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The Children of Timelessness:
Contemplative Poetry of the Soviet Stagnation

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Abstract

This dissertation explores the poetry and culture of the late-Soviet era of Stagnation (1964-1985) through a broadly conceived cultural metaphor of stagnation. The five Russian poets and one American poet in this study- Viktor Krivulin, Alexei Parshchikov, Aleksandr Eremenko, Ivan Zhdanov, Elena Shvarts, and Lyn Hejinian- each engage with a poetic world encumbered by visible signs and markers of decline. To consider the world in which these poets came of age, wrote poetry, and sought out meaningful lives, I frame my analysis through Mikhail Epstein's label of the poets as "children of timelessness," an alteration of the then common cliché, "children of stagnation," to situate the poets within an historical temporality of sluggish time, poor social mobility, and unreachable horizons of desire and success. While the dissertation focuses on a fairly narrow grouping of poets, all of whom pursued a bohemian lifestyle, an esoteric and contemplative worldview, and a rejuvenated poetic language after years of Socialist Realist aesthetics, my primary interest was to consider the inner life of a superpower in its historic decline, a time which produced a paradox of artistic flourishing alongside social decay.

Dedication:

This dissertation would not have been possible without the profound guidance of my committee, Ilya Kutik, Clare Cavanagh, and my advisor Nina Gourianova. Not only did they guide me through the professional process of writing a dissertation, but also through my pursuit of wisdom and a deeper understanding of poetry, the late-Soviet era, and my very own era of a pandemic, social unrest, and decline. They are not merely advisors and colleagues, but friends. This dissertation was written in part while on a Fulbright research scholarship in St. Petersburg, Russia, before the 2020 pandemic saw me kicked out of the country where many of my research materials remain. I am not at all certain that I would have finished this thesis without my parents' unconditional love, support, and gift of a soft landing in their comfortable house where I've waited out the pandemic. Lastly, I would like to thank my close friends and colleagues at Northwestern and elsewhere who read countless drafts and spent many hours discussing stagnation and decay with the devotion, hope, and good cheer that makes any period of artistic flourishing possible.

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Part One:

The Metaphor of Stagnation

Introduction: A Tale of Two Generations

Into the march of history, long driven by the humming engines of progress, there can steal a powerful countervailing force. It is not the work of any one person or people, but rather the wayward drift of interests, tendencies of thought, conceptions of self, duty, and belonging; and it is first and foremost the frictions of time arrayed against those promises and ideals that reared us along with our mother's milk. It can arise as a visible part of the economy, of politics, of culture, and even in the perception of time itself- present as a slow and directionless temporality, an endlessly unreachable horizon- and then it becomes a pervasive anxiety of structural decay. In turn, the adherents and denizens of the land continue to maintain their weak purchase in the struggling system, as there appear to be no solutions or novel ideas waiting in the wings to step out onto the stage. And even if their purchase be firm, ever bound up in the spinning of the wheel, they sense in themselves a creeping disenchantment with the system's ideals and promise, and a permeating alienation from its practices and institutions, which now no longer seem to advance their own *personal* interests. And yet nothing is done. And they themselves do nothing, for there seems to be nothing they can do, divided as they are. And they sink further into themselves and their own private alienations. And that countervailing force, stagnation, takes to the foundation like dry rot.

Such is the inner life of a country during the slow demise of a grandiose system. And a premise that rings true beyond the isolated incident of the Soviet Stagnation in the years leading up to the collapse of 1991. Without a doubt, though, such an assiduously negative description as the one above in no way accounts for every angle of the story and is, perhaps, not even a warning but a fearful bout of poetry issuing from a concerned and curious mind. It is certainly the case that the later years of the Soviet Union were marked by a broadly felt disenchantment,

alienation, apathy, and a pervasive antipathy toward the system. Yet, as was also the case, it was a period with a relatively large degree of social, political, and even economic stability, albeit one with a comatose gerontocracy and limited life choices, among other sacrifices. And in yet another way, it was a period characterized by the leisure time necessary for unique and varied cultural and artistic expressions, resulting in torrents of wonderful art. Such a seeming paradox, as it has been called,¹ is for me a thing of endless fascination and concern, and one that's brought me to Russia on multiple occasions and to the end of a dissertation with fewer concrete answers than when I began. Not only has my wide reading in the subject often left me sleepless and bewildered, but my numerous conversations with former Soviet citizens has as well. Some would describe the Brezhnev era of Stagnation as a miserable train wreck, while others referred to it as a time of rich cultural expression and pronounced individual freedom, with one or two even claiming it as the greatest period of their lives.

Such wayward anecdotal data is, of course, in no way scientific enough to make any kind of definitive claim, even if it weren't contradictory. But what it can and must do, I believe, is remind us that the life and spirit of any single time and place in which more than one person is present cannot be received as if it were some kind of cultural monolith, as uniformly good or bad. And yet that being said, while there certainly would have been as many opinions about the present as there were people to voice them, there of course are certain common tendencies visible in the mix that might guide us. Some in the Soviet Union bought American blue jeans on the black market and, in their parents' eyes, betrayed the collective promise of the Revolution, dreaming of a world as brightly lit as Hollywood. Others, on whom this dissertation will focus,

¹ See: Yurchak, A. (2005). *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation*. Princeton: Princeton University Press. and Epstein, M. (1995) *After the Future: The Paradoxes of Postmodernism and Contemporary Russian Culture*, Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press.

checked out of the system, tuning in, turning on, and dropping out to live independently of the system, to create their own lives and art, or even to contemplate private artistic worlds while tucked away in communal kitchens, shunning any sweeping vision of history other than that of the high cultural past. Still others maintained with fierce dedication their devotion to the cause of revolution, and blamed a pernicious Western influence for sapping the Revolution's strength. And countless others still, likely the majority, went on living with a faith in the promise of whatever system and order guaranteed returns on the investments of their emotional and workaday lives, be it a Western or Eastern system, communist or capitalist, individual or collective, religious or secular.

Near the end of the Soviet Union's tenure on the earth, four American poets with strong communist sympathies yet nevertheless consciously and unconsciously imbued with their culture's individualistic liberalism, visited Leningrad in 1989 and wrote about the experience. One of the poets, Barret Watten, near the end of the collectively written text, *Leningrad*, questions the worth and potential of the four poets' pilgrimage to the crumbling empire and one-time bastion of leftist hopes and dreams. Referring to transformative journeys of past intellectual luminaries to the outwardly energetic Soviet Union of the 30s, namely Theodore Dreiser and Ludwig Wittgenstein, Watten doubts the value of such a journey in his own, much later day: "Would it matter in the same sense what contemporary poets would think of the Soviet Union, now that its heroic period has ended?"² What is the point, he seems to ask, of visiting the Soviet Union at a time when it no longer seemed fated to transform the world and had ceased to be anything like a bastion of progressive hopes, even switching into something of the opposite? What is left to discover and communicate aside from disenchantment and a pale reflection of the

² Davidson, M., Hejinian, L., Silliman, R. and Watten, B. (1991) *Leningrad: American Writers in the Soviet Union*, San Francisco: Mercury House, p. 143.

West's own postmodern condition, even during the Brezhnev Stagnation or Gorbachev's liberalizing period of *Glasnost*?

When I first set out on this research project, I was fascinated by the avant-garde and postmodernity, mysticism and poetry in the face of modern, secular disenchantment, and the fate of existential philosophies in the bohemian countercultures of the Post-War period. Consequently, while I had chosen to focus on Russian postmodern poets of the 1970s and 80s, the Soviet Era of Stagnation remained merely an extra-literary context through which I would situate and study them. And it was a context, moreover, that the poets themselves often seemed inclined to forget, emphasizing the independence of their private poetic worlds and insistence on a higher cultural context. It was the generation preceding them, after all, who wrote and fussed about the Soviet Union. Poetry, and so many other related spiritual, existential, and psychedelic pursuits of the late 20th century, happened only after you liberated yourself from the hegemonic structures of a dominant system, meaning that humdrum Soviet reality and its socio-political problems would only be an impediment to the attainment of deeper truths. As such, the theme of Stagnation, a cheerful reformer's word for a disengaged, distrustful, and increasingly individualistic society no longer buying into the promise of achieving great things together, only gradually came to mean something for me. And then suddenly it had taken over my project.

The Stagnation generation, born between the late forties and the early sixties- and therefore a rough equivalent of the Baby Boomers in America- was unique in the context of preceding Soviet generations. As scholars have noted, this generation lacked a major, foundational event, experiencing in its formative years neither "war, revolution, reform, or

natural disaster”³ around which a common, consistent set of values and worldviews often forms. It is a generation for whom, by and large, nothing happened. That is, of course, until a parade of events swept by them in their more mature years, including a ten-year war in Afghanistan, the Chernobyl disaster, *Perestroika*, and that definitive moment when the whole “eternal” Soviet system up and disappeared from their lives. All that being said, one other event in their early years might be taken as a definitive moment for the formation of their worldviews, a moment immensely disenchanting for leftists all across the globe, as well as Soviet citizens in general: the Soviet invasion of Prague in 1968, resulting in the end of hope for any kind of “communism with a human face.” This year, 1968, momentous for youth culture across the Western world, is now taken as a popular date for the moment when characteristics of the Soviet Stagnation began to gain weight and take on a more visible form.

After some two years of reflecting on this generation, it still perplexes me as to why I, an American of the Millennial generation born in 1990, might have such an interest in a generation for which “nothing” happened and disenchantment reigned. Such a period of conservative stability largely untouched by major events was not, after all, a feature of my own formative years. I was born a year before the Soviet collapse and the beginning of the truly triumphant American era: the “End of History,” as a Stanford political scientist proclaimed before walking back his victory lap of a phrase some time later.⁴ But I certainly was not born into a generation for which nothing happened. My global awareness came online at age 11 with the terrorist attack of September 11th, followed by 20 years of war in Afghanistan; I graduated high school the year

³ Ostanin and Kobak. (2003) “Molnia i raduga: puti kul'tury 60-80kh godov” *Molnia i raduga: literaturno-kriticheskie stat'i 1980kh godov*, Sankt Peterburg: Izdatel'stvo N.I. Novikova, p. 13. See also Zubok, V. (2011). *Zhivago's Children: The Last Russian Intelligentsia*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

⁴ See Glasier, Eliane (2014) “Bring back ideology: Fukuyama's 'end of history' 25 years on,” *The Guardian*, [Online]. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/mar/21/bring-back-ideology-fukuyama-end-history-25-years-on>.

the Great Recession began to greedily acquire people's homes in 2008; and I was months from turning 30 and in the last year of my PhD when the pandemic hit, abruptly ending my Fulbright scholarship in Russia and pitching me back into my parents' house. This isn't meant to solicit some kind of pity, but to hint at possible reasons for a generation's mounting collective recoil. If "history" had phoned it in for the Stagnation generation, it showed up to play ball with mine.

That being said, the great march of history did not in fact simply disappear from the lives of the Soviet "Children of Stagnation," as a cliché of the day had dubbed them. The "stability" of the Brezhnev era was nothing like the sprawling regularity of American lawns and track homes produced by the white flight of 60s' suburbia. History had barreled through their parents' lives and it left the children powerless and adrift in the murky, roiled up flotsam of fragmented modernizations, half-baked secularizations, and enough broken utopian promises to look like the real thing if you squint a little and then clamp your eyes shut. But still, stable in certain ways it was. Soviet reality had long been culturally isolated behind a yanked-shut and famously heavy metal curtain, forming a space in which there were not many ladders to climb or novel places to go, but in which there developed a world of internal riches, which were nevertheless invisible to the untrained eye of an outsider. In a grandiose work of documentary fiction, *Secondhand Time: The Last of the Soviets*, Svetlana Alexeivich's magnum opus on the end of the Soviet Union, such strange profundities, invisible riches, and numerous paradoxes of the Stagnation era abound despite the deep suffering that by and large bookends it:

I was a stoker in a boiler plant. You'd work one twenty-four-hour shift and then get two days off. Back then, an engineer made 130 rubles a month, while in the boiler room, I was getting 90, which is to say that if you were willing to give up 40 rubles a month, you could buy yourself absolute freedom. We read, we went through tons of books. We talked. We thought we were coming up with new ideas. We dreamt of revolution, but were afraid we would never live to see it. In reality, we were completely sheltered, we

didn't know a thing about what was actually going on in the world. We were like houseplants. We made everything up, and, as it later turned out, everything we thought we knew was nothing but figments of our imaginations . . . the Russia of our books and kitchens never existed.⁵

Such was the life of many in the Stagnation generation: isolated, sheltered, and imaginary, yet free and fairly comfortable in that shelter, provided for by public debt and the secretive goings on of the Soviet macroeconomic system. For those capable of intellectual or spiritual detachment, endless days of conversation and imagination, and a celebration of life largely through art, literature, and thought, it could easily be seen as a fairly positive time, one of flourishing even. But for those with no desire to play any part in the Soviet system, or those with some kind of burning ambition, a willful desire to remake the world as it exists in one's head or to amass a fortune and demonstrate one's worth in cars and seats on the boards of charitable organizations, it was likely significantly less comfortable. Concerning most people, I find it is easier to imagine it as somewhere in-between, neither too ethereally complacent nor too much like a version of Comrade Kane, people ever pursuing their lost Rosebud in the corruptions of wealth and power, foreign goods and *kompromat*.

By the era of *Perestroika*, as Alexeivich's novel describes in great length, the dreams of this generation cooked up in kitchen conversations, traded as *samizdat*, and filled with ideas of freedom, democracy, and a tomorrow brighter than a drab Soviet today, had developed into a vague but hopeful vision of the future. And indeed, in 1989 and 1991, such worthwhile dreams energized unprecedented masses of people into the streets for another revolution in the name of democracy and freedom from Soviet-style rule. The total systemic breakdown that followed,

⁵ Alexeivich, S. (2017) *Secondhand Time: The Last of the Soviets*, New York: Random House, p. 19.

though, was anticipated by almost no one. And the collapse resulted not in any stable and brightly lit democracy, but a far deeper and utterly unstable economic downturn in Russia, replacing the age of the Iron Curtain with the Iron Door age, in which there was so much street violence and home robberies that people purchased iron doors to shield them from their neighbors, while irredentist ethnic populations in former Soviet republics murdered each other in droves. After the Soviet collapse, the faith cooked up in Stagnation- and *Perestroika*-era kitchens, which many would later recall as naïve and romantically misinformed against the volatile and anxious backdrop of the 90s,⁶ has remained largely absent as a guiding force in Russian politics and culture ever since, experiencing only short-lived resurgences.

For my own generation, having grown up entirely in a world formed after the end of social government and Keynesian New Deal macroeconomics of the 1970s, there is no tangible sense for this kind of stagnation-era stability. We have new iPhones and two-day shipping with Amazon Prime, but social mobility has stagnated as formerly macroeconomic debts and burdens have shifted onto the individual, minimizing levels of shared social stability. We have entered what economist Wolfgang Streeck has called a new “interregnum,” an “age of entropy,” that has its own characteristics of stagnation and is unlikely to change anytime soon: “Is capitalism coming to an end? The problem is, while we see it disintegrating before our eyes, we see no successor approaching. As indicated, by disintegration I mean an already far advanced decline of the capacity of capitalism as an economic regime to underwrite a stable society.”⁷ In this world, the consumer is king, but wage-growth and standards of living remain stagnant, and the social democratic bedrock of society is chipped away, placing a constant “privatization of stress”⁸ on

⁶ Alexeivich’s *Secondhand Time* is filled with such statements.

⁷ Streeck, W. (2017) *How Will Capitalism End?* New York: Verso Press, p. 35.

⁸ Fisher, M. (2009) *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* Zer0 Books, p. 19.

the individual, such that a perpetually unreachable horizon opens up before them as they make an almost arbitrary choice of college major and career.

The individual, then, experiences something like the complete opposite of the boiler room stoker in the late-Soviet period: there is no external structure that protects against the outside world, for good or bad. Instead, the individual is open to the entire gamut of confused and overwhelming existence- technological changes, political unrest, and major economic insecurity. Institutions, often invasive in the Soviet Union and therefore suspect for their extensive violence and control, begin to recede from everyday life until there is nothing left of government and democratic practices- again, for both good and bad- until there is only a mostly symbolic vote every two to four years. No longer living as citizens of a political state, and treated almost exclusively as consumers, citizens must now endlessly convert themselves into products and brands of personal development to attain some ever-receding modicum of security in life:

Without supportive institutions, the burden of organizing everyday life is moved from the macro- to the micro-level, meaning that the onus of securing a minimum of stability and certainty- of creating a modicum of social order- is shifting to the individual. The behavioral program of the post-social society during the post-capitalist interregnum is governed by a neoliberal ethos of competitive self-improvement, of untiring cultivation of one's marketable human capital, enthusiastic dedication to work, and cheerfully optimistic, playful acceptance of the risks inherent in a world that has outgrown government.⁹

When I look at the Stagnation era of the Soviet Union, after two years of study, I know that my generation struggles with something different, although many bars of the song remain the same. We are a generation confronted with repeated crises and events that have derailed most

⁹ Streeck, W. (2017) *How Will Capitalism End?* New York: Verso Press, p. 38.

any sense of private or collective security, which then open up in us a vulnerability that is compounded by meritocratic pressures in a time of decreasing social mobility. In turn, my sense is that we are ebbing away from the kind of individualism placed at the bedrock of economic liberalism and popular culture since the 1960s. In my view, Millennials and Gen Zers now display fewer signs of a non-conformist culture based on the liberation of the self's innermost irrational desires, which itself has become the mainstream; there can be no liberation from the control of hegemonic social structures when you are essentially behaving in concert with them. I think- for better or worse I won't say for now- that we are making our way precisely toward a new notion of a collective self, if for now only in the divisive languages of identity politics that further and disrupt the liberal hegemony. It is my sense, and hope, that we are tired of basing our lives around the purchase of products that prove our spontaneous, unique existence in the world. And increasingly, it seems, we are growing more and more terrified of endlessly compounding crises, especially as we sense an imminent and even more calamitous environmental collapse foretold with increasing clarity in the rising temperatures, violent storms, and noxious wildfire smoke swirling around us.

What I am articulating here is not a concrete vision of today or tomorrow, but at the very least a justification for my interest in the late-Soviet Stagnation, through which I hope to consider and cultivate possible approaches to living in a world of declining growth. In director Aleksandr Sokurov's 2011 update of the Faustian myth, *Faust*, the titular character throws off all human attachments and even the shackles of the devil himself to drive ever onward into the barren rocks of hell in endless pursuit of his own private cravings, mindless and unrepentantly destructive. I am both nervously hopeful and deeply suspicious of the common, mantra-like faith in the infinite growth upon which the success of capitalism to "underwrite a stable society" is

predicated. I hope never to see this infinity wane, however comical that sounds. But in light of that comedy, the following dissertation is in my mind something of a toe dipped in a murky-dark pond, a scouting party dispatched into foreign terrain. A terrain that I wish never to enter more fully or be relegated to in the course of my life.

For this reason, in certain ways, the actual focus of my dissertation may seem misguided, as I focus on varieties of what I call contemplative poetry grounded on the detached and socio-politically indifferent mindsets of the Stagnation generation, statically contemplating cultural history and the divine in kitchens and corridors of communal apartments. Though I focus here on the powerless, I do not myself wish to be powerless in the face of history and thereby to accept that nothing can be done in answer to Chernyshevsky's and Lenin's eternal question: what is to be done? But neither can I look easily at the Soviet project as something ultimately positive and replicable, even though I am certainly one of those dreamy intellectuals who would love a financially humble yet stable two days off for every day I work. Therefore, this study marks an intellectual interest that seems to cleave my thinking in two, or three, or four: I am drawn ever to a life of detachment, contemplation, shelter, and spiritual quietism; and also invigorated by sincere activism, forms of attachment and belonging, and direct social involvement in the everyday. Occasionally, such Janus-faced concerns unsettle me to no end, driving me back and forth from my peaceful contemplation to a restless searching for immediate answers and actions. And yet in other moments, of course, I feel no end of a love and dedication to my chosen topic of this peaceful, contemplative poetry. And I know that I am not alone in this. One voice of comfort has remained that of the great, recently deceased Polish poet Adam Zagajewski, who once wrote in a book that helped inspire me into graduate school, *Another Beauty*, that a life of the mind

attuned to the poetic is and will be a meaningful path to follow, regardless of that burden the Russians have long referred to as the *accursed questions*:

Imagine someone who wants to write a defense of poetry. He prepares scrupulously, and spends years on the book. He's three-quarters done when he notices that he's unconsciously begun attacking poetry; he doesn't like it anymore, he sees only its artificiality and pretensions, its bookishness, its inability to answer the most difficult questions. But then, as he draws near the end, he forgives poetry once again for its obvious imperfections, and thinks that this is precisely the point: to be able not to answer the most difficult questions, and keep living anyway.¹⁰

In 1973, the 29-year-old “unofficial” poet Viktor Krivulin wrote a short poem in which he outlined what he felt were the available life choices for an intellectual such as himself. His answer, mystical and religious in tone, points to the contemplation of divine beauty as his choice of primary focus and concern in a stagnant world. The poem itself, though brief, is permeated with a sense of resignation, sympathy, and fear of impending disaster. I do not believe that I live in this same world yet. The options for my life, and so many of my generation, remain too rich to repeat Krivulin's language as a definition of our common beliefs and bearing in the world. But the germ is there, and the possibilities forecast. I imagine that a majority of people my age has felt a creeping suspicion that climate-related catastrophes will seriously affect their lives someday soon, and that their political, social, and economic realities may well grow increasingly unstable. But in the last analysis, I am not yet of the mind to resign into internal freedom and the blissful practice of contemplation through an admittedly powerful detachment and indifference. To become, as they say, a lotus eater. And yet nevertheless, this poetic stance of Krivulin and many in his generation, in my mind, remains a deeply profound mode of thought and an inspiring

¹⁰ Zagajewski, A. (2002) *Another Beauty*, Translated by C. Cavanagh. Athens: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, LLC, p. 203.

idea of freedom that can and will persist even after all other options and hopes have been thwarted, and especially after that great countervailing force, stagnation, has long since taken to the foundations of our common yet fragile shelter like dry rot:

The squalor of style, and the refuge in every courtyard,
awaken in me a compassion and fear of inevitable
catastrophe. To escape abroad, into gardens or verses,
or to sit it out in some hole-

all of these options are loathsome to me, but one:
to safeguard that blaze of final light on the wall,
to saturate my yawning pupils with brick dust-
with a beauty that is not of this earth!

И убожество стиля, и убежище в каждом дворе
возбуждает во мне сострадание и страх катастрофы
неизбежной. Бежать за границу, в сады или строфы,
отсидеться в норе-

но любая возможность омерзительна, кроме одной:
сохранить полыханье последнего света на стенке,
да кирпичною пылью насытить разверстые зенки-
красотой неземной!¹¹

¹¹ Krivulin, V. (2019). *Voskresnye oblaka*. Moscow: RIPOL Classik, p. 54.

Chapter One: The Metaphor of Stagnation

I

In his novel *Ransack* (*Шмон*) written in the early 1980s and published only in 1990, the poet Viktor Krivulin created a metaphor for what might be called a condition of stagnation: five individuals sit on the landing of a communal apartment, “wandering” through an endless, aimless “conversational labyrinth,” stuck there while police conduct a search in one of their apartments. The metaphor, reminiscent of Beckett’s *Godot*, provides the only grounding structure for what is otherwise a plotless and fragmentary 60-page novel composed of one single run-on sentence. Throughout the novel, the five interlocutors discuss life in the Soviet Union and current works of literature with satire and praise, numerous anecdotes, engrossing poetic asides, and even something resembling the genre of a saint’s life. With the end of the novel- and the sentence- the story does not actually conclude; the conversation merely breaks off in the middle of a phrase without resolution or even punctuation. The actual ending of the novel is then placed at the very beginning like a prologue, making of the whole thing a circular and almost pointless diversion, one which Krivulin relates to the last decades of artistic and social life in the Soviet Union: “The time came- this book began with these words three years ago, recounting the endless sitting around of five nameless interlocutors on the landing (тупичок) of a communal apartment, and then, three years ago the beginning itself turned out to be the only possible exit from the dead ended conversational labyrinth, where we already circled for many years (the last two decades at the very least)”¹²

¹² Krivulin, V. (1990). “Schmon,” *Vestnik novoï literatury*, no. 2. Leningrad: Assotsiatsii, p. 20.

A central component of the metaphor is the specific setting of the novel, a “landing,” or “*tupichok*” in Russian, an atypical usage formed as a diminutive for the word dead-end or impasse (*tupik*). This landing in the corridor of an apartment building then becomes a stage for the entire conversation of marginalized voices all subject, yet relatively indifferent to, the forces of the state and secularized modernity which bind them in this endless, unchanging existential predicament in what Krivulin refers to through the “house of being” of Martin Heidegger:

and if language, as the German philosopher said, is the house of being, then the being of the house where any one of my heroes live (wander) . . . their language, I repeat, is a thing still more conditional, than the conversation, which (while these lines are being written) is unable to budge from its standstill, unable to gather strength and speed, to begin to speak in human and angelic languages, since it cannot suddenly break free with an unexpected rupture, with lightning, with the ring of a telephone or knock at the door, with the shock of the instantaneous awareness of a newfound truth¹³

In a memoir essay from his 1998 prose collection *Hunting the Woolly Mammoth*, Krivulin expanded upon the idea of this space as the free yet marginal and lethargic atmosphere of communal apartment corridors, naming it a space of “homelessness” in which a figuratively underground culture developed largely of its own accord and energy.¹⁴ This space, in Krivulin’s conception, fostered an alienated yet independent mindset through which high culture, a new poetic language, and experiences of the sacred could be sought despite the sense of a temporal dead end in the “being of their house.” Viewed retrospectively, after the Soviet collapse, the situation of the “conversational labyrinth” in the microcosmic impasse of the communal apartment’s corridor recalls the breakdown of linear historical time embodied in the Soviet project’s attempt to transform reality, banking as it was on a utopian future. The result, in the

¹³ Krivulin, V. (1990). “Schmon,” *Vestnik novoï literatury*, no. 2. Leningrad: Assotsiatsii, p. 20.

¹⁴ Krivulin, V. (1998) “Leningradskii dom kak pochva bezdomnosti” *Okhota na mamonta*. St. Petersburg: BLITS, p. 43.

stagnant economy and intellectually stilted atmosphere, was a pressurized feeling of timelessness at the end of history. Yet, as the novel also makes clear in a paradoxical way, this timeless space- the “conversational labyrinth” of the novel in Krivulin’s inert “house of being”- is also a space ready *for* the possible pursuit of “human and angelic languages.” It is a place, the novel seems to say, of stagnation, disenchantment, and powerlessness before social disintegration and decay, and yet simultaneously one of inner freedom, poetic vision, and a shared, contemplative longing for culture and connection.

In a 1987 essay on the state of the dominant trends in what would later be called Russian postmodern poetry, scholar Mikhail Epstein briefly described the historical experience of those individuals he calls “the poets of timelessness” in a way that closely recalls the guiding metaphor of stagnation in Krivulin’s novel: “The flow of history has forfeited that linearity of direction called progress. Having slowed down and broadened out, time has formed a delta: this is a descent into an ocean, where times do not follow one another in sequence, but where waves roll in all directions in an infinite space.”¹⁵ Yet at the same time, Epstein pointed to the poets’ positive mode of inhabiting their timeless world and how they made positive discoveries within it: “All of these poets have experienced not only the negative effects of historical stagnation, which has transformed them into a belated, “stagnant” generation, but also the positive discovery of supra-historical foundations, rising out of the shallows of recent decades.”¹⁶ In this way, Epstein points to a prevalent tendency in the writing of the “poets of timelessness,” one which does not involve a principle of historical overcoming or a political and social will to dominate or alter reality. Rather he marks a tendency toward accepting and grasping a seemingly stagnant

¹⁵ Epstein, M. (2019). *Postmodernizm v rossii*. St. Petersburg: Azbuka. p. 190. Epstein, M. (1999) “Like a Corpse in the Desert: Dehumanization in the New Moscow Poetry” *Russian Postmodernism: New Perspectives on Post-Soviet Culture*. New York, Oxford: Berghahn Books, pp.134-144.

¹⁶ Ibid. p. 191 and pp.134-144.

and “timeless” reality, while simultaneously working to renew a poetic language and engage with the cultural past in meaningful ways in the changeless atmosphere of the Soviet Stagnation.

II

Beyond these versatile metaphors of stagnation, the actual era of the Soviet Stagnation, meant to define and delineate the years from roughly 1968 to 1985, can be characterized in two parallel ways. First, it represents a decline and disintegration of the unifying forms of belief and meaning associated with the summons to collective labor and heroism within the utopian Soviet project, a decline resulting in increased indifference, apathy, and alienation from the project’s collective efforts and utopian futures. Second, the era, although conservative and isolationist, entailed a relative relaxing of repression and violence in comparison with earlier eras, especially the Stalinist years, resulting in the gradually tolerated emergence of the unofficial or underground world of the non-conformist intelligentsia. The space created by the meeting of these two tendencies, one of economic decline and collective indifference and the other of the decreasing threat of outright violence and persecution, helped give rise to the perception of a timeless historical moment, one in which a conversation in the hallway of an apartment goes on in its own inertia or a delta in which the possibility of major historical change has, like a great river, turned to mere rivulets and disappeared. But in the unique frame of this stilted, timeless moment, literature and nonconformist life flourished, not simply despite historical circumstances, but largely because of them. Indeed, some of the major figures of this literary efflorescence- poets such as Viktor Krivulin, Alexei Parshchikov, Alexander Eremenko, Ivan Zhdanov, and Elena Shvarts- all engaged in various ways with this atmosphere of timelessness. Directly or indirectly, their poetry related and confronted a common feeling of the end of

progress and history, of the strange and alienating position of the poet in the secularized world of modernity, and of a reality in which they could find no stable and meaningful place of their own, often both literally and figuratively.

Historically, the label of Stagnation comes from the Gorbachev camp of Soviet reformers as a broad indictment of the preceding Brezhnev administration and the condition in which they left the Soviet project. The label was, first and foremost, an attempt to reassert a future for the communist project, one which would stimulate the seemingly moribund and disenchanted idealism of the population. As such, the label helped form an assault on the entrenched conservative powers-that-be. Stagnation, then, is first and foremost a metaphorical political framework to justify the reforms Gorbachev sought to implement under the varied names *uskorenie* (acceleration), *glasnost* (openness), and *perestroika* (reconstruction), each a top-down attempt at major reform. The label therefore appears partisan and largely limited to the spheres of economy and governance that Gorbachev wished to critique and transform. Yet through the label itself, having stuck and become a dominant catch-all term for the period, something was expressed beyond a critique of bureaucratic red tape and excessive military spending alone.

This political metaphor of Stagnation is one in a series of generalizing labels defining supposedly culturally cohesive epochs of Soviet history. The revolutionary Twenties, the Stalinist era, and the period of the Thaw. Among these, the period of the Thaw is perhaps most determinative for the Stagnation period. The metaphor of the Thaw, in a highly generalized sense, has become shorthand for the post-Stalinist period of the 1950s and early 60s, in which utopian enthusiasm, brief and turbulent years of liberalization, social programs directed against the persistence of Stalinism and the bureaucratic stranglehold it came to represent, and an explosion of interest in the pre-Stalinist revolutionary period of art, culture, and Leninism were

definitive. Stagnation, on the other hand, is considered the revanche of Stalinist bureaucracy and limiting “formalism,” the ossification of ideological discourse and the decline of public engagement, all alongside an increase of consumerist demands and a popular turn away from the higher cultural interests of the Thaw era. Stagnation, first and foremost, represents the period of the slow decline in utopian faith and the truisms of progress that had become so much empty propagandistic sloganeering in the final decades of the Soviet Union. And yet, more broadly, when considered within the context of the global loss of historical perspective that characterizes the end of the 20th century as a decline of “metanarratives,”¹⁷ the metaphor of stagnation contains something deeper and more pervasive than a disenchantment with the slumbering Soviet gerontocracy, years of a strictly controlled information sphere, and cultural isolation behind the Iron Curtain.

As critic Alexei Konakov has noted, these are not the dominant characteristics of the era. The dominant characteristic was, rather, an increase in the availability of free time. Following in the footsteps of other nations, the Soviet Union’s transition from a six day work week to five enabled more than just a rested workforce with a penchant for consumer goods as Henry Ford had hoped to yield,¹⁸ but also enabled a greater individualism, pursuit of humanistic interests, and ideological disinterest that developed in private kitchens across the Soviet Union: “For the overwhelming majority of citizens of the USSR, the main characteristic of the Brezhnev era was all in all not oppression, not suffocation, not totalitarianism, not persecution by the KGB, and not the impossibility of travel abroad- the main characteristic was precisely an abundance of time.”¹⁹

¹⁷ “Simplifying to the extreme, I define *postmodern* as incredulity toward metanarratives.” Lyotard, J. (1984) *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, p. XXIV.

¹⁸ Sep 25 1926 Henry Ford Announces 5 Day Work Week [Online]. Available at: <https://worldhistoryproject.org/1926/9/25/henry-ford-announces-5-day-work-week>. (Accessed 19 July 2021)

¹⁹ Konakov, A. (2021) “Izobretateli i dendi èpokhi ‘zastoia’” Paper presented to AATSEEL, Remote, January 25, 2021.

Stagnation, then, was first and foremost an idea defined through a specific relation to time: an abundance of private time interrelated with a dwindling of the collective social energies driving the revolutionary, modernizing utopian movements of the early 20th century, with the Soviet Union at the helm.

This transformation of a collective relation to time created a unique situation in which an increasingly individualistic society emerged within the linear trajectory of history that had previously provided a sense of belonging and subsumed the private time of individuals. As critic Alexander Genis has written about the trajectory of Soviet time in particular, and in agreement with many such statements on the historical model structuring the revolutionary project, Soviet temporality was teleologically oriented precisely toward a utopian end or extratemporal finale of history: “because this model of history had a beginning and an end, Communism hastened to eliminate time, to render it obsolete. After all, time was seen as finite. It could be used up like sand in an hourglass: the less there is left on top, the sooner history will conclude and eternity can set in.”²⁰ Thus, on an historical level, Soviet temporality demanded all private senses of time merge with its dominant trajectory; yet, as that historical trajectory developed a modern and more comfortable state, an increasing demand for private, free time undermined it. As a result, this paradoxical development within Soviet temporality came to feel like a kind of “eternity,” an horizonless sea of time in which the historical continued its collective demands while the individual desire for private time increased. What resulted was a sense of lived or felt time that

²⁰ Genis, A. (2012). “Colonizing Chaos: Russian Literature at the End of the Twentieth Century.” Center for Democratic Culture. Available at: https://digitalscholarship.unlv.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1016&context=russian_culture.

recalled a kind of “continuous present,” an “immutable” “forever,” as anthropologist Aleksei Yurchak named the Brezhnev years, in which neither collective nor private time held sway.²¹

For philosopher Boris Groys, as described in his work, *The Total Art of Stalinism* (1988), the initial perception of the end of history and this grueling eternity of disparate temporalities that followed it came as a deep shock to many, yet was followed by a pervasive irony and “indifference” associated with a condition he names “post-utopian,” characterized by a complete refusal of any utopian or teleological thinking.

Confronted by the failure of the Stalinist project to escape from world history, *homo sovieticus* at first requested readmission to history- one illustration was Khrushchev's 1960s exhortation to "overtake and outstrip America." At that moment it suddenly became terrifyingly clear to Soviet individuals how far removed they were from world history and the world context. Utopia had been transformed into anti-utopia, and transcendence of the historical had become a horrible lapse, almost into the prehistorical. [] At the very moment when *homo sovieticus* wanted most of all to leave the utopia and return to history, there suddenly was the discovery that history no longer existed and there was nowhere to return to. In the West that was to be "overtaken," no one was hurrying anywhere anymore; all hopes of change had vanished, because the historical perspective or orientation to the future had itself disappeared.²²

Nevertheless, the concept of stagnation and unfavorable cycles of history go well beyond this very particular historical moment in the Russian mindset, and reveal more factors at play than the emergence of private time and individual desire within the confines of a collectivist state. The stagnation label in many ways harkens to a tendency in Russian thought that invokes a proclivity toward conservative periods of dormancy when progressive, often Westernizing

²¹ Yurchak, A. (2005). *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

²² Groys, B. (1992). *The Total Art of Stalinism: Avant-Garde, Aesthetic Dictatorship, and Beyond*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, p. 109-110.

efforts and intentions disappear back into the immensity of the steppe and with its sleepy authoritarian mentality. This is precisely the kind of cycle that Mikhail Epstein describes in a work written a few years after the Soviet collapse: “In Russia, the moment that history begins to gain momentum, churning and raging before finally overflowing its banks, preparations are made for the creation of a more voluminous, otherworldly temporal vessel in which history can attain eternal rest. Barely exiting the realm of dreary public stagnation, Russia feels the alarming alacrity of time and immediately seeks a return to metaphysical stagnation, which in order to ease our national consciousness we give the name “eternity,” “metahistory,” etc.”²³ In Icarus-like fashion, history is sought to be overcome, given wings and made to fly, but only voluntarily to crash back down to the same eternal and immutable condition from which it sought escape in the first place.

While Epstein’s essentializing description of the Russian character and history may err slightly in its overgeneralization, the notion of a common perception of time and national purpose- independent of the collectivism of the Soviet project- has its place in both public and private mindsets. In a discussion of “moods” in *Being and Time*, the great philosopher of time and meaning, Martin Heidegger, claims that we “can, should, and must, through knowledge and will, become master of moods,” mood being the primary way by which we relate to our “Being-in-the-world,” our existential situatedness, a situatedness similar to a personal depression or sense of historical defeat and decay. But Heidegger is still quick to point out, and so to complicate this stoic line of thinking long common to philosophy, that we can never simply escape or exit completely from a mood, such that “when we master a mood, we do so by way of a counter-mood; we are never free of moods.”²⁴ In other words, one can never fully escape from

²³ Epstein, M. (2007) *Amerussia: Selected Essays*. Moscow: Serebrianye Niti, p. 472.

²⁴ Heidegger, M. (2008) *Being and Time*. New York: Harper Perennial. p. 175.

the moods of a period's historical determination. A common sense of history and time binds us, but an individual or a collective of people can attempt to alter the mood. And as the Heidegger will emphasize in his later works dedicated to art and poetry, this attempt at alteration a task often undertaken by art and literature in relation to periods of personal depression, "dreary public stagnation," or technological and political domination. And such is the case even before the modernizing projects of the 20th century took hold.

Indeed, this notion of a "dreary public stagnation" precedes the advent of the Soviet era in Russia. Anton Chekhov, in his highly-regarded short story of 1894, "The Student," portrays a young seminary student gloomy with thoughts of a familiar stagnant "eternity" thwarting any progress and inhering in the world as a basic condition to which all human effort returns: "And now, hunching up from the cold, the student thought how exactly the same wind had blown in the time of Rurik, and of Ioann the Terrible, and of Peter, and in their time there had been the same savage poverty and hunger; the same leaky thatched roofs, ignorance and anguish, the same surrounding emptiness and darkness, the sense of oppression- all these horrors had been, and were, and would be, and when another thousand years had passed life would be no better."²⁵ Walking through fields on a winter evening, the young student is overtaken with a mood of despair and a loss of faith in the historical narratives of progress that have long compelled the hopeful. The student, looking out over the expanse of the Russian steppe, is utterly subject to such a mood, though he does not remain so throughout the story.

