest for (A) National Identity in the Works of Alexander Grin', in *Cultural Interaction and Nationalism: International Forum on Languages and Cultures in the Age of Globalisation* (Beijing: Beijing Normal University, 2006).

[8] E. Dobrenko, 'The art of social navigation: The cultural topography of the Stalin era,' E. Dobrenko and E. Naiman, *The Landscape of Stalinism: The Art and Ideology of Soviet Space*, (Seattle, University of Washington Press, 2003), 163–200.

[9] Dobrenko, 190–191.

[10] Ю. Первова, 'Алые паруса в сером тумане', *Грани*, № 148, 1988, с. 107.

and harassed post-Stalinist society. Before his works could be reintroduced to the reading public, however, a certain amount of ideological make-up had to be applied to render his literary style and philosophical views more acceptable. A whole system of ideological myths was elaborated to show that Grin was not alien to socialist realism, the class struggle or collectivist thinking, and to represent him as essentially an author of juvenile fiction. This process of 'Sovietisation' can be seen, for example, in the 1961 film version of *Scarlet Sails* (*Алые паруса*: 1923), which featured specially added scenes of a rebellion in Kaperna in which Captain Grey is actively involved.[11] Such myths, and especially the notion of Grin as a writer for naïve and enthusiastic teenagers, became so deeply rooted in the mindset of Soviet citizens that they survived the collapse of the Soviet system and have been passed on as a legacy to the new post-Soviet generation.

It is possible that Ostretsov's manuscript – subconsciously propagating a number of these myths about Grin – appealed to the publishers less because of its artistic merits, than because of its echoes of Grinlandia. This may help explain the unusual marketing campaign, in which Vagrius announced a competition among readers for the most complete knowledge of Grin's works, the winners to receive as a prize a copy of Ostretsov's novel. Effectively, the publisher was exploiting Grin's enduring popularity among post-Soviet readers to promote the work of a virtually unknown post-Soviet writer.

Ostretsov's novel introduces some (as it were) newly-discovered features of Grinlandia, giving it a new name, Liliana (after the river described by Grin). The action takes place in Zurbagan, the capital of Liliana, where the hero Serov has come for a holiday. Liliana is given a more detailed historical past than Grinlandia: for instance, we learn that the country was founded 'by adventurers from different countries at the time of the Crusades',[12] and that in 1601 it became a French possession, gaining complete independence after the Second World War (which is to say it was still under French rule Grin was writing!). Grinlandia in this new incarnation is a small country in the south of Europe, the population of which speaks a specific dialect: French with an admixture of English and Italian.[13] It is a developed capitalist country and a popular tourist destination and,

[11] For further examples, see Oryshchuk, 'Мифы о Грине в системе советской идеологии', *New Zealand Slavonic Journal*, 38 (2004), 57–70.

[12] Ostretsov, 16.

[13] Ostretsov, 41.

even more surprisingly, represents for Serov (and by implication for Ostretsov himself) a classic 'foreign paradise' (*заграничный рай*), to invoke the stereotype formed in Soviet culture at the beginning of the Cold War and defined by Maia Turovskaia.[14] Thus the basis for the accusations of cosmopolitism levelled against Grin in the 1940s and 1950s – his allegedly idealised depiction of a non-Russian/foreign/capitalist world – finds its echo in Ostretsov's novel, but within a completely different cultural discourse.

Whereas in 1950 Vladimir Vazhdaev, one of Grin's main prosecutors in the Stalinist media, complained that 'Гриновская страна «Мечты» на поверку оказывается идеализированным капиталистическим строем' ('Grin's country of the "Dream" on closer examination appears to be an idealised capitalist regime'),[15] Ostretsov in 2004 celebrates just such an 'idealised capitalist regime' in Liliana. Serov is astounded by everything in Zurbagan that distinguishes a stereotypical West from a stereotypical Russia: he is impressed by the widespread use of computer technology, the high salaries of academics and scientists, the generous tax concessions, the law-abiding nature of the average citizen, sexual freedom, bright lights, wide modern boulevards and narrow medieval streets. Looking out over Zurbagan in the evening from his room in a multi-storey hotel, the Russian visitor reflects:

> […] было видно, как живет и дышит огромный европейский мегаполис. […] Фасады домов, остроконечные крыши, уходившие в перспективу улицы, подсвеченные пальмы и свисающий по стенам зданий виноград – все это напоминало город из старинной средневековой сказки.
>
> ([…] One could see how a huge European megapolis lives and breathes. […] The facades of houses, the pointed roofs, the streets stretching as far as the eye could see, the floodlit palm trees and the vines hanging over the walls – all these reminded me of a city in an old medieval fairy-tale).[16]

Another highly remarkable feature of Ostretsov's narrative is the mysterious manuscript read by Serov which forms a parallel plot, a 'story-within-a-story'. This manuscript is supposed to have some hidden, yet strong, link with the history

[14] See M. Turovskaya, 'Soviet films of the Cold War', in R. Taylor and D. Spring, eds., *Stalinism and Soviet Cinema* (London: Routledge, 1993), 131–141.

