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**FROM LITERATURE TO ECOCRITICISM:
SIBERIAN DAMS AND THEIR IMPACT ON THE NATURAL AND HUMAN
ENVIRONMENT**

**От литературы к экокритике:
сибирские плотины и их влияние на природную и человеческую среду**

Аннотация

С эко-критической точки зрения, настоящее эссе посвящено анализу некоторых сходств и различий между двумя значительными произведениями русской литературы второй половины XX века – «Прощание с Матёрой» (1976) В. Распутина (1937–2015) и «Зоной затопления» (2015) Р. Сенчина (1971). Спустя сорок лет эти романы вступают в диалог, исходя из ряда ключевых тем и общего предмета: реального затопления ряда сибирских деревень в результате строительства плотин и гидроэлектростанций. Первая часть статьи представляет и контекстуализирует строительство так называемых «великих плотин», описывая их основные цели и характеристики, а также экологические последствия для окружающих территорий и населения. Вторая часть рассматривает параллели между двумя литературными текстами, особенно исследуя образ природы и своеобразный «сибирский хронотоп», возникающий в обоих произведениях. В обоих романах конфликт между человеком и природой играет центральную роль. Заключительная часть статьи углубляется в сопоставление содержания и основных тематических вопросов этих произведений, учитывая травматическое психологическое воздействие эвакуации и переселения на персонажей. Бросающиеся в глаза стилистические различия между двумя авторами позволяют предложить некоторые заключительные размышления о глубинных связях между их литературными произведениями, выходящих за рамки простого «ремейка» или актуализации.

Ключевые слова: В. Распутин; «Прощание с Матёрой»; Р. Сенчин; «Зона затопления»; плотины в Сибири; эко критика

«И тихо, покойно лежал остров, тем паче родная, самой судьбой назначенная земля, что имела она четкие границы, сразу за которыми начиналась уже не твердь, а течь. Но от края до края, от берега до берега хватало в ней и раздолья, и богатства, и красоты, и дикости, и всякой твари по паре – всего, отделившись от материка, держала она в достатке – не потому ли и назвалась громким именем Матёра?»

Распутин: Прощание с Матерой

1. The “great dams” and the environmental question

Since ancient times “great dams”, that is, massive water infrastructures over 15 metres high, have been built to artificially block rivers or to divert their course, creating reservoirs intended to power aqueducts and irrigation canals. As is widely known, the specific aims of these works are the generation of hydroelectric energy through the power plants, water supply and river flood regulation [JACKSON 1997]. Currently dams generate about one-sixth of the electricity consumed in the world and irrigate one-seventh of all agricultural fields: therefore, they represent a necessary element for the well-being and economic development of a society.¹ In any case, their presence significantly alters the natural system of the area in which they are built, because they modify its hydrology and hinder the downstream transport of vital sediments for the environment inside and around the watercourse [CAMPANELLA 2015]. One of the main problems related to the construction of dams is indeed the loss of land – not just any land, but one of the most fertile types – due to the filling of the basin, along with damage to fauna, forests and wetlands characterized by a delicate hydrogeological balance [ROTA 2023: 32–34]. A second negative aspect, which is largely ignored, is the downstream effect of the barriers: the diversion of waterways may lead to the disappearance of floods, and sometimes to the dissolution of flows. In any case, it may result in the reduction of the global flow rate of a river or provoke the erosion of the riverbeds (cf., for example, the progressive drying up of the Aral Sea).²

Due to defects in manufacture or to an inadequate assessment of the fragility of surrounding rocks and sedimentary materials, great dams have also caused significant security problems: over the centuries, as a consequence of their collapse or of the basins’ overflowing, various accidents have occurred, with thousands of victims and invaluable damage to the ecosystem. Just to name a few, the landslide of the Vajont Dam in Northern Italy in 1963 [see TEMPORELLI 2011; IOVINO 2016; SALABÈ 2013] and the recent destruction (6th June 2023) of the Ukrainian Kakhovka Dam, built between 1950 and 1956 on the Dnieper River,³ are two tragic examples. In addition to the irrigation of fields and the water supply of urban centres, the construction of these infrastructures has acquired symbolic values that refer to an image of economic power. In fact, in different cultural and socio-political contexts, great dams have been described by their proponents as positive icons of progress and

¹ On this aspect, see MCINTOSH 2023: <https://www.culturalsurvival.org/publications/cultural-survival-quarterly/big-dams-serving-greater-common-good>.

² The saltwater surface of the Aral Sea has progressively dried out due to the diversion, for irrigation purposes, of the riverine waters of the Syr Darya in the north and the Amu Darya in the south, which discharged into the lake and were its main sources of inflowing water. Regarding what is considered one of the worst ecological disasters in the regions belonging to the former Soviet Union, see <https://www.britannica.com/place/Aral-Sea> and https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-3-030-42254-7_4.

³ On the flood and evacuations in the Kherson region provoked by the destruction of the *Kakhovka Dam*, see <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-65818705>.



expressions of national pride [RYABOV 2014]. However, it should be underlined, as has been shown by several independent reports, that in many cases construction companies are powerful and enjoy favouritisms, or in any case entertain hardly transparent relations with the respective political classes [BOCCALETTI 2022: 35–38]. Moreover, especially in recent years energy production has not always been designed to meet the real needs of the surrounding areas, but for sale to third parties. Another significant issue concerns the social impact of dams and power plants,⁴ namely, the number of people forced to abandon their homes and lifestyle due to the flooding of their territories [see BOYÉ 2016; NOSENGO 2022].