But in the grip of this mood of "metaphysical stagnation," expressed through the metaphor of a hard and driving wind, the present moment becomes a revolving spoke upon the destructive wheel of history from which there may seem to be no escape. Indeed, in a Stagnation-

²⁵ Chekhov, A. (2000) *Stories*. New York: Bantam Books, p. 263-264.

era 1982 text by Conceptualist artist Ilya Kabakov, “On Emptiness,” written after a first “catalyzing” trip outside the Soviet Union, Kabakov invokes a similarly destructive wind and converts it into an almost metaphysical condition. The wind, in Kabakov’s embittered telling, is now a heuristic image for his abstract notion of “stateness,” a bureaucratized system of power negating any possibility of flourishing and authentic dwelling in the world: “the image of wind blowing interminably alongside and between houses, blowing through everything, an icy wind sowing cold and destruction, howling and crushing, with an unchangeable composition.” “The inhabitants of this place,” he goes on to say, “are cast into this sweeping stream, themselves becoming powerless elements inside the whirlwind.”²⁶ Nothing, for Kabakov, can take root and flourish in this world of essential “emptiness.” And unlike for the young student in Chekhov’s story, there is no escape from this wind-driven condition, only a detached and medical diagnosis of the illness it causes, or a spiritual pursuit of a separate redemptive world somewhere beyond it.

Another expression of this stagnation-inducing wind comes in poet Alexei Parshchikov’s 2006 collection of essays, *Paradise of Slow Flame*, in which he remembers the feeling of time in the Brezhnev era as akin to a “somnambulant time, with a singular task and goal, [which] turned out to be a grand, extraterrestrial, quivering picture, a dumbstruck being without hands or feet, winning out by the millimeter in its advance against a hard wind.”²⁷ The effect of such a wind gave rise to the sense that there was a slowing and eventual cessation of time, a cessation resulting in an historical generation that “lacked a modality of the future.” Indeed, in the same essay, Parshchikov ties many of the poetics and worldviews held by poets and friends of his generation directly to the characteristics of Stagnation, associating the political metaphor with

²⁶ Kabakov, I. (2018) “On Emptiness”, *On Art*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, p. 40.

²⁷ Parshchikov, A. (2006) “Situatsiia” *Raĭ medlennogo ognia*. Moskva: NLO, p. 23.

the notorious density, interiority, and linguistic compression present in much of the poetry of the period, including his own: “The situation the world allotted us forced my like-minded cohort to shrink inward, as if from a hard frost or cosmic overload.”²⁸

The description tracks well with Mikhail Epstein’s earlier-cited description of the “negative effects of historical stagnation,” which he claims transformed many among Parshchikov’s generation into a belated, stagnant generation, making of them “the children of timelessness.” As such, Parshchikov and Epstein both keep with the notion of stagnation as a mood, and invoke it as something that can be altered or transformed only from within through the creation of new moods with the cultivation of counter-moods in art forms like poetry. While Kabakov finds no escape or boon in the situation of stagnation, Epstein describes many poets’ “positive discovery of supra-historical foundations, rising out of the shallows of recent decades,” while Parshchikov optimistically claims that “Stagnation turned out to be a freeze-frame, inside of which it was possible to give measures and intently examine the enchanted elements (заколдованные стихии).”²⁹ Stagnation, for Epstein and Parshchikov at least retrospectively, actually made possible new approaches to writing poetry, new manners of thinking, and new modes of relating to the world poetically.

For Boris Ostanin and Aleksandr Kobak, scholars slightly older than Epstein and Parshchikov, this timelessness at the end of history can also be received with an element of optimism. In their 1985 essay, *Lightning and Rainbow*, Ostanin and Kobak investigate the culture of two different generations through comparison of Thaw-era poets of the 1960s, such as Yevgeny Yevtushenko and Andrei Voznesenski, considered through the metaphor of lightning, with Stagnation-era poets of the 70s and 80s, including many of the poets in this study, who they

²⁸ Parshchikov, A. (2006) “Situatsiia” *Raĭ medlennogo ognia*. Moskva: NLO, p. 23.

²⁹ Ibid. p. 24.

considered through the image of the rainbow. In their conception, the era of the late 1970s and 80s can be seen through the slow and communal image of the rainbow- appearing after the storm- and also through the metaphor of a labyrinth, one which can be comfortably inhabited: “The labyrinth for the person of the rainbow is not a prison from which there is *no exit* (the name of the English translation of Sartre’s play, popular in the ‘60s), but a place of dwelling and habitation, of leisure and contemplation of its endless corridors.”³⁰ For the two scholars, romantic as they might have been, the late-Soviet labyrinth of Stagnation was not the hellish picture of social relations that it was in Sartre’s play *No Exit*, or the nightmarish vision of bureaucracy found in a Kafka novel; and still less was it the endless prison camp of Solzhenitsyn’s writing. Rather it was a place of dwelling and contemplation, artistic activity and intellectual labor, a world in which an alienating and failing system nevertheless made available an expanded notion of “leisure” time, which the German philosopher Josef Pieper defined with great particularity as a “disposition of receptive understanding, of contemplative beholding, and immersion – in the real.”³¹ A definition of leisure he understood to be the very basis of culture and civilization.

Parshchikov, in a comparison similar to Ostanin and Kobak’s from another memoir essay on the era, titled “Sikos-nakos,” proclaims the idea of hell to have been an important concept for earlier generations of Soviet writers, but not his own. In contrast to these earlier generations, he claims, his generation’s troubles were governed by a problematic of paradise, one which demanded new approaches to literature and thought: “In hell there is the concentration camp and the court system, Kafka, Ivan Denisovich, Shalamov, Akhmatova . . . In paradise, there is a

³⁰ Ostanin and Kobak. (2003) “Molnia i raduga: puti kul’tury 60-80kh godov” *Molnia i raduga: literaturno-kriticheskie stat’i 1980kh godov*, Sankt Peterburg: Izdatel'stvo N.I. Novikova, p. 27.

³¹ Pieper, J. (1998) *Leisure, The Basis of Culture*. South Bend: St. Augustine’s Press. p. 50.

different *unbearable concern*: the problem of the incompleteness of perception. But the conflict of “paradise” was for them, the people for whom ideology turned out to be more important than literature, more difficult and alien to their temperament. The conflict of paradise remained elusive. Their themes withered without a world driven by the dialectics of lashes and cake. In paradise, the primary conflicts are the suffering of the nobody, the meeting with energies surpassing your understanding, and surpassing you yourself while caught up in the game of elevation.”³² Though Parshchikov’s language here is decidedly opaque, he is undoubtedly describing the emergence of a postmodern world in which there are no more heroic authors pitted against a violent system or hard and fast ideological principles with which one must stand firm and do no other.

In the world of paradise, there is only the individual pursuit of pleasures or the personal pursuit of fame and wealth in the lives defined by private temporalities without the pursuit of collective action or existential authenticity of past generations. As such, these notions of paradise and the labyrinth of late-Soviet life can be taken as intricately intertwined with the perceived incapacity of individuals to enact change on a collective level or rise above the pervasive yet “unbearable” problems of the day bound to private lives and temporalities, resulting in a cultivated indifference and disenchantment with any will for change among sophisticated intellectuals, and a “dreary public stagnation” for everyone else. But, he is quick to point out, it is one in which individuals were nevertheless free to pursue their own artistic interests unburdened and unprotected either by the “lash” of ideology or the “cake” of a paid position in the world of state-run literature, Yevtushenko and Voznesenski enjoyed.

³² Parshchikov, A. (2006) “Situatsiia” *Raĭ medlennogo ognia*. Moskva: NLO, p. 81.

III

To examine the concept of stagnation in the relation to late-Soviet and 20th century intellectual life, my dissertation will consider five Russian poets—Viktor Krivulin, Aleksei Parshchikov, Aleksandr Eremenko, and Ivan Zhdanov, and Elena Shvarts—all based in either St. Petersburg or Moscow, and one American poet, Lyn Hejinian, who visited the Soviet Union as Stagnation became Perestroika and then collapsed. I will contend that these poets—unique in style, worldview, and geographical location—are connected by their similar relationship to time, history, and metaphors of stagnation invoking a feeling of an eternal, unchanging state of timelessness. The dissertation is structured around three themes connected with this sense of stagnation- existential homelessness, disenchantment with utopian history, and a complicated relation to the sacred and profane arising out of experiences of alienation. In turn, my analysis of these poets and their interrelated themes will help me develop a wide-ranging yet detailed notion of the metaphor of stagnation as it relates to contemplation and the pursuit of meaning within a particular generation experiencing the breakdown of political systems and historical narratives of progress.

In the first section of this dissertation I will examine the poetry of Victor Krivulin, a major figure of Leningrad unofficial culture and an individual of symbolic importance to the counter-cultural elements of the late-Soviet period. Throughout the 1970s, his poetry cultivated a versatile and motivating figure of an “underground man” who leads a cultural withdrawal from a state of homelessness in mundane life and into a higher, spiritually determined world. The two chapters of this section will both develop on Krivulin’s notion of homelessness as a basic existential and spiritual condition of the Stagnation-era Leningrad underground, as well as a broader condition of the poetic and spiritually-oriented self in the secularized modernity of the

late-20th century. The particularities of this condition for the Leningrad underground, Krivulin claims, arose primarily in the marginalized spaces of metaphorical dead-ends and communal apartment corridors throughout Leningrad in its dilapidated post-war state, relegated to the status of a backwater with stricter ideological impositions than Moscow. Chapter one will emphasize the existential character of Krivulin's state of homelessness through Martin Heidegger's own notion of homelessness and "dwelling poetically," ideas with which Krivulin directly engaged through his wife Tatiana Goricheva's translations and seminars in the 1970s. With this theoretical framework, in the second chapter I will point toward Krivulin's vision of a productive and positive mode of dwelling through his sense of an active and engaged non-belonging in which the spiritual trumps the social, forming a position through which he could pursue a new sacred language of poetry in the bohemian underground of Leningrad.

The second section of the dissertation will focus on three poets, commonly referred to as Metarealists- Alexei Parshchikov, Aleksandr Eremenko, and Ivan Zhdanov- in order to consider the metaphor of stagnation in relation to the decline of faith in utopian progress and the idealistic movement of history toward utopia. These three poets, all of whom lived in Moscow and debuted on the literary scene almost a decade later than Krivulin, enjoyed a greater degree of freedom in the more liberal Moscow of their day and have been referred to as "semi-official" (or in Zhdanov's rare case, an official poet in the Writer's Union). This in many distinguishes them from somewhat older and more fully unofficial poets of Leningrad and Moscow, including the by then well-known Moscow Conceptualists. Nevertheless, these poets employed a detached and contemplative poetics similar to Krivulin's and largely incompatible with the reigning ideology of the Soviet project. For these poets, the pressure and sense of disintegration associated with the metaphor of stagnation arose not solely through a deeply alienating homelessness, but through an

often playful and performative (Parshchikov, Eremenko) or tragic (Zhdanov) sense of history's burden and meaninglessness.

This section is comprised of three chapters, with each one focusing on a single poet. The section will begin with a chapter on Parshchikov, who while being the youngest was nevertheless the most theoretical of the group, and will provide a broad introduction to the sense of disenchantment with history that pervades all three poets. The chapter will trace the poet's playful engagement with many political and ideological aspects of Soviet stagnation primarily through the disappearance of a cohesive and teleological understanding of history. The chapter on Eremenko, whose poetry is deeply sarcastic and performative, will consider Eremenko's own vision of the Stagnation-era poet through his meditations on the relationship between technology and nature; for Eremenko, there is an inextricable and almost dystopian relation between them that offers no definitive transformation or refuge on either side, creating a world of insurmountable chaos. The chapter on Ivan Zhdanov concludes the section by examining the poet's particular, lyrical relationship to utopia through his conception of a human jealousy for the wholeness of religiously conceived utopia. Zhdanov's utopia, more of a stand-in for any perfect harmony of part and whole, be it political, religious, or otherwise, is conceived as a perfect harmonization of the broken shards of the past into a new mythic totality. But the emotion of jealousy, which in his view comprises both the self's desire for this union with a whole, or God, and the alienated condition that renders it impossible, remains definitive in his poetic vision of human life, imbuing his transcendence-seeking poetry with an aura of tragedy.

The final section of the dissertation will focus on two women poets with very different approaches to poetry and experiences of the Soviet Union. Russian poet Elena Shvarts and American Lyn Hejinian are highly unique poets who nevertheless produced works that help shed

light on the transition from Stagnation to Perestroika. Shvarts's romantic, meditative work develops from out of the era of Stagnation, while Hejinian's poetic investigations enter into the world of Perestroika from the outside. In her book-length collection of poems, *Oxota* (1991), Hejinian depicts her engagement with Russian culture across the Iron Curtain in the Leningrad of the Late-Soviet Union, which she visited numerous times from 1983-1991. In Shvarts's own book-length collection of poems, *Works and Days of Lavinia, a Nun of the Order of the Circumcision of the Heart* (1987), the poet portrays her character Lavinia as an ardent nun seeking spiritual transformation in the timeless space of an imagined convent. Both works involve a journey, or hunt, following Hejinian's guiding metaphor, for a sense of understanding and belonging that overcomes the borders and biases of spaces where they initially or ultimately do not belong. The two chapters that form this final section each focus on a single work, considering the ways the poets developed their own creative relations to the world around them to overcome powerful forms of isolation and alienation.

IV

"The time came," begins Krivulin's novel *Ransack*, a book "recounting the endless sitting around of five nameless interlocutors on the landing (тупичок) of a communal apartment." While all five of the Russian poets in this study likely knew each other and often quite closely, they themselves do not constitute the kind of close-knit, intimate society that Krivulin describes as participating in the "dead ended conversational labyrinth, where we already circled for many years (the last two decades at the very least)."³³ Krivulin and Shvarts knew each other well and spent much time together. Parshchikov, Eremenko, and Zhdanov were close friends, and likely

³³ Krivulin, V. (1990). "Schmon," *Vestnik novoї literatury*, no. 2. Leningrad: Assotsiatsii, p. 20.

knew Krivulin and Shvarts from trips between the two cities. Hejinian for sure met Krivulin, Parshchikov, and Zhdanov at conference of Avant Garde writing in 1989, but not necessarily the others. They did, however, all constitute a part of the literary conversation that took place in the private kitchens and public “*tupichoks*” of the Soviet Stagnation, forming a “conversational labyrinth” that lasted for “the last two decades at the very least,” and into which Lyn Hejinian and other American poets entered just as it was emerging into the mainstream and breaking up. And just then, the eternity and timelessness of Krivulin’s novel, the whole “conversational labyrinth” of unofficial Soviet literary life, and the Soviet Union itself all abruptly came to an end as if in mid-sentence, a whiplash attested to by the young poet Babylen Tatarsky in Viktor Pelevin’s *Generation P*:

Then events took an unforeseen turn. Something began happening to the very eternity to which he had decided to devote his labors and his days. Tatarsky couldn’t understand this at all. After all, eternity – at least as he’d always thought of it – was something unchangeable, indestructible and entirely independent of the transient fortunes of this earthly realm.³⁴

But in the time before this ending, in the changeless and eternal yet stable space of the stagnant present, the children of timelessness confronted shared experiences of existential homelessness, disenchantment, and alienation. And by these they were formed into what many referred to as a “belated, ‘stagnant’ generation,” through they never fully succumbed to the pressures and defeats it entailed. Instead, pursuing a poetics grounded in a spiritual mindset of detachment and a conscious form of social non-belonging, they cultivated their own contemplative visions of profoundly poetic and sacred worlds which supported their unique, existential modes of “dwelling poetically” in the late-Soviet world of 20th century modernity.

³⁴ Pelevin, V. (2002) *Homo Zapiens*. New York: Penguin Publishing, p. 3.

Part Two:
Homelessness, Nonbelonging, and Poetic Dwelling

Chapter Two: Victor Krivulin and the Poetics of Homelessness

I

In a short, 1990 “documentary” film, *Obvodnyi Canal*, director Aleksei Uchitel captures a “slice of time” by filming various locations around the well-known Leningrad site and symbol of Late-Soviet, underground culture.³⁵ The locations, a filthy beer hall in which a rough-looking crowd drinks, jostles, and fights one another; a seminary with a scene of young students marching in a courtyard; not one, but three different mental institutions; a Soviet House of Culture with a scene of traditional dancing set to no music; and various other strange, yet authentic locations, are brought together, it seems, for no apparent purpose other than as a study of an particular place and time. But taken together with the liminal scenes of underground artists and writers who fill the spaces in-between, the film becomes, more than anything, a rendering of these individuals’ angle of vision, one colored by the ironic distance and sense of marginalization that characterize the alternative lifestyles through which these in-between figures seem both to belong and not to belong to their surroundings. And from the very first scene of the film’s journey into this marginal, defamiliarized microcosm of Late-Soviet reality, our guide, wandering out ahead of the camera like a specter through the rain-dark, decrepit Leningrad alleyways, as if a Virgil to the viewer’s Dante, is the poet Viktor Krivulin (1944-2001). Krivulin was a leading figure of *samizdat* literature and the unofficial culture of the Leningrad

³⁵ Uchitel refers to *Obvodnyi Canal* as being at the juncture of live action and documentary cinema; it is, he claims, a “documentary parable about time and St. Petersburg.”

See: Sazonov, Anton (2010) *Aleksej Uchitel' kommentiruet svoi rannie dokumental'nye fil'my* [Online]. Available at: <https://theoryandpractice.ru/posts/1883-aleksey-uchitel-kommentiruet-svoi-rannie-dokumentalnye-filmy> (Accessed: 8 July 2021)

underground since the early 1970s, and still remains, as Stephanie Sandler has noted, “without question a major figure in late 20th-century Russian poetry.”³⁶

In his 1998 memoir, *Hunting the Woolly Mammoth*, Krivulin would name the in-between position of those in the film as one of “homelessness.” This homelessness, he claims, was a “soil” from which his poetic vision of the Leningrad underground grew, and an idea he bases on his childhood spent in the common corridors and stairwells of a Soviet apartment building, and one which he contrasts with a specific notion of home: “Home is first of all a vertical, an alpine ascent, a transition away from the external world, from “no one’s” world into the world of “our” own; not “my” world personally, but precisely “our” world.”³⁷ The idea of home is here given three primary points of orientation: first, the paradoxical homelessness of a common “no one’s world,” where everyone exists but in which no one belongs; the traditional, private sense of “my” world, my home; and finally a carved-out and transformed world of “our own,” of a smaller, cohesive collectivity. Seen through these designations, the notion of home that arises from out of the common, “no one’s” space is that of a mode of being that encloses and defines, that makes possible a sense of belonging within the homeless state of non-belonging in “no-one’s” world. This idea of homelessness, as a loss or absence of a secure, hierarchical and vertically oriented framework, which is often both an explicit and subtle presence throughout Krivulin’s writing, echoes the use of the term by the German philosopher Martin Heidegger.³⁸ Heidegger defines this sense of existential homelessness directly in one unfinished essay on the connected questions of “philosophizing and poetizing.” “Without God and without a world,

³⁶ Sandler S. (2007) “A Poet Living in the Big City: Viktor Krivulin, Among Others,” Boudreau N, O’Neil C Poetics. Self. Place: Essays to Honor Anna Lisa Crone. Columbus, Ohio: Slavica, p. 3.

³⁷ Krivulin, V. (1998) “Leningradskii dom kak pochva bezdomnosti” *Okhota na mamonta*. St. Petersburg: BLITS, p. 43.

³⁸ Krivulin became acquainted with the philosophy of Martin Heidegger in the mid-1970s through his wife Tatiana Goricheva, who herself studied the philosopher and famously corresponded with him.

humans no longer have *that* in which they belong, to which they can listen, whence they can be addressed and claimed. We call this circumference that is historically enclosed and nourishing, that fuels all courage and releases all capacities, that surrounds the place where humans belong in the essential meaning of a claimed listening: the *home*.³⁹ The home, then, defined through its loss in both Heidegger and Krivulin's thinking, represents a shared horizon of meaning, within the borders of which one's life may become articulated and grounded, i.e. meaningful.

While for Heidegger the loss of home as a definite horizon of meaning may well have led to his infamous historical misjudgments, for Krivulin the uprooting or departure from the private, hierarchical, and insistently local world of the past plays out as something both positive and negative. Deprived of private value-forming hierarchies and any rooted forms of home, Krivulin and his young friends grew up in a position of common non-belonging and detachment within the in-between spaces of Leningrad, such as the corridors of apartment buildings and the marginal spaces of the "*Obvodnyj Canal*" film. And yet it is precisely this in-between "no one's" world that opened up new possibilities of belonging and diverse modes of reengagement with the world through artistic and poetic transformations within Krivulin's conceptualization of the underground. As the poet claims, "The street, canal embankment, square, and for a few, the book, were gradually transformed into our actual home. And, of course, the palaces, redressed as government museums and therefore no one's, came to be ours."⁴⁰ In the concluding lines of the essay, Krivulin describes the famous Hermitage museum in the Winter Palace, with its own world enclosed "under the resonant arches with purple columns and victory banners, along the

³⁹ Heidegger, Martin. (2017) *Introduction to Philosophy—Thinking and Poetizing*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, p. 24.

⁴⁰ Krivulin, V. (1998) "Leningradskii dom kak pochva bezdomnosti" *Okhota na mamonta*. St. Petersburg: BLITS, p. 51.

decorative parquets with five-, eight-, and twelve-pointed stars.”⁴¹ And he goes on to proclaim such a cultural enclosure as home, “Your home were the stars underfoot, an underground luxury of the socialized palace.”⁴² From the ruins of the traditional and holistic old world figured as original vertical of “home,” long ago ruptured by modernity and revolution, there arises a common homelessness of a disinherited “no-one’s” world. Yet such a condition nevertheless allowed for the creation of new modes of belonging and experience of home, of metaphysical “underground luxury,” which provides the modern, disinherited poet with what Krivulin calls, a “place at the worldly feast,”⁴³ marginalized and impoverished yet independently abounding with cultural and spiritual wealth. This trajectory, then, from out of the home of the past, through homelessness, and into a new, marginalized yet culturally rich sense of a shared home, helps inform a reading of the existential position of Krivulin’s underground and the ontological tendency in his poetry.

This chapter will explore the sense of homelessness of Krivulin’s poetic underground of the early and mid 1970s as it emerges through a process of what Aleksei Yurchak calls “deterritorialization,” defined as “new temporalities, spatialities, social relations, and meanings that were not necessarily anticipated or controlled by the state, although they were fully made possible by it.”⁴⁴ I will argue that this trajectory attained a position of relatively positive, or productive, non-belonging within the Soviet context with its dissolving socialist and collective values, stagnating faith in progress, and the dystopian fragments and traces of 20th century “catastrophes” that inform Krivulin’s work. Focusing on some of the poetic, social, religious,

⁴¹ Ibid. 52.

⁴² Ibid. 52.

⁴³ Ibid. 51.

⁴⁴ Yurchak, A. (2005). *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, p. 128.

and philosophical aspects of Krivulin's underground, I want to consider this existential, deterritorialized homelessness as both embodying characteristics of and confronting the historical and cultural paradigm of alienation and modern homelessness in the Late-Soviet period of Stagnation through a poetics that recalls the Heideggerian notion of "dwelling poetically," in which poetry "brings man onto the earth, making him belong to it,"⁴⁵ yet in Krivulin's case ultimately remains in tension between homelessness and home.

II

The catastrophe and existential homelessness of Krivulin's reception of the world, as it emerges throughout his poetic work through consistently repeated images such as ash, soot, scorched loam, and the tatters of a traditional poetic language, is not a world solely formed by the Soviet context. In the recurring images of a post-war, Stagnation-era Leningrad, with its ashes of revolution, terror, and war, there are present many of the same poetic, existential, and cultural concerns that fill the urban poems of other 20th century poets from T.S. Eliot to Paul Celan. A common theme here is the struggle of traditional poetic language's ability to move past the modernist recognition of desacralization or the postmodernist impossibility of writing "poetry after Auschwitz," in Adorno's famous phrase.⁴⁶ For many poets working in the 20th century, there was a subsequent loss of any traditional sense of continuity and the meaningfulness of the poetic word within a unified frame of understanding. As such, any mass movements, major ideologies, and large-scale narrative structures in which a poet might find a position from which to direct their creative output, gradually gave over to the particular, the

⁴⁵ Heidegger, M. (2001). *Poetry Language Thought*. New York: Harper Perennial, p. 216.

⁴⁶ For more on the question of "poetry after Auschwitz" in the context of Russian poetry, see Tregulova, Z.I., et al. (2017). "Vypustili svet na svezhiĭ vozdukh. Poëziia ottepeli." *Ottepel'*. Moskva: Gosudarstvennaia tret'iakovskaia galereiia, pp. 147-165.

incomplete, and the fragmented. For the non-conformist poet of Krivulin's era, there was no longer any overarching framework or existential and ideological orientation with which he might structure and shape his representations of the world. For such a poet of the Late-Soviet underground, there could only be an alienating or *quasi* relation to those traditions and frameworks with which one might transform experience into a meaningful, cohesive poetic representation.

This situation became especially visible and acute in the period referred to as the Soviet Stagnation (1968-1985). During this period, the power of Soviet ideology declined throughout the population following the preceding period known as the Thaw, a time of liberalization and renewed ideological vitality following Stalin's death. This time period then became increasingly conservative, isolated, and associated with the decrepit gerontocratic leadership of the Brezhnev years. In turn, the broad ideological framework of Soviet modernity gave way to spaces wherein many of the original questions of modernity arose again, but in which no single framework could become stably grounded.

Philosopher Boris Groys, in his celebrated work, *The Total Art of Stalinism*, defined this late-Soviet period as "post-utopian," a period in which a modernist avant-garde's confrontation with what he called a "black chaos" was continued but without its universalizing tendencies and absolute pretensions to any utopian reordering of the chaos. As Groys explains, the mimetic "picture of the world" that had been passed down since antiquity and grounded in the notion of an external creator, the creation of which one must imitate to arrive at truth, was destroyed in the 19th century. In response, this fostered the task for the modernist Avant Garde and its continuation in the Soviet project of a utopian transformation of reality and creation of a new

“picture of the world,” a task which had become exhausted by the 70s and 80s and gave way to an historical indifference.

The intrusion of technology into European life in the nineteenth century caused this picture of the world to disintegrate and gradually led to the perception that God was dead, or rather that he had been murdered by modern technologized humanity. As the world unity guaranteed by the creative will of God disappeared, the horizon of earthly existence opened, revealing beyond the variety of visible forms of this world a black chaos—an infinity of possibilities in which everything given, realized, and inherited might at any moment dissolve without a trace.⁴⁷

From Groys’ subjective perspective, avant-garde artists such as Kazimir Malevich and Velemir Khlebnikov responded to this situation in an essentially reactionary way, attempting to seize the dissolution of the world picture through a simultaneous futurism and primitivism that raced out ahead of it and brought elements of the past into the present. And in turn, post-utopian conceptualist artists such as Ilya Kabakov and Dmitry Aleksandrovich Prigov let it fall, believing that any willful effort to contain it would lead to the same 20th century ravages connected with the totalitarian transformations of society.

But this does not mean that any pursuit of the sacralizing, archaizing, and mythological tendencies of modernism disappeared from the Late-Soviet world. Rather, such a pursuit flourished among a number of poets, artists, and thinkers of the time, and informed Krivulin’s own poetic concerns in the 1970s and beyond. Krivulin’s poetry reaches beyond specifically Soviet interests and sense of isolation behind the Iron Curtain in an effort to poetize, transform, and meaningfully counter-pose an experience of the world’s disintegration into a “black chaos,” in Groys’ words, with a reemerging world of spiritual and meaningful ways of being. The

⁴⁷ Groys, B. (1992). *The Total Art of Stalinism: Avant-Garde, Aesthetic Dictatorship, and Beyond*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, p. 14.

resulting poetic and spiritual pursuits that arose out of these concerns, I will argue, can be considered as particular features of a Heideggerian “poetic dwelling,” as attempts to pursue through poetry and artistic creation that which “brings man onto the earth, making him belong to it.”⁴⁸

This task of “dwelling” as an existential category and artistic mission is decidedly visible in one of Krivulin’s repeated poetic concepts, that of the “garden.” This theme was popular among Krivulin’s contemporaries as well. As Mikhail Epstein has explained in reference to the “garden” in the work of Olga Sedakova, it is emblematic of a poetry considering “the spiritual structures of the universe, visible through the now thinned out fabric of history.”⁴⁹ Furthermore, the critic Boris Ivanov has specifically pointed to the garden in Krivulin’s work as signifying “a project in which the world awaits a transformation,”⁵⁰ a subject of meditation in which the world is turned into a range of possibilities and opened up to change. Such a transformation, though, does not in Krivulin’s case denote a revolutionary change of social or political activity. Rather it in large part points to the representations of endless natural cycles of transformations and interconnections of phenomena that such poets as Krivulin and Sedakova focused on in their pursuits of new and old meanings in the historically stagnant, slow-moving wake of the 20th century utopian projects’ failed attempts to utterly transform the world. The response among such poets accordingly became one of contemplation and dwelling in the spheres of culture and poetry- efforts to transcend, reconnect, and develop- without ever hoping to fully transform or step outside of the context within which this effort arises. These poetics thus mark an inherited melancholy and sense of defeat prevalent in the Late-Soviet underground. Yet these existed

⁴⁸ Heidegger, M. (2001). *Poetry Language Thought*. New York: Harper Perennial, p. 216.

⁴⁹ Epstein, M. (2019). *Postmodernizm v rossii*. St. Petersburg: Azbuka. p. 196.

⁵⁰ Ivanov, B.I. (2004). “Viktor Krivulin – poët rossiïskogo Renessansa (1944—2001).” *NLO*, Number 4.

simultaneously with a celebration and poetics of what Krivulin frequently names a “feast” (пир) in his meditations on the theme of the garden as endless transformations that unite transcendent ideas such as freedom with temporality and death in formulae recalling the paintings of avant-gardist Pavel Filonov: “endless brotherhood, eternal sisterhood- Death and Freedom- Feast of the humanflowers.”⁵¹

This theme of the garden and feast, as Ivanov further notes in his authoritative study of the poet, “Viktor Krivulin: Poet of the Russian Renaissance,” is intimately related to a medieval conception of culture as creation, building, and inheritance, and is therefore not, ultimately, an escapist place of Edenic refuge or a projected “utopia of mystical bliss.”⁵² Rather it is a garden that, from the very first lines of his 1972 elegiac poem, “O, Garden,” “endures in architectural torment, recalling an unconstructed building.”⁵³ In his 1982 study, the *Poetry of Gardens*, Dmitri Likhachev writes that “The garden is an attempt to create an ideal world out of the interrelationship between nature and the human.” “The garden always expresses a certain philosophy, an aesthetic conception of the world, a relation of the human to nature; it is a microcosm in the most ideal sense.”⁵⁴ In Krivulin’s poetry, the garden is often a place of infertile clay and “transformative decay,” a place still “unconstructed” or only the “drunken memory of a never-before paradise,” where one can meditate in “blessed absentmindedness.” The garden image, as a metonymy, draws associations throughout Krivulin’s poetry with the homeless position of the underground, the dilapidated Leningrad of the 1970s-80s, and a modern existential experience of fragmented contemporaneity.

⁵¹ “Бесконечное братство, вечное сестринство- Смерть и Свобода- Пир человекоцветов.” Krivulin, V. (2019). *Voskresnye oblaka*. Moscow: RIPOL Classik, p. 16.

⁵² Ivanov, B.I. (2004). “Viktor Krivulin – poët rossiïskogo Renessansa (1944—2001).” *NLO*, Number 4.

⁵³ “V arkhitekturnoi muke dlitsia sad, podobno nedostroennomu zdan'iu.” Krivulin, V. (2019). *Voskresnye oblaka*. Moscow: RIPOL Classik, p. 30.

⁵⁴ Likhachev, D. (2018). *Poëziia sadov*. Sofia: Colibri, p. 10.

As such, throughout all of his thematic associations and repetitions, the garden for Krivulin is a place to consider the nature of human dwelling as akin to the Heideggerian notion of the poetic as a measuring of the ontological horizon of meaning, “the element within which human dwelling has its security, by which it securely endures.”⁵⁵ This horizon of meaning, “the taking of measure” “is what is poetic in dwelling,” “which occurs through an upward-looking measure-taking of the dimension, in which the sky belongs just as much as the earth.”⁵⁶ Heidegger’s poetic measure-taking is, then, above all an act of contemplation in which a conception or picture of the world is gained wherein the human has a place, home, and position of enduring. And such a position of enduring then becomes a mode of reconsidering and redefining experience after the “picture of the world” came to “disintegrate and gradually led to the perception that God was dead.”⁵⁷

Heidegger’s conception of a contemplative poetic existence, comprised of what he calls a “releasement toward things,” a non-willing “letting them be,” and an “openness to the mystery” as a meditative and largely anarchic mode of remaining open to the deeper, hidden meanings of things, is meant to “grant us the possibility of dwelling in the world in a totally different way,”⁵⁸ restoring modes of dwelling lost to rapid technologization and overwhelming changes of modernity in a way that is simultaneously progressive and deeply reactionary. “Releasement” and “openness,” the philosopher claims, “give us a vision of a new autochthony (rootedness) which someday might even be fit to recapture the old and now rapidly disappearing autochthony in a changed form.”⁵⁹ But in Krivulin’s garden of “architectural torment,” this “security” and

⁵⁵ Heidegger, M. (2001). *Poetry Language Thought*. New York: Harper Perennial, p. 219.

⁵⁶ Ibid. 221.

⁵⁷ Groys, B. (1992). *The Total Art of Stalinism: Avant-Garde, Aesthetic Dictatorship, and Beyond*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, p. 14.

⁵⁸ Heidegger, M. (1966) *Discourse on Thinking*. New York: Harper & Row, p. 55.

⁵⁹ Ibid. 55.

“rootedness” of dwelling remains deeply in question, even though it does, in many ways, remain *the* question as part of his attempted resurrection of Silver Age poetics, religious and philosophical practices, and cultural and archaic traditions that were lost or exterminated during the 1917 revolution and in the modernizing Soviet state.

In the “unconstructed building” of the garden in the 1972 elegy, “O, Garden,” the pieces of an unnamed building perform the role of suggesting the “mystery” of the sky and the rootedness of the things of the earth, yet are rendered ultimately inert both by the naturally destructive processes of time (rot, decay, forgetting) and, in a highly subtle and brief allusion, to the impossibility of such a thing in the modern, Soviet world, claiming only, “despite the times . . .” The microcosm of the garden is quickly transformed and made simultaneous with a vision of a cosmic reality in which the sky and earth are brought together in a way recalling Heidegger’s notion of measure or Krivulin’s own description of the Hermitage as home. The poem claims: “The arch of transparent radiance has not come to light, the chandeliers still do not ring with leaves, but the crystal suspensions of all the heavens are already changing their color.”⁶⁰ Within this transparent yet enclosed poetic space the poem raises the question of what these incomplete and fragmentary architectural features that define the garden are meant to be. And though ultimately leaving the question unanswered, the poem begins to express, as in so many of Krivulin’s poems, the temporal changes of seasons and times that govern more than just bloom and rot, but endless unending cycles of hope and loss, death and resurrection, to which systems and creeds, Soviet or otherwise, are all subject and equally insecure:

Здесь времени назло
не храму ли расти до неба, чтоб легло

⁶⁰ “Еще не застит свод прозрачного сиянья, еще не люстры листьями звенят, но всех небес хрустальные подвески уже меняют цвет.” Krivulin, V. (2019). *Voskresnye oblaka*. Moscow: RIPOL Classik, p. 30.

на душу облегчение, и крыло,
 небесной ласточки напрягшаяся арка,
 земли коснулась тенью – и лица?

Едва ли церковь. . . Или же дворца
 здесь вечный остов? Память о барокко?
 [...]

Скорее, сад – холодный дом Творца,
 оставленный расти пустым и неуютным,
 чтобы в существовании минутном
 ты не забыл, что жизни нет конца.

Despite the times,
 can a temple possibly grow to the sky here,
 that it may lay relief upon the soul, as a wing,
 the straining arc of a heavenly swallow,
 that touched the earth, and a face, with a shadow?

Is it perhaps a church. . . or the eternal frame
 of a palace? a memory of the baroque?
 [...]

Likely the garden is just the cold home of the Creator,
 left to grow into emptiness and discomfort,
 so in that this momentary existence
 you may never forget there is no end of life.⁶¹

In this poem, as in so many others, Krivulin looks to obtain a vaulted spiritual or existential position, a higher angle of measure, dimension, or representation, so as to reduce the power of one's current circumstances and reframe one's being in the world in a way that makes

⁶¹ Krivulin, V. (2019). *Voskresnye oblaka*. Moscow: RIPOL Classik, p. 31.

possible new modes of freedom, creativity, meaningful connections, and pursuits of transcendence. Yet such a pursuit hinges on the ambivalence of the phrase, “Despite the times,” pointing to the highly conditional restrictions and limitations of one’s current circumstances and yet attempting to overcome them through meditation on potential modes of dwelling available within this garden-microcosm, the most significant of which would be the temple. Such a temple, as a possible mode or symbol of sacred enclosure, might grow to the sky and connect the “earth” as garden and a “face”- the upward glance of the human residing in the garden- with a transcendent heaven manifest in various modes as the “sky,” “arc” of a “swallow’s” flight, and a “shadow.” And these connections in turn reveal possible modes of transcendence, belonging, and “relief.” Such a conception of the temple echoes the Heidegger’s notion of an ancient Greek temple in his “Origin of the Work of Art,” in which “it is the temple-work that first fits together and at the same time gathers around itself the unity of those paths and relations in which birth and death, disaster and blessing, victory and disgrace, endurance and decline acquire the shape of destiny for human being.”⁶² The temple is an object that gathers around itself the possible modes of human being in the world, and sets them into viable interconnection. But this temple, as a stable and definitive ordering and enclosing that meaningfully orients and “destines” a people’s way of being in the world, remains in Krivulin’s poem either incomplete or abandoned, left “unconstructed” and in “architectural torment,” “left to grow into emptiness and discomfort.” The temple, as well as the church (religion), the palace (power, government), and the baroque (art), all remain subject to the endless process of life, of the “feast” of transformations, which endlessly continues in its cycles of winter decay and summer efflorescence.

⁶² Heidegger, M. (2001). *Poetry Language Thought*. New York: Harper Perennial, p. 41.

