Queer Childhood in Russian Modernism

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THESIS

Submitted as a partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Slavic Studies (Russian Literature and Culture)
in the Graduate College of the University of Illinois at Chicago, 2021
Chicago, Illinois

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Summary

My dissertation investigates those childhood narratives of the early Soviet era that neither embrace the received wisdom of 19th-century autobiographical writing nor fall within the inflexibly teleological regimen of socialist realism. As it aims away both from the memoir as an instrument of retrospective self-fashioning, and from the ever-edifying propulsion of the Soviet *Bildungsroman*, my project seeks to theorize a conflicted modernist temporality anchored in the present tense and charged with unforeseen possibilities: erotic in nature, but aesthetic, political, and ontological in implication.

My scholarship utilizes the interconnected frameworks of queer theory, psychoanalysis, and even animal studies to gain a more sophisticated understanding of the child's role in variously modulated modernist projects. The child of the 1910s-1930s, placed at the center of my academic attention, is no longer the reflective and predictive hero of memoiristic meditations, but nor is he yet father to the New Soviet Man. This child is certainly a subject rather than an object; a reluctant and unreliable observer of history rather than its valued personage; a character in its own right rather than, merely, an artistic device or a political fantasy.

Briefly put, the biggest conceptual question tackled by my project is: What can Russian modernism and queer theory *do* for each other?—and not, merely, How can they be made to fit together? (both are, of course, capacious enough to do so). My readings of Isaac Babel, Margarita Barskaia, Leonid Dobychin, and Pavel Zal'tsman consider what purposes the literary (or, in Barskaia's case, cinematic) child might serve when its autobiographical duty is enervated or exuberantly confounded, and its ideological functions are not yet locked in. Queer theory gives me a nuanced enough language to talk about a childhood oriented other than toward the future or even

the past; a childhood that, taken as neither prologue nor flashback, participates in the non-linear temporalities of modernity from the vantage point of frequently inarticulate, unfulfilled affect.

My main theoretical undertaking has been to formulate a modality of permanent becoming which is proper to the unfinalizable, uncontainable, and purposefully immature self. By nominating this brand of non-teleological childhood as "queer," not only do I mean to address its desires that run aslant all reproductive futurity; I also venture beyond the conventional timelines of psychological maturation, historical determinism, and linear character development. What is at stake when the writers and filmmaker in my purview dwell on a child's "temporary" sexual variance, or privilege the enclosed moment of childhood over the grand cataclysms of Russian history, or estrange their characters' voices from the adult narrators'? I propose not to ground the answers, merely, in some phenomenological accuracy of a difficult age. Instead, I strive to locate a livelier, and less predictable, language to wrestle with the constitutive conundrums of modernity broadly construed, propelled as it is by the push-and-pull between tradition and experiment, primordiality and progress, identity and performance, mimetic and generative art.

Acknowledgments

First and foremost, I would like to thank my advisor, Professor Julia Vaingurt: an intimidatingly brilliant scholar, a wise mentor, and, if I may be so bold, a dear friend. Her own child, Bella, once described her profession as follows: "My Mom teaches kids how to read." I, for one, certainly owe most of my reading skills to her, and that is just the tip of an iceberg of debt, both intellectual and emotional, that I hope someday to repay. My boundless gratitude goes out to Professor Peter Coviello, whose two seminars on queer theory planted the seeds of this dissertation, and whose inspiration, as tireless as it is effortless, has sustained my work ever since. His typically aphoristic justification of getting a PhD in literature—"You learn to talk intelligently about things you're stupidly in love with!"—was surely taken to heart by me. I also want to acknowledge the generous contributions of my esteemed committee members: Professors Lilya Kaganovsky, Michał Paweł Markowski, and Colleen McQuillen, without whom this project would have been an infinitely more blundering and shambling affair. It is a joy and a privilege to be able to submit this humble thesis to academics whose writing, thinking, and teaching I have long admired and envied.

My warmest thanks to the whole 1604 Crew: Tetyana Dzyadevych, Andrei Gorkovoi, Agnieszka Jezyk, Lucas Plazek, Yelena Zotova, and others. They have made graduate school a much more nurturing—not to mention, fun—place to be than rumor has it. A special thank you to Olga Seliazniova, who has been, over the years, my strictest taskmistress and gentlest consoler, depending on what the situation called for. Another debt of gratitude that will not be paid off anytime soon is owed to Andrzej Brylak, the patron of my arts and the apple of my eye. To ask for a more considerate, forgiving, or magnanimous friend would be to test the universe's patience.

This dissertation has been supported, when I most needed it, by an ASEEES Summer Dissertation Grant, the UIC Provost's Graduate Research Award, and funding from the Harvard Ukrainian Research Institute. I thank the members of their respective selection committees, as well as all of my discussants, co-panelists, and audiences at UIC, USC, UIUC, UChicago, and other venues where rough drafts of these chapters premiered. My colleagues, past (at UIC, Macalester, and St. Olaf) and future (at the University of South Alabama), should also know how much they are appreciated.

Finally, none of this would have been possible without the love, care, and encouragement from my parents: my Mom, Professor Tamara Goncharova, who is always inordinately proud of me, and my Dad, Viktor Svynarenko, who always was.

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Vanechka Grows Up Sideways: Introduction

Somewhere in the wake of Leo Tolstoy's "pseudo-autobiography,"[1] or perhaps even within its range, there occur, we are told, a series of reverberant shifts as literary childhood transitions from theme to method: what once was an archive of dependable self-knowledge becomes a tool for intuitive decipherment; facile prediction gives way to intractable perception; personalized history and socio-psychological motivation turn the last resort of transcendence (especially in the mystical precincts of Russian Symbolism). As childhood begins to index less the locus of an irretrievable past than a form of poetic consciousness straining to fathom some dramatically ruptured present, the child's consummate virtue is superseded by an artistry of similarly unattainable perfection. Where the Romantic pined for the remote, the modernist now scrambles for the immediate. "Aestheticism," as Mikhail Epstein shrewdly remarks, "is hardly alien to infancy," inasmuch as both appreciate "not the hidden cause or purpose of a thing but its givenness—its appearance, shape, and color" (140). Epstein's claim for Russian modernism's fundamental obsession with all things childish—"A total infantilization of poetic language takes place" (131)—has been passed on to many a scholar. Sara Pankenier Weld, most famously, expounds the instrumentalization of the "naïve" perspective and "childlike" ebbings of logic by the Neo-Primitivists, Cubo-Futurists, and OBERIU, in her monumental *Voiceless Vanguard: The Infantilist Aesthetic of the Russian Avant-Garde* (2014). Most epigrammatically, Fiona Björling puts it this way: "[The modernist artist] aligns himself with the child whose vital business is to see, to hear and to understand for the first time" (119).

[1] This term, particularly germane to Babel's and Dobychin's self-stylings, hails from Andrew Wachtel's important study *Battle for Childhood: Creation of the Russian Myth* (1990), where it encapsulates the numerous internal ironies that Tolstoy keeps up in *Childhood* by blending different narrative voices.

For proof of how deeply ensconced childhood had become, by the 1920s, as a paragon of freshness of vision, one need not look further than Lidiya Ginzburg's diaries, in which she credits Andrei Bely's *Kotik Letaev* with "[making] the child hero's function absolutely clear: it is to motivate the *ostranenie* of the thing" (21–22). The verdict, therefore, has been in for a century now: if one wishes to be modern, one writes about childhood to enact a certain severance from the familiar. By swapping out virtuousness for virtuosity, the modernist child serves to establish an aestheticized distance from oneself, marking off the outer limit of verbal representation as such. Divergent in any number of ways, the pre- and post-Tolstoyan children stand united insofar as both set an example for the adult writer, impelling him to seize verbally that which lends itself to articulation so tantalizingly poorly.

From the turn of the century and up to the advent, in the early-to-mid-1930s, of socialist realism, whose designs on childhood would be considerably less benign,[2] whatever task the Russian modernist takes upon himself, whether it be purification of language, grappling with the recalcitrance of memory, or flight from sociohistorical determination, the child, it would appear, is his man. To write *like*, more than about or for, a child means to fulfill the era's most extravagant, and thus most coveted, fantasy—a fantasy that I see lurking once again in the margins of queer theory as it engages with the imaginings of the child. And the overarching question delineating this shared fantasy seems to read as follows: How does one honor the wondrous strangeness of childhood—or, to quote Kevin Ohi, "attend to the child's illegibility or its exorbitance" ("Maisie" 105)—without essentializing and sentimentalizing it out of existence? In historicizing the multiple

[2] Catriona Kelly interrogates the devious Stalinist "cult of childhood" in her comprehensive *Children's World: Growing Up in Russia, 1890-1991* (2007). For a more minute case study, see Evgeny Dobrenko's "'The Entire Real World of Children': The School Tale and 'Our Happy Childhood'," which reads iconic Socialist Realist author Arkady Gaidar's output "in connection with the transformation of the violence out of which the Soviet world itself was born" (226).

constructions and deployments of childhood as a strategically useful fiction, scholars (Jacqueline Rose, to name but the most seminal figure)[3] have occasionally linked cultural investments in the prelapsarian innocence of children to the utopic desire for unmediated representation, but the curious intersection that I want to point up lies slightly afield. Drawn to the child's radical open-endedness, spontaneity, fluidity, and inarticulacy, the Russian modernist, who may have little interest in its uncodified, uncomfortable sexuality, and the queer theorist, who narrates precisely that, both search for an expressible mode of being-child in the absence of adult imposition—for a *good* way to romanticize the child. Both believe that a child left to its own devices is something to see. Without, necessarily, entertaining any fancies of an *écriture enfantine*, queer theory nevertheless implies what Russian modernism declares: that the definitional lack of childhood—its other-than-itself-ness—is rife with creative potential; that its protracted present tense, neither bound by sequential retrospection nor yoked to any coherent and/or habitable future, is cause for invention and imaginative world-making. The queer child's "frequent fallback onto metaphor," as Kathryn Bond Stockton concisely puts it, composes its "way to grasp itself" (11), and from this vantage, the Russian modernist child, asked to speak of everything, including its own interiority, in words that have not been used before to name it, is surely the queerest of them all.

The story I seek to tell in my dissertation, then, is a slightly asymptotic one, not against but beside the two narratives that I have summarized above. Both conceptualize childhood in opposition to some utopia, preexisting or incipient. The Russian modernist is antagonistic toward the typologically readable child of autobiographical convention, either in its 19th-century

[3] "Children's fiction emerges, therefore, out of a conception of both the child and the world as knowable in a direct and unmediated way, a conception which places the innocence of the child and a primary state of language and/or culture in a close and mutually dependent relationship" (9).

Tolstoyan iteration (Sergei Aksakov, Nikolai Garin-Mikhailovsky)[4] or the socialist realist Gorkyan one (Feodor Gladkov, Valentin Kataev, etc.). The queer child is an antidote to childhood's self-evidentiality and transparency (whether Victorian or, say, neoliberal), making room instead for motility of affect, instability of gender assignation, non-genital eroticism, and other modalities in which wariness of sex as destiny can be expressed. Both paradigms, as Elizabeth Freeman has it, "counter the common sense" (xv) of maturation. I would hazard a guess that the Pasternak of *Detstvo Liuvers* (1922) and *Ohrannaia gramota* (1929), or the Mandelstam of *Shum vremeni* (1925) and *Egipetskaia marka* (1928), would not have been unenthused about the queer child's "growing up sideways" (Stockton) or about its mistrust of Muñoz' "straight time" (*Cruising* 22), Halberstam's "time of inheritance" (12), and Freeman's "chrononormativity" (xxii). I allot quite a few of the following pages to the numerous and momentous similarities between these two paradigmatic childhoods, underpinned, by and large, by the same premise: within what Stockton calls "managed delay" (the pause before confident, autonomous being that is drawn out artificially and, thus, artistically; 40), the child—as queer as it is modernist—embodies "the irresponsible, often puerile excess to which we owe the poetic word" (Ronell 102). Though seldom repeated in so many words, Stockton's idea of a queer child imaginatively, innovatively stalling in the face of something so unappeasable as full-bodied personhood informs practically all of my readings. In fact, the very definition of "queer childhood" to which I subscribe descends from Stockton's all-important book where it is taken to mean children's "propensity for growing astray inside the delay that defines who they 'are.' Children grow sideways as well as up […] in part because they cannot, according to our concepts, advance to adulthood until we say it's time" (6).

[4] The Tolstoyan tradition, untouched by socialist realism, stayed alive and well in émigré writing, by authors who otherwise had little to nothing in common: Bunin, Nabokov, Shmelev, etc.

Theoretically valuable and all-around heartening as it is, Russian modernism's queerness, which I locate precisely in its doubts toward the utopian verities of unambiguous childhood, nonetheless harbors something of a utopian aspiration, as well. This is where my story of the alignment between the two stories begins to cast some doubts of its own. What if this aesthetically unimpeachable child—half anti-psychological, episodic, recurrent "Vanechka"; half erotically malleable, politically intransigent "emblem and occasion for the absorption and pleasure that can attend the contemplation of art" (Ohi *Innocence* 9)—has crystalized into a counter-utopia all on its own, when we were not looking? Departing from this provocation, the chapters that follow analyze some 1910s–1930s fictional children with a view to determining where and how Russian modernism and queerness stick together, drift apart, and make as if to correct each other.

In Chapter I, I look at four short stories from Isaac Babel's unofficial "Childhood Cycle," broken up into two conceptual pairings. The first two, "Childhood. At Grandma's" and "The First Love," join forces to tell a tale of initiation into proper, articulate sexuality—a rite of passage of whose gains and losses the narrator seems to be equally aware. The movement I see him perform––a movement neither unimpeded nor, in the end, irreversible—goes from what I call *englobement* to what may be called, for the sake of symmetry, emplotment. By the former I mean Babel's child's peculiar variation on immediate perception of the world. In "englobing" (I choose this word based on the preponderance of spherical images in the character's self-descriptions) his surroundings, the boy establishes a strange, and strangely artistic, contact with reality that is direct not only in the sense that it bypasses cognition, but also in framing a mode of intensely incarnate, even violent living. Emplotment, then, would be the child's pained arrival at convincing, legible self-narration. The connection between epistemology and embodiment persists in the two stories as the physical pressures of uncategorizable, incoherent, and impermanent affect in the first one yield in the

second to the lasting wheal, or scar (*rubets*), of storytelling. It is, I contend, a process that Babel finds both fertile and detrimental, inescapable and unnatural.

In reading through the queer lens "Awakening" and "In the Basement," I train my sights on Babel's narrators' adolescent sexuality as it dovetails with their literary ambition—a theme metaphorized in the former pair but made explicit here (and not without recourse to the natural/unnatural dynamic, either). In doing so, I strive to resolve the most vexing quandaries embedded in the stories' plots (for instance, the exact, pun intended, nature of the narrator's relationship with Smolich in the former or the reason for his suicide in the latter), but my theoretical intervention, I hope, goes beyond textological Babel studies. Namely, my readings, which present the queer child as a failed demiurge, help to revise, through Babel's sobering precedent, the quasi-Romantic investments in the creative potential and aesthetic exceptionality of childhood as I see them percolating both in Russian modernism and in queer theory.

In "Awakening," the boy wants to draw from homosexual attraction the visceral physicality that his all-too-formalist writing lacks, but ends up in a narcissistic gridlock where another lack—that of gendered difference—prevents him from original creation. A similar conundrum awaits the narrator of "In the Basement," although what he pursues in his infatuation with a boy is the additive of cultural refinement to his coarsely embodied literature. By falling in love with a male classmate, he realizes soon, he tilts his *Verliebtheit*—that composite of self-projection and recognition of otherness which we know as besottedness—too heavily toward the former. Then, even the male classmate's deliberate ungendering takes on the secondary meaning of replicating the self, resulting in an overall sterility that for Babel is incompatible with the generativity of the literary

enterprise.[5] However, as I conclude, queerness, whether we appoint as such all unruly, peripatetic desire or some distinctly homoerotic attachments, perseveres in Babel in a chain of remissions and flare-ups, not to be reduced for good to the protective platitudes of temporary aberration.[6]

In Chapter II, I change several gears—those of medium, context, and mood—to talk about a much more queerly optimistic outlook on the artistry of childhood in Margarita Barskaia's film *Torn Boots* (though I do not ignore the profound pessimism of its historical circumstances). The Soviet "school movie" subgenre (*shkol'nyi fil'm*) does not come into any prominence until the late 1940s, and the child of Stalinist cinema remains hamstrung by mandatory pseudo-adult heroism all through the 1930s as he or she participates in dekulakization, the hostilities of the Civil War and 1917 Revolution, sabotage and espionage prevention, etc. However, in 1933—pincered, that is, between the 1920s avantgarde and the liftoff of socialist realism—*Torn Boots* sets forth a vision that not only demurs at portraying children as miniaturized adults, but configures childhood on the whole as refusal of political participation and as a laboratory for disinterested art.

While young-adult playwright Aleksandra Brushtein bemoans the fact that the contemporary Soviet child "is made not out of flesh but out of its future monument's marble" ("sdelan ne iz ploti, a iz mramora svoego budushchego pamiatnika" qtd. in Turbin 412), Barskaia mobilizes the child's unfinishedness, plasticity, and indeterminacy—of sexual and gender affiliation, among other things—to stage a conversation about the primacy of artistic form. "Stage" is the operative word here insofar as the alleged spontaneity of Barskaia's child actors both turns

[5] Svetlana Boym voices a congruent observation in her *Death in Quotation Marks*: "The desire for androgyny is often a veiled desire to devour the other in oneself, to eliminate the difference. Androgyny suggests a final reconciliation of the sexes, the absence of conflict, tension, dialogue, an ultimate self-complacency and self-sufficiency" (218).

[6] "Childhood itself is afforded a modicum of queerness when the people worry more about how the child turns out than about how the child exists as child. […] The utopian projection of the child into the future actually opens up a space for childhood queerness […] as long as the queerness can be rationalized as a series of mistakes or misplaced desires" (Bruhm and Hurley xiv).

out (according to the director's eloquent memoirs and articles) and appears to be, to a perceptive viewer, a meticulously fashioned device. Using as my implicit jumping-off point Julia Vaingurt's reframing of the Soviet avantgarde as a "not productive per se, but mythic and revelatory" activity rooted in play (67), I bring to light the non-transformative, contemplative, and ludic legacies of 1920s art hiding in the film's authenticities done to excess. Simultaneously, I attempt to think through some acutely-felt concerns shared by Russian formalism and such queer practices as, for instance, the improbable Muñozian drag of disidentification.

My discussion of the benefits and frustrations that accompany sexual indecision and tie into artistic ingenuity continues in Chapter III, where I dissect Leonid Dobychin's 1935 novel *The Town of N*. At this point, I attempt to theorize, with the help of many a distinguished queer scholar, its narrator's uncertain, mobile subjectivity that arises from intertwinements of time and sex: a posture or a tone, perhaps, more than a legitimate self; a replicable instant of mutuality in lieu of a continuous, durable individual. Although Dobychin's prose is widely known for its intentional uneventfulness, I argue that it is precisely the event of erotic communion, orchestrated in the novel always athwart conventional sexuality, that calls forth a fascinating child-subject: naïve, myopic, tongue-tied, and prone to rather obtuse imitation, but also promising aesthetically and ethically. The promises of such a brand of relational subjectivity, of course, are tempered with certain foreclosures (I would not have selected this text if they were not). Complicating Babel's notion of queerness as an obstruction to acknowledgment of otherness and, thus, to demiurgic creativity, Dobychin's narrator cannot write either as a queerly positioned not-quite-subject (because he does not have the verbal means to do so) or as an inductee of sexual—and not necessarily "hetero-"—self-determination (because through this induction, he loses his hold on those idiosyncrasies of vision that could have made him a worthwhile writer). The author himself, in the meantime, claims

to have succeeded where his narrator failed as his novel is supposed to attest to the preservation (or at least perfect fabrication) of a thoroughly unparaphrasable, infantile idiom, not accessible through memory, mystical experience, or stylistic ornamentation (all of them staples of Russian modernist commerce with childhood, best exemplified by Andrei Bely's "pseudo-autobiographical" trilogy *The Silver Dove*/*Kotik Letaev*/*The Baptized Chinaman*).

That his objects of diffuse desire are virtual unknowns, both to the reader and to the narrator, only emphasizes the boy's incomplete presence to himself—an opacity that he tries to maintain by, precisely, "growing sideways" rather than, teleologically and tyrannically, up. Not unlike in Barskaia's film, where the device of faithless mimicry is used to contrast and compare the partial autonomies of childhood and art, the tentative, superficial, saying-but-not-meaning imitations of adult romance from which he derives his sensual pleasure allow him to dodge the draft of Foucauldian "incitement to discourse": i.e., compulsory transcription of desire (*History* 20). By meeting the world on its thickened surface—neither fully fleshed out nor discarnate—Dobychin's child remains, as it were, a secret to himself, therefore immune to the decipherments of sexuality's umpires. Such minimized carnality is suggested to him by religious imagery and rituals, and the temporal axle around which he winds it comes from the church, as well. In a manner of speaking, the boy takes refuge from the non-negotiable secular timelines in the erratically ceremonial timekeeping of organized religion, permitted as the latter is to deviate from calendrical normalcy because its main responsibility is always to eternity. The event of falling in love, singular in its epiphany yet endlessly repeatable by invocation, times out then most closely to the movable feast of Easter as the narrator comically relates to Jesus Christ's post-resurrection command "Noli me tangere" ("Touch me not").

Whereas in Dobychin arrest of time is a promise held out (and broken) by suspension of sex, in Pavel Zal'tsman's *The Puppies,* to which I turn in my final Chapter IV, all temporal errancy becomes a bleak and gruesome timelessness of uninterrupted bodily harm. In all, I read the novel as a queer-negative project that pushes up against the limits of my previous authors' hopes and reservations. Instead of uniting—as, to use Donna Haraway's expression, "queer messmates in mortal play" (19)—in their communal, hierarchy-blind pliancy of the body and self, children and non-human animals, practically indistinguishable in the turmoil of the Russian Civil War, cannot unite even in their shared biopolitical disposability. The subjectivity that Zal'tsman's novel painfully envisions—anti-identitarian, non-transparent, and left undecided on principle as a debt to childhood—takes a dark turn. Man's dividedness against himself, which the unpredictabilities of queer eroticism and art are meant to mitigate, in *The Puppies* can only count on the repetitions of (oftentimes sexualized) violence for some semblance of cohesion and integrity.

In my Conclusion, I outline directions for further research that I plan to undertake in the foreseeable future. All my Babel and Dobychin references are to their respective *Collected Works*; all the timestamps and stills for *Torn Boots* are taken from my personal copy of the film, also available free of charge on YouTube. All translations from Russian are mine unless otherwise noted, in which case they are listed by the translator's name in the Works Cited section. Smaller quotations in Russian are transliterated in keeping with the ALA-LC transliteration system (except for the commonly accepted Anglicized spellings of such proper names as Gorky, Shklovsky, Tolstoy, etc.); more sizeable excerpts are given in the original Cyrillic.

I. Troubled Consolidation of Sexuality in Isaac Babel's Childhood Stories

Trapped in a freight car teeming with stir-crazy Cossacks, an itinerant profiteer holds up her baby as a shield against gang rape. In her own nominalist definition, a child is that which she swaddles, cradles in her arms, and lulls to sleep; it is a sum of external actions performed upon it, wherein "it" might as well stand for a slab of salt (as it does). Babel's Cossacks, however, do not content themselves with mere nominalism. Emblematic though it may be, both as guarantor of moral rectitude and, more importantly, as the mother's contribution to the Red Army cause (for the infants of today will join the infantry of tomorrow), the bundle nursed by the profiteer fails to answer their basic description of babyhood: "It doesn't ask for titty, doesn't wet your skirt, and doesn't bother people when they sleep" ("Salt" 92). What kind of life, the narrator Balmashev wonders, can be led in the absence of hunger, excretion, or any such perceptible disturbance? If the baby is not an animal, he reasons with some justice, it must be a mineral.

In "Salt" ("Sol'," 1923), the catastrophic grotesquerie of the plot—or, in Gregory Freidin's charmed phrase, its "delirious mixture of pathos and baseness" ("Isaac Babel" 1892)—appears to arise from little more than a conflict of terms. In an attempt to capitalize on the symbolic import of childrearing, the profiteer trusts her own nomination to be wholly substantiated by outward signs: she says it is a baby; she treats it as such; ergo, a baby it is. And yet, the fierce and archaic dictionary of Babel's Cossacks, to whom Lionel Trilling consequentially imputed "the truth of the body" and "full sexuality" (111), defines a baby as that which cries and urinates first, and symbolizes second. After its own disquieting fashion, the story corroborates our post-Ariès ian, constructivist understanding of childhood best synopsized by James Kincaid: "A child is not, in

itself, anything. Any image, body, or being we can hollow out, purify, exalt, abuse, and locate sneakily in a field of desire will do for us as a 'child'" (5).

At the same time, "Salt" is just perverse enough to magnify the threats of misattribution as we see the Cossacks exact their disproportionate revenge upon the woman. A child, the story seems to warn us—and Kincaid agrees in his conjuring of the pedophile's specter from the Victorian novel—is nothing proper until the body comes in. As soon as these "antiresnye" kids (by curious happenstance, Balmashev's Russian colloquialism for "interesting" here guesses at the saline toddler's lack of substance, its anti-*res* unreality) have secured flesh, we nominate them at our own peril, and punish others for misnomers to the best of our ability.

In the first portion of this chapter, I analyze Babel's impassioned excesses attributable to a child's worldview as they help me ponder the questions put forward by Jacques Derrida and revisited by Paul Kelleher: "How is a natural weakness possible? How can Nature ask for forces that it does not furnish? How is a child possible in general?" (*Grammatology* 147). My intention is to dissect, through a close reading of two stories, "Childhood. At Grandma's" ("Detstvo. U babushki") and "The First Love" ("Pervaia Liubov'"), the writer's preoccupation with childhood insofar as they strategize the living out of "a child's long dream of despair" ("dlinnyi detskii son otchaianiia") ("Story of My Dovecot" 198). Presenting maturation as a swelling rather than a growing, the queered Babel under consideration here is one to privilege the elasticity of childhood over its fragility, recurrence over precocious development, intensity of desire over its morphology, and the libidinal sacrifices that adolescent sexuality demands over the rewards that it pledges.

In its second half, this chapter deals with two related short texts and two well-theorized frameworks, not unrelated to each other either. The texts are Babel's "In the Basement" ("V podvale," 1931) and "Awakening" ("Probuzhdenie," 1930). The first framework I invoke is that

of childhood as an aesthetic category in Russian modernism; the second is that of the queer child. By reading Babel with an eye to his mobilizations of queerness, I show how the two stories arbitrate the values that the two conceptual models, almost in concert, assign to childhood, specifically with regard to its implied artistic merit.

The two stories given consideration in the respective subchapters stop short of contesting outright either recapitulations of the Russian modernist impetus as a quest for impossible childlikeness, or the queer adjacency between the child's sexual inconclusiveness and its ample artistic capacities, untapped and unforeseen. However, both texts, in dealing with children as aspiring writers, do relitigate the valorization of juvenility as a reference point in formal proficiency. Likewise, the same-sex attachments through which the stories figure their chief concerns conceive of adolescent queerness as neither an attenuated identity, whose very vagueness of shape can be parlayed into fruitful literary experimentation, nor even as an insular temporality of trial and error, eventually subsumed under the optimizing heading of heterosexual masculinity with no harm done. Rather, much like heterosexual masculinity itself, apprehensible, at least in Babel's *Red Cavalry*, through desiring exemplary men and then disavowing such desires, the queerness of "Awakening" and "In the Basement" offers itself up as the writer's perpetually returned-to and recoiled-from state of insufficiency, coterminous in that with childhood writ large.

1.1. "Childhood. At Grandma's": The Little Dreamer's Englobement

A 1915 piece of juvenilia, the programmatically entitled "Childhood" outlines the Babelian child whom the growing authorial confidence will solidify in the "Story of My Dovecot"/"First Love" diptych (both 1925). As early as the first paragraph, the reminiscing narrator posits an intimate, detailed, and affectively charged knowledge of his surroundings: "I knew them in a

special way, only for myself, and I was sure I saw in them the most important, mysterious things: what we, adults, call the essence of things" ("Я их знал особенно, только для себя и твердо был уверен, что вижу в них главное, таинственное, то, что мы, взрослые, называем сущностью вещей"). Signaled here is a mystical world whose singularity would not be accessible via any adult channels such as conventionalities of language ("what we, adults, call") or any other shareable experience (the world has to be known on a personal basis). A childish procedure is introduced in their stead: an engagement too physical to be merely contemplative, and compound of both metonymic fragmentation and associative reassembling:

> "Всё мне крепко ложилось на душу. Если говорили при мне о лавке, я вспоминал вывеску, золотые потертые буквы, царапину в левом углу ее, барышню-кассиршу с высокой прической и вспоминал воздух, который живет возле этой лавки и не живет ни у какой другой. А из лавок, людей, воздуха, театральных афиш я составлял мой родной город."

> "Everything about them was deeply imprinted on my soul. When grown-ups mentioned a store in my presence, I envisioned its sign, the worn, golden letters, the little scratch in the left corner, the young lady with the tall coiffure at the cash register, and I remembered the air around that was not around any other. I pieced together from these stores, from the people, the air, the theatre posters, my own hometown" (Constantine 43).

In order to bind himself to this imaginative scene summarized later as a "passionate, inimitable dreaminess," the narrator has to engage with the scene's particulars—i.e., with a complex synecdochical linkage of various material incidentals—through the scarcely translatable "krepko lozhit'sia na dushu" (Peter Constantine's serviceable approximation reads, "Everything about them was deeply imprinted on my soul"). Here, I would argue, a distinct Babelian mode of world-making vouchsafed to children first takes shape as the narrator's "soul," by which he evidently means those extensions of consciousness that have more in common with his body than they do with his intellect, presses hard up against the resonant objects around him to be affected by them directly. Premised in physicality yet recapitulated in language, it is a process that, in one breath, recasts acquisition of memories as an almost-bodily function and dignifies the child's oftentimes suspect attachment to the tangible side of things (grappling, as it were, to reconcile the profiteer's conceptual performance of childhood with the Cossacks' exhortation of manifest carnality in "Salt").

As he meditates on the peculiar dynamism of othered children in the Victorian context, Kincaid quotes the anonymous 1860 article "Children's Literature": "We must not think of a child's mind as of a vessel [...], but as a wonderfully organized instrument" (66). A vessel, we are made to understand, is for filling, whereas an instrument is for playing; but Babel's resourceful child, graced with a kind of sensual intelligence, proves capable of fashioning a world for himself where instrumentality and vessel-like receptivity merge into a palpitating whole. Bookended by intimations of synesthesia ("How we feel our mother's smell, the smell of her affection, words, and smile") and compulsory eroticization of early adolescence (see the encounter by the lingerie store), a fulcrum sentence stands out in the story: "Я был совсем пузырем в то время и ничего не понимал, но весну чувствовал и от холодка цвел и румянился" ("I was just a lad back then

and didn't understand anything, but I felt the spring and I blossomed and blushed under its chill"). Though conventional archaic slang for "a kid," the word "puzyr'" here, I believe, is not reluctant to be taken at face value, as "a bubble" or "a blob": not quite a container but, rather, a capacious enclosure; not so much an emblem of fragility as an elastic instrument of absorption.

Taking into account the consistent abundance of spherical metaphors that continues on in Babel's childhood prose (see "runts with ballooned blue heads" in "Awakening," or "a 12-year-old heart swelling with the merriment and ease of someone else's wealth" in "In the Basement"), I propose to group such Babelian dealings with and confabulations of reality—i.e., the child's world-making effort of "blossoming and blushing" where an adult would discern and cognize—under the rubric of *englobement*. To englobe, then, is to embrace and fictionalize the world erotically, yet with no reference to genital sexuality; to be a voracious reader of the material culture, yet to reserve the right of misinterpretation; to respond to stimuli with a wildly interpretable, yet irreducible physical vehemence. A child who englobes is one who imbibes his modest allowance of knowledge without any determination to solve himself definitively by it.

"I was a dreamer, that's true," the narrator concedes, "but I had quite the appetite" ("no s bol'shim appetitom"). It is this "appetite" of the child-bubble that I want to unpack now, drawing upon Val Vinokur's account of Babel's constitutional *liubopytstvo*: "a love of experience" that, according to the scholar, permits "glimpsing the world in its otherness, 'as it truly is'" (677). Trilling, too, intuits a similar affect surging through the *Red Cavalry* cycle, and for him this "feral passion for perception" is isomorphic with revolutionary savagery (120-121). The bountiful, measured meal at Grandmother's ("Edim sytno, obil'no i dolgo") starts out with the stuffed fish that the child suggests is worth converting to Judaism for. However, the irony of this suggestion is an anachronistic legacy of the grownup he will be, while the actual seduction is all his: after all,

if anyone possesses the sensual wherewithal to adopt a religion based on its traditional food, it has to be a child. Our adult selves, of course, prize this ferocity of appetite much like Liutov, for Trilling, begrudges the Cossacks their robust masculinity as something he (and with him, the entire collective body of civilization) has unhappily surrendered. In "Childhood," Sorokin the teacher, all "big red hands" and "beautiful full lips," prefigures the healthy and alluring ripeness of the flesh (mostly gentile, with the exception of Benia Krik) that Babel's narrators will desire so profusely and be denied so systematically. In a sense, englobement is the lovemaking to Vinokur's "love of experience"; an attempted infantile practice to accompany the very adult theories anchored in deconstruction, as it allows Babel's child to devour without replenishment, to desire without fulfillment, to make a religious joke and mean it just the same—and, as he himself spells it out, to flee and to stay forever in Grandma's overheated room ("ot vsego hotelos' bezhat' i navsegda hotelos' ostat'sia").

Psychoanalyst Adam Phillips sums up this fantasy of childhood as having your stuffed fish and eating it, too: "This child who can be deranged by hope and anticipation—by ice cream—seems to have a passionate love of life, a curiosity about life, which for some reason isn't always easy to sustain" (*The Beast* 18). However clichéd it might be to describe his predominant artistic method as condensation, and however childlike my literal application of the term, Babel is by no means oblivious to the pressures he exerts as he condenses—or to the pressures the child withstands as it englobes. Indeed, the sustainment of that appetite which, for Phillips, in turns entices and unsettles the adult, carries quite a tax. That pivotal early phrase—"Vse mne krepko lozhilos' na dushu"—bespeaks not only a lasting impression, but also a strain on the resourceful child's available resources: for something to be embedded into a soul, this "something" must be thrust pretty forcefully. And, while the story parades a safely insular vision of childhood ("spliu

molodo za sem'iu pechatiami"), the opening of that sleep's "seven seals" portends a rather dangerous kind of emancipation.

The postponed story of Grandma's friendship with her dog Mimi, this "quiet and secretive" alliance, may very well be an agreeable one ("ochen' horoshaia, trogatel'naia i laskovaia istoriia"), but stories of childhood, the narrator insinuates, seldom are. Asked to square conflicting definitions of himself, and sate hungers that always exceed what is on offer, and process with primarily physical tools a world not altogether exhausted in corporeality, the child does maintain his capability to enjoy it all (this is, largely, what I call the practice of englobement)—and yet, "puzyr'" that he is, he also expands his knowledge of constraints and unfreedom. Grandmother's languid, controlling presence, her "dull" face studded with a pair of watchful, "yellow and translucent" eyes, can be, in fact, made part of the perceptible—and therefore, more loveable and more habitable—environment, especially when she relishes "the sweet music" of unfamiliar words or unwittingly cooperates with her grandson in his treasured misapprehensions ("hotela, chtoby iz menia vyshel 'bogatyr'' – tak nazyvala ona bogatogo cheloveka"). Still, at some point the sobering words produced by Grandmother's "swollen throat" ("glotka vzdulas', tochno vspuhla") begin to mean things that are much too bitterly articulate to be englobed along with "the sweet music": "Don't believe people. Don't make any friends. Don't give them any money. Don't give them your heart." Although I am hesitant to concur with Hamutal Bar-Yosef's "wicked image of the Jewish grandmother, avaricious and full of suspicion" (264), I would like nevertheless to discuss how the Babelian child's physical participation in the world accommodates adult intervention, and how said child melodramatizes the body for his own benefit. To do so, let me turn now to "The First Love" and position it alongside its apparent predecessor, the hallucinatory scene in "Childhood" occasioned by Ivan Turgenev's novella of the same name.

