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## **NAMING SYSTEMS IN EVGENII VODOLAZKIN'S «LAVR» THROUGH THE LENS OF MEDIEVAL FOLK TRADITION**

*The following article will analyze the development of the protagonist of Evgenii Vodolazkin's novel, Lavr, who is a boy growing up in the author's imagined, syncretic medieval period, as he undergoes several namings and renamings throughout the course of the plot. During the Russian Middle Ages, one's name performed a protective and fate-defining role, while also situating its bearer within a framework of familial and religious tradition, thereby strengthening both horizontal ties to other individuals and vertical ties to a divine power. Following Erich Auerbach's theory of figural interpretation and drawing on folklore, Orthodox chronicles, and onomastic studies, this article will consider the ways in which the main character of the novel is able to subvert the bounds of both space and time through his varied appellations. As the narrative develops, it becomes clear how his names irrevocably link him to his friends, family, historical figures, and ultimately, to the biblical story of salvation.*

*Keywords: name, double names, figural interpretation, salvation, onomastics, etymology, monastic name, baptismal name.*

### **Introduction**

In the medieval period, popular belief suggested that names performed both a protective and fate-determining function. After the conversion of Rus' to Orthodoxy, it was common practice to bestow children with two names upon their birth, one being used by the child's family and immediate acquaintances and following local or familial naming traditions, while the other was dictated by the Church's calendar of saints' feasts. The following study traces the phenomenon of naming and renaming, which the protagonist of Evgenii Vodolazkin's *Lavr*, Arsenii, undergoes over the course of the novel. This process will be analyzed

through the lens of the system of double names that existed in Russian folk life until the end of the seventeenth century, tracing the names that Vodolazkin's main character receives throughout his evolution. This changing of names allows the protagonist to transcend temporal and spatial boundaries and to become integrated into a wider story of salvation that spans the length of history.

### **Materials and Methods**

In its analysis of Evgenii Vodolazkin's 2012 novel, «Lavr», this study follows the framework of Erich Auerbach's concept of figural interpretation [1], in which events and literary plots exist in a spiraling continuum and events of the present not only repeat past narratives, but also fulfill them, breaking down old stylistic limitations and bringing these events into a new light. This article cites folkloric sources, Orthodox chronicles and scholarship in historical onomastics in order to elucidate the ways in which the novel's protagonist is a fulfillment of biblical scripture, a reimagining of biblical figures, which is only made possible through his many name changes and metaphorical rebirths.

### **Results and Discussion**

The novel «Lavr» centers around Arsenii who grows up under the guardianship of his grandfather, Khristofor, a healer in the village of Rukina Sloboda. After Khristofor's death, Arsenii continues to practice his grandfather's craft and one day receives a woman in need, Ustina, into his home. She becomes pregnant by him, but during childbirth his shame about their relationship prevents him from sending for a midwife, and she dies due to complications, along with their newborn son. This sin becomes the central driving force in the novel, as Arsenii vows to live a life in maximum denial of his own needs and desires in the hope that his earthly suffering will bring forth Ustina's salvation.

Arsenii is named in honor of the saint whose feast day falls on the day of his birth, Arsenii Velikii. While scholars in the field of historical onomastics have determined that children were in some cases not named for the saint whose feast day was celebrated on the exact day of their birth (they could be named for a saint whose feast day was near the time of birth, or they could be named for a saint that had personal significance for the child's family), the parallels between Vodolazkin's character and the religious figure are too many to go unacknowledged. According to the saint's hagiography, Arsenii Velikii was housed in the emperor's court, but the lavishness of such quarters weighed upon him, and he left the comfort of this life in order to enter a period of solitude, just as Vodolazkin's Arsenii also feels drawn to solitude and extreme poverty in order to maintain his spiritual connection with his beloved, Ustina. Further, Arsenii Velikii and Vodolazkin's Arsenii both overcome great distances in their respective pilgrimages, the first traveling from Constantinople to Alexandria, and the later from Pskov to Jerusalem. Arsenii is also a harkening back to the Biblical Adam, his name being of Greek origin meaning

“man.” Arsenii’s insatiable interest in Alexander the Great (who’s namesake, Alexandria, was the site of Arsenii Velikii’s pilgrimage), also, in a roundabout way, traces a line between the literary character and Adam, as Vodolazkin himself explains in «*World History in the Literature of Ancient Rus*» («Всемирная история в литературе Древней Руси»). One chronicler specifically uses Adam and Alexander as the outer limits of his account before allowing their narrative to spiral in on itself: «[...] хронисты отличали историю спасения от ‘просто истории’ и умели первую во второй выделять. [...] Георгий Амартол, начинает свое повествование дважды, о чем и предупреждает в предисловии. В начале он излагает историю от Адама [...]. Дойдя до смерти Александра Македонского, Георгий вновь возвращается к Адаму и сосредотачивается преимущественно на истории библейской» [2, p. 17].