III

Krivulin's poetic world thus revolves around a detached and contemplative vision of super-historical transformations to which the pretensions of religion, government, and art are all subject. And with this cosmic vision, Krivulin fosters a means of confronting the varied manifestations of loss, alienation, and chaos that together define the existential condition of homelessness. This trajectory of contemplation, then, allows the poet to imaginatively wade into the endless churn and cycle of nature, creating novel frameworks for dwelling beyond the narrow confines of a stagnant and mundane historical reality. Yet it does so without ever attaining the position of a conclusive answer, of stability or faithful consolation. Indeed, subject to this feast of transformations, the "cold home of the Creator" signifies an inhuman sense of home and subsequent homelessness in its indifference. It is the cold home of a silent God that remains both inviting and uninviting, attesting to a creative, divine power in the cosmos, yet in a way that forms no human connection with a manifest presence, nor provides any relief which the "wing" of a "heavenly swallow" might give. Such a place remains, in the words of a poem written two years later in 1972, only a "home settled by no one,"⁶³ a largely uninhabitable world of divine inheritance.

In the end, the concluding lines of the poem "O, Garden" proclaim the unendingness of life, yet they do not clearly signify whether this entails a personal eternal afterlife as within the Christian theology and aesthetics that inform and permeate Krivulin's poetry, or simply a naturalistic or mythologically oriented sense of organic, impersonal decay and regeneration of life on earth corresponding to the naturalistic imagery in his garden poems. As Boris Ivanov has written concerning this ultimately mythic orientation in Krivulin's work, subtly connected with

⁶³ "никем не заселенный дом" Krivulin, V. (2019). *Voskresnye oblaka*. Moscow: RIPOL Classik, p. 75.

Nietzschean thought, the “the death of God is not a crucifixion and not a summons to repentance of sins, but a celebration of the eternal transition of dark into light, of winter into spring. It is more that of Dionysus, god of life and fertility, of the cosmic cycle of natural being.”⁶⁴ Yet nevertheless, in Krivulin’s poem the modern individual is left in a position of existential homelessness within the “cold home of the Creator,” wherein human history, progress, and true dwelling in the world remain in “architectural torment,” recalling an “unconstructed building.” To make one’s home here, to poetically dwell, is to reside in this garden and participate in the ever-in-between position of the temple as human endeavor that would rise to the sky, only to face utter collapse in the inevitable future, returning back into the Biblical dark water from which it came: “But the reservoir, from which everything came, lies colorless and imperceptible between the column-trunks, like a mirror clouded with the smoke of a burning leaf.”⁶⁵ There the results of human endeavor may persist, shrouded in mystery, inaccessible, “unconstructed,” yet still capable of new, temporary building, creation, and celebration.

Krivulin’s meditative poetic position, then, while remaining within the Soviet context yet looking beyond it and thereby relativizing its many absolute pretensions, forms both a pursuit of meanings, connections, and forms of belonging beyond the “homelessness” and temporality of the everyday, and a simultaneous recognition of the impossibility of their stabilizing into long-standing forms, thus finding poetry in acts of both odic praise and Heraclitean weeping, as he claims in one of his most celebrated poems, the word “dies, but joyfully dies.”⁶⁶ Krivulin’s time

⁶⁴ “смерть Бога — не распятие и не призыв к покаянию в грехах, а праздник вечной смены тьмы — светом, зимы — весной. Это скорее Дионис, бог жизни и плодородия, космического цикла природного бытия.” Ivanov, B.I. (2004). “Viktor Krivulin – poët rossiïskogo Renessansa (1944—2001).” *NLO*, Number 4.

⁶⁵ “А водоем, откуда все пришло, лежит бесцветно и неосязаемо между колонн-стволов, как зеркало, что дымом сжигаемой листвы заволокло . . .” Krivulin, V. (2019). *Voskresnye oblaka*. Moscow: RIPOL Classik, p. 31.

⁶⁶ “Гибнет каждое слово, но весело гибнет” Krivulin, V. (2019). *Voskresnye oblaka*. Moscow: RIPOL Classik, p. 115.

and space, as in the poem “O, Garden,” is separate yet tethered to an absent God that has left this world cold, a metaphysical elsewhere, in which all boundaries are blurred by smoke, rot, mystery, and an ashen presence of the archaic past in the garden-microcosm as “a heavy ornament of branches, and unenlightened anguish sunken deeply into the unseen pool, into the glass of its pupil.”⁶⁷ Yet it is also the brief, flickering, and drifting elements of light and color, seeds and shoots of green, “splashes, sparks or bursts”⁶⁸ of fructification and renewal that can be found throughout his poetry. And it is within the larger existential homelessness of this layered and unbounded space and temporality that Krivulin’s poetry nevertheless attempts to make into a home, within which to “dwell poetically.”

⁶⁷ “тяжел орнамент веток, и тоска непросвещенная, запавшая глубоко в невидящем пруду” Krivulin, V. (2019). *Voskresnye oblaka*. Moscow: RIPOL Classik, p. 31.

⁶⁸ “брызги, искры или всплески” Krivulin, V. (2019). *Voskresnye oblaka*. Moscow: RIPOL Classik, p. 30.

Chapter Three: In Pursuit of the Sacred: Krivulin's Poetry of Nonbelonging

I

Much of late-Soviet era poet Viktor Krivulin's poetry, with its archaism, metaphorical complexity, and sacralizing tendencies, is directly connected with the stagnant modernity of the Soviet 1970s. Throughout the 1970s, a number of Krivulin's poems represent a romantic spiritual seeker through an uneasy and marginalized position in a modern and dilapidated world. It is rarely a political position, and is rather detached from the concrete elements of everyday life in favor of a mystical, contemplative mode made possible by sinking down into a state of underground homelessness. But his poetic vision did not remain in that condition of homeless alienation and disenchantment. His imaginative trajectory beyond- beyond the artistic dictates of the Soviet state, beyond the realities of daily life in secularized modernity, and beyond the confines of purely oppositional political thinking- resulted in what I call a poetics of nonbelonging, a social and poetic engagement with reality that stands in complex relation with the determinations of the everyday, Soviet or otherwise. To consider this poetics of nonbelonging, I will explore the position from which much of Krivulin's poetry is written in the 1970s, tracing its movement beyond the condition of homelessness in the Stagnation era as an attempted apolitical stance, through the poet's creative pursuit of a new sacred language of poetry within his general position of social and philosophical nonbelonging.

Krivulin's quest for a new poetic language, one that will allow the poet and spiritual seeker to overcome the conditions of Soviet reality without confronting them politically, is prototypical of many poets, thinkers, and intellectuals in the Stagnation era. As Josephine von Zitzewitz writes in her major study, *Poetry and the Leningrad Religious-Philosophical seminar*

1974-1980, many intellectuals felt that their everyday situation, “in which people were surrounded by claims and statements the content of which was irreconcilable with the circumstances of their very lives, was crippling the Russian language, leading to a fatal *dvaiazyhie* in whose ambit words lost their meanings and creative vitality.”⁶⁹ This gave rise to “literary experiments” that were “above all directed towards the restoration of the creative vitality of literary language, through a rediscovery of the suppressed registers of poetic language, as well as by reclaiming forbidden subject matter.”⁷⁰ And this direction of creative focus coupled with a broader existential concern led to trajectory beyond the confines and direct critical engagements with political concerns and Soviet reality that had so dominated the liberal sixtier poets and intellectuals (шестидесятники) of the previous Thaw period.

As Tatiana Goricheva has recalled, this poetic quest for a new language, and the broader context of her and Krivulin’s life together in those years, including hosting the famous Religious-Philosophical Seminar and running the samizdat journal 37, named for the number of their shared apartment, was characterized by a position outside of the political sphere and emphasizing a focus beyond its confines, to the degree that this was possible: “Our second culture was never any kind of political culture. . . We didn’t extol Soviet power, but we also didn’t malign it. We lived as if it didn’t exist and never had.”⁷¹ It is easy, then, to see the resulting poetics as nothing more than a vain escapism and ignorance of the social issues of a modern world in which there can be no true apolitical position. Indeed, the idea of a new sacred language and poetic dwelling as a form of opening into a higher, yet separate and marginal status

⁶⁹ von Zitzewitz, J. (2016). *Poetry and the Leningrad Religious-Philosophical Seminar 1974-1980*. Cambridge and New York: Modern Humanities Research Association and Routledge, p. 41.

⁷⁰ Ibid. 41.

⁷¹ Goricheva et al. (2007). *"P'û vino arkhaizmov..." O poëzii Viktora Krivulina*. SPB: Kosta, p. 75.

by a place in the social world for the private spaces of a linguistic reality is easy to write off as being a simple rejection of reality in the name of utterly disengaged private realities.

But as Aleksei Yurchak responds to this criticism of the “last Soviet generation,” such an apolitical position was not simply a mode of fundamental disengagement, but an alternative reengagement, an engagement in a different direction that was more significant and productive at the time. As Yurchak claims, “the constant refrain in all these milieus that they were profoundly uninterested in anything political was, of course, not a nihilistic position, but a kind of politics that refused heroic “clear truths.”⁷² Krivulin’s rejection in the late 1960s of any possibility of effectively and productively working with the “official” stratum of Soviet culture led the poet, along with so many others during the period of Stagnation, to forgo the possible channels of publication and comfortable positions within the state apparatus in favor of life in an unofficial, secondary culture, wherein the regime was often simply ignored. This then, as Yurchak writes, developed into a politics in a wide sense that was oriented toward a concern with “deep truths,” as opposed to “clear truths,” that were grounded in separate and particularized spaces and times. In this way, the unofficial poetry of the underground was able to create its own new visions of reality while ultimately remaining within the system, i.e. not confronting it on any literal and immediate dimension, and instead occupying a marginal and therefore tolerable social position by simply opting-out into a status of non-belonging. This status of marginalized invisibility, then, gave the poets and artists of the underground the chance to live and develop ideas and creative works freely and to concern themselves with things otherwise proscribed within the official dictates of the system.

⁷² Yurchak, A. (2005). *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, p. 157.

Subsequently, in both Krivulin's own writings and the writings of others related to him, this culture of the underground and its forms of poetic transformation can be seen as going beyond the aesthetic confines of a strictly artistic role while ultimately remaining within it, as a position, strategy, or operative mode of political and existential non-belonging within the Soviet context. This trajectory often resulted in a search for new and old modes of belonging and relating to the world through higher aesthetic, religious, and philosophical pursuits. As Boris Ivanov has written, "here and in other areas Krivulin intuited the birth of a new poetic language and its consolidating significance. And though it didn't follow from this that all of his premonitions were realized, what is important is that by way of his spiritual reserve Krivulin was inclined to run out ahead of events, to hurry them along, and was an obvious inversion of that passive relation to reality embodied in the name of the era itself, stagnation."⁷³ In this way, Krivulin's lifestyle and poetry can be seen as embodying certain disengaged, escapist tendencies leading to the creation of one's own private worlds, yet in such a way that he moved beyond the limitations of the time-period and to open new routes of thought and imagination that helped people engage with and dynamize the Late-Soviet experience. And as such the poet became fundamental figure and leader in this highly engaged form of cultural non-belonging, summoning his fellow denizens of the underground to something higher, something beyond the apathy and total indifference imputed to the era.

Krivulin expressed these dynamics in his 1979 essay on unofficial poetry, "20 Years of the New Poetry," in which, writing under the pseudonym Aleksandr Kalomirov, he defined an artistic intent to write a poetics of "the unfolding of historical experience into the personal

⁷³ Ivanov, B.I. (2004). "Viktor Krivulin – poët rossiïskogo Renessansa (1944—2001)." *NLO*, Number 4.

word.”⁷⁴ This intention moves beyond one’s immediate surroundings and petty personal concerns to address the realm of historical perspective, of literary heritage, religious meditation, and a view of time that extends beyond any single human life. In one poem written as a message of inspiration and summons to unofficial writers and artists, Krivulin bids “do not be captivated by no one’s freedom, by another’s prodigious haul, but be concerned only that your soul is not yet ready for its aerial path, regret only this.”⁷⁵ The choice of the word captivation here, rather than a more direct use of “captivity,” acts as a denial of any role as a kind of victim, thus refusing to see the isolation, marginalization, and occasional persecution as something worth fetishizing or forming into an identity, limitation, or excuse. Instead, he says, “desiring only the Word, not glory, do not pity the iron bars of the prison, where a ragged language freezes to the scalding grate of winter.”⁷⁶ By reducing the negative aspects of the conservative Soviet stagnation to a merely temporal moment in the natural cycle of winter’s dying back that will be followed by spring’s blooming forth, the poet summons the underground toward the heights of a sacred, poetic language, pursuing the tradition of the Logos and the spiritual attentiveness that such ritualized creative activity involves.

It is precisely Krivulin’s energetic pursuit of something beyond himself that was a driving factor of his creative influence and poetic output in the 1970s. Indeed, in a eulogy on Krivulin’s death in 2001, philosopher and scholar Mikhail Epstein described him as a creative figure that formed an entire “team” of people: “This team had no official status, form, or institution. It was a pure energy, a throng of impulses, signals, and meditations, which in tensile

⁷⁴ “свертки исторического опыта в личное слово” Kalomirov, A. (1979). “Dvadtsat’ let noveisheĭ russkoĭ poëzii: Predvaritel’nye zametki.” *Severnaia pochta*, number ½.

⁷⁵ “Не пленяйся свободой ничьей, ни чужой полнотою улова, лишь о том, что душа не готова в путь воздушный, о том пожалей.” Krivulin, V. (2019). *Voskresnye oblaka*. Moscow: RIPOL Classik, p. 103.

⁷⁶ “Только Слова желая – не славы, на жалей о железах тюрьмы, где язык примерзает шершавый к раскаленной решетке зимы.” Krivulin, V. (2019). *Voskresnye oblaka*. Moscow: RIPOL Classik, p. 104.

vibrations were conveyed to everyone around him.”⁷⁷ The culture of samizdat publications, which, based on a lack of official networks and funding was always limited to private seminars, readings, and exhibits in peoples’ apartments, became for Krivulin both a fact of life and a sphere of freedom throughout the 1970s and 80s.

As a result, this activity within a position of vulnerable yet productive non-belonging in the Soviet system can be seen as a source of strength and a mode of being that resulted in a significant sense of group connection and point of creative exchange for Krivulin and others. Stephanie Sandler has identified this mode of inspiration in an essay on the poet, claiming that “he gains not a private sense of individual identity but rather a collective mood of belonging to something larger than himself. That mood defends against the alienation that pervades much of the writing of his generation.”⁷⁸ This sense of collective belonging is a frequent theme throughout Krivulin’s poetry and, according to Boris Ivanov, was instrumental to Krivulin’s poetics. As Ivanov points out, Krivulin considered “the development of poetry as a single living process”⁷⁹ and so sought to blend into his figure of the underground poet an entire “literary environment” that included the voices of his contemporaries and poets of the past, such as the 19th century poets Baratynsky and Tyutchev, and the influential unofficial poet Leonid Aronzon. And while this “collective belonging” was largely an abstract concept, it was deeply rooted to Leningrad in the 1970s as its home.

⁷⁷ “Эта команда не имела никакого статуса, формы, институции - это была чистая энергия, толкотня импульсов, сигналов, медитаций, которая упругими вибрациями передавалась окружающим.” Epstein, M. (2007). *Viktor Krivulin Vmesto nekrologa*. [Online]. Available at: http://www.litkarta.ru/dossier/nekrolog-epshteina-krivulinu/dossier_2381/ (Accessed 14 February 2020).

⁷⁸ Sandler S. (2007) “A Poet Living in the Big City: Viktor Krivulin, Among Others,” Boudreau N, O’Neil C Poetics. Self. Place: Essays to Honor Anna Lisa Crone. Columbus, Ohio: Slavica, p. 4.

⁷⁹ “развитие поэзии как единого жизненного процесса” Ivanov, B.I. (2004). “Viktor Krivulin – poët rossiïskogo Rennessansa (1944—2001).” *NLO*, Number 4.

One highly significant location for Krivulin's literary environment was the legendary St Petersburg café nicknamed the Saigon, likely in relation to the global counterculture of the 1960s that formed around opposition to the war. In Alexei Yurchak's analysis of the Saigon, prominently featuring writing by Krivulin himself, the café is taken as emblematic of the broader experience of unofficial life in the 1970s. Opened in 1964, the Saigon followed in the tradition of cafes as important sites of artistic life going back to the 1920s with places such as the Stray Dog in Petersburg. In the 60s and 70s, the café became one of the more important public spaces for *obshchenie*, the "open-ended and temporally unconstrained interaction"⁸⁰ that Yurchak points out as having made possible the communal exchange of ideas, insights, and creativity that formed the basis of unofficial cultural life. Once described through radical contrast as an "English club through which alcoholics walked,"⁸¹ Krivulin himself described its strange contours through a penetrating presence of the state in the cafe. State actors, he claims coexisted within the same space as all the bohemian nonconformist patrons, limiting the sense of security, concealment, and enclosure, yet without disrupting the club's continued status as a hub of freedom and bohemian life. And in turn this created a kind of homeless space of "underground luxury"⁸² in which simply being present became adventurous. Indeed, speaking of the presence of the KGB in the Saigon, Krivulin remembers how "they stood, like everyone, and drank coffee . . . I would stop by and, let's say, stand next to someone, and suddenly remember his face: he was one of the ones that searched my apartment . . ." Yet all of this, as the poet claims, did not

⁸⁰ Ibid. Ivanov.

⁸¹ Ibid. Ivanov.

⁸² Krivulin, V. (1998) "Leningradskii dom kak pochva bezdomnosti" *Okhota na mamonta*. St. Petersburg: BLITS, p. 52.

inspire fear, but rather a sense of “romanticism and adventure,” a romance of rebellion and adventurous insecurity located in the everyday.⁸³

Through the Saigon, as a representation of Late-Soviet underground life, with its literary and artistic groups, alcoholics, drug addicts, and black marketeers spending countless hours alongside the KGB, one can grasp the contours of the exposed, defenseless, and existentially homeless formation of Krivulin’s underground poetic position. As a rejection of the world of officialdom and thus any chances for publication or stable intellectual work, this position was subject to the powerful force of an ossified system of ideological, “authoritative discourse” along with the ramifications of the stagnant, immobile temporal atmosphere of Leningrad in the Brezhnev era. And it is within this position that Krivulin’s romantic and energetic poetic transformation, overcoming and dwelling within the homelessness of the underground arose, be it through reconnections with the ruptured past or seeking new ways of meaning and belonging. In this way, as Tatiana Goricheva rhapsodizes in her own memorial essay on the cafe, the Saigon became for some an “element of paradise, of primordial being,” a place open to fundamental transformation. The Saigon for her was more than just a place where diverse people would gather, but a state of mind representative of the underground way of life that her and Krivulin were organizers of, manifest concretely in their religious seminars and samizdat publications, and was a specific yet still vulnerable place within which the underground’s mode of productive and creative non-belonging existed, in her words, as a form of positive, “apophatic nihilism.”

Saigon nihilism, touching all levels of being, was an apophatic nihilism: that is, not the nihilism of the 19th century revolutionaries, who ultimately wanted to depose everyone, to shoot and kill, but a positive nihilism, behind which a beginning was hidden. This nihilism negated absolutely everything that belonged to this world, and at the same time

⁸³ Melisovna, V. (2009). *Sumerki Saigona*. SPB: Tvorcheskie ob”edineniia Leningrada, p. 16-17.

accepted all of it, though in a transformed light. Yet it seemed as if there was nowhere from which to undertake this light: culture, morality, religion did not exist among us at that time, the tradition was absolutely broken, the Russian tradition, the European tradition, the world tradition. Generations without God . . . When I wrote a letter to Heidegger, he was touched by this, having thought that everyone in Russia either lived in a madhouse or a prison. And suddenly from this madhouse a madness breaks free, the holy madness of the Saigon. The “Saigon” embodied everything that was going in the country at that time.⁸⁴

Homelessness, forming into the sense of non-belonging and nihilism of the underground, was something that participants of this culture, as Goricheva alludes, were thrown into as an existential condition, having been born into a period following the revolutionary rupture of traditions and of “generations without God.” Yet it was simultaneously a reality that was chosen, accepted, and brought out into a “transformed light,” as she calls it. This transformed light, as a religious or spiritual image, is a frequent and richly associative trope present throughout Krivulin’s poetry of the 1970s and appears at a central moment in one his most programmatic and frequently cited poems, “I Drink the Wine of Archaism.” “The spirit of the underground, as an early apostolic light, glimmers in windows and curls up from the cellars.”⁸⁵ But as he claims earlier in the poem, “who said catacombs? We trudge to beer halls and pharmacies!”⁸⁶ and with such an irony pushes against any possibility of full identification with this past self-conception and sacralization of experience in an act of invocation and simultaneous negation. Within these brief moments of push and pull, though, the temporally limited flashes of an archaizing and sacralizing impulse that are captured in the “word” that “dies, but joyfully dies,” as Krivulin

⁸⁴ Melisovna, V. (2009). *Sumerki Saïgona*. SPB: Tvorcheskie ob’edineniia Leningrada.

⁸⁵ “Дух культуры подпольной, как раннеапостольский свет, брезжит в окнах, из черных клубится подвалов.» Krivulin, V. (2019). *Voskresnye oblaka*. Moscow: RIPOL Classik, p. 115.

⁸⁶ «Кто сказал: катакомбы? в пивные бредом и аптеки!» Krivulin, V. (2019). *Voskresnye oblaka*. Moscow: RIPOL Classik, p. 115.

describes it in the same poem, is a process typical of the poet's work. It is a romantic, spiritualizing inclination that is quickly invoked and negated within the poem, marking the pathos of a pursuit of a spiritual, archaic world preceding the underground's Late-Soviet experience with its ruptured traditions and modern sense of homelessness, all of which can be associated with the madness and creative openness of the Saigon atmosphere. Indeed, as the poet Olga Sedakova has claimed, speaking of the role of historical awareness and the muse of history in Krivulin's work, it is not a "wiseman, but a madman" who is the "contemplator of the course of time" in his poetry.⁸⁷

The madness that Goricheva claims lies at the base of this may well be the madness of defenselessness and the groundlessness of the relation to a "transformative light" and its poetic equivalents; yet it is also the madness of pure energy and religious intoxication, a harnessing of creative forces that rejected the protections and stability of a compromised, narrow, and exclusive official world and which manifest as novel lifestyles, modes of dwelling, and archaizing joys made possible by this refusal and acceptance of homelessness." As has been briefly mentioned, throughout Krivulin's writing on the underground in the 1970s there is little emphasis whatsoever on a sense of victimhood that comes with the marginalization, "defenselessness of closed doors,"⁸⁸ and the general instability of the unofficial style of living manifest as homelessness and the madness of the Saigon. There rather remains a refusal of any resentment of one's position or "captivation" by victimhood and the bars of cages. Instead, this position, as one of defeat and powerlessness, as the poet's social voicelessness, is written as a source of strength and possibility in a position of seemingly interminable "impasse" during the

⁸⁷ Sedakova, O. (1988-1989). *Очерки другой поэзии. Очерк первый: Виктор Кривулин*. [Online]. Available at: <http://olgasedakova.com/poetica/247>. (Accessed 20 February 2020).

⁸⁸ "беззащитность закрытых дверей" Krivulin, V. (2019). *Voskresnye oblaka*. Moscow: RIPOL Classik, p. 99.

Brezhnev years, about which the poet claims in an often-quoted line: “I choose defeat like an exit or a pure exhale.”⁸⁹

This position, then, taken as both a defeat and a victory, becomes one in which the underground personality lives “comfortably and inoffensively” in his “own black corner,”⁹⁰ thereby sharing something of the underground status of Dostoevsky’s infamous character, though none of his sickness or spite. As such, there is within this broad process of negation and preserving acceptance an inclination that is determined by its impossibility, its acceptance of an almost foregone conclusion, a predetermined defeat, the joyous acceptance of which informs the positive nihilism and madness of the Saigon milieu, and which forms a poetics of continued negation and preservation, a recalling of the archaic, sacred word, and an acceptance when the word “joyfully dies.” And, finally, this Saigon madness is ultimately of a Nietzschean character, in particular of the intuitive man in his “On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense” “the intuitive man, standing in the midst of a culture, already reaps from his intuition a harvest of continually inflowing illumination, cheer, and redemption- in addition to obtaining a defense against misfortune.”⁹¹ Yet as the poet Olga Sedakova points out, also referring to Nietzsche in her essay on Krivulin, yet pointing to a different aspect of the philosopher’s work, she claims that Krivulin’s position outside of officialdom and the dominant culture as one “sunken to the bottom, to prophetic madness,” is something “completely particular, not the Nietzschean “beyond good and evil,” not something beyond the ethical division, as Nietzsche thought, but below it, below any differentiation.”⁹²

⁸⁹ “я избираю поражение как выход или выдох чистый” Krivulin, V. (2019). *Voskresnye oblaka*. Moscow: RIPOL Classik, p. 51.

⁹⁰ “безбедно живу, безобидно” “в углу своем черном” Krivulin, V. (2019). *Voskresnye oblaka*. Moscow: RIPOL Classik, p. 51.

⁹¹ Nietzsche, F. (2012) *On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense*. Theophania Publishing.

⁹² Sedakova, O. (1988-1989). *Очерки другой поэзии. Очерк первый: Виктор Кривулин*. [Online]. Available at: <http://olgasedakova.com/poetica/247>. (Accessed 20 February 2020).

In the situation of the Late-Soviet, in the “romanticism and adventure” of places like the Saigon, the underground figure’s defeat is manifest as an existential “homelessness” and a bohemian refusal of a bureaucratic world, yet one that makes possible a romantic notion of martyrdom for a higher calling of the spirit and “the unfolding of historical experience into the personal word.” It remains to be seen, though, in what ways Krivulin explored and developed this energetic bohemian lifestyle, Saigon Nihilism, and pursuit of a higher spiritual calling as a poetics of non-belonging in his poetry of the 1970s.

II

“Where does the heart have a place?” sincerely begins one of Krivulin’s poems from 1972, only to repeat the question with a more ironic inflection, “Where does the heart-mollusk have a place, to what can it attach itself?”⁹³ A place for this comical invertebrate muscle-mussel is soon found on the bottom of a boat in the rot and stagnation of a harbor’s standing water: “there is the scent of rot where the fleet is harbored, and the heart presses to the bottom of a packet boat.”⁹⁴ It is not a time, with such an atmosphere of rot, for normal goings-on in the human sphere, and thus the only possibility for the speaker of the poem to attain some kind of existential place for his heart is by sinking to the bottom and thereby refusing the world of daily life. Such a diminution, rendered metaphorically a descent or sinking to a static position in the stagnant water, was characteristic of the unofficial way of life of the time period, and was expressed a few years earlier in Venedikt Erofeev’s *Moscow to the End of the Line*, in which one is encouraged to lean in and accept the rot and stagnation of one’s surroundings, claiming that “everything should take place slowly and incorrectly, so that man doesn’t get a chance to start

⁹³ «Где сердцу есть место? Где сердцу-моллюску есть место, к чему прилепиться» Krivulin, V. (2019). *Voskresnye oblaka*. Moscow: RIPOL Classik, p. 29.

⁹⁴ “Вот запах гниющего в гавани флота- и сердце прижалось ко дну пакетбота.” Krivulin, V. (2019). *Voskresnye oblaka*. Moscow: RIPOL Classik, p. 29.

feeling proud.”⁹⁵ And from this slow and incorrect position at the bottom of the harbor-universe, what Krivulin calls the “bivalve nearness of sky and sea,” a question is posed that is made possible by the descent and enacting an upward glance, a plea for a temporary vision of what lies outside time: “Where does there glimmer a scrap of unwavering firmament, if only for a momentary forgetfulness of death?”⁹⁶

As Boris Ivanov claims in “Viktor Krivulin: Poet of the Russian Renaissance,” the metaphorical axis of Krivulin’s poetry is directed upwards, replacing in Russian verse of the time a Pasternakian horizontal metaphorical system with a Mandelstamian vertical, which he considers “key designations of the different hierarchies of values and semantic orders.”⁹⁷ The Mandelstamian trajectory upwards, especially in the later years of the poet’s life, operated alongside a descent downward along the hierarchy of values and beings that the poet chose to represent in one poem through images of the Lamarckian, pre-Darwinian system: “I will descend to the annelids and the cirripeds, rustling among lizards and snakes.”⁹⁸ Such a vertical axis was instrumental for many of the poets associated with Krivulin’s underground. Indeed, as Josephine von Zitzewitz has written, “a new-found faith in a higher reality contributed to the contempt in which they held the demands and limitations of Soviet everyday life. Destitution was entered into consciously; social marginalization was known to be the consequence of staying true to one’s vocation.”⁹⁹ And from this descent to “destitution,” she continues, comes what for Krivulin

⁹⁵ Erofeev, V. (1992) *Moscow to the End of the Line*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press.

⁹⁶ “В двусторонней близости неба и моря» «Где брезжит клочок неколебимой тверди- хотя б на секунду забвение смерти?” Krivulin, V. (2019). *Voskresnye oblaka*. Moscow: RIPOL Classik, p. 29.

⁹⁷ “Пастернаковская “трава” и мандельштамовская “вертикаль» «ключевые обозначения разных ценностных иерархий и семантических рядов.” Ivanov, B.I. (2004). “Viktor Krivulin – poet rossiiskogo Renessansa (1944—2001).” *NLO*, Number 4.

⁹⁸ Mandelstam, O. (1931). “Lamarck.” [Online]. Available at: <http://max.mmlc.northwestern.edu/mdenner/Demo/texts/lamarck.html>. (Accessed 8 July 2021).

⁹⁹ von Zitzewitz, J. (2016). *Poetry and the Leningrad Religious-Philosophical Seminar 1974-1980*. Cambridge and New York: Modern Humanities Research Association and Routledge, p. 39.

was “one of the great discoveries of the spiritual journey,” “the vertical of time, history, and aesthetics” that “liberated the poets from the limitations of the here and now.”¹⁰⁰ This simultaneous poetic and existential descent into the lower regions of being, as a humbling and preserving act that skirts the social and everyday center of language and experience, then becomes an ascent toward potential new heights of vision, representation, and forms of poetic engagement. And this descent and ascent occurs in a way that echoes Krivulin’s statement on the reversal and loss of the sense of Home: “Home is first of all a vertical, an alpine ascent, a transition away from the external world.”¹⁰¹ Consequently, such a trajectory of descent and ascent within Krivulin’s poetry can be seen as forming basic elements of a poetization and transformation of the underground, homelessness, and Goricheva’s positive nihilism of the Saigon. This essay will explore this vertical trajectory from the depths upward as a foundational structure in the mode of “poetic dwelling” within Krivulin’s worldview.

If, as Ivanov claims, Mandelstam has greater influence on the aesthetic orientation and development of Krivulin’s poetics, Pasternak does still resonate within Krivulin’s underground world in the spiritual depths of the underground and involves an important aspect of its conception in a social and literary context. In Vladislav Zubok’s study of the “Last Russian Intelligentsia,” *Zhivago’s Children*, the historian focuses on the publication and globally turbulent reception of Pasternak’s great novel as “the first defiant challenge to the postwar cultural silence” that helped define a generation.¹⁰² But while the publication of the book abroad and harassing of Pasternak influenced the generation of the Sixties in favor of a pro-communist liberalization, the spirit in the novel of the poet-doctor’s seemingly nihilistic detachment from

¹⁰⁰ Ibid. 39.

¹⁰¹ Krivulin, V. (1998) “Leningradskii dom kak pochva bezdomnosti” *Okhota na mamonta*. St. Petersburg: BLITS, p. 43.

¹⁰² Zubok, V. (2011). *Zhivago’s Children: The Last Russian Intelligentsia*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

post-revolutionary reality and his ascetic descent into spiritual poverty might be claimed as more influential for the subsequent generation of the seventiers. In Krivulin's novel *Schmon*, the final lengthy section is dedicated to an oral history of a young orphan girl that, realizing Soviet ideological humility and dedication to collective well-being over individual desire, exceeds the state's productive capacities in various jobs and reveals numerous flaws and absurdities in the bureaucratized system with her near total selflessness and almost inhuman dedication to labor, echoing in a small way the narrative of Zhivago's orphaned daughter at the end of the novel. And yet while the notion of a profound Christian asceticism found in Zhivago's life and later in Krivulin's orphan girl stands as a backlight for many of the religious, existential, and ethical concerns of the stagnation generation, the high seriousness and profound helplessness before the violent chaos of the revolutionary years in Pasternak's novel was not able to manifest in the same way for Krivulin's own postmodern generation of the stagnant years of the 1970s.

Indeed, as Boris Ivanov has written concerning the culture and relation to the past of the unofficial life of Leningrad through Krivulin's frequent use of the pronoun we to describe the underground, asceticism was significant "insofar as it served as an existential bridge, leading to a religious problematic, which in the beginning was connected with a prevailing interest in Hinduism, and much later led to Christianity."¹⁰³ And, further, he claims how this bridge, created by a turn toward asceticism as a relation to pre-revolutionary cultural and religious forms, became a means of "expression through the past" that, "existentially," was a "means of legitimation of one's own existence in culture."¹⁰⁴ The pursuit of novel and archaic social identities, in Ivanov's understanding, became a key mode in the formation and existence of the

¹⁰³ Ivanov, B. (1977). «Po tu storonu ofitsial'nosti/ iz knigi "chasy kul'tury." *Chasy*. No. 8. Available at: https://samizdatcollections.library.utoronto.ca/islandora/object/samizdat%3Achasy_8.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid. (manuscript has no page numbers)

Leningrad underground, and in the pursuit of meanings that form Krivulin's collective figure of the underground. There remains, though, a dissonance within this attempted legitimation through assumed identities that tracks with any assumption of identities on top of a modern self-awareness, attested to by the often-quoted lines from Krivulin's poem, "I Drink the Wine of Archaism," invoking and rejecting identification with early Christian martyrs: "who said catacombs? We trudge to beer halls and pharmacies!"

But within Krivulin's poetic and existential descent into ascetic and past-cultural identities, there is more than just a pursuit of existential legitimation, renewed artistic perspective, and attempted engagement with a spiritual, hierarchical model to legitimate one's cultural status. There is also within this attempted legitimation a form of ultimately critical negation with the everyday of Soviet modernity, although it is a largely passive negation characterized by a nihilistic, non-willing indifference, a conceptual and imaginative reduction of something's power, making possible the modes of poetic creation and a spiritual pursuit. In one of Krivulin's poems, "Romanticism stripped to its final emptinesses," this process of reduction is connected with a cyclicity of the water theme in the "reservoir" of the poem "O, Garden," analyzed in the essay above, as well as a theme of music, which is a staple of Krivulin's thematic of spiritual ascent and refutation of any "captivation" with the literal, *merely* earthly confines of the Late-Soviet period:

Вода зацвела, застоялась, застыла.
Здесь больше не надо ни воли, ни силы,
Ни тайной свободы, ни прочих свобод.

Здесь музыка льется и кровь мою пьет,
Как стебель кувшинки, связующий руки,
Обвившись вокруг. . . И неожиданная, в звуке

Завяжется боль потому ли, что плод-

В мучительной завязи нового знанья
О мире до дна оголенном, до срама,
До ямы, до судороги отрицанья . . .

Water blooms, stagnates, and freezes.
Here one no longer needs strength or will,
Neither secret freedom nor any other kind.

Music flows here and it drinks my blood,
Like a waterlily stem that binds my hands,
wound around them. . . An unexpected pain
begins in that sound, perhaps because fruit

Is in the agonizing seed of a new knowledge
Of the world bared to the depths, to shame,
to a pit, to a shudder of negation . . .¹⁰⁵

The birth of the new, of spiritual renewal, built from out of the negation of the old, is an agonizing process. And the rejection of the forms of freedom associated with romanticism, which is “stripped to its final emptiness,”¹⁰⁶ no longer holds out in the poem’s world. The speaker of the poem rejects an empty eternity where “our most sterile thoughts remain almost untouched by the burden of cares”¹⁰⁷, assuming an immanent transformation that comes through the refutation of all hopes, and a descent to the depths, shame, a pit, and a shudder of negation.

¹⁰⁵ Krivulin, V. (2019). *Voskresnye oblaka*. Moscow: RIPOL Classik, p. 20.

¹⁰⁶ “Раздет романтизм до последних пустот.” Krivulin, V. (2019). *Voskresnye oblaka*. Moscow: RIPOL Classik, p. 20.

¹⁰⁷ «где настерильнейших помыслов наших почти не касается бремя забот» Krivulin, V. (2019). *Voskresnye oblaka*. Moscow: RIPOL Classik, p. 20.

Yet the last image, the shudder, becomes in another poem of three years later a “shudder-smile,” which, like the “humanflowers” at the garden feast of transformations, bears within it the fructification of a different kind of freedom within “new knowledge,” albeit a knowledge undisclosed by the end of the poem.

Nevertheless, this feast and new knowledge must first be born through the pain and agony of the “depths,” the bottom, the place of total renunciation. There are numerous ways in which Krivulin depicts the bottom as a place of renunciation where the figures of the underground gather, but one common throughout his poetry of the early and mid-70s is the metaphorical figure of a rat. Rats in Krivulin’s poetry, what he names the “friend of the underground,” are insignificant, marginal, indifferent to the goings on of the average citizen; they are located in-between the common spaces, filling basements, courtyards, and attics; and they form a community representing a collective we echoing Krivulin’s conception of the literary process and his brotherly unofficial community of the underground. As such, almost invisible yet ever-present, both within and without the system and the world’s daily goings on, these rats that live in the depths as one collective shudder of negation become connected with conscience, something “following secretly behind us” and representing an unseen force that makes “the soil beneath us” stir. This force of conscience, then, transforms into “an irreversible multitude . . . rustling like a fresh letter” in a 1972 poem describing a sense of the interconnectedness of writing that invokes the notion of samizdat as a mobile yet almost transcendent form of being together: “We meet at the crossroads of writing.”¹⁰⁸ As denizens of an in-between and nomadic placelessness, gathered together only in the commonality of writing, these rats form some of the basic contours and positionality of Krivulin’s simultaneously negating and ascending position of

¹⁰⁸ Krivulin, V. (2019). *Voskresnye oblaka*. Moscow: RIPOL Classik, p. 92-93.

creation and dwelling in the underground, beginning from what Tatiana Goricheva, philosopher and ex-wife of Krivulin, calls the “metaphysical bottom.”

In a 2007 collection of philosophical dialogues dedicated to Krivulin’s poetry organized by Goricheva and taking its title from Krivulin’s well-known poem, *I Drink the Wine of Archaisms*, the philosopher defines what she means by the metaphysical bottom. In this condition, sacralizing and desacralizing tendencies are simultaneously present as modes of negation and reconnection with past traditions and beliefs, a space of opening up to the inherited world and of its enclosure into a meaningful cosmos. Her conception of this literary-existential position, as she is quick to explain, is not unique to the poet, but is explicitly drawn from the position represented by the “mythic” Venechka in Venedikt Erofeev’s above-mentioned text, *Moscow to the End of the Line*. Erofeev’s legendary prose poem, a drunken postmodern tragicomedy of stymied progress and temporal stagnation informs Goricheva’s concept through Erofeev’s figurative act of spitting “on every rung of the social ladder from [his] place at the bottom.”¹⁰⁹ But in addition to Erofeev’s comical act of audacious yet delicate rejection of the social hierarchy, the metaphysical dimension is especially important for Goricheva, who distinguishes it from other conceptions of the bottom that are connected with the position: “it was a bottom, but not a social bottom. Society in itself did not interest us. It wasn’t a political bottom. At that time politics also barely attracted us, much less so than the Muscovites. And it was not a moral bottom, because the majority of the people in Krivulin’s circle had a rigorous sense of morality. . . . Rather it was a metaphysical bottom, that is, a bottom from which the measures of depths and heights are simultaneously revealed.”¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁹ Goricheva et al. (2007). “*P’iu vino arkhaizmov...*” *O poëzii Viktora Krivulina*. SPB: Kosta, p. 3.