1.2. "The First Love": Kissing and Scarring Your Way into a Life of Shame

In the brief pause between homework and a music lesson, the narrator of "Childhood" picks up Turgenev's book only to set it aside, seized by "inexpressible excitement" ("Menia ohvatyvalo neiz"iasnimoe volnenie"). It is at this juncture that his swelling perception gets positively tumescent. As he visualizes Vladimir's father lashing Zinaida across the face, his englobing contact with the text feels so immediate that the "lithe leather body" of the whip sinks into his own flesh, "sharply, painfully, instantly" ("ostro, bol'no, mgnovenno"). The stagnant heat hanging in the room—this site of Grandmother's "yellow-eyed" surveillance—is momentarily roiled with a swishing sound. Alexander Zholkovsky, with good reason, reads this scene as "an Oedipal pantomime" (*Babel* 49), and his reading certainly gains in piquancy when paired with "The First Love" the Babel story. However, in my estimation, the boy's transfer of the father-administered whipping onto his own body poses fewer questions and yields lesser insights than the willful inaccuracy that he commits in his reenactment. The narrator, in a word, chooses to read the novella wrong. To begin with, Turgenev's Petr Vasil'evich never strikes Zinaida's face. Instead, his whip lands on her outstretched arm:

> "Вдруг в глазах моих совершилось невероятное дело: отец внезапно поднял хлыст, которым сбивал пыль с полы своего сюртука, — и послышался резкий удар по этой обнаженной до локтя руке. Я едва удержался, чтобы не вскрикнуть, а Зинаида вздрогнула, молча посмотрела на моего отца и, медленно поднеся свою руку к губам, поцеловала заалевшийся на ней рубец" (122).

> "All of a sudden, something amazing took place before my eyes: father abruptly raised the whip with which he had been dusting the hem of his coat, and I heard a crack against her arm, bared to the elbow. As I fought down a scream, Zinaida winced, looked at my father without saying a word, and slowly lifted her arm to her lips to kiss the crimsoning welt."

At the end of the same chapter, however, Vladimir relives the scandal in a dream, in which "a crimson line" crosses Zinaida's forehead and from which the actual blow is omitted (124). Of course, the kiss Zinaida plants on her fresh wound calls attention to itself as the most notable omission from the original scene. For Adam Phillips, as for the Freud of *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, the kiss indexes a rupture in the child's illusion of self-sufficiency: we kiss others because we cannot kiss our own lips. From this deficiency stems our dependence on "a reliable but ever-elusive object that can appease but never ultimately satisfy" us—the fundamental inadequacy of desire that necessitates repeated, and repeatedly imperfect, compensations (*On Tickling* 11). By relocating the kissable welt from the much-too-reliable arm to Zinaida's own radically unreachable face, the little dreamer of big appetites appears to "glimpse," per Vinokur, "the world in its otherness," and his feelings toward it well up decidedly mixed. The boy senses, it seems to me, that a world announced by the whip-crack, unlike the pleasurably decentered globular creation in which he currently resides, will be very much centered (obviously for us, around sex), and the swelling some call "growing up" will entail certain diminishments, as well. For one, his ravenous, non-hierarchical appropriation of phenomena will be harder still to sustain. Between "My First Fee" that alludes to the loss of virginity and "My First Goose" that heralds induction into physical violence, Babel's first times usually tend to have a euphemistic quality.

His “first love,” then, is code for the prepubescent narrator’s realization that desire—the same desire whose unfinalizable recurrences he takes considerable pains to savor—may loom larger than he bargained for, while his capacity for unsanctioned enjoyment may dwindle soon. The erasure of Zinaida’s autoerotic kiss from a worrying, “inexpressibly exciting” episode buys him more time to keep performing, in the relative safety of englobement, the heroics of desire as he knows them.

But maybe, beside the psychoanalytical interpretation, there lurks another. Riding with his father after the incident, Turgenev’s Vladimir suddenly finds himself bonding with a former man of great severity, now leavened by that violent outburst: “And then, for the first and perhaps last time, I saw how much tenderness and compassion his strict features could express” (“И тут-то я в первый и едва ли не в последний раз увидел, сколько нежности и сожаления могли выразить его строгие черты,” 123). Concurrently, Zinaida’s acceptance of the lash, sealed with the blessing of a kiss, telegraphs to Vladimir a love for whose complexity and self-shattering fervor he cannot quite account. Vladimir mumbles, perplexed: “How could one not be outraged, it would seem, how could one stand to be hit by any hand, even the dearest one… But, it appears, one can if one’s in love… And me… I used to think…” (“Как, кажется, не возмутиться, как снести удар от какой бы то ни было!.. от самой милой руки. А, видно, можно, если любишь... А я-то... я-то воображал...,” 123). Babel’s young reader, admittedly, appreciates the clarity (“iasnye slova”) of Turgenev’s writing, its readiness to be englobed in his makeshift cosmos somewhere between the faith-affirming stuffed fish and the music teacher’s fleshy limbs. The outsized passion that he ascribes to the fabricated slap in Zinaida’s face—i.e., the coveted clarity of gesture—overrules the inassimilable meaning of the text. As long as the needlessly bewildering and, he rightly presumes, unsatisfactory melodrama of adulthood can be disavowed, Babel’s narrator

procures all the melodrama that he needs from his own misreadings. The welt he understands; the ratifying kiss he prefers to ignore.

"Innocence is a lot like the air in your tires," James Kincaid quips, "there's not a lot you can do with it but lose it" (53). Naturally, childhood is a lot like innocence, whatever air we pump into the term. If Liutov's attainment of honorary masculinity in "My First Goose," as shrewdly pointed out by Eliot Borenstein, "[resembles] less a rite of passage than the beginning of a long and difficult courtship" (93), then "The First Love"—a sequel of sorts both to "Childhood" and to "The Story of My Dovecot"—puts one of many possible ends to the hero's englobing days. This time around, initiation (or, in Yuri Slezkine's fanciful locution, "ecstatic Russian bar mitzvah," 87) stands at its most unabashedly sexual insofar as the narrator learns to love the kiss along with the welt. In fact, even the name of his object of desire, Rubtsova (from the Russian "rubets," a weal), suggests the transformative effect of scarring. "I saw in them the astounding, shameful life of all people on earth" ("Ia videl v nih udivitel'nuiu postydnuiu zhizn' vseh liudei na zemle," 209), the narrator remarks on the Rubtsovs' affectionate rituals for whose self-surpassing, excessive splendor he yearns. The woman's sumptuous flesh floats around in all its blemished glory as she either makes her husband kiss her legs, chaffed and marked by abrasions ("Potselui vavu," she fatuously commands), or smooches the boy herself with her "puffy mouth" ("zapuhshim rtom," 210). In the latter scene, having just lost his innocence to a pogrom, the boy lets Rubtsova wash a pigeon's entrails off his face, and experiences what must be his first kiss: a profoundly distressing erotic approbation that he, in a small triumph of englobement, fuses with the recent trauma. Struggling to narrate either cataclysm, the boy gets the hiccups and is diagnosed later on with some vaguely psychosomatic "nervous disease" (215).

"The love and jealousy of ten-year-old boys are just like the love and jealousy of adult men" ("Liubov's i revnost' desiatiletnih mal'chikov vo vsem pohozhi na liubov' i revnost' vzroslyh muzhchin," 210), the narrator insincerely comments. Inasmuch as Babel's "The First Love" takes after Turgenev's, his comment does ring true, even though the story is shot through with some native ironies. When Rubtsova, all of a sudden, in mid-kiss, implores the boy in a whisper to call his Daddy home, he cannot help but map the intergenerational rivalry of Turgenev's novella onto his own plot: an impossibility, one would assume, given his father's emphatically ridiculous appearance, and a double impossibility considering the setting (Rubtsova is sheltering her Jewish neighbors from the pogrom-mongers). The damage of initiation, however, is already done. The unleashed interpretive impulse engulfs even the boy's mother, whose voice, as she thanks the "mortified" Rubtsova, sounds now alarmingly "sonorous and strong," implying some suspected indiscretion. Made privy to the confusing playbook of adulthood, this narrator gives himself over to what the narrator in "Childhood" tried to forestall, and begins to narrativize suspiciously what his earlier iteration trustingly englobed. But the transition to the spoken kind of love—to that discourse which grants acceptable contours to the disarrayed affects of childhood—is neither without a hitch nor without a toll.

Similar though they might be to their adult counterparts, the love and jealousy of a ten-year-old, nonetheless, take place in a differently configured body that conducts a different sensuality. The boy's kiss, Babel reminds us, is still a devouring one, so Rubtsova's plump "moving and breathing hip" (210), on which he rests his head, ends up almost literally swallowed. In the story's dénouement punctuated by roaring hiccups, the narrator locates his beloved's flesh within his own: "A tumor, nice to the touch, had swollen in my throat. The tumor breathed, ballooned, closed up my pipes, and spilled out of my collar" ("Опухоль, приятная на ощупь,

вздулась у меня на горле. Опухоль дышала, надувалась, перекрывала глотку и вываливалась из воротника," 214). In succumbing to this "nervous disease," the child-bubble transforms himself into the "writhing snarl" of an adolescent: the former "puzyr'" "stal izvivaiushchimsia klubkom" (214). A welt—that previously arresting "crimson line" left by a deliberately misunderstood melodrama—clots into a legible scar that presupposes healing and memorializes the wound. Just yet, the boy may not be able to see sex for the way out of Grandmother's supervisory feasts that it is, but he guesses his narrative arc correctly: in order to enter the realm of cognizant carnality otherwise known as sexuality, his body will have to be reequipped and reassembled. And by convulsing in hiccups, the body balks at the idea.

Of all the scars in human history, the one of circumcision is probably the most celebrated. In *Circumfession,* Derrida underscores its indelibility "because circumcision is precisely something which happens to a powerless child before he can speak, before he can sign, before he has a name" (21). I believe that Babel's scars, whether displaced and disavowed as in "Childhood" or owned as in "The First Love," travel under the same sign of literature made flesh. The naming of a child, of course, can be carried out in a variety of manners. In "The Story of My Dovecot," it is the epiphany of the word "pogrom" uttered in the very last line, whereas in "The First Love" it is the admission of shamelessness: "ne ispytyval bol'she styda." Wrapped over Rubtsova's flawed carnal grandiosity the narrator sees a robe embellished with symbols of nature, such as birds, cavernous trees, and fantastic dragons. Here, the Babelian child already gives us a hint, expounded on in "Awakening," that nature, whose plenitude we so often assign to childhood, is something to be learned from others, at times the hard way; something for which to "blush and blossom," and to break the cozily apocalyptic "seven seals" of englobement. That "nature," as Derrida and Kelleher conclude in unison, is appallingly akin to "culture" (159). By articulating a nebulous

sensuality that is neither sexual per se nor yet exceptionally potent, and then by tracing its painful and taxing hardening into a knowable, literary quantity inscribed in a scar, Isaac Babel for the first time gives childhood its queer due.

1.3. "The Bones of Little People": On "Natural" Queerness in "Awakening"

One is not born, but rather becomes, a child: this much "Awakening" announces right out of the gate, in its first two paragraphs. In the mercantile Odessa circa 1910, the child's sentimental value—Rousseauian, Wordsworthian, Tolstoyan, you name it—is too seductively convertible into financial gain to let childhood remain a natural, unproblematic span of gradual development. It is, instead, a lucrative act to be conjured up at will—quite fittingly, too, through the medium of the performing arts. In the course of what the narrator dubs "a lottery" (253), run by their maladjusted fathers, all Jewish boys from four years onward are subjected to rigorous violin lessons with the intent of producing the next Mischa Elman or Jascha Heifetz. Long before the lottery is modified by the adjective "monstrous" (254), the uncanny aspect of these proceedings is brought to the fore as precocious genius is, precisely, *produced*—rather than, say, discovered or nurtured—by Mr. Zagurskii, supervisor of the "wunderkind factory" where "Jewish dwarves" don "lace collars and patent-leather shoes" (253). A child prodigy's success, in the final analysis, relies upon this temporal subterfuge that plays up the prematurity, and not scope or versatility, of his gift, which in a grown-up musician may be dismissed as mere skillfulness. In a masquerade as sartorial as it is economic and chronological, the golem-like products of Zagurskii's factory, trained to provide for their own parents, redirect the audience's attention from the performance of music, perhaps unexceptional by adult standards, to the performance of childhood, whose exceptionality the adult

dress-up vouchsafes. To succeed in being a child, the story suggests through the metaphor of a ubiquitous "lottery," is nothing short of an art.

Not only is this art profoundly, like all arts, unnatural—it also rests "on the bones of little people"; and here, I believe, Babel first intimates a rather fascinating complication to two well-established narratives. The first one is routed through the post-Ariès ian academic landscape, which, informed by the historically justifiable fears of colonizing, usurping, or otherwise prevailing upon children's subjectivity, has been loath to speak of childhood as anything other than a floating signifier for strategic manipulations of affect. Ever since James Kincaid, provocatively and influentially, proclaimed that the "child is not, in itself, anything," the scholarly conversation around the modern child has pivoted on the notions of emblem, fetish, and surrogate.[7] By the same token, this highly manipulable ideal, instituted by the Enlightenment and then steadily perpetuated for many a vicarious pleasure and prohibition, has been repurposed by queer theory as a welcome liminality through which "deconstructing sex, transcending gender, and even achieving social neuter can be performed and fantasized" (Honeyman 170).

Far be it from Babel to dispute that childhood, and Zagurskii's "wunderkind factory" is there to keep him honest, is manufactured with great care and deployed with ulterior motives. However, the foundational "bones of little people" do offer a sly counterpoint to the Kincaidian vision of a child's authenticity as nothing but *objet petit a* of sorts, fueling the maintenance of exchangeable cultural phantasms. This tangible detritus, mentioned in the story's opening passage, seems to lend a somewhat different—neither Ariès ian nor Lacanian, strictly speaking—inflection

[7] For instance, Carolyn Steedman's *Strange Dislocations* (1995) situates the 19th century's ardent communications with childhood alongside psychoanalysis and archival research as the three most effective tools for "personalizing," and therefore recapitulating, irretrievable losses of history. Building upon Steedman's work, Robert Bernstein posits that "children often serve as effigies that substitute uncannily for other, presumably adult, bodies and thus produce a surplus of meaning," and concludes that "by the twentieth century, childhood became an emblem of a lost past, of a lost self, and of memory itself" (204-5).

to Babel's narration of how and why childhood is made. And in his narration, before the convoluted show of overdressed, overperformed, adult-sanctioned childishness begins, the child is not quite "in itself, not anything"—why, it is physically, accessibly *something*; something, as its fertilizing function indicates, organic and fecund.[8] Before it becomes the unobtainable, self-chasing object-cause behind variously modulated desires to appropriate, barter, and stage, childhood is flesh and bone: provable, destructible, desirous in its own right.

The other paradigm already troubled by Babel has to do with childhood as a modernist aesthetics, harnessed for the sake of sensory, linguistic, and epistemological rejuvenation. The "lottery," I think, immediately sets Babel aslant of this received wisdom. If Russian modernism as we know it, and its, in Ginzburg's snappy phrase, "turn from Ivan Ivanych to Vanechka" (22) in particular, has a vested interest in construing, recapturing, and imitating childhood, "Awakening," by introducing the image of children's bones so early on, appears to eye an altogether different array of questions. Indeed, these relics do not want for possibilities of authentication or direct access; the matter of persuasive reproducibility, as shown by the "factory" churning out "Jewish dwarves," seems to be settled as well. What is at issue, however, is a strange resequencing of the timeline, in which the artfulness, and by implication artifice, of childhood must be preceded by the destruction of its natural, uncultured prototype: that embodied, "englobing" childhood in and for itself which, though within reach, is inherently without value.

In his 1936 interview with *Komsomol'skaia Pravda*, Babel lays out an ordered, but not necessarily final, chain of events leading up to artistic accomplishment:

[8] Bernstein's "Childhood as Performance" is a rare example of methodical investigation into how "children and childhood coemerge and co-constitute each other" (211).

> “Литература складывается из трех явлений. Во-первых: действительная жизнь; необходимо знать действительную жизнь. Во-вторых: чтобы эту действительную жизнь забыть. В-третьих: чтобы ее сочинить и чтобы осветить таким ослепительным светом действительную жизнь, чтобы это и была настоящая жизнь” (Goriaeva et al. 529).

> “Literature consists of three phenomena. First of all, real life; one has to know real life. Second of all, this real life has to be forgotten. Third of all, one has to invent life and shine such a blinding light on real life that it becomes a true one.”

Childhood, then, as an illustrative instance of literary creation at large, progresses along similar lines, from acquiring a firm grasp on what is “real” to disposing of that knowledge, no matter how savagely, to fashioning a “truth”—that is, a literary artifact—out of reality’s fossilized remnants. The childhood that emerges from these phases cannot but catch us unawares as Babel renders it, first, at least potentially representable (bound to “deistvitel’naia zhizn’”); then, not worth representing without drastic adult intervention; and, coming full circle, finally integral to the “truthful” kind of artistry, whose “nastoiashchaia zhizn’” is inconceivable unless “reality” has been both profitably examined and resolutely unlearned.

“Awakening” dilates over the temporal snags of its narrator’s attempts to coordinate these processes. His untimeliness in attaining a properly performative childhood is self-reported: “Even though I was too old to become a child prodigy, 13 going on 14, my stature and sickliness allowed me to pass for an eight-year-old” (253). A lack of familiarity with “real life”—a flaw later to be verbalized and derided by his mentor Smolich—is already evinced by his physical infirmity. In

the midst of other children, who are railroaded into reenacting their childishness *e contrario*, through the illegitimate adultness of costume and musical talent, Babel's narrator stands as the true freak of time—an actual "Jewish dwarf," a passing almost-adult surrounded, much to his own discomfort, by "big-headed, freckled children with necks as thin as flower stems" (254). In a fortuitous overlap between the narrator's instinct and the author's conviction, it is surmised that this particular "little person's" frail bones, as it were, are not yet ready to be built upon, because literature, unlike music, does not originate in technique. "There was nothing for me to do in this cult," avers the narrator. "I detected a different prompting ("drugoe vnushenie") in the voices of my ancestors" (254).[9]

So begins his backward drift into the physicality of "deistvitel'naia zhizn'," the mastery of which Babel's manual enjoins all writers to, successively, achieve and renounce. In stark contrast to "In the Basement," where the male members of the narrator's family, even in their writing, denote the outrage of carnality, "Awakening" means by the very same characters all that is *un*natural—writing included. His father, motivated less by money than by pursuit of chimerical fame, coerces him into an untimely "lottery," chronologically belated but artistically premature. More emphatic still is grandfather Leivi-Itskhok, the graphomaniac author of the unfinished (and, by all appearances, unfinishable) epic *Man without a Head*, whose literary compulsions the boy claims to have inherited. An art object unto himself, the grandfather is "the town's laughing-stock and its adornment" (253), generously dispensing expertise on such matters as "why the Jacobins betrayed Robespierre, how artificial silk is produced, how a cesarian section is performed" (note the foxiness with which revolution, that most offensive breach of the natural order of things, shares space here with synthetic fibers and invasive meddling in childbirth). The "different prompting"

[9] For the indebtedness of Babel's writing on childhood to the Jewish tradition, see Carden, Hetényi, and Luplow.

issued by these ancestors is to flee, away from their unsupported, ideational art, which only endures either in infertile continuity (the ongoingly shapeless *Man without a Head*) or in mechanistic reproduction ("the wunderkind factory").

As a matter of fact, the story's dénouement is a confession to that effect: "I was thinking of an escape" (259). But the deed, as befits a temporally skewed narrator, predates the word. In a sort of reverse *Bildung*, the boy has to shed superfluous accretions of culture in order to embrace (and then, as the fundamental "bones of little people" prevent us from forgetting, to bury) unmediated experience. It is small wonder that his path proves a great deal more tortuous than that of the *Bildungsroman* hero. So, before the narrator meets his most helpful, albeit still inadequate, adviser Smolich, he enters the decivilizing precincts of the Odessa port with two other male guides. The first, his classmate Nemanov, is merely entrepreneurial beyond his years, engaging in "the most elaborate commerce in the world" and bullying the narrator into submission to his early onset adulthood ("I obeyed him without a word," 255). Quite obviously, Nemanov, with his preternatural business acumen, has nothing to teach a writer in training, who is out to win back his *tabula rasa*; but one of Nemanov's liaisons, the elderly seaman Trottyburn, does.

In a richly suggestive conflation of artistry with procreation, in general a modernist commonplace but not a little bizarre in chosen imagery, the sailor compares the craft of pipe-carving to the production of offspring: "Gentlemen […], mark my words: children have to be made by one's own hands. Smoking a factory-made pipe is like sticking an enema into one's mouth" (255). To the narrator, these handcrafted pipes are works of art *par excellence*, with "droplets of eternity" lodged in them, each "breathing with poetry" (255). In light of what follows when the boy befriends Smolich, this recipe for artistic success, prescribing autonomous demiurgic creation and connecting it at once to the joint enterprise that is propagation of the species, sounds a bit of a

warning. Before he can participate in the discursive reproduction of childhood in the "dwarf factory," the narrator has to gain (and forego) the immediacy of experience, without which the poetic pipe is but an absurd, mislaid "enema in the mouth." Yet, the locale of such an experience (the port) loses no time in reminding him, through Trottyburn's proxy, that the experience in question is also a kind of reproduction: an artisanship, sure, but one that cannot claim full parthenogenetic self-sufficiency. The tango of creation, where the immediacy of the senses and the mediation of skill coalesce, takes no fewer than two, and it matters little if the children at stake belong to "deistvitel'naia zhizn'" or its "nastoiashchaia" counterpart.

One thing the narrator gets right is that to navigate the experiential waters of nature, he needs a counselor adroit enough in the cultural realm of storytelling, as well. The multi-hyphenate Efim Smolich—raconteur, naturalist, and proofreader for the newspaper *Odesskie Novosti*—rises to the occasion, offering the sickly juvenile swimming lessons. Originally introduced as a local "aquatic god," the man boasts of an intimacy with the sought-for "droplets of eternity" even at the level of physique. "With his copper shoulders, an aged gladiator's head, and slightly bandy legs of bronze" (256), he stands as art incarnate, ever out of season and as close to immortality as human form gets. "I loved that man the way only a boy suffering from hysteria and migraines can love an athlete" (256–267), professes the narrator as the ailments that he elects for self-description, both patently feminine, exacerbate his sense of surrender to the classically chiseled masculinity. And the all-but-timeless artwork of Smolich's body, so proximate to the order of nature, seems to require exactly that from its admirer: a quiet, genuflecting submissiveness ("I never left his side and tried to minister to his needs," 257).

The bartering between the erotic and the literary, which structures all of Babel's narratives of initiation,[10] transpires in Smolich's menagerie, where the narrator, singled out among his peers for his failure to swim, repays his mentor with the manuscript of a tragedy. It is received rather tepidly: "What you're missing is a sense of nature" (257). The mentor's criticism grows harsher still once the boy has flunked his natural science exam, unable to name any plants in his vicinity or at least determine the cardinal directions of sunrise. "And you dare write?" exclaims Smolich in frustration. "A man who doesn't live in nature the way a rock or an animal does won't write two worthwhile lines in his entire life… Your descriptions of nature sound like descriptions of stage decorations" (257). This last piece of opprobrium permits us a glimpse into the artistic particulars of the "tragedy" that we are otherwise debarred from reading. "Descriptions of stage decorations," of course, harken back to Tolstoy's "painted pictures showing trees" in *War and Peace*, as invoked by Viktor Shklovsky to illustrate the effect of estrangement (*Theory* 16). The child's "unnaturally" naïve wordsmithery, then, malfunctions precisely to the extent that it is also unconscious, unearned, and most importantly, ill-timed as it puts the cart of "nastoiashchaia zhizn'" before the horse of *deistvitel'nost'*. What Shklovsky, in his fulsome praise of Babel's ornamentality, dubs "crimson riding breeches and boots of sky-blue leather" ("Romance" 300) is, technically, already present in the boy's sophomoric writing, but its author has yet to take a walk—or, in compliance with the dominant imagery of "Awakening," maybe a swim—in that ornate footwear. Unwitting formalism proves worthless both to the tutor and the story's controlling influence, whom we might as well call Isaac Babel.

In Smolich's atemporal domain populated by animals and soundtracked to joyous, voluntary singing (the opposite of mandatory violin practice), the narrator makes the acquaintance

[10] For an exhaustive anatomy of this interconnectedness, see Yampolsky's and Zholkovsky's *Babel*, especially Chapters 1–2.

of, and dutifully immerses himself in, the corporeal—but hardly masters it. So assiduous is his yielding to the water, an element ruled over by his teacher, that the boy invariably sinks like a rock instead of "living in nature" as one (i.e., floating). Not buoyed by formal control, which he is discouraged from practicing, his pliant sensuality, which Smolich positively encourages, lacks the ossified quality of "little people's bones" that undergirds any successful enactment of childhood. Needless to say, Babel's temporal catch-22 is that no authorial agency can be attained, either, before direct contact with nature, inclusive of sexuality, has been made. The child finds himself in a double bind where nature, bereft of artfulness, is as futile as is art without the propping of sensual savvy.

That Smolich, for all his demonstrable ties to the physical world not at all at variance with his purported literariness, fails to induct his protégé appropriately into the carnal dimensions of "deistvitel'naia zhizn'," is not an idle guess but the story's implicit conclusion. The narrator, ruminating on his own inability to tell the difference between lilac and acacia, wonders: "Where do I find someone ("cheloveka") to explain to me the voices of birds and the names of trees?" (258). By that point, Smolich has already made his exit, forced out by the boy's father, so it is, I believe, only fair to importune the story with the following question: Why, exactly, could not Smolich be that "someone"? Why does the need for a new "escape," presumably not toward the port, close—and at the same time, reopen—the text?

Without insinuating that the grown man in any way reciprocates his underage charge's feelings, I am certain that the narrator's worship of his robust physique, cast in terms of classical antiquity, and his amorously tinged pride in being singled out, and the sexualized offering of a previously untouched manuscript ally to make "the aging gladiator," if not an acknowledgeable object of desire, then at the very least a conduit for what sexuality comprises in the story:

deliverance from the cultural protocols of the family and into that queer bodily unruliness that literature, for Babel, whips into shape. Perfectly at home in the elements as well as endowed, on the face of it, with a knack for words, Smolich may personify, to the besotted adolescent, a matured harmony between raw matter and disciplined form (or, in Babel's own terms applied elsewhere, between color and line).[11] But the narrator's attraction to this unity, on closer inspection, turns out to be faulty, for reasons that add up to an odd unity of their own.

In an aside revealing his sharpness as to the boy's creative shortcomings (and, I would argue, the creative shortcomings of their relationship as a whole), Smolich remarks in reverie: "You have that kind of look… You're not looking anywhere else…" ("Ty vse bol'she nikuda ne smotrish'," 257). Such is the eccentricity of this observation's syntax, isolating the indefinite "anywhere else" from all visible options, that the "look" gets lost, directionless, returned to sender: if the boy is not looking "anywhere else," what *is* he looking at but himself? Taking into account that the "look" is intercepted by none other than Smolich, there appears to arise, in one of the text's most crucial movements, a vexatious commingling between the young narrator's inward gaze, blind to the natural splendor around him, and his ostensibly outward, enamored gaze, exclusive of "anywhere"—that is, anyone—"else." Picking up just where Trottyburn left off with his disclosures of the contiguity between creativity and procreation, Smolich disqualifies himself from any scene where his mentee might be able to look beyond himself, "anywhere else," and see something *different*, because the "escape" for which the child artist yearns would be of necessity foiled by their sameness.

[11] In his probe into this dichotomy from Babel's eponymous story, Victor Erlich writes: "In one sense "Line and Color" is a metaphor for Babel's own art, where the "orgy of color," the "tempests of imagination," the richness and exuberance of imagery are disciplined, hemmed in, held in check by the "line," streamlined into unsurpassed concision and brevity" (*Modernism* 161).

In a conflict not quite concussive but irresolvable nonetheless, Babel pits the optimistic queerness of a child, understood as an abiding effort of imagining oneself "other than," against an imagination hampered by the queer elision of I and not-I. The narrator's initial predicament, in which his artistry was nothing but barren form (line) unless he accessed the corporal "nature" (color), faces its grievous inverse in the infertility of all color and no line, the missing line being one of distinction—which is to say, of gender. By Smolich's own admission, he can lead a queer child to water but he cannot make him swim, for the "deistvitel'naia zhizn'" of homosexual eros, its educational allure notwithstanding, skips that make-or-break moment of recognizing otherness without which no "nastoiashchaia zhizn'"—a correctly sired pipe, a child raised on bones, a work of literature—can ensue. To show in fuller detail how this decidedly anti-Symbolist,[12] though potentially Solovyovian,[13] idea of a narcissistically sterile queer desire is incompatible with Babel's faith in demiurgical creation, let me now turn to this story's companion piece.

1.4. "In the Basement": On Adding Lies, Quoting Men, and Holding Hands with Boys

In 1931, Isaac Babel sends his mother a batch of "pseudo-autobiographical" writings, with a note enclosed: "All the stories are from my childhood years, with lies added ("privrano"), of course, and much that is altered" (qtd. in Freidin's "Question" 228). This arch avowal, mailed, no less, to a firsthand witness of his boyhood, has in equal measure exasperated biographers[14] and

[12] Olga Matich's *Erotic Utopia* (2005) is indispensable for understanding the Russian *fin de siècle*'s unflagging attempts to rechannel reproductive sexuality into artistic grooves. The link between same-sex desire and abstinence in decadent and Symbolist fantasias results in a heightened aesthetic sense.
[13] In his *The Meaning of Love* (1892–94), which exerted a formative influence on the "erotic utopias" of turn-of-the-century Russia, Vladimir Solovyov writes about the "unnatural" futility of same-sex unions as surrogates for a gender-reconciling sexuality: "Friendship between persons of one and the same sex is lacking in the overall difference in form, in qualities which complete each other" (49).
[14] See Patricia Blake's "Researching Babel's Biography: Adventures and Misadventures."

inspired literary scholars like Rebecca Jane Stanton, who finds the grave epistemological disquiet of modernism dramatized most playfully in Babel's "roguish manipulation of the distinctions between autobiographical and fictional narrative" (143). Bridging the author's well-documented propensity for self-mythologizing and the aesthetic value compounded by his narrators' lavish unreliability, the critical consensus on the matter is best captured by Gregory Freidin, to whom Babel appears, in quite the diplomatic understatement, "more concerned with following the spirit of the truth than its letter" ("Isaac" 1892). Concomitantly, Alexander Zholkovsky lists among Babel's central motifs "the supplanting of 'reality' with a felicitous verbal find" ("Toward" 152). Then, in another assessment, Zholkovsky elaborates: "For him, art is not a search for but the creation of truth; not the laying bare of reality but its transformation" (*Babel* 43).

What I would like to do in my analysis of the story whose narrator instantly recommends himself as "a lying boy" (245) is to pivot a little away from the explicit provocation of "lies" and toward the fraught banality of "added" and "altered." Neither of these taciturn verbs seems to bear out Babel's own call to "deistvitel'nuiu zhizn' zabyt'" and *"*ee sochinit'"—nor do they, for that matter, support Zholkovsky's formulae of "supplanting 'reality'" and "creating truth." At best, "adding" and "altering" amounts to a transformative act, but an attentive (and, I hasten to specify, queer) reading of "In the Basement" deepens the irony of Babel's tongue-in-cheek note. It does so, I believe, by suggesting the ideal of a creativity completely unloosened from all external, verifiable reference. In fact, this powerlessness to generate, freely and afresh, is what knits the child and the queer subject together, confining both to "additions" and "alterations."

In typical Babelian fashion, the narrator's friend Mark is introduced via a close-up on a metonymically loaded object: "One day I saw a book about Spinoza in the hands of our top student, Mark Borgman" (245). No less typically Babelian is the undertow of mockery flowing through the

next sentence: “He had just finished it and couldn’t help but to inform the boys around him about the Spanish Inquisition” (245). Though endearing to the older narrator, the ungainly youth’s authoritative cluelessness, conveyed in the verbal pileup of “ne uterpel, chtob ne soobshchit’,” rankles the 12-year-old, who scoffs at Mark’s disquisition as “scholastic babble” and passes judgment with age-mandated peremptoriness: “There was no poetry in Borgman’s words” (245). However, what is strikingly un-Babelian here is effacement of all physical description, never to be made up for in the rest of the story. Faceless and disembodied, apart from the hands that hold the Dutch philosopher’s biography, Mark begins and ends in the synecdoche of a book and remains essentially mute, his sole utterance being a timid “It’s nothing, it’s really nothing…” (252). And as his poetry-free primer on Spinoza makes clear, Mark does not even know what this book is *really* for.

Babel’s tween narrator, conversely, is an expert on books and a novice when it comes to hands. His permanently “inflamed imagination” (245) far outstrips his circumspect involvement in corporeal reality. He contravenes Mark’s abridgement with an impassioned expansion, beyond the factual and into the literary: an operation that he finds both liberating and, less predictably, quite embarrassing. As if shirking the responsibility of full self-possession, the narrator relays how Spinoza’s death “was painted as a battle”; how “it seemed to [him] that Rubens stood at Spinoza’s deathbed”—how, in all, “a lot of [his] own was added to what [he] had read in books” and “[this fantastic tale] was told with enthusiasm” (245). By the time his flight of fancy is complete, we are left with the impression that the narrator *blames* his imagination, the spread of whose “inflammation” he is unable to resist, as much as credits it with having spun a good yarn. In proliferating the passive voice and other indicators of relinquished authorial control such as “it seemed to me,” Babel’s narrator recalls, of course, the original scandal of all fiction—its coercive

injunction to make believe—but, to my mind, the kinship between literature and perjury, so dangerous for a child and so resonantly present in any "pseudo-autobiography," is not his only source of shame.

Consider the following sentence: "My imagination amplified dramatic scenes, altered the endings, steeped the beginnings in more mystery" (245). Once again, what could have been a hymn to the child's gleeful, emancipatory disregard for the facts of Spinoza's life is couched instead in the workmanlike terms of "alterations," the three Russian verbs the picture of humdrum neutrality: "usilivalo", "pereinachivalo", "zaviazyvalo". "Altered" here, among other things, is the sentimental narrative extolling the creative abandon of a child, who resorts to the cute euphemisms of "taking liberties" or "bending the truth" in the name of unlocking his innate artistic potential and nurturing it toward the reminiscing writer's career in *belles-lettres*. This narrative poses a double bind inasmuch as it stipulates that the child be at once unspoiled by technique and instrumental in its formation, but Babel cuts the Gordian knot of prophetic ignorance by admitting that not even his own child-self can write in any consequential sense of the word. Until a form-giving style has been developed, the creative abandon unto itself is more of an unmanageable disease brought on by the "inflamed imagination": "Ya ne vyderzhal i vmeshalsia" (245). It is not for nothing, either, that the narrator's "altered" Amsterdam is a "ghetto" peopled by diamond cutters, processors not generators of material, in league with Smolich the proofreader. Dimly alert to the lack of aliveness in any such quasi-creative editing and trimming, as well as to his own entrapment in mere embellishment, the narrator pictures Rubens casting Spinoza's death mask.

"I read in class, during recess, on my way back home, at night—under the table, hidden by the tablecloth that hung down to the floor" (245), confesses the narrator, unmistakably positing a homology between devouring text and what in Russian goes by the polite term "a child's sin"

(*detskii greh)*. Sending the boy into the throes of "inflamed imagination" (in Peter Constantine's translation, it goes, more bluntly still, "My imagination was always aroused," 18), reading and masturbation, both reprehensibly excessive, also share a solitary setting that no companionship can penetrate. The narrator's fictionalization of Spinoza's life, then, is a poor attempt to rework the inward impulse of creative exploration into the outward fact of an utterance: to give up, in other words, the shameful, masturbatory self-containment of reading for the expansive openness of storytelling. However, the attempt is frustrated by the narrator's unfitness, as yet confusing to himself, to anything exceeding an alteration. Though, at the age of 12, nominally younger, the narrator of "In the Basement" charts another temporal involution to do away now with "deistvitel'naia zhizn'", i.e., the worries of the flesh pursued by his 14-year-old alter ego in "Awakening." His dream of creation *ab nihilo* is such that it should tear him free, not only from the traditional form or confines of believability, but also from his own body, complicit as it is in the formally traditional accretion of experiences, affects, and imperfections. And the mistake of his idealism—an idealism unspoken yet condoned and partaken in by the story on the whole—lies, not in the allegiance to artistry from scratch but, much more pointedly, in the forsaking of the body, seen by the boy only as a burdensome bond with the family (his male relatives, to wit) and disenfranchised as a portal on the otherness of bodies separate from his.