Thus, the chronicles are also written in the same manner as Auerbach’s figural interpretation, and therefore historical figures from entirely different periods are irrevocably linked across spatial and temporal dimensions. Vodolazkin, in his own role as author also weaves together secular history with the Christian story of salvation, situating his narrative within one temporal trajectory while recalling widely recognized historical events, although in an entirely inverted context. For example, in the opening of the narrative, Vodolazkin orients the reader to the timeline within which the plot exists in the following way. About Arsenii’s grandfather and his dwelling place by the village church, the author writes: «Церковь была сооружена в благодарность за благополучный исход 1492 года, семитысячного от Сотворение мира. И хотя ожидавшегося конца света в том году не произошло, тёзка Христофора неожиданно для себя и других открыл Америку (тогда на это не обратили внимания)» [3, p. 14].

Vodolazkin layers the temporal planes of history in such a way that within the span of one passage, the reader is made aware of events belonging to two entirely unrelated geographical locations, while the players in each scenario remain unaware of, or at least uninterested in each other. While in this passage, Khristofor, Arsenii’s grandfather, and Columbus may be irrevocably linked by the significance of the year 1492, Vodolazkin points, with a single word, тёзка, to a second point of contact – their names. Vodolazkin, in this way, intentionally draws a line between the aged man, his locality, and the events that will unfold in the life of another man who shares nothing more in common with him than his name. While the connection may seem tenuous, Vodolazkin thereby closes a concentric circle in the spiral of historical time, and this only serves to strengthen the meaning given to names, and especially shared names, within the system of this text.

In order to understand the magnitude of importance afforded to names, let us turn to the research of A. F. Litvina and F. B. Uspenskii [4], who have traced the use of double names throughout the Russian medieval period. As the date

of birth of a child was considered to be divinely determined, choosing a name corresponding to a saint's feast day, as Litvina and Uspenskii explain, could be understood as a sign of obedience to God's earthly design. However, despite the persistence of this belief, the custom of naming children based on family tradition concurrently existed and perhaps had much earlier roots in the eastern Slavic tradition. These practices demonstrate that names provide a means for reaching across both space and time, horizontally bridging familial and other relations, while vertically linking the lives of the living with the lives of the saints. Thus, as the chronicler Georgii Amartol traced the line between Adam and Alexander the Great, and eventually returned back to Adam, so does Vodolazkin, although his return to Adam comes in the form of Arsenii, a new first man who once again sets in motion the story of salvation, which encompasses the overarching structure of the history of the universe.

Arsenii's first name transformation occurs when he wanders into the city of Pskov, weak and on the verge of death. He briefly regains consciousness, introducing himself to the Pskovians as Ustin (the male equivalent of his beloved's name), meaning «just», or «fair». Arsenii's sin, described above, aligns him with the sin of the first man, Adam – the sin of knowledge. Arsenii knew Ustina in a way that only husband and wife were prescribed to know, and this knowledge bore within him a sense of shame similar to that of Adam and Eve upon becoming aware of their physical nakedness. Further, his arrogance and vanity in regard to his abilities to bring a human life into this world without the help of a midwife are reminiscent of the arrogance and vanity displayed by the first people in their desire for divine knowledge. Arsenii's shift to Ustin, then, builds upon Arsenii's role as a new Adam, while also marking a new stage of his existence, which is consumed by his desire to achieve justice for his departed family.

Although the etymological basis of Vodolazkin's naming system in Lavr has already been expounded by scholars, these meaning-saturated names are more than a literary device. In the article «Names in the Context of Folk Culture» («Имя в контексте народной культуры») [5], authors N. I Tolstoi and S. M. Tolstaia examine names as an instrument of folk magic, having the ability to shape and create a reality around them. It is for this reason that in Slavic cultures during the medieval period, it was typically forbidden to name a child after a recently or tragically departed person, as a similar fate might await the newly born child. In adulthood, as in Lavr, people could acquire new names, either as a strategy to escape from physical or mental illness, a type of rebirth, or to distance themselves from a sin attached to their original names. Although Arsenii seemingly commits a taboo by attaching a name to himself that is associated with an early and tragic death, his choice does follow a certain logic. Not only does he want to link himself to Ustina so that his deeds might count in her favor on the Day of Judgement, but