¹¹⁰ Ibid. 4.

As a literary-artistic position of the metaphysical bottom, emphasizing a marginalized spiritual pursuit and non-willing contemplation, this sinking below view can be taken as a refutation of the avant-garde and modernist position as director of language and being, shaper and organizer of human and non-human forces. As such the position becomes a negation of the creative subject as a willing master, technician, or transformer of the external objects of politics, society, nature, etc. and involves a subsequent sinking to the bottom of the chaos of forces manifest within these external spheres as a form of aesthetic-religious renunciation of the ego and any will to power, emphasizing a poetics of potential as opposed to necessity or command. From this position, then, the non-willing subject that remains homeless, alienated, and defenseless in the chaotic play of forces gains a sensitivity and creative imaginary of the metaphysically capacious and religiously expansive heights of being in all their possible and potential forms. This, then, can be seen as a fundamental aspect of Krivulin's poetic dwelling, as Heidegger defines it, which "depends on an upward-looking measure-taking of the dimension, in which the sky belongs just as much as the earth,"¹¹¹ in order to right an inverted relation whereby "man acts as though he were the shaper and master of language, while in fact language remains the master of man."¹¹² As such, the opening up of the spiritual depths and heights within language and experience within which there is pursued a rootedness in modes of being deeper than those of Soviet and modern everyday reality. Rather than shaping reality, the poets open up novel ways to make it meaningful as it is.

As scholar Mark Lipovetsky has written about the Soviet underground, the "central conflict of unofficial Russian culture of the 1970s-1980s appears as a conflict between a desacralizing discourse and a discourse directed toward the pursuit and renewal of transcendental

¹¹¹ Heidegger, M. (2001). *Poetry Language Thought*. New York: Harper Perennial, p. 219.

¹¹² Ibid. 213.

values.”¹¹³ And, he continues, this conflict is represented in Erofeev’s text as a *parodia sacra*, “in which all that is sacred is diminished, while all that is base is elevated.”¹¹⁴ Yet for these reasons Erofeev’s classic and highly comical text is a consummate parody and carnival in which no hierarchy can be sustained, lending itself to the postmodern theories that have long been connected with the text. Krivulin’s, meanwhile, operates within a similar postmodern framework, in which the high and low have been mixed and are rendered largely indistinguishable. But where Erofeev’s text remains profoundly ambivalent, Krivulin’s undertakes these descending and ascending hierarchies in pursuit of a creative and existential position that can extend beyond the confines of the stagnant present and reclaim or renew the possibility of transcendental values within the modern homelessness of Krivulin’s Leningrad underground, albeit outside of the doctrinal structures or power relations that long accompanied such values. In this way, this pursuit, present throughout numerous poems of the 1970s, manifests as a romantic, sacralizing phenomenon of imaginative expansion built into the descending act of refusal and negation, embodying the Heideggerian “upward-looking measure-taking,” located within language as the “house of being” in which “humans dwell” and of which “those who think and those who create with words are the guardians.” And this simultaneous descent and expansion is directly apparent in one of Krivulin’s poems of 1973, titled simply, “City:”

Так покорна вмешательству свыше
глина жизни — и вязнет, и лепит
самое себя, тайно поправ

¹¹³ “центральный конфликт неофициальной российской культуры 1970—1980-х годов представляется конфликт между десакрализирующим дискурсом и дискурсом, обращенным на поиск и обновление трансцендентных ценностей.” Lipovetsky, M. (2008). *Paralogii: Transformatsii (post)modernistskogo diskursa v russoi kul'ture 1920-2000-kh godov*. Moskva: NLO, p. 289.

¹¹⁴ “в которой все сакральное снижается, а все низменное возвышается.” Lipovetsky, M. (2008). *Paralogii: Transformatsii (post)modernistskogo diskursa v russoi kul'ture 1920-2000-kh godov*. Moskva: NLO, p. 290.

самое себя. Град поднебесный
 тяжелой обувью землю истопчет,
 но в даруемом свете легка
 вся горит она, словно бы сводчат
 потолок в этой горенке тесной,
 в этой келье свечной языка!

So the clay of life, submissive
 to higher intervention, sinks and takes
 to its own mold, having furtively

trampled itself. The city of this world
 will tread the earth with a heavy shoe,
 but all of this in the gifted light
 will easily illuminate, as if the ceiling
 of this narrow chamber would vault,
 of this candle-lit cell of language!¹¹⁵

It is precisely within language as the “house of being,” then, that Krivulin’s underground world is truly expanded and reoriented toward a poetics of the high made possible by a descent to the low, of the earthly leading to the unearthly, of a type of Heideggerian “upward-looking measure-taking” that allows for a mode of dwelling within the modern world, albeit from the perspective of a romanticized figure in the isolation of a “candle-lit cell.” The cell (келья) in the poem and in Russian poetry in general is most closely associated with the work of Aleksandr Pushkin, who used it numerous times throughout his oeuvre. Of particular interest here is the quote from Pushkin’s “Dreamer,” in which the poet’s muse “shining with a burning light, flew into the humble cell,” invoking a monastic, spiritual light that inspires and enchants the

¹¹⁵ Krivulin, V. (2019). *Voskresnye oblaka*. Moscow: RIPOL Classik, p. 63.

dreamer's cell.¹¹⁶ In Krivulin's poem this spiritual light becomes an unnamed and undefined yet "gifted light" in the darkness of Soviet modernity, a possible and future-oriented stand-in not only for the muse, but for some form of sacralizing, transcendental value. Such a light, then, exists within the underground cell of language as an experience set against the sense of alienation and "homelessness" in the underground, guarding it as a spiritually expansive place of dwelling. Subsequently, the preservation of such a light becomes a central task in Krivulin's conception of the underground dating back to the early 1970s. In one poem from 1973, Krivulin both defines the inescapable position of the underground and points to the preservation of a romantic privileging of "unearthly beauty" within a condition where a "squalor of style, and a refuge in every courtyard, awaken in me a sympathy and fear of inevitable catastrophe."¹¹⁷ There is, as he claims in the poem, a few responses to this condition, each of which is in itself "loathsome:" "to run beyond the border, to gardens or verses, or to sit it out in some hole."¹¹⁸ Each of these, aside from the first, is a characteristic feature of Krivulin's verse, yet each remains loathsome without the addition of the final possibility: "to preserve the blaze of final light on the wall, yes, saturate these yawning pupils with the brick dust of unearthly beauty!"¹¹⁹

Yet this light, the same as the romantic, sacralizing yet unattainable "early apostolic light" that confers meaning on the alienation and homelessness of the underground, is revealed only through the underground's descent to a position of the "metaphysical bottom" along with Venechka in Erofeev's novel, of whom Krivulin writes as having the goal "to look at his contemporaries with the drunken eye of Socrates, yet to look, so that the ulcers and open,

¹¹⁶ "Горним светом озарясь, влетала в скромну келью" Pushkin, A.S. *Mechtatel'*. [Online]. Available at: <https://ilibrary.ru/text/286/p.1/index.html>. (Accessed 8 July 2021).

¹¹⁷ Krivulin, V. (2019). *Voskresnye oblaka*. Moscow: RIPOL Classik, p. 54.

¹¹⁸ Krivulin, V. (2019). *Voskresnye oblaka*. Moscow: RIPOL Classik, p. 54.

¹¹⁹ Krivulin, V. (2019). *Voskresnye oblaka*. Moscow: RIPOL Classik, p. 54.

stinking wounds of our monstrous social body were transformed into gaping, light-conducting apertures, reminding us of the Gospels, and into light-bearing holes from which pours light and light and light and covers all visible space and illumines everything unseen.”¹²⁰ In Krivulin’s assessment, it is Erofeev’s descent, his act of critical negation accompanied by the opening of “light-bearing holes,” that makes the experience and preservation of light possible. But it is not just a preservation or guarding of light within language, it is also a transformation. The repetition of the image of eyes in Krivulin’s writing about Erofeev and in the 1973 poem on the task of the underground, in which the material, base element of “brick dust” is figured as a substance of light that will “saturate” the figure’s “yawning pupils,” both refer to the transformation undergone by the poet-prophet in Pushkin’s poem, the “Prophet,” in which the Biblical “six-winged seraphim,” “with touch as light as slumber, he laid his fingers on my eyes, which opened wide in prophecy.”¹²¹ The poet-figure, “tormented by spiritual thirst” in a “murky emptiness,” is then transformed into a prophet that “must ignite men’s hearts with a word,” a task that Krivulin thus partially adopts within the underground as part of the ascent of poetic spiritual pursuits.

And it is precisely this ascent, this upward trajectory of evaluation and reevaluation, made possible by identification with madness, nihilism, homelessness, and the lower elements of physical being that are subsequently subject to the transformative light that comprises the metaphysical bottom as Krivulin’s poetic position. Light, as inspiration and a religious or mythic mode of vision facilitates poetic ascents, yet remains primarily an aspect of preservation, guarding, and openness to spiritual transformation.

¹²⁰ “Взглянуть на современников пьяным глазом сократа- так взглянуть, чтобы язвы и незаживающие зловонные раны нашего общественного уродливого тела превратились в зияющие светопроводные отверстия, памятные нам по Евангелию, - в светносные дыры, откуда льется свет и свет и свет и заливает все видимое пространство и высвечивает все невидимое” Krivulin, V. (1990). “Schmon,” *Vestnik novoi literatury*, no. 2. Leningrad: Assotsiatsii, p. 20.

¹²¹ “Перстами легкими как сон моих зениц коснулся он. Отверзлись вещие зеницы.” Pushkin, A.S. (1826). “Prorok.” [Online]. Available at: <https://www.culture.ru/poems/4409/prorok>. (Accessed 9 July 2021).

Another theme found in Krivulin's work that pushes farther than the theme of light toward a transcendent framework of reality and a possible mode of poetic dwelling in the world, and which acts as a continuation of the pursuit of the transformative word that is associated with the prophet, is that of music. Music in Krivulin's poetry is often directly connected with a relation to the past and its traditions and holistic modes of vision, and in turn to the future as an expression of renewal and transformation within the Late-Soviet context. This connection of the past with an orientation to the future is especially visible in two of Krivulin's poems, each of which attempt to imaginatively connect the past with the present to gestate a possible future. In connecting the past and present the poet then hopes to relate to the future as a development of the idea that underground poets "will sing over the times," "мы время отпоем."¹²² Both of the poems relating to music, the first an untitled poem from 1971 and the second an untitled poem from 1973, furthermore develop aspects of the theme of "homelessness" as something to be transformed and if possible overcome.

"Porcelain music," the poet writes in the untitled poem of 1971, "opens, like flames, half-transparent petals" and admits us "into the forests of an artificial order," an organized nature, a garden, a home, "where our doubles are happy, separated by glass and the distance from you and I, living with this earthly soot."¹²³ Music here opens up another world, a highly fragile and Elysian world within which we are able to behold our possible happiness. It is a "shepherd's world, without blood and anguish," with "fields, bewitched by the game of shadows in the grass that are light and vivid;" music allows one to enter "another being, but being nonetheless," and "a reasonable century of peace."¹²⁴ But this projected world of music remains an impossibility in

¹²² Krivulin, V. (2019). *Voskresnye oblaka*. Moscow: RIPOL Classik, p. 25.

¹²³ Ibid. 74.

¹²⁴ Ibid. 74.

the present, a projection only. It is a place that “has grown weak with blood loss, was torn into scraps” and “that has become clay, as becomes everything living.”¹²⁵ The vision of the world that music provides, a fragile music of flame and petals, which is nevertheless wholly earthly and caught between two forms as porcelain and clay, has been bled out and torn apart bit by bit, subject to the same natural cycles to which the universe-garden in the poem “O, Garden!” is subject.

Yet most importantly, in the final lines we learn that this clay which forms the substance of music is an historically marked clay, “a scorched clay- a blue and white clay, whose shards are priceless.”¹²⁶ If the imagined yet existing lands to which music brings us are replete with contemplative moods, reasonable peace, a shepherd’s simplicity, and happiness, all elements of a longed for poetic dwelling, then this land is also conceived as a land of the historical past, the pre-modern, pre-revolutionary world, the broken inheritance of which is nothing more than scorched clay and broken shards of porcelain, forming a homelessness of lost inheritance and severed traditions. Thus, the world to which music brings us is a world filled with connections and atmospheres of the past, as so much of Krivulin’s poems are, and at the same time a world of detachment from the present, all alongside a contemplative renewal of language that imagines possible forms and potential modes of being in the world, each of which then remains a vital yet impossible projection toward the future within the present. As such, the poet, if at all a modern prophet, is a prophet only of this other impossible world, of the possibility and brightness of this impossible world that may confer upon the shards of music in its varied stages of porcelain and scorched clay a sense of a sacralizing value of the priceless, a value that is then neither wholly earthly nor transcendently absolute.

¹²⁵ Ibid. 74.

¹²⁶ Ibid. 74.

Thus, an archaizing yet contemplative and ultimately indifferent positional center is formed by the equalizing of things in their endless transformations, of clay to porcelain music, fragile music to “scorched clay” and “priceless shards,” and of potential living forms and imagined modes of being that flash forth as possibilities, illuminating with “transformative light,” only then to disappear again. The poem here forms a bifurcation between the actual and possible, were the actual, the impoverishment and homelessness of being cut off from the past, forms the descent of the metaphysical bottom figured as the scorched clay and broken porcelain. And yet the poem still summons the reader to the imagined, possible worlds that it evokes as itself a form of music, while simultaneously reducing this possibility from ever being named as actual. And so, despite the recognized impossibility of attaining this “shepherd’s world, without blood and anguish,” the poem remains a summons to imagine and cultivate these potential ways of imagining, valuing, and belonging within the present, “despite the times.” And it is precisely this idea of music as summons, as that which initiates us along a spiritual path of speaking and being drawn beyond the present and toward a possible future, that is described in an untitled poem of 1973 that directly refers to the theme of homelessness.

The poem begins with a staccato and declarative set of phrases: “Wings of homelessness. Whistle. Freezing tarpaulin.”¹²⁷ The effect is a two-part metaphorical formula of an existential and literal homelessness with the ascendant possibilities of music that rise within it. The position it describes is one fraught with tension, unable to overcome the homelessness and yet winged in that position. Krivulin, in more detail, describes this position of tension in another poem, “On the Roof,” written a few months earlier in 1972, in which he establishes more of the parameters of the underground’s homelessness as a fraught and powerless life in which existential questions

¹²⁷ Krivulin, V. (2019). *Voskresnye oblaka*. Moscow: RIPOL Classik, p. 96.

are considered and suffered, thus serving as an important background to the 1973 poem. To be in the underground, as Krivulin defines it at the beginning of the poem, is to be one of those who have been “cast away,” one of the “formerly,” “the unselected and even uncalled, who live secretively on the roofs with a love for lofty words.”¹²⁸ The figure of the underground is “air that is always nameless, always homeless and empty,” as if a negative substance, only the possibility of spirit or the air of a voice that can speak no words. And having begun the poem with these broader descriptive contours, Krivulin takes the poem in a decidedly Dostoevskian direction, turning the poem into an existential meditation on suicide, a possible outcome of the difficult position that such a diminutive, superfluous, and lonely existence implies.

In this Dostoevskian mood, the figure, pacing in the attic, asks, “Is it really not for the soul to live in freedom? backward, backward it is pulled, to the human noose of cold daily life . . .”¹²⁹ Following this questioning of freedom as one of this life or the next, the voice suddenly changes in the midst of the meditation from the third person to the first, raising the pitch still higher, “Would I really begin to languish so, would I begin to love my abandoned home upon exit to the sky?”¹³⁰ In the speaker’s Hamlet-like meditation, the hope of the afterlife is ultimately subject to heavy doubt, incapable of guaranteeing the consolation that is sought, insofar as the soul, after being freed into death, may not even want its freedom there. Following this, the poem leaves off the narrative focus and begins to proscribe its only antidote to the longing for death. For the underground figure, cast away and unneeded, lonely and unable to find any future consolation, the only answer is to be let inside to a sense of collectivity or detachment and minimization of one’s place and expectations in the world, “let inside the prodigal son, if only to

¹²⁸ Ibid. 109.

¹²⁹ Krivulin, V. (2019). *Voskresnye oblaka*. Moscow: RIPOL Classik, p. 109.

¹³⁰ Ibid. 109.

the community of rats, to the shred of a cobweb, suspended over a lampshade!”¹³¹ But this answer of detachment and community proves still to be horrifying. In the end the poet opens a void-like space by reducing life to nothing more than a pre-death convulsion that would be preferred to a chaotic and indifferent, empty and blanched-white universe in which the soul is nothing more than a detached and infinitesimal speck, soiling the cleanliness of a tablecloth.

Хотя бы вся жизнь оказалась
судорогой одной
предсмертной- но только не хаос
вселенной, от нас остальной!

Но только не лунная мука
на площади, белой дотла,
где ни человека, ни звука,
ни даже намека, что где-то
душа по-иному жила,
чем соринкой на скатерти света.

Let it be that life turns out
To be one long convulsion
before death, only not the chaos
of a universe that is separate from us!
But only not the lunar torment
On the city square, blanched out,
Where there is no person, no sound,
No single hint that somewhere
The soul would live otherwise
Than a speck on the tablecloth of the world.

¹³¹ Ibid. 109.

The final moment of the poem, Krivulin depicts a would-be suicide with a “love for lofty words,” who looks out at the “chaos of a universe” as the fact of alienation and homelessness, that against which Heidegger conceived “poetic dwelling” as a “place where humans belong in the essential meaning of a claimed listening.” And it is after such a silence-inducing moment, within which human life is reduced to an absolute minimum, that the theme of music returns as answer in the poem dated a few months later, in January of 1973, which looks to give wings to the “homelessness” “of those who have been cast away as the capacity to speak and make one’s experience and existential questions meaningful despite the “chaos of a universe that is separate from us.”

Крылья бездомности. Свист. Леденящий брезент.

Как ненасытна продольная флейта заката!

Гонит сквозняк - и колена его козловаты, -

гонит по улицам черную ноту легенд.

Кто-то хоть вишенкой . . . я же значком, запятой

в горле чирикнул, по жерлу прошел перспективы!

Все не гонимы – блаженны и режущей музыкой живы,

хлопаньем рваным, палаточных дел суетой.

Племя, должно, бедуинов. Двуструнный трамвай

сопровождает порыв духовой и духовный.

То-то и вспомнят нас, что суетливо-греховны

были. Но все-таки были. И значит – играй!

Wings of homelessness. Whistle. Freezing tarpaulin.

How insatiable is the longitudinal flute of the sunset!

A wind drives, its kneecaps bent goat-like,

It drives the black note of legends through the streets.

Someone as if with a cherry . . . but with a sign, a comma
 In my throat I chirp, perspectives pass through its orifice!
 Not all are doggedly driven- blessed, alive with tearing music,
 With ragged clapping, with the bustle of tent affairs.

It must be tribes of Bedouins. A two-stringed tramcar
 Accompanies the surging of spirit and instrument.
 We will be remembered for being busily sinful.
 But all the same we were. Which means, play on!

While most images of the physical location of the underground in Krivulin's poetry remain static and enclosed, confined to basements and attics, in-between and marginal spaces, here the figures of the underground are rendered as nomads, recalling a tribe of Bedouins. They live in tarpaulin tents and are consumed with the affairs of daily existence. But, as it is revealed, they live in this condition "blessed, alive with tearing music." As such, they are rendered as inspired dwellers of what is a kind of metaphysical bottom, a sense of impoverishment, marginalization, and insignificance that is defined by its spiritual heights and poetic possibilities. And this condition is by and large made possible by the music of the "longitudinal flute of the sunset." Such an image of a flute in Russian poetry is, without a doubt, rife with references and meanings, from Trediakovsky's nationalist-odic flute to Mayakovsky's Futurist "Backbone Flute," and so seems to refer to the Russian poetic tradition itself, while the connected sunset invokes the countless symbolic connections of a red sunset with temporal decline and impending apocalypse in the second-wave Symbolism of Blok and Bely. But there is another aspect within Krivulin's own mythology of the underground that provides background to the significance of the flute in a poem titled "Earthly City," dating from less than a year before. In it, the Pied Piper,

the German folkloric rat catcher, first appears in Krivulin's poetry the same year as the other recurring image of rats analyzed above as the "friend of the underground." In the "Earthly City," the speaker of the poem describes how, in another act of transformation, "I am led beneath the earth among the others by the perfect path of the rat catcher . . . The dark rustling of the human current becomes my furtive voice."¹³² Having followed the "perfect path of the rat catcher"- the Pied Piper with his magic pipe- the speaker of the poem gains the voice of human masses, yet whether it is a prophetic voice of all people, a nation, or a select community is not clear. But nevertheless, from this underground position the figure gains a vision of "otherworldly heights," a "secret Italy in white flowers, a blue comet in the Gothic sky of Hamelin," and the "eternal meadow of Joachim Of Fiore."

As such, with the poem "Earthly City" there is figured another descent into an underground position where a novel voice is gained, followed by a contemplative ascent that opens visions of other worlds and imagined future possibilities. This notion of the flute, then helps form some of the background for the "flute of the sunset" that is connected with a music by which the homeless yet "blessed" tribe of the "Bedouins" live. Furthermore, where the figure in the 1972 poem referencing the Pied Piper was led underground, now the figure in the poem, having gained a voice, is himself the one who either plays or at least harmonizes with the temporal flute of decline and sunset, albeit with the music of words that "chirp" in his throat with difficulty. He is the wind that drives through the streets with "goat-like" knees, recalling either a demon with goat legs or, perhaps, Krivulin himself who as a child suffered a crippling bout of polio and had to walk with sticks while his legs splayed outward at bent angles. The figure of the poem, then, whose "furtive voice" was formed by the "the dark rustling of the human current" a

¹³² Krivulin, V. (2019). *Voskresnye oblaka*. Moscow: RIPOL Classik, p. 38.

year before, now leads the “tribe” of the spiritually bereft and “busily sinful” through the streets of sunset and decline with the sound of an “instrumentalized” tramcar accompanied by an instrument that is at once of wind and something spiritual. And despite this temporality of decline, the flute leads away from the situation of homelessness and into a flight that is made possible by the wings of music, however incomplete, ragged, and makeshift:

Перед финальной каденцией века вздохнет
глубже флейтист, собирая остатки дыхания
для заключительной фразы, для краткого чуда звучания
после эпохи молчания или длиннот.

Но пропадет ни одна. Не умрет ни один
голос живой, и любая звучащая нота
птичьей оденется рванью, в лохмотьях воскреснув полета,
для завершения божественных длин.

Before the final cadence of the century, the flutist
Will breathe deeply, gathering remainders of breath
For the concluding phrase, for the short miracle of sound
After an epoch of silence and longueurs.

Not one will be lost. Not one of the living voices
Will die, and every resounding note
Will be clad in bird's-eye rags, resurrected in scraps of flight
For the completion of divine lengths.

In the final culmination of the poem, music as a summons of the flutist that sounds out in the silence and tedium of the Late-Soviet epoch is that which draws the homeless, underground figure up into the heights of “divine lengths,” clad in “scraps” of tradition and the inherited

sublime and mystical modes of vision that, as Krivulin claims in his poem written two months later in March of 1973, “I Drink the Wine of Archaism,” “fly away into the embrace of the Logos-brother.”¹³³ Yet this aerial embrace and the subsequent connection with traditional religious, poetic, and philosophical words that it entails remain incomplete and temporary, as “each word dies, but it dies joyfully.”

Two years before the “Wings of Homelessness” poem was written, Krivulin wrote his programmatic poem, “A Question to Tiutchev,” in which he proclaimed that “we will sing over the times.” Using the Russian word for singing the funeral service over the recently deceased, “отпеть,” the poem in its religious connotations implies a future-orientation maintained through the enduring or ever-lasting word of literature, one which will endure and come to stand over the poet’s epoch and its feelings of homelessness that has or will have passed on. The poet Olga Sedakova has emphasized this common future-orientation among the like-minded poets of her generation in the 1970s, including Krivulin, in her significant essay, “Music of a Deaf Age:” “It’s of course a simplification, but in the deaf years of the 1970s the future (in a non-chronological sense) occupied almost all of our field of vision, like the sky in the steppe.”¹³⁴ The future, as a field of vision mostly comprised of poetry’s cultivated, imagined possibilities, extends out over the negated significance of the present, which remains only “one long convulsion before death;” yet that future becomes, from the diminutive angle of a metaphysically nullified present, as large a measure as the endless sky of the steppe.

¹³³ Krivulin, V. (2019). *Voskresnye oblaka*. Moscow: RIPOL Classik, p. 115.

¹³⁴ “Это, конечно, упрощение, но в глухие 70-е годы будущее (в таком нехронологическом смысле) занимало почти все поле зрения, как небо в степи.” Sedakova, O. “Muzyka glukhogo vremeni (russkaia lirika 70-kh godov)” *Ol’ga Sedakova*. [Online]. Available at: <https://olgasedakova.com/Poetica/175>. (Accessed 14 January 2020).

III

Such a transition, from a poetics of the factual present to one of imagined futures as a cultivation and poetic construction of a new vision of the world in a position of homelessness, is an attempted mode of being at home in the world, of a sense of belonging within a greater non-belonging. Such a sense of place, in which the sky is transformed by a poetic vision to become a “sheltering” roof composed of “divine lengths,” rather than an unprotective emptiness of the “chaos of a universe that is separate from us,” is a fundamental component of a spiritually oriented poetic dwelling in the forcibly secular late-Soviet world of the Stagnation era. As Heidegger wrote in his essay on Holderlin and poetry, “Poetically Man Dwells,” “the measure taken by poetry yields, imparts itself- as the foreign element in which the invisible one preserves his presence- to what is familiar in the sights of the sky. Hence, the measure is of the same nature as the sky. But the sky is not sheer light. The radiance of its height is itself the darkness of its all-sheltering breadth. The blue of the sky's lovely blueness is the color of depth. The radiance of the sky is the dawn and dusk of the twilight, which shelters everything that can be proclaimed.”¹³⁵

And this poetic ontology of the sky is, in certain ways, a broader and more universal depiction of the cultural home of the Hermitage that Krivulin described in his essay on Leningrad homelessness: “Your home- the stars underfoot, an underground luxury of the socialized palace.”¹³⁶ While the differences between the depictions are numerous, both can be taken as attempts, albeit recognizably impossible, to define foundations or homes enclosed within being, culture, and forms of rootedness that allow for a correspondence of human experience with a holistic vision of the cosmos, as an enclosed cultural space in which traditions

¹³⁵ Heidegger, M. (2001). *Poetry Language Thought*. New York: Harper Perennial, p. 226.

¹³⁶ Krivulin, V. (1998) “Leningradskii dom kak pochva bezdomnosti” *Okhota na mamonta*. St. Petersburg: BLITS, p. 52.

and literary language attain a place of graspable and communicable meaning. Thus Krivulin's "Homelessness," as an underground experience of powerlessness, productive "nonbelonging," philosophical and spiritual detachment, and a poetic descent into the "metaphysical bottom," becomes, as Tatiana Goricheva describes it, a position "from which the measures of depths and heights are simultaneously revealed," thereby making possible such a holistic and grandiose vision.

In these depths and heights, formulated by Krivulin in the poem as "wings of homelessness," there echoes the Heideggerian "poetic measures" of dwelling that help form and define a vision of a world of graspable and communicable meaning. As such, it becomes a poetic world within which "not one will be lost. Not one of the living voices will die." These lengths thus become the contours of a world in which the underground figure has a "place at the living feast," as Krivulin desires, but from which there is no ultimate escape, no final overcoming of homelessness; there is always a movement of descent and ascent, the wings are always of homelessness, and the underground a mode of non-belonging without cultural legitimation. The metaphors of light and music in this way become a means of preserving and outlasting, of opening up and looking beyond the limited temporality of the alienation, stagnation, and poverty of the times.

Part Three:

Poetry and the (Dis)enchantments of Stagnation

Introduction:

The Estuary of Stagnant Time

Without direction, time stymies and eddies, slows and grows diffuse as an estuary, where a once rushing river has given over to an endless branching of interflowing rivulets that no longer realize the direction of the river's greater flow. The river becomes spatialized as a point from which many possible courses extend, as a fluvial crossroads with momentum and motion exhausted to a trickle. Such a metaphorical description of time forms the general thematic in one of Alexei Parshchikov's early lyric poems titled "Estuary" (Лиман). He begins the poem with the invocation of a "we," a rare pronoun in his poetry, marking a universality that is meant to invoke a feeling of a common human history: "Knee deep in mud. For centuries, we have stood where the bog waters suck. In the grasp of the inanimate, there are no straight lines. A sack race is good for a laugh. And like the Lord's own trumpets, funnels multiply in the muck."¹³⁷ All human efforts, he seems to say, are rendered useless and unworthy of the energy; folly and futility are, it seems, what define human history. Already in this early lyric poem one can see what Parshchikov will later describe as a "cosmic overload" of life in the period of Soviet Stagnation, a period defined by a perceived exhaustion of history and the "metanarratives" of utopian and scientific progress that shaped the 20th century and so much of Soviet reality.

Parshchikov's poetic estuary conjures a place wherein nothing can occur or be realized quickly, where ambitions, like "sack races" through a mud pit, produce only bitter laughter. It is

¹³⁷ "По колено в грязи мы веками бредём без оглядки, и сосёт эта хлябь, и живут её мёртвые хватки. Здесь черты не проведешь, и потешны мешочные гонки, словно трубы Господни, размножены жижей воронки." Parshchikov, A. (2016) *Selected Poetry*. New York: KRiK, p. 8-9.; Parshchikov, A. (2014) *Dirizhabli*, Moskva: Vremya, p. 37.

a place where there seems to be no advantageous path to something better, and no higher symbolic token with which to orient oneself in the mire:

не найти ни креста, ни моста, ни звезды, ни развилки.

Только камень, похожий на тучку, и оба похожи
на любую из точек вселенной, известной до дрожи

только вывих тяжёлой, как спущенный мяч, панорамы

you will find no bridge, no cross, no forking path, no star.

Only a stone that looks like a cloud (both resemble
countless other points of the universe so familiar as to make one tremble.)

Only the dislocation of a landscape, sagging like a deflated ball.¹³⁸

The horizon of human endeavor, knowledge, and hope implied in the invocation of a “landscape,” is in the estuary something “dislocated” and “sagging,” deflating any hopes of achievement or transcendence. There seems to be no exit from the estuary and no effective direction in which to point oneself. It is a place of mind-numbing sameness and familiarity, in which “countless other points of the universe” are marked by the same impenetrable greyness of stone and cloud, a solid or gaseous nothing that is only arbitrarily held in distinction. And it is a situation, as the poem claims, that has been this way for centuries, long before the Soviet project’s revolutionary advent less than sixty years prior, though it was especially acute in the two decades years before the Soviet collapse.

¹³⁸ Parshchikov, A. (2016) *Selected Poetry*. New York: KRiK, p. 8-9.; Parshchikov, A. (2014) *Dirizhabli*, Moskva: Vremya, p. 37.

But over and against this sluggish vision of human futility and time, the poem affirms an intimate, lyrical moment of love and affection: “Once again, darling, yours is a resinous, intimate whisper. Once again, I’ll bring you pelts and sprigs of heather.”¹³⁹ The poem twice insists upon a repetition, positioning the lines within the same monotonous consistency present throughout the rest of the imagery, yet doing so in a way that introduces an emotional and purposeful affect in the tedium of the temporal estuary. Even in the midst of the highly intellectual and complex imagery of the poem, and despite the comic human failure which the estuary comes to represent, the lyrical enchantments of love are still present and insisted on. And in general, as Parshchikov would later claim in a memoir essay of the 2000s, the slow-moving, sluggish experience of time associated with the era of Soviet Stagnation provided a means by which to discover and cultivate “enchanted elements” through poetry by providing the time to pause and experience them. As such, the poem and Parshchikov’s poetic project in general, considers the sluggish estuary not simply as a metaphor of futility, but a poetic condition in which a positive contemplative experience opens up and, allowing for the discovery or rediscovery of the world’s “enchanted elements.” But this vision was not entirely unique to Parshchikov; it can also be found in other poets of the era, especially Parshchikov’s friends and fellow Moscow poets, Aleksandr Eremenko and Ivan Zhdanov.

For Alexei Parshchikov (1954-2009), Aleksandr Eremenko (1950-), and Ivan Zhdanov (1948-), a group of poets often referred to as the Metarealists or Metametaphorists,¹⁴⁰ the era

¹³⁹ “Как и прежде, мой ангел, интимен твой сумрачный шелест, как и прежде, я буду носить тебе шкуры и вереск” Parshchikov, A. (2016) *Selected Poetry*. New York: KRiK, p. 8-9.; Parshchikov, A. (2014) *Dirizhabli*, Moskva: Vremya, p. 37.

¹⁴⁰ Philosopher and theoretician Mikhail Epstein coined the term “Metarealism” in the 1980s in a series of manifestos and essays. He claims that “on the philosophical plane, it is a meta-physical realism, which is a realism not of the physical given but of the multidimensional nature of objects. On the stylistic plane, it is a meta-phorical realism, which has substituted a real consubstantiality and intercommunion of objects for conventional resemblance or similarity.” (Epstein, M. (2016) *Russian Postmodernism: New Perspectives on Post-Soviet Culture*, New York: Berghahn Books, p. 183.) Theoretician and poet Konstantin Kedrov, however, coined the term “Metametaphorism”

known as the Soviet Stagnation proved a formative experience. Each of the three poets, bound more by friendship and common participation in seminars and circles of the Moscow literary scene than by any cohesive poetic vision or manifesto, were major figures of a Late-Soviet boom of creative output germinating in the stagnant Brezhnev years of the 1970s. In the Moscow of the 1980s, all three enjoyed a greater degree of freedom in the literary scene of their day and have been referred to as “semi-official”¹⁴¹ poets (or in Zhdanov’s case, an official poet in the Writer’s Union), in comparison with the more fully unofficial poets of Leningrad or the Moscow Conceptualists. Though they are often associated with the era of Perestroika, when their books began to appear in the state’s publishing houses with runs of 10,000 copies, the poetics of the three friends were nevertheless rooted in the stagnant years of the late 1970s and early 80s when their poetics and worldviews took shape. Their poetry, with its high degree of complexity, metaphorical density, and mixture of ironic and sincere appeals to transcendence, is in many ways both timeless, a poetry separated from and oriented beyond the moment of its writing, and highly attuned to the shifting winds of the day, offering an experience and vision of the new in a period of history which, to many, lacked any real vision of the future. As such, the Stagnation era can be seen as having helped these poets cultivate a poetics of contemplation, rather than any kind of “bellicose”¹⁴² relation to the world, due to a general sense of political disenfranchisement and indifference to the reigning social and historical paradigms of the day.

prior to Epstein’s coinage (see: Kedrov, K. (1984) “Метаметафора Алексея Парщикова,” [Online] Available at: [ru.wikisource.org/wiki/Metametafora_alekseya_parshchikov_\(Kedrov\)](http://ru.wikisource.org/wiki/Metametafora_alekseya_parshchikov_(Kedrov))). Kedrov posits that the “metametaphor” is the poets’s most salient feature, defining it as “a metaphor in which each thing is a universe,” facilitating a descriptive process known as “inside-out (инсайдаут).”

¹⁴¹ Johnson and Ashby. (1992) *Third Wave: The New Russian Poetry*, Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, p. 3.

¹⁴² Parshchikov, A. (2006) “Est’ linii v amerikanskoĭ l-re, kotorye pochtĭ polnost’ĭu otsutstvuiut v nasheĭ...” [Online] Available at: <http://parshchikov.ru/letters/est-linii-amerikanskoy-l-re-kotorye-pochtĭ-polnosty-otsutstvuyut-nashey>. Accessed 19 July 2021.

Alexei Parshchikov, the youngest of the three yet most inclined to theorizing, analyzed his and his “like-minded cohorts” poetics and the circumstances of its origins with the clarity of hindsight in a memoir essay titled simply, “Situation.” The essay, published in Parshchikov’s 2006 book *Paradise of Slow Flame*, ties the poetics of his cohort closely to the period of Stagnation (1968-1985), associating the metaphor of stagnation with the poetry’s notorious density, interiority, and linguistic compression: “The situation the world allotted us forced my like-minded cohort to shrink inward, as if from a hard frost or cosmic overload.”¹⁴³ Indeed, the situation of Stagnation, as the story goes, involved a cold yet stifling senescence that had permeated the country, shut-tight behind the iron curtain, while the doddering gerontocracy remained propped up by a vast bureaucracy whose stagnant coffers were gradually emptied by the arms race. On the ground, Soviet ideology had ossified into a moribund structure that had long since lost the revolutionary vitality of the 1920s and the 1960s’ calls for liberalization and return to a purer communism. Stagnation, then, was more than merely a political charge, it was a description of an existential condition of a superpower.

One can well see how an apparent sense of the crushing weight of the period that Parshchikov describes tracks with this typical story of Stagnation, yet the interesting part of the story is how it is subverted in crucial ways as well: while the atmosphere of senescence and “cosmic overload” pressed down on the poets and society, this compression fostered an imaginative poetics of contemplation and free creativity that was anything but the moribund and ossified world of pervasive stagnation. Indeed, critics Aleksandr Kobak and Boris Ostanin, in their essay on the culture of the Stagnation era written in 1985, characterized the period through a dominant metaphor of the labyrinth, yet one which “is not a prison from which there is *no exit*

¹⁴³ Parshchikov, A. (2006) “Situatsiia” *Raĭ medlennogo ognia*. Moskva: NLO, p. 23.

(the name of the English translation of Sartre's play, popular in the 60s), but a place of habitation and residence, of leisure time and study of its endless corridors."¹⁴⁴ In other words, it was precisely a function of the times, the stagnant sense of Late-Soviet bureaucratic reality as labyrinthine, cumbersome, and directionless, yet also as a place and set of conditions within which an accommodating "habitation and residence," and subsequent "leisure time and study," became possible.

As such, the historical period of stagnation, and the existentialized metaphor that it gave rise to, in Parshchikov's account seems to have actually fostered or led to an increased creativity, providing the conditions for the kind of directionless contemplation that is often so alien to the experience of technologized modernity: "Stagnation turned out to be a freeze-frame, inside of which it was possible to give measures and intently examine the enchanted elements (заколдованные стихии)."¹⁴⁵ While social and psychic fragmentation, alienation, and atomization are often seen as common effects of the burden of purposeless time and stagnant history, Parshchikov describes a world in which creativity, new measures or modes of understanding, and "enchanted visions of things are the result. In the strange temporality of the period, then, time itself seems to have frozen and fallen out of joint in the context of the Soviet project of utopian modernization. Yet within that sense of disjointedness, alienating as it might often have been, a poet had the opportunity to see the world anew if the effort was made to meditate upon it.