Indeed, it is precisely through Mark's bodily propinquity that the narrator continues his deficient quasi-creation. Once the embellished rendition of Spinoza's life has been shared, Borgman takes him by the arm, and the dull top student's metamorphosis, wrought by the "inflamed imagination," occurs with no announcement of a change of heart: he in whose words until recently "there was no poetry," abruptly comes into possession of a "powerful brain," dismissive of "school learning" and destined for "an amazing scholarly life" (246). In a mercurial

trick of Babel's writing, Mark is swiftly "altered" into a perfect object of love. Still "reserved" and "sober," he complements the narrator as the ideal receiver of his improvements upon fact ("drawn to me because of my knack for distorting everything in the world," 246). Simultaneously, Mark puzzles us with his flair for improvisation ("He didn't prepare for class," 246) and a longing for an escape from the preestablished—such unlikely qualities as are easy to recognize as the narrator's own.

The entire transformation happens through an ellipsis between the fateful walk, arm in arm, and Mark's reemergence as a cross between the narrator's perfect reader and his flattering self-extension. This ellipsis names speaking without so much as hinting at the contents of the spoken: "Proshlo nemnogo vremeni – my sgovorilis'" (246). The verb "sgovorilis'" here is a curiously capacious one inasmuch as it evokes continuation of conversation and an agreement reached, though the former would have been better communicated with "razgovorilis'," and the latter with "dogovorilis'"; whereas its most common meaning, "to conspire," strikes one as, contextually, rather odd. At any rate, a "sgovor"—some kind of growing together through language—has been carried out, allowing the narrator, this self-styled purveyor of "outlandish gibberish" ("Ya tak byl stranen so svoimi bredniami," 246), to funnel his transformative affection into an appreciative boy. Mark Borgman both sets off the narrator's passionate "gibberish" with his "reserve" and "sobriety," and reflects it back in his own presumed dissatisfaction with scholastic tedium and yearnings for "the true book," which he "seeks with ardor" (246). Silent as ever, he consents, within the parameters of their conspiracy, to be interpreted, no matter how contradictorily, and improved upon by means of the narrator's amorous "lies."

Mark's help is enlisted in hopes of promoting the narrator from the autoerotic self-sustenance of reiteration "with lies added" to the full, bilateral sexuality of demiurgic creation.

Before such hopes are dashed in the climax of attempted suicide, this ideal reader remains the narrator's perfect object of desire, too, whose gender gets progressively blurred. Wordless throughout, subject to constant male reinterpretation, generally passive, and admired for that, Mark exhibits many an earmark of Victorian femininity. During his visit to the narrator's home, he even undergoes a gentle diminution: "little Borgman" comes over wearing a "little coat" ("mundirchik," 250); further on, as "little Borgman [gets up]" to leave, he "[crumples] his little peak cap" ("kartuzik," 251). Notoriously varied in meaning, gender nonconformity in Babel ranges from recounting an attraction so illicit that to let it confound *only* heteronormativity would be to do it a favor (e.g., Cossack Savitsky's legs that "looked like girls" in "My First Goose," 49), to enhancing the overall carnival of Odessan exhilaration, where cross-dressing adjoins, for Freidin, "debasement" and "sexual license" ("Tuesday" 202). Something else, however, seems to be in operation here. In his tentative effeminacy, Mark escorts the narrator to the very threshold of gender differentiation, beyond which their queer romance would have taken on a pronounced homosexual clarity. As it stands, his androgyny actually serves to diminish their sexual prospects, and so does his adopted Britishness—the property of a desexualized governess, a Pushkinian "madame Miss Jackson," in whom "madame" and "miss," in effect, cancel each other out.[15]

As opposed to *Red Cavalry*'s Liutov, this narrator is not looking for an excuse to be attracted to someone of the same sex. Rather, by making Mark resemble a girl, he strives for that "blissful union of the male and female natures" which Freud discerns in Da Vinci's paintings *Bacchus* and *John the Baptist*. "It is possible," Freud ventures, "that in these figures Leonardo has denied the unhappiness of his erotic life and has triumphed over it in his art" (74). Babel's narrator's triumph in art, unfortunately, is far from decisive. Mark's genderlessness may

[15] For details on the "English governess" trope in Russian literature, including Alexander Pushkin's "Baryshnia-krest'ianka" (1830), see A.G. Cross.

partially redeem his friend's narcissistic queerness, providing the short-lived reconciliation (in this case, between self and other) that Freud himself struggled to carry off in his definitions of narcissism.[16] What Mark's word-induced genderlessness cannot accomplish is finalizing the narrator's renunciation of the body, on which he believes artistic prowess to depend. The body, the story cautions, always makes a comeback.

Mark's presence, all verbal projection and little to no corporeality (not even in forcible feminization), grants nearness to sex minus the exigencies of sex *per se*. "Altered" so utterly to the narrator's convenience, the Borgman boy is deemed worthy of love to the exact degree that his touch—say, handholding—can be accepted and yet, ignored. And for all practical purposes, what Mark does matters to the narrator considerably more than what he is (that is why his gender identity falls behind the gendered expressions that the narrator, alternately, elicits, disregards, and authorizes himself to inscribe). In the long run, Mark's own relation to the variable specifications of ideal femininity—his susceptibility to the chicanery of all narratives, including that of seduction; his perspicacity as to when physical affection (say, handholding) ought to be initiated, muted, or halted—takes a back seat to his function of bringing the narrator into proximity with the feminine: a closeness both titillating and out of harm's way. At its apogee, such controlled communion involves, not even Mark's own body, whose male anatomy puts an opportune check on the narrator's reactions to it, but a multiplicity of other bodies to which Mark ushers him. The Borgman family's dacha is opulent in more ways than one. Excepting Mark's father, withdrawn from the festivities, this is an Arcadia—and here Odessa remembers its past as an Ancient Greek colony—of virginal heterosexual imagination; a utopia of female flesh as bountiful as it is

[16] "Freud himself never resolved the tension between his contradictory understandings of narcissism as both normal and pathological, as a disposition both found in everyone and seen only in developmentally arrested homosexuals" (Lunbeck 84).

unavailable. Before the narrator so much as arrives on the scene, he envisions the Borgmans' residence as a place where "the bloated banker" has an affair with "a buxom prima donna" (246). Likewise, the initially gender-neutral "guests" at the colonnaded villa, who turn out to be exclusively women, display a fabulous surfeit of physicality:

> "Картежницы и лакомки, неряшливые щеголихи и тайные распутницы с надушенным бельем и большими боками – женщины хлопали черными веерами и ставили золотые. […] Отблески меди тяжелили черные волосы женщин. Искры заката входили в бриллианты – бриллианты, навешанные всюду: в углублениях разъехавшихся грудей, в подкрашенных ушах и на голубоватых припухлых самочьих пальцах" (247).

> "The women—card players and gourmands, both slatternly and foppish, furtive debauchees with wide hips and perfumed undergarments—fluttered their black fans and bet their gold coins. […] The women's black hair grew heavy with the sun's copper sparks. Flashes of sunrise pierced through their diamonds—the diamonds that hung everywhere: in the crevasses of their expansive breasts, from the lightly rouged ears, on the bluish and plump female fingers."

The density of this brief paragraph is nothing less than astonishing. As Babel's portraiture retraces his narrator's lascivious gaze, the spatial trajectory arcing over those bodies also maps out a slow movement through time as the setting sun gradually changes the very textures of the spectacle, only perceivable to the boy's patient bewitchment. From gambling to gluttony, the

women are as rich in vice as they are in paradox: their elegance is somehow unkempt ("neriashlivye shchegolihi"); their depravity, transparent to the spectator, "furtive" to the less bewitched ("tainye rasputnitsy"). Paradox turns uneasy harmony under the imaginative vigilance of lust, which forbears to distinguish between observation and fantasy, so that crude empiricism ("wide hips") accompanies sensual speculation ("perfumed undergarments").

In fact, the sheer capaciousness of lust, especially the kind that cannot lay claim to consummation and spends itself, instead, on the visual and verbal seizure of its object, is enough to accommodate the narrator's own equivocations about this carnal smorgasbord. As in any act of prestidigitation, we would be well advised to watch the fingers in this scene. Fiddling with fans and coins at the beginning, they eventually come to rest, rounding off the entire tableau. While the attribute "samoch'i," derivative of *samka* (a female animal, a bitch), comes across as hardly surprising given Babel's trademark propensity for grotesque physiological exuberance, the disquieting conjunction of "bluish" and "plump" ("pripuhlye") casts a pall over the whole mass of detailed flesh. With a little sleight of hand, the voluptuous is transformed into the cadaverous; the desirable, into the morbid.

What deadens this luxuriant spread of corporeality is, incidentally, what keeps it together: the diamonds. The "buxom prima donna" in the narrator's anticipatory vision receives a necklace from her lover. The female guests' breasts run the risk of sprawling, perhaps even bursting at the seams (*raz"ehat'sia*), unless clasped by jewelry. This exact misfortune befalls the narrator's aunt Bobka, whose "fat, kindly breasts drooped every which way" ("lezhala vo vse storony," 248) and who later waddles in "engulfed by her fat, kindly breasts" ("oblozhennaia svoei tolstoi, dobroi grud'iu," 249). From there, the fastening mechanism of diamonds makes manifest the entire set of nestled ambiguities that precipitate, in the long run, the narrator's attempted suicide. Transfixed

though he may be by the leisurely parade of female sexuality, he divines that in the absence of "diamonds"—paraphernalia of obscene wealth as much as, broadly, cultural inhibitors possessed by Mark's educated, English-speaking family—the flesh overspills and loses its desirability along with cohesion. As a flipside to "Awakening," where sexual attraction to Smolich instantiated the unregulated glut of "nature" that impeded artistry, "In the Basement" catches the narrator in the act of staving off sexuality—this time around, hetero, but still representative of line-deprived color—by the queerness of his "cultural," discarnate flirtations with Mark.

The bare business of unadorned, untrammeled bodies such as the narrator knows at home, and to which Mark will be mortifyingly exposed in due time, fails to arouse him, for "undergarments," in order to acquire erotic value, must be "perfumed." And yet, with nothing more than a handful of adjectives (*odutlovatyi*, *pripuhlyi*) and a similarly "curvy" verb ("My heart swelled with the cheer and ease of others people's wealth," 247), Babel makes sure that the irony of his narrator's attraction is not lost on us. The civilizing veneer with which this mode of sexuality is overlaid also renders what seemed rotund, somewhat pathologically puffy. Loosely translated into the terms of literary production, the narrator's demiurgic aspirations—to beget words, to give flesh to the disembodied, to write without precedent—square off against his ill-preparedness to reckon with the obstinance of all embodiment, least of all his own. As a burgeoning writer, he has to bridle the rampant animation of creativity/sexuality without reducing it to the "bluish fingers" of respectable, cultured, and ultimately, *in*animate re-creation of form (a conundrum not unfamiliar to the reader of "Awakening").

The narrator knows that Mark has to be inveigled into his literary project, lest it stall at the onanistic stage of embellished reiteration, reader- and characterless. But how does one seduce *around* the body? Caught up in the swells of ambivalent sexuality that courses through the dacha

scene, the narrator makes up his mind to repay his alleged coconspirator (they had, after all, "sgovorilis'," or so he imagines) for all "this endless splendor" (247). So as to retain the upper hand—as author, seducer, man—he invites Mark to the conventional wooing ritual of "meet the parents." Much to the narrator's chagrin, the "endless splendor" of his family is not at all braced by any "diamonds" of cultural capital. He realizes that a loan will have to be taken out to make the payment; a tall tale will have to be told to match Mark's silent spectacle.

Before his unseemly grandfather and uncle are physically banished, only to return with a vengeance, they are neutralized narratively. Witness the unrevealed obscenity that, according to the narrator, would have done nothing but hinder his body-shy courtship:

> "У нас и пьяницы были в роду, у нас соблазняли генеральских дочерей и, не довезши до границы, бросали, у нас дед подделывал подписи и сочинял для брошенных жен шантажные письма" (248).

> "There were drunks in our clan, my ancestors had run away with generals' daughters and then abandoned them before crossing the border, and my grandfather had forged signatures and written letters of blackmail on behalf of the abandoned wives."

This stuff of family legend, filled to overbrimming with sexual exploits and sensationalized intrigue, is too much like aunt Bobka's drooping breasts, so indecently in excess of their lawful form. During another walk the two friends take, now hand in hand, the narrator, enticed by Mark's touch, sure enough, but even more so by his own detachment from it, chooses to pay him in kind.

In exchange for the women whose fleshiness, both piquantly flaunted and safely immobilized, installed them in the *durée* of an unfulfillable promise, he gives him men housed in an atemporal, heroic past:

> "Тогда я сказал Марку, что хоть у нас в доме все по-другому, но дед Лейви-Ицхок и мой дядька объездили весь свет и испытали тысячи приключений. […] Сознание невозможного тотчас же оставило меня, я провел дядьку Вольфа сквозь русско-турецкую войну – в Александрию, в Египет" (247).

> "So, I told Mark that although things back at my place were different, my grandfather Leivi-Itskhok and my uncle had traveled the whole world over and had thousands of adventures under their belts. […] Within seconds, I lost all sense of reality, and took Uncle Volf from the Russian-Turkish War to Alexandria and Egypt."

As one war comes to substitute for another, and museum displaces bedlam, the work of losing "all sense of reality" is still cut out for him. Retreating from the pressing urgency of sexual interaction into time immemorial, the narrator edits the visceral, erotically prolific experiences of these "absurd, inarticulate people, with gnarled noses, pimpled heads, and lopsided asses" to the point where they, too, become cadavers of "bluish fingers" and "rouged ears." In a miscalculation bordering on misprision, the storyteller does not let go of his reader's hand as he gesticulates wildly, and registers Mark's "quivering" (247) in willful ignorance. Ostensibly being told for

Mark's benefit but leaving his "male" fingers unaccounted for, the story ends up recited, in essence, in front of a mirror. The narrator's narcissistic libido does not stand a chance of dispatching itself to an outside object as long as he keeps believing that his "quivering" companion prefers Alexandria and Egypt to the drunken anecdotes of seduction and abandonment. By the same rationale, he is doomed to someone else's bookish, ungratifying "adventures" in lieu of his own literature until he concedes that the Borgmans of this world flock to him, precisely, for flesh unfastened by diamonds—for the kind of physical overabundance that his incriminating male relatives, with "rags wrapped around their swollen legs" (248), epitomize and chronicle in formless novels.

Borgman is welcomed into a house whose very architectural contours bear the mark of its inhabitants' corporal intemperance in "the hump of the corridor floor" ("po gorbatomu polu koridora," 249). True to form, the narrator picks out of his home's material cornucopia those "curios" ("dikoviny") that, to varying degrees, signify containment: a handmade clock, a keg of shoe polish, grammar books and anthologies of ancient Jewish lore, all of which, in his opinion, should greatly impress his "reserved" and "sober" guest. Similarly, the main show of *Julius Caesar* that he puts on unfolds as a study in borrowed high culture, customized to dazzle the little Anglophile, but the remark that the narrator inserts of his own volition—"So Antony begins his game"—throws into question just how childishly oblivious he is to the monologue's famed prevarications. In selecting the queerest play in Shakespeare's *oeuvre*, and Borgman's namesake, Marc Antony, of all its characters, and this particular speech, tailored to dissemble the speaker's true intentions from the start ("to bury Caesar, not to praise him"), may it be that the narrator is now telling a story that only Mark can comprehend in full, between the lines ecstatically delivered? Viewed as his double, Mark would know that the refrain "Brutus is an honorable man" hides in

plain sight neither more nor less than *dis*honor; and that there subsists between the coconspirators Cassius and Brutus a love one ought not to "presume too much upon" (113); and that Portia, in this scheme of things, is always relegated to "the suburbs" of her husband's "good pleasure" (70): a suburb also known as sex. The trouble with Mark, however, is that he is as much the narrator's double as he is his protégé, identical and inferior at the same time. As he follows longingly the gestures of the orator's hands, rather than the solemn plot, he seems unable to grasp that his namesake is Caesar's underling, while Brutus is his equal, but that does not mean that the omitted lines "My heart is in the coffin there with Caesar/And I must pause till it come back to me" have not been written.

And that is not all that the narrator omits. A Roman riot still erupts, despite his best efforts, for the body, it bears repeating, never fails to make a comeback, no matter how secure its sequestration. Against his host's wishes to conceal and contain, Mark gets what he came there for, and as is often the case with sex, finds himself unprepared to deal with the fulfilment of desire. English theater deteriorates into Odessan carnival as the ousted "ancestors" burst back in, befouling the ritual of measured Shakespearian oration. The performance of civilization, co-authored by the narrator and his aunt, is laid waste to by a shock of beastly carnality, armed with deer antlers, "lion's jaws," and "dog mouths" (250–251). Helpless to shout down, with his unenlivening, neutered quotations ("I was dead, and I screamed"), this intrusion of flesh, violence, and generative virility, the narrator decides to drown himself in a barrel of water. His ultimate helplessness, however, divulges itself not so much in this suicidal evasion of nature's unceremonious preponderance as in the two images he spots meanwhile. After the first dip, the boy sees a cat, an animal indifferent to his drama of a disembodied artistry beyond attainment. After the second, he sees the one alternative: himself.

As mentioned earlier in this chapter, Val Vinokur ascribes to Babel a "childish inquisitiveness" that allows for "glimpsing the world in its otherness" (677)—a testament to the persistence of associations between childhood and literary innovation. Yet, the two stories discussed above acquaint us with a child—a Russian modernist one, mind you—who does precious little of what we have come to expect from him. By dwelling on how these aspirant narrators confront, and capitulate before, the challenges of authorship, I notice a child who repeatedly falls short of Babel's instruction to "invent life" and "make it true"; an incapacitated child whose inchoate writing is sterilized by his estrangement from sexuality but also not at all vivified by the occasional brush with eros. As the boy in "Awakening" asserts, his life as a child is spent "nailed to Gemara" (256), so it is from this immobility of complementarity, commentary, and revision that he seeks to escape into the Platonic ideal of a demiurge who crafts formalized worlds out of raw matter, rather than from prior forms. Dismayingly, both stories doubt the possibility of any such creation that would only be enriched by the "little people's bones" of experience, and never not imitative of and beholden to them. More dismaying yet is Babel's braiding-together of queer sensibility, artistic limitation, and epistemological tunnel vision. Whichever version of queerness we adhere to, whether it be Efim Smolich's generous offerings of nature or Mark Borgman's idiomatic exception to nature's language, the queer child just cannot win as his gaze—a lover's and a writer's—remains riveted to his own self, if duplicated in the other ("with lies added, of course").

That the young men in Babel's narratives of sexual initiation do achieve intercourse through demiurgically mature storytelling, on the one hand, gives us an inkling that the obstacles of childhood and queerness can be overcome. In "My First Fee," for instance, the narrator buys a prostitute's good graces with a complete fabrication, not culled in the slightest from his

biographical data; and in “Guy de Maupassant,” the erstwhile translator and proofreader enchants a woman with a fiction that amazes even himself. On the other hand, the latter’s escapade is, quite literally, interrupted by another man’s writings as Maupassant’s collected works tumble over his head, and the former’s invention is a queer one, painting him as a catamite abused by older men. Both, in point of fact, narrate their childhood—a state of unproductive restriction that no autonomous artist can ever seem to shake; and a queer state that refuses to be straightened out once and for all.

II. "An Incredibly Funny Relation": Margarita Barskaia's Queer Formalism

Thanks to a recent upsurge of interest among Russian film critics, and particularly through the Herculean effort mounted by the *Chapaev.media* online archive,[17] Margarita Barskaia's sole surviving feature, *Torn Boots* ("Rvanye bashmaki," 1933), can now be studied in the fullness of context, including contemporaneous reviews, the filmmaker's candid diaries, and extensive notes on her unorthodox methods of working with child actors. By pairing a close reading of the film with those ephemera, I aim in this chapter to analyze Barskaia's cohesive, albeit tragically truncated, artistic project as fraught with aesthetic, political, and sexual unease, central to which is the figure of the queer child. This figure's combined effects permit me, not only to trace lingering vestiges of the 1920s avantgarde in *Torn Boots*' somewhat vexed socialist realism, but also to propose possible connections—a crisscross of conceptual affinities, perhaps, in lieu of a proper genealogy—between Russian formalism and queer sensibility.

By "formalism" here I mean more than the compound of readerly tactics embroiled, to borrow Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's rueful phrase, in "the devalued and near obsolescent New Critical skill of imaginative close reading" (*Touching* 145). Devalued or not, formalist approaches have since been assiduously marshaled to resist the inhibitory predeterminations of "biographical imperative" and to engage, in the spirit of wayward receptivity, with "the imagistic suggestiveness of [the] lexicon" (Savoy 103). However, while tactically convenient, as a larger strategy formalism—tellingly, all but interchangeable to many Western audiences with New Criticism—remains suspect in queer academic circles, hampered as it is by its reputation to obfuscate the text's

[17] Additionally, Natal'ia Miloserdova's monograph entitled, simply, *Barskaia* inaugurated in November 2019 the *F-Kino* book series on female filmmakers, launched by the Saint-Petersburg-based *Seans* film magazine.

historical specificity in favor of something so quaint as art for art's sake.[18] A not insignificant amount of scholarship has set itself to the mighty task of repoliticizing the Russian ground zero of formalist criticism, whose own "historical specificity," we might note parenthetically, did not leave it too apolitical for too long.[19] Drumming up more uses still for a comprehensive aesthetic system that defined art by its "exclusion from everyday life" and "lack of practical application" (Eichenbaum 16) is not among my goals. Instead, I extend to queer theory, as it emerged in the English-speaking academy in the 1990s, an invitation to an exact juncture in Soviet history where the sway held by politics first became so wide-ranging, and its rulings on artistry so unforgiving, that "imagistic suggestiveness"—queer theory's coin of the realm, lest we forget—could no longer survive any contact with any political program at all. *Torn Boots*, a film set in one dawning totalitarian regime and made under another, dramatizes this impasse all too perfectly.

In affixing the adjective "queer" to the intimacy between the film's central children, as well as to the aesthetics that limn it, I cleave to the canonically Foucauldian understanding of the term as an aversion to legibility, with utilization being legibility's constant adjunct. However, as I contend that *Torn Boots* associates childhood with queerness, both of them with art, and politics with death to all three, I do not seek to enfold children in Lee Edelman's notorious "unassimilable excess" ("Ever After" 114) or "inescapable antagonism that no utopianism transcends" ("The Subject" 821)—i.e., in a negative politics in its own right. Nor am I foolhardy enough to attempt to sunder completely queer theory's vernacular obsessions with form from the political ambition that orients them in what Michael Warner dubs "the world-making project of queer life" (139). My intention, rather, is to reinforce art's capacity as refuge from the omnipresence of political

[18] See, e.g., William J. Simmons' "Notes on Queer Formalism."
[19] For some of the most brilliant attempts to challenge the commonly held view of Viktor Shklovsky's estrangement as withdrawal from politics and/or ethics, see Erlich (1965), Boym (1998), Kalinin, Striedter, and Vatulescu.

recruitment, and to do so in a concrete historical moment when art's uncompromising uselessness, envisioned by the Russian formalists in the previous decades, tried to cohabitate with the stern dictates of political utility. It is in *Torn Boots*' concealments, loopholes, and inner frictions that I catch sight of a peculiar queer lesson. Though apolitical–antipolitical, even—by definition, the film's aesthetics may do queer theory a good turn in suggesting certain *styles* of cheating the Foucauldian discursive cooptation "to become," through aesthetic contemplation and faithless mimicry rather than through revolutionary overhaul, "again what we never were" (*Hermeneutics* 95).

2.1. The "Funhouse Mirror" of Failed Mimesis

Originally trained as an actress, Barskaia spent the 1920s modeling (most notably, for Alexander Grinberg, who specialized in erotica and was later arrested on pornography charges), playing "breeches roles" (*travesti*) at theatres in Baku and Odessa, and dabbling in film, her on-screen résumé ranging from Alexander Dovzhenko's "Iagodka liubvi" (1926) to her then-husband Piotr Chardynin's "General s togo sveta" (1925; presumed lost), in which she appeared as a shoeshine boy. Upon moving to Moscow, Barskaia spearheaded the founding of a film council at the People's Commissariat for Education, and instituted a "children's section" at ARRK (The Revolutionary Cinema Workers' Association), all the while penning impassioned articles that lamented the state of children's cinema in the country and called for urgent bureaucratic intervention. Her first directorial outing, "Who Matters Most, What's Needed Most" ("Kto vazhnee, chto nuzhnee")—a highly experimental, partially animated educational short about, of

all things, the processing of grain—landed Barskaia a job with Mezhrabpomfil'm,[20] the wealthiest and most technologically advanced Soviet studio at the time.

Her feature-length debut *Torn Boots* took two years to complete, during which time Barskaia, already avoided by many as an unapologetic troublemaker and looked down upon as Chardynin's protégé, was repeatedly reprimanded, threatened with termination, and driven to a nervous breakdown that required hospitalization. When it finally came out in December 1933, the movie nevertheless enjoyed rapturous reception both at home and abroad, garnering near-unanimous acclaim from the likes of Lev Kassil' and Maxim Gorky. However, Barskaia's follow-up *Father and Son* ("Otets i syn," 1936), vetted at first by the Komsomol Central Committee and well-timed to accompany the Sovnarkom's 1935 decree "On Liquidating Homelessness and Neglect among Children," met with virulent criticism, in large part due to her affair with the recently arrested Karl Radek, against whom she had refused to testify. Heavily reedited, *Father and Son* was then excoriated as "barefaced Trotskyist libel" ("obnazhennyi trotskistskii paskvil'") (qtd. in Hillig), and Barskaia found herself indefinitely shunned from the filmmaking community. After several years in limbo, and having lost her one high-ranking defender, educator Anton Makarenko,[21] Margarita Barskaia committed suicide in 1939. No obituaries were published; in one of her last diary entries, she refers to herself as "civically dead": "Ia – grazhdanskii mertvets" ("Nashe vremia").[22]

[20] Home to the first synchronized sound system in the USSR (Tagefon), Mezhrabpomfil'm was behind Nikolai Ekk's *Road to Life* ("Putiovka v zhizn'," 1931), the tale of a group of troubled adolescents reformed through manual labor in a commune-like environment (a robust pedagogical motif of the Soviet 1920s). In the mid-30s, thanks in no small part to Barskaia's own petitions, the studio was transformed into Soiuzdetfil'm, and eventually, after WWII, into the iconic Gorky Film Studio, practically synonymous with "young adult" Soviet filmmaking.

[21] Shortly before his death, Makarenko cowrote with Barskaia a script for the film adaptation of his novel *Flags on the Battlements*. When he demanded that she be hired to direct it, the officials reportedly replied, "Anyone but Barskaia!"

[22] Anna Akhmatova, reminiscing about the same era, reproduces this figure of speech almost verbatim: "Between 1925–1939, I couldn't get anything published at all. It was the first time I witnessed my own civic death" (28).

Father and Son has not been preserved in its entirety and screened in public only once, in an abridged version with no sound, so all conjecture as to its sudden political incorrectness has to draw upon the film's screenplay and the minutes of several Soiuzdetfil'm kangaroo courts held between May 10th and 16th in 1937. For a story of filial love undone by the father's overzealousness in his professional duties,[23] the invective hurled by Barskaia's colleagues seems par for the course: "fundamentally depraved" ("porochna v svoei osnove"); "nefarious" ("vrednaia"); "not an iota of art" ("ni gramma iskusstva"). Throughout the transcripts, an emphasis is placed on the film's dearth of verisimilitude, which, in the logic of socialist realism, immediately and irreversibly strips it of all artistic value. The presupposed "fundamental depravity" of the author herself, then, may be imputed to bad company (Karl Radek's pernicious influence), or to a vague ideological malevolence propelling her toward "defamation" ("poklep"), or even to a sadistic sense of humor ("a disguised joke in poor taste"/"zavualirovannaia nehoroshaia hohma").

At any rate, the Moscow in the movie "is unlike our Moscow" ("ne pohozhaia na nashu Moskvu"), and the apartments dotting this forgery are all "terribly unrealistic" ("uzhasno nepravdopodobnye"), throwing *Father and Son* as a whole "out of alignment with Soviet reality" ("razlad s sovetskoi deistvitel'nost'iu") (all qtd. in Hillig). Whether deliberate or not, Barskaia's inaccuracies betray a deep-seated inability to portray—i.e., to discern and anticipate—"reality in its revolutionary development,"[24] while her irredeemable lack of attunement to the party line is intuitively, yet unmistakably, detected by her perspicacious peers. In the end, her cinematic Moscow simply *feels wrong*, presenting a mimetic failure and thus, a lapse from art.

[23] The full synopsis is available in the Chapaev.media online archive: https://chapaev.media/films/94

[24] This catchphrase comes from Andrei Zhdanov's oft-quoted speech at the 1934 Soviet Writers Congress: "In the first place, it means knowing life so as to be able to depict it truthfully in works of art, not to depict it in a dead, scholastic way, not simply as 'objective reality,' but to depict reality in its revolutionary development" (21). The formula is intimately connected, then, to futurity, of which children ought to be symbolic; Barskaia's film perilously lacks this connection.

The print media soon followed suit as *Iskusstvo Kino* indicted Barskaia for "distorting our Soviet reality in a funhouse mirror" (Zamkovoi), and *Komsomol'skaia Pravda* ran a review that reads almost ecstatic in its condemnatory ardor. As such, it is worth quoting at length:

> "Что это? Бред? Ложь?.. Нужно питать отвращение к детям, нужно ненавидеть жизнь, чтобы придумать такую непередаваемую ложь. Точно маньяк настойчиво и последовательно стремиться оболгать все, что попадало в поле его зрения. Семья, школа, завод, строительство, люди, дети, улицы, дома, воздух — все в картине становится мрачным, тусклым, безрадостным, теряет свет, краски, наливается тупой, каменной тяжестью... Этой антихудожественной, отвратительно-лживой картине не может быть места на советском экране" (Bachelis).

> "What is it? Delirium? Lies?.. One needs to be disgusted by children and hate life itself to invent a lie so indescribable. As though a maniac were striving, persistently and consistently, to slander everything in sight. The family, school, factory, construction sites, people, children, streets, houses, air—everything in the picture grows bleak, without luster or joy, loses light and color, laden with a dull, stony heaviness... This anti-artistic, disgustingly deceitful motion picture doesn't belong on the Soviet screen."

Even if we assume good Aristotelean faith on behalf of these critics, allowing for art's freedom from the truth as long as it is beholden to probability or necessity (*eikós* or *ananke*),[25] the movie's "fundamental depravity" appears here to stretch beyond Barskaia's unwillingness (or powerlessness) to tap into the repertoire of the plausible as encapsulated by the will of the people. In claiming an upsetting reaction from the gut, as well as an unpleasant, especially for a writer, loss for words, the *Komsomol'skaia Pravda* reviewer both washes his hands of analysis (the "lie," after all, is "indescribable") and accuses the failed mimesis of *Father and Son*, already improbable and/or unnecessary, of a flaw most foul: it leaves the viewer "without joy"—unpurged, robbed of catharsis. The reviewer's choice to frame his dissatisfaction as "disgust," a feeling scarcely detachable from the body, indicates an absence of catharsis both in Aristotelean and Platonic terms.[26]

"Everything in the picture," the review contends, "[is] laden with a dull, stony heaviness," rendering the film too blunt an instrument to carry out the delicate operation of tragic pleasure. All the "funhouse-mirror distortions" could have been pardonable had Barskaia, in compliance with *The Poetics*, aroused pity and fear without their concomitant negative affect. But as it stands, the uncleansed critic is cheated out of his rightful mimetic compensations: he feels *lied to*. The artistic design's disloyalty to Soviet reality—to that loose ontological weave of things as they are, should, and will be, verifiable mostly after and through the fact of violation—in this case adds insult to injury by being non-cathartic in execution. Without any such improving purpose to ameliorate its deviation from plausibility, the film is cast then, to use Aristotle's dichotomy, as "monstrous"

[25] "Since the poet, like the painter or any other image-maker, is a mimetic artist, he must in any particular instance use mimesis to portray one of three objects: the sort of things which were or are the case; the sort of things which men say or think to be the case; the sort of things that should be the case" (*Poetica* 61).

[26] In classics scholar Paul Monaghan's neat summary, "Just as the pure Mind of God is incorporeal and without weight, so a person who experiences *catharsis* will (temporarily) lose the weight of his own corporeality and approximate pure Mind—at least as much as possible for humanity" (97). Similarly, for Plato catharsis entails "the release of the soul from the chains of the body" (199).

rather than "terrible" or "pitiful" (25). A work of fiction degenerates into an "anti-artistic" falsehood.

In short, Margarita Barskaia "lies" twice: first, when she passes off her individual distorted view as a shared (actual, possible, desirable, impending, "revolutionarily developing," etc.) reality; and second, when she refuses to grace her inauthentic "funhouse mirror" with aesthetic motivation (elevation of the spirit via the pain of untruth). However, the frenzied joy with which the film critic relishes, as well as precipitates, his quarry's fall from grace—all the abundant superlatives and extravagant metaphors; compulsive, stuttering repetitions in diction; overblown punctuation—telegraphs to me a visceral response far exceeding the perceived moral repugnancy of Barskaia's misconduct as a socialist realist. In fact, the beleaguered *Father and Son* strikes the writer as so "disgustingly deceitful" that Barskaia herself, in a move of what Martha Nussbaum terms "projective disgust,"[27] ends up repulsed by children and hateful of life—the culprit in the ultimate apostasy. Since children emblematize life at its least adulterated, Barskaia is doubly morbid, her impaired faculties debarring her both from appreciation of the empirically available world and from preparation for the coming, artistically foreseeable one. However, since children also serve as her primary subject matter, Barskaia provokes additional disgust as a hater of art, this hatred being a corollary, of course, to her deathly misalignment with Soviet reality. The reasoning, to sum up, unrolls as follows: incapable of seeing the world in the correct grain and frustrated by this deficiency, she has no other recourse but to fabricate; "anti-artistic" at heart, she then reneges on the promise of catharsis built into the mimetic enterprise; the viewer, as a result, gains neither truth nor beauty.

[27] "Projective disgust rarely has any reliable connection with genuine danger. It feeds on fantasy, and engineers subordination. Although it does serve a deep-seated human need—the need to represent oneself as pure and others as dirty—this is a n eed whose relation to social fairness looks (and is) highly questionable" (16).

A proportionate emotion on the part of the *Komsomol'skaia Pravda* criticaster would be, to my mind, indignation, disdain, or anger, and yet he feels, keenly and reiteratively, nothing but *disgust*—that physical discomfort which, following Julia Kristeva's notion of the abject, accompanies the panicked maintenance of some porous border. The more stridently the disgusted foreswears the disgusting, the more revealing his admission that what ought to stay without has already slunk inside. According to Kristeva, close contact with abjection, fearful though it might be, also brings about an experience of *jouissance*: "One does not know it, one does not desire it, one joys in it [*on en jouit*]. Violently and painfully" (9). Inasmuch as art is a "means of *purifying* the abject" (Kristeva 17), its aim appears not too dissimilar from the protective workings of disgust as both grapple with the traumatic breakdown of meaning marked by abjection. The denouncer of Barskaia's film, on finding it meaninglessly, and therefore revoltingly, impure, proceeds to push it out of the Stalinist Symbolic order: as it "doesn't belong on the Soviet screen," so it must be expelled back into that perverse, life-defying space where even children elicit disgust. In doing so, however, he cannot help but doubt the safety of his own inclusion in the well-regulated Soviet body; nor can he conceal, as evident from the hyperbolic gusto of his style, that his disgust and fear of exclusion verge at times on captivation.

To venture that an upstanding journalist was "secretly" fascinated by a disgraced filmmaker would be, to say the least, naïve, but I do want, for the purposes of my further inquiry, to emphasize a few instances of Barskaia's persecutors' rather shrewd insight into her artistic goals and methods. First, by dwelling so relentlessly, and in the *Komsomol'skaia Pravda* pan, almost agonizingly, on her deceitfulness, her detractors point, no matter how clumsily, to a nagging, not easily resolvable preoccupation with authenticity and lack thereof that undergirds *Torn Boots*. Second, strangely absent from the extant chastisements, all of them coincident with the first anti-

formalist campaign unleashed in 1936, is the actual charge of formalism—an omission that, as I hope to show in what follows, testifies to Barskaia's success as a kind of clandestine formalist herself. And third, by projecting onto the filmmaker a "disgust with children," bound up in the same allegation with a "hatred of life," *Father and Son*'s most clamorous censure reevaluates that film's precursor with a beguiling degree of astuteness, insofar as *Torn Boots* intentionally distances itself from the inartistic, "monstrous" (rather than "terrible") children, and with them from the "disgusting" intractability of unmediated life. However, the mediations of political meaning-making, in my reading of the film, prove ruinous both to art's technique and to life itself.