[15] В. Важдаев, 'Проповедник космополитизма: Нечистый смысл "чистого искусства" А. Грина', *Новый мир*, 1 (1950), 257.

[16] Ostretsov, 83.

of Grinlandia, as well as to contain the code for finding the legendary secret treasure. This historical novel within the novel has its own protagonist, whose name is of more than passing significance: the (supposedly) French nobleman Gillaume du Vintrais. His name is more familiar in its Russian transcription, Гийом дю Вентре, as that of a mythical French poet and duellist invented as a collective pseudonym by Yurii Veinert and Yakov Kharon during their imprisonment in the GuLag.[17] The protagonist of Ostretsov's 'internal narrative' therefore turns out to be a 'mystification within a mystification' – an imaginary French poet invented in Stalin's camps embarks on his adventures in a country invented by Grin in the decades before Stalinism. However significant such cultural references and possible interpretations might be, there is very little evidence in the text of Ostretsov's novel to suggest that he was at all mindful of the origins of either Guillaume du Vintrais or Grinlandia. Rather, he seems to avoid approaching anything darker than the sunny holiday world of his hero or the colourful adventurous world of his second protagonist.

Apart from these complex, if vague, associations with Soviet cultural and social history (to be appreciated only by more sophisticated readers), the character of the French poet and his adventures give the narrative a distinctly romantic flavour. This is exactly the sort of plot, character and background traditional Soviet criticism considered the quintessence of the Grin *oeuvre*: cloaks and daggers, pirates and naval battles – the very elements that gave rise to the perception of Grin as 'an author of thrilling tales' loved by younger readers.[18] Serov too becomes involved in the kind of gripping adventures and mysterious incidents traditionally loved by the young. Occasionally he muses upon the chance occurences and coincidences which surround him in Liliana, the country of Grin's imagination.

> Теперь мне понятно, что подвигло в свое время известного русского писателя создать столько фееричных и увлекательных произведений о Лилиане. Не исключено, что причиной тому была здешняя таинственная, мистическая атмосфера, малоощутимая за автомобильной гарью,

[17] For more on this unique example of literary mystification and spiritual resistance see А. Симонов, 'Харон и русский зэк Гийом дю Вентре', *Новая газета*, Спецвыпуск «Правда ГУЛАГа», 07/08/2008; and Я. Харон, 'Злые песни Гийома дю Вентре' (Москва: Книга, 1987).

[18] See В. Вихров, 'Рыцарь мечты', Foreword to А. Грин, *Собрание сочинений в шести томах* (Москва: ГИХЛ, 1965) v. 1, 1965, 22; and М. Слонимский, 'Александр Грин реальный и фантастический', in В. Сандлер, *Воспоминания об Александре Грине*, (Ленинград: Лениздат, 1972).

> биржевыми финансовыми сводками и санриольскими небоскребами, но иногда проявляющаяся для особо чувтсвительных и романтически настроенных людей, каким, наверное, являюсь я.
>
> (Now it became clear to me what inspired the famous Russian writer to create so many magical and thrilling novels about Liliana. It is quite possible that the reason for this lay in its mysterious and mystical atmosphere of the place, barely noticeable behind the exhaust fumes, the stock-market reports and San-Riol skyscrapers, but sometimes revealing itself to the sensitive and romantically-inclined such as, perhaps, myself.)[19]

Here we might draw attention to further resonances between Ostretsov's Liliana and Grin's original Grinlandia, such as the clear reference to Grin's typical hypersensitive protagonist, capable of perceiving the mystical nature of things; and the mention of Chance, always the main driving force in Grin's literary world.[20]

However, as in the case of du Vintrais, Ostretsov shies away from the darker side of Grin's typical protagonist. Boris Serov, although an artist by profession, does not remind of Captain Gray from *Scarlet Sails* or Aleksandr Kaur from 'The Ratcatcher' ('Крысолов': 1924). Firstly and most importantly, Ostretsov's hero is a tourist and consumer, a holidaymaker who sees and enjoys only the lighter, adventurous, superficial side of Grin's world. Paradoxically, Ostretsov's post-Soviet novel with its glorification of capitalistic consumerism recalls the strictures of those Soviet critics who dismissed Grin's works as lightweight adventure fiction for children, teenagers and young adults. In the case of *Holidays in Zubargan*, we might add to this list of putative target readers certain categories of post-Soviet Russian tourists free at last to sample the heretofore forbidden delights of the world beyond the USSR.

True to the spirit of its era, Ostretsov's vision of Grinlandia revisited seems to combine all the ideal features of capitalist society as viewed by the average post-Soviet Russian on the eve of the twenty-first century. From this perspective, even the most ordinary hotel room becomes a symbol of European luxury: 'Гостиничный номер был небольшой, но довольно уютный, с душем, кондиционером, двуспальной кроватью, телевизором и телефоном' ('The hotel room was not large, but quite cosy, with a shower, air-conditioning, double bed,

[19] Ostretsov, 104–105.