In the course of the following three chapters I will focus on the way in which these three poets- Parshchikov, Eremenko, and Zhdanov- each represent and seek to overcome some

¹⁴⁴ Ostanin and Kobak. (2003) "Molnia i raduga: puti kul'tury 60-80kh godov" *Molnia i raduga: literaturno-kriticheskie stat'i 1980kh godov*, Sankt Peterburg: Izdatel'stvo N.I. Novikova, p. 27.

¹⁴⁵ Parshchikov, A. (2006) "Situatsiia" *Rai medlennogo ognia*. Moskva: NLO, p. 24.

element of temporality implied within the metaphor of stagnation. Each chapter will briefly consider ways in which the poets represent a unique relation to the metaphor of stagnation, and will then show some of the ways each of the three developed their poetry within its contours while trying to overcome it. In Parshchikov's poetry, there is a frequent and dynamic concern with the presence of multiple temporalities and spatial realities focused into the present through a contemplation of the disappearance of history as a specific, recognizably linear movement toward some greater purpose. The result, then, is an emphasis on the lived present moment of poetic experience as an ever-expanding or contracting, irreducible complexity. In considering Eremenko's poetry, I will continue to develop on the historical thinking established in Parshchikov's poetry through Eremenko's concern for the fate of technological and scientific progress in the stagnant chaos of late-Soviet modernity, particularly by way of his concern for the relation of technology and nature through a performative figure of a moron as an image of the modern idealistic poet. And finally, through the poetry of Ivan Zhdanov, I will consider the poet's concern with the alienated individual cut off from traditions and past sources of connection and belief, focusing on his reading of utopian thinking through the deeply personal and lyrical themes of jealousy and passion.

Each of these poets, I will show, emphasizes a mode of a contemplative relation to historical abstractions manifest through experiences of time that help pull the poets beyond the often stifling, everyday reality of Late-Soviet time. This contemplative move, thinking beyond the myths, political paradigms, and temporalities of their day, allowed the poets to develop a poetic thinking that "emptied out any kind of normalcy and mocked the false guarantees within which we lived,"¹⁴⁶ as Parshchikov would claim in the same essay. In this way, beginning

¹⁴⁶ Parshchikov, A. (2006) "Situatsiia" *Rai medlennogo ognia*. Moskva: NLO, p. 32.

through direct relation to metaphorical and historical stagnation, the poets relativized their times in order to open up new possibilities for the discovery of enchanted elements and the creation of new forms of meaning in what was experienced as a disenchanted and meaningless world.

Chapter Four: Stagnation Time and the “Abyss of Money” in the Poetry of Alexei Parshchikov

In the stagnant estuary of history, human endeavor languishes and becomes and exhausted. For Alexei Parshchikov, it seems, this broadly felt exhaustion manifested as a defining atmosphere, a prevailing mood that he sought to capture in his poetry of the late 70s and early 80s. Yet it is one that nevertheless harkened to something more fundamental and existential than a mere political metaphor for 20-some years of Soviet life. Indeed, Parshchikov is describing a kind of deep human mindset that can arise when life is governed by historical linearity and progress toward some definite goal or direction. And in his description of it, he does not fully eschew such historical thinking, but enters into this mindset and conception of time as something that has become fundamental and inescapable, yet also as something that must be challenged from within and renewed or relativized. In a discussion of “moods” in *Being and Time*, the great philosopher of time and meaning, Martin Heidegger, claims that we “can, should, and must, through knowledge and will, become master of moods,” mood being the primary way by which we relate to our “Being-in-the-world,” our existential situatedness, a situatedness similar to a personal depression or sense of historical defeat and decay. But Heidegger is still quick to point out, and so to complicate this line of thinking long common to philosophy, that we can never simply escape or exit completely from a mood, such that “when we master a mood, we do so by way of a counter-mood; we are never free of moods.”¹⁴⁷ One can never fully escape from the “moods” of a period’s historical determination; a common sense of history and time binds us, but we can attempt to alter the mood.

¹⁴⁷ Heidegger, M. (2008) *Being and Time*. New York: Harper Perennial. p. 175.

Following this line of thinking, the extensive mood of Stagnation- a cause to shrink inwards due to a cessation and directionless sense of time- can be seen as something transformable only internally through the creation of new moods which do not tend to arise from the external discourses of ideology, philosophy, religion, etc. (“you will find no bridge, no cross, no forking path, no star”), but through counter-moods cultivated in art forms like poetry. One cannot simply step outside of or transcend a mood, be it a defining social atmosphere or a personal depressive state, with an intellectual Archimedean lever. One is always in the fold of moods and counter-moods, always in the midst of them or in-between them. And as such, as Parshchikov claimed in his essay “Situation,” within the static mood of stagnation as “freeze-frame” “it was possible to give measures and intently examine the enchanted elements,” to develop into poetry new possibilities and moods from within the dominant situation itself and thereby lessen the pressure and magnitude by which a common feeling or sense of an historical period’s possibilities depress action, thought, and imagination.

Nevertheless, Parshchikov’s poetic attempt to transform the mood of stagnation cannot be taken as an optimistic attempt to overcome the politico-economic slump that the Soviet project had fallen into with a rejuvenation of communist fervor. Rather it was more of a contemplative attempt to deepen and enliven the experience of the seemingly unmoving temporal current that became associated with it. His poems are filled with descriptions of a sense of alienation from or attempted transcendence of historical time: “the wind of time unwinds me and sets me against the flow,” “letters, you are an army, suddenly blind and wandering along the edge of time.”¹⁴⁸ Yet these are almost always accompanied by a new mode of experiencing and connecting with time itself, often involving an attunement to a new atmosphere or environment in which time and

¹⁴⁸ “ветер времени раскручивает меня и ставит поперек потока,” “буквы, вы армия, ослепшая вдруг и бредущая краем времен” Parshchikov, A. (2014) *Dirizhabli*, Moskva: Vremya, pp. 95, 68.

space knit into a new interconnected whole through the poet's practice of meditative focus.

Nevertheless, consistent with the typically carnivalesque and cynical mentality common to many among the late-Soviet intelligentsia, this process of attunement and mediation is frequently presented in a tone as playfully ironic as it is sincere: "the entirety of my inner resource was claimed, and in standing water I lived as standing water"; a pair of scissors opened up between time and space . . . I became a sphere of habitation, vision of the whole planet."¹⁴⁹

In the stagnant waters of his imaginative historical estuary, Parshchikov finds a world as astonishingly complex and vital as that described in Leibniz's *Monadology*, a highly influential work of philosophy for the poet, albeit more for its aesthetic sensibility than its philosophical rigor; "Each portion of matter can be conceived as a garden full of plants, and as a pond full of fish." "There is nothing fallow, sterile, or dead in the universe, no chaos and no confusion except in appearance, almost as it looks in a pond at a distance, where we might see the confused and, so to speak, teeming motion of the fish in the pond, without discerning the fish themselves."¹⁵⁰ In this way, through this turn, the poet is able to "take measures and find the enchanted elements" of the stagnant time in which he meditates, revealing a world of immense and clashing scales, evocative realities and speculative thinking often beyond the reach of human senses. And within these meditations there arises an at times newly religious, even pagan-like sacrality of things, of objects and animals baptized in the ancient myths and conceptions of time's origin, reemerging in the still waters of the stagnant present: "if you carry the origin of times in your ears, you will recall the taming of the beasts, how they entered the waters of the flood, and then

¹⁴⁹ "Был затребован весь мой запас нутряной, я в стоячей воде жил стоячей воде"; "Открылись такие ножницы меж временем и пространством . . . я стал средой обитания зрения всей планеты." Parshchikov, A. (2014) *Dirizhabli*, Moskva: Vremya, pp. 115, 35.

¹⁵⁰ Ariew and Watkins. (2009) "Monadology" *Modern Philosophy: An Anthology of Primary Sources*, Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, p. 281. For more on Leibniz's influence on Parshchikov, see: Aristov, V. (2014) "Vkhod Leĭbnitsevu Mel'niĭsu," Moskva: NLO, [Online] Available at: <https://magazines.gorky.media/nlo/2014/2/vhod-v-lejbniczevu-melniczu.html>.

stepped out: . . . and the dog? The camel, the chicken? – all are holy!”¹⁵¹ And this transformative process of meditative poetic thinking that reaches out toward the sources of time and origins of myths and ideas can be found all throughout much of Parshchikov’s poetic oeuvre.

This process typically begins with a focus on some typical aspect of everyday Soviet existence, and then moves toward an attempt to transcend banal and stagnant everyday reality and commune with greater cultural and metaphysical depths that may invisibly determine it. In one of the poet’s most highly regarded poems of the early 1980s, titled simply “Money,” the poem’s persona steps through the picture-window on a three-ruble bill into an imaginative marketplace that connects all the world’s banknotes, a realization of space implied in the abstract metaphor of a financial market. And in that metaphorical space, the movement of history that drives society forward and is supposedly connected to money and macroeconomics ultimately disappears, leaving the poet with a set of questions akin to ironic yet meditative koans meant to designate a playful state of enlightenment, asking: “Who will draw it into a knot? Who will carry these powerful centuries on a stick? Where does the bearer go? And does he know what a mirror is? And a wheel? And where is his abode? And how much did he pay for a jar of milk?”¹⁵²

The ten-part poem is from a larger sequence of poems titled “Figures of the Intuition,” the majority of which playfully and with deep irony explore occasional scenes and social mythologies of Late-Soviet life. The meditation in “Money” begins when Parshchikov’s poetic persona happens upon a banknote laying on the famous Stone Bridge by the Kremlin, such that the Kremlin on the bill and the actual government building in Moscow line up and form a three-

¹⁵¹ “если ты носишь начало времен в ушах, помнишь приручение зверей, как вошли они в воды потопа, а вышли: . . . а собака? А верблюд? А курица? – все святые!” Parshchikov, A. (2014) *Dirizhabli*, Moskva: Vremya, p. 24.

¹⁵² “Кто его стянет в узел? Кто наденет/ на палку эти мощные века?/ Куда идёт его носитель?/ И знает ли он, что такое зеркала? /И колесо? И где его обитель? /И сколько он платил за кринку молока?” Parshchikov, A. (2014) *Dirizhabli*, Moskva: Vremya, p. 102.; Parshchikov, A. (2016) *Selected Poetry*. New York: KRiK, p. 13.

dimensional marketplace as the poem's initially concrete reality becomes multilayered and defined by air that is "tissued" and dream-like. This imagined marketplace then allows for a vast invocation of the poet's complex, multifaceted, and richly-detailed sense of Soviet reality in the early 1980s, while simultaneously "de-familiarizing" that reality, giving its readers new, open-ended ways of experiencing their surroundings. With such proximity to Soviet life, the poem's imaginative process becomes a way of visualizing the everyday in new contexts, as the poem then meditates on a personified figure of history and delimits the absolutism of temporal and historical paradigms of state and ideology by providing ever wider frames of reference, and by examining the "enchanted elements" in the poem's meditative "freeze-frame:"

Walking on Stone Bridge
 playing at star wars visions
 I suddenly felt the air
 tissue into whispered layers.
 Albania will triumph in global battles,
 departing toward the depths of another world,
 the wobblings of fleeting ether
 amplified, piercing me through.
 Within frenzied swarms of multiplication
 devoid of primordial zero
 a point opened on Stone Bridge
 from which I strode through a three-ruble note.

Когда я шёл по Каменному мосту,
 играя видением звёздных войн,
 я вдруг почувствовал, что воздух
 стал шелестящ и многослоен.
 В глобальных битвах победит Албания,
 уйдя на дно иного мира,

усиливались колебания
 через меня бегущего эфира.
 В махровом рое умножения,
 где нету изначального нуля,
 на Каменном мосту открылась точка зрения,
 откуда я шагнул в купюру "три рубля."¹⁵³

The defamiliarizing effect that the persona experiences in the poem is developed through a phenomenological description of money. The first stanza is filled with sounds of “whispering” that “tissue” the air. “Frenzied swarms of multiplication” hint at both the calculations the persona makes, having happened upon some extra cash, and the poetic multiplication of angles of vision and imaginative frameworks that are made possible by the correspondence of the banknote’s picture of the Kremlin and the Kremlin itself, of original and reproduction. But, the poem points out, this multiplication is “devoid of primordial zero”; there is no basic element to this process of multiplication as a transformation of everything into a flickering, unstable state. Nothing, including the Kremlin as the ultimate site of communist power, lies outside this process of metaphorical financialization. In this imaginative space that opens up, there is no ideological basis outside the reach of money, nor primordial, temporal point beyond the present moment of the poem. Nothing stable or fundamental can be referred to for guidance and clarity while the persona enters into this imaginative space in which currency and power are questioned and explored.

This general problematic surrounding the question of what lies beyond the reach of ideology and currency is central also to a short poem by one of Parshchikov’s poetic masters,

¹⁵³ Parshchikov, A. (2014) *Dirizhabli*, Moskva: Vremya, p. 98.; Parshchikov, A. (2016) *Selected Poetry*. New York: KRiK, p. 10.

Andrei Voznesenski, titled “Take Lenin Off the Money.” Voznesenski’s 1967 poem, directed at his “comrades” at the Central Committee, is not written against Lenin, the Revolution, and communism, but against the tarnishing of Lenin’s mythic stature by placing his visage on banknotes that are touched by oily fingers, used to buy vodka and pickles, and soiled with all manner of vileness, thus emphasizing the need to keep the image of Lenin as ideologically pure and separate from the grubby world of finances and physical banknotes. Yet in Parshchikov’s poem written some 15-18 years later, the external position that Lenin occupies in Voznesenski’s poem is not only excised, but so too is any possible space untouched by money and the “frenzied swarms of multiplication.” There is no external space- no ideological or religious point of understanding and faith- with which to make sense of the world.

This endless multiplication of angles of vision and disorienting transformation of reality which can have no center, direction, or purpose, is a fundamental component of other poems throughout “Figures of the Intuition.” The result in many of the poems is a set of ideologically informed myths that are emptied of their actual ideological content and taken only as moments of contemplation and raw material for poetic flights of fancy; they are only “frenzied swarms of multiplication,” words and symbols without any ideological grounding, a world “devoid of primordial zero.” In one example from the “Intuition” sequence of poems, “Pall-bearing,” Parshchikov describes the pomp and circumstance surrounding the highly ritualized removal of Stalin from the Red Square mausoleum alongside Lenin, one of the most significant elements of the process of “De-Stalinization” associated with Khrushchev. The poem presents this supposedly enlightened and liberalizing maneuver, though, through a deep irony: despite the materialistic and official atheism of the Soviet state, the Soviet leaders are described as an almost demonic hierarchy of angels, as “seven heavenly tiers.” The poet’s persona gains access to the

historical event through the famous Georgian medium and spiritual healer Djuna, a figure frequently summoned to the Kremlin in the 1980s as a healer and guide, and without a doubt introduced into the poem with a deep irony in the context of a politburo supposedly armed with atheistic dialectical materialism. Going further, the persona of Parshchikov's poem, through the occult powers of Djuna, is "divided into a hundred halves" and "moves as a swarm," witnessing the absurd rite of reducing Stalin to an ideological zero: "they carried decades of death and the great terror's bed," "splitting apart, he could chisel himself ever more precisely, right into a perfect void."¹⁵⁴

Another meditation performing a similar "frenzied swarm of multiplication" revolving around the historical nullification of a Soviet leader, comes in the poem "Dacha Elegy." Though remaining unnamed throughout the poem, the figure of a leader in forced, sequestered retirement, reduced to boredom at a dacha by the sea can be interpreted as none other than Nikita Khrushchev, overthrown and himself stricken from the upper echelons of Soviet power by his successor Leonid Brezhnev. Summing up the liberalizing era of the Thaw associated with Khrushchev's rule and preceding Brezhnev's Stagnation, the poem claims: "It had been necessary to put in a period, but he used a comma. And he left for himself precisely that as well, like the heel of a falling colossus. He put it there in the name of progress."¹⁵⁵ Khrushchev's attempts at reform, liberalization, and "de-Stalinization," the poem seems to say, resulted in nothing other than a comma left in the name of progress, with everything following it producing nothing more than a long, drawn out affair which should have been concluded with a period. As such, these poems describe historical changes which effectively are not changes; rather they are

¹⁵⁴ Parshchikov, A. (2014) *Dirizhabli*, Moskva: Vremya, p. 103-104.; Parshchikov, A. (2016) *Selected Poetry*. New York: KRiK, p. 13-14.

¹⁵⁵ Parshchikov, A. (2014) *Dirizhabli*, Moskva: Vremya, p. 112.

presented as moments in history characterized by the disappearance of the very drivers of history, resulting in Soviet stories or myths that are emptied of any authentic ideological content, but which nevertheless act as ironic vessels for the poet to develop his playfully defamiliarizing and meditative process of versification.

This process of playful reduction to zero of static and increasingly meaningless Soviet myths and ideological forms which nevertheless remain ubiquitous was not unique to Parshchikov, but was a common element of Stagnation-era culture. The anthropologist Alexei Yurchak, in his celebrated study of the “last Soviet generation,” *Everything Was Forever Until It Was No More*, refers to these ossified, propagandistic myths and forms of “authoritative discourse” of the late-Soviet state as a “hypernormalized” language. Stalin, he claims, having taken on the role of master and producer of the “metadiscourse” of Soviet ideology, was the sole agent able to determine developments within that ideology. Upon his death, the ideological system froze, incapable of further changes and accommodation of new elements of reality; and by the late-Soviet period Stalin in this role as sole agent capable of altering the orthodoxy was not only dead but “de-Stalinized.” He claims: “Stalin’s intervention, ironically, had undermined the very position external to discourse from which he had launched this intervention. In 1956, three years after Stalin’s death, Khrushchev pushed this transformation even further by publicly denouncing Stalin’s cult of personality, which finalized the destruction of any location external to authoritative discourse.”¹⁵⁶ The result was a hypernormalized, frozen, and endlessly repetitive linguistic system that not only “affect[ed] all levels of linguistic, textual, and narrative structure but also became an end in itself, resulting in fixed and cumbersome forms of language.”¹⁵⁷

¹⁵⁶ Yurchak, A. (2005). *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, p. 46

¹⁵⁷ Ibid. p. 50.

Without a primordial zero, an external basis upon which the system is built, the system froze up and became increasingly stagnant and meaningless in the context of a changing historical reality.

Parshchikov's poetry, then, develops out of reference to and encoding of this hypernormalized language in his writing of what are clearly Soviet texts. Yet in distinction from the path established by the more directly political and ideologically conscious Conceptualist poets and artists such as Dmitri Prigov or Ilya Kabakov, Parshchikov's texts do not engage with the Soviet language as a closed system referring only to itself. Rather, he describes a porous world in poems that only distantly echo the ideological system, an echo shot through with abysses and mysteries, mockery and ironic laughter, human frailties and the absurd ritualization of behavior. In the contemplative openings and intuitive interconnections of Parshchikov's highly complex metaphorical chains- a system of metaphors often scrubbed of any explanatory context- the closed linguistic vacuum of Soviet life is opened up, revealing a glittering array of oddities and ironic winks, alongside a vast storehouse of cultural, poetic, philosophical, and religious references all occurring within multiple and often contradictory timeframes.

"Money" involves just such a complex system of metaphors and references built from out of an experience of daily life in the Soviet Union, a system which explores or seeks to discover a sense of otherness that exists beyond the limitations of that life and world. This process of "intuitive" exploration, though, is regarded in the poem as bidirectional, with the poet's intuition discovering a deeper reality through his imaginative leap into money as an epistemology, and money itself taking on an intuitive epistemological role for the state that produces it. In the second stanza of the poem, the poetic persona apostrophizes the three-ruble note he has found specifically, and in turn all of currency itself: "You, money, are the same for

the government, as the lateral line of a fish,” i.e. it’s sensory organ.¹⁵⁸ The relation Parshchikov describes is therefore twofold. On the one hand, the poet, intuiting a deeper reality and the presence of history through the correspondence of the Kremlin and the ruble’s picture of the Kremlin, realizes the idea that “poetry is a sensitive register of social changes”¹⁵⁹ On the other hand, money is something which senses and itself knows something, in much the way that the philosopher and economist Frederich Hayek describes the epistemological capacity of the “price system:” “It is more than a metaphor to describe the price system as a kind of machinery for registering change, or a system of telecommunications which enables individual producers to watch merely the movement of a few pointers.”¹⁶⁰ The poet and the economist, in other words, both know that changing times communicate something about money and money communicates something about changing historical times.

Indeed, the poem is filled with references to an eschatological conception of history, specifically as an impending nuclear apocalypse referred to at the beginning through reference to star wars (the American missile defense system announced in 1983, not the film series of the same name). Stepping into the imagined space of currency thus becomes a way of knowing something beyond empirical everyday reality, yet it is done as a largely tongue-in-cheek way of divining the future, as if a banknote became a diviner’s tea leaves, the tongue of an inhuman prophet, or the sulfuric fumes of a financial oracle of Delphi. A frequent image of a rider of the apocalypse invokes this idea throughout the poem: “The bills flew, skirting riches, their shelf-ridges branched . . . transported by the horseman of the void, king of finances, all the world’s

¹⁵⁸ “Ты, деньги, то же самое для государства, что боковая линия для рыб.” Parshchikov, A. (2014) *Dirizhabli*, Moskva: Vremya, p. 98.

¹⁵⁹ Ostanin and Kobak. (2003) “Molnia i raduga: puti kul'tury 60-80kh godov” *Molnia i raduga: literaturno-kriticheskie stat'i 1980kh godov*, Sankt Peterburg: Izdatel'stvo N.I. Novikova.

¹⁶⁰ Hayek, F. (1945) “The Use of Knowledge in Society,” [Online] Available at: <https://www.econlib.org/library/Essays/hykKnw.html>.

money on his back. The Kremlin chimes struck twelve and the horseman turned to me.”¹⁶¹ Yet these references to possible futures mark an attempt to “know” a future that never comes, and so resists any vision of a utopia or apocalypse, resulting in a situation of strained “timelessness” and “emptiness that is identical for us and foreigners,” all connected by a “marketplace” through which history passes and seems to become visible. And within this space the poet intuits the truth behind the world of the “market” which he has fortuitously happened upon: in that space there is no stable ground. Money, like ideology, is intuited as an empty construct, an ossified and hypernormalized phenomenon which defines everything yet which remains ceaselessly changing and undefined, an arbitrary structure over an abyss, a record of development emptied of any of the actual engines of history; and it does not, then, actually relate in any way to history other than relatively and arbitrarily.

And so, within this space of money nothing of the future is learned, the space reveals only the present disconnection of money, power, and ideology all figured through the disappearance of a specific leader’s guiding hand- the disappearance of a recognizable driver of historical progress, of faith in the human agency to guide and transform the world. Parshchikov thus engages with Voznesenski’s poem about Lenin referred to above, yet does not remove him from the ruble to keep something ideologically pure. He makes Lenin merely another insignificant leader among leaders, as he is not taken from the money but simply gestured toward alongside numerous other leaders who grace the covers of their nation’s currency, all alike in their relativity to the empty space of the market, the “abyss of money” behind them: “I wandered there along the gallery and saw the presidents from behind, sitting straighter than a stalk,

¹⁶¹ “Они летели, богатства огибая,/ был разветвлён их шельф,/ они казались мне грибами,/ оплетшими вселенский сейф,/ везомый всадником пустот, царём финансов -/ все деньги мира на спине -/ куранты пробили двенадцать,/ и всадник повернул ко мне.” Parshchikov, A. (2014) *Dirizhabli*, Moskva: Vremya, p. 100.; Parshchikov, A. (2016) *Selected Poetry*. New York: KRiK, p. 11-12.

glancing from the windows of their nation's currency."¹⁶² And in this "abyss," in the deep regions of this imagined space behind the gallery of leaders sitting tall for their nations, there lurks a dark figure wandering aimlessly yet bearing the weight and direction of history on his back, the figure of an ultimate other whose mind and intention prophets and poets, ideologues and apparatchiks of the State Planning Committee ever attempted and attempt to fathom, yet which remains for them as incalculable as the absent space of "primordial zero:"

History is a sack, an abyss of money inside it.
 But the sack has its history.
 Who will draw it into a knot? Who will carry
 these powerful centuries on a stick?
 Where does the bearer go?
 And does he know what a mirror is?
 And a wheel? And where is his abode?
 And how much did he pay for a jar of milk?
 Could he have gotten lost or stopped
 while I walked along Stone Bridge
 and spent violet ink?
 And who was a figure of intuition to whom?

История - мешок, в нём бездна денег.
 Но есть история мешка.
 Кто его стянет в узел? Кто наденет
 на палку эти мощные века?
 Куда идёт его носитель?
 И знает ли он, что такое зеркала?
 И колесо? И где его обитель?

¹⁶² "Я там бродил по галерее/ и видел президентов со спины/ сидящих, черенков прямее,/ глядящих из окон купюр своей страны." Parshchikov, A. (2014) *Dirizhabli*, Moskva: Vremya, p. 99.; Parshchikov, A. (2016) *Selected Poetry*. New York: KRiK, p. 10.

И сколько он платил за кринку молока?
 Пока я шёл по Каменному мосту
 и тратил фиолетовую пасту,
 не мог бы он пропасть? остановиться?
 и кто был для кого фигурой интуиции?¹⁶³

History, then, is a space filled with the senseless emptiness of money, an abyss of it. But the poet claims that there is a history of the sack. It is the externally viewed form that contains the abyss and defines the contours within which exists all financial and governmental systems of the past and present, and which the meditation has gained a vision of through the coincidence of images the poem is built from. But the question remains as to what, precisely, controls and drives history. This line of questioning clearly remains unanswerable for the poet. This driver of history is described as a figure with increasing tangibility, yet remains ultimately inaccessible to thought and description. The questions concretize the figure of history through a layering of characteristics and specificities that could not be ascribed to it, and yet are given to it nonetheless as a form of apophatic or “negative” thinking. The figure of history takes shape as a homeless wanderer, a stereotypical hobo of the past with the abyss of money tied up in a sack strung on a stick and shouldered. Rhetorical questions arise through archetypal images concerning where it lives, its self-awareness (mirror), its relationship with technology or its linearity vs cyclicity (wheel), and a comical inquiry into the cost of milk. And these both anthropomorphize history as a mythic, knowable figure, yet distance it through the playful, tongue-in-cheek nature of the questions.

¹⁶³ Parshchikov, A. (2014) *Dirizhabli*, Moskva: Vremya, p. 102.; Parshchikov, A. (2016) *Selected Poetry*. New York: KRiK, p. 13.

The experience of the disappearance of history as the disappearance of a figure of history results then in a final unknowability of any historical direction, and thus the perceived stagnation of time. The only answer to such a sense of stagnation the poet provides, in the last analysis, is the cultivation of a separate aesthetic space through which an individual can attempt to grasp the “history of the sack,” to relativize and limit the power of any particular historical reality so as to foster something new, a new way of relating to the world from within its seeming “mood” of stagnation. And this is precisely what Parshchikov claims in a *Perestroika* era essay on late-Soviet “New Poetry,” claiming that poetry helps prepare this ground for change:

Language opens towards us with the quality of its appropriateness. You always see intuitively that for which “a place is prepared” and that for which it’s not. The author slowly realizes this and it parallels the maturing and simultaneous sinking of roots in the inner space of its opening or, I should say, of its linguistic openness. . . . Sinking roots, an artist understands that poetry is passed from hand to hand, not as a device but rather as a prevalent mode of perception.¹⁶⁴

This novel poetic space, as a mode of vision that can be easily shared, “passed from hand to hand” in samizdat, apartment readings, and eventually official publications, undermines any notion of the absolute nature of a particular historical period, particularly the myths and conceptions of specific leaders and ideas. While the poets of the late-Soviet period may have felt bound to their particular time and its dominant feeling of stagnation, what Parshchikov called “a hard frost or cosmic overload,” the mood that he cultivates through a contemplative, relativizing view helped foster a feeling of freedom and mood of transcendent liberation. Albeit one without any sense of political actionability. As such, Parshchikov did not seek in his poetry to overthrow

¹⁶⁴ Hejinian and Watten. (2015) “New Poetry” *Poetics Journal Digital Archive*, Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, p. 989.

and replace the myths and ossified language of the Soviet utopian project with a new, revolutionary poetic or political project; rather, he sought to open up new spaces within which to pursue his own aesthetic goals and interests, so as to dynamize the mood of a stagnant monolithic atmosphere and reintroduce new, individuated conceptions of time, space, and imaginative language through the artistic practice of poetry and develop the ground for meaningful future thought.

Chapter Five:

Performing the End of Progress: Aleksandr Eremenko and the Poet as Moron

During the peak years of *Perestroika*, in 1988, the poet Aleksandr Eremenko wrote a letter to billionaire philanthropist George Soros's Cultural Initiative fund. Soros's money was pledged to foster an "open society" in the Soviet Union through support of science, education, and culture.¹⁶⁵ While much of the funds were used to distribute computers, copiers, and faxes throughout the Soviet Union, the hard materials of an open society, Eremenko's letter requests something a little more ambitious. For the deeply satirical yet philosophically and scientifically inclined poet, outer space remained the final frontier, a world beyond the chaos, entropy, and stagnation that was so often the lot of the earth below and a frequent mood in his poetry, and a tendency Soros likewise sought to combat. And so, in the thoughtful two-page letter, Eremenko suggested that the fund be used to support humanist astronauts to accompany the "scientific naturalists and military types" that had up to then dominated space flight. It was time, he claimed, for a "humanization of the cosmos"¹⁶⁶ to follow in the wake of the great technological modernizing projects that the Soviet Union had undertaken, symbolized most triumphantly by Yuri Gagarin's space flight in 1961. The result could be a new and powerful symbol of progress in a time of stagnation and decline.

Despite the pretense at sincerity, it is difficult to read the letter as anything but pure mockery or "stiob," a slang term for a popular form of sarcasm in the late-Soviet period involving "such a degree of *overidentification* with the object, person, or idea at which this *stiob*

¹⁶⁵ (2015) "What did the Soros Foundation do for science, education and culture of Russia" [Online] Available at: <https://www.forumdaily.com/en/kak-soros-spas-rossijskuyu-nauku-obrazovanie-i-kulturu/>

¹⁶⁶ Eremenko, A. (2001) *Opus Magnum*, Moskva: Podkova, p. 172-175.

was directed that it was often impossible to tell whether it was a form of sincere support, subtle ridicule, or a peculiar mixture of the two.”¹⁶⁷ For Eremenko, street-crowned “king of the poets” and someone who lampooned the older, once “liberal” generation of Soviet literati of the 1960s such as Yevgeny Evtushenko,¹⁶⁸ this “overidentification” played an important role in the creation of his poetic persona. His poetry is filled with absurd visions of the natural world chaotically intertwined with an often ugly and banal technological reality counter to the image of the Soviet domination of space, forming a funhouse mirror in which naïve and moronic humans are rendered impotent and alienated in an empty cosmos. In this chaos, the people in his poems often seem to have nowhere to go, nothing to do, and have no hope of changing their circumstances or even differentiating between nature, culture, and technology so as to understand themselves and continue any progress and transformation.

At the same time, one cannot read Eremenko’s poetry as adopting any kind of straightforward Luddite stance, refusing all technological hopes and cultural developments, and thus making his letter to the Soros a thing of straight-forward irony alone. It is something entirely more complex. As one of the leading figures in the renaissance of new poetry that broke the surface of the ideologically-circumscribed Soviet publishing world of the early 1980s, his poetry, as he himself proclaimed in a programmatic statement of a few years later, was written as a “Synthesis of Poetry, Philosophy, and Science.”¹⁶⁹ In contrast to any kind of poetic or ideological purity, Eremenko sought to cultivate a poetry incorporating many angles of vision and forms of knowledge in order to better understand the immensely complex reality of his

¹⁶⁷ Yurchak, Alexei. (2006) *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation*. Princeton University Press, p. 250.

¹⁶⁸ See: Parshchikov, A. (2006) “Situatsiia” *Rai medlennogo ognia*. Moskva: NLO, p. 81.

¹⁶⁹ Johnson and Ashby. (1992) *Third Wave: The New Russian Poetry*, Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, p. 159.

modern technologized world. And so, with such a poetic apparatus in his employ, a poet-astronaut would be able to create artistic works for a “future humankind” that are, as Eremenko claims, of a “living spiritual experience, not of the narrow specialist, but of a person, endowed with the capacity for artistic thought.”¹⁷⁰ And anything less than this expanded frontier of poetic experience might well be left to the chaotic and stagnant world lampooned and meditated upon throughout much of his writing, a world that otherwise would be left to the “celluloid physicist-boys who marched through the novels of the 50s and 60s,” and who could perhaps appear even to be an “indirect cause of the Chernobyl nightmare.”¹⁷¹

Yet despite the expression of some degree of optimism in Eremenko’s poetry- which must be taken as only minimally serious- his poetics are thoroughly consistent with the pervasive disenchantment and “compression” associated with the period of Stagnation And Eremenko’s poetic personae are deep expressions of this cultural mood of the time. Alexei Parshchikov commented directly on Eremenko’s poetics in relation to Stagnation in his book *Paradise of Slow Flame*, “stagnation turned out to be a freeze-frame” “lacking a modality of the future,” in which the performative hero of Eremenko’s poetry appeared as the persona of a “moron (дебил),” “who was able only to dimly guess about everything; he didn’t sense things, he only had a presentiment of them.”¹⁷² (44) The figure of the moron, Parshchikov goes on to claim, was akin to a literary trope of “blissful, mentally scattered idiots without malice of any kind: Benjy from *The Sound and the Fury*, the naïve people of Platonov’s works, in whose well-proteined bodies dark mental knots could be found, the “Mad Wolf” of Zabolotsky, the animals of St. Francis.”

¹⁷⁰ Eremenko, A. (2001) *Opus Magnum*, Moskva: Podkova, p. 172-175.

¹⁷¹ Eremenko, A. (2001) *Opus Magnum*, Moskva: Podkova, p. 172-175.

¹⁷² Parshchikov, A. (2006) “Situatsiia” *Raĭ medlennogo ognia*. Moskva: NLO, p. 44.

While Eremenko's satire and often mocking tone may have had a touch more malice than the birds of St. Francis, his performance of a moronic persona was an integral aspect of many poems that engage with nature and technology, particularly those meditating on the capacities of the artist and individual to make sense of technology's near ubiquitous penetration and transformation of nature in the modern world. The moron, then, can be interpreted as Eremenko's performative figure of a poet and modern citizen living in a world defined by industrialization and technological progress which has brought about great transformations, yet which seems to be stagnating and to have no clear future. For this reason, without a doubt, of all of the figures whom Parshchikov mentioned, the figure of Nikolai Zabolotsky's long poem "Mad Wolf" (1931) can be taken as a guide to the idealistic conception of scientific progress and its relation to progress that Eremenko builds into his poetics through his persona of the "moron," albeit with far less optimism than the great OBEIRU poet of the late avant-garde.

Consistent with many of Zabolotsky's poems, the *Mad Wolf* sequence is structured in a parable like form, employing anthropomorphized animals to reveal essential features of human life. The Mad Wolf of the poem is a "reformer," an innovator who believes in science and progress, yet who is alive in its prehistory, and so is employing methods closer to those of the shaman and alchemist. He is, more than anything else, a naïve and blissful idealist who wishes to straighten his wolf's neck with the help of tools and scientific methods so as always to gaze at the heavens and discover there a transcendent world. Despite the advice of a conservative and pragmatic bear who wishes to live a simple life, the Mad Wolf is interested in impossible transformations and the discovery of an ultimate rootedness and harmony with the natural world, overcoming a fundamental alienation he seems to feel. He has private conversations with nature; he grows plants into animals in alchemical-like metamorphoses; he buries his legs in the ground

to become rooted and happy like plants; and in a final attempt to connect with the transcendent heavens, he climbs a hill and leaps in a vain and Icarus-like effort to fly, becoming a “tsar of the earth,” a “gladiator of the spirit,” and a “miser, lifted into the heavens.” And in the moment of his resulting death, in the final line of his monologue, he claims to have “lived as a god and seen no suffering.”¹⁷³

The final and most socially significant section of the poem takes place on the anniversary of the Mad Wolf’s demise as a conversation of wolves who have built the basis of a technological utopia in the time since his death. Together, the group of students, engineers, doctors, and musicians question the Wolf’s continued significance as a progenitor, at one point asking their leader and elder, “why do you cast into our sober age, like a renegade, apostate, and traitor, the absurd dreams of that Mad one?”¹⁷⁴ They do not need to celebrate his outdated views, as they have managed to make great strides toward a technological paradise, replete with labor-saving robots and medical breakthroughs; and they claim to have no more use for the Wolf’s absurd desire to “transform a plant into an animal with a dream,” or “to fly as a creative project of the earth and with this to purchase immortality for oneself.”¹⁷⁵ Their leader, though, answers them with a wider vision of progress akin to that of Newton’s “shoulders of giants,” a view of their successes as arising only “slowly, slowly, slowly” and proclaiming that “our hands have woven a wonderous linen, and our feet have marched over a million miles.” And most importantly, he claims, the Mad Wolf “passed over the earth as a great gladiator of thought,” as the “first breaker of chains,” a “river that gave birth to us.”¹⁷⁶

¹⁷³ Zabolotsky, N. (2018) “Ocharovana, okoldovana. . .” Sankt-Peterburg: Azbuka, pp. 134-135.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid. pp. 138.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid. pp. 138.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid. pp. 140-141.

In Zabolotsky's poem, then, it is clear that the naïve, blissful, and moronic Mad Wolf is meant to stand as a symbolic origin of a progressive effort to overcome the bear's conservative indifference and tame nature's control over suffering wolves, and is therefore inscribed into the great narrative of progress which might otherwise leave him in the dark obscurity of the superstitious and archaic. Yet he does so in such a way that affirms the traditional, spiritual, and pseudo-religious elements as root and origin of the progressive effort toward a scientific-technical utopianism, an origin that should be commemorated despite its absurd nature in the eyes of the technologically advanced wolves. Nevertheless, where a close and harmonious relationship with nature is posited at the heart of the Mad Wolf's worldview and concept of innovation, the wolves of the future introduce a technological mastery meant to replace, overcome, and determine the natural world. Where the Mad Wolf claims to "press his ear against a birch tree and discern a secret conversation," in which the "tree communicates its experience and teaches the proper management of branches," the wolves of the future proclaim only that "we are constructing a new forest" and therefore have no need for such a bumpkin, as it is they who have the future by the reigns.¹⁷⁷

This naïve yet vital role of Zabolotsky's Mad Wolf created in the early years of Stalin's forced industrialization of the country in the name of progress can be seen as having transformed in Eremenko's Stagnation-era poetry into a more crass and brutal depiction of a moron. Indeed, Eremenko directly represents such a figure as a "moronic girl" in his poem "There, where the mast-tree grove. . ." The girl in the poem is charged with immense symbolic weight, as the poem is written as a blatant parody of Aleksandr Blok's poem "On the Railroad" from his cycle of poems "Motherland." Blok's poem describes a girl at a train station who, in a grief and world-

¹⁷⁷ Zabolotsky, N. (2018) "*Ocharovana, okoldovana. . .*" Sankt-Peterburg: Azbuka, pp. 138.

weariness that invokes Anna Karenina and Blok's figure of the eternal feminine, is crushed beneath "love, filth, and wheels:" "Under the banked earth, in an unmown ditch, laying and looking, as if a live, hair thrown back in braids, in a colorful kerchief, young and beautiful."¹⁷⁸ Consistent with Blok's symbolism, the girl is as much a troubled literary figure of probable peasant origins as she is a symbol of traditional Russia crushed beneath a train, a clear symbol of technological progress. Eremenko's poem updates Blok's poem with a deeply ironic and heavily technologized language, bringing Blok's poem of 1910 into the late-Soviet era, and in turn developing a meditation that asks similar questions as Zabolotsky's "Mad Wolf." The result is a poetic evocation of a pastoral and magical past forced into historical interaction with a technologized future. But Eremenko's moron elicits a far more acerbic view than the highly sympathetic Mad Wolf and the tragic young woman of Blok's poem; and so, his poem can ultimately be received as a work of deep post-utopian irony with the moronic girl performing the role of an utterly inept outsider in the technologized banality of the poem.