2.2. "So Believable, So Good"? Excesses of Authenticity

Set in a thinly veiled approximation of Germany during the Nazi ascendancy, *Torn Boots* tells the story of a factory strike undermined by scabs, policemen, and fascist-leaning capitalists, but eventually victorious against all odds. A group of children in their early teens, indifferent at first, join their fathers' movement in due time, as soon as the rhetoric of proletarian emancipation brings forth the realization that "the young comrades" addressed in speeches "are us" (54:33). Parallel to the main—at least nominally—narrative run the considerably more trivial adventures of Bubbi and Emma, a pair of latchkey kids about three-four years old. Things come to a head during the workers' march when a policeman shoots Bubbi, the wearer of his brother's titular hand-me-downs, to death. In an epilogue that predates by three years the similarly jubilant finale of Grigori Aleksandrov's *Circus* (1936), newsreel footage merges with staged sequences to play up the validity of the final dedication: "To you, the revolution's third generation. To you, the young pioneers" (1:19:41–1:20:01).

In a mirror-like (and not without, as I argue, its own "funhouse" curvature) reversal of the aspersions cast on *Father and Son*, the reviews of *Torn Boots* across the board praised Barskaia for the utmost authenticity of her depictions. With a single-minded tenacity nearing autosuggestion, *The New York Times* and *Sovetskoe Iskusstvo* alike lauded the portrayed children's untrained easefulness, the former ascribing to them "a startling sense of realism" (Nurenberg 4), the latter raising the epistemological stakes to an overall "astonishing truthfulness" ("neobychainaia pravdivost'") (Kaufman, qtd. in Hersonskii). Literary luminaries, as disparate otherwise as Romain Rolland and Georgy Adamovich, echoed the sentiment in unison, each crediting the director with a breakthrough past the boundaries of the imaginable: "The realism here […] is excellent to a degree I couldn't previously envision" (qtd. in Miloserdova 132); "A miracle was performed by that person who made [the children] forget about the camera" ("Boots"). The officially broadcast audience response concurred. Katia Babantseva, the head of some high-school student committee or other (*uchkom*), voiced the Soviet youngsters' collective admiration from the pages of *Komsomol'skaia Pravda*: "Everything is so believable, so good ("tak vse pravdopodobno, tak horosho"), it makes you want to go to Germany and fight there alongside the German proletarian kids, in their midst" (qtd. in Hersonskii). The "good," we are made to understand, is twofold. Through the artful machinations of believability ("pravdopodobie"), the film affords us the instant pleasures of recognition as a series of mimetic triumphs build toward the catharsis of Bubbi's sacrificial death. His suffering, and thus our own, is alleviated then by the Aristotelean necessity of a tragic dénouement, generating in the viewer a state of *energeia*—that uplifting discharge that galvanizes her to the higher pursuit of continuous class struggle. In a word, by killing the cute preschooler with a stray bullet, the Barskaia of *Torn Boots*, as opposed to the one of its much-maligned sequel, proves that she *did*, after all, love life, and was *not* "disgusted by children."

The uniformity of these assessments signals to me more than the emergent socialist realist art's unpreparedness to appreciate itself in categories outside of truth and its faintly aestheticized cognate, lifelikeness. Instead of dismissing their language of authenticity altogether, I propose to look at it as an attempt to reckon with the film's odd, anxiety-inducing surplus, suspect both in its supposed origins and ramifications. On the one hand, this critical reckoning normalizes what I call *excesses of authenticity* by reducing them to a manageable, appropriate verisimilitude, in which the children are purported to "forget about the camera" and "live" on the screen in accordance with the laws of external reality. On the other hand, the critics do display a gnawing awareness of a certain breach in this unproblematic, mimetically smooth "living" as they attach to the normalized some quite abnormal qualifiers: "startling" and "astonishing"; "[realistic] to a degree I couldn't previously envision"; "a miracle was performed." Even Katia Babantseva's rousing catharsis, as it implies enough "believability" to lend "goodness" to a child's death, carries the movie's excessiveness over to her own excited speech, culminating in a pleonasm: "alongside the German proletarian kids, in their midst."[28]

Another open secret kept by the critical consensus is that the seemingly auxiliary children, Bubbi and Emma, eclipsed in *Torn Boots* the politically affiliated, older ones. Although the teenage activists do take up most of the running time, no characters of note are picked out of their undifferentiated, predominantly nameless mass, fit for a march but hardly for drama. Even Bubbi's brother Theo, whom the narrative, to all appearances, grooms for an instructive transformation from fence-sitter to enthusiast, loiters in the sidelines as his classmates participate in the strike. More importantly still, the fungible "young comrades," woodenly reciting slogans from memory

[28] My contention is substantiated by much more recent writings on *Torn Boots*, too. See, for instance, Evgenii Margolit's article, which argues that the child actors' lived-in performances attenuate the overt melodrama of Bubbi's death, fighting, as it were, fire with fire: "The scene's expressionistic strain ("ekspressionistskii nadryv") was removed by the perfect organicity of the children's acting" ("Kak v zerkale").

and, on occasion, reading them out loud from leaflets, cannot take any credit for the "unimaginable believability" attributed to the performances. As a matter of fact, in her own tutorial Barskaia explicitly warns against mistaking children for trainable dramatic actors: "At best, [the child] will just parrot the words back; he'll be rigid, mannered, and insincere" ("skovan, maneren i fal'shiv") ("O rabote"). Though numerous and instrumental in the plot development, the "acting" teenagers are, effectively, secondary to the two "living" rug-rats, upon whom the "miracle" of "forgetting about the camera" is allegedly wrought.

The reason they are lumped together in the realism-lauding reviews is quite clear: "useless" apart from the boy's ritual slaughter, Bubbi and Emma occupy themselves by playing, collecting junk, singing, and rubbernecking, and yet it is them that the movie without doubt privileges, whether in structure (it is both bookended and interspersed with memorable games); in grammar (most of its close-ups are reserved for them); or, for that matter, in dramatic impact (why could not a more ideologically mature youth die for the cause?). As though determined to sever all potential lifelines, Barskaia eliminates every trace of political "usefulness" in their behavior as she, for instance, inserts Emma, literally bored to tears, into the scene of a strike committee meeting (19:50), or has the villainous, cigar-smoking capitalist stiff a mustachioed old lady rather than Bubbi, who scavenges in the same junkyard (28:10–28:50). Bubbi's accidental death, too, runs counter in its essence to the metanarrative of children's martyrdom, best exemplified by Pavlik Morozov's myth.[29]

[29] As Liubov' Arkus, film critic and founder of the *Chapaev.media* archive, succinctly puts it, "If [children in Stalinist cinema] weren't performing heroic deeds, they were mostly busy dreaming of doing it" ("Adventures"). On the crystallization of the Soviet child martyr archetype, molded by the vestigial mythology of the Civil War, see: Olga Kucherenko's thorough survey *Little Soldiers: How Soviet Children Went to War, 1941-1945*, and Catriona Kelly's case study *Comrade Pavlik: The Rise and Fall of a Soviet Boy Hero.*

By cloistering, until the very end, Bubbi and Emma away from the main plot, *Torn Boots* throws the seeming authenticity of their on-screen existence into sharp relief. The illusion of unscripted spontaneity wields such power that critics young and old conflate, promiscuously and symptomatically, realism with the realistic, truthfulness with believability, persuasive imitation with recorded fact. That the handful of Bubbi and Emma's scenes feel natural and lifelike, brought to prominence by a cunning contrast with the adult's and teenagers' flagrant overacting, exempts Barskaia from the charge of formalism. However, to dodge its dialectical counterpart in socialist realism—the transgression of *dokumentalizm*, or, in keeping with Gorky's dictum, failure to "pluck the fact of its inessential plumage"—the natural feel must intimate at least some artificiality. In order to hit the sweet mimetic spot, a work of art ought to reference the outside world under the terms of partial autonomy, lest it devolve into either uncathartic spectacularity or what Aristotle would deem unpoetic "natural philosophy" (the former known in Soviet idiom as "otorvannost' ot zhizni"; the latter, to continue with Gorky's vocabulary, "reverence for the fact").[30] Tasked with this dual imperative, Barskaia had to devise a film that contained neither too much art nor too much life, since complete artistic immanence (formalism), according to the Stalinist rubrics, was no less abject than a complete lack of mediation (*dokumentalizm*). Moreover, life unfiltered through the right kind of artistry would have invited accusations of deceit (as *Father and Son* did).

An inkling of just how deftly Barskaia navigated this interpenetration of self-avowed artifice and mandated recognizability can be found in another review, written for *Sovetskoe Kino* (1934, vol. 1–2) by her most hesitant admirer, Hrisanf Hersonskii:

[30] "A fact is still not the whole truth; it is merely the raw material from which the real truth of art must be smelted or extracted—the chicken must not be roasted with its feathers. This, however, is precisely what reverence for the facts results in—the accidental and inessential are mixed with the essential and typical. We must learn to pluck the fact of its inessential plumage" (qtd. in Groys 54).

> "[…] любовь к изображаемым детям у Барской уже кое-где переходит в любование ими. Отсюда начинает появляться сентиментализм, в задушевную теплоту фильмы вкрадывается надуманность, нарочитость. Еще немного, и вот-вот начнется совсем неприятная фальшь."
>
> "Barskaia's love for the portrayed children at times tips over into empty reveling in them. Hence sentimentalism; the film's heartfelt warmth is encroached upon by contrivedness, ostentation. One false move, and utterly unpleasant artificiality will begin."

Seen through Hersonskii's eyes, *Torn Boots* teases the formalist edge without ever crossing the line into the inadmissible, and Barskaia's affective investment in her child characters (and, by extension, in the performers "living" on camera) both nudges the film toward "ostentation" and stops it short of falsity. Intended though it is to damn the director with faint praise, the text, in spite of itself, pays tribute to Barskaia as an adroit explorer of the threshold between artfulness and "unpleasant artificiality." Her immoderate "love for the portrayed children" is inflected here, not as maternal per se (that would have entailed a forgiving blindness to formal imperfections) but, rather, as a superfluity of an artist's attention to her own work ("pustoe liubovanie")—the original sin of formalism.[31] What exonerates Barskaia is that she knows how to keep her love under control, safeguarding "heartfelt warmth" against the encroachments of "contrivedness," however

[31] In his review of Miloserdova's monograph, Margolit goes so far as to pinpoint Barskaia's "uniqueness of cinematic vision" at the perspectival intersection of a child's and a mother's gazes, the former insatiably curious, the latter permanently worried ("Third Route"). The filmmaker's diary, however, couches her creativity in terms that are more reminiscent of decadent imaginings (Zinaida Gippius', for example) of poetry as a life-giving substitution for motherhood: "So this is how, as it turns out, childless women transform the instinct of procreation" (qtd. in Miloserdova 104).

indicative this process may be of affection's "disgusting" proximity to affectation. She knows, for Hersonskii, when her "love" is to be amplified, so as to verify the children's artistic provenance, and when it is to be withdrawn to let formlessness and effortlessness balance out that dubious proliferation of form of which other critics appear willfully ignorant.

When I argue that *Torn Boots* deals in intentional excesses of authenticity, fashioning an artistic device out of the device's camouflaged, and thus the more conspicuous, absence, my argument arises precisely from the meeting point of the critical texts I have discussed above. As the adulatory chorus of "so believable, so good" singles out an ideologically worthless—outside of martyrology, that is—pair of children and senses in their artless self-presentation some unsavory formalist wiles (a suspicion that the writers' frenzied prose strives to hyperbolize away), so Hersonskii's reservations betray his uncanny understanding of Barskaia's concealment of a device laid bare. By telling his reader what the film is saved from doing, he alludes to what it, in fact, brilliantly achieves: as she maneuvers between the Scylla of formalism and Charybdis of *dokumentalizm*, Barskaia renegotiates the Aristotelean pact of art's partial autonomy from reality, deploying her children's exaggerated, emphatic authenticity as nothing less than the prime signifier of artifice. Bubbi and Emma, in other words, are made much too realistic to be, merely, real.

While the "so believable, so good" chorus is mildly discomfited by *Torn Boots*' not-quite-nameable infractions against the elusive mimetic integrity of nascent socialist realism, Hersonskii's article defends these infractions on purely ideological grounds. Barskaia's children, it continues, neither imitate adults nor languish in a world of their own, fused instead in an "organic, inextricable unity between adults and children" ("organicheskoe, nerazryvnoe edinstvo vzroslyh i detei")—a fluctuating continuum of the working class. Roughly translated, her artistry is neither "reverential to facts" nor captive to the immanence of form but partially autonomous, if

on occasion too enamored of the extremes. This idea of intergenerational political continuity in *Torn Boots* has over the years received its share of theoretical sophistication, most prominently in Emma Widdis' *Socialist Senses*, which frames child's play itself as a form of utopian revolutionary consciousness, a kind of low-tech version of Walter Benjamin's innervation (308–310). And yet, such "unifying" visions, whether celebratory (Hersonskii), cautiously optimistic (Widdis), or wary of any and all politicization of childhood (Jamie Miller, Marina Kolbakova), seem to treat the film's children as a monolith, transferring Bubbi's and Emma's characteristics onto the teenagers and vice versa, while disregarding the former pair's careful isolation from the latter. In deference to the film's structural arrangements and stylistic idiosyncrasies, I would like to offer a reading of the scenes featuring the prepubescent and "prepolitical" kids as a formally accomplished world apart. By scrutinizing their subplot, I intend to articulate the film's queer childhood as an obliquely installed alternative to an adolescence that merges, in "organic unity," with adulthood; to the inevitability of political and sexual affiliation; to temperate authenticity and mimetic plausibility.

2.3. "I Don't Want My Place": Misuse and Misattribution in the Games Of Art

Torn Boots opens on a bunch of children, all of them obviously at the lower end of the age range advertised in the credits ("15 months to 13 years old"), engrossed in play. The rules of their games are never explicitly verbalized, but the first audible piece of dialogue, "Let's agree/make an arrangement…" ("Davaite uslovimsia…"), ushers the viewer into a strictly regimented situation. Amidst the heavy shadows of chiaroscuro lighting popularized by German Expressionism, the kids reenact dismal scenes from adult life. A quarrelsome "storeowner" refuses to put any more groceries on the tab for a destitute "mother of 20"; a bespectacled, incessantly

beaming "doctor" receives "patients," one of them complaining of pains in his "ears, eyes, nose, mouth, stomach, and liver" all at once (1:04–4:48). Over about four minutes of running time, we are led to believe that the reality of "somewhere out West" (as per the title card) is so grim that it necessitates somber expressionistic visuals, and the ubiquity of hardship is conveyed in the children's metonymic adjacency to it.

These games, however, are not illustrative metonymies through and through, as we soon realize. One of the "patients," during her "checkup," breaks character for a second to blow into the upturned klaxon that her "doctor" uses for a stethoscope (Fig.1–2). "You can't do it," he berates her then. "You have diphtheria!" (4:12–4:20). The main—which is to say, adult—narrative impels the children to such copying of grown-up rituals centered around poverty and disease: their play must be, in a word, made *useful* inasmuch as it renders social commentary all the more poignant. And yet, as Johan Huizinga helpfully reminds us, assignment of extrinsic value to play is as pervasive as it is off the mark: "All these hypotheses have one thing in common: they all start from the assumption that play must serve something which is *not* play" (2). Within the partial autonomy of play, as in art, the realism of external metonymic contiguity ought to be diffused through a metaphorical distance generated internally. This is where the children's unclarified rulebook comes in, its "agreements" and "arrangements," worked out before the cameras started rolling, stipulating a particular code of conduct that, we assume, mandates exaggeration (the unbelievable twenty dependents and ailments of every organ in the body); precise blocking (the "doctor" choreographs his "patients" in space); and what Huizinga calls the ascription of "a secondary meaning of 'for fun,' 'not seriously'" (29–33).

"Play creates a separate sphere by neutralizing the [ordinary] world in a limited way," adds Peter McDonald in his reading of Huizinga, "but this requires the player to be capable of bracketing

the demands of the world on the play sphere" (258). Itself a toy meant to be played with appropriately, in a harmless and, ideally, edifying imitation of adulthood, the klaxon in the hands of Barskaia's children becomes something that it only remotely resembles in shape (a stethoscope), kept silent and therefore altogether divorced from its permissible instrumentality of sonic amusement. Though mobilized by the overarching narrative as a small contribution to the film's overt political statement, insofar as it helps to "diagnose" a social ill, this object grows, as it were, skeptical of its own function once the girl reveals it. The klaxon's "secondary, for-fun meaning," invented by the children independently and beyond the rational prescriptions of "forced play" (McDonald 258), must be sustained by all inhabitants of this formalized setting. When the plaything is momentarily upset by the girl's attempt to put it to its original use, the "secondary meaning" is immediately restored by the "doctor," who concocts an explanation for his injunction within the parameters of the game: infected with diphtheria, the renegade "patient" is not allowed to strain her lungs.

Fig. 1: The Physical

Fig. 2: The Violation

In one of his numerous etymological forays, Huizinga traces play's defining attributes—"lightness, tension and uncertainty as to the outcome, orderly alternation, free choice"—back to "Plato's conjecture that the origin of play lies in the need of all young creatures, animal and human, to leap" (37). As shown in the opening scene of *Torn Boots*, Barskaia's children play, not only in illustration of their German parents' privations under national socialism, but also—primarily, even—in perpetuation of a certain metaphorical *leap*, positioning artistry at a remove from reality and jealously guarding that remove. While the chiaroscuro of the scene may very well illuminate societal contrasts, and the children themselves may reenact, with the imposed didacticism of a fable, some imperfectly overheard scenarios of adulthood, the game to which the viewer is privy obeys its own, self-sufficient motivations. The quotation marks around the game's objects and participants must at all times be subtly, but doggedly, present. To stop the "doctor" from becoming a doctor, the boy who plays him keeps smiling through his invariably terrible diagnoses, rejoicing in the metaphor (his klaxon "is," but is not really, a stethoscope) and oblivious of the metonymy (the colorfully acted-out maladies are a synecdoche for proto-Nazi Germany's moral decay).

Since the klaxon returns in a few other pivotal scenes and establishes itself as a sort of privileged totem of Barskaia's play sphere, I believe it warrants additional consideration. After all, the object in question is a toy *by design*—and one, at that, which in Roland Barthes' nomenclature "offer[s] dynamic forms," as opposed to the static ones that "*literally* prefigure the world of adult functions" (*Mythologies* 53). And yet, its intended usage as a toy is expressly prohibited by the gamemaster; its counterinstrumentality is doubled through the fictional, quotation-mark-enclosed pseudoutility of a "stethoscope." Barskaia operates in managed excess as she both enlarges her object's repository of meanings, by liberating the klaxon from its direct function, and limits the free play of signification—Huizinga's "tensions" and "uncertainties"—by circumscribing its

semantic transformations in accordance with the rules of the game (the "orderly alternation"). The provision that the klaxon remain unacknowledged for what it so glaringly is—a toy—accentuates the object's play- and, by extension, artfulness, much like the children's stammering speech, full of garbled lines and trailed-off sentences, and punctuated by sidelong glances, creates an illusion of authenticity at the cost of heightening its own illusory aspect. The girl blowing the horn alerts us to the fact that what we see is an overperformance at heart; that the medium in *Torn Boots* cannot ever be fully transparent; that Barskaia's project may very well involve various productions and inflations of authenticity, but hardly its unquestioning, life-size mimicry.

Reared in the avantgarde ethos, though not married to it,[32] the director herself puts a formalist *sdvig* ("dislocation") into the very core of her artistic temperament. "I hate 'right places' ("svoi mesta")," she snaps in her diary. "Nothing is more disgusting ("protivnee") than a thing in its right place. […] My mother says everyone should know their place ("svoe mesto"). But I don't want my place. I want some other" (qtd. in Miloserdova 30). Any sense of appropriateness, adequacy, direct correspondence, or commensurability thus hits too close to abject home, triggering off the defenses of disgust. What is more, a mere inversion of the natural order—say, a child building a precious scale model of grown-up realities for an adult's knowing eyes—does not suffice, either. So, the game detailed above overextends itself and harmonizes with the players' excessive, fourth-wall-breaking, mimesis-sabotaging naturalism. From its opening scene onward, *Torn Boots* is in breach of both visions of normative childhood, whether it be one of palatably independent purity or one of miniaturized adulthood. Instead of "being themselves" as dictated by the former ideal, or rehearsing their own future selfhood in obeisance to the latter, these kids act

[32] In his article "Assembling Eisenstein's Horse" ("Sobiraia loshad' Eizenshteina"), Oleg Kovalov details Barskaia's ambivalent attraction to Cubism and the avantgarde cinema, which never strayed too far from mockery in her proclamations ("Those directors competed against each other in showing the most ordinary horse, for instance, in the most whimsical fashion"), and yet endured in her own, frequently fragmented, cinematic forms.

out their roles too believably for comfort, riveting our attention upon the disinterested artifice of their make-believe. The places that they occupy are not theirs by any natural law: they are assigned by the unnatural decree of aesthetic choice.

Just how intentional and meticulous Barskaia was in her staging of authenticity is evident from her own writings. "Effortlessness (*neprinuzhdennost'*)," she jots down in a diary entry, "is the best way of keeping a distance between people" (qtd. in Miloserdova 461). The children's behaviors on screen, oddly, deceptively, and unsettlingly "authentic" by dint of artistic errancy, were stimulated by an on-set analogue: the establishment of what the filmmaker called "an incredibly funny relation between me and the child" ("On Working"), equidistant from uninvolved observation, traditional directing, or emotional incitement oftentimes resorted to in children's cinema. It was, rather, a game in which the child performers themselves became more toys than players—or better yet, where the borderline between player and toy kept fluctuating. Barskaia formulates her pursuit as follows: "To master a child's vocabulary and motions. To master a child's essence ("ovladet' detskim estestvom") and to learn to reproduce it" ("On Working"). Not to capture, she underscores, but to master; not to preserve but to reproduce. Meant as vehicle for an aesthetic experience that is not containable in unadorned reality, this child of hers parses into movement, speech, and gaze (no mention is made of emotionality or psychology). All the above is indirectly manipulated then through "provocative remarks" and "mimic prompting" (*mimicheskoe suflerstvo*)—a game of almost-Pavlovian reflexes that breaks the semantic ties between cause and effect, subject and predicate. For instance, in the scene of Bubbi rejoicing in the mechanical wonders of a toy store, the boy playing him is not unlike an apparatus himself: the toys were spliced into the scene in postproduction, whereas on set he had been instructed to try and pinch the director's nose, and clapped his hands gleefully whenever she let him. The footage

of his glee was afterwards remotivated by editing it together with the shots of toys. Another one of Barskaia's operative terms is "plastic folklore": "A normal grownup's plasticity is limited. A child's plasticity, however, is excessive, oftentimes with no logic behind it. It is precisely this excess of accumulated muscle energy, expended in flamboyant ("vychurnykh") and almost incessant motions, that I call plastic folklore." Once again, the notion of excess comes into play as Barskaia fantasizes about harnessing a child's natural, over-the-top mobility and lending it to the logic of her film, wholly unrelated to the child's own intentions or emotions (all the examples are taken from her article "O rabote s rebenkom v kino").

Unless the playing children estrange the protocols of their own cultural circulation, the "semantic features," to use Shklovsky's term ("Poetry and Prose" 177), or "transitive-practical speech," to use Eichenbaum's ("Problems" 16)[33], will continue to prevail in spite of our best interpretive intentions. However, once we begin to assess the movie's central children as, primarily, means for intransitive and impractical aesthetic ends that have little to do with the adults' ethical comportment, the entirety of Barskaia's endeavor comes into a much cleaner focus. Its overarching formalist objective can be located then in complicating something so insufferably simple—and so infinitely instrumentalizable—as a child's lack of affectation; in decontextualizing poetically the fundamental pragmatics of childhood; and in advancing a rather queer amendment to the formalist technique.

Visual homologies to Barskaia's conceptual stakes are spread out across *Torn Boots.* Before the totemic klaxon reemerges, the viewer is introduced to Bubbi's destitute family at dinner, when his father announces that he has been laid off. Heartbroken, the mother spills the

[33] Eichenbaum is adamant that cinema's primary task is to decontextualize pragmatics, prioritizing what in poetry is called "intransitive-artistic speech" as opposed to "transitive-practical speech" ("intranzitivno-hudozhestvennaia rech'" vs. "tranzitivno-prakticheskaia").

soup, lapped up by a kitten, and starts sobbing. Bubbi, meanwhile, misinterprets her despondency and assumes that she is crying over wasted food (7:45–8:10; Fig. 3). The next scene transports us next door, to their well-off, conformist neighbors, and comes to a climax as the neighbors' corpulent son Peter picks a hole in a sack of sugar and lets it trickle into his mouth (10:35–11:20; Fig. 4). Finally, in the movie's gruesome finale, a stray bullet from the parade, at which Bubbi will soon be killed, buzzes into Emma's apartment and punctures a pot of boiling milk, letting the liquid out in a picturesque stream (1:14:49–1:15:05; Fig. 5).

Fig. 3: Spilled Soup

Fig. 4: Peter's Sugar

Fig. 5: Milk from a Bullet

While the first episode does designate a social theme with an emotional emphasis laid upon it, the spilled soup is at once taken up by Bubbi as an occasion for misattributed affect. In continuation of the formalist games from the prologue, the political interpellation issued by the scene is muffled again by a child's imaginative denial of an object's functionality. The dripping soup, to which Barskaia's camera cuts away, is evaluated as an aesthetically and affectively valuable *mistake*, establishing a Shklovskian artistic basis of "incongruity between thought or feeling and its setting" (*Theory* 130). Thus, political commentary is insinuated but held beneath the scene's concern. Immediately following this dramatic leakage is the satirical spillage of sugar

in the ideologically malfeasant household, so the formal rhyme between the two overshadows all vicissitudes of content: even though the spilled soup indicates tragic depletion in Bubbi's family, and the spilled sugar comically points up an immoral accumulation of resources, Barskaia's formal decisions frame—and visually equate—the two as, first and foremost, movements of matter, as dynamic texture, and as calls to inadequate responses. Bubbi's misunderstanding of his parents' socially determined crisis mirrors the rotund Peter's propensity for unmotivated overabundance, posited as an end unto itself. The third scene in this series of excess revisits a lot of the benchmarks previously touched upon: misapplication of a functional object (a stray bullet hitting an innocuous household item); climactic resolution of tension through an outpouring of some viscous substance, filmed in a vivid close-up; a child's gleeful misprision. Silhouetted against, rather than obscured by, the socio-political critique around it, what Eichenbaum dubs "self-contained play with details" (738)—and whose disappearance he bemoans in the advent of socialist realist filmmaking without naming the latter—hijacks the movie and jolts the viewer by bleeding rapidly into that "someone else's place" which Barskaia chases. In all three, the lull of continuity editing is electrified into "a sense of anticipation" by "isolating moments of play"—the principle by which montage cinema, according to Shklovsky's "On Laws of Film," stands and falls (251).

This tussle between "adult" narrative exigencies—to put a word on it, the themes—and formalist "childishness"—the self-sustaining artistic devices—animates a number of other scenes in *Torn Boots*. For instance, it is in the spirit of pure, unjustifiable play that Peter hoodwinks—with a "fokus," a magic trick—Bubbi's brother out of a sandwich right after the equally needless theft of sugar (12:40–13:02). Instead of undergoing any appreciable reeducation, Peter remains unchanged throughout the film and cuts, in spite of his petite bourgeois background, a rather sympathetic figure. In his tireless inventiveness, ill-motivated playfulness, and poetic readiness to

rattle off a rhymed rejoinder to any censure, the boy makes a game out of adult behavior, as opposed to the "political" children "monstrously" inhabiting adulthood in earnest. An example of such inartistic imitation would actually be Bubbi's brother Theo as he tries to beat Peter with a belt, inflicting paternal humiliation rather than, say, engage in a peer-to-peer fistfight (13:40–14:00). While a host of adult villains, including Peter's philistine parents, schoolteachers, and clergymen, repeatedly infantilize all revolutionary activities, the weighty scene of children first affiliating themselves to the class struggle adds a few wrinkles to our, perhaps all too idealistic, elision of child and revolutionary (an elision that permeates, not only the Soviet *preemstvennost' pokolenii* and the regenerative bloom of an evergreen country, but also, for instance, Widdis' interpretation of *Torn Boots* that links youthful ingenuity to the vigor of adult activism).[34]

What critics from Hersonskii to Widdis perceive as a naturally conditioned continuity, and I think ought to be read as an artistically, and thus artificially, created lesion in the narrative's overt pronouncements, is marked by the viewer's first entrance into the school—that most convenient of societal microcosms, where fictional children are enlisted to occupy most unwaveringly "their places" in reference to adults. At the outset, Theo's classmates filter into the classroom, each bringing along a live animal for a large-scale prank that they want to pull on their despotic teacher. However, as the menagerie is gradually built up a dispute arises between the Young Pioneers, who report on the dire straits of their Soviet counterparts, and the Scouts, an organization by then long outlawed (since 1922) in the Soviet Union. The former beseech their peers to join, as responsible proto-adults would, the imminent strike ("an important affair"); the latter insist they go through, instead, with the "mischief" ("shalost'") (35:10–37:49).

[34] Miloserdova, shunting the same conversation onto a biographical track, writes: "[Barskaia] welcomed the change of power mainly because it freed her from the school she hated" (53).

The two sides deliberate the expediency of their prank versus the potentially world-altering event of a strike. The prank, it is decided, "won't lead to anything." Of the students' many stilted exchanges, all a far cry from Bubbi's and Emma's artfully naturalistic babble, one stabs out in particular: "Do you know what 'obstruction' means?"–"And what do you want me to *do with this word*?" The sheer pragmatism of these children, consumed by the tangible results of their play and the *doing* of something with words, unifies communists and fascists alike, in a space where, as their pastor drones out censoriously, "everyone should be where they belong." In the ensuing brawl, the politically conscious Young Pioneers win out on paper, having crushed the "apolitical" (which is to say, swastika-wearing) minority, but "mischief" carries the day on film (49:40–52:25). Disjointed limbs flicker in sped-up montages; the moving mouths do not line up with the sound; the ink from a knocked-over inkwell smears the surfaces and fighters' faces in a complete abdication of its sensible calling to be written with. Even Theo, who previously attempted to educate Peter with a fatherly belt, now pounds clownishly with a globe on the rather spheric miscreant, engendering a sort of geometrical slapstick. By way of all this anarchic mayhem, arrayed in Barskaia's formalist flourishes, a "useless" childhood hitherto repressed returns with the fierceness of those prank-bound animals, some as exotically unlikely as tropical snakes, that leap out of their hiding places to create an oxymoronic incongruity.

If we were to interpret the scene, through Widdis' optics, as revolutionary violence joyfully unleashed, we would have on our hands a revolution flanked by two acts of its deliberate evasion, both brimming with joy. In the preceding one, Bubbi is window-shopping for toys and wandering around town, which prevents his brother from getting to school on time (he is wearing the only pair of boots). In the one that follows, we see children splashing about in the water—a pastime they have to forsake to support the strike. Pushed by Barskaia to the defamiliarizing extreme of

showing actual animals, the release of animalistic vibrancy paints revolution as aesthetically viable only to the extent that it renounces its own pragmatic goals, and as cessation of play otherwise. Either way, the carnivalesque flurry of role-reversal owes its estrangement of reality to impermanence. The Young Pioneers, having celebrated their Pyrrhic victory with one last time of being young and strange, carry on with adult-aping rhetorical clichés for the rest of the film. Putting a fine point on how ineluctably all political ferment petrifies into obduracy, a drum is used by the marchers to transmit a handwritten message instead of producing music (1:10:04): a repurposing that augments utility and boosts language's conventional communicativeness.

2.4. The Funny Relations

In a gesture that disaffiliates, criminally but rather furtively, the political avantgarde from its artistic twin,[35] *Torn Boots* relegates pure play to the younger children, unseduced as they are by politics and unconscripted into ideological valorization except through the final claim of an arbitrary, involuntary, and "useful" death. The film's most prolific artists are Emma, who cries with boredom at the proletarian rally, and Bubbi, who finds a better use for Theo's shoes than wearing them to school, that battlefield for children's prized allegiances. The klaxon totem—a toy discreetly but perceptibly in excess of its own toyness—reappears then at the most childish of places chosen as school's replacement: the city dump, which houses a staggering assortment of non-utilizable objects. Though he technically "works" there as a scrap collector, routinely withheld payments absolve Bubbi's meanderings of any conceivable practicality, thrusting him instead into a perpetual exploratory adventure, akin to that sojourn in the city center which takes him to a toy

[35] In John Roberts' trenchant recapitulation, the avantgarde is "the recurring name we give to art's long and embattled intimacy with the revolutionary tradition itself" (482).

shop and, once again, away from the ideological summons of schooling. The motley crew of people rummaging the heaps of garbage alongside Bubbi match their finds in agnosticism of purpose as their bodies—prepubescent, elderly, or disabled—stitch together a patchwork of impossible recuperation. Falling outside of the usual orthodoxies of productive, able, adult citizenry, an old person who cannot age back meets here an invalid who cannot be healed and children who cannot attain to any gainful futurity—the queer coupling of Bubbi and Emma. And it is under the commonality of the klaxon that Barskaia's preferred childhood, the most remunerative in aesthetic dividends and least comparable to, or "organically united" with, adulthood, is driven home.

Already endowed with a playful counterinstrumentality in the opening scene, the film's talismanic object resurfaces as Emma wanders the junkyard and extemporizes yet another game. This time, the game is motherhood: the girl picks up the klaxon and hides it under her dress to form a visible bump (28:51–29:05; Fig. 6). Much later, in the penultimate sequence, the "embryo" she carried has already been "born," now swaddled and nursed by Emma in the vicinity of her actual mother (1:10:40–1:11:38; Fig. 7). As the workers' march advances right outside, jarringly crosscut with this locus of creatively doubled domesticity, the klaxon is rapidly drained of its added "for-fun meaning" and sobered into proper functionality by the brewing storm of political meaning-making that will soon sweep Bubbi up. As if reprising on screen Barskaia's off-screen methods of indirect provocation, the girl applies pressure to make her "baby" "cry," thereby perpetrating a slight but crucial infringement of the terms established in the children's play sphere. Though quickly reinstated in its status as a ridiculous "infant," one to be rocked and soothed, the klaxon forfeits its artistically appointed difference from itself by having made a noise—that is, by having slid, if momentarily, back into its "right place." The gathering forces of revolution eventually envelop both of the kids as Bubbi, murdered by the fascist gendarmes and laid up on a

bed, receives his eulogy in the shape of Emma's question: "You don't want to play anymore, do you?" It is also at this funereal moment that the klaxon is appealed to, at last, by its rightful (and thus, imagination-stifling) name, "gudochek" (a little horn) (1:16:50–1:18:10; Fig. 8).

Fig. 6: The Klaxon Pregnancy

Fig. 7: The Mothers

Fig. 8: "Gudochek"

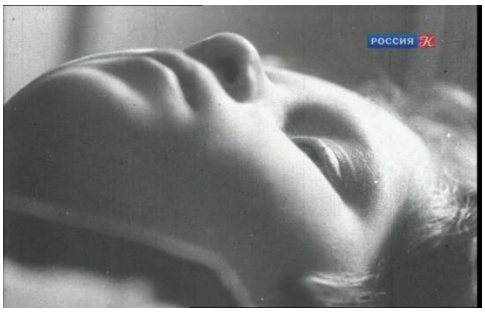

Fig. 9: Not Playing Anymore

By telegraphing through these minuscule details a whole confluence of interrelated "deaths"—the termination of play, the abrupt impoverishment of language, the breakup of a childishly alchemized "family"—the film careens away from the propagandistic simplicity of Bubbi's "useful" slaughter as seen by the "so believable, so good" doctrinaires. Barskaia juxtaposes childhood against politics as temporally and ontologically incompatible entities: in a

manner of speaking, the latter for her is the afterlife of the former. A child must die before it can signify, and the "deadly" occurrences coterminous with Bubbi's physical demise, all of which index a certain exhaustion of the children's artistic resources, leave room for speculation as to how far its symbolism may be taken—as, for instance, an evaluation, and not exactly an oracular one by 1933, of the infantile Soviet avantgarde lethally growing up toward socialist realist maturity. At any rate, Barskaia's last formal quirk dots all the i's and crosses all the t's in the fatal disjuncture between adult signification and art's puerile insignificance as Bubbi's corpse, hoisted on a makeshift altar, is given over to the viewer in a freezeframe, letting on how the imposition of extraneous political value halts no less than the very motion of a motion picture (Fig. 9).