here he attempts an inverted variation of intercession of the saints, in which he on earth acts as an intercessor for one who has already passed into the afterlife. Vodolazkin's text suggests that this attempt is successful. When Arsenii is found collapsed in the woods, he is close to death, and it is in this liminal condition between life and death that his transformation begins: Here, Arsenii asserts that he is called Ustin, thus bringing the essence of the departed Ustina from his internal world, where he has successfully been communicating with her since her death, and into the external, physical world. When he does so, he begins to feel as though his body is not his own and a reacquaintance with his own physicality takes place: «Яко в чуждем телеси пребываю, подумал Арсений. [...] Арсению больше не было холодно, ибо не может же быть холодно пребывающему в чужом теле. Напротив, он явно чувствовал, как (не) его тело наполнилось силой и уверенно двигалось навстречу рассвету» [3, p. 169].

This passage retains a degree of ambiguity, as it remains difficult to ascertain whether Arsenii's alienation from his own body is more physical or emotional. Vodolazkin makes discerning more challenging by including large swaths of ellipses, which in some places occupy several consecutive lines, thereby creating the effect of someone coming in and out of consciousness, which the reader experiences along with Arsenii. As Arsenii regains some of his strength and begins his wandering, however, he makes an interesting discovery: «Скрипя свежевывавшим снегом, Арсений пошел из деревни прочь. Через некоторое время этот звук привлек его внимание, и он осмотрел свои скрипевшие ноги: они были в лаптях. [...] А прежде были в березовой коре, вспомнил Арсений. Такие вот превращения» [3, p. 173].

By including this inexplicable physical alteration in Arsenii's appearance, Vodolazkin suggests that in changing his name to Ustin, Arsenii also changes in a more literal way, as well. A new reality is created through his new appellation. Despite these linguistic and physical transformations, though, the narrator interestingly continues to refer to the protagonist as Arsenii. Before we consider the significance of this discrepancy, let us examine Arsenii's next iteration. During their pilgrimage to Jerusalem, Arsenii's friend and companion Ambrodegio is murdered, after which Arsenii returns to Rus' and takes monastic vows, at which point in time he is given the name Amvrosii, meaning «undying», in honor of the saint Amvrosii Mediolanskii, as well as his departed friend Ambrodegio: «Мы выбираем тебе имя в память святителя Амвросия Медиоланского, сказал старец Иннокентий. И слышаны – так уж оно всегда получается – о твоём преданном друге, произносившем это имя на иной лад. Пусть это имя в правильном произношении будет воспоминанием и о твоём друге. Сколько же жизней ты будешь проживать отныне одновременно?» [3, p. 374].

Here, the elder monk Inokentii's question echoes the belief in the fate-determining and reality-creating function of names. It is also worth noting that this onomastic transition occurs in an altogether different manner from the shift from Arsenii to Ustin. First, the change is made by external agents, rather than by Arsenii himself. What's more, this is the first time in which the narrator also begins to call Arsenii exclusively by his new name (excluding one passage, which will be examined below), even in places in the text in which the protagonist is not being addressed or referred to directly. This seemingly heightened respect for the monastic name was characteristic of the Middle Ages, according to Litvina and Uspenskii, although the name received upon taking religious vows did not undermine the significance of previous names, such as one's baptismal name, a Christian name used in public, or other names that were not rooted in the Church calendar: «Появление нового христианского (календарного) имени сразу оказывается здесь непременным условием вхождения в христианское сообщество, однако прежние имена [...] никуда не деваются. Именно они воплощают в себе вертикальные и горизонтальные связи человека с его родом, с семьей и окружением, с миром живых и умерших – они столь же необходимы для жизни в миру, как имена календарные для жизни церковной» [6, p. 137].

The vertical and horizontal connections referenced by Uspenskii and Litvina, which have already been referred to above, echo a sentiment voiced by Vodolazkin in his personal essay, «*The Age of Concentration*» [7]. In this essay, Vodolazkin bemoans the veneration of horizontal threads, which are the ways humans relate to each other, in contemporary society, while failing to acknowledge vertical threads, which are those that connect individuals with a higher power. In the universe contained within *Lavr*, the author bolsters these vertical connections with his use of Christian names. Arsenii's names, both self-chosen and given, are all taken directly from the Church calendar, even those that have a second association with individuals from Arsenii's own life. Therefore, his strongest ties are not to his ancestors, as many medieval people would have had, but instead, Arsenii is connected first and foremost with the history of the divine universe, from the first man, whose name is echoed in his own, to the present day within the novel (and even beyond, as Vodolazkin has included vignettes in his storyline dating up through 2012, the date of *Lavr*'s publication).