Taking into account the theoretical contributions and the interdisciplinary methodological perspective of ecocritical studies [SCAFFAI 2017],⁵ the present paper aims to reflect on these themes through the comparison of two relevant works of 20th-century Russian literature. Overall, compared to Western studies, mainly associated with liberal or progressive orientations, the late-Soviet and Russian contributions of *naturfilosofskaya proza* share a critical view in favour of environmental protection, but they are characterised by conservative and nationalist tendencies.⁶ A further distinctive feature is their emphasis on the past and the search for a moral way of life [LEVINSKAYA 2015: 148].

Both novels analysed here, *Proshchaniye s Matyoroy* (Farewell to Matyora, 1976) by Valentin Grigoryevich Rasputin (Ust-Uda 1937 – Moscow 2015) and *Zona zatopleniya* (“Flood Zone”, 2015) by Roman Valeryevich Senchin (Kyzyl, 1971)⁷

⁴ About the controversial social and human impact of great dams, see, for instance, BOYÉ and DE VIVO 2016 and <https://archive.internationalrivers.org/human-impacts-of-dams>.

⁵ As is known, the term *ecocriticism* refers to the study of literature and environment from an interdisciplinary point of view; its movement originated and initially spread in the English-speaking world in the 1980s. The label was coined by William Rueckert in his 1978 paper *Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism*. Critics sharing this multifaceted orientation analyse literary works illustrating environmental themes and examine the various modalities in which literature represents the image of nature. Some studies offer reflections on possible solutions to the serious contemporary environmental situation, even though not all agree on the purposes, methodology or scope of the movement. In the USA these efforts are spearheaded by the *Association for the Study of Literature and Environment (ASLE)*, which hosts a biennial conference on these topics. Ecocriticism is an intentionally broad approach, which at present intertwines with other designations, among them *literary ecology*, *environmental literary criticism*, *ecopoetics*, and *green cultural studies*, and is connected to research areas like ecology, sustainable design, biopolitics, environmental history, environmentalism, and social ecology. For an overview of the most significant authors and contributions in the field, see GLOTFELTY ET AL. 1996, IOVINO ET AL. 2018, GARRARD 2023 and <https://www.hisour.com/it/ecocriticism-49390/>.

⁶ An exception is represented by *Ekologicheskyy roman* (“Ecological novel”, 1993) by the author and environmentalist Sergey Zalygin (1913–2000), in which the issue of environmental protection is in the foreground, not subordinate to nationalistic claims. The seminal papers in *Ekologiya kultury* (“The Ecology of Culture”, 1979) by Dmitry S. Likhachev (1906–1999) are still points of reference for Russian scholars of ecocriticism [see LIKHACHEV 1985]. For a recent overview of the main authors and themes of the movement in Russia, see PERKIÖMÄKI 2021: 119–124.

⁷ The famous *povest* of the award-winning Valentin Rasputin, first published in the literary journal *Nash sovremennik* (“Our Contemporary”) in September–October 1976, then in various editions in volume apart, has been translated in major European languages. In Italian the work has been translated by Editori Riuniti publishing house in 1980 with the title *Il villaggio sommerso* (“The

are set in central eastern Siberia, in the macro-regions of Irkutsk and Krasnoyarsk, respectively. Forty years later, the subjects of the stories narrated are similarly inspired by the last weeks of life of some villages condemned to evacuation due to the planned flooding to power two hydroelectric plants along the course of the Angara⁸ river [CAPRIOGLIO 2018: 282]. The authors share their Siberian origins and the fact of having drawn inspiration from real events, in part lived or “collected in the field” also in terms of testimony and documentation.⁹ As evidenced by the book’s dedication, to Rasputin, Senchin’s work, already from its conception recalls that of its illustrious predecessor, with which it develops a dialogue at various levels: that is why many critics have defined “Flood Zone” as a ‘contemporary remake’ of *Farewell to Matyora*.¹⁰ In fact, in addition to the subject and the environmental

submerged village”): although the image alludes to the event at the centre of the plot, from the formal point of view this choice deviates from the original version, putting in the background, in my opinion, some key motives of the text expressed from the recurring word ‘farewell’ (on this topic see REMONATO 2022: 51–52). The novel by Roman Senchin *Zona zatopleniya* (“Flood Zone”) has not been translated into Italian yet; among the authors’ works available in Italian there is only the *noir* saga *Eltyshevy* (2009; Italian translation: *L’ultimo degli Eltyshev*, 2017), that brought him to the forefront of the literary scene with the nomination to the prestigious Bolshaya Kniga (“Big Book”) award.

⁸ The Angara, a protagonist of several Buryat folk legends, is a Siberian River (1,853 km), and a right tributary of the Yenisey. It is the only outlet of Lake Baikal, from which it flows southwest through the Sayan Mountains, which border the lake itself. The Angara flows through the city of Irkutsk (see <https://mygeografi.ru/reka-angara>). On the etymological level it is interesting to note that in the Buryat language the ancient root *amnga* refers to the “open mouth of an animal”, from which derive the meanings of “wide open”, “opening, openness”, “throat”. According to some historical sources, the river Angara was first mentioned in the 13th century with the name of *Ankara Muren*. On the most famous legend handed down orally, later transcribed and reworked into a fable by V. P. Starodumov (1901–1996), see <https://historicus.media/legendabaikala/> and https://baikal.place/2017/07/15/beauty_angara.

⁹ Because of the high concentration of industrial enterprises on its shores, currently the main environmental problems of Angara are caused by the wastewater of the plants. In fact, the water supply coming from the recycling of the water of the three basins is rarely used, because there are not enough treatment facilities. In the river and its artificial lakes residue of petroleum products has been detected, as well as heavy metals and organic matter. Overall, therefore, today the Angara waters are classified as moderately polluted: see <https://srcaltufevo.ru/it/eta-reka-vseghda-spokoina-sintaksicheskie-normy-russkogo-literaturnogo.html>. Note that already in 2010, after one of his trips to the submerged places, Rasputin had expressed himself forcefully and pessimistically on the state of the river when interviewed by V. Kozhemyako (02.02.2010) on the website <https://www.plotina.net/rasputin-boges-moges/>.