Up until its final disruption by revolution, art perseveres through childhood as Bubbi, whom the ranks of *Roter Frontkämpferbund* cannot take alive, marches down the street in imitation of the protesters. Much like the boy misrecognizes a situation of mortal danger for a massive game of cops and robbers, the viewer is misled by Barskaia's dramatic overhead shot that sets the stage for Bubbi's putatively self-sacrificial faceoff with a trigger-happy riot squad (1:13:37–1:14:05; Fig. 10). In that instant, the film seems to admit to its own complicity in proving the Katia Babantsevas right, insofar as it belies, by means of framing, the devotions of a child *en route* to a friend's house, rather than on a suicide mission. Far from a grimace of heroic ardor, his smile, too, attests exclusively to a game well played, acknowledging the artistic success of his vivacious strut being so similar to the adults' lockstep in execution, and yet so different from it in intent. The policemen's violent reaction also stems from a misrecognition of a sort, but, unlike Bubbi's playful emptying out of an action oversaturated with meaning, theirs is a failure to countenance the meaninglessness of a child's performance art, and the boy's posthumous beatification in and by the communist rationale, to which *Torn Boots* itself knowingly contributes, repeats this failure. To

distinguish, therefore, between clashing political loyalties within the film's bounds is to ignore, not only how unsurprisingly consonant ascendant Stalinism and national socialism are in commandeering childhood, but how deeply embedded violence is in the conferral of purpose on all that evades it. Manifesting in any number of ways, from the general totalitarian infatuation with utility to socialist realism's murderous intolerance of pure form, the political, per *Torn Boots*, intrinsically means an exhortation to mean—or else.

The dirge with which Emma laments Bubbi's death is a Young Pioneer staple about "the red flag on a white staff/to be carried by the bravest" (the lyrics were published in *Murzilka*, the flagship magazine for Soviet preschoolers). Conversely, in the scene of their utmost intimacy (21:29–23:43), the two do a disarmingly off-key duet of "The cat has four legs…"—the anthem of all post-Civil War street urchins, popularized, with slightly changed verses, first by Belykh's and Panteleyev's reform-school novel *The Republic of ShKID* (1926), then, on an even larger scale, by its 1966 screen adaptation. As ever in thrall to the disparities between error as a poetic resource and as a deadening consequence of political overinterpretation, Barskaia etches another arc that brings her children from dynamic artistry—the dilettantish performance of a mercurial folk song at odds with the rest of the scene—to the immobility of Bubbi as he lies in state, recruited at last and subjected to the grotesque ritual of *otpevanie* with a socialist rah-rah chant. Barskaia's gambit here consists in showing revolution, and by proxy the rampant politicization of artistic production and assessment, as a force that purports to upend but only, in the end, restores "the right places," smoothing over the "funhouse mirror" of representation and eradicating non-equivalence instead of inequality. When turned upside down, Bubbi the singing gamin—an artist, or a pretender by any other name—faces us the right side up, in his true "revolutionary development": as a dead martyr.

What exact modalities of togetherness, childhood, and art are killed off by the depredations of politics, understood here as an antimetaphoric but hypervigilant explanatory absolutism, can be gleaned from the duet scene mentioned above, climactic as it is to Bubbi and Emma's queer romance. The scene unfolds in a deserted port whose space, freed up by the longshoremen on strike, has been taken over by the children, similarly to the way Barskaia reappropriates the setting of Eisenstein's *The Battleship Potemkin* so that the nested significances of the latter—the sailors' mutiny as synecdoche for the 1905 Revolution as synecdoche for revolution writ large—dissolve in placid, sun-dappled seascapes, which put one in mind of Yasujiro Ozu's "pillow shots."[36] Now the port, blissfully evacuated, plays host to the children's secret affections bathed in halo-like glare (Fig. 11). After each lyrical distraction, the camera returns to Bubbi and Emma, placed for the first time in a frame next to each other, the boy's arm wrapped around the girl's shoulder; they kiss before long. Of course, the categorical contingency of "boy" and "girl" is taken the measure of by these two indeterminate figures: he long-haired and clad in something like an apron, she sporting a buzzcut, both speaking in nearly identical voices. The presumptive asexuality of childhood, as Susan Honeyman, *inter alia*, points out (167–170), enables a kind of haphazard queerness in which gender can be worn at random, or, going the theoretical limit, abrogated altogether—an extremity if not promised, then at least dreamed up through Bubbi and Emma's kiss, self-enclosed in its tentative chastity and heralding nothing so solid as intercourse. In brief, they look every inch the couple that would cathect a klaxon and adopt it as a child of their own.

[36] The term "pillow shot" was coined by Noël Burch in his book *To the Distant Observer: Form and Meaning in the Japanese Cinema*: "I call these images *pillow-shots*, proposing a loose analogy with the 'pillow-word' of classical poetry." He elaborates: "*Makurakotoba* or pillow-word: a conventional epithet or attribute for a word; it usually occupies a short, five-syllable line and modifies a word, usually the first, in the next line. Some pillow-words are unclear in meaning; those whose meanings are known function rhetorically to raise the tone and to some degree also function as images." As Martin Schneider elucidates, a "pillow shot" then "[serves] as a visual "nonsense-syllable" or non sequitur that creates a different expectation for the next scene." Eichenbaum's understanding of photogeny, the visual equivalent of "literariness," invokes its "trans-sense" essence in a similar fashion: it lies in the "faces, objects, a landscape" "[observed] outside any connection with plot" (11).

Fig. 10: The Pseudo-Faceoff

Fig. 11: Children of the Port

Conditional though it may be on gender negligence and preclusion of classifiable sexuality, their queerness, however, does not end there. In a way, queerer still are the occurrences that surround the kiss: a conversation and a look. Before she becomes kissable, Emma tells Bubbi a rambling story of her father's arrest, her delivery "believable and good" in the sense that nothing whatsoever sounds rehearsed—and at the same time, so emotionally uninflected that a sneaking suspicion of stylization creeps in almost immediately. To console her in her grief, outlined but not at all audible ("Did you cry?"–"I did"–"For a long time?"–"Yes"), Bubbi gives her a quick, embarrassed peck on the cheek, then glances away and smiles with waggish pride at somebody off-screen, in all likelihood the filmmaker herself. This most "authentic" petition for acknowledgment, which any other realist nonfiction director would have edited out, instantly apprises the viewer of the film's formalist *sdelannost'* ("made-ness"), breaking the spell of mimesis with an overinsistence on naturalistic behavior. Meanwhile, the boy's smile, for which the narrative makes no provisions, and the grieving girl's flatly delivered monologue circle the wagons to make sure that said naturalism continues to be a device, rather than a bid to unseat the aggregate of artistic mediation. Invention of secondary purposes catercorner from the authorized

primary ones is one last element of Barskaia's infantile aesthetics, and Bubbi and Emma's make-believe throughout the movie—from the estranged kiss that wears its "as if" on its sleeve to the klaxon "pregnancy" to Bubbi's last rites on their "conjugal bed"—affirms that the main object being re- and, as it were, de-purposed is none other than adulthood itself, made up of such smaller playthings as gender, sex, marriage, and procreation.

If revolution, as Barskaia's film stealthily suggests, is the derivative of an uninspired reading of the world that misses its artistic point and, ultimately, rehabilitates the intended usages of its contents, Peter's parents furnish quite a horrific model for revolutionizing the family. Though traditionalists themselves, they nonetheless serve up an image of how all automatic reversals—of gender roles, to name but one—do precious little to rejuvenate reality. The assertive wife, ostensibly empowered, beats on her sheepish husband with a rolling pin. Adults, in their meaning-extortionist seriousness that preys on children and art alike (a seriousness also known, in the environs of *Torn Boots*, as politics), revolve around the same axis of violence without fail. Young Theo doling out fatherly discipline with a belt completes the cycle. In this regard, the maneuver of Bubbi and Emma's *sdvig* gives one an option to move otherwise and to reiterate orthodoxy with a twist, instead of overturning it. The children do so by thinking gender an accessory rather than destiny; by conceiving, bearing, and raising a kid that also happens to be a discarded toy; by kissing, sure, but in a self-conscious awareness of the camera's and director's presence.

2.5. "An Ironic-Hopefulness": Coda

The fine-drawn semantic discrepancy between "wreaking havoc" and "playing havoc" underpins Barskaia's aesthetic system as a whole, insofar as the automation of ideological standbys must be told apart from the artificial nonchalance of narration (which, in fact, deautomatizes our

spectatorship); a child's error, from a policeman's; "mischief," from dissent; mutual leakages and overflowings, from "organic unity." As I have argued, *Torn Boots* is ever-mindful of the distinction between its prepubescent children, such as Bubbi, Emma, and their playmates, and the teenagers already implicated in the proceedings of sexual and political coming-of-age. It comes as no surprise, then, that imitations conducive to art coexist in the film with those antithetical to it, and age determines which is which. A telling example of a child internalizing adult discourse is provided by the short scene where an older girl relates to her comrades a treacherous negotiation involving some strike-breakers and the factory administration (55:22–56:10; Fig. 12–13). So seamless is the fusion between the young narrator and the narrated grownups that the grownups' words, voiced by her, pass their lips once more on screen, in a ventriloquist one-to-one correspondence that rules out any deviation (though, politically, the reporter and the characters in her report fall on the opposite sides of the spectrum). By acting like a grownup, the girl begins to *act*—a métier that, for Barskaia, is as unsuitable for the art of film as it is inaccessible to children.

Contrary to the young proletarians aging themselves through discursive impersonation, Bubbi, having reclaimed his brother's school shoes for a jolly bit of *flâneurie*, seeks out a pair of elderly Herren to infantilize. As observed by the boy, the hearing-impaired adults gamify their communication so that a mundane exchange between them morphs into an absurdist, proto-Kira-Muratovian skit:[37] "Are you going for a walk?"–"No, I'm going for a walk."–"I see. And I thought you were going for a walk!" Bubbi's lips, in the meantime, sync up with the adults' only formally as he puckers up but leaves their utterances unchanneled (Fig. 14). Incidentally, seconds before this encounter, the boy "lip-syncs" with no less enthusiasm the sounds emitted by a wind-up pig and a toy train chugging along in the shop window (30:30–33:00).

[37] On Kira Muratova's repetitions as "a parody of the notion of figuration, as well as a broad critique of signification" (39), see Tom Roberts' "Simply an Anachronism."

Fig. 12: The Girl Medium Fig. 13: The Capitalist Fig. 14: Bubbi Puckering

Komsomol'skaia Pravda's vitriol against *Father and Son*—the pan that accuses its author of hating life—includes a passage that, in a paranoid extrapolation typical of its era, demonizes the nearly-Meyerholdian undertow of *Torn Boots* as well: "The wildest imagination cannot picture a child deprived of a smile forever, for the rest of his life. But Barskaia's imagination came up with this terrifying phenomenon, this little person (*chelovechka*) with a wolf's gaze, with mechanical, soulless movements." One would assume that her "chelovechek" should have complied with Stalinist era's "Orwellian futurology," as Natal'ia Nusinova puts it, "where children were portrayed as adults of short stature, as a kind of aliens from the wonderful world of communism sent into an as-yet-imperfect adult world of socialism in the making." No such luck: Barskaia's homunculi, at least judging by *Torn Boots,* resided in an arrested aesthetic temporality that turned out to be too contemplative to shore up the transformative Soviet timeline of future in the present. Indeed, the departures lodged in her children's imitations, revealed all the more by the cover-up of excessive authenticity, queried the very givenness of such transformations.

In the film's imbrication of affect and aesthetics, this deviant mimicry stands as far apart from the adults' reversals as it does from the adolescents' conscientious copycatting, sheltered

against both in the childishness of disinterested art. The timbre of such imitations with an impish difference, always less than faithful to the imitated and thus a threat to their totalizing integrity, has been a mainstay of queer theory since Judith Butler's "subversive repetition" (*Gender Trouble* 42), where failed performances exposed gender as, at all times, already performative and volatile despite its regulatory authority. In charting some possible circuits of queerness at a slant to identity politics, Butler poses the following question: "What are the possibilities of politicizing *dis*identification, this experience of *misrecognition*, this uneasy sense of standing under a sign to which one does and does not belong?" (*Bodies* 219). By analyzing, among other things, the practices of drag and lip-syncing, José Esteban Muñoz responds with disidentification's ability to "[scramble] and [reconstruct] the encoded message of a cultural text in a fashion that […] exposes the encoded message's universalizing and exclusionary machinations," and "to use this code as raw material for representing a disempowered politics or positionality that has been rendered unthinkable by the dominant culture." Where his "recycling and rethinking" beguile in order to "account for, include, and empower minority identities and identification" (*Disidentifications* 31), Butler's own "decontextualizing and recontextualizing," chiming rather closely with Muñoz's account, work to instill "an ironic-hopefulness that the conventional relation between word and wound might become tenuous and even broken over time" ("Sovereign" 376).

However, the referent whom the children's disidentificatory performances in *Torn Boots* destabilize is not so much heterosexual, male, or white as adult—a person, according to Barskaia, designated by acquisition of political subjectivity. Politics bifurcates here into a dominant code to be submitted to the play of resignification (along with, say, gender and sexuality), and a condition that disables playfulness once and for all. To pay heed to politics' former capacity means to find productive inroads into what "the political" may encompass, and to honor the many brands of

energizing strangeness that infiltrate the stodgiest cultural monoliths. Yet, to disregard the latter means to forget that queer theory's adherence to the business of expanding the domain of politics is a historical-materialist contingency, as well. With its queer child characters miming adult life, as per Muñoz, neither in assimilation nor in disavowal, and its author smuggling the avantgarde into her own "performance" of socialist realism, *Torn Boots* seeks, if not to shrink the political sphere, then to stunt its inexorable growth at least by demarcating its boundaries—an exercise in futility, needless to say, in the Soviet 1930s. Consequently, a queer reading that only notices the world-remaking potential in its disidentifications cannot help but dash the film's "ironic-hopefulness" for a queerness, not just thoroughly depoliticized, but taken in and of itself as a slipping-away from the political grip.

I have deliberately refrained from applying to Barskaia's children the most, some would argue, becoming term in the formalist vocabulary—parody—as it seemed to me much too revolutionary in its built-in desire to displace the old form by repeating it masterfully, where infidelities are further proof of mastery. Shklovsky's seminal definition of parody as "consciousness of form through its violation" (*Theory* 149) appears to me all too willing to answer Butler's call to "politicize misrecognition," whereas playing out in *Torn Boots* I sense a self-reliant yearning for a distance from convention, rather than an itch for the dialogue of subversion (a distance all the more palpable in the forced close quarters of a transitional era). My own hope in this chapter, then, has been to map out a queer possibility for existing next to the hostilities of politics without being subsumed in them, not even in a negative Edelmanian fashion, and for depending on art's guile in such survivalism. The irony of my hope lies in deducing this possibility from the work of an artist whose project was speedily proven impossible.

III. *Noli Me Tangere*: Queer Subjectivity in Leonid Dobychin's *The Town of N*

Leonid Dobychin's *The Town of N* ("Gorod En") came out in 1935, a year before his death. As was the case with Margarita Barskaia, the critical harangues, which, by all accounts, precipitated the author's suicide, not infrequently got to the root of the matter as they lambasted the novel for what Dobychin had most pointedly wanted it to be. Read today, the shortcomings denounced by contemporary reviews sound practically uncanny in their similarity to the merits vaunted in later assessments. For instance, the novel's child hero, who to Aleksey Tolstoy seemed "simplified almost to the level of cretinism" ("uproshchennogo pochti do kretinizma" qtd. in Bahtin 22), becomes in Yuri Shcheglov's panegyric the steward of a "fragile spiritual enterprise" ("hrupkoe […] dushevnoe hoziaistvo"), whose "symptoms of alienation" constitute "the book's chief delight" ("glavnaia prelest' knigi – simptomy otchuzhdennosti") (465–466). The rancorous accusations of ahistorical and apolitical cynicism pelted at Dobychin in the 1930s[38] have over the years softened into a patina of timelessness ("connections between personal and historical time in Dobychin are not established") (Belobrovtseva 79), or rebranded themselves as a political victory of another kind: "his characters turned out to be stronger than history" (Markstein 139); "Dobychin is so hostile to the popular 1920s idea of history as a tool of necessity that he is prepared to

[38] Through the formidable mouthpiece of *Literaturnaia gazeta*, critic Osip Reznik pans Dobychin's 1931 short-story collection *The Portrait* ("Portret") as a "a string of anecdotes and impressions" from "a man who has helplessly and fearfully closed his eyes to reality" ("sploshnoe nanizyvanie etih anekdotov i vpechatlenii cheloveka, bespomoshchno zazhmurivshegosia v strahe pered deistvitel'nost'iu" qtd. in Evgrafov). During the fateful 1936 Writers' Union debates, literary scholar Naum Berkovskii castigates Dobychin as "a writer who either missed all that has transpired in the history of our country over the last 19 years, or pretends to have missed," and satirizes his treatment of the 1905 Revolution as follows: "So, boys went to school, priests held services, ladies bought hats, their husbands made money, and somehow, in passing, upheavals were happening" ("Добычин такой писатель, который либо прозевал все, что произошло за последние девятнадцать лет в истории нашей страны, либо делает вид, что прозевал"; "У Добычина дело изображается таким образом, что вот мальчики ходили в классы, попы служили молебны, дамы покупали шляпы, мужья зарабатывали деньги, и вот, между прочим, происходили беспорядки"). For all its righteous indignation, Berkovskii's résumé is essentially spot on.

renounce history altogether" (Serman 148). What *Literaturnyi Leningrad* decried once as the "sad results" of Joyce's influence, and Tolstoy as a Proustian "grey dotted line" ("seryi punktir") of narration and characterization,[39] now provides a blueprint for grandfathering Dobychin into the High Modernist canon.[40]

Terse, oddly humorous, and, as Viola Eidinova puts it in an unlikely compliment, "grotesquely monotonous" (103), the slender novel is narrated—or rather, reported, so archly neutral is its narrative voice—by a nameless protagonist between the ages of about seven and 12. The boy lives in a small burg somewhere in prerevolutionary Russia (a stand-in for the writer's hometown, Dvinsk), and falls in love, although the word is seldom uttered, with a number of people, a lot of them strangers or nodding acquaintances. The funny ways in which Dobychin's characters yearn for each other have not been ignored by scholarship: Tat'iana Shehovtsova, for example, devotes to his "latent eroticism" several chapters of her tremendous monograph, wherein she generously and aptly synopsizes the sexual poetics in his prose as "an unfulfilled possibility that both expands and narrows the horizons" (215; 87). However, when it comes to Dobychin's children, especially those in same-sex alliances, the critics usually recoil, and "friendship" becomes the timorous byword. Shcheglov demurely remarks on *The Town of N* that "the narrator

[39] "Joyce's work, which had risen on the yeast of Freudian philosophy ("vyrosshee na drozhzhah freidistskoi filosofii"), has had a certain influence on Dobychin, which could only have led to sad results" (qtd. in Kaverin 497). The same newspaper's editor-in-chief, Efim Dobin, concurs in his speech before the Writers' Union: "Speaking of concentrated formalist tendencies in literature ("o kontsentratah formalisticheskih iavlenii"), one should cite Dobychin's *The Town of N* as a prime example. Dobychin consummately follows in Joyce's footsteps ("idet vsetselo po stopam Dzhoisa")" (qtd. in Evgrafov).

[40] In all probability, Dobychin, who was not fluent in any foreign languages and spent most of his life in the provinces, had never read either Joyce or Proust, to whom he is routinely compared in the press both in Russia and abroad. Translator Richard C. Borden, who introduced *The Town of N* to the English-speaking readership in 1999, links the novel to *Ulysses* and *The Dubliners*, but also notes in the foreword that Dobychin's "jaundiced representation" of a pre-Soviet childhood "[reflects] an attempt to follow in its social and political orientation officially authorized conceptions" of Tsarist-era vices. Borden discerns in the "almost gardenless childhood" of his pet project a certain neurotic urge to please—one that failed due to inadequate modernist execution. Dobychin, for Borden, tried to write a Maxim Gorky novel and somehow ended up writing a Joycean one, which cost him his life, yet bolstered his future critical cachet (xi–xii). For more substantive discussion of Dobychin's writings vis-à-vis European modernism, see Carbone, Shehovtsova, and Shcheglov.

does not clarify his relationships with Serge, Natalie, or Vasia […], and we cannot say anything definite about them" (486). Feliks Kuvshinov writes about the transformative power of a child's miracle-working gaze that promotes a "poshliak" (a vulgar philistine, a boor) to a friend, whose hand can now be held (302). Marina Chukovskaia, in her reading of Dobychin's 1926 "The Sailor" ("Matros"), neuters the boy's same-sex attraction, unspoken and all the more dazzling for it, as a thoroughly deeroticized, fraternal "boyish admiration" ("rebiacheskoe voshishchenie," 8).

My intention in what follows is not to endow, by substituting "friend" for "lover," the narrator of *The Town of N* with more sexual proficiency than he is meant to possess. On the contrary: as I use the two designations interchangeably, I want to submit the novel as a queer text whose queerness consists precisely in its refusal to "say anything definite" about the characters' relationships. This refusal, to me, does not stray far from the novel's readiness to profess, upon close reading, a peculiar eroticism to be had in chastity and "boyish admiration."[41] I propose to accept the category of friendship, not as expungement of all sexual potential, nor as an alibi for suppressed yearnings, but as, in Svetlana Boym's wonderfully poetic double definition, "an elective affinity without finality" and as an "[extension] of ourselves into the realm of liminal adventure" (406; 413). From that angle, Dobychin's narrator can then be leveraged for his queer subjectivity that neither aligns too well with the catechisms of adult sexuality, nor abdicates from carnality altogether. Instead, his romantic attachments, which are enacted through distance, and

[41] To my knowledge, academic conversation about Leonid Dobychin as a queer author so far has rarely ventured beyond biographical guesswork. Chukovskaia mentions his habit of befriending women and going antiquing in their company (10); Andrei Ar'ev, in his otherwise detailed and insightful preface to Dobychin's *Collected Works*, speaks of his homosexuality as a slightly embarrassing, though amusing, distraction from literary analysis proper: "Another thing he has in common with Kuzmin are some of his secret character traits: he didn't have any children, never married, and judging by his prose and letters, his interest in female attire was stronger than in the ladies themselves" ("С Кузминым его сближают и некоторые прикровенные черты характера: он не имел детей, никогда не был женат, а судя по его прозе и письмам, к женским нарядам испытывал любопытство более устойчивое, чем к самим дамам" 10). Shehovtsova's chapter on Dobychin's Proustian motifs and Arkadii Neminushchii's article on his "bab'e nachalo" largely echo Ar'ev's timbre.

physical interactions, which slight the decorum of identity, collaborate in the creation of a queer child to whom superficial love-friendships hand approximate coordinates of being rather than an unerring script, and whose eventual solidification of the self into a sovereign, solipsistic subject ushers him into the exact type of literature that the novel is at pains to avoid.

3.1. This Time Is Personal: The Temporalities of "Imaginative Docility"

Densely populated by purposely one-dimensional characters, *The Town of N* overspills with details begging to be grouped, taxonomized, and catalogued—so much so that any reading but a close one seems like no reading at all. The unprotesting matter-of-factness of the boy's voice accords equal (un)importance to everything in his range of experience. Understandably, in a novel that, for lack of any visible narrative propulsion or lucid emotional cues, often reads like a stylized and idiosyncratic almanac, keeping track of time is key. The timeframe which the juvenile narrator inhabits, defined by monotony, piecemeal composition, and almost unaccountable distensions and contractions, soon goads the reader to venturesome reconstruction: it is a record that promises the thrill of detective-like pleasure to whoever sets it straight. Strewn with minutiae of unvaried living, the text sends its surveyor on a scavenger hunt for temporal knickknacks—the debris of the passage of time. The narrator's intimate archive offers clues in all shapes and sizes, with religious holidays most prominent among them: both commonly celebrated (Christmas or Shrovetide) and lesser known (The Blessing of the Waters or Our Lady of Sorrows); gleaned in equal measure from the Russian Orthodox liturgical calendar, the registry of Catholic saints, and local anti-Semitic lore (the Christian boy fears that he might be kidnapped during Rosh Hashanah).

Even within the span of a single day, the narrator's time is normally broken up into such ceremonial blocks as obligatory chapel or his parents' return from matins. Other markers of

periodization include the name days of family members and friends (the nameless narrator, obviously, does not have one, nor is his birthday ever brought up over the course of five years); seasonal sales of merchandise; rotations of servants; and adults' ambient small talk of the changing weather. The indiscriminate vehemence, as well as the stealth, with which the narrator makes these calendrical miscellanea his own is such that some milestones, identified by Borden in the English translation and by Belousov in the original *Collected Works* (the death of Leo Tolstoy, the transference of certain holy relics, the centennial celebrations of Gogol's birth, etc.), eluded me on the first reading.

As the lengthy Russian Revolution of 1905 unfolds in the background, the aforementioned temporal knickknacks are only given ironic point by History's clumsy interventions. For instance, the assassination of Grand Duke Sergei, alluded to ("some prince was murdered"/"kakogo-to kniazia ubili," 139) but not named, occasions a welcome reprieve from educational drudgery and allows the narrator ample time to bond with a classmate. The classmate in question is the bad boy Olov known for "drawing silly things" ("liubil risovat' […] gluposti," 138) in textbooks and for frequenting brothels. As their frolicsome, giddy coalition for a day moves along through town, the two are eventually brought into proximity with some foul-mouthed, sexually knowledgeable working men: "We giggled and, holding on to each other, gave each other shoves. […] The muzhiks were saying nasty things out loud. I had never seen them so close before" ("Мы хихикали и, держась друг за друга, толкались. […] Мужики говорил вслух гадости. Я в первый раз еще видел их близко," 139–140).

This throwaway scene (as much as one can talk about throwaway scenes in a novel whose entire scope may be described as "smaller than life") makes manifest several of the critical features characterizing the narrator's entwinement of the temporal and the erotic. Set against the smudged

backdrop of History, which is taking place elsewhere, in mainland Russia, yet serendipitously induced by History's reverberations across the back of beyond, the day-off with Olov charts a meaningful trajectory from **(1)** school to **(2)** church to **(3)** the market square. For the narrator, **(1)** school constitutes a site of perpetual deferral, where classes are always about to begin, looming large, but most of the time are cancelled, rescheduled, or replaced with a drawn-out prayer meeting. Discipline here is also meted out in the currency of time, insofar as it is the duration of one's stay inside that renders a regular room "the punishment room." In the corridor, the narrator stops to marvel at a clock flanked by two paintings, *The Baptism of Kiev* and *The Miracle at the Borki Train-wreck* (according to the official version, Tsar Alexander III held on his shoulders the caved-in roof of the royal car as his family members escaped. Their miraculous deliverance became part of 1880s government propaganda). This combination of a timepiece and a piece of iconography neatly emblematizes the connection between the school and the church. The magical quickness of the Lord's Anointed One—the extraordinary timeliness of the whole averted catastrophe—seemingly wraps around the fictional turn-of-the-century Town of N, where people speak of lottery winnings and inheritance from shirttail cousins and neighbors as the most realistic sources of income.

This reliance on chance and narrow escape also works tiny miracles to redeem the adult population of the town, otherwise hidebound by such temporal notions as "a dangerous age" or "growing up too fast." When sprayed with perfume from an atomizer (a richly suggestive image in and of itself) by her husband, the boy's mother, for instance, exclaims, "How come? We haven't won two hundred thousand rubles yet, have we?" (113). If there is an artistic device to vindicate the crude procedural of marriage through the eyes of a child, it must be some such refinement of detail—a fantastic, unnecessary precision in conveying the mother's materialistic pettiness. The

painstaking evacuation of the characters' third dimension in the novel leads to a more loving, more forgiving concentration on the particularities and exaggerations. After all, a lot of fixities and totalities reveal feet of clay on closer inspection—or rather, it is through closer inspection that they often grow them.

For Dobychin, amorous attentions to the banal flourish in institutional settings responsible for timekeeping, postponement of leisure, and appraisal of maturation. It is especially true of the **(2)** church as two of the narrator's most constant objects of desire enter the novel in religious trappings: Natalie/Tusen'ka instantly reminds him of the Virgin Mary (128), while Vasia Strizhkin is cast, alternately, as an angel, a disciple, John the Baptist, and Christ himself (114; 120; 125). Besides marking time, the church hosts scores of ritualistic repetitions. However, unlike the monotonous chronotope of the school, the repetitions furnished by acts of worship comfort and excite the narrator. The narrator uses religion to maintain his loyalties, too, such as when he refuses a Catholic classmate's advances based on their ostensible confessional incompatibility: "So when Serge asked me one day if I had struck up a new friendship at school, I was able to answer no" ("Так что Сержу, когда он однажды спросил у меня, не завел ли я себе в школе приятеля, я мог ответить, что – нет," 133) At the same time, the boy is willing to forge new alliances in order to procure theological advice: "I wanted to find out from a monk if God would agree to put someone in hell if you were to pray for this well and truly, and in order to meet a monk I planned to take up with Martinkevich" ("Мне хотелось узнать у монаха, согласится ли бог посадить кого-нибудь в ад, если будут хорошенько молиться об этом, и, чтобы встретить монаха, я думал сойтись с Мартинкевичем," 143). In any event, his relationship with organized religion invariably slips, with dispassionate ease, into forms of companionship that the church does not, it would appear, openly espouse.

Regardless of the occasion, the local priest reiterates the same mini-sermon, in whose beguiling simplicity and incantatory tranquility the narrator recognizes some theatrical patterns. These patterns he treasures and links to adult romance at large. An earlier scene has already specified for him how grown-ups enact love—how they, as it were, make it:

> "По субботам приходили ученицы и ученики и репетировали. Я и Серж однажды подсмотрели чуточку. Софи стояла на коленях перед Колей Либерманом и протягивала к нему руки. – Александр, – говорила она трогательно, – о, прости меня" (117).

> "Each Saturday, schoolgirls and schoolboys came to rehearse. Serge and I once peeped on them a little. Sophie stood on her knees before Kolia Liberman and reached out to him. "Alexander," she was saying touchingly, "oh, forgive me."

The narrator then goes on to dramatize his budding friendship with Serge (their "play," inspired by a comical misreading of Gogol, is violently interrupted). Every conceivable scenario of mutual attraction is henceforth subsumed for him in a vision of physically overperformed emotion, whereby the nameless narrator, momentarily, even manages to obtain a moniker (he is addressed as "Alexander" by his imaginary admirers). Bearing in mind how closely the Russian word for "rehearsal," *репетиция*, is bound up with repetition, the boy's incessant replaying of the scene signals a fascination with routine at the detriment of analysis, and lets the infinitely replicable buildup eclipse the singularity of the outcome. The sensory raptures that attend his acts of none-too-creative replication never make "Alexander" a dull boy, and the controlled drama of religious exaltation, supplicant poses and all, sculpts his sentimental fantasies of virtuous love.

All in all, notwithstanding a few episodes of haphazard disobedience later in the book, the narrator's demeanor may be quite accurately captured by Henry James' phrase from *The Portrait of a Lady*: "ingeniously passive and almost imaginatively docile" (36). The sacred rites are quietly appropriated by him, more than bent to his uncertain will; they are used precisely to the extent that he needs them, such as when he decides to bid farewell to the nanny by performing the traditional greeting ritual backwards. As he holds out to her a salted piece of bread, he welcomes her into a shared future of living apart (113). What upsets the narrator within the church walls is, in fact, the needless variety imposed by external forces, such as additional services for peace during the Russo-Japanese War. Meanwhile, the tedious rituals of wars gone by, such as preparing surgical dressings from lint, are what he misses (135).

At the end of the sojourn with Olov the bad boy, the accidental beneficiaries of History's cataclysms arrive at **(3)** the market square—a concrete instance of the abstract crowd, and a self-regenerating locus of chance encounters where the narrator meets and/or interacts with all of his love interests: through stolen glances, fugitive brushes, and overheard remarks. The church and the theater, fused for him in a continuum of spectacular prolongation, complement the square as loci of such interactions. The first of his main paramours, Serge, is introduced to the boy in absentia as an inescapable, rather than merely potential, friend, for such is his mother's prophesy (like most characters in the novel, Maman, too, is granted a few elaborate contacts with time in the shape of trivial clairvoyance and occasional ghost sightings). Before the narrator even knows it, however, he meets Serge on the street making scary faces at him. The narrator christens Serge "The Frightful Boy" only to accept, a couple of weeks later, their prophesied friendship. Serge is the first to determine the narrator's mode of lovemaking, which is to be conducted through extrasensory

perception and mechanical reiterations, with a focus on stark and arbitrary detail, from a seemingly inapposite distance:

> "Я тоже был счастлив. Оставив их, я потихоньку убрался в гостиную. Там я притих возле печки и слышал, как сыплется хвоя. Фонарь освещал сквозь окно ветку елки. Серебряный дождик блестел на ней. — Серж, Серж, ах, Серж, — повторял я" (115).

> "I, too, was happy. Leaving them, I secretly made off for the living room. There, I settled quietly next to the stove and heard the pine needles falling. Through the window, a lantern illuminated the branch of a fir tree. On it, sparkled the silver rain. —Serge, Serge, oh, Serge!—repeated I."

The narrator is never formally introduced to his object of desire №2, Vasia Strizhkin, and their only physical contact remains the fillip that Vasia anonymously gives him at a religious parade (114). Vasia's name is carried around town through the grapevine, extolling him as "the flogged boy" whom other children dread and to whom they kowtow. The sadomasochistic undercurrent of this ephemeral, taunting relationship has been explored elsewhere (see Borden's excellent essay "The Flogging Angel: Toward a Mapping of Leonid Dobychin's *Gorod N*"), but for me Vasia, first and foremost, embodies that queer fusion of the religious and the erotic that I have mentioned above: an adventitious rendezvous between spirit and flesh, where the former is divorced from the church dogma and the latter, from the exigent provisions of sexuality, although neither divorce is final. The narrator prays to Vasia with gusto and believes that their unacknowledged encounters bring him good fortune. Much like he repurposes, in his "imaginative

docility," the ecclesiastic timelines to tell the reader some very intimate stories[42] (is there a greater narrator-reader confidentiality than sharing what never really happened?), so the languages and ceremonies of the church become the boy's languages and ceremonies of love. Furthermore, Vasia's evanescent carnality, to which the boy has no access, gains weight through nothing else than religious imagery: an embossed picture of an angel, a statue, a decapitated Holofernes. In a similarly queer disturbance to the secular/clerical dichotomy, Tusen'ka communicates with the narrator almost entirely through glances, nods, and winks in public places, having delegated the carnal duties to recurring comparisons with the Virgin Mary.

When the untimely death of an obnoxious penmanship teacher is announced in the newspaper, the narrator approaches one of his auxiliary paramours, Osip, rumored to own a pocketknife: "Would you have agreed to kill him if he hadn't died himself? I took his hand and looked at him with excitement. He answered me that for an acquaintance everything would be possible. I wished I had met him sooner" ("Ты был бы согласен убить его, если бы он сам не умер? — Я взял его руку и в волнении смотрел на него. Он ответил мне, что для знакомого все можно было бы. Мне было жаль, что так поздно я встретил его," 145). The passage, to my mind, perfectly encapsulates the narrator's acute complicity with times that never came—times, in point of fact, made "good" by their non-arrival. As he strives to mold all his friendships in the sentimental image of romance, placing a premium on fidelity in the face of his own decentralized polyamory, the narrator nonetheless gravitates without fail toward people who can offer him the most in the way of futility and disappointment. His are the people with regret baked in; those who jump the gun, overstay their welcome, and leave too soon. Serge—a friend predicted in advance, frequently postponed and repelled, then lost to a "fast girl" who dies prematurely—

[42] Superstition as a middle ground between "straight time" and the queer clocks of intimacy is one of Dobychin's leitmotifs; see also his short stories from the collection *The Material* ("Mater'ial").

may very well be the boy's "husband," but their "marriage" is also open to Vasia, whose promising nearness hovers just out of reach, and to Natalie, whose normative femininity is never untinged with melancholy. As a guest of his parents' broods, "It's a pity […] that science invented [the gramophone] so late: otherwise, we would now be able to hear the voice of Jesus Christ, delivering sermons" ("Но жалко, — сказал один гость, — что наука изобрела это поздно: а то мы могли бы сейчас слышать голос Иисуса Христа, произносящего проповеди," 132). From the narrator's point of view, in institutional religion there pulsate the ripples of stories that were not meant to last, praising the Jesus he wishes he had heard, seen, and maybe even touched.