While the narrator's transition to Arsenii's monastic name could signify its precedence over the others, this interpretation is complicated when he, as Amvrosii, enters into an ascetic way of life and the reader is presented with the following passage: «18 августа года семитысячного от Сотворения мира в храме Успения Пресвятой Богородицы Амвросий принял схиму...» [3, p. 399] only to be followed by the following: «В храм Арсений



вступил, как и подобало, во время малого входа литургии» [3, p. 399]. It is curious why Vodolazkin would include such an abrupt and fleeting return to the protagonist's original given name. Just as abruptly, the narrator switches back to his monastic name, as if the momentary lapse never occurred. Perhaps it is connected to the belief, cited again by Litvina and Uspenskii [8, p. 41], that at the moment of acquiring a new status, a person must appear before God as he was in the sacrament of baptism, including in name, although this still fails to explain the narrator's immediate return to the protagonist's monastic name after this digression. The text contains one other passage in which Arsenii's naming choice was violated. This moment transpires much earlier in the text, when the main character has recently arrived in Pskov and has been taken by the locals to be a holy fool, of which there are already several in residence in the area. Arsenii is shocked when he has an encounter with another holy fool, Foma, who calls him by his birth name, despite Arsenii's not having shared it with anyone in Pskov, stating: «А за кого же тебя еще принимать [...] Смотри на себя, Арсение. Ты и есть юродивый, иже избра себе житие буйственное и от человек уничиженное» [3, p. 179]. Later, when Arsenii decides to make the long trek from Pskov to Jerusalem, Foma tells him, «Отныне ты не Устин, но как прежде, Арсений. Готовься же, товарищ, в путь» [3, p. 245]. In this way, Foma uses Arsenii's names as a way of switching between one manner of speech to another, and perhaps even between another state of consciousness to another. To the outside world, Foma is a babbling holy fool, often expressing territorial or outright aggressive behavior toward other holy fools and Pskovians at large. Although this behavior is at best erratic, it is a way of signaling a belonging to another plane of existence, a sacred plane. However, his pronouncement of Arsenii's name establishes a channel of communication between them that extends to no one else and brings Arsenii within the range of this same sacred zone. Foma's sending Arsenii off on his pilgrimage across far distances is also not without its significance. «*Onomasticon of Russian Charms: Proper Names in Russian Magic Folklore*» («*Ономастикон русских заговоров: имена собственные в русском магическом фольклоре*») details the structure of mythical space, it being formed by a system of concentric circles leading to a sacred realm, which is held in its center [9, p. 20], not unlike the conceptualization of time that Vodolazkin presents in «*World History in the Literature of Ancient Rus*» [2]. One's pursuit of the sacred would take him on a journey through this mythical space, where one must carry the stamp of his secret name, which would serve as protection against the evil spirits and forces that a person can encounter in this realm. While Litvina and Uspenskii have since denied the widespread practice of "secret names," it is true that most people living during the Russian Middle Ages would have had a name that was used in public space, and a more intimate name used in the domestic sphere. These scholars have also cited rituals in which

one's baptismal name was preferred or even required in order for the ritual to be performed successfully. In this way, Foma's verbal uttering of Arsenii's baptismal name offers the latter a sense of protection, one that would eventually bring him back from his pilgrimage safely.

The final name that will be analyzed in the course of this study is also the singular name that, once given to Arsenii, becomes his exclusive appellation, and the one that provides the novel with its title. The name Lavr ("laurel"), a symbol of eternity, is reminiscent of the deity Apollo, who wore a crown of laurels on his head. In mythology, the plant is also considered a symbol of the greatness of tragic love, which is one of the central themes of the entire novel. Toward the end of his life, Arsenii notices that he is able to cure his patients without the aid of the medicinal plants that his grandfather had always taught him to use. Although Khristofor first and foremost called upon divine power in his healing rituals, it was through these physical, plant-based means that God's power was manifested. Having received the name Lavr in the final stage of his physical and spiritual life, Arsenii becomes the very instrument through which divine intervention can be brought to the lives of men.