There, where the mast-tree grove
Lies and looks, as if alive,
A moronic girl is out for a stroll
along the yellow embankment.

Туда, где роща корабельная
лежит и смотрит, как живая,
выходит девочка дебильная,
по желтой насыпи гуляет.¹⁷⁹

¹⁷⁸ "Под насыпью, во рву некошенном,/ Лежит и смотрит, как живая,/ В цветном платке, на косы брошенном,/ Красивая и молодая." Blok, A. (1910) "Na zheleznoi doroge," [Online] Available at: <https://ilibrary.ru/text/1745/p.1/index.html>.

¹⁷⁹ Eremenko, Zhdanov and Parshchikov. (2002) *Metarealisty*, Moskva: MK-Periodika, p. 40.

The opening line of the poem replaces Blok's "unmown ditch" with the shipbuilding term "mast-tree grove," introduced into Russian by Peter the Great to designate specific sections of forest for ship building alone. Though Eremenko's poem invokes the Russian woods- an immensely significant trope of refuge and national pride throughout Russian literature- it is nevertheless invoked as a reference to industry and the technology of ship-building through what Martin Heidegger would call the "standing reserve," a view conceiving of nature as simply a storehouse and energy supply for technological advancement.¹⁸⁰ While the image refers only to outdated wooden ship-building, it nevertheless serves to invoke an early technological rationality that runs throughout Eremenko's poetry as something that has the potential to overcome everything natural, for better and for worse. Indeed, throughout Eremenko's poetry the two distinct spheres of reality involved in the poem- nature and technology- are described as having become inextricably intertwined, such that neither can fully define or determine the other, nor offer any kind of refuge or future promise. As such, the late-Soviet world that Eremenko invokes is one wherein nature has been utterly transformed by technology and by the logic of such forward-thinking individuals as Zabolotsky's wolves busily "building a new forest." In numerous other poems throughout Eremenko's oeuvre, though, this new forest is not represented as any kind of possible utopian reality, but something thoroughly ironic and approaching the dystopian. This depiction of reality is present in a number of otherwise unrelated poems:

In thick metallurgical forests,
where the construction of chlorophyll is occurring¹⁸¹

¹⁸⁰ Heidegger, M. (2013) *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, New York: Harper Perennial Modern Thought, p. 17.

¹⁸¹ "В густых металлургических лесах, где шел процесс создания хлорофилла" Eremenko, Zhdanov and Parshchikov. (2002) *Metarealisty*, Moskva: MK-Periodika, p. 29.

Nature sleeps, having donned a gasmask.¹⁸²

Look at the way that nature develops:

To the right- a forest, to the left- a detox center,

And straight ahead- a river in its own juice¹⁸³

And in this world of technologized nature, a world transformed by modernizing progress such that nature and technology are impossible to differentiate, the moronic girl is utterly out of place and blundering. The voice of the poem describes the moronic girl with a rough and ironic tone, partly in keeping with the dry, unemotional, and yet elevated descriptive language of Blok's poem, and partly through the crass and terminology-laden patois of a late-Soviet laborer. It is as if the Mad Wolf were alive and continuing his absurd behavior in a world where the "new forest" being constructed proves as alienating as ever. In this view, the girl is "hippyish" and inept, clumsy and oblivious. In numerous examples, it is revealed that she has no mechanical knowledge, is using old and ineffective tools, and is behaving in obscure and absurd ways, like a child "beating on a transformer with a shovel" while digging through scrap metal for some unknown treasure. She herself is like the size 28 socket wrench in a world that requires a size 18, and is something that no one asked for in the first place. Nevertheless, she remains seemingly sincere and devoted in her tasks. And in this way the girl becomes an inverse of a romantic lyrical hero, though she is placed center stage in the poem as if she were one. Moronic and out of place in a thoroughly mundane and unattractive way, yet lacking any of the Byronic romanticism

¹⁸² "Природа спит, надев противогаз." Eremenko, Zhdanov and Parshchikov. (2002) *Metarealisty*, Moskva: МК-Periodika, p. 31.

¹⁸³ "смотреть, как развивается природа: направо – лес, налево – вытрезвитель, а прямо – речка в собственном соку" Eremenko, A. (2001) *Opus Magnum*, Moskva: Podkova, p. 180.

of the poetic outsider, she makes her way with broken tools through the scrap metal left over after the great storms and transformations of technological progress.

Her bag, imperceptible to the eye
And unintentionally hippyish,
Is sagging with instruments
Including a drill, no longer new.

And in a kind of half-witted way
(though in general she is a moron),
she tries to fix stripped bolt threads
With a file that's already worn smooth.

What are you looking for in all of
this scrap metal? Primate-like,
you beat on transformers with a shovel
And drag rusty wrenches from the scrap.

It's difficult for her to bend down.
She brings a size 28 wrench
When she needed a size 18,
though no one asked for one at all.

Ее, для глаза незаметная,
непреднамеренно хипповая,
свисает сумка с инструментами,
в которой дрель, уже не новая.

И вот, как будто полоумная
(хотя вообще она дебильная),
она по болтикам поломанным

проводит стершимся напильником.

Чего ты ищешь в окружающем
металлоломе, как примата,
ключи вытаскиваешь ржавые,
лопатой бьешь по трансформатору?

Ей очень трудно нагибаться.
Она к болту на 28
подносит ключ на 18,
хотя ее никто не просит.¹⁸⁴

In one of the most striking stanzas, the girl is likened to a primate playing in a heap of scrap metal that is reminiscent of a dystopian or post-apocalyptic future. Rather than any kind of technologically dominant new man that the Soviet project was supposed to give birth to, the result of progress is seen as more of a regress, with the girl primate-like in a world not of magnificent new buildings, but metal scraps. In an inverse of the transformational trajectory of Zabolotsky's poem, moving from plant to animal to technologically sophisticated creature, the girl has descended along this hierarchy down to being animal-like without any of Zabolotsky's sympathy. And such a movement then becomes a trope for the diminishment of the poet attempting to speak a meaningful word in late-Soviet modernity. Just as the moronic girl moves through the scrap heap attempting to repair bolts and discover riches among the rusty wrenches, so Eremenko the modern poet must search through a scrap heap of rusted and broken linguistic forms to create something new. Drawing on Blok's romantic Symbolist poetics, Eremenko forces

¹⁸⁴ Eremenko, Zhdanov and Parshchikov. (2002) *Metarealisty*, Moskva: MK-Periodika, p. 40.

this inheritance into a broken, metallic, and pseudo-scientific language and paradigm that revitalizes the tradition yet narrates a greater sense of stagnation and defeat.

Indeed, the drama and tragedy of Blok's young girl crushed beneath the train has, in a way, already occurred in a far less dramatic fashion in Eremenko's poem, which figures a girl crushed and reduced by something more abstract. And Eremenko continues this theme of crushing and death further along in the poem, yet in a way that elicits sympathy through descriptions of her troubled and ascetic nature:

Such times as these mow her down,
And such demons enter into her . . .
She brings her own lunch with her,
While other times she goes without.

Nature and actuating systems
Whistle all around her.
She has two priors on her record,
For theft of a drill and a cable wire.

One question gnaws at her,
As she doesn't want to bifurcate:
Better to become a railroad switch
Or a locomotive shifter?

We can see her here and there.
And, not in any way a spy,
She follows any path she wants,
And is ready all her life to suffer,

But will never be content
to let unenlightened nature

and indignant man fall forever
into sediment, like soda!

Ее такое время косит,
в нее вошли такие бесы...
Она обед с собой приносит,
а то и вовсе без обеда.

Вокруг нее свистит природа
и электрические приводы.
Она имеет два привода
за кражу дросселя и провода.

Ее один грызет вопрос,
она не хочет раздвоиться:
то в стрелку может превратиться,
то в маневровый паровоз.

Ее мы видим здесь и там.
И, никакая не лазутчица,
она шагает по путям,
она всю жизнь готова мучиться,

но не допустит, чтоб навек
в осадок выпали, как сода,
непросвещенная природа
и возмущенный человек!¹⁸⁵

¹⁸⁵ Eremenko, Zhdanov and Parshchikov. (2002) *Metarealisty*, Moskva: MK-Periodika, pp. 39-40.

The girl seems to embody a strange mixture of troubled alienation and asceticism, a combination further compounded by her light criminal past involving theft of her outdated and ineffective tools, mimicking Eremenko's theft of Blok's poetics and perhaps lightly invoking the unofficial and underground nature of the bohemian life that Eremenko and many of his friends led at the time. Nevertheless, in this world the girl moves freely, is considered largely harmless, and maintains an idealistic desire to transform and preserve something, even if it requires a lifetime of suffering. Like Blok's tragic young girl in his poem of 1910, Eremenko's poem invokes a symbolic figure that can be taken as a figure of traditional Russia with its endlessly significant forests, crushed by overwhelming technological change; as a Christian or generally religious ascetic, living idealistically for the benefit of some vaulted ideal; or as a poet and artist, largely shunned and looked down upon by the pragmatic and masculine world of the technologized future, yet patiently fulfilling the task of developing "unenlightened nature and indignant man." Nevertheless, the present "era"- "such times as these"- are precisely what "mow" the girl down. It is no longer the train of progress, as it is in Blok's poem, but the times that crush her. And so too, like Zabolotsky's Mad Wolf, Eremenko's girl is a naïve and idealistic outsider in the present era, a figure of a bygone time who has no real place in the technological and utopian framework of the present, yet who represents some of its fundamental and original impulses.

In one decidedly absurd stanza, Eremenko's moronic girl contemplates a single biting question: to become a switch track on the ground of a train yard, or a shifter engine that rides the rails. Both pursue the same end, controlling the direction that a train takes, and thus in turn controlling the train as a symbolic figure of historical progress. Yet one is partly beneath the train as the track itself, playfully and macabrely invoking Blok's young girl dead beneath the

train, while the other is on the level of the train itself. Primarily, though, the stanza seems to be playing off the reality of transformation itself that runs throughout the poem. Nature has everywhere been transformed and technologized, leaving the naïve moron outside of its complicated reality. But a hierarchy is established that points out a unique and comical trajectory of transformation. Where the Mad Wolf's project of reform had involved a harmonization with nature, a transformation of plants into animals, and animals into higher, anthropomorphic beings, Eremenko spoofs this alchemy by making technology the highest, with the moron naively wishing to become a mechanical object. Yet there remains a link between the Mad Wolf and the moronic girl insofar as she does not wish completely "to make a new forest" as the utopian wolves do. Rather, she wishes to preserve and raise up to the level of technology the two traditional philosophical opposites and precursors to technology: "unenlightened nature and indignant," suffering, emotional humanity. As such, the poem remains deeply ironic toward its precursors' idealized views of nature, as seen in Blok and Zabolotsky's poetry. Eremenko's modern symbolic figure is neither truly tragic and pessimistically crushed beneath technology as Blok's figure; nor is she a naïve and optimistic figure, who despite an absurd and utterly unpragmatic skillset and worldview will still be plugged into an historical narrative of progress. She merely exists in the in-between state of nature and technology's chaotic blending and incomplete transformations, a process now reduced to oppressive stagnant.

It seems, then, impossible to make any clear-cut assessment of Eremenko's vision of technological progress. In another often-cited poem of Eremenko's, "Facing Nature," which also takes nature as an object of contemplation, Eremenko quotes the famous young "nihilist" of Ivan Turgenev's novel *Fathers and Children*, Yevgeny Bazarov, declaring "Nature is not a

temple.”¹⁸⁶ Building on the idea, the poem further lampoons any unqualified and overly romanticized vision of nature by depicting its seasonal transitions through surreal and technological metaphors, and ultimately reveals a collision of three different views of the forests around Moscow: an abstract “Copernican” view reducing the significance of humanity, an agricultural view with “tractors spinning in place,” and a city-dweller’s view hoping for an unspoiled refuge from the city only to find a nature trashed and technologized.¹⁸⁷ In the novel, the rest of Bazarov’s quote claims that nature is rather a “workshop where man’s the laborer.”¹⁸⁸ Bazarov, famously, represents the young generation of pragmatic and scientifically minded individuals who would later influence the Bolshevik revolutionaries, who in turn were represented as the young technological-utopian wolves in Zabolotsky’s “Mad Wolf” poem.

There is, then, no clear and straightforward manner by which to understand Eremenko’s conception of nature, and thus no straightforward manner by which to understand the moronic girl of his poem. The idea of nature as a sacred, poetic refuge becomes an impossible and ultimately comic idea in the modern world of late-Soviet reality. Yet also unacceptable is the idea of an entirely new forest built on the technological rationality of viewing nature solely as a standing reserve, defined only by its technological use-value, a value which can be overly extended to define people as well. As such, the moronic girl can partly be taken as a kind of “worker” in Bazarov’s workshop of nature, idealistically attempting to transform “unenlightened nature and indignant man” into the higher humanity of a future technological utopia. And yet she can just as well be interpreted as a performative symbol of a naïve artist operating outside the rationality of use-values, and thus remaining nothing more than an unpragmatic outsider in a

¹⁸⁶ Turgenev, I. (2009) *Fathers and Children*, New York: W.W. Norton and Co, Inc, p. 35.

¹⁸⁷ Eremenko, A. (2001) *Opus Magnum*, Moskva: Podkova, p. 180.

¹⁸⁸ Turgenev, I. (2009) *Fathers and Children*, New York: W.W. Norton and Co, Inc, p. 35.

world requiring a pragmatic and mechanical mind. And, furthermore, following Blok's poem as the basis of Eremenko's text, she can as well be seen as an utterly ironic and playful invocation of a traditional Russia and its spiritual resources falling well behind in the great advance of industrialization in the Soviet era, an advance which may have come to feel like so much scrap metal in the era of Stagnation during which Eremenko was writing.

Much like Eremenko's proposed figure of the poet-astronaut, his moronic girl is difficult to interpret in any way other than as *stiob*, an acutely ironic "overidentification with an object, person, or idea," done to such a degree that it is impossible to discern "whether it was a form of sincere support, subtle ridicule, or a peculiar mixture of the two." And insofar as Eremenko himself defined his creative program as a "Synthesis of Poetry, Philosophy, and Science," it is impossible to understand his writing as either unequivocally critical or supportive of the technological and progressive mindset that he explores in his poetry. Without a doubt, its effect in the world is rendered with bitter irony and at times manifest as an all-encompassing and inescapable horror. Yet the technological and scientific language that he employs to explore and revitalize past poetic forms and ideas cannot be fully divorced from the progressive ideas with which this language is connected. As such, the poet-astronaut and the mysterious moronic girl can both be seen as figures of this absurd overidentification and chaotic blending that is foundational in Eremenko's world. As critic Mark Lipovetsky has written: "For Eremenko's lyrical hero, chaos is a customary image of the world rooted into consciousness since childhood." And further: "Chaos, for Eremenko, is a raging element of immobility, an incursion of global constructions, rockets, and thrones."¹⁸⁹ As it seems, then, for Eremenko the Stagnation-era poet, all meaningful movement and progress are stymied, and everything external seems to bear down

¹⁸⁹ Eremenko, A. (2001) *Opus Magnum*, Moskva: Podkova, p. 327.

as an incursion, an assault akin to a train crushing the life of Blok's young girl. In such a worldview, effort and faith in technological progress inevitably become an utterly futile and moronic endeavor.

In conclusion, whether as the naivete of the Mad Wolf, the tragedy of a young girl as a symbol of a lost traditional world, or as a moronic girl useless in a world of broken tools, technologized nature, and a system determining everything by its function and use-value, nothing seemingly can right the insurmountable chaos Eremenko experiences at the root of things. His expressed faith in the idea of a humanistic synthesis of poetry, philosophy, and science through the exploration of space is without a doubt a deeply ironic idea, yet one directly related to *stio*b as an “*overidentification*” with a faith in the idea. The economic situation of the Soviet Union during the *perestroika* years did not allow for frivolous spending, let alone any such ultra-extravagant spending on the deeply underfunded humanities. Furthermore, Eremenko was writing at a time when the ideological enthusiasm for the Soviet state summoned by Yuri Gagarin's 1961 space flight had largely stagnated into indifference, leaving *perestroika*-era calls oriented more toward cultural, economic, and democratic reform than technological progress. But there is a definite optimism associated with those years that nevertheless offsets the stagnation mentality visible in Eremenko's poetry. With the resurgence of hope for a better future that Gorbachev's reforms first initiated, Eremenko may well have wished to be plugged into a narrative of progress in a way similar to Zabolotsky, who yoked together two immensely diverse conceptions of the world through his naïve and primitive Mad Wolf and the technocratic utopians that followed him. Nevertheless, Eremenko's pervasive Stagnation-era mindset, a ruling experience of entropic decline, unrealized utopian promises, and a technological chaos that eats any true progress and renders individuals as nothing more than morons and primates beating on

scrap metal with rusty tools, persists as a major element of his poetry and vision. Especially insofar as Eremenko never did, alas, make it into the outer space as a poet-astronaut.

Chapter Six:

Lyrical Jealousy and the Passion for Utopia in the Poetry of Ivan Zhdanov

In a short poem from the 1970s, the poet Ivan Zhdanov depicts a night in which the unnamed figures of the poem live, a nocturnal condition thrust upon them, over which they have no control. “Such a night is not chosen-” the poem begins, “an orphan-God enters into it, and the rivers press up to their banks. And there is no light remaining in the world, and the sky is less than a silhouette of rain, clinging to our feet.”¹⁹⁰ It is a young and deeply felt poem, and is one that helps set a tone of tragedy and metaphysical high seriousness that characterizes so much of Zhdanov’s verse. It is a tragedy of loss and disconnection from a more fundamental past, yet it is also a poetry of pursuit and renewal, of reconnection and fulfillment in the depths of memory and heights of imagination. In the world of Zhdanov’s poem, deprived of any remaining “light,” the alienating, all-encompassing “night” recalls a form of blindness, a deep severing from reality; yet it is nevertheless a blindness which contains the possibility of accommodating and reconnecting with a sacred past: “We only remember, we cannot see, and we do not offend the

¹⁹⁰ Таковую ночь не выбирают —/ Бог-сирота в нее вступает,/ и реки жмутся к берегам./ И не осталось в мире света,/ и небо меньше силуэта/ дождя, прилипшего к ногам. Eremenko, Zhdanov and Parshchikov. (2002) *Metarealisty*, Moskva: MK-Periodika, pp. 94.

sacred.”¹⁹¹ The blindness of the poem is a condition in which there is no discernible future or graspable present, yet within the dark of the night there can be found remnants of the past that persist through memory, remnants that alone endure in the poem’s disintegrating, stagnating present, as the poet claims: “Only the past remains in us.”¹⁹²

The short lyric poem concludes in the depth of this night without any apparent transformation or vision of escape, yet at the same time it ends with a potent symbol of what Jean-Luc Nancy has called the “ancient, immemorial” “scene of myth.”¹⁹³ In such a scene, myth is spoken as an essential story which “often seems confused,” and “is not always coherent;” it speaks of “strange powers and numerous metamorphoses,” and it “names things unknown, beings never seen.” Nevertheless, those who gather around the fire “understand everything,” and “in listening they understand themselves and the world,” “and why it was necessary for them to come together.”¹⁹⁴ In turn, Zhdanov’s night, lacking in any “greater significance,” nevertheless provides the possibility of a gathering of bones, pieces of the past, its fragments and relics, in order to bring them together into a new kind of coherence and metamorphosis through a mythic, possibly sacred poetic experience around the fire as a new scene of myth:

In fits of weeping, through this night
Without any greater significance,
We gather our bones around the fire.

Сквозь эту ночь в порывах плача
мы, больше ничего не знача,

¹⁹¹ “Мы только помним, мы не видим,/ мы и святого не обидим” Eremenko, Zhdanov and Parshchikov. (2002) *Metarealisty*, Moskva: MK-Periodika, pp. 94.

¹⁹² “В нас только прошлое осталось” Eremenko, Zhdanov and Parshchikov. (2002) *Metarealisty*, Moskva: MK-Periodika, pp. 94.

¹⁹³ Nancy, J. (2015) *The Inoperative Community*, Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, pp. 43-44.

¹⁹⁴ Nancy, J. (2015) *The Inoperative Community*, Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, p. 44.

сойдем в костер своих костей.¹⁹⁵

Wandering through this night, Zhdanov's figures move through a tragic, darkened, meaningless world. Yet they do so such that they can hope to carry forth whatever fire and light of the sacred yet remains. And they seek to do so with their very bodies, their bones, as fragments and pieces of the past, of which the holistic forms of novel creation are formed in the mythic scene. Precisely this metaphorical, primordial and mythic mood helps define a pulse that persists throughout Zhdanov's poetry, one oriented toward an enlightening and redefining of this night. It is a pulse that runs throughout much of the poetry he produced in the years of the Soviet Stagnation, a correspondence which draws associations between his vision of night and the late-Soviet era. But even a cursory reading of Zhdanov's poems would show that such a correspondence cannot be reduced to mere political consideration, and should be taken more in line with Martin Heidegger's association of night with modernity and the departing "flight of the gods" in his essay "What Are Poets For?" as a time of the "default of God," and a "destitute time" of disenchantment and stagnation that entropically "grows ever more destitute."¹⁹⁶

While the idea of a social or existential stagnation is often connected with history, as an effect of entropy, disenchantment, and a sense of alienation with a large social, political, or religious narrative, it can be further interpreted as the loss of vision of a definite future or as a breakdown of the active power of a positively viewed, well-ordered past. If both Parshchikov and Eremenko explore the stagnation of history and progress through an orientation toward the future, Ivan Zhdanov explores the themes of stagnation and utopia through a more conservative relationship to the past, claiming: "Utopia is not just a matter of the future. And more often it is

¹⁹⁵ Eremenko, Zhdanov and Parshchikov. (2002) *Metarealisty*, Moskva: MK-Periodika, pp. 94.

¹⁹⁶ Heidegger, M. (2001). *Poetry Language Thought*. New York: Harper Perennial, p. 89.

actually the opposite. Because shards of the past are more real (understood) than fragments of the future.”¹⁹⁷ Zhdanov’s poetry is oriented precisely towards these “shards of the past” as objects of meditation, shards akin to the bones which his figures gather around the fire. The result is a poetics of memory raised beyond the personal and into the metaphysical. As such, his poetry becomes a means of reconstructing memory, and in turn reconstructing a world of the past. As scholar Mikhail Epstein claims: “Zhdanov is a master of depicting forms that seem already to have lost their substance, but regain themselves in memory, in times of waiting, in the depth of a mirror or the shell of a shadow.”¹⁹⁸ In the midst of the “night” that was not chosen, Zhdanov’s poetry stands still, and remembers a world back into being.

Through this work of reconstruction and memory, the seemingly timeless, primordial landscapes and mythic scenes of his poetry help to stage a central lyric hero’s pursuit of holistic, pre-modern forms of meaning and experience. And in turn, each poem with such a pursuit becomes a new, iterative version of a hero’s journey set outside of time, and an attempted expression of a fundamental human condition through the recollection of a pure, pre-conscious state. As such, the condition of night and stagnation, in Zhdanov’s poetry, is first and foremost an alienated existential condition in which an abstract, metaphysical notion of wholeness- of which any utopia is a mere example- is pursued in the life of an individual or historical humanity. Yet this pursuit is regarded in his poetry not as a straightforward endeavor of hunter and hunted, but a dilemma often filled with disruptive violence, a violence he refers to through the emotion of jealousy, a desire that vainly seeks to put all the “shards of the past” into a perfect harmony again.

¹⁹⁷ Zhdanov, I. (2005) *Veter i vozdukh*, Moskva: Nauka, p. 73.

¹⁹⁸ Epstein, M. (1995) *After the Future: The Paradoxes of Postmodernism and Contemporary Russian Culture*, Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, p. 42.

Zhdanov's theme of jealousy can be seen within this framework as a fundamental human predicament. It is both a positive desire for a more pure, utopian state and a desire which in itself alienates people from that wholeness which they desire. To represent this, he invokes jealousy as a common sentiment of romantic lyric poetry, yet builds it into an emotion of yearning that both compels his lyric personae to pursue utopian wholeness, something greater than themselves, and proclaims the inability of ever attaining it. Jealousy and wholeness, then, are conceived of as two related and fundamental conceptions in human life, and forms a tempestuous dynamic that he explores explicitly in two of his poems published-but not necessarily written- in the early years of *Perestroika*, just after the end of the so-called Stagnation era. The poems, "Jealousy" and "The Distance Between Me and You is You," both mythologize an archetypal journey that exists as if outside of time and in memory alone, and are described with a voice that seems to originate in the primal feeling of Jean-Luc Nancy's "scene of myth" and narrate the lives of people who are as if lost and wandering through the same existential night that is not chosen.

Both of the poems take the form of a monologue that addresses a seemingly absent other, creating a narrative and lyrical persona in the statements of unanswered address. And each poem blurs any lines that would clearly identify the nature of the addressee, at times becoming a form of a self-referential dialogue by which the poetic persona creates a distance of self-reflection, and at times taking the shape of address to an absent lover or a figure of the Divine without fully distinguishing between the two. "Jealousy," one of Zhdanov's longer poems clocking in at an even 100 lines, develops an epic, cosmic vision that allows Zhdanov to speak as if with the gravity of ancient myth. The poem describes a dialogue that has died off and become a silenced and fragmented thing of memory alone, practically indistinguishable from falling snow: "was

there snowfall, or was there a conversation between us?”¹⁹⁹ This conversation takes place in what becomes a central image of the poem, an isolated and almost prison-like corridor that becomes the primary structure of an existential condition, an iteration of his night, which Zhdanov will build throughout the poem into a metaphorical space of fate or a kind of Heideggerian “thrownness.” In this space, the persona seems simultaneously to address himself and an unspecified other- perhaps a friend, a lover, a past version of himself, God- who is likewise in a state of alienation, yet in a way that makes the current conversation of the poem merely an echo of some prior, more fundamental conversation. As such, the persona seems to be speaking as if after the seeming end of a uniquely individual yet at the same time universal conversation- of history, of mythic or Biblical time- which has broken off and become only a distant memory, and of which only fragments remain in what appears to be the silence of God in an alienating world at the end of history:

Was it even winter? When was it? Really
 It's unimportant, there was a conversation in a corridor,
 That is, in a space, where a step to the side is impossible,
 There, where you find yourself out of place, apriori
 Guilty of something, and fenced off from everything.

Было ли это зимой? И когда? Вообще-то
 это неважно, а был разговор в коридоре,
 то есть в пространстве, где в сторону шаг невозможен,
 там, где находишь себя не попад, априори
 в чем-то виновным, и ты от всего отгорожен.²⁰⁰

¹⁹⁹ Zhdanov, I. (1990) *Nerazmennoye Nebo*, Moskva: Sovremmenik, p. 46.

²⁰⁰ Zhdanov, I. (1990) *Nerazmennoye Nebo*, Moskva: Sovremmenik, p. 46.

And within this space Zhdanov raises the poem's dominant motif of the Biblical notion of original sin, a fallen state devised by a Mephistophelean trickster as a dark confusion in a corridor with only the slightest gap of promise, and one that will create the space in which jealousy arises:

For him its nothing to create confusion, to appear as a corridor
 With a ventriloquized gap, skillfully placed so as
 To become obvious, to ensnare you with a contract,
 And as if with some ever obliging, infamous mark
 to braid anything at all into a blizzard flower,
 Where petals, like a freeze-frame, are tired of lasting,
 And with the passion of utopias freeze into the immobility
 of pursuing the departing and that with no strength to occur.

Что ему морок устроить, предстать коридором,
 чревоушательной щелью, подставленной ловко,
 стать очевидным, опутать тебя договором,
 словно стоустой, услужливой татуировкой
 И заплести что угодно в метельном бутоне,
 где лепестки, как стоп-кадры, уставшие длиться,
 страстью утопий вмерзают в недвижность погони
 за уходящим и тем, что не в силах случиться.²⁰¹

With the same word that Parshchikov would later use to describe the situation of the Soviet Stagnation, a “freeze-frame,” Zhdanov describes the situation created by a Mephistophelean force in human life, and connects it with other descriptions of personal and

²⁰¹ Zhdanov, I. (1990) *Nerazmennoye Nebo*, Moskva: Sovremmenik, p. 47.

historical stagnation: “tired of lasting,” “freeze into immobility,” “no strength to occur.”²⁰² And he connects this with a utopia and the more fundamental desire for some form of “wholeness” through the phrase a “passion for utopias,” which itself freezes and becomes immobile, and finally stagnates into a cold indifference through the temptation and tricks of human frailty manifest in the figure of Mephistopheles. As such, Zhdanov interprets the notion of the pursuit of utopia and its failure in stagnation by way of religious and philosophical terms, rather than political ones.

In one piece of journal-like prose writing included in his 2005 book that collects poems from the 1970s to the 2000s, *Wind and Air*, Zhdanov meditates directly on this religious notion of utopia and his more fundamental sense of the idea as a conceptualization of wholeness, which is sought throughout human life and not just in political terms:

On utopia. Is its timeliness exhausted? Is it still necessary? Up till now it has always been extravagant: a miraculous image is necessary for a transformation of circumstances. And then “I” or whoever will transform for the better and become eternally happy. Now such a construction summons laughter. Evil laughter. But no one forces a faith in utopia. Utopia is a witness of the instinct of completeness, of that same harmony. It’s not so much a faith as it is an instinct of wholeness, though . . . it’s possible that faith also begins from this instinct. Yet if there is no faith (naïve knowledge), then there is no reason to speak about wholeness. Again, everything depends on the question of faith vs. knowledge. Why did so-called knowledge win? Indeed, in general, it’s illusory: as if there were something other than rational faith. As in the guarding of a desire, that the miraculous become obvious, a “natural” image. And yet from here also the rupture of utopia. Which was shown by Dostoevsky in Raskolnikov.²⁰³

²⁰² Ibid. 47.

²⁰³ Об утопии. Исчерпана ли ее своевременность? Нужна ли она? До сих пор она была экстравагантной: должны чудесным образом измениться обстоятельства. И тогда «Я» или кто еще измениться к лучшему и станет вечно счастливым. Сейчас такая установка вызывает смех. Смех злой. Но никто и не заставляет верить в утопии. Утопия ведь есть свидетельство инстинкта завершенности, той же гармонии. Это не столько вера, сколько инстинкт цельности, хотя . . . Возможно, вера и начинается с этого инстинкта. А если нет веры (наивного знания), то нет смысла говорить и о цельности. Опять все упирается в вопрос о вере-

For Zhdanov, the instinct toward utopia and wholeness rises out of the same difficult existential condition within which we are susceptible to the Faustian temptations of a Mephistophelean spirit, with its “ventriloquized gap” representing the slightest hope of escape. And this notion becomes not only pervasive and definitive in an existential sense, but manifest in the decisions and desires of daily life and current affairs. Indeed, Zhdanov is not just speaking abstractly and metaphysically about the nature of utopia, insofar as his concern is precisely the present possibilities and actuality of utopian thinking in the late 1970s and early 1980s in the Soviet Union, as Soviet ideology proved increasingly vapid, ossified, and emptied of utopian hopes. Yet he considers such current affairs through a deep and immensely metaphorical approach to them, as he claims in an interview cited for an introduction of his poems to English readers: “I have never, under any circumstances, been directly engaged in politics. For me it was more important to discover the roots of events that make up our lives, the life of our country, our society, and our history, in that order.”²⁰⁴ And so without in any way directly commenting on politics, Zhdanov expresses a fundamental conflict that persists in the legacy and remaining possibilities of the Soviet project, the fate of his country, and all subsequent projects of total reform.

In this way, the condition of deception and inferiority that characterizes the difficult reality of what he calls an “instinct” for wholeness can lead both to a constructive utopian thinking or a murderous and destructive one, without any perfect hope of finally distinguishing the two. And this difficult condition in which humans find themselves with their hunger for

знании. Почему так называемое знание победило? Ведь, в общем, оно -иллюзорно: как будто нечто вроде рациональной веры. При сохранении желания, чтобы чудесное устроилось очевидным, «естественным» образом. Отсюда и крах утопии. Показанный еще Достоевским в Раскольникове.

Zhdanov, I. (2005) *Veter i vozdukh*, Moskva: Nauka, p. 73.

²⁰⁴ Zhdanov, I. (1997) *The Inconvertible Sky*, New Jersey: Talisman House, Publishers, Back Cover.

wholeness is what Zhdanov names jealousy, a condition he explores as the direct manifestation of a Mephistopheles or Satan, a personification of that force which confronts, tempts, and destroys human aspirations and authentic hopes:

Jealousy is his being and attempt at revanche
 Or a hunger of deficiency, fiercely harrowing,
 Or a longing for that which has already faded,
 but would have achieved a fullness of the absolute.

Ревность - его бытие и попытка реванша
 или ущербности голод, терзающий люто,
 или тоска по тому, что растаяло раньше,
 чем завершиться смогло полнотой абсолюта.²⁰⁵

To explore this existential situation of an alienation from a “fullness of the absolute”- a utopian “wholeness” in which the individual human soul would have an ultimate completion and fulfilment- Zhdanov bases his meditation in a traditional lyrical trope of a lover’s jealousy. Jealousy, in this respect, becomes a desire for something in its entirety. As the lyrical lover covets their beloved completely, desiring that they share their life with no other and be wholly enthralled in the love bond of the lyric poet’s desire, yet thereby ensuring their status of separation through the subject/object relation of lover and beloved, so too the alienated human seeks fulfillment in the absolute of religious divinity, philosophical wholeness, or a political utopian heaven on earth.

Zhdanov partly achieves this mix of romantic language with a higher form of meditative thinking with a direct reference through the word “attempt” to Marina Tsvetaeva’s famous poem

²⁰⁵ Zhdanov, I. (1990) *Nerazmennoye Nebo*, Moskva: Sovremmenik, p. 47.

on the theme of jealousy, titled “An Attempt at Jealousy,” in which she addresses a lover who abandoned her for another, only to raise herself higher than that pair through her elevated status as a divinely inspired Poet in whom a god inheres. Zhdanov’s use of the political word “revanche”- the return of lost territory after military or political seizure- elevates the notion of jealousy for what is lost beyond its romantic context while retaining a link to the lyrical romantic mode and poetic tradition through the echo of Tsvetaeva’s phrase “attempt at jealousy” in “attempt at revanche.” As such, the jealous, alienated human being, abandoned into a world ruled by the devious spirit of Mephistopheles, just as the lover is abandoned by their beloved, responds to their situation through a “hunger of deficiency” or a “longing for that which has already faded,” i.e., for the substantial possibility of absolution conceived of as the return of a beloved, the healing of a sense of alienation, or a reconstruction of bones, fragments, and memories into a novel whole. And in conclusion, the condition of jealousy, Zhdanov explains in another short prose piece employing similar language as his poem, is a matter of a ruptured and fragmented part desiring to become one with a greater whole:

. . . jealousy is a consciousness, a condition of deficiency. A sense of loss or shortage of wholeness, a longing for wholeness; a desire to integrate a part to oneself or oneself to a part; a desire to reconstruct the whole at all costs. A sense of oneself as incomplete, a definition of oneself in relation to some kind of object as to a possible or (necessary) part for the restoration of the whole; an absolutely external (objective) relation to a possible part, which remains lacking for the formation (reconstruction) of the whole.²⁰⁶

²⁰⁶ “ . . . ревность – сознание, состояние ущербности. Ощущение потери или недостатка цельности, тоска по цельности; желание присоединить к себе часть или себя к части; желание во что бы то ни стало восстановить целое. Ощущение самого себя нецелым, определение себя по отношению к какому-либо объекту как к части возможной и (необходимой) для восстановления целого; абсолютно внешнее (объектное) отношение к возможной части, недостающей для образования (воссоздания) целого.” Zhdanov, I. (2005) *Veter i vozdukh*, Moskva: Nauka, p. 93.

Through the metaphysical language of speculative philosophy, Zhdanov explores the relation of subject and object as the basis of utopian thinking and the jealousy that both gives rise to it and undermines it. And as a meditation on the relation of an individual to a part outside of oneself, an objective aspect of reality to which an individual can subject or attach oneself, his thinking becomes a mode of exploring a fundamental human desire, that of belonging. The ideas of utopia and jealousy, then, become abstract reflections and extrapolations on the human longing to belong to something in an ultimate way, in perfect wholeness and unison, as with a lover, a political society, or God. The construction of a utopian wholeness from out of the broken or missing pieces of the past thus becomes a utopian desire to construct some form or mode of being in the world that invokes a pre-reflective, or at least a pre-modern, notion of primitive identity, an ultimate mythic unity and interconnectedness of things. The modern human is jealous of this in their desire of it; yet, being jealous, they are at the same time cut off from any possibility of its realization. And this conflict forms the existential condition in which the human being, extended into history, becomes trapped in a greater metaphorical stagnation.

This whole existential condition is further explored and brought into a new orientation in one of Zhdanov's most anthologized poems, "The Distance Between Me and You is You." The poem foregrounds the poet's response to this difficult human condition in which a conflict of hope and temptation inevitably persist as a form of distance between the human and God as the ultimate image and conception of wholeness. The metaphysical language conceiving a relation of part and whole that he has repeatedly used in his writing is shifted in the poem directly to the language of romantic love. Yet it does so while clearly connecting the persona of a lover with the context of the alienated human who has long experienced the silence of God as definitive in the modern era. Subsequently, the beloved addressee of the poem is simultaneously represented as a

human beloved and as a divine Other which is only ever present through its silence, forming the idea of a lost yet sought after whole or fundamental connection that can never truly be resurrected, and so is only present through the distance of its absence. Jealousy, in this relation, is not overcome, as it is a fundamental component of human alienation and longing for reconnection. Rather, it is assumed as the basis of the romantic/philosophical relation and transformed:

The distance between you and me is you,
 As when you stand before me, deciding this or that,
 As if constructing me from the fragments of your own muteness,
 Regarding yourself in them, not seeing a whole.