¹⁰ Rasputin had the opportunity to know about the dedication and the contents of Senchin’s novel, which he encouraged and supported, but he died a few days before the actual publication of the book [MARTAZANOV 2023]. In the sixth chapter of “Flood Zone”, while Aleksey Bryukhanov, one of the villagers to be resettled, is bitterly reflecting on the lack of effective or consoling responses even from literature, the figure of Rasputin himself is evoked. He expresses empathy and compassion, but in the end he retains a powerless silence: «Писатели в тот раз целый день бродили по улицам, заходили во дворы, в избы, слушали людей, кивали, сочувственно вздыхали. Написавший книгу про свою затопленную родину всё потирал глаза, кривил, как от боли, лицо. Молчал... Словно на место скорого природного бедствия они приехали, осматривали то, что должно быть вот-вот уничтожено каким-нибудь ураганом, цунами. Но ведь не

theme, in terms of contents both novels focus on the highly conflicting relationships between city and countryside, on the loss of social identity and the historical memory of rural communities, and on the motif of the “ordinary man” crushed by the decisions taken from above. In my view, however, at close reading, these literary works share a number of characteristics but also exhibit differences in style, in their atmosphere and in the psychological characterization of the main heroes, starting from their vision of nature and the feelings about the villages they are about to leave.

2. The “Siberian chronotope” and the representation of nature in the two works

As is well known, since the beginning of its “internal colonization” from the 17th century, Siberia has always been considered by the Russians as a territory of conquest and exploitation for its immense natural resources [MINGATI 2017: 9–10]. In line with the rest of the country, in Soviet times the region was the subject of several campaigns aimed at its electrification and industrialization “in forced stages”. In fact, political propaganda exalted these plans in the name of collective economic progress, overshadowing the socio-environmental consequences and stifling any critical voices. A real ecological consciousness had the opportunity to develop and obtain mediatic resonance in the country only with Gorbachev’s *perestroika* (1986–1991), during which Valentin Rasputin assumed public offices. The commitment to the defence of the Transbaikal territory¹¹ ecosystem and of its indigenous traditions against the intrusiveness of Western models played a central role in his political and journalistic activities¹² [KARPENKO–MERINOV 2013]. From the beginning, his prose was characterized by an intense and poetic representation of nature, which was gradually enriched with existential and philosophical meditations. For the thematic issues and rural settings of his works, Rasputin was often associated by Soviet literary critics with the current of *derevenskaya proza*, the so-called “Village Prose” [see PARTHÉ 1992 and 2021], alongside authors such as Fedor Abramov, Viktor Astafyev, Vasily Belov and Vasily Shukshin.¹³

природное бедствие надвигалось на деревню и на весь этот край, а рукотворное. Остановимое.» [СЕНЧИН 2015: 205]

¹¹ Among his manifold activities, in 2009 Rasputin took part into the shooting of Miroschnichenko’s film *Reka zhizni* (“The River of Life”), devoted precisely to the flooding of some villages as a consequence of the construction of the Bratsk and Boguchanskaya hydropower plants. Upon his death in 2015, number 357/2 of the literary journal *Sibir* and the Baikal cinematographic festival “Chelovek i priroda” (“Man and nature”) were dedicated to him. In 2017 in Irkutsk a Rasputin museum was founded, which presents information, cultural events, as well as critical and bibliographical materials: see <http://vgrasputin.ru/>.

¹² See the following collections of interviews, articles and essays by the author: V.G. Rasputin, *Sibir, Sibir*, Moscow: Molodaya Gvardiya, 1991 (2nd edition Irkutsk: Sapronov, 2006) and id., *U nas ostayetsya Rossiya: ocherki, statyi, vystupleniya, besedy*, ed. by T.I. Marshkova, Moscow: Institut russkoy tsivilizatsii, 2015. In the last years of his life, feeling deeply uneasy among the strident contradictions of post-Soviet reality, Rasputin took controversial positions, increasingly conservative and nationalistic [see RUMYANTSEV 2016].

¹³ On the thematic and stylistic affinities of the Siberian author’s novels with other relevant works belonging to the *derevenskaya proza*, see among other works – YE. STARIKOVA: “Sotsiologichesky

The *povest Proshchaniye s Matyoroy* relates the last weeks of life of the island and the eponymous village. The events are inspired by a journey actually made by the author in the area of the Ust-Ilimsk hydroelectric power plant in the summer of 1975: an island in the Angara, inhabited for three hundred years, is destined to be submerged and replaced by a vast artificial basin¹⁴ which will power a hydroelectric station [KARPENKO–MERINOV 2013: 86–87]. The Ust-Ilimsk plant is one of the great Soviet hydraulic infrastructures erected in the post-war period (1963–1974); the complex, which is still relevant in terms of size and quantity of energy produced, reached its full capacity in 1980.¹⁵ The *incipit* of Rasputin's novel is a lyrical digression on nature and the cyclical alternation of seasonal rhythms in the Siberian "little homeland":

И опять наступила весна, своя в своем нескончаемом ряду, но последняя для Матеры, для острова и деревни, носящих одно название. Опять с грохотом и страстью пронесло лед, нагромоздив на берега торосы, и Ангара освобожденно открылась, вытянувшись в могучую сверкающую течь. Опять на верхнем мысу бойко

aspekt sovremennoy 'derevenskoy prozy'", *Voprosy literatury*, 1972/7: 12–35; L.F. YERSHOV: "Valentin Rasputin i sotsialno-filosofskaya proza 1970–1980-kh godov", *Russkaya literatura*, 1987/1: 145–155; A.F. LAPCHENKO: "Chelovek i pamyat v povestnyakh V. Rasputina", in id., *Chelovek i zemlya v russkoy sotsialno-filosofskoy proze 70-kh godov*, Leningrad: Izd. Leningradskogo universiteta, 1985: 14–44; M. LEVINA: "Apofeoz bespochvennosti ('Ontologicheskaya' proza v svete idey russkoy filosofii)", *Voprosy literatury*, 1991/10: 3–29; V. CHALMAYEV: "Uroki 'derevenskoy prozy'", in *Istoriya sovetskoy literatury: novy vzglyad. Po materialam Vsesoyuznoy nauchno-tvorcheskoy konferentsii 11–12 maya 1989 g.*, Moscow: Nauka, 1990: 3–34; and FRANZONI 2020: 73–76.