Arsenii's transformation into Lavr is the most complete, the most permanent of all his physical forms. However, it would be a mistake to believe that Arsenii's shift into this final iteration of himself occurs only in the last portion of the novel. In fact, two earlier passages suggest a likeness between Arsenii and trees. The first occurs while Arsenii is sitting with a dying child, waiting until his soul passes into the next life. Arsenii asks the child to look for the soul of his son, and to give him a kiss. In that moment, «Арсений прижался лбом к дубу и почувствовал, как в него вливается деревянность» [3, p. 188]. The second occurs when he is sitting at the grave of another recently departed young person: «Прислонившись к сросшимся дубам, на кладбище остается лишь Арсений. Кажется, что он тоже с ними сросся, переняв цвет их коры и неподвижность. Это впечатление ошибочно, так как суть Арсения не древесна, но человечна и молитвенна» [3, с. 218]. While Arsenii may have not taken on a tree's form in these other moments, his adoption of the name Lavr may be the key to his conversion, as during the medieval period it was believed that a name determines a person's essence.

### Conclusions

In his final days of life, Arsenii is able to relive the moment when his beloved Ustina died, but this time he helps another young woman in need, Anastasia – whose name means «resurrection» – to give birth successfully, and he ends his life propped up against a pine tree, holding Anastasia's newborn, just as he wished to hold his own son. In order to understand Lavr as a tree symbol, one must consider the cultural perception of this tree from that period. According to the article, «*The Names of Trees in East Slavic Charms*» («Имена деревьев

в восточнославянских заговорах»), the authors provide the following textual citation for the laurel tree: «Стану я, раб Божий имрек, благословесь, пойду, перекрестесь, из избы дверьми, из двора воротами, в чистое поле, на восточную сторону, на Сионской горе стоит дуб Лаврентиев, под ним четыре мужа – св. Евангелисты» [10, p. 24]. Thus, if Arsenii's final iteration is that of the oak tree that stands watch over Mount Zion and the four evangelists, history's spiraling shape has come to a close, and Vodolazkin has successfully closed the concentric circles that span from Adam to Christ, the Word, without truly writing a story about either.

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## **ЕВГЕНИЙ ВОДОЛАЗКИННИҢ «ЛАВРДАҒЫ» АТАУ ЖҮЙЕЛЕРІ ОРТАҒАСЫРЛЫҚ ХАЛЫҚТЫҚ ДӘСТҮРДІҢ ОБЪЕКТИВИ АРҚЫЛЫ**

*Бұл мақалада романның басты кейіпкері Евгений Водолазкиннің «Лавр» бейнесінің дамуы талданады, оның атауына және атауын өзгертуге ерекше назар аударылады. Басты кейіпкер-автор жасаған синкреттік орта ғасырларда өсетін бала. Орыс орта ғасырларында бұл атау адамды отбасылық және діни дәстүрлер жүйесіне енгізетін қорғаныс және өмірді анықтайтын функцияны атқарды, осылайша адамдар арасындағы көлденең байланыстарды және адам мен жоғары күш арасындағы тік байланыстарды нығайтты. Эрих Ауэрбахтың теориялық әдістеріне сүйене отырып және фольклорлық материалдарға сілтеме жасай отырып, православие шежіресі, және ономастика саласындағы ғылыми еңбектер, мақалада кейіпкердің есімдері кеңістіктік және уақыттық ауысу құралы ретінде қарастырылады.*

*Кілтті сөздер: аты, екі есім, бейнелі-аллегориялық түсіндіру, құтқару, ономастика, этимология, монастырлық есім, христиан есімі.*

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## **СИСТЕМЫ ИМЕНОВАНИЯ В «ЛАВРЕ» ЕВГЕНИЯ ВОДОЛАЗКИНА СКВОЗЬ ПРИЗМУ СРЕДНЕВЕКОВОЙ НАРОДНОЙ ТРАДИЦИИ**

*В данной статье анализируется развитие образа главного героя романа Евгения Водолазкина. «Лавр», уделяя особое внимание его именованию и переименованию. Главным героем является мальчик, который вырастает в сотворенном автором синкретическом средневековье. В русском средневековье имя выполняло как защитную, так и жизнеопределяющую функцию, вписывающую человека в систему семейных и религиозных традиций, тем самым укрепляя горизонтальные связи между индивидами и вертикальные – между человеком и высшей силой. Следуя теоретическим методам Эриха Ауэрбаха и ссылаясь на фольклорные материалы, православные хроники, и научные работы в сфере ономастики, в статье будут рассматриваться имена главного героя как инструмент перехода пространственных и временных границ. В ходе развития сюжета выясняется то, как эти имена связывают его с друзьями, родными, историческими личностями и, в конечном итоге, с библейской историей спасения.*

*Ключевые слова: имя, двуименность, фигурально-аллегорическое толкование, спасение, ономастика, этимология, монашеское имя, христианское имя.*

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