It takes, of course, a rather peculiar character anatomy to develop an affective repertoire so effortlessly queer, and all the while to be able to trace the encroachments of progress by the susurrus of rubber tires, glimmerings of electric lights on Christmas trees, and the adoption of political neologisms. The autumn of 1905 is conveyed to the narrator by the crackling of acacia pods, a sound as faint as it is, frankly, implausible. At various moments in the novel, he also eavesdrops on his mother and her friend "laughing in a whisper" ("smeialis' shepotom," 112); listens intently to "pine needles falling"; smells the aroma of globes at a bookstore, the scent of melting snow, and even the stench of pilgrims by the altar, long after their departure (110; 114; 111). This hypersensitivity is easy to attribute to the narrator's progressing nearsightedness. After all, it is precisely his error of the eye—i.e., his strange gift of not seeing the essential forest for the incidental trees—that permits the narrator to zoom in on the details without recourse to any standardized vision. But what the opulent concreteness of the boy's sensorium is likelier to make up for, in my opinion, is not his myopia but the inscrutable, vertiginous strangeness of all tactility. Bewildered by the multitude of tactile options that include, alas, predatory passes from the adults, the narrator embraces the caption on a cheap religious postcard, *Noli me tangere* ("Touch Me

Not"), as his motto: it is a sign that hangs on his body. The rest of his sensual adventures are dedicated to problems just as vexing: How, for instance, does Judas' kiss amount to a betrayal? If the protocols of romance endorse women as kissable objects, is it where the great divide between genders lies—in the highly consequential moment of a kiss one boy plants on another?

The boy looks into the preordained future through a delightfully myopic haze while compiling an archive of eventualities and retrospections, of belatedness and untimeliness, of withdrawals from assigned meaning and experimental pursuits of beauty.[43] Inside the narrator's childish reality, senses may be quite droll in their misplacement (e.g., when a neighbor's daughter summons the kids, "Gentlemen! They're going to beat up Karl. Who wants to listen?," 128), but their irregular collaborations contribute greatly to his tender relationship with the surfaces of things (as well as to his disregard for layering, deepening, or hermeneutical onion-peeling of any description). Therefore, the closeness of reading that the novel, as I mentioned before, seems to necessitate has less in common with analytical penetration than with a kind of delicate gliding across the textual veneer.[44] A stranger to metaphor, symbolism, ornament, or any other attention-seeking formal bravura,[45] Dobychin has his narrator speak "in a colorless singsong" (in the spirit

[43] In this, Dobychin's narrator carves out a temporal hideout for himself, at a remove from what Elizabeth Freeman dubs "chrononormativity." The rhetorical figures of time that Freeman sets out to explore (e.g., anastrophe, ellipsis, prolepsis, and reversal, to name a few, xxii) are either similar or identical to his. However, while the exponentially more radical texts in Freeman's purview enlist in "semiotic insurgency" or even "semiotic warfare" (xiv), the boy in Dobychin's novel, at best, practices semiotic apathy.

[44] Among the more striking consequences of Dobychin's preoccupation with the superficial and the tangential is the flattening of impact that transforms events into items on record, with a slightly mannered disregard for their apparent emotive significance. The death of the boy's father, for instance, is embedded into the text alongside the pretty postcards with condolences which the family receives from a distant relative. On moral concerns inherent in such undiscriminating acceptance, see Erofeev, Fiodorov, and Zolotonosov.

[45] In evaluating his far more successful colleagues, Leonid Dobychin goes back and forth between defensive coyness ("What is a Zoshchenko?" 250) and bursts of thinly-veiled jealousy, such as when he compares his "disheveled" ("rastriopannye") miniatures to his peers' "substantial" ("solidnye") tales of "square paragraphs" (251). Nowhere is Dobychin's moody mixture of coquettish arrogance and earnest woundedness more apparent than in a 1929 letter to Mikhail Slonimsky, in which he quotes the purple prose of his—he makes no secret of it—meager fan mail. "Some madam," sneers he, prefers his "moonlit frosted woods" to Isaac Babel's verbal "guipure lace" ("Maybe creamy lace, I forget" 300). Both metaphors, of course, jar the author, elsewhere explicitly "depressed" ("udruchaiut") by "the beauty of epithets" (303). His contemporary Leonid Rahmanov's memoir claims that Dobychin "rejected Babel and considered him perfumelike" (330)—a phrase seemingly on loan from the same repository of gendered invective as

of returning the author retroactively to the modernist tradition to which he felt entitled, I borrow this snippet from Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*, 51). His pithy sentences are often stamped with hardly warranted inversions, and his errant employment of verbs makes for an intensely pleasurable misunderstanding of linguistic ordinances. Due to a scarcity of tenses, the Russian language strictly regulates the verbs' aspect, mood, voice, transitivity, etc. In his neglect of the differences between complete and incomplete actions, continuous and perfective forms, or even between action and inaction,[46] the narrator takes parts of speech at face value: a verb is a verb, much like a fillip is still some form of physically expressed attention. But before I tease out the implications of this purposeful, reportorial flatness, I need to spend more time with what I have classed as the narrator's "queer affective repertoire."

3.2. "Adorable!": Touching, Feeling, and Saying

In Igor' Fomenko's congenially succinct phrase, feelings in Dobychin "are more named than expressed" ("perezhivaniia skoree nazvany, chem vyrazheny," 116); and even "named," I would wager, is too strong a word. *The Town of N* talks about all kinds of things instead of talking about love, but when love is the subject matter, the novel tells it like it is. At a school dance, the narrator receives an anonymous note—a Valentine delivered via "Cupid's mail" ("pochta amura") and containing but one word: "Wow!" ("Ogo!" 163). As he wends his way through an ever-ramifying network of sensual attachments, at no point is he capable of adding much to the semantic

the "guipure lace." At any rate, the letter to Slonimsky concludes with a plea: "Do you … get letters from madams?" And the plea, quite unmistakably, is not for a reciprocal anecdote.

[46] An impeccable structuralist breakdown of Dobychin's syntax and grammar, simplistic yet almost baroque in their oversimplification, can be found in Shcheglov.

looseness or ecstatic jolt of this interjection, to its idiomaticity or, not least of all, its anonymity.[47] Each time his wandering desire happens to fasten itself to an object, the narrator emits another "wow" that puts the descriptive specifications of language to shame. Where adults devote themselves to expressing and qualifying their feelings, and call this redoubtable fool's errand "literature," the child's devotion is to that "impropriety of the utterance" which alone, for Barthes, can be "proper to desire" (*Discourse* 20).

Instead of naming the feeling, and in doing so concocting for it a plausible origin story, he records his affect by naming its temporary, all-surpassing focus. "Serge, Serge, oh Serge," sighs the boy until it becomes "a habit" (115; 151). "Vasen'ka," sends he a one-word prayer when Vasia's angelic intercession is needed (149). "Natalie, oh," he wants to say to Tusen'ka, then watches her with a single "thought" in his head: "Natalie, Natalie" (135; 138). Dumbfounded by the physical nearness of another boy, Karl ("ego palets byl pochti riadom s moim, i ia chuvstvoval zhar ego"), the narrator is tempted to call him by his name but dares not (154). "Of this failure of language," continues Barthes, "there remains only one trace: the word "adorable" (the right translation of "adorable" would be the Latin *ipse*: it is the self, himself, herself, in person)" (20). The right Russian translation for "adorable," then, would be Dobychin's frequent, somewhat simpering epithet "milen'kii" ("darling")—an adjectival rendition of those enamored "ogo!" and "oh" that herald Barthes' otherwise incommunicable "everything of affect" (19).

Later in *A Lover's Discourse*, the "fascinating image" derives its potency from the recognition that, in an extremely fortuitous turn of events, "something accommodates itself exactly

[47] Sergei Korolev puts an interesting spin on the characters' "unnamedness" ("nenazvannost'") by assuming their familiarity in and typicality of the depicted world. In his interpretation, the narrator possesses all the information about them but elects to withhold it from the reader (135). While concealment certainly is a strategy frequently employed both by Dobychin and his protagonist, the novel still figures the event of love as a reckoning with someone or something exceptional in its ordinariness, rather than as a mystery solvable in, but also kept to, the lover's heart of hearts.

to my desire (about which I know nothing)" (191). By announcing his fascination through nothing but the names of those who fascinate him, Dobychin's narrator, like the good Barthesian lover that he is, does bear out the exceptionally tautological character of all love: "You are thus, thus and so, precisely thus" (*Discourse* 221)—without ever itemizing in vain what exactly "you" might be. Uttered over and over, with no elaboration besides the occasional "oh," these names acknowledge the narrator's gasps at his repeated strokes of good fortune, but abstain from verbalizing them with any pretense to enduring accuracy. However, mixed in with the ecstasy of encountering a person to match so precisely the nebulae of his desire is the boy's bafflement as to how his desire's promiscuity can be made square with the singularity ascribed to its object.

Granted, Dobychin's novel is not unaware that its protagonist's exclamations of "oh Serge" and "Natalie, oh" constitute, as is the wont of all poetic apostrophes, a conjuring trick at bottom: a false presence that, for Barthes, "designates the unnamable site to which my desire clings in a special way" (19). At his most verbose, the narrator dreams of meeting Tusen'ka and saying "Hello" to her (152)—a word that furnishes phatic proof of her existence, but is undercut by the improbability of a fantasy. The anxiety set off by the fact that the amorous totality of "adorable"/"ogo!" always points the lover back to the beloved's zone of opacity is quite elegantly, and humorously too, conveyed in the narrator's unassuaged doubts regarding the "Frightful Boy's" ("strashnyi mal'chik") identity. Serge first swears it was not him, then admits that it was, then recants his admission (115–116), whereas the rational Andrei cautions his friend that this mystery will never be solved ("I ne uznaesh' nikogda," 122). Yet, abutting this, shall we say, grown-up predicament of love's constitutive ignorance, self-avowed in the same breath as it feigns infallible knowledge, is a question much more childish in nature: How do I, the narrator seems to wonder, love one person, and do it as lastingly as I am told I should, when my unnamed and shapeless

desire provisionally fills in the boundaries of Serge, Tusen'ka, Vasia, and others? How does the random and fleeting endorsement of love fit its unique, scarcely verbalizable, time-annihilating eventfulness? How does, to take out yet another loan from Barthes, the "Ah, this!" of intense queer observation synchronize itself to the judicious apprehension of "That's how it is" (*The Neutral* 174)?

The circumstances aggravating the narrator's plight of reconciling the sweep of desire to the particulars of love are many. For one, he is rather passionately in love with the appurtenances of romance: its prevalent narratives, customs, and languages, all of them worn anonymously thin through overuse (romance's theatrical, ritualized banality, as I have already argued, ties it for him to the rituals, sites, and paraphernalia of organized religion). The near-sedentary shapes assumed by his roving pleasure thanks to romantic convention amount to a full-bodied pleasure unto itself. In a maneuver none the less comforting for being recursive, the narrator finds himself *erotically* drawn to the transmutations of "erotic ambivalence" into "serial experience" (Berlant 9), based on the scant worth both impute to their cast of characters. At the same time, the gulf still needs to be repaired between the fungible objects of love and the indeterminate object of desire, and it is this conceptual mending that gives special force to the boy's relationship with Serge. The besottedness with which the narrator adheres to the prescriptions of romance as he knows them, not only encodes a child's sexual elasticity searching for adult tutelary support; it also powers his exploration of how romance's generalized applicability works with the illegible exceptionality of same-sex attraction.

Throughout the novel, as the narrator bounces from one courtship to another, he muses whether his commitment to Serge ought to prevent him from reciprocating their overtures: "I wanted to befriend him, but loyalty to Serge stopped me" ("Mne zahotelos' podruzhit'sia s nim,

no vernost' Serzhu uderzhala menia," 121); "I was enjoying his company, and since I already had a friend, I doubted if it was permissible" ("Mne priiatno bylo s nim, i tak kak u menia uzhe byl drug, ia somnevalsia, pozvolitel'no li eto," 124); "I thought […] that it's unbecoming to mention others in the presence of a friend" ("Ia podumal […], chto predosuditel'no v prisutstvii druga vspominat' o drugih," 133); etc. In fact, his friendship with Serge in its entirety is plotted rather tightly along the most sentimental lines of exaggerated, novelistic heterosexuality. As the boys say their goodbyes at the train station, "Serge, Serge, oh Serge," cries out the narrator in his mind, "Serge, will you remember me the way I'll remember you?" ("ty budesh' li pomnit' menia tak, kak ia budu pomnit' tebia?," 144). The petty possessiveness ("I thought that [Serge] was too taken with Aleksandr"/"slishkom uzhe uvlechen Aleksandrom") quickly turns petty revenge (behind Serge's back, the jealous narrator lets slip that his father "wouldn't have been killed for no reason"/"bez prichiny […] ego ne ubili by," 151).

And yet, just as importunate are the boy's attempts to put it on record that the romantic plot in which this relationship is so carefully and delightfully vatted looms out of its reassuring confines, grateful for the structure but never quite satisfied with it. After all, the emotion which the two lovers share most frequently, and on which the doubtful exclusivity of their choice of each other seems to depend, is none other than arrogance—a joint statement of having been elevated by love above others (in this, it parallels his brief tryst with Olov cemented, if speciously, by class privilege, insofar as both are delusional in regard to their social station). "Idiots," Serge and the narrator joyfully sneer together at the latter's classmates, lax in matters of personal hygiene and grammar ("Duraki, – posmeialis' my i priiatno nastroilis'," 133).[48] After he loses Serge and spurns

[48] Ar'ev formats such bonds in the novel as "mutual misunderstanding" (27), to which I am more than sympathetic, although I think that something on the order of "mutual pre-understanding"—an affective accord that shirks all investigative profundity and stays on the surface of desire—may be more befitting.

Andrei, "a nice guy" who has "nothing poetic" to recommend him ("S Andreem […] priiatno, no v nem kak-to net nichego poeticheskogo"), the narrator keenly misses the world's exclusion presumed by the cruel layout of romantic coupledom: "I wanted someone to make fun of that with me, but I had no one" ("Mne hotelos' togda, chtoby bylo s kem vmeste posmeiat'sia nad etim, no mne bylo ne s kem," 171). Fellow pupil Ershov, too, attracts him with a combination of inscrutability, out of which love is born, and haughtiness, by which it is maintained ("On nadmenno smotrel i kazalsia tainstvennym," 168–69).

In a tussle between claiming extraneous legibility and fleeing its inherent predeterminations, the boys try to solemnize their union with a kind of engagement, but the crosses distributed by a visiting bishop prove unworthy of hanging from their necks. "If we get these [diamond-encrusted crosses] […], we can exchange them, Serge, as a sign of our friendship" ("Esli my poluchim [kresty s bril'iantikami] […], my smozhem, Serzh, v znak nashei druzhby pomeniat'sia imi"). The promised marital crosses, meant to be bejeweled not even with diamonds but with coquettishly diminutive "bril'iantiki," turn out to be made of tin (124). Andrei, conversely, fails miserably the test of shared arrogance when he dubs the narrator's mother's banal exchange with Kondrat'eva "a conversation between two idiots": "I once again promised myself not to talk to him anymore" (154). Too thoughtful for his own good, Andrei cannot appreciate the surface-oriented pleasures of the quotidian that should offset the rituals of ridicule.

So ardent is the narrator's dedication to the reproducible coherence of heteroromantic scenarios that he wants them wholesale, with the inevitable obstacles (Serge's departure), abatement of passion, the fictional lovers' awkward reunion, and mutual pangs of wistfulness over what they could have been ("Of the friendship that we used to have we didn't talk"/"O toi druzhbe, kotoraia prezhde byla mezhdu nami, my ne vspominali," 165). In fact, unlike Babel's narrators in

my earlier chapter, who submit themselves to the narratability of scarring but also miss the inarticulacy of englobement, Dobychin's is in great haste to turn Serge into a memory, a character, a vestige of erstwhile romantic plenitude: "Serge, do you remember, – said I, – we were once happy here" (149). However, the retrospective gaze here comes shortly after the anticipation, having skipped altogether any duration of fulfillment. In a manner of speaking, the narrator's ambition is to vault himself out of childhood, in which Serge is eagerly awaited and guessed at in all passersby ("Can it be Serge?"/"Vdrug eto Serzh?," 113), and into a simulated old age defined temporally by remembrance and regret: "A sweet sadness washed over me, and I was glad to be 'reminiscing about my childhood' already, like an adult" ("Priiatnaia grust' ohvatila menia, i ia rad byl, chto mne, slovno vzroslomu, uzhe 'vspominaetsia detstvo'," 147). It is in these twined wishes to look forward to erotic possibility and to look back on its loss, but never to realize it in full in any experiential present tense, that the narrator of *The Town of N* is least dissimilar from Babel's in "In the Basement" (except that the latter aspires to a desexualized high culture of Shakespearian proportions, whereas the former ingests, in a nondiscriminatory fashion, Gogol and Dostoevsky along with sentimental paraliterature and other pop-cultural media).[49]

3.3. Sex as Fiction, Harm, and Death

How, then, does the boy understand that very sex the avoidance of which, confusingly, allows him both to stick to and frustrate the available sexual narratives? The definitions furnished

[49] More specifically, Viacheslav Sapogov tracks down in Dobychin's narrative voice the quaint "forgotten tones" ("zabytye intonatsii," 261) of such low-brow publications as "Zadushevnoe slovo" (a late-imperial children's magazine predominantly authored by women) and "Zhenskaia zhizn'" (a short-lived periodical that mostly addressed the woman's role in WWI). Dobychin himself, in a letter dated March 14th, 1926, confesses to having been raised on cloying books for girls ("poluchil zhenskoe vospitanie," 282), such as Countess of Ségur's *Soniny prokazy* (*Les malheurs de Sophie*) and Eduard Granstrem's *Liubochkiny otchego i ottogo*. Sergei Shindin, without italicizing the gender aspect, simply points out the structuring importance of the novel's "images in the cultural periphery" (64).

by the novel are so numerous that only something absent can oblige them all. On the one hand, sex is a most remote likelihood; it is a name given to the disbelief in which lovers are united: "We talked about those silly things that adults are reputed to do" ("My pogovorili o teh glupostiah, kotorye rasskazyvaiut pro bol'shih," 119). When Karl apprises the narrator of the "silly things" supposedly perpetrated in a local cemetery, he goes there for a stakeout among the tombstones but leaves before anyone arrives (132). Another excursion, this time to the red-light district, ends just as anticlimactically: "I didn't see anything noteworthy there" ("ne uvidel na [Podol'skoi ulitse] nichego zamechatel'nogo," 138). Moreover, it is not until he picks up a copy of *One Thousand and One Nights* that any credence is lent to the idea of "silly things" at all ("I confirmed that the boys hadn't been lying")—and then too, the source, revealingly translated into Russian as "Arabian Fairytales for Adults" ("Arabskie skazki dlia vsrozlyh"), still has to be considered (140).

Of course, Dobychin, like Babel before him, mines the imbrications between sex and class for comedic effect as the narrator of *The Town of N* regards the "silly things" with a decidedly petit-bourgeois mistrust, bringing to mind the way the Borgmans—genteel Jews who made it out of the ghetto—allegedly reined in their flesh in Babel's "In the Basement." "We weren't sure," Dobychin deadpans, "if ladies and gentlemen engaged in it" ("My somnevalis', chtoby gospoda i baryni prodelyvali eto," 119). The rumored "gluposti" of carnal knowledge only ring true to him as "gadosti" ("filthy things") spoken of by "muzhiki"—the hoi-polloi, who are "like cattle" ("Oni kak skoty," 139–40). But underneath the satirical layer of class prejudice, there always lurks in the novel an erotically charged agreement between the narrator and whoever happens to be his lover *du jour*. What holds them together sexually is a contract of suspicion toward the unconvincing "adult fairytales" of sex: a willingness, as Adam Phillips phrases it in his defense of the Freudian

child, to "go on worshipping their own idols in secret" and to remain, despite ample proof, conspiratorially "unimpressed by other people's truths" (*The Beast* 11).

On the other hand, sex tends to impinge on its own unlikeliness with a glut of corporeality that makes it all the more difficult to doubt it. The most disturbing of such impingements are the advances that Madmazelle Gorshkova, the narrator's middle-aged tutor, makes at her pupil.

> "В день перед экзаменами мадмазель Горшкова рассказала, как уже при встрече с нами она вдруг почувствовала, что я буду приходить к ней. Поэтическое выражение появилось на ее лице. Она сказала, что ей будет скучно без меня. – Пойдемте в сад, – звала она меня, спровадив Синицыну и Осипа. – Смотрите, яблони цветут. – Нет, мне пора, спасибо, – отвечал я. Она вышла проводить меня. С угла я оглянулся, и она еще стояла на крылечке и пускала дым колечками, внушительная и печальная" (129).

> "The day before the exam, Madmazelle Gorshkova told me that when she first saw us she had a sudden feeling that I'd continue coming to her. Her face assumed a poetic expression. She said she was going to miss me. "Let's go out into the garden," she invited me once Sinitsyna and Osip were gone. "Look, the apple trees are in bloom." "No thank you, I gotta go," was my reply. She went outside to see me off. I looked back from the corner, and she was still standing there on the porch, puffing out smoke rings, stately and sorrowful."

The entire romantic heterosexual plot, as the narrator has come to know, carry out, and surpass it in partnership with Serge, uncoils again in this paragraph: the predestined entry of the significant other into one's life; the pain of being apart and the rare opportunity for being alone together (contemplating the nature, to boot); the inevitable, protracted goodbye, and the dignified sorrow of closure. Even the affectedly rhyming diminutives, "krylechke" and "kolechkami," help to place the scene within the narrator's "serial experience" of the "milen'kie." However, the plot's ritualistic beauty crumbles under Gorshkova's touch. As his tutoring sessions continue as foretold, the woman's infatuation with her student grows progressively assaultive: "I'd hide my hands so she couldn't grab them" ("Ia zapriatyval ruki, i ona ne mogla zahvatit' ih"); "She swiftly attacked me, seized me, and kneaded me in her arms" ("bystro nabrosias', shvatila menia i potiskala," 137). The latter act of violence, so jarringly out of keeping with Gorshkova's "poetic expression" but also, he faintly intuits, somehow of a piece with it, occurs when she announces the death of Vyacheslav von Plehve, Russia's Minister of the Interior assassinated in 1904 by the SR Combat Organization. The idle gossip of adults acting foolishly in the graveyard gains substance in the fact of unwanted and brutal physical contact: a fact triggered off by a murder, too.

Yet, to establish itself in the novel, the linkage between sex and bodily harm does not necessarily need anything so harrowing as child molestation, or so distant and abstract as political unrest. When the narrator reunites with an older, already sexually active Serge, he comments on his appearance as follows: "Serge had gotten fat. His mouth had become meaty, and something was darkening around his lips" ("Serzh rastolstel. Ego rot stal miasistym, i okolo gub ego uzhe chto-to temnelos'," 164). Accession to manhood, though in all probability skewed by the acrimony of a snubbed ex, makes meat out of flesh, and even the tentative facial hair of puberty "darkens" rather ominously (in another reminder of how closely interconnected the narrator's paramours are,

Serge's description overlaps significantly with that of another teenager, the non-virginal Kolia Liberman, "meaty and hirsute head to toe"/"tolstomiasyi i kosmatyi s golovy do nog," 122). It is somewhere, the boy estimates, between the two indefinite durations of anticipation and remembrance—monotonous, sure enough, but palliatively so—that the messy temporality of love receives from consummation a straightening jolt. Once streamlined by sexual acts, far-fetched though they might seem, the extendable, shimmering time of impossible catch-up between the lovers, metaphorized through Serge's library books that the narrator reads after him, always missing the last one due back (150), leads directly to the cemetery—that adult arena of "silly things."

By shifting the emphasis from time-defying intimacy onto future-oriented procreation, the harsh realities of sex bring out the body's meat-like perishability. The kinks of Stocktonian "managed delay" are smoothed out by the teleological linearity of heterosexual romance, which the narrator has reclaimed for himself through the queer cycles of impersonal companionship. Quite fittingly, he gauges these perils by two women closest to Serge. As he looks at Sophie, Serge's sister of high-school age, married with kids, the narrator is filled with the condescending sadness of someone who has so far dodged a similar bullet: "Poor thing, for some reason she already seemed to be about twenty years older" (148). More cautionary yet is the example of Ol'ga Kuskova, the "fast girl" for whose seductions the narrator did not have the time: "She whispered furtively to me that she'd be waiting for me the next day, after dark. […] I felt too lazy to go see [her]" ("Ona mne shepnula ukradkoi, chto zavtra buden zhdat' menia v sumerki. […] mne len' bylo idti k [nei], 165). Once Ol'ga begins, to use the Russian polite term for fornication, "to live"/"zhit'" with Serge (167), it is only a matter of time before she has to die. "Pitiful" and "unwieldy" ("mne bylo zhal' ee"; "nepovorotlivaia," 168) in her sex-augmented flesh, Ol'ga kills

herself soon enough in a kind of profanely humorous travesty of Russian literature's most revered female suicide, Anna Karenina: "She decided to play hard to get. Went to the railroad embankment, threw a sack over her head, and, having cozied up on the tracks, let a passenger train run her over" ("А она показала себя недотрогой. Отправилась на железнодорожную насыпь, накинула полотняный мешок себе на голову и, устроясь на рельсах, дала переехать себя пассажирскому поезду," 169). Although in line, at first blush, with the sentimental narratives favored by the narrator, this particular melodramatic gesture, brought on by the advancement of sexual relations (Ol'ga is, presumably, pregnant with Serge's child), differs from the rest in its irreproducibility. Only for so long can the form of romantic custom, hewn to and reappropriated by the narrator, belie the contents of procreative marital monogamy, which he knows to be life-ending despite its unearned pretensions to the giving of life. Ol'ga death by sex, synonymous with foreclosure of any further narrative possibilities, is what lies so solidly and immovably under the serializable surface of the boy's dalliances with virtual strangers.

The surface is, evidently, the spatial order that suits best the novel's chosen temporality. The narrator's superficial reenactments of straight romance that, oftentimes hilariously, manage to circumvent sex altogether serve many a queer purpose, broadening the functionality of children's "lip-syncing" in *Torn Boots.* Through these Muñozian surface-level disidentifications, there comes into being a peculiar child who sees the advertisements of adult depths for the imperatives that they are ("I didn't see anything noteworthy there"), and yet absorbs their rudimentary languages as formally adequate to his own deviance. What better code, the novel asks not without coyness, in which to speak of desire than words that do not belong or refer to anyone in particular? Of course, by having his narrator shun carnality as an acceleration of life and thus a hastening of death, Dobychin has a lot to say about, not only the abstractly managerial, but also the specifically

punitive workings of those entrenched mandates by which carnality at large is governed. A prerevolutionary Russian cousin to, as Judith Fetterley has it, the "ethereal sexless Peter Pan of Edwardian England," the narrator of *The Town of N* has his share of reservations about growing up expressly male, monogamous, and heterosexual, but the cousinship between the two is more distant than it appears to be.

Fetterley's "fantasy of the successful evasion of adulthood" does not become for Dobychin's child "the nightmare of being unable to grow up," precisely because he is not quite "ethereally sexless" to begin with (176–77). Rather, in allowing the boy to fall in love, most superficially, with the idea of falling in love, the novel undertakes the queer task of arbitrating what the content of sex may be if its form is an assortment of glances, a flick of the finger, or the apostrophic recollection of a name. As it imagines, and takes the solace of humor from, the teasingly erotic bond to be found in a common sexual disinheritance—and in explicit disavowals of sex, too, for that matter—*The Town of N*, I believe, pays homage to Muñoz', Stockton's, and Freeman's queer scholarship that combs the strictures and compulsions of romantic coupledom, gender differentiation, and self-governing maturity for what is livable and salvageable in them. Dobychin's performances of conventional devoutness, where religiosity and romance are knit together in a sort of low-key camp, suggest to me an alternative to the less reparative and more paranoid, in Sedgwick's still vital terms, forms of queer thought: those usually rubricked under critique of or transgression against normativity. Not at all preoccupied with how performative (i.e., artificial) the norms in themselves are, the novel's narrator, who markedly lacks so many attributes of a successfully queer self (such as, say, ingenuity, originality, and defiance), enlivens the artifice of the normal with nothing but sheer affects unhooked from sex proper. This self-effaced subject, who finds for his intensities a suitably self-less mode of storytelling, comes about only in relation

to his encounters with others, who are, in turn, destitute of personhood themselves: they all send out vocatives to the nominative. To quote Bersani, the narrator dwells in an ascetic virtuality that lies "on the other side of the sexual" (*Intimacies* 27); his love affairs, conditioned by a disablement of the ego, are uniformly "impersonal intimacies"—except that the pleasurable shattering of the self which Bersani illustrates with unprotected coitus at barebacking parties, Dobychin instantiates through an erotic abstinence (inherited, not without qualms I am sure, from the Russian Symbolists). One might say that Bersani does with sex as much as Dobychin does without.

The captors of sex are as diverse as is the company the narrator keeps in his flight from captivity: straight like Madmazelle Gorshkova or gay like the sadistic school inspector who "failed attractive students for the sake of some special sensations" ("provalival uchenikov s privlekatel'noi vneshnost'iu radi kakih-to osobennyh perezhivanii," 181); pedophilic like the both of them or age-appropriate like Louise, whose "powdered, swollen face" wears a "squint like Gorshkova's" ("litso u nee bylo pudrenoe, s odutlovatostiami"; "shchurias', kak kogda-to Gorshkova," 165). It matters surprisingly little whether the touch emanates from a "natural" source ("No eto tak estestvenno," remarks his mother's friend on Stefania's flirtations with the narrator, 131) or from an "unnatural" one (a male classmate, in an outrush of affection, "put his arm in mine, as if I were a young lady"/"Kak devitsu, on vzial menia pod ruku," 178). What matters exceedingly more is that any act explicitly billed as sex threatens to dragoon the narrator into the foregone conclusions of Foucauldian sexuality: its insidious depths, its loquacity, its always-final revelations of one's own self to oneself. Every kiss in the novel is thus a kiss of death, a betrayal of that aliveness which only suggestion and anticipation can nourish. The most treacherous kiss in history, of course, makes a well-timed appearance, as well: "Judas […] betrayed Jesus Christ by kissing," writes a teacher on the blackboard as his students uncomprehendingly copy the text ("'Iuda […]

tselovaniem predal Iisusa Hrista,' – i my nachali spisyvat','' 139). Once the profound self-illumination of sexual identity is initiated, no such surface-level, disidentificatory copying is sustainable any longer. Every name in the narrator's directory of "impersonally intimate" contacts will be saddled with a personality—with that "intolerable reduction" of Barthes' knowledgeable "gossip" which, among other things, genders the exalted, angelic "you" as a he or a she (*Discourse* 185).

So, it is from these discursive certitudes that the narrator takes flight, equating, much to Foucault's supposed pride, the fullness of sex-given subjectivity with coherent linguistic expression. The procedure of confession, both revelatory and constitutive of one's true sexual self, bobs and weaves throughout the novel as a comical chase: at first the children, deemed unworthy of individual penitence, are instructed to confess as a group and in their minds only ("velel nam vsem zaraz ispovedat'sia myslenno," 135); later, as the priest inquires whether he has committed adultery ("poliubopytstvoval […], 'preliuby sotvorial' li ia"), the teenaged narrator averts self-examination by playing the fool ("Ia poprosil, chtoby on raz"iasnil mne, kak delaiut eto, i on, ne nastaivaia, otpustil menia," 180). Equally amusing is his response to an older woman who incites him to evaluate a couple living in sin: "So, what do you think of them? […] I was surprised. – Nothing, – said I" ("Kak vy k nim otnosites'? […] Ia udivilsia. – Nikak, – skazal ia," 179).

Overall, however, the tenor of his evasions is wistful more than it is playful: "Excited, [Ershov] grabbed my hand, lifted it up, and pressed it against himself. I quietly pulled it away" ("Uvlechennyi, on shvatil moiu ruku, pripodnial ee i prizhal k sebe. Ia tiho otnial ee," 175). In the interest of remaining "quiet," then—unresponsive, that is, to the bugles of sex and sexuality in like manner—the narrator begins to hide from his mother, whose meddlesome participation in his life, after all, is the result of a sexual act ("S etogo dnia ia staralsia vesti sebia tak, chtoby ei pro menia

nichego nel'zia bylo uznat',' 157). He also tear ups his letters to Serge because they will be intercepted anyway ("Maman zhe pered otpravkoi chitala by ih," 148). Likewise, a mixture of relief and despondency tinges his hovering at the threshold of puberty as he longs to stay 14 years old before "the dangerous age" of 15 imparts to him any definitive lineaments ("'Opasnyi,' – podumal ia, – 'vozrast,' kogda ia poimu uzhe eto, – p'iatnadtsat', a mne eshche tol'ko chetyrnadtsat' let," 159).

To circle back to pronouns, the narrator's I, for most of his tale, is spoken as a we ("my"). More often than not, this collective "my" merges him with adults, whose reactions, assessments, and expectations he "lip-syncs" before the terminal ruling of identity forces him to choose a self of his own. While reporting on his borrowed emotional and rhetorical stances, such as the refrain "I was moved" ("Ia byl tronut") or the uncalled-for solemnity of "ia vyshel torzhestvennyi" (139), the boy brims with a laughable seriousness. He is ludicrous in his adult dress-up, yet as grave as can be a child smitten with the templates of adulthood and unsure whether his love is requited. Although there is much to be said for his inextricable fusions with Maman, I am hesitant to box the narrator's reservations about sovereign selfhood in the masterplot of Freudian narcissism. His mother, demonstrably, is no boy's best friend; in fact, his "we" just as easily assimilates his father, friends of the family such as Aleksandra Lei, and even the hired help such as Cecilia the Catholic maid (to say nothing, for example, of the multiple characters in Gogol's *Dead Souls*). To me, his unfinalized "we" parses more persuasively as a queer expedition through available options, one restricted by time (i.e., the imminence of distinct sexuality) and bittersweet for the dawning realization that those options are fewer and patently less interesting than advertised.

In his tenacious fidelity to a sense of coextension with the world around him—his last hurrah of "we" before "I" cleans house; his indecorously prolonged mirror stage, if you will—the

narrator celebrates his incomplete presence in said world. This positionality of a lover, who, according to Barthes, is always both feminine and infantile ("This man who waits and who suffers from his waiting is miraculously feminized"; "Only the lover and the child have a heavy heart" 14; 53), safeguards him against the Hobson's choice of mature masculinity. That presence, he intuits, is as deceptively steadfast as it is the harbinger of a sex-quickened absence. The pun of his late father's "prisutstvie," which in Russian means both presence and government service, is something of a *memento mori*.

3.4. On Skin-Deep Loving and Living

Thus, the superficiality and transience of his "impersonal intimacy" with Serge is ever-preferable to Andrei's personalized, commonsensical, in-depth commitment; somehow, it even scores more durability points thanks to its repeatability with others, where otherness is hardly a concern. The queerly sentimental connection forged between the narrator and Serge, who does not see beyond his most shallow attributes (now he calls him, disparagingly, "a switchboard operator's son"; now reveres him as a high-school student, 129; 132), still holds more future—or better yet, a longer present—than the reasonable, character-based rapport propounded by Andrei, who is "not a good fit" because he "takes it upon himself to reflect on everything" ("Andrei ne ochen' dlia menia podhodit, potomu chto obo vsem beretsia rassuzhdat'," 131). In Chapter 12, Serge quizzes his friend on the obscenities carved into his desk: "Are they body parts?" ("Chasti tela?," 133). Andrei, meanwhile, captions an image in a book as "Facial Features" ("Cherty litsa," 132). In a dilemma between the faceless transferability of a sexual promise ("chasti tela") and the compulsory individuation of a homosexual relationship ("cherty litsa": a path no less narrow for

not being straight), the narrator is proud to say that he is not at all tempted by the second, and final, offer: "Happy I was to feel no interest in [Andrei]" ("Ia dovolen byl, chto ne chuvstvuiu nikakogo interesa k [Andreiu]," 160).