- ¹⁴ The motif of native places submerged by water is rich in biographical and literary resonances; in fact, it is also present in one of Rasputin's first novellas, *Vniz i vverkh po techeniyu* ("Downstream and upstream", 1972) [see PERKIÖMÄKI 2021: 88–90]. Valentin Rasputin was born in Ust-Uda, but he spent his childhood with his grandparents in the village of Atalanka, which was later flooded. The dam of the Ust-Ilimsk hydroelectric power plant is 110 metres high; on the history and details of its construction see <https://puntomarinero.com/ust-ilim-hydroelectric-station-location/> and <https://www.so-ups.ru/index.php?id=1402>. The edification of the hydroelectric station started in 1963, while the filling of the eponymous reservoir dates back to 1974–1977. It is estimated that during its creation between fifteen thousand and twenty thousand people were evacuated and resettled. Nowadays the Ust-Ilimsk basin is the third artificial lake in the Irkutsk region in terms of volume after the Irkutsk and Bratsk ones. It has a surface of 1,922 km², an average depth of 31 metres, and a volume of 58,93 km³; it features numerous bays, and is characterized by a high coastal development that reaches 2,500 km. Today this artificial lake is used for the production of electric energy, for navigation, rafting, fishing, and water supply.
- ¹⁵ Ust-Ilimsk is an industrial town in the Asiatic part of Siberia (population 79,746), and it is located in the Irkutsk *oblast*. The settlement is positioned along the course of the Angara, near the confluence with its tributary, Ilim. Its official foundation dates back to 1966, the time of the construction of the eponymous plant. Today the town is served by an airport and is the capital of the *Ust-Ilimsky* district. Due to the edification of the dam and the hydroelectric station, it has seen rapid development, mainly related to certain industries (mechanical, timber and aluminium processing) created thanks to the availability of hydroelectric energy. Lately the urban area is at the centre of concerns, appeals and complaints from environmentalists due to river and air pollution, see <http://bse.sci-lib.com/article114759.html> and <https://www.ust-ilimsk.ru/>.



зашумела вода, скатываясь по релке на две стороны; опять запылала по земле и деревьям зелень, пролились первые дожди, прилетели стрижи и ласточки и любовно к жизни заквакали по вечерам в болотце проснувшиеся лягушки. Все это бывало много раз, и много раз Матера была внутри происходящих в природе перемен, не отставая и не забегая вперед каждого дня. Вот и теперь посадили огороды – да не все: три семьи снялись еще с осени, разъехались по разным городам, а еще три семьи вышли из деревни и того раньше, в первые же годы, когда стало ясно, что слухи верные. [РАСПУТИН 2002: 211]

Thanks to a thick web of echoes and symmetries created by repetitions (*opjat...*, *mного raz*), the Matyora rural community is evoked as a harmonious microcosm in which space and time have always flowed one into the other, but whose future is drastically marked. Already in the title, in fact, the word *proshchaniye*, “farewell” appears, which represents one of the *leitmotifs* of the text and condenses its nostalgic and elegiac tone. The changing of the seasons, with the rebirth of nature in spring, is contrasted with the imminent end of the village time [REMONATO 2010], with the bitter awareness that every daily task in the fields and gardens now has an ephemeral, precarious character. The web of semantic echoes is highlighted also by the name of the island-village through the common etymological roots of the Russian terms *materik* (today mainly meaning “continent”), and *matëra*, which in regional Siberian dialect is used to mean “the high bank of a river that continues on the hills”. According to some sources, both terms derive from a contamination between the Common Slavic **маторь* “old, ancient, mature” and the Old East Slavonic *мать* “mother”,¹⁶ which on the literary level refers to the vision of nature as a great ancestral mother [YURYEVA 2019: 296].

The title of Senchin’s novel *Zona zatopleniya* (“Flood Zone”),¹⁷ instead, appears neutral, aseptic, almost impersonal in its lack of evocative toponyms to be connected to the memory of places. In its bare essentiality, the expression selected seems to reflect the “technical formulas” typical of the bureaucratic state machine, anticipating at the same time the concrete fate of the area, destined to become an anonymous and lifeless ‘zone’ submerged by water, and the laconic style that characterizes the formal fabric of the text [YAN 2024: 33–34]. If, on the one hand, the lack of proper names in the title may suggest a metaphorical loss of identity and

¹⁶ On the probable common etymological origins of the terms, see M. FASMER: *Etimologicheskyy slovar russkogo yazyka*, 4-e izdanie, 2009, online <https://lexicography.online/etymology/vasmer/м/матерой> and E. BERNEKER: *Slavisches etymologisches Wörterbuch*, Heidelberg, 1908–1913, vol. 2: 25.