[20] For further discussion of this see N. Oryshchuk, 'В предчувствии «Несбывшегося»: Герой Александра Грина как адепт Иррационального', *ASEES*, 19, 1–2 (2005), 53–67.

TV and phone').[21] Going out for a walk, Serov wonders at the brilliant neon restaurant signs, under which 'сидели люди, поглощая изысканную пищу и прохладительные напитки' ('people sat consuming sophisticated food and cold drinks).[22] For the Russian abroad in Liliana, even the commonplace is invested with a spurious glamour.

No one familiar with Grinlandia could fail to notice that many of the cafés in Ostretsov's Zurbagan operate under the name of Grin's novel *She Who Runs on the Waves* (*Бегущая по волнам*: 1928). This is a perhaps unconscious reflection of the Soviet tradition of using the titles of Grin's works as names for public catering and entertainment establishments of various kinds. The most obvious example is *Scarlet Sails*, which in the USSR was so often bestowed on such institutions that it became the subject of jokes. As Vadim Kovskii pointed out in 1990, this name had become a popular title not only for cinemas and Pioneer camps, but also for cafés and restaurants, thus striking deep roots in Soviet popular culture.[23] To explain the analogous use of *She Who Runs on the Waves* in Ostretsov's novel, we must look back to the late twilight of the Thaw, and the release of Pavel Liubimov's film version in 1967. Essentially, the subject of the film is the disillusionment that followed the collapse of hopes that sprang into being earlier in the Soviet 1960s. Grinlandia is represented here as a popular tourist resort, ugly in its vulgarity. The residents of Gel′-Giu offer a grotesque version of Grin's spiritual quest for 'that which is yet to happen' (Несбывшееся),[24] proudly announcing to tourists that '[…] у нас Несбывшееся в мраморе, круглосуточно вместе с горячей водой' ('our That Which is Yet to Happen is made of marble, with a round-the-clock supply of hot water'). At the end of the film, the marble figure of She Who Runs on the Waves, Frezi Grant, is publicly destroyed by official decree, in a significant departure from Grin's original novel. The message conveyed by the film is that Grinlandia is no more, its only denizens dead souls and tourists.

Indeed, Ostretsov's book seems to have been written precisely about the Grinlandia of this film version, the only difference being that in *Holidays in Zurbagan*

[21] Ostretsov, 23.

[22] Ostretsov, 84.

[23] See Kovskii, *Реалисты и романтики*, 241–242.

[24] This difficult term might also translated as 'Something that Has Not Happened Yet/Never Happened.'

the image of the Dream equipped with all amenities, including double beds and air-conditioning, is entirely devoid of irony or sarcasm. A pessimistic researcher might suggest that the very appearance of the novel merely confirms the worst fears of the disillusioned Soviet romantics of the 1960s. The post-Soviet author and his protagonist make constant reference to Grin's world while remaining remote from Grin's spiritual quest for That Which Is Yet To Be; they are wholly concerned with the material world and the joys of consumerism. In *Holidays in Zurbagan*, Grinlandia has been overrun by vulgar tourism. As though in fulfillment of the menacing promise of the 1967 film, Ostretsov erects a new monument to replace the destroyed statue of Frezi Grant, left to its fate by the disappointed romantics of the 1960s; ironically, it is a monument to Aleksandr Grin:

> В центре, напротив здания ратуши, возвышался памятник Александру Грину, именем которого именовалась сама площадь. Грина лилианцы бесконечно уважают за то, что он воспел их страну в своих бессмертных произведениях. Писатель стоял во весь рост, почему-то в старинном распахнутом камзоле, с книгой в руке, и взгляд его был устремлен вдаль на морской горизонт.
>
> (In the town centre, just opposite the town hall, towered a statue of Aleksandr Grin, after whom the square itself was named. The residents of Liliana hold Grin in the highest esteem because he sang the praises of their country in his immortal works. The writer stood full height, dressed for some reason in an unbuttoned old-fashioned waistcoat, a book in his hand, his seaward gaze fixed on the distant horizon.)[25]

Sculpted in granite, Grin stands amid the bright lights of a European megalopolis and restaurants bearing the name of his heroine who 'ran on the waves', created by a post-Soviet writer to dominate a confused utopian space of the new cultural paradigm of consumerism based on a curious mixture of old and new stereotypes. Inevitably, this 'marble Grin' recalls innumerable architectural creations of Soviet times, especially the ubiquitous statues of Lenin standing full height, gazing to the horizon, arm outstretched, as though pointing to the future. How long the modernist Grin will remain confined in his marble cladding of current ideological stereotypes and clichés – be they old socialist or newly-invented capitalist ones

[25] Ostretsov, 25.

or a mixture of both, – and whether or not Grinlandia will arise again on the ruins of Zurbagan and Liliana, remain questions for the future.