As a mirror shatters itself from thirst,
 (this thirst to appoint oneself a spy of various perspectives)-
 So the hapless tree of Tree of Longing completes itself in foliage,
 In all its multitudes to predict the wind's slope

. . .

Like one of your particles, jealous- searching
 My resurrection through you, and I fear it will cost me,
 As I see you raise the sling, like jealousy,
 Beating the dust of a locomotive from the foliage's shame.

. . .

Distance binds us, this is the law,
 Allowing jealousy's existence, as it does your own truth and will.
 Immortal while subjugated, yet not subjugated,
 Because I love, because I love, because I love.

Расстояние между тобой и мной — это и есть ты,
 и когда ты стоишь предо мной, рассуждая о том и о сем,
 я как будто составлен тобой из осколков твоей немоты,

и ты смотришься в них и не видишь себя целиком.

Словно зеркало жаждой своей разрывает себя на куски
(это жажда назначить себя в соглядатаи разных сторон) —
так себя завершает в листве горемычное древо тоски,
чтобы множеством всем предугадывать ветра наклон,

. . .

Как частица твоя, я ревную тебя и ищу
воскресенья в тебе, и боюсь — не сносить головы,
вот я вижу, что ты поднимаешь, как ревность, пращу,
паровозную перхоть сбивая с позорной листвы.

. . .

Да, я связан с тобой расстоянием — и это закон,
разрешающий ревность как правду и волю твою.
Я бессмертен, пока я покорен, но не покорен,
потому что люблю, потому что люблю, потому что люблю.²⁰⁷

A fundamental concern of Zhdanov's lyrical and existential reality, whether it is manifest as a shattered relation between the alienated individual and God, or as the insurmountable distance that holds two lovers apart, is the persistence of a jealousy that simultaneously expels the human being from any mode of wholeness and yet epitomizes the very desire to become whole, to possess or be subjected to something in its entirety. As such, the individual and historical pursuit of utopias and heaven on earth is taken as a basic element of being alive and is a kind of need or overwhelming desire. Yet any enacting of this pursuit inevitably falls to temptation, entropy, and stagnation, insofar as it is an enacting of a desire to re-attain a whole

²⁰⁷ Zhdanov, I. (2005) *Veter i vozdukh*, Moskva: Nauka, p. 99.; Zhdanov, I. (1997) *The Inconvertible Sky*, New Jersey: Talisman House, Publishers, p. 35.

that is displaced and alienated all the more by a pursuit which turns wholeness into a concrete object and places it at a distance. Yet this distance that cannot be overcome, a distance that lies at the heart of this paradox of jealousy, can be taken as its own form of possibility: the possibility of vulnerable and non-utopian, non-absolute love. Wholeness and utopia are static concepts that inevitably succumb to entropy. Yet the love that Zhdanov espouses in the poem becomes an answer to the entropy and stagnation of disintegrating utopian conceptions through the repetitive, continuous activity of loving that resists the temptations of jealousy and its promise of escape from a human condition defined by an alienating distance.

In exploring the human drama of jealousy and wholeness, of love, utopia, and the temptations and stagnation that arise in the pursuit of an absolute, Zhdanov wrote far beyond the political reality of his day, yet nevertheless was able to speak deeply to that reality. In his poetry, which evokes a higher and more fundamental paradise only to renounce it as a possibility within earthly life, Zhdanov describes an impossibility of full connection and restoration; yet in this he finds a deeper and truer connection. And in this way his poetry passes through the late-Soviet failure to create a true heaven on earth, the condition of Stagnation, into a unique and meaningful mode of being in the world, deepened by a “resurrection” of religious and philosophical traditions and cultivating a form of poetic wisdom in the modern, stagnant night that is not chosen.

Conclusion:

Stagnation Overcome?

As Parshchikov has claimed, the creativity and poetic vision of the three poets, Eremenko, Zhdanov, and himself, was closely related and bound up with the era of Stagnation. In response to the sense of time associated with the era, the poets adopted a contemplative stance, shrinking inward in response to the pressures of the epoch, “as if from a hard frost or cosmic overload.” More precisely, and without reading the political term of Stagnation prior to its coinage as a cause, what the poets reacted to, and what Parshchikov seems to have in mind, was the pervasive absence of a “modality of the future,” an absence of an ordered and coherent concept of historical time which a poet might represent and relate to in a positive manner, becoming a part in its greater whole. As Alexei Yurchak has written, this seeming absence of time became manifest in two particular ways, both reflected in the poetry of the three Metarealist poets: “The temporality of the late-Soviet period was paradoxical; it involved the simultaneous existence of two of these characteristics: on one side, stagnation, a slowing, and from the other, eternity, a movement without end.”²⁰⁸ For the three poets, and many others of the Stagnation era beside, this sense of the stagnation and slowing of the march of historical progress was one aspect of time that revealed another, that of eternity, a glimmer of more fundamental foundations and connections with a time outside of everyday and historical time.

Indeed, as philosopher and literary scholar Mikhail Epstein has pointed out, this dualistic conception of late-Soviet temporality is precisely what fostered the poetics of Metarealism as a sense of stagnation accompanied by a sensation of the timeless and eternal: “All of them, the children of timelessness, experienced not only the negative effect of historical stagnation, which transformed them into a restrained, stagnating generation, - but also the positive sense of supra-

²⁰⁸ “Темпоральность поздне-советского периода была парадоксальной; она включала одновременное существование двух этих черт: с одной стороны, застоя, замедления, с другой — вечности, движения без конца.” Yurchak, A. (2021) *Geterkhroniia: zastoĭ i beskonechnost' na granitse sovetskoi istorii*, Unpublished paper.

historical foundations, rising out of the shallows of recent decades.”²⁰⁹ For the Metarealist poets about whom Epstein is speaking, and especially for Parshchikov, Eremenko, and Zhdanov, such an engagement with historical time through the presence of a stagnant, slow-moving, and directionless everyday time gave rise to and occasioned a meditative relation to imagined times outside of time, to timelessness and eternity.

Nevertheless, it must be said, for Parshchikov, Eremenko, and to a lesser degree, Zhdanov, this orientation was a matter of deep irony and in many respects an inescapable burden. Parshchikov experienced historical time and its disappearance through the lens of an ideology that in the era of Stagnation persisted in its definition of progress, yet failed to present any believable and meaningful claim to the reality of lived experience. His contemplative approach to it, exclusively a matter of aesthetics and imagination, developed from out of this rupture of ideology his own new forms of imagining and representing the world. Eremenko, whose poetic stance was the most ironic, embittered, and resistant to any escape from the chaotic situation that technological progress has brought to the world, engaged with history as something destructive, embodying a playful, performative vision of the ultimate impotence of the human being- and the idealistic poet specifically- in the stagnant world of contemporaneity. Yet he nevertheless fostered a desire and interest to see a “synthesis of poetry, philosophy, and science,” and to live this synthesis as a poet-astronaut. Yet leaving aside the irony of proposing such an unlikely feat, he more than likely would have stepped aboard the spaceship if given the chance, and perhaps even experienced it as a kind of progress. Zhdanov, though, is without a doubt the

²⁰⁹ “Все они, дети безвременья, испытали не только негативное воздействие исторического застоя, превратившего их в задержанное, «застоявшееся» поколение, - но и позитивное ощущение сверхисторических устоев, обнажившихся на отмели последних десятилетий.” Epstein, M. (2019). *Postmodernizm v rossii*. St. Petersburg: Azbuka. p. 190. Epstein, M. (1999) “Like a Corpse in the Desert: Dehumanization in the New Moscow Poetry” *Russian Postmodernism: New Perspectives on Post-Soviet Culture*. New York, Oxford: Berghahn Books, pp.134-144.

most idealistic of the three, and retains a deep faith and desire to speak a meaningful and positive word to the human condition of his day and all days, marred as it is by Mephistophelean-inspired human error, abyssal distances that keep us from that which we yearn for and seek, and the fragmented and alienated sense of stagnant time that governs experience in the inescapable corridor of an existential night.

In turn, each poet, in their own way, transformed their particular vision of a definitive temporal “stagnation” into a new mode of creativity, imagination, and thought, through the “leisure” time of active contemplation, which German philosopher Josef Pieper defined as a “disposition of receptive understanding, of contemplative beholding, and immersion – in the real.”²¹⁰ And it is a broader notion of leisure time that, as Parshchikov inadvertently claimed, was directly related to the slow and eternal sense of time unique to the isolated, conservative, and economically strained period of the late-Soviet Stagnation under Brezhnev. Nevertheless, it was a unique situation that was ultimately short-lived, slipping away just as the fruits of that period seeped up into the mainstream during the era of *Perestroika*. In the same memoir essay in which he discusses this Stagnation, Parshchikov directly pointed to a leisurely, contemplative orientation that allowed the poets to relativize and mock the “false guarantees” in which they lived, made possible by the very “cosmic overload” and “hard frost” that had pressed against them. With the distance of time and the biting irony of a mature man’s view of his youthful undertakings, Parshchikov described the approach to creativity that he and his poetic cohort had breathed life into, garnered fame for, and then watched as that fame and appreciation disappeared into an historical time they could not overcome, along with the condition of a slow-moving and eternal stagnation that had given rise to it:

²¹⁰ Pieper, J. (1998) *Leisure, The Basis of Culture*. South Bend: St. Augustine’s Press. p. 50.

Conditionally, cynically, creativity looked like this: the writer adopted the position of an unmoving point of focus, becoming an outside observer, placed into the center of a would-be axis of the universe, and, having crossed their legs in a Buddhist pose or levitating in a condition of *hanging on*, they sank into a reading of the “Diamond Sutra” or the “Revelation of John.” That which had already been seen as unconventional immediately emptied out any sense of the ordinary and mocked the false guarantees in which we lived. It was a short-lived period with an infectious originality of reception, but one which later lost its exaltation and the support of its sympathizers.²¹¹

²¹¹ “Условно, сценически, творчество выглядело так: пишущий принимал положение неподвижной точки центра, становился посторонним наблюдателем, размещенным в середине предполагаемой оси вселенной, и, скрестив ноги в буддийской позе или левитируя в состоянии *hanging on*, погружался в чтение «Алмазной сутры» или «Откровения Иоанна». То, что однажды уже было увидено необычно, сразу опустошало любую обыкновенность и осмеивало ложные гарантии, в которых мы жили. Это было непродолжительное время заразной новизны восприятия, которое позже потеряло экзальтацию и поддержку сочувствующих.” Parshchikov, A. (2006) “*Situatsiia*” *Rai medlennogo ognia*. Moskva: NLO, p. 32.

Part Four:
Russian and American Parallels: From Stagnation Sacred to
Perestroika Profane

Introduction: Elena Shvarts and Lyn Hejinian: Russian and American Poetry on the Hunt

“Poetry,” proclaimed the Nobel-prize winning poet Czeslaw Milosz, is a “passionate pursuit of the Real,”²¹² an effort to attain and represent something of the world around it. The poet, then, is someone in pursuit, a figure out on the hunt, desiring that their verses capture some element of reality, be it essence or detail. By intuiting and interpreting the tracks and traces of their sought-after object in a reticent world, they work to imagine a greater map than any grammar, meter, and lexicon alone can provide. And in doing so, they create a reality of their own, a space exceeding the measures and turns of verse. For American poet Lyn Hejinian (1941-) and Russian poet Elena Shvarts (1948-2010), the notion of such a hunt is both implicitly and explicitly explored as a function of poetic creativity in two book-length sequences of poems published within a few years of one another: Elena Shvarts’s *Труды и дни лавинии, монахини из ордена Обрезания Сердца* (*Works and Days of Lavinia, a Nun of the Order of the Circumcision of the Heart*) published in 1987, and Lyn Hejinian’s 1991 collection, *Oxota*, a transliteration of the word for hunt in Russian. Each poet’s hunt, despite a nearly opposite set of concerns and conceptions of poetry’s object, is ultimately manifest in both of their texts not simply as a quest to capture or a pursuit of dominance, but as a versatile receptivity, an openness, and an active, creative position that pursues a greater vision and experience of reality, constructing their own poetic worlds and forms of affirmation and meaning-production in the process.

In this essay, I will explore the way that Hejinian and Shvarts’s poetic figures conduct their hunt through often opposing and incompatible worlds of exteriority or interiority,

²¹² Miłosz, Czesław. *The Witness of Poetry*. Harvard Univ. Press, 1983, p. 25.

emphasizing communal relationships in Hejinian's work, and private realities in Shvarts's. Furthermore, I will discuss the ways that Hejinian's hunt strives to render profane the myths and shibboleths of Cold War enmities as she crosses the Iron Curtain into Soviet Russia, while Shvarts's sacralizes private poetic experiences and cultivates a transcendent relationship with the divine as she moves away from it. To do so, I will consider closely each poet's respective approach to representation and figurative language, specifically metonymy, metaphor, and symbol, examining the ways each text advances unique constructions of poetic experiences and spaces. Both of these poets, I will show, were largely representative of their respective milieus' interests and concerns, Hejinian in the American Language school of poetry and Shvarts in the Leningrad underground, while nevertheless being singular female voices in these groups and circles. And while these two poets often had opposing relations to aesthetics, politics, and modernity, their divergent conceptions were nevertheless grounded by their specific texts in a relatively similar place and time- the final years of the Soviet Union- and by their poetic hunts that situate their women protagonists as playing an active role in the creation of their own reality.

In the late 1980s, the once isolated and stagnating public sphere of the Soviet Union experienced a sudden deluge of information and intellectual production from the capitalist West and the margins of its own interior, a result of Gorbachev's new policy of *Glasnost*. This period, known more broadly as the time of *Perestroika* running from roughly 1985-1991, was filled with optimism and a vertiginous sense of change that introduced as many freedoms as it did new difficulties. And one fruitful point of contact within this sudden appearance of freedom and openness in the public sphere was the interaction and exchange between American and Russian poets. The American group was mostly comprised of so-called Language school poets- Michael Davidson, Lyn Hejinian, Ron Silliman, and Barret Watten- who were eager to see for themselves

the land of the Soviets, while the latter was mostly made up of those surfacing from the “attics and basements” of their marginalized unofficial status in the Late-Soviet state. For the visiting Americans, primarily a group of left-leaning thinkers struggling to overcome the implicit conservative bias in their understanding of the Cold War enemy, many of the Russian poets were a surprise with their interest in metaphysics, emphasis on individualism, and what the Americans defined as a project of “interiority.”

Interiority seems to be the dominant project of contemporary Russian poetry- an interiority that takes alternating wildly metaphysical and theatrical stances and that would take more than our week of talking to Russian poets to understand. What this interiority means for the conditions of belief that have developed within the context of the Soviet state- and in consideration of its historical disjuncture from its course- can only be speculated on; how could it directly be known? . . . The spaces that can be read between the lines will be grounds for recurring questions.²¹³

In one significant example resulting in a collectively authored travel narrative published in 1991 from which the above quote is taken, *Leningrad*, the four American poets mentioned above- Davidson, Hejinian, Silliman, and Watten- visited the USSR in 1989 for a conference of avant-garde writers²¹⁴ with the broader intention of overcoming the individualistic paradigm of their native culture and finding community with those across the Iron Curtain.²¹⁵ They sought to do so with a depersonalized poetics scrubbed of poetry’s many romantic myths and sacred cows,

²¹³ Davidson, M., Hejinian, L., Silliman, R. and Watten, B. (1991) *Leningrad: American Writers in the Soviet Union*, San Francisco: Mercury House. pp. 29-30.

²¹⁴ The conference, organized in large part by Arkadii Dragomoschenko, was described as the “First International Summer School,” titled “Language—Consciousness—Society”. It took place from August 9 to 15, 1989. These details are provided as context in Davidson, M., Hejinian, L., Silliman, R. and Watten, B. (1991) *Leningrad: American Writers in the Soviet Union*, San Francisco: Mercury House, p. 1.

²¹⁵ With “travel grants from the University of California and from the Fund for U.S. Artists at International Festivals and Exhibitions,” and despite their explicit leftism and communist sympathies, the Language poets’ trip invites comparison with other aspects of the cultural Cold War, especially the Abstract Expressionists and the influential 1959 American National Exhibition in Moscow. The government’s approach, a so-called “long leash,” involved the use of avant-garde and democratic artists, writers, and intellectuals to showcase the freedom such individuals enjoyed in a democratic society. It was one of the primary weapons that government agencies, particularly the CIA, used to fight for the “hearts and minds” of those in communist lands. See especially the chapter “Yanqui Doodles” in Saunders, Frances Stonor. *The Cultural Cold War: The CIA and The World of Arts and Letters*. The New Press, 2013.

and which consciously engaged with politics in its approach to poetic language: “The authors of *Leningrad* have sought to ground the literary movement known as “language poetry” in a sense of community and to connect it to progressive politics and new social theory. This concern is reflected in the text, in which their alternating voices run together, collectively forming these essays.”²¹⁶ Yet by the time of their visit, many Russian poets, artists, and intellectuals had long since moved into more marginal spaces away from the dominant Soviet collectivism, into inner worlds and the privacies of “deep truths,” often employing relentless irony and political detachment. In short, these Russian poets and intellectuals existed predominately in the social and cultural “spaces that can be read between the lines” of their immediately legible Soviet reality, leaving the Americans a chance only to speculate on their nature, and for both sides to reach out from their interstitial spaces.

Nevertheless, some poets found great affinity with one another, such as the American Michael Palmer with Russian Alexei Parshchikov, and Lyn Hejinian with Russian poet Arkadii Dragomoshchenko,²¹⁷ long-standing affinities that resulted in many translations, essays, and collections of poetry between them, not to mention enduring friendships. Yet while these affinities were the focus of academic studies comparing Russian and American poets from the early 90s and into the 2000s, often debating the reach and nature of a global postmodernism²¹⁸, I am more interested in capturing some of the unique differences that define the figures in this

²¹⁶ Davidson, M., Hejinian, L., Silliman, R. and Watten, B. (1991) *Leningrad: American Writers in the Soviet Union*, San Francisco: Mercury House, title pages.

²¹⁷ For studies on Hejinian and Dragomoshchenko together, see Sandler, Stephanie. “Arkadii Dragomoshchenko, Lyn Hejinian, and the Persistence of Romanticism.” *Contemporary Literature*, vol. 46, no. 1, 2005, pp. 18–45. and Edmond, Jacob. “‘A Meaning Alliance’: Arkady Dragomoshchenko and Lyn Hejinian's Poetics of Translation.” *The Slavic and East European Journal*, vol. 46, no. 3, 2002, pp. 551–564. For a comparison of Michael Palmer and Alexei Parshchikov, see Perloff, Marjorie. “Russian Postmodernism: An Oxymoron?” *Postmodern Culture*, vol. 3 no. 2, 1993. Project MUSE, doi:10.1353/pmc.1993.0008.

²¹⁸ See especially the proceedings of the 1992 conference on Russian Postmodernism: McGann, Jerome J., et al. “Symposium on Russian Postmodernism.” *Postmodern Culture*, vol. 3, no. 2, 1993, doi:10.1353/pmc.1993.0015.

period of contact. And indeed, a focus on Hejinian and Shvarts together, two poets who shared no recorded affinity despite their status as major women poets and Hejinian's own numerous visits to the Soviet Union in addition to the one described in *Leningrad*, produces somewhat different comparative results.

Both Hejinian and Shvarts are leading poets of their generation, both are major contributors to the late avant-garde styled poetry of their languages' verse traditions, and both are internationally recognized postmodern poets of their time. And yet while both poets are emblematic and integral representatives of their poetic milieus, neither are truly typical, insofar as both women maintain authentic and unique feminine voices in largely male-dominated groups and spaces. Hejinian, a major proponent and innovator in the American Language school of poetry in its San Francisco instantiation, was one of the few initial women participants in this grouping of poets, a demographic attested to by the three other male authors of the collective travel narrative cited above. Shvarts, similarly, was frequently a lone voice in the highly masculine culture of the Late-Soviet underground, and from the 1960s onward frequented such male-dominated gathering spots, symposia, and clubs as Malaya Sadovaya, Club-81, and her own symposium, "*shimposium*," hosted in her apartment with a mix of playfulness and close attention to high culture.²¹⁹ Both poets, furthermore, received an education from some of the highest institutions in their countries, with Hejinian graduating from Harvard and Shvarts from the Leningrad Institute of Theater, Music, and Cinema, connecting them through backgrounds in the highest echelons and traditions of their respective cultures. Yet both represent some of the

²¹⁹ Shvarts's "Shimposium," which undoubtedly involves a reference to Aleksei Remizov's mock literary society, was a gathering of major figures of the Leningrad underground: "Шимпозиум" был объединением литераторов, собиравшихся, в основном, на квартире у Елены Шварц. Там были и писатели, и поэты, философы: Кривулин, Эрль, Горичева, Останин." Source: Радио Свобода, Энциклопедия "Самиздат Ленинграда," 24 May 2011, www.svoboda.org/a/24199962.html.

foremost avant-garde, counter-cultural trends of their day and sought to move against, or beyond, the dominant frameworks of their nation's official culture.

Yet while two poets share similarities, they also maintain distinct, nearly antithetical, differences. For these two contemporaries and significant figures of women's poetry in their day, poetry was attendant to different masters and spawned of very different contexts. Though poets both maintain and are united by various degrees of non-referentiality in their textual worlds, Hejinian emphasizes the fragmented "here and now" of a material, cultural present in her texts, while Shvarts cultivates a separate, symbolically charged reality largely constructed out of high cultural sources. On the one hand, Hejinian's theoretically informed poetry frequently revolves around a largely impersonal and open-ended critical language partly influenced by Russian Futurism and Formalism's "language as such"²²⁰, and partly through a tradition of verse laid down by Gertrude Stein and developed throughout the 20th century.²²¹ It is, furthermore, a publicly oriented verse meant also to embody a largely anti-capitalistic and counter-cultural political praxis, and one meant to resist any form of closure and authorial singularity of meaning. On the other hand, Shvarts's poetry continues a Romantic and ecstatic verse tradition with a visionary figure of the Poet at its center. Her poetics often employ a textual and extra-textual performativity grounded in the use of modernistic verse personae such as the nun and holy fool found in the highly influential 20th century tradition of Russian women poets such as Anna

²²⁰ On numerous occasions the authors of *Leningrad* reflect on the influence of Russian Formalist criticism on their own poetry and the Language school. For further information on Lyn Hejinian, the Language School, and Russian Formalism, see Edmond, Jacob. "Lyn Hejinian and Russian Estrangement." *Poetics Today*, vol. 27, no. 1, 2006, pp. 97–124.

²²¹ See "Two Stein Talks" in Hejinian's *The Language of Inquiry* (2000), and Perloff's essay "A Fine New Kind of Realism: Six Stein Style's in Search of a Reader" in *Poetic License: Essays on Modernist and Postmodernist Lyric* (1990)

Akhmatova and Marina Tsvetaeva.²²² And it often implements the complicated referentiality of a playful, surrealistic, and symbolic character typical of avant-garde poets such as Velemir Khlebnikov and Nikolai Zabolotsky.²²³ And it is a poetics largely oriented toward the private worlds and mythic temporalities pursued and developed within the politically disinterested, “deterritorialized” spaces of the Late-Soviet Underground.²²⁴

Both of these writers, though, produced long-form, cohesive collections of poetry within a few years of one another that involve a woman persona’s singular creative path and pursuit of belonging within spaces both sacred and profane, and where they initially or ultimately do not belong, bringing the two poets into a similar framework for textual comparison. Shvarts’s collection, *Works and Days of Lavinia, a Nun of the Order of the Circumcision of the Heart*, and Hejinian’s novel-in-verse, *Oxota*, are both book-length narrative collections comprised of numerous individual lyric poems, meditations, thoughts, and images that clash, conflict, or juxtapose against one another, creating rich worlds that amplify and exalt, or breakdown and interpret, the spaces in which they unfold. Each work is grounded within an autobiographical or biographical element, invoking at times the feel of a memoir, a travel journal, or a private diary. Yet each text has one or more significant literary points of reference that shape it, with Aleksandr Pushkin’s *Eugene Onegin* guiding the Russianness and contributing the 14-line Onegin stanza replicated in Hejinian’s text,²²⁵ and Hesiod’s *Works and Days* adding a mythic, high cultural background to Shvarts’s text.

²²² For analysis of Shvarts’s connection with Akhmatova and Tsvetaeva, see Дарк, Олег. “Пчела Шварц Из Цикла ‘Венок Портретов Современной Русской Поэзии.’ Новая Карта Русской Литературы, 9 Jan. 2008, [Online] Available at: www.litkarta.ru/dossier/dark-o-schwartz-pchela/dossier_4681/.

²²³ Шубинский, Валерий. “Садовник и Сад.” Знамя, [Online] Available at: znamlit.ru/publication.php?id=1591.

²²⁴ Yurchak, Alexei. *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation*. Princeton University Press, 2006. For a description of “deterritorialization,” see especially pp. 114-116.

²²⁵ For more on Hejinian’s engagement with Pushkin’s text, see Perloff, Marjorie. (1998) “How Russian Is It: Lyn Hejinian’s *Oxota*.” [Online] Available at: writing.upenn.edu/epc/authors/perloff/hejinian.html.

Hejinian's Pushkinian novel in verse,²²⁶ the title of which is taken from the Russian word for hunt, and which is based on her own experiences in Russia, describes the somewhat straightforward travel narrative of an American poet temporarily residing in Leningrad in the 1980s. But it is just as much a figurative journey and a kind of treasure hunt through Russian culture, the situation of the changing Late-Soviet world and its emergent consequences, and the numerous stereotypes, associations, and desires that an American might have with regard to that culture and place, all manifest to her as fragments, traces, and clues alone. Over the course of the text, the journey becomes a navigation of diverse and constantly blending spaces of the domestic, public, privately romantic, and creative, which are generated through many months and years spent constantly amidst the other in a foreign country. Shvarts's text is more a spiritual diary or biography of an inner life recorded in the "found" poems of a deeply religious and self-destructive yet pure-hearted nun who might recall the ecstasy and exaltation of Theresa of Avila. The text moves through a constantly shifting mixture of internal and external, private and public, mundane and mythic spaces situated within a single convent, and marks a journey of interiority more psychological than physical. The transformation that occurs along this journey, furthermore, echoes to some degree the Russian Romantic tradition's trope of the creation of the masculine poet-prophet²²⁷, revised in the form of a feminine poet-nun, with both emphasizing the poet's divine orientation.

As internationally recognized poets of late-20th century avant-garde poetry, both Hejinian and Shvarts have received substantial critical attention over the years. And both poets have

²²⁶ Hejinian labels her collection of poems as a "novel in verse" in a direct reference to Pushkin's Eugene Onegin, which popularized the "novel-in-verse" form in the Russian tradition through serial publication between 1825-1832. The critic Vissarion Belinsky famously referred to the work as an "encyclopedia of Russian life." See: *Сочинения Александра Пушкина*, В.Г. Белинского.

²²⁷ See, especially, Aleksander Pushkin's "The Prophet," "Пророк" Александра Пушкина.

received some of this consideration in terms of their respective uses of metonymy and metaphor, lending themselves to comparison through the Jakobsonian distinction of the two linguistic tropes. For linguist and literary theorist Roman Jakobson, this polarity formed not only isolated linguistic devices, but modes or tendencies through which discourses might develop: “The development of a discourse may take place along two different semantic lines: one topic may lead to another either through their similarity or through their contiguity. The metaphoric way would be the most appropriate term for the first case and the metonymic way for the second, since they find their most condensed expression in metaphor and metonymy respectively.”²²⁸

And indeed, the two dominant tropes, with the trope of metonymy in Hejinian’s case, and metaphor in Shvarts’s, significantly determine and structure the lyric poems and overarching narrative of the poets’ respective texts, without being bound to them. These, in turn, correspond to two parallel tendencies in the construction of textual meanings and worldviews for each poet: for Shvarts there is often a pursuit of synthesis, harmony, and the expression of complex relation through the similarity and implied identities of metaphor; and for Hejinian there is an emphasis on analytic disjunction, juxtaposition, and an encyclopedic array of detail rendered significant through the associations, attributes, and contiguous contexts of metonymy. Both infer or relate to the idea of a broader whole, a connectedness and inter-significance of things, yet both resist or complicate any stabilization of that interconnected whole. Consequently, Shvarts can be seen as yoking things together to fashion a separate, inward-looking, and unique synthetic world through the attempted expression of essence and inner likeness, transformation and symbolic reference, while Hejinian analyzes and breaks down forms of coherence such as self, world, and narrative, reducing them to parts and colliding details, so as to resist any complete and therefore false or

²²⁸ Jakobson, Roman. (1971) “Two Aspects of Language and Two Types of Aphasic Disturbances.” *Word and Language*, pp. 239–259.

illusory assumption of a total knowledge, a transparent whole, or external judgement upon the Soviet other.

Ultimately though, both of the poetry collections are oriented by a pursuit, or hunt, for a mode of belonging within the spaces that they explore or dwell in, with belonging interpretable as an understanding of self and other in the foreign spaces of Late-Soviet Russia for Hejinian, or a spiritual connection with the religious tradition and sense of home within the cultural myths of the past outside of domestic and daily life for Shvarts. And this hunt, then, develops around the creativity of two passionate women's voices which form an active, creative center in the role of a poet-hunter connecting the varied spaces they engage with, as either the constructive persona of the foreign observer in Hejinian's poems, or as the tempestuous, ecstatic spiritual seeker in Shvarts's.

Through the paths opened up by these personae, both poets develop unique worlds that embody a deep understanding of their generation's longings and aspirations, not as passive figures or victims subject to greater historical, social, and political forces, but as creative individuals able to govern their own manner of passing through the world. Hejinian's hunt, privileging the trope and epistemology of metonymy, emphasizes the rupture of narrative clarity, identity, and any hierarchy of values or peoples within homogenous, intentionally profane spaces that thereby resist the dominant modes of thinking, or myths, in American relations with their Cold War other. Shvarts's largely metaphorical and often religiously symbolic approach attempts to synthesize many diverse and conflicting images, ideas, and experiences into a world of sacred spaces in which "everything is interwoven with everything"²²⁹, creating a universal figure of a spiritual hunt for transcendence through eclectic and ecumenical images, rituals, and beliefs that

²²⁹ "Всё переплетено со всем." See: Нестеров, Антон. "Поэтика Живого: Беседа с Антоном Нестеровым." Новая Камера Хранения, [Online] Available at: www.newkamera.de/shwarz/o_shwarz_05.html.

are not bound within the borders of any single religion, place, or time. The two poets, then, profaning and sacralizing their respective experiences, undertake opposing yet related hunts that in many ways typify some of the intellectual and existential desires of their respective milieus as they developed on each side of the Iron Curtain, and which in turn became manifest in the visions and figurative language of their poetry.

Chapter Seven: Creating the Sacred in Elena Shvarts's Stagnation-Era Text, *Works and Days of Lavinia, A Nun of the Order of the Circumcision of the Heart*

“Loneliness, estrangement, isolation- a most contemporary disposition.”²³⁰ With these words, directly echoing the language of the famous New Leftist Port Huron Statement of 1962,²³¹ the scholar Lidia Ginsburg began a 1973 notebook entry dedicated to her much younger friend, Elena Shvarts, one of the foremost poets of her generation. As a participant in the unpublishable and marginalized literary world of unofficial poetry and samizdat, Shvarts existed outside the well-supported apparatus of state officialdom and typically lived by translation and her mother's support alone. And as a poet of the so-called Stagnation era, Shvarts's generation experienced history more as a disenchantment and burden than as modernizing progress, technological liberation, and the route to utopia. As the historian Vladislav Zubok has written in *Zhivago's Children: The Last Russian Intelligentsia*, “The younger cohort of intellectuals,” Shvarts's generation that followed the Thaw era, “lacked an ‘inaugural event’, such as Stalin's death or Khrushchev's secret speech, to animate their spirit and mobilize their energies for social and political activities. Instead, their common identity was one of intense alienation from the absurd and tedious routine of the Brezhnev years.”²³²

While Shvarts's poetry is typically anything but political, a sense of alienation often pervades her writing without ever converting into an identity of victimhood. And this sense of alienation, as Darra Goldstein has argued in Shvarts's case, led to a corresponding pursuit of a

²³⁰ “Одиночество, заброшенность, неконтактность — все это самый современный набор.” Ginzburg, L. (2010) “On Elena Shvarts.” *Slavonica* 16.2, pp. 142-43.

²³¹ “Loneliness, estrangement, isolation describe the vast distance between man and man today.” [Online] Available at: http://www2.iath.virginia.edu/sixties/HTML_docs/Resources/Primary/Manifestos/SDS_Port_Huron.html

²³² Zubok, V. (2011) *Zhivago's Children: The Last Russian Intelligentsia*. Belknap Press of Harvard Univ. Press, p. 320.

private, creative space and transcendent sense of belonging: “Plagued by skepticism and estrangement, Shvarts’s personae long to find a place in the natural order of things.”²³³ Yet this sense of alienation, of skepticism and estrangement, is not directly connected or represented in Shvarts’s work with any aspect of Late-Soviet reality, but is felt as a condition of life itself for soulful and passionate individuals seeking forms of transcendence. In her celebrated collection of poems, *Works and Days of Lavinia*, Shvarts represents precisely this mode of intense alienation and its overcoming through a pursuit of personal creative spaces in which sacred, mythic realities triumph over mundane existence.

In Shvarts’s collection of poems, completed in 1984 and published in 1987, a relatively naïve yet tenacious young nun, Lavinia, attempts to find a sense of belonging in a highly unique monastery (convent²³⁴) and develop a connection with the divine there, easing her of the burdens, temptations, and alienation of earthly, everyday existence. Throughout the text the figure of Lavinia confronts these in attempts to overcome her individuality, submitting her ego to something greater, claiming metaphorically that her “I” is a fountain in the ocean.”²³⁵ And yet she also insists on her own passionate and individualistic path, whereby her individual spiritual journey is not overcome but raised to a kind of singular universality of the spiritual pursuit of the divine, given in another important metaphor: “Forgive me, Lord, - You were a Pheasant, and I a hunter, frozen in the cold.”²³⁶ This tension, though, is not so much a matter of conflicting impulses within Lavinia, but the complex character of the text itself, which makes of the convent an incredibly diverse and magpie-like panorama of religious, spiritual, philosophical, and literary

²³³ Goldstein, Darra. (2015) “The Heartfelt Poetry of Elena Shvarts.” *Fruits of Her Plume: Essays on Contemporary Russian Woman's Culture*, edited by Helena Goscilo, Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, pp. 239–250.

²³⁴ In Russia, the word for convent and monastery are the same. All uses of the word “monastery” in the translations of poems refers to the same convent.

²³⁵ “Что такое “я”? Фонтан /в океане” Shvarts, E. (2019) *Zver'-Tsvetok*, Moskva/Sankt-Peterburg: Pal'mira, p. 231.

²³⁶ “Прости, Господь, – Ты был Фазан, /а я – охотник, стынувший в тумане.” Ibid. p. 239.

references and ideas. The ensuing postmodern ecumenical eclecticism is then filtered through the singular experience of the nun Lavinia and in the singular place of the convent, pushing the tension of the insistent individualism of Lavinia and her desire to overcome her ego into a journey for a connection with the divine, yet existing in many places, times, creeds, and individual desires throughout history. Thus, Lavinia's spiritual hunt can be seen as taking place through a dizzying array of scenes occurring in multiple religions, locations, and varied temporalities, all non-identical in mundane space and time, yet rendered identical beyond their boundary in a utopian convent of mythic, sacred time.

Sarah Clovis Bishop, in her highly detailed close-reading of the text, has written of this coming together of multiple, contradictory elements as the poet's urge toward "harmonious disharmony," explaining that: "Throughout the book, Shvarts brings together disparate worlds: Christianity and Buddhism; the temple and the body; the ritualized past and the individualized present." And further claiming that, Shvarts's "urge to integrate, combined with a desire to value and preserve the distinct parts, defines Lavinia and the spiritual journey which it contains."²³⁷ Consequently, Lyn Hejinian in *Oxota* breaks down borders, biases, and oppositions within her metonymic representation of Late-Soviet Russia, facilitating her "hunt" to understand the "other" without judgement and to "this time be both" within a free, feminine and creatively "profane space." While Shvarts's Lavinia, in a kind of mirror image, exceeds the profane borders and distances of daily life to become a universal figure of spiritual pursuit and ecumenical harmony manifest through a vision of the sacred made possible by metaphorical and symbolic expression. Thus, it is the universality of the spiritual quest, rendered in poetry, that breaks down borders and limitations. As Lavinia claims in one poem, directly addressing the divine: "O God, I have

²³⁷ Bishop, Sarah Clovis. (2012) "Harmonious Disharmony: Elena Shvarts's *Trudy I Dni Lavinii Monakhini Iz Ordena Obrezaniia Serdtsa*" *Slavic and East European Journal* 56.2, p. 214.

served you through what century, as what face,” as if she had already lived so many lives as to lose count.²³⁸

The opening poem of the collection, a part of the prefatory materials that introduce it, is attributed to Lavinia’s sister and labeled as a letter to the publisher of the nun’s “found” poems.²³⁹ In it, the sister introduces Lavinia and the convent by describing the ecumenical, non-dogmatic, and fantastic, mythic-utopian nature of the convent as well as the singular yet equally universal character of Lavinia:

Где этот монастырь – сказать пора:
Где пермские леса сплетаются с Тюрингским лесом,
Где молятся Франциску, Серафиму,
Где служат вместе ламы, будды, бесы,
Где ангел и медведь не ходят мимо,
Где вóроны всех кормят и пчела, –
Он был сегодня, будет и вчера.

Каков он с виду – расскажу я тоже.
Круг огненный, змеиное кольцо,
Подвал, чердак, скалистая гора,
Корабль хлыстовский, остров Божий –
Он был сегодня, будет и вчера.

А какова была моя сестра?
Как свечка в яме. Этого довольно.
Рос волосок седой из правого плеча.
Умна, глупа – и этого довольно.
Она была как шар – моя сестра,
И по ночам в садах каталась,
Глаза сияли, губы улыбались,
Была сегодня, будет и вчера.

Where this nunnery is- it's time to say-
Where the Permian forest blends with Thuringian forest,

²³⁸ “О Боже, я тебе служил/ который век, который лик.” Shvarts, E. (2019) *Zver'-Tsvetok*, Moskva/Sankt-Peterburg: Pal'mira, p. 246.

²³⁹ These materials also include ten epigraphs ranging from ancient sources to poems written by fellow poets in Shvarts’s underground, as well as a pseudo, ironic preface written by the supposed “publisher” of Lavinia’s poems.

Where they pray to Serafim and Francis,
 Where lamas, buddhas, and demons worship together,
 Where the angel and the bear do not pass by,
 Where the ravens and the bees feed everyone-
 It was today and will be yesterday.

What it looks like- I will also tell.
 A fiery circle, ring of snakes,
 Cellar, attic, sheer cliff face,
 Ship of the Khlyst sectarians, god's isle –
 It was today and will be yesterday.