¹⁷ I chose to translate the original title in this way to emphasize the artificiality of the event and at the same time the bureaucratic and official connotation of the Russian expression. Other English terms belonging to the same semantic field, among which ‘inundation’ or ‘alluvion’, seem more related to natural causes like water overflows or atmospheric precipitations. Besides, in Russian the word *zone* evokes sinister suggestions, especially vivid in the Siberian context: its second meaning, in fact, alludes to a prison, and in particular to the area of the GULAG.

importance of the single localities involved, on the other it reflects the structure of the work. In fact, unlike Rasputin's novel, it was conceived at first as a series of autonomous tales focused on different villages of the area, among which Pylyovo, Bolshakovo and Kutay stand out. The real events underlying the stories, linked by common characters and punctuated by the frequent changes of the narrative point of view, are connected to the construction of the Boguchanskaya dam and hydroelectric power plant.¹⁸ As the text reminds us, the work for the realization of this infrastructure was started from the Soviet regime in 1979, then it was interrupted in the difficult following decades, to resume in more recent times (2006–2014):

Некоторых покойников забрали родные еще лет двадцать пять назад, когда в первый раз наверху было просчитано, что будущее водохранилище затопит место, где стоит деревня. Самые активные стали тогда переезжать и прихватывали кости родителей, бабушек-дедушек... Если побродить, наткнешься на присыпанные сухими иголками углубления – это следы разрытых могил.

Но потом власть в Москве поменялась, строящуюся электростанцию забросили. О переселении разговоры заглохли, некоторые даже вернулись на родину из шумного мира. А вот теперь – бац! – и опять: строительство решено завершить, в зону затопления попадают такие-то «сельские поселения». В том числе и их Пылёво. [СЕНЧИН 2015: 22–23]

Though on the verge of dissolution, the Siberian chronotope of Matyora village, as several scholars observed, has its own poetic integrity and acquires a mythical dimension [DE LOTTO 1984: 13–14], shifting the background conflict between peasant *uklad* and urban life from the concrete, historical plan to the universal one. The subtext of biblical references in the text makes us aware of the irreparable fracture caused by the massive and aggressive intervention of man on nature, of the *razlad* “disruption of harmony” which hangs over the secular rhythms of the rural community, but at the same time something remains intact. In fact, the spiritual world

¹⁸ The Boguchanskaya hydroelectric power plant, the fourth in chronological order to be erected on the Angara river (see <https://voda.gov.ru/reservoirs/7310/>), is located in the Southern Siberian region of Krasnoyarsk, not far from the town of Kodinsk (population 14,873). The total number of the resettled among the population is estimated at 12,173 people, taking into account the first moves in the 1980s and the second wave in 2007. The resumption of the plant construction by the private company RusHydro generated a large protest movement by environmentalists (WWF Russia) and local residents (the association “Dam. No!”). They complained that no updated and objective assessment was carried out on the social and environmental impact of the infrastructure, which was still based on the detections of the 1980s. The lawsuit filed, however, was dismissed by the court both at first instance and on appeal (2012); on the topic, see <https://ejatlas.org/conflict/hydro-power-plant-boguchanskaya/> and <https://www.plotina.net/news/boguchan/>, rich in news from independent sources and various materials on Siberian hydropower plants.



of the elderly is opposed to the “progressive fervour” of young people, showing who are the true custodians of island life:

А постоянно оставались теперь в Матёре только старики и старухи, они смотрели за огородом и домом, ходили за скотиной, возились с ребятишками, сохраняя во всем жилой дух и оберегая деревню от излишнего запустения. По вечерам они сходились вместе, негромко разговаривали – и все об одном, о том, что будет, часто и тяжело вздыхали, опасливо поглядывая в сторону правого берега за Ангару, где строился большой новый поселок. Слухи оттуда доходили разные. [РАСПУТИН 2002: 212]

As Yuryeva writes, Matyora embodies the projection of mother-earth and mother-homeland, which is a refuge and “spiritual mainland” for the inhabitants. The island, metaphorically part of the national Cosmos-Logos, presents itself in a mythopoietic perspective as a living, intelligent and sentient being [YURYEVA 2019: 298]. In Bakhtinian terms, the Angara occurs in the text as the most important horizontal *topos* that gives shape to the chronotope, and it expresses the archetypal connotations of river life. The river also acquires a symbolic semantics of eternalizing time [IVANOVA 2022: 578–579], which contrasts with the tragic awareness of the “last term” (*srok*). Though it is about to be erased by human will, the image of nature that emerges from the work is powerful and evocative [ZIOLKOWSKI 2020]. It is charged with positive connotations expressed on the symbolic level, especially through the mysterious zoomorphic figure of the “Master of the island” (*Khozyain ostrova*), sort of *genius loci*, and the “King Larch” (*Tsar Listven*). The 300-year-old tree, which the inhabitants respectfully refer to with the masculine gender, knows the whole history of the island and dominates it from above, resisting in a mighty and majestic way the various attempts of felling:

Матёру, и остров и деревню, нельзя было представить без этой лиственницы на покотине. Она возвышалась и возглавлялась среди всего остального, как пастух возглавляется среди овечьего стада, которое разбрелось по пастбищу. Она и напоминала пастуха, несущего древнюю сторожевую службу. Но говорить “она” об этом дереве никто, пускай пять раз грамотный, не решался; нет, это был он, “царский листвен” – так вечно, могуче и властно стоял он на бугре в полверсте от деревни, заметный почти отовсюду и знаемый всеми. [РАСПУТИН 2002: 357]

In his *requiem* on the sunset of the space-time of this pastoral Atlantis, Rasputin describes young people as unaware of that deep sense of belonging to the land and life which gives harmony and spiritual solidity to the old Darya Pinigina [FRANZONI 2020: 85]. In fact, even though marked by inner desolation and the brutality of the sanitization operations, from the beginning to the end of the narrative the relationship between the old inhabitants and the natural environment remains biunivocal, almost symbiotic. As De Lotto writes, “the same days become the astonished witnesses

of the island's drama. Deeply unsettled by the conflict brought by man, nature is split, and it observes itself and its own destruction from the outside" [DE LOTTO 1984: 23; my translation].