Indeed, Andrei's unwillingness, or inability (this character, like all the rest, is completely externalized), to take part in the narrator's network of affections on an equal footing spells his eventual expulsion. "'Andrei,' said I, moving closer to him, 'there is this female student called Tusen'ka. 'Susen'ka?' said he. I got up and left him" ("– Andrei, – skazal ia, pododvinuvshis' blizhe: – est' odna uchenitsa po imeni Tusen'ka. – Susen'ka? – peresprosil on. Ia vstal i ushel ot nego," 146). The "wow!" of Natalie's name, proffered as initiation into a polyamorous fellowship, is debased into adult "gossip" as the name is mispronounced, whether it be a deliberate attempt to invalidate her or an entrance exam that Andrei cannot pass due to a deep-seated, surface-preventive flaw. Dobychin oftentimes portrays the circulations, rather than settlements, of desire in his short stories, the most accomplished of them being "Dorian Gray" (1925), where an affair between two women is constructed around their shared fascination with a man who wants neither. In *The Town of N*, to a greater degree still, no one love is independent from another. The narrator's love for Serge is mediated through oblique mentions of Natalie, about whom he does not know how to feel ("Serzh, chto by ty skazal o takom cheloveke…," 148). The would-be seductress Stefania (dubbed by Mother "a harlot"/"razvratnitsa"), unlike her sexually precocious colleague Ol'ga, continues to reside in potentiality, where she and the narrator are "happy with each other" ("dovol'ny drug drugom") thanks to the invoked presence of Serge and Andrei (131). Ershov has Natalie's eyes; Sofronychev is likeable because he dates her; Natalie herself stands at her most appealing while skating with Kolia Liberman, whose own attractiveness to the narrator is built out of his unanimous popularity with the ladies (168; 180; 163; 117).

Beyond the nominal exclamations issued now and again, the countless denizens of N are only ever characterized by their interconnectedness in desire; relationality supplants the essence without any remainder, to the point where its participants become well-nigh fungible (as long as they are predisposed to pronounce the "adorable" names correctly). Though frequently consistent with some homosocial configuration or other, and technically indebted to the Russian Symbolists' triangulations of rechanneled affect,[50] the novel's inter- and impersonal enmeshments, I think, paint a portrait of a desiring subject who is considerably less invested in renegotiations, let alone reestablishments, of any gendered power dynamics than the former,[51] or in erotic conservation for art's sake than the latter. What I see Dobychin do more purposefully is instantiate an ideal model of desire wherein the object's effaced interiority allows for relationships—perhaps, let us dream big, a whole uncharted sociality—unimperiled by difference. This attenuation of otherness through omnivorous erotic longing, I believe, overrides in the novel the object's unavailability, by which the inventors of various affective perpetuum mobiles, including the Russian Symbolists, have often sworn. As opposed to Babel's narrator, who must surmount his narcissism in order to create (and does so by enrolling in heterosexuality), Dobychin's practices Bersanian "impersonal narcissism": a queer manner of tolerating others (perhaps even, for Bersani, doing it all-inclusively) through the divestiture of the ego. It is this retention of intersubjective capacities that bids me classify the novel's erotic movements as those of desire, and not of a drive. Unlike Edelman's sinthomosexual,

[50] Once again, Olga Matich's *Erotic Utopia* ("The Symbolist Meaning of Love: Theory and Practice" chapter in particular) supplies a beautiful and perceptive overview of the subject. Dobychin's ideas on sexualized chastity and its ties to artistry prove, strange to say, even more complicated than their *fin de siècle* antecedents.

[51] As Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick writes in *Epistemology of the Closet* (the charter, as it were, of homosociality), "Men's accession to heterosexual entitlement has, for these modern centuries, always been on the ground of a cultivated and compulsory denial of the unknowability, of the arbitrariness and self-contradictoriness, of homo/heterosexual definition" (204). While Dobychin's narrator does participate in several male-female-male triangles that use the female as little more than their base, the "arbitrariness and self-contradictoriness of homo/heterosexual definition" plays a much more prominent role in these multidirectional arrangements than does the woman-sanctioned enablement of an otherwise unfeasible male-to-male attraction.

who forswears the perpetual delay of desiring for "the continuous satisfaction that the drive attains by its pulsions and not by its end" (*No Future* 86), Dobychin's subject meets the world through a series of shared deferrals and "nonsatisfactions"[52]—and does it in amazingly ethical ways, especially for someone unperturbed, say, by his own father's death. What gets in the way of this Bersanian utopian impulse, however, is the inevitability of sex. Like death and taxes, it comes and it taxes.

Though unconsummated in the traditional (and, for Dobychin, dismally reductive) meaning of the word, the narrator's liaisons with his "significant sames," whom he treats as dispositions toward the world rather than as the world's qualified, transcendental interpreters, remain markedly embodied as they find sex in the outskirts of sexual discourses and even smuggle their finds into those discursive fields. But, within the limited temporal scope of childhood, this model proves ideal not only in the aspirational, but also in the impracticable sense; and this is where, as it does in Babel, art comes in with most force. Androgyny, promiscuity, and anonymity signpost desire as it ought to but cannot be, at least not in any adult—duly subjectivized, linguistic, social—setting. Combined, the three features still amount to an artistic inexpressibility: a child's perfectly amorphous desire depends on an adult to shape it up and render it into literature. Yet, Dobychin, undeterred, saves the day.

Hints to the effect that the narrator of *The Town of N* will not grow up to be its author are sprinkled all over its pages, but red herrings abound, as well. One might suspect, for example, that the boy's queerly skewed miming constrains his creative vigor, if creativity is modernistically

[52] Shehovtsova's formulation of this "inclusivity" of postponement and disappointment is rather unimprovable: "At the end of the day, all characters, regardless of their gender, age, or temperament, are equal in the face of that which never came to be ("pered nesbyvshimsia"): in Dobychin's world, one hard-and-fast rule is always in effect, and that is the rule of wish unfulfillment ("zakon neispolneniia zhelanii")" (74).

taken to mean demiurgic generation of unprecedented forms. And this suspicion would not be ill-founded, either: originality, indeed, is not what he is after as he gamely copies samples from a cursive workbook ("'Kaftany,' spisyval ia s propisi, – 'zeleny'" 125); or takes obedient dictation from Gorshkova ("'Tiulen'i kozhi, – diktovala ona i puskala dym kolechkami, – idut na rantsy," 127); or receives the compliment "You're a poet" for, merely, reciting someone else's work (174). He himself freely admits to an imagination that does not exactly run wild: "Mne zhe na um nikogda nichego ne vzbredet" (142).

And yet, the narrator *does* become a writer, albeit one dramatically different from, and, we are made to understand, inferior to, Leonid Dobychin. As years in the narrative slip by, the boy's sentences noticeably lose their terseness and syntactic idiosyncrasies; subordinate clauses begin to multiply; nonchalant observation gives way to introspection. In Chapter 27, the reader is stunned to discover a full-fledged internal monologue communicating identifiable emotions and redolent of some realist 19th-century "sentimental education," possibly Turgenev's *Torrents of Spring* or Goncharov's *A Common Story*. In Chapter 18, just as stunning is the first mention of "reading Dostoevsky" ("chital Dostoevskogo," 145), instead of the habitually depersonalized "kniga 'Dostoevskii'/'Gogol''/'Dikkens'"; the affectionately flattened "'Dostoevsky' image" ("kartinka 'Dostoevskii'") in due time ripens into a grammatically fleshed-out statement: "His face looked like Dostoevsky's" ("litso ego napominalo litso Dostoevskogo," 177). In other words, the narrator learns to write *properly*, relinquishing in the process most of those stylistic improprieties that earned him the modernist right to narrate in the first place. The maladroit, misreading-based imitations of reality, with which he once filled his queer delay, undergo a temporal and teleological naturalization as a learning curve on the way to a consolidated writerly self.[53] As early as Chapter

[53] Here I depart slightly from Mazilkina's otherwise enviably compelling interpretation of the narrator's final "I once was blind, but now I see" moment. As she describes his vision as one that "experience cannot systematize" ("ne

8, Maman, having consulted her respectable friends, compels her son to start writing ("Ona reshila, chto mne nado nachinat' pisat'," 124). By the novel's end, the narrator has fully succumbed to her command. He still writes derivatively, with Chekhov, rather than cursive workbooks, now being the original that he copies, but does so from the completed, identity-insured position of a diligent apprentice.[54]

This surreptitious change, so cleverly concretized in the narrator's evolving sentence structures, vocabulary expansion, and mastery of punctuation, never occurs too far from the solidification of his sexuality. A captivated girl observes that he is the same but different: his eyes betray—an English verb in whose polysemy the author doubtless would have rejoiced—a certain mutation ("vse takoi zhe, no v glazah chto-to drugoe," 137). With the affected naivete of his own protagonist, Dobychin remains loyal to the literal, and thus also corporeal, dimension of seeing. Here, his narrator both converges with Stephen Dedalus, whose artistic vision springs from "being as weak of sight as he was shy of mind," and diverges from him, since Joyce's youth "drew less pleasure from the reflection of the glowing sensible world through the prism of a language manycoloured and richly storied than from the contemplation of an inner world of individual emotions mirrored perfectly in a lucid supple periodic prose" (180). The childish gift of "a lucid supple periodic prose," for Dobychin, should be spent precisely on "the glowing sensible world," leaving the adult "language manycoloured and richly storied" to "individual emotions." Alas, the

uporiadochivaetsia opytom"), and with a good deal of conceptual dexterity notes that his flattened world, once perspective is shoehorned in, "is deducted an entire reality" ("mir sokrashchaetsia na tseluiu real'nost'," 86), she also equates the narrator with Dobychin himself: "The novel is not finished because the character put on a pair of glasses" (88). I think the novel has been written precisely because Dobychin does no such thing, while his narrator goes on to write things that have nothing to do with the style and preoccupations of *The Town Of N.*

[54] In a letter to Mikhail Slonimskii, Dobychin expresses the utmost contempt for the vestiges of such "apprenticeship" writing that he detects in his own short story "The Sailor": "There is nothing interesting in it; it looks—as if a high-schooler wrote it following the Classical Models" ("Interesnogo v nem nichego net, on pohozh – kak budto uchenik starshih klassov sochinial po Klassicheskim Obraztsam," 289). The capitalization of "Classical Models" is, of course, the most contemptuous shot fired in this brief bout of self-deprecation.

onslaught of interiority and coherence, both literary and sexual, cannot be fended off once and for all. What is quite remarkable is that this paradoxical impoverishing enrichment of the self does not coincide to a hair with the advent of heterosexuality.

Corrected with a pair of glasses, the narrator's roving eye does land, in the end, on Natalie, but shortly before that he has an equally enlightening aha moment whose manifest homoeroticism distinguishes it from the previous moments of "ah," "oh," and "ogo": "On the seashore, having found themselves without any pants or jackets, in the water, they all suddenly became different than they had been in school. From that day on, I started thinking about them differently" ("Na vzmor'e, ochutias' bez shtanov i bez kurtok, v vode, vse vdrug stali drugimi, chem byli v uchilishche. S etogo dnia ia inache stal dumat' o nih," 173). As the boys' nudity awakens him to an irrevocable change in his own sexual optics, the communal bathing scene echoes an earlier one in which a friend took him out peeping at swimming women: "Then Schuster brought me to the 'female spot,' but my eyesight was worse than his, so the bathers looked to me like blurry, palish smudges" ("Potom Shuster svel menia k bab'emu mestu, no ia videl huzhe, chem on, i kupal'shchitsy mne predstavlialis' rasplyvchatymi belesovatymi piatnyshkami," 156). The newly-gained vision, then, can hold in its focus men and women alike, for the gendered object-choice plays second fiddle to the *necessity* of choice as such. That Natalie is a girl, ultimately, is less of an impairment to the narrator's presumable future writing than the novel's concluding prioritization of essence over appearance: "I would want to see Natalie now and find out what she's like" ("Mne interesno by bylo uvidet' teper' Natali i uznat', kakova ona" 182).

The double bind of having to remedy nearsightedness (i.e., lose innocence) in order to write originally, and having to keep it because the entire novel owes its original point of view to it, resolves itself by splitting up narrator and author. The boy, who once distilled Natalie down to the

direction of her gaze ("glazki ee […] byli podniaty naiskos' vlevo," 163), and admired Serge for seeing in Repin's painting only Ivan the Terrible's "incredibly bulging eyes" ("vykatyvaet neveroiatno glaza," 167), is no more. The flower he astigmatically espied in Tusen'ka's hair yields to "what she's like": her body as a whole, her sexual significance, her psychological traits. Leonid Dobychin the author, in the meantime, takes credit for the preservation—or artistic fabrication—of a myopic virginity waived by his narrator.

The load-bearing irony of this transformation (one that Dobychin, with his signature wryness, denies in his own ever-immature style) is also its core metaphor: Jesus' anastasis and ascension. By repeating Christ's post-resurrection words, *Noli me tangere*, the boy actually reverses their meaning: if He beseeches Mary Magdalene to stop clinging to His past self, he wants his women (and men) to leave him a while longer in a pre-future, pre-I state of being. Where the Savior's resumed carnality starts him off on a redemptive transition to pure spirit, the narrator's implacable move is toward full, conclusive embodiment—but not away from some bodiless childhood, either. After all, the flatness that he so cherishes is, to an extent, an optical illusion, and his surfaces are evidently in conflict with, say, the flat images with which Gorshkova tries to entice him (120). They do have a volume of their own, much like his untouchable body still engages in various sensual experiences: it is no coincidence that the picture of an angel that stands in for Vasia is convex ("mestami vypuklyi," 110); and the object that he regards most pornographically, in dreamy privacy, is a cardboard replica of a building ("kartonazh," 126); and his favorite pastimes are "live photographs" and "electric theatre"—which is to say, tangible bodies pretending to be in the two dimensions of film. What the repercussions of touch bode for him, then, is a parting from his ability to use the body sparingly, prospectively, and secretively; a parting from a subjectivity that was prior to the formation of a subject.

IV. Childhood and Animality in Pavel Zal'tsman's *The Puppies*

An accomplished visual artist from Pavel Filonov's circle and a film-set designer by trade, Pavel Zal'tsman honed his sole novel, *The Puppies* ("Shchenki"), in fits and starts between 1932 and 1952. The manuscript was revised, although, in all likelihood, not quite completed, in the early 1980s, and remained unpublished until long after the author's death in 1985. When the book, cobbled together from a congeries of notes, came out at last in 2012, critical notices in Russia were uniformly rapturous but cautious, too, promising the reader an experience that often goes by the genteelism "rewarding": Valerii Shubinskii, for example, tactfully warns of "a certain readerly sophistication" demanded by Zal'tsman's prose ("trebuet osoboi chitatel'skoi izoshchrennosti"). Indeed, *The Puppies* is a novel of relentless syntactic complexity, its lexicon at times verging on Futurist *zaum*, its characters baffling in their ontological indeterminacy, and its setting consequent more on some fabulously disorienting freedom of movement than on any terrestrial verisimilitude. Flinging its reader at will from the Baikal region to Moldova to Petrograd, and populated by creatures who shuttle indecisively between the rungs of Osip Mandelstam's proverbial "rubbery Lamarckian ladder,"[55] the novel's fluid space, of course, cannot but form a most peculiar relationship with time. "Most likely," hazards Piotr Kazarnovskii in his article, "time in the novel is conditional" (*uslovno*). Zaltman himself, writing in his diary, is both more radical and more evasive than his future critic: "Time doesn't exist. I had mourned in advance all the horrors that I

[55] D.S. Danin details the poet's early-1930s "love affair with biology" in his article "Osip Mandelstam's Fluke" ("Nechaiannoe schast'e Osipa Mandel'shtama, published in *Nauka i zhizn'*, №7, 1999). Particularly noteworthy is an excerpt where Mandelstam meditates on Lamarck's "shame" for "evolution's shamelessness": "[Lamarck] never forgave nature that little trifle we call variegation of species"—an observation very much in tune with Zal'tsman's own thinking on the subject. In his afterword to *The Puppies*, Il'ia Kukui cites another Russian modernist, one more suitable from a biographical standpoint: the fellow OBERIU member Nikolai Zabolotsky. As he sketches out parallels between *The Puppies* and Zabolotsky's poem "Lodeinikov," Kukui quotes a stanza that does mirror Zalt'sman's novel rather strikingly: "Природы вековечная давильня/Соединяла смерть и бытие/В один клубок, но мысль была бессильна/Соединить два таинства ее."

would endure" (291). In the following chapter, I attempt to articulate how exactly the writer engages with this "most likely, conditional," "non-existent" time. The interwoven temporalities of *The Puppies*, invariably rooted in physical violence, not only structure what otherwise looks like narrative chaos, but also speak to—and seek to amend—some cultural givens, such as an idealizing trust in animals and children, inherited from the Romantics, and the poeticized isolated moment vaunted by many a modernist. Meanwhile, the modern impermanence of the self, a post-Freudian given that it would be philosophically naïve, if not to say barbaric, to dispute, infuses Zal'tsman's novel with a particularly archaic—and thus also temporal in nature—horror. It is this visceral fear of the animal's and child's shared unknowability, as well as of time's inconstancy, the pliancy of anthropological categories and the fragility of language, that allows me to put this modernist novel in a curiously anachronistic dialogue with a broad swath of postmodernist thought. Bracketed into the latter are such lines of inquiry as posthumanism, animal studies, and queer theory, all of which, to varying degrees, tap into the nebulousness of humanity: as a taxonomic entity, as an autonomous linguistic authority, and as an assembly of well-defined and stringently compartmentalized bodies, regulated through gender and sexuality.

4.1. "Time of No Division": Zal'tsman Against Linearity

The exasperating, meandering Civil War odyssey of two starving puppies, smitten with their respective human ladyloves and on occasion treated by the outside world as vagrant boys, ventures beyond the distinctly possible with so much fervor that all appeals to earthly sense—to any realism at all, let alone the then-reigning socialist one—soon begin to sound positively improper. However, if the reader is willing to meet the text at its peculiar wavelength, she will not take long to realize that Zal'tsman's perverse, fragmented time-consciousness is not barren of *all*

chronological comfort, and most events do arrange themselves, with due effort, into somewhat legible sequences. War Communism may, for all we know, be succeeded here by the New Economic Policy, but the Puppies, for instance, still fail to grow up to be dogs. The bizarre fact that the passage of time holds no sway over the characters' morphology prepares us for the unremitting endangerment of linearity that each scene at least threatens, and frequently enacts. Without calling too much attention to itself, the text's temporal surface is rippled over now and again by a time loop (e.g., the monstrous campfire scene is suddenly reiterated, now through Lidochka's and Vera's eyes, 46), or by a belated backstory that discomposes the already-established meaning of a scene initially presented *in media res* (e.g., the altercation between the Soldier and "Iron Boy" in Part I appears to be motivated by theft, but a later flashback reveals that Kol'ka is avenging his sister's rape).

Part IV is especially rich in reshufflings of chapters and other mishandlings of linearity, permitting some characters, for instance, to wait for a wagon that has already arrived, or for a dress already delivered and tried on. To catch a glimpse of such temporal knotting, in defiance of all the pieties of verb agreement, look no further than Chapter 1: "The tent stands empty (*pustuet*), from all four corner to the middle tentpole, slightly nibbled on, the cracks are leaking (*natekaet*), and somewhere grass has already broken through the brick floor" (8). The static verb "pustuet" here is put on equal footing with the dynamic "natekaet" (the tent, as it were, is actively "standing empty"), turning a state into a process, while the long duration of "natekaet" rubs off on the grass that, quite implausibly, "has broken through" by the end of the sentence. Protracting and thickening the action are also numerous adverbial participles, whose profusion is brandished as early as Chapter 1, when the soldiers' maneuvers are recounted with no main verb whatsoever: "dispelling swarms of blue flies," "riding around," "leaving behind," "making a detour" ("razgoniaia tuchi

sinih muh," "ob"ezzhaia," "ostavliaia," "ogibaia," 9). The reader, then, is compelled to fill this lacuna with a verb (say, "idut"). Other times, the narrator's reveling in pure, inexpedient movement gets in the way of determining by whom the action is even performed:

> "Петька наблюдает ползанье по полке; с трудом, так как черные следы, как когти под крылом, вонзаются, разделяя тело, разрывая связки, в жару, и сладкий кусок глотает насильно, противясь, неподвижен, убегая, спотыкается" (26).

> "Pet'ka watches the crawling on the berth; with difficulty, because black tracings, like talons under the wing, sink in, dividing the body, severing the ligaments, in the heat, and forced to swallow a chunk of something sweet, reluctant, immobile, running away, stumbles."

Zal'tsman's interest in, shall we say, animated stasis—in oxymoronic motions such as "protivias', nepodvizhen, ubegaia"—increases considerably as soon as physical harm enters the picture. Here is, for example, how the Owlet's pulsating, and therefore "dynamic," wound is depicted:

> "Когти расслабляются, разъединенные кости, смещенные связки, хрупкие прослойки жира, раздавленные или смятые, – всё притягивает горячую кровь; отработка, не находящая выхода, медленно уносимые частицы скапливаются и оволакивают воспаленное место" (27).

> "The talons relax, the severed bones, the dislocated ligaments, brittle layers of fat, flattened or squashed, everything attracts hot blood; discharge, directed nowhere, the particles, slowly drifting away, gather up and coat the inflamed spot."

The narrator's proclivity for such "close-ups," attentive to the fluttering of microprocesses in an apparent rest, is a particular instance of the text's overall organization, according to which the characters' fantastic mobility aligns perfectly well with their captive settings. All living creatures in *The Puppies*, migrating between different locales and taxonomies with equal adroitness, are doomed to miss each other narrowly and get lost like babes in the woods, sometimes literally. Even the titular Puppies' climactic reunion in Part V does not come to pass, since one mistakes the other for his own reflection in the shop window. Thus, the novel's time-space continuum makes for an incongruous combination of stasis and dynamics, in which the overall geographical scope is illogically unified (from Moldova to Baikal) but separate locations never cease to fluctuate. A timelessness that trumps any development clashes in it with an overwrought continuousness of action, magnified by the narrator's piercing vision.

To illustrate how this incongruity functions in the novel, let me turn to the aforementioned conflict between the Soldier and the "iron" Kol'ka, still unnamed at this point. Having hurt his leg in hot pursuit, the Soldier orders the boy to stop, but he "runs away while standing still" ("ubegaet, ne shodia s mesta," 17) and then falls down, shot. "Sir, why did you kill me," wonders the boy out loud before he is "resurrected" to have his revenge (his "iron" body deflects lead): "…having pointed the barrel at his chest, just to be sure, and holding the revolver with both hands, he shoots four times, peeking after each: what has happened?" ("...nadevia dulo dlia vernosti na ego grud' i

derzha revol'ver obeimi rukami, streliaet chetyre raza, razgliadyvaia posle kazhdogo – chto sluchilos'?"). The boy then picks up the stolen rooster, "fumbling in the dark," and "runs away pouring downhill" ("ubegaet, ssypaias' vniz po sklonu," 18). The duration of this whirlwind scene is ensured by an overabundance of verbs, as pointless as they are persistent: "sam upolzaet, tol'ko trudno" ("crawls away, but it's difficult"); "korchitsia" and "probuet polzti" ("writhing" and "trying to crawl"); "tianetsia i perevorachivaetsia" ("reaches out and turns over"); "volocha nogu, upiraias' rukami [...] sharit v trave" ("dragging his feet, pushing himself up […] gropes in the grass," 17).

Both of them gripped by agonistic convulsions, the boy and the Soldier ape each other's gestures, mirror-like, but remain hostage to a situation that has to be resolved in death—i.e., a release from this time-space muddle, a redemption from all the nonsensical "running while standing still." And yet, in the novel's temporality that apprehends cyclical, spasmodic micromovements in fixed forms (such as the body or language), death—the most, it would seem, fixed of all forms—cannot be static and atemporal. So, the "dead" are given an opportunity to inquire after the motive of their murder, and to avenge themselves not once but four times, each death-dealing shot followed by a "peek" into what has changed in the murdered murderer. Death for Zal'tsman is reproducible, fluid, and inconclusive. The temporal inconstancy of the one event on whose absolute inviolability we can rely—death—is transmitted to the surrounding space as well, in which the "murdered" boy (and a four-time murderer after the fact) continues his uncertain, unclarified movements, "groping in the grass" and "pouring downhill."

The Puppies abounds in scenes that undermine the transcendental authority of death, ranging in their poker-faced gallows humor from some children's multi-step attempts to drown a

cat to the storyline of the book-loving Bear who, presumably, is a reincarnated male suicide.[56] Life, meanwhile, palpitates with unimpeded mutations, repetitions, and fragmentations (the Puppies, for example, have obvious human counterparts, Pet'ka and the Nephew, while Tania is split into two independent characters). Songs furnish erroneous prophesies (the Foal falsely predicts the Puppies' imminent reunion, 115), and in dreams come imprecise visions of the future (Lidochka fantasizes about her soon-to-be rapist, 53). It is, for lack of a better word, only *natural* that a life like that cannot be circumscribed by any finite contour of physical demise: it has to go on like an action that overhangs with participles but lacks a verb; or like a present tense that is no longer future-oriented. The Second Puppy crisply labels this temporality as "time of no division"––"vremia bez razdelen'ia" (it is also worth noting that a few pages earlier this Puppy both dies and goes crazy, in that order, which in the novel's precincts is, of course, business as usual).

Stabbed through with memories of food and directed only at sating some appetite or other, this continuous present tense of ageless, deathless characters is a moment of hunger, sure, but also one of frantic, insatiable speech. In their syncretic worldview, pagan incantations alternate freely with fervid monotheistic addresses. Pet'ka, for instance, appeals to "unresponsive gods" (56), and then proffers the following lament: "Dear God! I'm praying to him who will answer my prayer… Send me some bread in the forest, not to eat but to live by." He continues: "I may die, but let us live together" (58). The prayer, once again, treats death as a condition destitute of finality, since the boy declares his willingness to die if that is what it takes to live with Lidochka. The focus on the mouth as both an organ of both speaking and digesting reaches its climax in the standoff

[56] In his human life, now happily forgotten, the Bear "[used to wake up] from fatigue and for pain" ("[prosypalsia] ot ustalosti dlia boli"). However, now that he "has been replaced by time" ("podmenilo vremia"; the time of death, one would assume), he is submerged in a purely intellectual, contemplative state of being: "Let others run and fly. I have my thoughts." This state , nevertheless, does not negate carnality—on the contrary: only "losers are destroyed by death," while "a co-owner of experiential thought" "grows out of meat" ("vyrastaet iz miasa") (74).

between the immortal street urchin and Lidochka. “Give me some money, or I’ll bite you. […] You scream – I bite,” browbeats Kol’ka while the girl “hurries and feels his iron teeth.” Having taken away her money and sausage, Kol’ka hides the rubles in his cheek (228). In other words, “time of no division” is, first and foremost, a corporeal time inasmuch as it is both the duration of the characters’ speech, frustrated by its inadequacy to external reality (“moving the lacerated tongue with difficulty”/“s trudom shevelia rassechennym iazykom,” 55), and the duration of their unavailing, painful internment in unsatisfied bodies. But, before I attempt a clarification of how these bodies experience time inwardly, I would like to specify the stakes of these bodies’ external evaluation in the novel’s endless present.

4.2. The Habit of Violence: Zal’tsman Against Immortality

As I hope to have shown by now, the present tense of *The Puppies* has vanishingly little in common with European modernism’s euphoric explorations of the moment, understood as a “jubilant undoing of totalities” (Bahun 51) and meant to humanize the subjective time wrested from inhumanly objective history by turning a quantitative substance into a qualitative one, the lethal *chronos* into a salvific *kairos*. Caryl Emerson maps this tendency onto the Russian context, using Andrei Bely’s *Peterburg* as her point of tangency: “Apocalypse and strong closure are everywhere prepared for during these agitated revolutionary days, but they default to *more shabby, compassionate, everyday outcomes*” (172; emphasis added). Or, as Zal’tsman’s fellow OBERIU and *Chinari* sympathizer and kindred spirit Iakov Druskin would tersely put it, “I don't understand it when people say that something exists in time. Everything exists in the moment and is destroyed in time” (926).

In his detailed, seemingly slow-motion depictions of atrocities perpetrated in a "time of no division" (the sadistic murder of a hen in the "Tabor" chapter is gruesome evidence enough),[57] Zal'tsman hardly counts on the reader's empathy invoked, say, by Bergsonian *durée* or by Husserl's "shared present"[58]—some temporality that is intuitively compassionate by definition. The unconcerned, convulsive monotony of violence inflicted throughout the novel deprives violence of any and all finitude (even in death), rather than emphasize its moral reprehensibility: in a sense, it is akin to Prince Myshkin's seizures, except stripped of their epiphanic nature and followed by another fit, another contraction of the "bad infinity," instead of relief and enlightenment ("neobychainyi vnutrennii svet ozaril ego dushu," Dostoevsky 188). Just as the text's mutilations of conventional Russian syntax and grammar—those hindered "movements of the lacerated tongue"—bode here no linguistic rebirth promised by the avantgarde, so the novel's mechanistic resurrections and reincarnations end up profoundly pessimistic in essence, and immortality comes across as a truly depressing circumstance ("the Iron Boy" and the Bear spring to mind once again).

It is no accident that the warped "time of no division" is mostly inhabited by children, animals, and various creatures in-between (at some point, for instance, the Owl recalls once being a "stuffed bird"/"chuchelom," 37). The chosen time period, however "conditional," is telling, too, insofar as the Civil War, as Olga Kucherenko convincingly demonstrates in her *Little Soldiers*, not

[57] "The Brother says, "I'll kill it with a rock." He goes off to find one, but they are all too small. Finally, he comes back with a fist-sized one, and hits the chicken's neck. There is plenty of noise, flapping of the wings, cackling. The sister snatches the rock and gives it a try herself, but the chicken thrashes and flails around; a lucky stroke breaks its neck, it tries to wiggle itself free even more desperately, its bleary eyes unseeing. [...] Tanya hits harder still, red with anger, and pokes out the chicken's left eye and breaks its beak. Screams in the dugout are never-ending. At last, she manages to squash the head completely. The split brain is squeezed out onto a tray, Tanya's hands are splattered with blood" (35).

[58] On Bergson's temporal interpenetrations between the concepts of "sympathy" and "intuition," see David Lapoujade's *Powers of Time: Versions of Bergson* (2017). On how *Einfühlung* ("feeling-into") hinges on the pre-analytical, timebound sense of a *gemeinsam Gegenwart* ("shared present") in Husserl, see Marek Pokropski's "Timing Together, Acting Together. Phenomenology of Intersubjective Temporality and Social Cognition" (2015).

only secured the Soviet child's linkage to the rebooted Russian history, but also primed him for the next enemy attack through military-themed games (*zarnitsy* and *orliata*) and carefully curated reading lists in school (89–90; 102–105). Although Zal'tsman's beastly children, forever-young, bulletproof, and prone to an especially fumbling, reiterative violence, do not participate in any hostilities per se, their very presence in the scene bares the absurdities at which the adolescents in official Soviet literature (and, by extension, Soviet mythology) only hint. These absurdities are, doubtless, of temporal nature as well, in that the "official" kids, barred from war on the basis of age, make to replace the fallen adults and bide their time until a new batch of old-enough soldier arrives (see Pavel Bliakhin's 1921 *Red Devils*; Aleksandr Fadeev's 1946 *The Young Guard*; Arkadii Gaidar's 1935 "The Tale of a Military Secret," etc.).

Furthermore, Kucherenko underscores the significance of war in general, immortalized and permanently anticipated by the Civil War's mythologemes, as a transcendental experience, irrevocably lost and impotently longed for: "Self-sacrifice," she writes about the ideological mandates of youth on the eve of World War II, "becomes an end unto itself" (105). Overcome by a certain "global feeling" ("mirovym sostoianiem"), the Young Pioneer Petia Sagaidachnyi dreams in his famous diary of "rebirth" ("pererozhdenii") and "tempering" ("zakalke") (qtd. in Kucherenko 105) by means of imminent war. In the meanwhile, Zal'tsman's underage ragamuffins, leading a monotonous life of crime and able to "shake off molten lead" ("sbrasyva[iushchie] s sebia raspliushchennyi svinets," 202), grotesquely reenact this self-sacrifice of Russian boy soldiers, angled in the long run at heroic victory over time and the posterity's atemporal "vechnaia pamiat'" ("eternal memory"). By travestizing the immortality of children, the author discerns in the Civil War pandemonium that Soviet eschatology (also worried over, for

instance, in Andrei Platonov's *Foundation Pit*) which agrees to kill today's children, and on an industrial scale at that, on behalf of the children of tomorrow.

Opposing it to gradual growth and provable metamorphoses, both characteristic of the *Bildungsroman* genre, philosopher Paul Ricœur meditates on "a jagged chronology interrupted by jumps, anticipations, and flashbacks," best suited for times of violence and danger: i.e., for structures that have lost their "overall internal cohesiveness" (81). Taking into account the arbitrary contingencies governing in *The Puppies* all transformations and encounters, whether accomplished or missed, it is also tempting to recognize in its condensed present tense a Bakhtinian hiatus, that "highly intensified but undifferentiated" temporality of exception which designates a "pure digression from the normal course of life" (Bakhtin 90). In order to investigate the exasperating timelessness of war—an "adventure time" made boring, routinized through the repeated confusions of armed conflict—Canadian scholar Maureen Moynagh sifts through African child-soldier fiction in her "The War Machine as Chronotope." Drawing upon both Ricœur and Bakhtin, she puts forth a "chronic temporality without an ending—or future" (325), which is so benumbed that it is "disruptive to death itself" (331). Indeed, the First Puppy echoes this perception of war-torn reality as an inescapable, preprogrammed monotony of outstanding occurrences, when he is struck with a sudden déjà vu:

> "Всё, что происходит сейчас, было видено давно, и тогда было известно, что это будет, и в подтверждение этого ощущения вдруг издали слышатся несколько выстрелов, а потом непрекращающаяся трескотня и гул" (208).

> "Everything that is going on at the moment has been seen before, and it was known back then that it would be, and a few shots ring out in the distance to confirm this feeling, followed by an incessant rattling and a din."

In coming back to the previously recapped scene with the "resurrected" boy who avenges himself with four "deaths" in a row, Moynagh's Bakhtinian-Ricœurian interface of exceptional and routine helps us better to understand the mechanics of this, as it were, *habit of violence* developed by the child—itself the most ill-fitting and untimely figure on the battlefield. In the protracted emergency to which war amounts, death, neutered by its own recurrence, is no longer capable of even stymying plot development. The curiosity displayed by a boy who "shoots four times, peeking after each: what has happened?" makes a cruel mockery both of the plasticity of children's worldview, so cherished by the European civilization since the Enlightenment, and of the more specifically Soviet variations on vigilance attributed to the Young Pioneers and summarized by Nadezhda Krupskaia's slogan "Train your sharpness of sight!" ("Razvivaite zorkost'!" qtd. in Gusarova). Zal'tsman himself, in the novel's presumed conclusion, credits children with a unique susceptibility to wishful conditionality—a kind of dreamy subjunctive mood: "Again with 'would,' 'would'—the childish pleas" ("Opiat' by, by – detskie pros'by," 298).

Behind these quizzical "what ifs," however, lurks an even more sinister implication of the child's death-defiance, which Moynagh insinuates and on which she refrains from elaborating. In discussing the fetishes distributed among African child-soldiers "to make them bulletproof" (331), she cannot help but conjure up the mythology of child immortality along with its biopolitical ramifications. From the medieval Children's Crusade to the trope of the drummer boy, this potent mythology ascribes talismanic powers, reliant on invincibility by dint of innocence, to the abstract

child in the same gesture that renders individual children interchangeable and expendable. In the Soviet case, this fantasy of a "syn polka"—a child camp follower, the regiment's mascot—is best exemplified by Andrei Tarkovsky's Ivan in *Ivanovo Detstvo* (1962): a precious but ultimately insupportable form of life, damaged by war beyond repair and thus, at the end of the day, sadly disposable. Far from any moralizing impulse, Zal'tsman none the less acknowledges the insidious predicament of a life so priceless it is without value, and does so quite explicitly when he writes about a gang of street urchins sent into the ambush as a decoy. It seems, however, that the indestructible boy Kol'ka has at least as much to say about the experience of mortality supplanted by infinite reproduction of life—so eloquent is his complete, absurd unawareness of anyone's vulnerability, including his own.

4.3. "A Panicked Metamorphosis": Zal'tsman Against the Romantics

As the cynical military adage goes, "Baby novyh narozhaiut" ("The women will give birth to new children"—and by extension, more soldiers). The saying has been erroneously attributed to Zhukov and Voroshilov, but it actually dates back to prerevolutionary times, at least to the Russo-Japanese War, when it was preceded by the exhortation "Beregite loshadei..." ("Take care of the horses…"). In order to attend to the language in which children speak of Zal'tsman's replaceable life, one of necessity has to listen to his animals too, who, thankfully, launch into long-winded, stream-of-consciousness monologues time and again. This "live" speech, defiantly incoherent, grammatically incorrect, and uncomfortably simulated in the animals' thoughts, is inextricably linked in the novel to the terrifying vitality of violence perpetuated in a layered, permeable present, in reflexive lurches, and in the absence of any cause-and-effect grounding (the

violence here has no clearly demarcated past or future). We may view Zal'tsman's child and animal characters as biopolitically undying in their regenerative "life eternal," or as timeless in the Bakhtinian sense—i.e., positioned outside of any perceptible change, expectancy of progress, or, simply, history. Following the interpretation offered by Lotta Zal'tsman, the author's daughter and literary critic in her own right, we might even see in *The Puppies*' ecosystem a "unified simultaneous composition" cubistically, à la Filonov's Analytical Realism, fusing "faces outside of time and space."[59] In any event, violence, to which most activity in the novel boils down, remains the crux of "time of no division" in that the current moment here is consubstantial with physical exertion, injury, and transgression of the body's boundaries. All the violence in *The Puppies*, whether it be purely performative (the "mischievous" drowning of a cat) or pragmatic (the crushing of a hen's skull out of hunger), is rendered meaningless by its own nonplussed continuation.