The natural images that dot the ten dense chapters of "Flood Zone" appear instead already mined at the root, and show a highly conflicting relationship between humans and the environment. The atmosphere is shabby and asphyctic: in the villages from which evacuations had already begun twenty-five years earlier, people linger in a suspended dimension, without real working or existential ways out. In Senchin's vision, with the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the rural traditions of the past completely lost their authentic meaning and their deep ties with the natural environment. They survive out of pure necessity on the plan of a prosaic 'daily chronicle', deprived of the mythical and almost sacred aura that one feels between Rasputin's lines. The chronotope outlined in the text is fragmentary, confused, crystallized in an unnatural acronym, and emptied of that sense of identity and firm consistency that characterized the Siberian countryside. The wild and majestic nature of the region, even more violated and plundered by the fierce struggle for survival of the 1990s [SAZANOV 2020], is evoked in a primitive and hostile way, and seems to take revenge for human neglect and abandonment by reclaiming the land:

Обезлюдявали деревеньки – эти несколько избышек, – и сырая темная тайга сразу наваливалась на отвоеванные у нее когда-то деляны; дикие травы засыпали огороды, дворы, улицы семенами, сосны и ели швыряли расщеперенные шишки; на срубах поселялся мох, расползался по плахам крыш лишайник. Снег и ветер валили заборы, дождь разъедал бревна, доски, слеги, по стайкам шастали лисы, напрасно вынюхивая кур, на чердаках и вышках строили гнезда белки, долбили городьбу дятлы... Природа забирала обратно свою территорию. [СЕНЧИН 2015: 77]

If in *Farewell to Matyora* the elegiac and melancholic dimension of waiting for the end prevails, with the reversal of the traditional positive and vital values of water, here the feeling of impotence is intertwined with bitter considerations that suggest a post-Soviet "periphery of the empire" attitude [CAPRIOGLIO 2017: 40]. On several occasions, in fact, in the narrative references to corruption, the injustice of decisions taken from above, and the intensive exploitation of the ecosystem of the remote region for profit appear. They would certainly not have allowed Moscow to disappear underwater, murmur caustically among themselves some re-settled inhabitants from the village of Pylyovo:

– Да?.. То-то с нами не церемонились – одним Кутаем больше, одним меньше... Москву бы не стали топить...

– Хе-хе, эт ты к месту сказанул. Про Москву. С минуту молчали, представляя, что вот появилась идея перегородить Москву-реку, построить на ней ГЭС. И началось расселение москвичей по России... [СЕНЧИН 2015: 360]

3. From chaos to alienation: the impact on human beings

As has already been pointed out, a number of elements that allow a dialogue between the two works are directly associated to the social impact of the flooding and to the psychological characterization of the inhabitants. In fact, they are facing the trauma of forced displacement and of an “urban type” resettlement intended to radically change their rural style of life. Transplanting an old tree is against nature, it cannot survive; Rasputin’s vivid image resumed by Senchin highlights the network of echoes and literary resonances which connects the texts:

<...> Кто ж старое дерево пересаживает?!

– Всех нас, девка, пересаживают, не одну тебя. Всем тепери туды дорога. Только успевай, господь, прибирай. [РАСПУТИН 2002: 219]

– Да ладно помирать, – отзывались те, что моложе, – еще поживете с удобствами.

– Ну их к язве с их удобствами! Меня только оторви отсюда, я по дороге окочурюся.

– Мда-а, – поддерживали, – старые деревья не пересадишь.

– Не пересадишь... [СЕНЧИН 2015: 86]

The inner ties with the natural world of Siberia in which they grew up, the only one they have ever known, are so deeply interwoven with the spiritual dimension of Pylyovo dwellers that to express their feelings they compare themselves to trees. In contrast to the positive vision of younger characters, in their words it is possible to grasp all the anger and anguish aroused by the uprooting of one’s existential microcosm, heightened by the painful perception of old age. The same sense of alienation is shared by the old people of Bolshakovo; in a crescendo of details the narrative describes their bewilderment, distrust and disbelief, their shattered lives suspended by peremptory orders between past and present:

Большаково – село некрупное. И, казалось бы, расселить его можно за неделю. Да когда-то за сутки целые народы грузили на транспорт и отправляли за тысячи километров. Было такое. Но теперь все делалось вроде бы по закону, с соблюдением прав, и процесс шел медленно, кое-как.

Первые семьи покинули Большаково еще в конце семидесятых, когда электростанцию только начинали строить. Но их дома заняли другие – дальняя родня или приезжие. Да и некоторые из местных вернулись прижились на чужбине. И по существу село и теперь не выглядело обреченным на гибель. [СЕНЧИН 2015: 77]

In the two works there are many affinities between the moods of the characters who experience the same catastrophe, but also due to the drastic socio-political and economic changes that followed the fall of the USSR, their relationships are deeper and more complex than what is generally defined as a ‘contemporary remake’. From

a chronological point of view, “Flood Zone” begins in September, just when Farewell to Matyora ends: spring, the symbol of the flourishing rebirth of nature, is opposed to the crepuscular and melancholic tones of autumn, prelude to the long winter. Instead of the elegiac evocation of the seasonal rhythms and the history of the island, in Senchin’s novel the actual events¹⁹ begin in medias res, with the death of the old woman from Pylyovo Natalya Privalikhina: «В первых числах сентября умерла Наталья Сергеевна Привалихина» [СЕНЧИН 2015: 11], “In the early days of September Natalya Sergeyevna Privalikhina died” (my translation). The sentence is barren, neutral and concise; despite the fact that the event acts as a temporary catalyst for a common, collective commitment of the fellow villagers, it is emphasised that the preparations for the funeral and burial are carried out outwardly, almost by inertia. The rituals, in fact, appear emptied of their ancestral meaning by the thought of the flooding, which will interrupt the generational continuum between the living and the dead represented by the cemetery. As Zhurov remarks, the death of the woman is a metaphor of the impending end of the whole settlement, which is not evoked in a mythical or sacred way, but in a fragmentary one. Like any other part of described reality, it is reported as a set of daily and contingent circumstances [ZHUROV 2015: 160]. What we are dealing with here is not so much an ‘actualization’, as an overcoming of Rasputin’s poetic vision. In her function as spokesman of the author in the work, on the literary level the old Darya Pinigina represents the spiritual consciousness and the memory of Matyora [TSVETOVA 2015: 1445]; in other words, she expresses the universal reference values of the rural island microcosm, which still appear intact:

А Дарья все спрашивала себя, все тащи́лась отвечать и не могла ответить. Да и кто, какой ум ответит? Человек приходит в мир и, пожив, устав от жизни, как теперь она, Дарья, а когда и не устав, неминуемо уходит обратно. Вон сколько их было, прежде чем дошло до нее, и сколько будет после нее! Она находится сейчас на самом сгибе: одна половина есть и будет, другая была, но вот-вот продернется вниз, а на сгиб встанет новое кольцо. Где же их больше – впереди или позади? И кто знает правду о человеке, зачем он живет? Ради жизни самой, ради детей, чтобы и дети оставили

¹⁹ The first chapter of the narrative, entitled “A telephone conversation”, may be considered as a sort of prologue to the events: two politicians, or unidentified members of the ruling elite, discuss the idea of resuming work on the construction of the Boguchanskaya power station in order to sell the electricity produced to third parties. Several critics have pointed out the analogies with real events at the basis of the story and with the oligarch called the “King of aluminium” Oleg Deripaska (1968).



детей, и дети детей оставили детей, или ради чего-то еще? Вечным ли будет это движение? [РАСПУТИН 2002: 355–356]

The woman's anguish is connected to the trauma of the loss of her birthplace and of the ties with her ancestors, and, consequently, of her own identity. According to Rasputin, spiritual decadence characterizes those who deny their origins: their peasant roots, respect for nature, the experience of manual work carried out together ensure a balance to humans, a serene wisdom opposed to the individualistic "nothing" of newly-urbanised people. Let us also think of the latent inner suffering of Pavel Pinigin, Darya's middle-aged son, who for his duties divides his time between the two worlds of the island and the new settlement:

Что верно, то верно – это не Матёра. Вот и не стало Матёры – царствие небесное, как бы сказала, перекрестясь, мать. Вот и не стало Матёры-деревни, а скоро не станет и острова. Еще можно будет, наверно, нынче же сплавать, покружить, гадая, тут или не тут стояла она... <...>

Все – поминай как звали. Но удивительно, непонятно было и то, что он не чувствовал сейчас ничего, кроме облегчающей, разрешившейся боли: будто нарывало, нарывало и прорвало. Все равно это должно было случиться и случилось, а от ожидания этой неминуемости устали и измучились больше, чем от самой потери. Хватит, хватит... никаких сил уже не осталось. Теперь не придется изводиться Матёрой, сравнивать одно с другим, ездить туда-сюда, баламутить, натягивать без конца душу – теперь, и, взыскивая с новой жизни здесь, в этом поселке, придется устраиваться прочно, вращать в нее всеми уцелевшими корнями. [РАСПУТИН 2002: 380–381]

Compared to the almost fairy-tale *epos* through which the life of the rural community is outlined in *Farewell to Matyora*, Senchin's characters appear marked by resignation and humiliation, and also by the ruthlessness of their squalid everyday lives. As many scholars observed, they embody the ultimate death of the peasant myth of "village prose" [KOVTON 2018: 158–159]. This aspect is expressed above all in terms of style: it is in this aspect, in fact, that the two works differ more. Considered by some critics as a Russian "neo-realist" author [see BELYAKOV 2011; ZHUROV 2015; WAWRZYŃCZAK 2018] and often compared to Chekhov for his plain language and tones, Senchin seems to refer to what Calabrese calls the "diminished symbolic significance of reality" typical of contemporary prose [see CALABRESE 2009: 420]. In fact, his way of writing is characterized by short and incisive sentences, as a documentary, almost "physiological" attention to daily details, objects and gestures, which, according to Jastrzębska, reflect on the syntactic and lexical plane the distinctive psychological features of post-Soviet men [see

JASTRZEBSKA 2016b: 263]. The sparse style and colloquial lexicon²⁰ prevailing in the episodes that compose the text effectively transmit the prosaicism, brutality and hopelessness of today's life in the Russian *provintsiya*. Moreover, the atmosphere closely recalls the progressive “descent into hell” of the Eltyshev family in the eponymous novel [DISCACCIATI 2016: 19–20]. The journalist Olga comes from the city and is initially indifferent to the social problems of the remote countryside; anyway, after having taken to heart the situation of the inhabitants she clashes with the “rubber wall” formed by rampant corruption and the complex bureaucratic machine. There are no more answers or stable reference points: faced with aluminium oligarchs' demands of economic power, even literary words seem exhausted and useless [SAZANOV 2020: 193]. In chapter 9, during the old fellow villagers' endless conversations about the past, Gennady, who had never particularly loved rural life, tries to explain what he really lacks following the resettlement:

– Да не про то, говорю же. Не в олигархах дело, не в плотине, алюминии... И не в том даже, что мы свою родину потеряли. Не от этого тошно. <...>

– И к чему ты все это? – устав слушать, поторопил Виктор.

– К тому, что не саму деревню нам жалко. Ладно, – поймав глаза мужиков, Генка поправился, – мне, о себе говорю... Не деревню саму и эту жизнь деревенскую, а... Там я жил, томился по чему-то такому, по другому. И вот попал в другое, и чувствую – потерял защиту... Не такую, что, в смысле, от земли оторвали, а... а другую какую-то... Как объяснить? [СЕНЧИН 2015: 386]

Beyond any critical definitions and literary currents, the stories told in “Flood Zone”, set between 2009 and 2011, are full of disillusionment and violence against those who refuse to comply with the evacuation and the 18 m² granted in the new dwellings.