Overrun with bookish bears, melancholy hares, and suicidal camels, the universe of *The Puppies* is a pained, perturbed animal kingdom whose subjects are locked in the present tense. Man and beast here share a highly porous border, both unbalanced in their restive symbiosis. That no two categories are allowed in the novel to be either inviolably separate or decisively welded together prompts literary critic Igor' Gulin to call these organic oscillations, unabating and poorly motivated by the plot, "a panicked metamorphosis" and "metaphysical turmoil" ("metafizicheskaia sutoloka," 23). Together, they bear witness to the dissolution of language and with it, of all

[59] Invoking Filonov's theory of the object's "predicates" that ought to be activated in a "biodynamic entity," Lotta Zal'tsman expatiates on her father's visual artistic method as follows: "In the watercolors *Five Heads* and *The Steppe Song*, life's journey is interpreted, not as extended over time, but as a superimposition of moments compressed through memory into a point. Filonov's premise of "the fourth predicate," i.e., time (art usually manipulates the three predicates of space, shape, and color), which can be conveyed through the movement of form, is realized in the "principle of made-ness." In *Group Portrait with S. Ornshtein and Lidochka*, the faces are unified beyond time and space in a joint simultaneous composition. They are not united by shared action: instead, they are frozen, as though awaiting something (perhaps a miracle?)"

universal coherence. As the Puppies "decide to part ways" (12) and burst into song in the very first chapter, anthropomorphism comes quick and fast, and through various channels, from the animals' stream-of-consciousness monologues to the subtler insinuations of their partial humanity such as the First Puppy's "red fingers dripping with sweat" (19) or the Owlet's "sleepless crying" (33)—the former anatomically extravagant, the latter vested with unseemly affect. Contrary to the most foundational taxonomic criterion, traceable from the Biblical nomenclature to Jacques Derrida's ruminations on a cat who sees him utterly naked, sans any cultural subtext (in *The Animal That Therefore I Am*), Zal'tsman's animals go so far as to feel *ashamed* of their nudity: "[The Puppy] runs without fur, naked, with his ribs shivering, bashfully" ("[Shchenok] bezhit bez shersti, golyi, s drozhashchimi rebrami, stesnitel'no," 22–23).

Likewise, the expressions of people's animality span in the novel a rather wide spectrum, whose laws appear to have temporal patterns. While Tania's deviations from the handbooks of humanity hew, more or less, to the trope of experiential immediacy buried under and seeping through the cultural taboos ("Tol'ko gliadit do sih por zverem," 160), Lidochka's animistic perception of the world is not so much an irradicable vestige as a bemused grappling with something yet to come. In her hallucinatory anticipation of the Owl's arrival that will result in rape, she speaks of a "fluffy darkness" ("pushistaia temnota") and "frosted fur" ("moroznaia sherst'," 53), and then conjures up their intercourse in a scene of semi-wakeful courtship: "I'll revive myself for our date; in the blood, haloed with little feathers, a joy of warmth will be awakened" ("Ia ochnus' dlia svidaniia; v krovi, osenennoi peryshkami, prosnetsia vesel'e ot teploty," 54). The assault itself, perpetrated by the Owl at his most humanlike, heavily perfumed and clad in a "foppish suit" ("frantovyi kostium," 58), shatters Lidochka's earlier reverie of interspecies romance: "You'll be scaring off my girlfriends behind the door," she once fantasized

about the Owlet, “and looking through the window at the snow and touching my neck with something warm” (27). However, when later, in Part VI, the Owl violates Anna Mikhailovna he does it precisely as a bird, and is even recognized as such by an outside observer. “This is some kind of a bird, not a human” (“Eto kakaia-to ptitsa, a ne chelovek”), comments on the sex scene the 12-year-old boy Arkashka. “It’s an owl” (281). Lidochka, meanwhile, gives up the Owlet, already adorned with some erotic trappings, only too humanly.

As structurally unreasoned and as morally deadpan as is his violence, Zal’tsman’s amalgamations of ontological diversity—his “panicked metamorphoses”—are immune to the paranoias of didacticism compacted in J.D. Weinrich’s bon mot, “When animals do something that we like we call it natural. When they do something that we don't like we call it animalistic” (203). Without arrogating to themselves any moral power, the novel’s beasts absentmindedly morph into one another (the Hare, for instance, spreads “red branching wings” 96), and on occasion “forget” what guises they are currently wearing, as does the Owl in his human incarnation: “Balaban, as though unconscious (“vidimo pozabyvshis’”), takes too great a stride about six meters long” (262). The animal in Zal’tsman’s novel, in short, is too uncertain of itself to show man the error of his ways, or to illustrate by example the conceptual weakness of the term “humanity” in inhuman times.

4.4. “Every Mug Is a Face”: Zal’tsman Against Posthumanism

While the author’s philosophical and aesthetical incompatibility with moral pathos is rather obvious, his skepticism of any all-encompassing, reconciliatory wholeness-in-animality may baffle contemporary readers no less than his refusal to poeticize the moment as the most humanistic

unit of time. Maneuvering between two extremes, one marked by the Romantics' "metaphorical habit of composing a […] moral and cognitive bestiary" (Braidotti 84), the other by an equally, in Zal'tsman's opinion as I understand it, anthropocentric yearning for some blessed, "vanished continuity" of tribes (Pettman 67), the writer sets out to talk to nature on its own terms and in its own language—a decision that, understandably, reduces the transparency of his text by quite a few degrees. This operation of recognizing in the animal a radically inassimilable alterity has been central to the entire posthumanist project, as long as by "posthumanism" we mean a coordinated, concerted effort of deemphasizing sovereign subjectivity. The first procedure integral to this endeavor of epistemic humility—and consequently, flexibility; and consequently, tolerance—is "becoming-animal," which, in Deleuze and Guattari's account, refers to the subject's enraptured disbandment in an ever-evolving multiplicity of "demonic," rather than Oedipal (symbolic) or Jungian (archetypal), animals. "Becoming-child," incidentally, tabulates very similar flows of non-subjective, non-chronological, and polymorphous affect. In this swing from the "arborescent model" to the "rhizomatic" one, and from "the molar" to "the molecular," identity does not undergo any substantive change or regroup itself in contact with other identities but accepts, instead, the state of flux as the be-all and end-all: "a consistency all its own" (39). The result is, in Eugene Holland's phrase, the emergence of an ethically enhanced and nondestructive, "perpetually renewed, 'nomadic' subject always different from itself" (326)—a queerly decentered subject, too, if we define queerness as "the ongoing project of kneading plasticity into thinking" (Facundo 24).

Secondly, posthumanism asks of its practitioners a willingness to jam, if momentarily, the "anthropological machine" that generates meaning through otherness to humanity: "To render inoperative the machine that governs our conception of man will therefore mean […] to risk ourselves in this emptiness: the suspension of suspension, Shabbat of both animal and man"

(Agamben 92). Though in possession of enough artistic mettle and conceptual perspicacity to enter this "open," Zal'tsman is nevertheless horrified by what awaits inside. If, as Dominic Pettman puts it, "for a Deleuzian, the distinction between human, satyr, seal, or seductive software is a provisional and contextual one, soon to be dissolved by a different assemblage in the passage of time" (105), Zal'tsman deliberately abolishes the passage of time to let his "desiring machines" show their true colors. When the Agambenian interlude, "the suspension of suspension," becomes a throbbing eternity of wartime, *The Puppies* finds desire, not merely run amuck, but sapped, more damagingly still, of all its unlocatable propensity for renewal and mobility—and made as dull as an ache can be. Not only do the animals and children, to whom we leave it to tutor us in perpetual becoming, shrink the expanses of desire down to sustenance, copulation, and physical violence, they also grow mind-numbingly bored themselves under the conditions of limitless possibility. With his novelistic "rhizome" that looks a lot like a rat king, Zal'tsman presages and repudiates Agamben's self-rupturing and self-reassembling "coming communities," as well as the "flat ontologies" of speculative realism, which confer a sort of supportive, nonhierarchical sameness upon all species across the board. Writing in complete secrecy through the years of High Stalinism, he also catalogs the dreadfully meager options still in existence after the Russian Revolution, as Saul Bellow cracked wise in 1975, had "promised mankind a permanently interesting life" (193).

The narrator's panoramic view, unmoored from any particular vantage, is indeed subject-less, nonevaluative, and indiscriminate in its choices of objects: as Zal'tsman's German translator Christiane Körner observes, plainly and astutely, "the subject as an authority that interprets events against the outside world is no longer there." As if parodying narrative omniscience, a facility that in the case of *The Puppies* dives down to the absurd level of internal organs, Zal'tsman's narrator embarks on a course of envisioning animals as-they-are, yet arrives, as they keep themselves busy

only by devouring and maiming one another, or submitting to bouts of inarticulate introspection in the best-case scenario, at no redemptive potential whatsoever. As the subhead of one of the chapters goes, somewhat wistfully, "Every mug is a human face" ("Chto ni rozha – to chelovek," 147). In the abovementioned scene of intercourse between Anna and the openly avian Owl, the narrator brushes off any posthumanist faith in mutually enriching affinities between species: "But the *most horrible of all* is that some details speak of a certain common language, of a certain mutual understanding, of a certain…" ("No *samoe uzhasnoe*, chto nekotorye detali govoriat o kakom-to obshchem iazyke, o kakom-to vzaimoponimanii, o kakom-to...," 282; emphasis mine). *The Puppies*, briefly put, is a novel allergic to moral imperatives, whether they tout themselves as parables of "metaphorical habit" or wear the camouflage of a Deleuzian/Agambenian intellectual experiment, still inevitably implicated in the Romantic nostalgia for some freewheeling, deregulated sensuality (not to mention that nothing but human subjectivity could possibly halt "the anthropological machine" or prevent it from restarting).

Nature here could not be any less interested in teaching culture an intelligible lesson, and the animals protest their symbolic or Aesopian utility every step of the way: they are neither vehicles for moral superiority and lyric respite amidst the beastliness of war, built along the Byronic formula of "beauty without vanity, strength without insolence, courage without ferocity"; nor beacons of some "nomadic," surpassingly desirous vividness so envied by insipid and rigid personhood. Evidently not in the business of condemnation and acquittal, Zal'tsman's novel attests periodically to a kind of ghoulish enthrallment with licensed physical harm—a brand of violence that pursues no personal agenda and is caused, primarily, by arbitrary vibrations of bare life (in a wartime setting, children and animals become soldiers *par excellence* inasmuch as their acts of violence are doubly exempt from any legal or social repercussions, and in this exemption they

stand together). Aimless and bereft of language, these vibrations, on the other hand, offer in their indefatigable *élan vital* no viable alternative to the adult, and thus fully human, mode of existence. The healing properties of being one with nature, so often valorized as an escape in times of civilizational crisis such as war, are altogether discredited in the novel. Not only is nature here wounded, and therefore proven fragile and fallible (see "snow's scars"/"snezhnye rubtsy" and "a stone still alive"/"eshche zhivoi kamen'," 25; "a birch-tree that twitched"/"drognuvshaia bereza" and "the tree sap deadening"/"sok mertveet," 7)—it also confronts man with a cosmic indifference, permitting the human form as an element of landscape at best: "The gathered rainwater had pooled, sagging, in the interstices between the bodies" ("Sobravshiisia dozhd' luzhami provis v vyemkah mezhdu telami," 50). For Zal'tsman, the cyclical apathy of untamed, uncultivated life is more of a piece with the violent "bad infinity" than with some salubrious posthumanist "open," much like in the animals' babblings and grunts he hears unfortunate wordplay and inane couplets (none of them, alas, translatable) before any other-than-human insight, or at least avantgarde poetry: "Izvinite, pochemu vy tak zvenite?" (275); "V serebre, v serebrianke, serebree, v seryh bryzgah sobiraia, chto ia!" (116); "I vot vyletaiut v nebesa orlinye slove-slovesa" (144), etc.

The qualification that the animals in the novel are only partially animals, captured in a reversible and infinitely extendable moment of transformation, forecloses another panacea for which a hopeful reader may have wished. Obviously enough, *The Puppies* is of great interest to such vigorous academic slipstreams of recent years as animal studies or the trans-centric offshoots of queer theory, both of them fascinated by the unpredictable, nonfinal plasticity of bodies. And yet, one ought not to forget that the aesthetic, epistemological, and political optimism of these tendencies is heavily reliant on envisaging the formerly monadic individuality as very much "divisible" and ready to reinvent itself in perpetuity. In fact, they are *only* optimistic inasmuch as

one's fictional being "in one's own skin" is allowed to be an adventure, albeit a doomed Lacanian one. To "know thyself" queerly, then, is to learn, unabatingly and without any guarantees of eventual psychic peace, to what extent thou art mutable in body and in mind.

In Adam Phillips' gloss on Freud's ideas of necessary self-estrangement, being a person means "to be continually meeting oneself as though one was somebody else" (*Terrors* 15). Psychoanalysis, then, furnishes as "a conceptual apparatus that invites the leopards into the temple, and makes them integral to the ceremony" (*Terrors* 73). However, Zal'tsman's "leopards," depended upon to emancipate that man who is otherwise straitjacketed by his unimpeachable—and, from a psychoanalytical point of view, unbearable—knowledge of himself, do nothing but exacerbate this unbearableness of identity. Almost all transboundary characters bloviate about the anguish of having a body, no matter how pliable those bodies or how itinerant the affects they flesh out. Before he dies at the hands of the Owl, the thieving Hare breaks out into the following monologue:

> "Я благодарен голоду за силу задних лап, за скорость бега и за то, что я забываю страх, когда думаю о них. […] Я хотел бы таскать морковку в нору потихоньку, *бесплотно*, срывая как ветер. […] Сохрани меня, земля, *ноги, уши*, шорох, свободный луг, от встречи с его бешенством" (88; emphasis mine).

> "I'm grateful to hunger for the strength of my haunches, the speed of my running, and for forgetting fear when I think of them. […] I'd like to be stealing carrots and stashing them in my hole on the sly, *fleshlessly,* picking them up like

the wind. […] Save me, earth, *legs*, *ears*, the rustling and the spacious meadow, from meeting his wrath."

This brief passage advances three definitions of the body in quick succession: it is that which hungers beyond the dictates of self-preservation; it is a burden; it is separable, limb by limb, from what it is not—call it soul, call it the mind, call it personality or ipseity. Distracting though it might be from the ethical charge contained in the disposability of small non-combatant lives, the Freudian fact obtains: in *The Puppies*, the body means trouble. "I'll hang on to this earth for a long time, I'll finish my life having smashed my face, in full swing, latching on to other souls, this body is cramped, cramped" ("Ia uderzhus' na zemle dolgo, prozhivu, razbiv litso, razoidias', vpivaias' v dushi, mne tesno, tesno v etom tele," 128)—so goes a character's imagining of the backbreaking labor of living materially, in ceaseless discord with one's own bodied self and others. It is also worth remembering that time itself in the novel is corporeal, while the temporal experience, by and large, comprises a series of identification attempts within bodily limits—an act that Zal'tsman deems both disastrous and futile.

"Sweet, funny little minutes accumulated in this body" ("Milye smeshnye minutki, sobrannye v etom tele" 204), simpers Tania in an unlikely erotic scene that conflates self-knowledge with masturbation. Gripped by a "continuously tender," "kissing enjoyment" ("dlitel'no nezhnym," "tseluiushchim ee naslazhdeniem"), she "had a meeting with herself, re-merged herself with the girl she had been separated from" ("svidelas' s samoi soboi, slilas' s toi, s kotoroi byla razluchena," 205). Later, as she commits suicide, the girl rejects her own "impoverished body"("nishchee telo")——"those rags, long cast off, punctured by the heels of my shoes" ("rvan', vybroshennuiu davno, protknutuiu moimi kablukami," 214)—for its surreptitious

complicity in the passage of time. The intimate entanglement between the human's temporal and corporal dimensions is on display even in the novel's most unabashedly sarcastic fragments, such as the narrator's mock-lament over a nanny fired for professional negligence:

> "Все-таки это странно – такая заботливость о детеныше, который вообще ничего не понимает, а вот на старуху Кристинку, у которой все-таки было и прошлое, и свои мысли, – просто плюнули. Зачем тогда и растить человека?" (291).

> "Still, it's strange: taking such great care of a baby that doesn't understand a thing, and not giving a damn about old Kristinka, who, after all, has had a past and some thoughts of her own. What's the point in raising a person, then?"

No matter how interminably durable and anatomically mobile, the novel's creatures are one and all condemned to corporeality, to self-exploratory autoeroticism, and to selfhood. What the genderfluid criminal the Owl (a grammatical "he" in all the internal monologues, but still a "she"—"sova"—elsewhere), endowed with the ability to be in several places at once and with a penchant for "endless life" (180), embodies here is less the protective mutability of identity than the danger of any impermanence and unchecked potentiality—any, for that matter, freedom—comparable in degree to the better-trodden perils of stagnation and, as Leo Bersani puts it, "settled being" (*Forms* 9).

"All that constitutes the present seems disgusting if it requires care" ("Vse, chto sostavliaet nastoiashchee, kazhetsia protivnym, esli trebuet zabot," 31), philosophizes Lidochka when her

hopes for the Owlet as a sexual prospect have already been dashed. This seemingly throwaway remark, in my opinion, encapsulates the quintessence of Zal'tsman's temporal hopelessness. The multilayered "time of no division," composed, among other things, of an unreliable memory and an ignorant imagination, is the one time available to the human consciousness (a claim perhaps unwittingly consonant with St. Augustine's much-debated concept of *distentio animi*). Yet, its experience requires of the subject the uphill battle of "zabota" (both "care" and "trouble"), which involves an ever-intensifying physical presence, concentration and expression of thought, and self-identification unredeemed by the malleability of form. The present, following Zal'tsman's intellectual involutions, is a time of one's categorical incompatibility with oneself.

"Uncompromising," this frequent companion of "rewarding" in critical exonerations of experimental writing, in the case of *The Puppies* applies, not only to its plot's and style's eagerness to tease the edge of unintelligibility, but also—more so, perhaps—to its mistrust of conceptual closure, resolution, or recipe. In spite of that, some semblance of an escape, I would venture, can still be detected in it, leaving the scope of its allegorical potency to the reader's discretion. Suspicious of all rebirth and resurrection, and assigning "a passion for endless life" to the novel's most despicable monster, *The Puppies* looks at suicide as possible deliverance from the multivectored, war-of-all-against-all iniquities. This redemptive suicide is scarcely kin either to the existentialist, Dostoevskyan expenditure of free will against the universal absurdity of circumstance, or to the ritualistic self-abnegation of a child soldier leaping out of provisional time and into the heroic absolute. Instead, Zal'tsman means by "suicide" some Freudian longing for a total absence, for a comprehensive emptying-out of the self, for an inorganic state supremely preferable to organicity as it is posited in the novel. "The little bird rolled away" ("Ptenets pokatilsia"), writes Zal'tsman in an early scene, "and *it turned out*, he didn't exist" ("i *okazyvaetsia*

– ego net," 10; emphasis mine). It is precisely to register their own exclusion from the murderously repetitive world that Zal'tsman's numerous suicides occur, including Tania, who saves "her living self" ("sebia, zhivuiu") from the "imprint of death" ("ot nalozhennoi na nee smerti" 212); and the Uncle, who slits his throat in order to "trample the mirror, having broken himself" ("zatopta[t'] zerkalo, razbivshi samogo sebia" 91). Even the aggrieved camels dream fancifully, in the divertissement of a miniature play, about "not having a house, wife, daughter or eyes" (156), and then ram their heads against a "stone bulwark" built from "the rage of all the days […] of all the water flowing undrunk, all the thorns in the tongue" ("iarost' vseh dnei […] vsei begushchei, nevypitoi vody i vseh koliuchek v iazyke" 187). Steadfastly unfit for any kind of apologia, Zal'tsman's novel at least allows its characters to orient themselves in this direction: away from themselves, from the body, from death delayed and made nonfinal in other ways, and toward a true no-time at last.

Conclusion

As I expand my dissertation manuscript into a book, I hope to augment and finetune the theoretical import of my analyses. The conceptual vein that I would like to deepen the most lies in the linkage between queer recuperations of the past, neither explanatory nor expectant, and the formation of subjectivities made possible by modernity and constantly muddled by modernity's defining discontents, including its volatile temporalities of non-linearity, interruption, belatedness, virtuality, etc., all of them so prominent in the Russian cultural imagination.

In addition to, and more specifically than, this general direction, I see myself complementing my chapters with several considerations that did not make it to the final draft. With Isaac Babel's stories, it should be illuminating to historicize his characters' lingering pause on the threshold of sexual articulacy (and with it, legible and legitimate subjectivity) as a properly "off-modern" moment, thereby giving more political torque to their prolonged failure of persuasive self-narration. In other words, I want to contextualize erotic incredulity as not only a stalling tactic in the face of totalizing discursive forces, but also as a strategy for grappling with some concrete, and pointedly correctional, historical-material realities of late-imperial Jewish life.

With Barskaia's *Torn Boots*, I would like to further my inquiry into the childlikeness and playfulness of the untimely avantgarde aesthetics as they found themselves besieged by the rapid encroachments of socialist realism. I am particularly intrigued by the trope of a doll: a preparatory but still ill-timed surrogate for a child, which in the movie is surrogated, in turn, by a different toy, a klaxon. On the one hand, dolls are instrumental in that imaginative thwarting of reality which encompasses both the artist's and child's rearrangements of language (Velimir Khlebnikov, for instance, in his "Nasha osnova" presents futurist poetry as adults playing house; Korney

Chukovsky writes of children's "unconscious mastery"/"neosoznannoe masterstvo," through which their imperfect imitations of grown-up speech become creative acts in and of themselves). On the other hand, the doll of the Soviet 1920s and 30s performed a variety of completely different auxiliary functions, from ideological taboo (the doll was purported to limit child's play to mimicry of the bourgeois lifestyle, including motherhood) to, in Eduard Nadtochii's reading, guidance through the anti-mimetic, mechanical "total theatre" of an unprecedented Soviet state.

With Dobychin, I want to return to the deliberate trivialities of his style and reconsider them as a markedly queer aesthetic approach. In the process, my intention will be to participate in some of ongoing debates as to what alternatives to the formal normativities of literature queerness can furnish, outside of subversion, transgression, excess, etc. How do we, in short, decide that a syntactic whim, a grammatical oddity, or an outlandish word-choice is erotically intense, and how is this intensity shored up, rather than obviated, by stylistic neutrality? I imagine that my thinking on the subject will lead me into some kind of dialogue with the emphatically gendered discourse that has jelled around minimalism—the "strong silent type" of artistic temperament—since its inception. I will position, then, Dobychin's inadmissible minimalist technique at an angle both to the mandatory verbal austerity of 1930s Soviet adolescence, and to the affect-informed interpretations of (Western) High Minimalism in other media, such as visual arts and music.

My Zal'tsman chapter, I believe, would gain from the inclusion of a hopeful posthumanist flipside, which I intend to find in Teffi's short stories. Both in pre-revolutionary years and during her exile in France, Teffi wrote of children and animals in an attempt to conjure up a companionate, mutually vitalizing, and fragile partnership of the othered.

Extant scholarship mainly groups Teffi's childhood stories with Sasha Chorny's, Arkady Averchenko's, and Mikhail Zoshchenko's, foregrounding their satirical bite and commendable aversion to didacticism. Catriona Kelly, in particular, favorably opposes Teffi's "children who felt a wide range of emotions, not all of them reassuring or edifying" to the "sweet, whimsical fantasies" of her contemporaries (*World* 48). The general tenor of these readings credits Teffi with granting the innocent tykes a degree of intuitive wisdom to counteract the grown-ups' reason (that is, seasoned idiocy). The functioning of children as revealers and amplifiers of the adult absurd is also habitually underscored in Teffi's émigré writings, where the kids "denaturalize" the added absurdities of acculturation (especially in her 1938 Parisian collection *On Tenderness*). I would like to complicate this picture by aligning her children with other "unreasonable"—i.e., tacitly expendable, though not necessarily immature—forms of life, such as the dispossessed ("Trinity Sunday"), the elderly ("Grandpa Leontii"), and of course, the animals. Instead of positing "the childish" (*detskoe*) as an incontestable value in itself, undergirded by the precious, and yet ultimately unacceptable, affects of immediacy and spontaneity, Teffi seems to imagine what Haraway calls "unpredictable kinds of 'we'" (5)—a permanently imperiled kind of togetherness, which might as well enroll a homesick expat in love with a fly (or with a piece of sealing wax) and a girl caught up in her premature motherly duty toward a bear cub ("A Child of the Woods").

The imaginative lateral communications among Teffi's characters on the wrong side of the Latourian Great Divides (human/inhuman, natural/artificial, adult/child, etc.), in my reading, do not reveal or amplify the absurd of reasonable maturity so much as suggest a doomed sensorial alternative to it. In "Revaluation of Values," politically savvy kids, at their most unabashedly satirical, convene in a rally to demand "fwee love" and "secret equality" ("tainoe ravnopravie") for "ladies, women, and children." I am taking this "secret equality" as my point of departure,

extending it to the animals—both beasts and toys, plausible and fantastic—that populate Teffi's affective scene. The two pivotal figures in my analysis are *the freak* and *the shapeshifter*. While shape-shifting indexes any number of anxiety-inducing erotic possibilities, from the vicissitudes of object-choice ("Brother Sula") to resolution of an insupportable love ("The Dog"), freakishness temporarily empowers and even sanctifies (in "Kishmish") Teffi's children in their obliquity to Agamben's "anthropological machine." Rather than be buckled into the logic of personification and de-animation, the child here halts the machine that produces humanity from animality as she devises a miniature world of "secret equality"—a conceptual space akin to "zones of non-knowledge" in Agamben's parlance, or "contact zones" in Haraway's. In brief, Teffi's strange children threaten the adults, not with their naturally virtuous knowledge but with a frustrated intimation of how multitudinous, invigorating, and in the end, ethically superior their ignorant and untested communications turns out to be.

Nowhere does the punitive reaction to such unsanctioned enrichment come through more forcefully than in "A Lifeless Beast," the sentimental account of a girl parting with her transitional object (a stuffed sheep) and a negotiation of the distinction between a (human) response and an (animalistic) reaction. Teffi's conclusion appears to be that recognition of suffering, whether someone else's or one's own, can be, after all, unglued from the project of measuring the other's humanity, and used instead as baseline for some fabulous (and, it bears repeating, doomed) interconnectedness before the "anthropological machine."

As a chronological, though not thematic, detour, I am also working on an article about Natalia Kudriashova's 2015 film *Pioneer Heroes* ("Pionery-geroi"), provisionally accepted for publication in the upcoming volume *Nostalgia and Anxiety in the Visual and Performing Arts: Russia, Eastern, and Central Europe.* The film claims to explore the spiritual malaise of a

deceptively well-adjusted generation born in the late 1970s, reared in the waning phantasms of Soviet mythology, and now facing the frustrations of a disenchanted, sanitized capitalist Russia. Through extensive use of flashbacks and surreal, Vladimir Sorokin-inspired dream sequences, the movie remains persistent in tracing the grievances (few of them explicitly sexual in nature) of its characters back to their early-life psychosexual traumas rooted in the ego-shattering need to sacrifice oneself ecstatically for the common cause. However, just as persistent is the film's disavowal—in its dialogue, narrative devices, and even the writer/director's interviews—to admit to any such reasoning.

I intend to treat the text's psychoanalysis more seriously than does its author. I particularly look forward to the interpretative opportunities afforded here by the conspicuous absence of *jouissance* in the film's heavily regulated, thoroughly Symbolic environs—an absence that generates moral, rather than merely sexual, anxieties. Drawing, additionally, on Kelly's, Dobrenko's, and Nadtochii's scholarship regarding the ideological constructions of the perfect Soviet child, I take up *Pioneer Heroes*' disavowed allegiances to psychoanalytical thought to see how its unmistakably Lacanian undercurrents entwine, perhaps perversely or at least nervously, with several different strains of nostalgia, such as a post-Soviet longing for the grand narratives of History; reappropriations of late-Soviet cultural codes, somewhat glib in their postmodernist sportiveness and yet profoundly affectionate; and even a premature, it would appear, desire to resuscitate the aesthetic and ethical motifs of the cinematic matrices that marked Vladimir Putin's first presidential term.

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Professional Experience

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RUSSN 265: Introduction to Russian Film

Independent Studies:

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RUSS 150 (Introduction to Russian Cinema): Spring 2017; Spring 2018.

Independent Study:

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Research Assistantships, University of Illinois at Chicago

- July–November 2018: Translated, proofread, and copyedited article submissions for the peer-reviewed volume *Non-standard: Forgotten Experiments in Soviet Culture, 1934-64* (edited by Profs. William Nickell and Julia Vaingurt). Moscow: NLO, 2021.

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Teaching Assistantships, University of Illinois at Chicago

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Publications

Published Peer-reviewed Articles:

- "The No-Time of War in Pavel Zaltsman's *The Puppies*," in *Non-standard: Forgotten Experiments in Russian Culture, 1934-64* [*НестандАрт: Забытые эксперименты в русской культуре,* 1934-64]. Novoe Literaturnoe Obozrenie, 2021 (pp. 186–208).

Recommended for Publication after Revisions:

- "The Queer Child as Thwarted Demiurge in Isaac Babel's Childhood Stories" (*PMLA,* due Sep. 2021).

In Progress:

- "O You Youths, Eastern Youths: The Sexualized Nostalgia of Natalia Kudriashova's *Pioneer Heroes* (2015)," in *Nostalgia and Anxiety in the Visual and Performing Arts: Russia, Eastern, and Central Europe* (ed. Tetyana Dzyadevych), forthcoming from Vernon Press (to be submitted in Fall 2021).

Professional Translations:

Academic:

1) In «НестандАрт: Забытые эксперименты в советской культуре, 1934-1964 годы» (Москва: Новое литературное обозрение, 2021):

- Юлия Вайнгурт (UIC), «Ненормальные» (pp. 9–40)
- Мэттью Кендалл (University of California, Berkeley), «Стереоскопический реализм: инженеры иллюзий Александра Андриевского» (pp. 71–92)
- Саймон Моррисон (Princeton University), «Галина Уствольская в истории музыки, вне ее и за ее пределами» (pp. 243–272)
- Лилия Кагановская (University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign), «Женщина с киноаппаратом: Маргарита Пилихина в советской "Новой волне"» (pp. 273–304)
- Ричард Тарускин (University of California, Berkeley), «Коле посвящается» (pp. 305–332)
- Уильям Никелл (University of Chicago), «Иноверцы и инновация» (pp. 335–346)

2) Джейкоб Эмери (Indiana University), «Медицинская терминология в прозе Достоевского и ее англоязычных переложениях», доклад на Международной научной конференции «Литература в поисках действительности: познавательные стратегии русской реалистической прозы 1860-1870-х гг.», Государственный музей Л.Н. Толстого, Москва (June 2019)

3) Саймон Моррисон (Princeton University), «В поисках Сатаниллы: о забытом балете Мариуса Петипа», доклад на Международной научной конференции «Искусствоведение в контексте других наук в современном мире», Институт современного искусства, Москва (April 2019)

4) Selections from 18th-cent. Russian poetry (Lomonosov, Sumarokov, Trediakovsky, etc.) for Prof. Julia Vaingurt's seminar "Parody and Imitation in Russian Literature" (Summer 2015)

5) Yaroslav Hrytsak (Central European University), "Ignorance Is Power." *Ab Imperio,* vol. 2014 no. 3, 2014, pp. 218–228.

Russian-English:

- Promo materials for the ROSKINO State Agency and NTV Channel (2019-2021)
- The *Welcome to Ukraine* guidebook commissioned by the Ministry of Culture of Ukraine (Summer 2018)
- Article submissions for *MUBI*, *Sight & Sound*, and *Cinema-Scope* (2010–2017)

English-Russian:

- Subtitles, press releases, catalogues for the Moscow International Film Festival, BEAT Festival, and *On the Edge* Sakhalin IFF (2004–2018)
- Film criticism and scholarship for *Seans*, *Variety (Russia)*, *Kinote*, and *Lookatme* (2004–2018)
- Fifteen British and American novels under contract to *Family Leisure Club* (2005–2012).

Invited Talks

- "Queer Children in Russian Modernism," presented at the University of Southern California (Los Angeles, CA, Apr. 9th, 2021).
- "Teffi's Queer Women & Children," presented at the annual Workshop on Russian Modernism, UIC (Chicago, IL, April 2019).
- "The No-Time of War in Pavel Zaltsman's *The Puppies*," presented at *Found in Time: Lost Experiments in Soviet Art*, University of Chicago (Chicago, IL, Oct 5th–7th, 2017).
- Invited Discussant: Ilya Kukulin, National Research University – Higher School of Economics, Moscow, "Official and Underground Culture(s) in the Soviet Union: How Do They Persist in Contemporary Russia?" SEE NEXT Seminar: East European and Northern Eurasian Crosstalk, UIC (Chicago, IL, Oct 12th, 2015).

Conference Presentations

- "A Very Peculiar Relation: The Queer Child in Margarita Barskaja's *Torn Boots*," presented at the Association for Slavic, East European, and Eurasian Studies Annual Convention (San Francisco, CA, Nov 23–26, 2019).
- "A Girl's Best Friend: Queer Animality in Teffi's Short Fiction," presented at the Central Slavic Conference (St. Louis, MO, Oct 19–21, 2018).
- Discussant on the "Explorations in Folklore and Children's Literature" panel at the Southern Conference on Slavic Studies (Charlotte, NC, March 22–24, 2018)
- "From Englobement to Scarring: Children Inhabiting Isaac Babel's Short Prose," presented at the Association for Slavic, East European, and Eurasian Studies Annual Convention (Chicago, IL, Nov 9–12, 2017).
- "From Apple Cake to Apple Pie: Transcultural Adolescence in David Bezmozgis' *Natasha and Other Stories*," presented at the UIC *Converging Narratives* Conference (Chicago, IL, March 31–Apr 1, 2017).
- "The 'Wreck' in Recreation: Drinking through the Child's Eyes in John Cheever's Stories," presented at the UIC *In/Between* Conference (Chicago, IL, Feb 25–26, 2016).
- "*Noli me tangere*, for Queer I Am: Sex and Time in Leonid Dobychin's *The Town of N*," presented at the American Association of Teachers of Slavic and European Languages Annual Conference (Austin, TX, Jan 7–10, 2016).
- "How Soon Is Now? Euromaidan Filmed Posthaste," presented at the Association for Slavic, East European, and Eurasian Studies Annual Conference (Philadelphia, PA, Nov 19–22, 2015).

- "Julia Loktev's *Day Night Day Night*: The Terror of the Stupid Body," presented at the UIC *In/Between* Conference (Chicago, IL, Feb 27–28, 2014).
- "Contested History in Film Adaptations of *Taras Bulba*," presented at the Association for Slavic, East European, and Eurasian Studies Annual Conference (Boston, MA, Nov 21–24, 2013).

Awards

- ASEEES Summer Dissertation Writing Grant (June–July 2021)
- Provost's Graduate Research Award (February–June 2019, UIC)
- Harvard Ukrainian Research Institute (June–July 2016, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA)
- UIC Curriculum Development Grant (Summer 2015, Chicago, IL)
- Graduate Student Council Presenter Award (2016; 2017)
- Graduate College Presenter Award (2015; 2016; 2018)

Professional Development

- 2021 STARTALK Spring Conference (Apr 9-10th, 2021)
- Reading Group in Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in Slavic Studies (Spring 2021, University of Southern California, Los Angeles, CA)
- *Humanities without Walls* Pre-Doctoral Workshop (July 16th–August 3rd, 2018, Chicago, IL)
- Oral Proficiency Interview Workshop (May 2017, Indiana University, Bloomington, IN)

Professional Affiliations

- Member of the Association for Slavic, East European, and Eurasian Studies (ASEEES).
- Member of the American Association of Teachers of Slavic and East European Languages (AATSEEL).
- Member of the Modern Language Association of America (MLA)

Languages

Russian, Ukrainian – Native

English – Near-Native Fluency

Polish, German – Basic Reading Knowledge