The two authors show a different aesthetic approach to writing, based on a radically *other* conception of the world. If in *Farewell to Matyora* a recurring motif is the nostalgia for the *sobornost*²¹ and the joy coming from working together, connected to a sense of piety towards the native land that dies without a master, the “human landscape” of Senchin's *provintsiya* is colourless and dominated by misery

²⁰ From this point of view, the glossary of Siberian colloquial terms at the end of Senchin's work is of linguistic and ethnographic interest, and it recalls once again his predecessor. Dialectisms, often linked to daily life or working tools, connote in fact Rasputin's old characters' speech, reflecting the rich cultural heritage of a rural world that has disappeared.

²¹ The Russian term *sobornost*, which has no direct equivalents in other languages, refers to a concept elaborated in Russian religious philosophy: it suggests the free spiritual unity of people both in the life of the Church and in the secular community. This idea is connected to a vision of existence in mutual love, communion and brotherhood. According to some sources the theorization was first introduced in the Russian language with its current meaning by Yury Samarin (1863), and was then at the basis of the thought of many philosophers of different orientations, among whom it is worth mentioning the Slavophiles, A. Khomyakov and I. Kireyevsky, and other prominent exponents such as V. Solovyev, P. Florensky, S. Bulgakov and N. Berdyaev.

and the wild hostility of the Siberian environment. Death, disbelief and dismay are not by chance the most frequent terms in the thoughts of the characters, who feel abandoned and helpless (*bessylny*). Unlike the innerly mangled but indomitable old people of Matyora [REMONATO 2016: 251], they appear frail to the adverse blows of fate. Rasputin's spiritual legacy is called into question: as I have already observed, "Flood Zone" can be interpreted as a deconstruction of the myth of the "promised land" of the island on the Angara, but at the same time as its overcoming [see KOVTUN 2017: 84; WAWRZYŃCZAK 2018: 75–76]. The real subject treated by Senchin, in other words, may be considered the artistic representation of the disintegration of the human world [YAN 2024: 35]. This becomes particularly evident when comparing the final parts of the two works. The last night arrives, Matyora island was sanitized and finally prepared for the flooding; one is just waiting for the end, which nevertheless remains suspended due to a thick fog which mysteriously rises from the river to hide the strip of land:

Туман стоял сплошной стеной, и, катер, казалось, топтался, буксовал на месте, не в силах выбраться за нее, эту отвесную стену, снова и снова соскальзывая с ее кручи; Павел не помнил, чтобы он когда-нибудь попадал в такой туман, настолько густой и плотный, что с трудом, будто из глубокого и темного колодца, пробивалось смутное мерцание воды. [РАСПУТИН 2002: 390]

The five old protagonists who have remained to the bitter end are unable to break away from the salvific arms of the ancestral mother-island. So, the *povest* ends with an open and apocalyptic ending, *in limine* between life and death:²²

В раскрытую дверь, как из разверстой пустоты, понесло туман и послышался недалекий тоскливый вой – то был прощальный голос Хозяина. Тут же его точно смыло, и сильнее запестрило в окне, сильнее засвистел ветер, и откуда-то, будто споднизу, донесся слабый, едва угадывающийся шум мотора. [РАСПУТИН 2002: 394]

The fluid rhythm of Rasputin's language, rich in adjectives, assonances and repetitions, outlines the scene muffled by the fog with sweet tones and formal elegance.

One feels a rather different atmosphere in the final scene of "Flood Zone", which, through the circular structure of the text, underlines the triviality and absurd inherent in contemporary reality [JASTRZĘBSKA 2016a: 75]. The narrative, in fact, closes once

²² This evocative scene is rendered very effectively in the film transposition of the novel *Proshchaniye* (*Farewell*, 1983), directed by Elem Klimov (1933–2003). He shot it after the sudden death of his beloved wife, the well-known film director Larisa Shepitko (1938–1979), who had started working on the project and had written its screenplay. On the affinities between the novel and the film, see BJÖRLING 2004.

again in a cemetery:²³ the former fellow countrymen have settled among a thousand difficulties in the newly built town, in which some of them, as it had been told at the beginning of the novel, managed to have their loved ones re-buried. But fate seems to rage, since on Easter day an accident causes the collapse of the dam, and between the horror and the sarcastic disbelief of those present water invades the sacred place:

Меж холмиков, как какие-то щупальца, ползла вода. Медленно, тяжело, тратя силы и время на то, чтобы промочить, напитать сухую почву. Концы этих щупальцев словно проваливались в землю, делая ее, серовато-коричневую, почти черной, но через несколько секунд новый толчок огромного организма двигал щупальце дальше. И новая полоска земли чернела, вода исчезала, а следом уже шел новый толчок. <...>

– Алё! Алё! – кричала Валентина. – Вода идет на кладбище! Прорвало что, я не знаю... Сообщите там, поднимайте всех! Вода идет... <...>

– Вот судьба же, а! И здесь не уберегли... Довелось им хлебнуть. Эх-х... [СЕНЧИН 2015: 418]

Is it a fatal misfortune due to natural causes, or bad construction work? Whatever the answer, water manipulated by humans seems to take revenge, turning into a dark and destructive force that furiously sweeps aside what it finds on its way. In the Siberian *Waste Land* portrayed by Senchin the conflict between human beings and nature is resolved in favour of the latter: it is not the Russian village that is submerged, but, metaphorically, contemporary people as such.

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²³ As further evidence of its centrality in the conceptual fabric and in the chronotope of the work, it should be noted that the term *kladbishche* “cemetery” appears 48 times in the text.



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