And what sort of a person was my sister?
 Like a candle in a pit. Enough of that.
 A growth of grey hair from the right shoulder.
 Wise and stupid- that's enough of that.
 She was like a ball- my sister,
 At nights she would go rolling through the gardens,
 Her lips were smiling and her eyes were ardent-
 She was today, she will be yesterday.²⁴⁰

The poem primarily describes one of the two spaces in which the entirety of the text operates, a perfect mythic-sacred version that is played out in the text in a more literal and imperfect manifestation. In its obvious impossibility, the convent exists as an idea, a mythic or spiritual construct toward which Lavinia's hunt is directed, a symbolic reality or home which is sought beyond the boundaries of the literal, the lived space and time of the convent from which Lavinia is gradually alienated throughout the text. The mythic convent is a place wherein predator and prey coexist, where the coordinates of geographic space overlap, where the arc of religious figures and dogmas bend toward harmony, and which exists now, in the past, and in the future, that is, ultimately outside of time. It is the ideal realm of toward which is oriented the

²⁴⁰ Shvarts, E. (2019) *Zver'-Tsvetok*, Moskva/Sankt-Peterburg: Pal'mira, p. 193.; Shvarts, E and Molnar (1993) *Paradise: Selected Poems*, Hexham: Bloodaxe Books, p. 111, with some emendation.

spiritual seeker; yet, symbolically, it can be taken as a unified vision of the differentiated places and times, religions and texts, in which and with which spiritual seekers scattered throughout the world and history have pursued the sacred. Furthermore, these varied versions gathered into the universal figure of Lavinia are seen metaphorically as light in the darkness, individualistically as an errant outgrowth of a grey hair on a shoulder, and the self-sufficient image of a ball rolling through space, as spiritually complete. Through these metaphors and symbols, the mythical convent and the figure of the nun become universal yet singular representations of countless individuals born into the world at different places and times, a multiplicity of persons and communities, reincarnations and symbolic echoes of significant spiritual figures, all of whom sought a second, more accommodating home in the realm of the spirit, all of which become essentialized through the figure of Lavinia.

In one intensely direct and intimate poem, number 15 of the 78, the young nun asks the “Creator” about the purpose of her life and her sufferings in the earthly realm, having been expelled from its original place with God and born into the material world of flesh (“heart”). The question has a deeply existential and broadly human character, and largely defines the desire and hunt of the universal figure of Lavinia. The poem, furthermore, gives a vision of the original home for which the composite ideal of the convent becomes a possible replacement:

Что делать с жизнью небольшою,
 Пришитой к сердцу моему,
 Что делать с этой живорослью,
 Что пятится, завидев тьму?
 Зачем, Творец, в меня сослали?
 Уж лучше б Вы ее держали,
 Как прежде, кошечкой в дому.
 Зачем ее Вы баловали

И часто за ухом чесали,
 А после сливки отобрали
 И кличку тоже, – не пойму.
 Она мне сердце рвет и мучит
 И все по Вас, Творец, мяучит.

What should I do with this small life,
 That has been fastened onto my heart?
 What should I do with this zoophyte
 That withdraws, having seen the dark?
 Why, Creator, did you banish it into me?
 It would have been better to hold it,
 As before, a kitty kept at home.
 Why did you coddle and pet it,
 And often scratch behind its ears,
 Only to take away its nickname
 And bowl of milk? I don't understand.
 It claws and torments my heart,
 And always meows, Creator, for you.²⁴¹

The soul, the spirit, or whatever language from whichever religious tradition one might choose to draw from, is banished from its original status in harmony and bliss, its proximity to the divine, and affixed to the material world in the metaphor of the heart. The subsequently formed “zoophyte,” animal-flower, metaphor of this admixture of spirit and flesh, soul and heart, becomes a problem for Lavinia, as it raises the Platonic question of what to do with the alienation that such an embodied composite raises. And the answer to the question is built into the poem: seek it's return. But the nature of the place it should seek and the means by which it

²⁴¹ Shvarts, E. (2019) *Zver'-Tsvetok*, Moskva/Sankt-Peterburg: Pal'mira, p. 203.

should do so is a question that remains open. the bulk of the poems that mark Lavinia's spiritual quest as an attempt to return to this home where God dwells describe a series of approaches, many of which are violently self-destructive acts that imitate Christ's self-sacrifice before and upon the cross, and which involve the "circumcision of the heart" for which the convent is named. Such a sacrifice is not just a wounding of the body, but a spiritual rejection of earthly life in which the body is primary. Nevertheless, this battle with the flesh of the heart and one's earthly life is not figured solely by acts of physical sacrifice and the "inspiration" that it brings to Lavinia, but also as a matter of relating to her fellow nuns and to the realities of the literal world of the convent and the matters of daily life which define it.

Following the intensely private, spiritual journey of the collection, the register of the poems throughout it is often of a deeply intimate and diary-like nature. The poems both implicitly and explicitly mark the natural changing of seasons and chronology of holidays and events of domestic life in the convent, describing a mundane temporality which Lavinia attempts constantly to transcend. The scenes of non-mythic, human time, then, are more typically background for the struggles and alienations with daily life that foster the imaginative, metaphysical visions and dreams which comprise the immense inner world of her private life. The constant interplay of these temporalities throughout the text brings into view the ardent young spiritual seeker's status as an outsider in the everyday collectivistic practices and domestic spaces of the convent, despite her apparent desire to belong and reside there. In the poem, "Before the Holiday," number 26 of the 78, Lavinia watches her fellow religious sisters in the domestic work of preparing for a Buddhist holiday in early spring and continues her line of questioning about the purpose of her "zoophyte" heart-soul, her embodiment in the world, by pointing out her own uselessness in the daily life of the convent:

«Перед праздником»

Кручу молитвенную мельницу
 Весенним утром на заборе.
 Как сестры весело и радостно
 Толпятся у разрытых клумб,
 Одаривая землю жирную
 Тюльпанов наготой подвальнойю.
 А те – буренушек священных
 На пастбище ведут украшенных
 И лентами и колокольцами,
 Те – моют Будд водой чистой,
 Водой пещерной, ледниковую,
 Те – чистят кельи, пол метут,
 Захлопоталась перед праздником
 Вся наша сторона буддийская!
 И только я одна – бездельная
 И больше ни на что не годная,
 Верчу молитвенную мельницу,
 В цветные глядя облака.

“Before the Holiday”

I am turning the prayer wheel
 At the fence-line this spring morning.
 The sisters joyously and happily
 gather in the upturned flowerbeds
 endowing the loamy soil
 with the underground nakedness of tulips.
 And they lead to pasture the blessed cattle
 Adorned with ribbons and bells,
 And they wash the Buddhas
 with pure, icy-cold cave water,

they clean the cells and wash the floor,
 all of our Buddhist side
 is bustling before the holiday!
 and only I am alone, doing nothing
 and unsuited for anything else,
 I wind the prayer wheel
 And glance up at the colored clouds.²⁴²

Her world is steadfastly oriented toward prayer and the divine, to the negation of the collective and domestically ritualistic aspects of religious life that demands the submission of her private journey to a common path, rendering her outside the letter of the convent's law and its features of ordinary life. The "uselessness" of her position as an outsider within the domestic and ritualized world of the convent is furthermore figured through a number of poems, most of which testify primarily to the extreme devotion of Lavinia's own personal journey. In her relations with others in the convent, she often seems too callous in the radicality of her faith. Where others might look for consolation to their immediate sufferings, she seeks to aggravate these sufferings to grow closer to the divine through the intensity of her suffering. In one poem, Lavinia offends a fellow nun who has complained of her "ugliness" by pointing out that she is lucky to be so unattractive and to have facial hair, as she thereby has the opportunity to lay her "toad"-like appearance on a sacrificial alter and wear her "beard" as her own personal "cross."²⁴³ Lavinia "envies" this fellow nun insofar as all suffering can be made into something transformational. Yet the nun, being of a less radical character, is highly offended. And though their relation is mended in the poem, this intensity gradually sets Lavinia apart from the rest over the course of the collection.

²⁴² Shvarts, E. (2019) *Zver'-Tsvetok*, Moskva/Sankt-Peterburg: Pal'mira, p. 209.

²⁴³ Ibid. p. 230.

The personal extremism of Lavinia's journey is nevertheless not without its doubts, and at times Lavinia raises an interest and concern with the secular side of her life. Such doubts and concerns then result in numerous battles with temptation and sin, often of an unnamed character but which are primarily of a sexual nature.²⁴⁴ All of these can be seen as rooted, though, in the question of desire itself, of the will, which becomes associated in the text with the nun's "secular dreams" and their possible promise of earthly happiness in the future, dreams which she must ultimately detach herself from as they are a "sinful affair:"

“Меж «я» и «ты»»

Снятся мне до сих пор светские сны,
Грешным делом – даже постом,
Вот сегодня – будто бы на бегах
Ставлю на лошадь по кличке «потом.»
О Боге я думала – где Он, - бродя по двору,
Вдоль стены кирпичной, ворот
(то к дереву никла, то к нутру),
И когда он меня позовет.
Что он мне ближе отца, сестры,
Но не бренного моего ребра.
Все искала я слово – роднее, чем «ты»,
И чуть-чуть чужее, чем «я.»

“Between “You” and “Me””

Secular dreams still come to me,
even during lent- a sinful affair,
just like today, as if at the races
I bet on a horse by the name of “then.”

²⁴⁴ See especially poem number 25, “Soblaznitel,” Ibid. p. 208.

I was thinking of God- where is He, -wandering
 The courtyard, the brick wall, the gate
 (drooped against the wood, to the core),
 And when will he call me.
 That he is closer to me than a father, a sister,
 But not of my fragile rib.
 I have searched and searched for a word closer than “you,”
 And a little bit more alien than “I.”²⁴⁵

The short poem marks a subtle interplay and drift between secular and sacred dreams in the nun’s “search” for a meaningful relationship that is closer than the typical bond. The nun begins by thinking of God, written as usual with the capitalized letter denoting the monotheistic preeminence of the Christian God, and then switches over to an uncapitalized letter. It is possible that this is simply a typo in Shvarts’s original, but in the context of the “worldly dreams” mentioned at the beginning of the poem, it seems to enact the changing pattern of her dreams and a subtle shift from the sacred to the secular.

Lavinia, who struggles throughout the text with the “demon” of temptation, begins by thinking of God as akin to a spiritual marriage, and then passes in her thought to the possible figure of a living husband in the world of domestic and daily life. She waits to be called, possibly as to a marriage, and possibly to a greater intimacy with the divine as through sacrifice or death. And for a moment, in this brief and aloof state of daydreaming, the battle of the mythic-sacred and the worldly continues and is held in suspense. But, ultimately, she turns away from this battle, emphasizing her pursuit for that which is not fragile, human, and of this world, not for a husband figured through the frail, shared rib of Adam representing the male-female couple, but

²⁴⁵ Shvarts, E. (2019) *Zver'-Tsvetok*, Moskva/Sankt-Peterburg: Pal'mira, p. 225.

for a spiritual connection beyond this frailty and human coupling. And as such, this pursuit, as it becomes more radical throughout the text, is envisioned as a form of freedom, a freedom from the domestic roles allotted to a woman even in the convent, from the temptations of the secular and mundane, and from the strictly dogmatic bonds of religion. Yet it is a freedom which alienates her from her fellow nuns and ultimately plays a part in her banishment from the convent.

This estrangement and banishment are first represented concretely in the fifty-seventh poem of the collection, only to be dropped from the discourse and then brought back in the seventy-eighth and final poem concluding the sequence. In the fifty-seventh poem, the nun addresses her fellow nuns and proclaims her independence from them, claiming to have her own power over the convent and expressing her sense of its mobility. In doing so, she invokes not the actual physical location and buildings of the convent, but the utopian idea or mythic vision of the place as it is invoked in the first poem of the book, the sister's "letter to the publisher." Lavinia, then, proclaims upon her dismissal a sense of power flowing from her private and ardent adherence to the vision of the convent as an ideal, one which does not require a physical location or any of the strict bodies of texts and dogmas that tend to comprise a religion's status in the world. She is, in this sense, free in her personal hunt for the divine from any limitations, boundaries, or borders. And she declares this in the poem playfully, yet also with the combative attitude of a shunned and wounded person:

Выгоняли меня – говорили – иди!

Спасайся, сестра, где знаешь,

А нас ты, сестра, ужасаешь.

...

Как же я отсель уйду?

Я поволоку с собою,

Как ядро на ноге,
 Как сурка на плече,
 И лису под рубахой, -
 Монастырь весь.
 Уйду- за мной по горам и долинам
 Монастырь ваш на цепи поволочится,
 А трястись весь тяжкий путь мой длинный
 Сладко ли вам будет в нем, сестрицы?
 лягу в поле спать –
 Под голову положу –
 Хорошо ли вам будет на голой земле?
 Нравится мне только два,
 Только два жития мне привычны,
 Схожие между собою весьма, -
 Иноческое и птичье.

They drove me away. They said, go!
 Save yourself, sister, wherever you can,
 Because, dear sister, you terrify us.
 . . .
 How can I quit this place?
 I'll drag it along with me
 Like a ball and chain,
 A marmot on my shoulder,
 A fox tucked in my undershirt,-
 The convent is everything.
 I will go, and along mountains and valleys
 Your convent will trail behind me on a chain,
 And will it be sweet for you to jostle about in it
 For the length of my long and heavy path, sweet sisters?
 I will lie down to sleep in the field

And place it underneath my head.
 How will you like to be on naked ground?
 There are only two that please me,
 Only two dwellings to which I'm accustomed,
 Thoroughly alike between them, -
 The monastic and the avian.²⁴⁶

The tension that has been building throughout the collection of poems between the specific, domestic locality of the convent and its female collective with Lavinia's often radical and singular devotion to a mythic, sacred beyond and direct connection with the divine is here utterly strained, yet does not snap. By the final lines of the poem, she has foregrounded the singular question that has remained persistent throughout the collection: the nature of one's dwelling, or place in the world. After being expelled from the "home" in which she had been as a "kitty" frequently shown affection by God, only to be affixed to the suffering flesh of her "heart" as a "zoophyte," Lavinia has pursued a place of belonging to replace that heavenly home and save her from the suffering of embodiment in a cruel world. Thus, as we have seen in increasing degree, Lavinia's search for God and a place of belonging is here forcibly private, and something occurring outside of the collective, a matter of individual freedom in her pursuit. And it is this aspect of her spiritual hunt that renders possible her ability to "drag it along with me like a ball and chain" upon her banishment.

In an earlier poem, Lavinia announced this spiritual mobility and freedom through the representation of the language of prayer as a personal "chapel:" "I pitch my prayer tent wherever I would like in bed, the metro, the bathhouse- wherever God would have it."²⁴⁷ Throughout the

²⁴⁶ Shvarts, E. (2019) *Zver'-Tsvetok*, Moskva/Sankt-Peterburg: Pal'mira, pp. 232-233.

²⁴⁷ "Свою палатку для молитвы /Я разбиваю где угодно – /В метро, в постели или в бане – /Где это Господу угодно." Ibid. p. 211.

collection, the body has been rendered into a sacrifice and negated, yet simultaneously words and prayers were formed into a shelter and temple of a personal sacred space, manifesting the truly sacred reality of the visionary convent and overcoming the alienation from her heavenly home. From out of these tendencies, the negation of the body and mobility through the language of prayer, there arises Lavinia's two modes of freedom, each related to the pursuit of the divine through spiritual transformation. The two freedoms are relayed in the above poem of her departure as two "dwellings," or modes of being in the world, which she defines as "the monastic and the avian," noting that the two are "thoroughly alike between them."

The first, the "monastic," is represented as akin to that of a stoic male warrior spirit, which she describes in one poem as "the agile fighter, the masterful," who has "rosaries grown into his hands," and around whom "candles ignite from a glance." In the possession of a great spiritual strength, he is supported by the devout and poetic language of the Biblical Psalms and other rituals of self-negation: "he lays a shoulder on the psalms, like a battering ram, to beat on the gates of hell. With vigils and Lent his body is humbled, he serves, quiet, like the hatchet does the woodsman."²⁴⁸ One can visualize this as a kind of negative freedom, a freedom from, where the monk embodies a physical and spiritual strength that allows for one to be untouched by evil and temptation, egotism and torpor; he acts not through his own design and will, but as a trusted instrument of God, one perfectly attuned to the divine will and in keeping with a spiritual path in the kingdom of this world.

The second version of freedom is the "avian," a series of metaphors exploring features and attributes of birds throughout the text, yet one which remains diffuse and protean, never fully

²⁴⁸ "На псалом плечом – как на таран/ Он наляжет, бьет в ворота ада. /Бденьями, постом смирилось тело, /Служит, тихое, как леснику топор" Shvarts, E. (2019) *Zver'-Tsvetok*, Moskva/Sankt-Peterburg: Pal'mira, pp. 231-232.

defined. Yet it seems largely to be connected with freedom of movement, the freedom to fly up and connect with the divine, to ascend to a “Divine nest,” and is therefore a compliment to the freedom-from of the monk. And this series of metaphors is often furthermore connected with the mobility and freedom of language, usually invoked as prayers which can be uttered anywhere and anytime: “Devour, my soul, a prayer. Study it, so as to know it firmly enough that I, when I quit this earth, will immediately utter it.”²⁴⁹ And as such, this mode of “avian” freedom is quintessential to the text, symbolizing Lavinia’s universal and endless human desire to quit one’s confines, limitations, and mundane borders in favor of a transcendent, unhampered fulfillment:

На красноглазой злой земле –
 Зиянье я, провал, пустыня.
 А пятки землю отшвырнули,
 И полетела к облакам [...]
 Мелькнула птицею в пруду . . .
 Щетина леса, ноготь крыши, –
 Через облака и дальше, выше,
 Куда-то к Божьему гнезду.

On the red-eyed evil earth-
 I am chasm, wilderness, collapse.
 Yet my heels threw off the earth,
 And I suddenly flew to the clouds [. . .]
 I flashed like a bird in a pond . . .
 Bristle of forest, nail of a roof,
 Through the clouds and father, higher,
 Somewhere to the Divine nest.²⁵⁰

²⁴⁹ “Проглоти, душа, молитву. /Выучи – чтоб твердо знать, /Чтобы мне – как свет покину – /Сразу же ее сказать.” Shvarts, E. (2019) *Zver'-Tsvetok*, Moskva/Sankt-Peterburg: Pal'mira, p. 232.

²⁵⁰ Shvarts, E. (2019) *Zver'-Tsvetok*, Moskva/Sankt-Peterburg: Pal'mira, p. 247.

Through the vision of freedom that is developed with these two forms of “dwelling,” the “monastic” and the avian,” the scope and scale of the religious world that Lavinia has struggled fully and comfortably to inhabit in the place of the convent is transformed into a mobile and powerful individual space for the pursuit of the divine. On the one hand, she keeps as a model the spiritual strength of the “agile fighter,” a monastic power to resist temptation and overcome the limitations of earthly life; and on the other, she has the capacity of her “avian” freedom to become unbounded by the domestic and mundane aspects of being and to ascend toward the divine. With the strength these two combined, Lavinia will be able to overcome the alienation and sense of abandonment that comes with her banishment in the pursuit of belonging within an inner sacred space. By the final poem of the collection, the pursuit of such a space, which has been transformed into a symbolically universal manifestation of the spiritual pursuit for home, the mythic reality of the imagined convent described in the “Sister’s Letter to the Publisher,” becomes manifest as a site of death and transformation, total abandonment by God and rebirth to immortal life.

Скит

Куда вы, сестры, тащите меня?

Да еще за руки и за ноги?

Ну пусть я напилась... была пьяна...

Пустите! Слышите! О Боже, помоги!

Но раскачали и швырнули в ров,

Калитка взвизгнула и заперлась,

И тихо все. Я слизывала кровь

С ладони и скулила. Грязь

Со мной стонала. Пузырилась ночь, спекаясь.

Шуршали травы.

Лежала я, в корягу превращаясь.

Господь мой Бог совсем меня оставил.
Мхом покрываясь, куталась в лопух.
Вдруг слышу я шаги, звериный дух,
И хриплый голос рядом говорит:
"Раз выгнали, пойдем поставим скит."
"Ох, это ты! Ты, огненный, родной!
Меня не бросил ты, хмельную дуру!"
Мы в глухомань ушли, где бьется ключ,
Лев лес валил и тотчас его шкурил.
Мы за три дня избенку возвели
И церковь, полый крест – как мне приснилось, –
В мой рост и для меня, чтоб я вошла,
Раскинув руки, в ней молилась.
Пока работали, к нам приходил медведь –
Простой медведь, таинственный, как сонмы
Ночных светил, –
И меду мутного на землю положил.
Он робкий был и так глядел – спросонья.
Лев мне принес иконы, свечек, соли,
Поцеловались на прощанье мы.
Он мне сказал: "Коль будет Божья воля,
Я ворочусь среди зимы."
Встаю я с солнцем и водицу пью,
И с птицами пою Франциску, Деве,
И в темный полый Крест встаю,
Как ворот, запахнувши двери.
Текут века – я их забыла
И проросла травой-осокой,
Живой и вставшею могилой
Лечу пред Богом одиноко.

Hermitage

Where are you dragging me, sisters,
Seizing my arms and legs?
All right, I had a drop too much, got drunk . . .
Let me go! Do you hear! O help me God!
But they swung and hurled me in the ditch,
With a creak the wicker gate was shut,
And silence fell. I licked the blood
From my palms and whined – the dirt
Groaned with me. Night swelled up like bread,
Grass rustled.
As I lay I turned into a crooked stump,
Abandoned by my Lord and God.
Covering myself with moss, I rolled in the weeds.
Suddenly I sensed footsteps, breath of beasts,
Nearby a hoarse voice spoke:
‘Since they’ve thrown you out, let’s found a hermitage.’
Oh, it’s you, my fiery friend!
You haven’t dropped a drunken fool like me?’
We went out into the wilderness where a spring flows,
The lion stacked wood and hewed it straight.
In three days we had raised a wooden hut
And a church – a hollow cross- just as I had dreamed-
My own height, so that I could fit inside
And pray with arms outspread.
While we worked a bear approached,
A simple bear, mysterious as the multitude
Of stars at night- and laid some clouded honey on the ground,
He was shy and seemed half somnolent.
The lion brought me icons, candles, salt,
We parted with a kiss,

He said: 'If it's the will of God
 I'll return when winter ends.'
 I rise at dawn and water is my drink,
 I sing to Francis and the Virgin with the birds,
 And stand in the dark hollow cross
 Like a gateway opening its gates.
 Ages pass- I have forgotten time,
 All around me sedge has grown,
 alive, I have become a tomb
 and I will fly [before] god alone.²⁵¹

Recalling Darra Goldstein's words describing the primary trajectory of Shvarts's poetry, the final poem seems precisely to entail the discovery of a place of belonging in the natural world, a meaningful place away from the determinations of any restrictive, limiting structures, yet one instituting its own self-determining order: "Plagued by skepticism and estrangement, Shvarts's personae long to find a place in the natural order of things." By the first few lines of the Hermitage poem, Lavinia has been aggressively cast out of the convent, forced out for drunkenness and presumably the fear that she inspired in others with her intensity and behavior of a brooding, alienated outsider. Despite Lavinia's insistence on the "avian" as a mode of freedom coupled with confidence in her ability to drag the convent along with her, she feels fundamentally abandoned, deprived of the protection and hope the convent offers. And she suffers this loss as a serious defeat. As Sarah Clovis Bishop has claimed, this process of expulsion, abandonment, and defeat was forecast and took place over the whole course of the collection, becoming only a point of culmination in the finale: "Over the course of the book,

²⁵¹ Shvarts, E. (2019) *Zver'-Tsvetok*, Moskva/Sankt-Peterburg: Pal'mira, pp. 247-248.; Shvarts, E and Molnar (1993) *Paradise: Selected Poems*, Hexham: Bloodaxe Books, p. 139, with some emendation.

Lavinia describes this fall- her physical suffering, her descent into madness, her expulsion from the convent. In the book's final poem, "Hermitage," she has reached an ultimate low.²⁵² Her banishment and sense of abandonment, in short, were something of a foregone conclusion.

Yet this defeat and sense of abandonment become in the final poem a turn that makes possible an ultimate transformation of the private and secluded space she discovers into something personal and sacred. And this reconciliation helps bring her a blessed peace through her sought-after proximity to God. This relationship is made possible through the establishment of a hermitage, a place that Sarah Clovis Bishop has described as a new "universal church," yet one which nevertheless decidedly favors the Christian tradition as first among ecumenical equals. To do this, Lavinia, banished from the convent, undergoes a literal and symbolic death. In partial echo of the metamorphosis of the Greek myth of Daphne's escape from Apollo by transforming into a tree, Lavinia becomes a "crooked stump," a dead tree that develops the metaphorical negation of the body, which will soon become overgrown and enlivened with the natural world outside the gates of the convent. Her guardian lion, long a symbol of Christ in the Christian tradition and a repeated presence throughout the collection, often referred to as "Brother Lion" in an echo of language from Francis of Assisi's *Canticle of the Sun*,²⁵³ aides her in the establishment of the hermitage, marking most definitively the transition to Lavinia's internal, private, and spiritual world, announced throughout the text as a spiritual "madness." After three days, the amount of time Christ laid dead in the tomb after the crucifixion, the two manage to erect the hermitage, a hut that is at the same time a hollow, wooden cross and the empty space of a coffin for her body, all of which become "like a gateway opening its gates."

²⁵² Bishop, Sarah Clovis. (2012) "Harmonious Disharmony: Elena Shvarts's Trudy I Dni Lavinii Monakhini Iz Ordena Obrezaniia Serdtsa" Slavic and East European Journal 56.2, p. 227.

As such, the “hollow cross,” as coffin, church, and flying object extending the “avian” metaphor, thus opens into an access point, a “gate” between worlds. Such an opening is precisely that which Mircea Eliade has defined as fundamental to the symbolic construction of a “sacred space” and, therefore, to the realization within the Lavinia’s experience of the mythic, utopian convent toward which Lavinia has been oriented: “On the most archaic levels of culture this possibility of transcendence is expressed by various images of an opening; here, in the sacred enclosure, communication with the gods is made possible; hence there must be a door to the world above, by which the gods can descend to earth and man can symbolically ascend to heaven.”²⁵³ Through this opening, then, Lavinia transforms the space into a “sacred enclosure,” and thereby manifests through the “open gates” of the symbolic “hollow cross” something of the divine connection that she sought beyond the confines of the domestic and collective reality, and in her occasional “secular dreams.” The sacred space that she establishes is thus a final culmination of her spiritual hunt for a reality that goes beyond the boundaries of a singular and limited space and time. In this urge to discover and creatively transform one’s earthly lot, the collection’s various modes of synthesis and emphasis on Lavinia’s inner life, constructed primarily through metaphor and symbol, can therefore be seen as an effort to express a universal experience of the human pursuit to overcome alienation, to express a human essence through the fundamental urge for transcendence and the pursuit of a refuge or home, a place of comfort, meaning, purpose, and proximity to the divine that lies beyond the boundaries of a singular space and time.

²⁵³ Eliade, M. (1963) *The Sacred and The Profane: The Nature of Religion*, San Diego: A Harvest Book Harcourt, Brace and World, Inc. p. 26.

Chapter Eight: Profaning Perestroika: Metonymy and Cold War Myths in Lyn Hejinian's *Oxota*

In one short, striking line from *Oxota* (1991), Lyn Hejinian captures the disorienting Late-Soviet environment of Leningrad that she entered and returned to many times from 1983 to 1991, claiming enigmatically that “The sphinxes all utter glasnost.”²⁵⁴ The vocal “sphinxes” that Hejinian hears are undoubtedly those that crouch along the Neva river by Saint Petersburg State University, a remnant of the Egyptian fervor that gripped the imperial city in the 1830s. Cresting the stone walls that run along the river and echo with the sounds of the Northern metropolis, the “sphinxes”- longtime symbols of mystery and silence- paradoxically “utter” the buzzword of the day, “glasnost,” or openness,” one of then-Soviet president Mikhail Gorbachev’s policies to reform the Soviet Union, introduced in 1985 under the broader title *Perestroika*. But it is a word that Hejinian herself redefines in *Oxota* simply as “information,” such that it becomes a metonymic catch-all for the overwhelming influx of new information, people, and political and economic changes that she and others experienced at the time. As such, the paradox of mute figures of profound enigma pronouncing “information” and historical projects of reform densely connotes a general sense of otherness and absurdity that marked the often-volatile experience of the Russians whom Hejinian would meet there, as well as her own experience crossing the Iron Curtain and the numerous barriers it had come to represent.

In the strange, at times alienating, and ever exhilarating environment of Leningrad, Hejinian’s *Oxota* becomes a wandering description of an American poet’s attempt to cross borders and traverse unfamiliar spaces in pursuit of meaning and understanding without the

²⁵⁴ Hejinian, Lyn. (2019) *Oxota: A Short Russian Novel*, Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, p. 90.

prejudice and biases associated with walls, borders, and geopolitical isolation. The hunt, furthermore, is one of desire and aspiration, which forms the second meaning of the Russian word “oxota.” The poet of Hejinian’s text desires to understand and be understood in Russia, to belong and feel connection. With these intertwining meanings of “oxota,” then, the collection becomes a hunt to make sense and meaning of the world she has entered, as well as a desire to understand and build bridges across the collision and rupture of spaces and cultures so as to create a genuine intellectual community of Russians and Americans in the figurative space of poetry.

In her role as both a literary theoretician and a theoretically informed poet, Hejinian has both contributed to the theorization of metonymy in her work and consciously developed its theoretical operations within her poetry. In occasional poems throughout the text of *Oxota*, Hejinian meditates, however opaquely, on the function of metonymy and its place within her poetics, emphasizing its spatiality and complex relation to time and narrative:

In a metonym

It’s not displacement but dislocation²⁵⁵

The ruble is a poor metonym for Leningrad

The use of a word is no metonym for telling time²⁵⁶

Everything really happens and its metonyms happen as well²⁵⁷

In direct response to this, Marjorie Perloff has read the ways in which Hejinian makes use of metonymy despite Jakobson’s famous identification of the device with prose writing. In her

²⁵⁵ Hejinian, Lyn. (2019) *Oxota: A Short Russian Novel*, Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, p. 55.

²⁵⁶ Ibid. p. 72.

²⁵⁷ Ibid. p. 262.

essay on Hejinian's "novel-in-verse," "How Russian Is It?" Perloff relates the role of metonymy in *Oxota* to the poetics of difference common to other American postmodern poets working under the influence of French and American post-structuralism and, especially in the case of Hejinian, to the influence of Gertrude Stein's poetics on the 20th century American avant-garde.²⁵⁸ Ultimately, the function that Perloff sees metonymy fulfilling in Hejinian's poetics is not, as Jakobson had it, a tendency towards realism and narrative, but is rather a stressing of the "instability . . . of the metonymic world," a rupturing of narrative reality, and cites Hejinian herself as claiming that "compared to metaphor, which depends on code, metonym preserves context, foregrounds interrelationship."²⁵⁹ It is precisely these values of "instability" and a foregrounding of "contexts" and "interrelationships" that form the peripheral poetic reality which Hejinian explores as typical to both her "novel-in-verse's" poetics and the Late-Soviet intellectual world of *Glasnost* into which she has entered.

Hejinian's novel-in-verse begins and ends with a repetition of a phrase laden with significance for the author and the American poets with whom she co-wrote the collective memoir *Leningrad*, mentioned above. From the first line "This time we are both," to the final line, "We are both," the novel creates a repetition that marks the homogeneous space of the text, that is, the horizontal and indefinable world within which one can attain no privileged position to grasp it as a whole. The phrase, "This time we are both," as explained in both *Oxota* and *Leningrad*, is taken from the title of a painting by a young painter they met in Leningrad, Ostap Dragomoschenko. Ostap is the son of the poet Arkadii Dragomoschenko, the Russian poet with

²⁵⁸ Perloff, Marjorie. (1998) "How Russian Is It: Lyn Hejinian's *Oxota*," [Online] Available at: writing.upenn.edu/epc/authors/perloff/hejinian.html. For more on topic this see "Two Stein Talks" in Hejinian's *The Language of Inquiry* (2000), and Perloff's essay "A Fine New Kind of Realism: Six Stein Style's in Search of a Reader" in *Poetic License: Essays on Modernist and Postmodernist Lyric* (1990)

²⁵⁹ Perloff, Marjorie. (1998) "How Russian Is It: Lyn Hejinian's *Oxota*," [Online] Available at: writing.upenn.edu/epc/authors/perloff/hejinian.html.

whom Hejinian was close friends and who fills the pages of *Oxota* as the character “Arkadii.”

The relationship and collaboration between the two poets lasted many years and is the subject of numerous articles and reflections by the poets themselves. The title of the painting, then, became for Hejinian and the other authors of the collective text of *Leningrad*, a significant and layered phrase tokening their intentions and collaboration with their Russian counterparts across the Iron Curtain. In Hejinian’s usage in *Oxota*, though, the repetition of the phrase at the beginning and the end of the novel functions as a marker of the many possibilities for meaning and signification that remain within the homogeneity of the text. The novel-in-verse opens, as Marjorie Perloff points out, *in media res*, and “immediately displays Hejinian’s deceptive flatness: the language seems totally ordinary, and yet it throws out any number of plot lines.”²⁶⁰ And the integration and selection of these possible plotlines within the space of the novel-in-verse, then, hinges on a number of “interrelationships” implied through the coupling within the phrase “we are both.”

There is, then, a definitive emphasis within the text on relationships and intersections that retain and yet accommodate or seek to unify the numerous differences and possibilities that form and shake the “instability . . . of the metonymic world.” And within this singular phrase, these differences are manifest through the ambiguous metonym of the painting referring all at once to a variety of contexts. First, it refers to the coming together of artistic and poetic milieus of American and Russian poets through reference to Ostap and Arkadii Dragomoschenko. Second it invokes the ambiguities of the relationship with Arkadii that run throughout the novel, another element of desire implied in the word “oxota,” and which referentially invite and resist the romantic narratives of Pushkin’s *Eugene Onegin*, with the name Arkadii echoing the Russian form of Eugene, Evgenii. Finally, and most importantly, it broadly refers to the Iron Curtain

²⁶⁰ Perloff, Marjorie. (1998) “*How Russian Is It: Lyn Hejinian’s Oxota*,” [Online] Available at: writing.upenn.edu/epc/authors/perloff/hejinian.html.

context itself, which divides and differentiates things American from Russian, forming and forcing the national identities and ideological enmities that are to be engaged with and in some ways overcome in the course of the hunt.

The phrase “This time we are both,” then, metonymically cultivates a broad engagement in the novel with the longstanding philosophical concern to overcome the distinction between the subject and object in epistemology, the person and the world that they perceive. Yet in this case, or rather, “This time,” the philosophical problem is specifically manifest through Lyn Hejinian’s figure of the American poet and the people and world of the Late-Soviet Union which she experiences and attempts to understand and to some degree identify with, without entering into a colonial relation of imposing one’s own understanding on anyone else. And in so doing, Hejinian attempts to create a new form of unity between individuals, ideas, and spaces: “But what could one predict from the syntax of a desire to surpass the opposition between “me” and “you”/ some manifestation of life as a whole.”²⁶¹ Thus, the opposition which is to be overcome here is not just that of a single relationship, specifically that of the narrator and Arkadii, playfully echoing Eugene Onegin and Tatiana, what in the text she calls a “love not provided with intrigue.”²⁶² It is more broadly an opposition undergirded by that of the traditional philosophical dichotomy of subject and object, yet manifest in the deeply significant and historically determined Cold War opposition between the Soviet and American people, an overcoming of which might reveal some “manifestation of life as a whole,” unbroken by opposition, enmity, and a hierarchy of differences.

But these relationships and this overcoming are never brought to any finality and resolution within the text. And this absence of finality results in the persistent recurrence of

²⁶¹ Hejinian, Lyn. (2019) *Oxota: A Short Russian Novel*, Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, p. 67

²⁶² Ibid. p. 279

fleeting connection and multiplication of differences implied in the repetition of the phrase, “we are both,” as it appears again at the end of the text. Indeed, throughout the novel, no relationship, whether between the narrator and Arkadii or the Russians and Americans, becomes stable and definite. The process the novel describes, rather, is hinted at in the lines preceding the final line “we are both.” “and we will continue to acquire existence/ and to confuse it,” thus confusing the clarity of the whole and possibility of overcoming all difference.²⁶³ Thus, “existence,” the often mentioned “information,” and the text’s numerous relationships all function as things slowly acquired through the narrator’s journey in Late-Soviet reality, but which never become stabilized or brought into the clarity of transparent understanding, the ultimate object of the hunt. Indeed, such a feat of transparency would require a separate, heterogenous position from which to order and understand the elements that are acquired throughout the text, namely, existence, information, and relationship. Yet Hejinian’s novelistic “space” remains homogenous, incapable of definition from an outside position or mode of understanding that would one-sidedly dominate rather than find mutuality in the relation of “you” and “me.” And so, all of what is experienced in the text remains within the uncertainty of brief “interrelationships,” pointed to from the beginning by the temporal marker in “this time we are both.”

Thus, spatial homogeneity of the text, its resistance to hierarchy and equivalence of things, people, ideas within the logic and development of the narrative, is registered and made meaningful in Hejinian’s texts first and foremost through a notion of “relationship.” Firstly, this involves a rethinking of the nature of the subject by resisting any static essentialist approach to selfhood, and secondly, involves an attempted extension of this anti-essentialism so as to overcome the long significant epistemological divide between subject and object. Both of these

²⁶³ Ibid. p. 292

aspects of Hejinian's thinking, then manifest as the "instability . . . of the metonymic world," arises and becomes meaningful through "relationship rather an essence," as Jacob Edmondson has pointed out:

Instead of the self, Hejinian envisions a dynamic entity she terms the "person": "the exercise of possibilities (including that of consciousness) amid conditions and occasions constitutes a person. The "person" is "a relationship rather than an essence," and it is here that the epistemological nightmare of the solipsistic self breaks down, and the essentialist yearning after truth and origin can be discarded in favor of the experience of experience.²⁶⁴

Relationships and contexts, "conditions and occasions," the "exercise of possibilities," all of these are fundamental elements of the fluid and dynamic orientation of the "person" within the world, within both external reality and in language. In poetry this becomes an "experience of experience," a basis of the hunt for meaning and a coherent understanding of the world. This dynamism of the person and world becomes fairly explicit in one poem through an array of oppositions that Hejinian establishes in another poem by again elaborating on the thematic phrase "this time we are both." The oppositions invite one to think of them as matching binaries yet seem to lack any direct balance and relation, and so become relatively disordered pairings that arise thematically and metonymically in the novel without being ordered into the structurally consistent "whole" of a sign system. The oppositions, moreover, are designated a brief temporal status much the same as the emphasis on "this time" in the phrase "this time we are both," limiting the discursive act of opposition as a momentary and insufficient phenomenon:

Leningrad lies in the haze of its sides
It lies as a heroine

²⁶⁴ Edmond, Jacob. (2006) "Lyn Hejinian and Russian Estrangement." *Poetics Today*, vol. 27, no. 1, p. 103.

Now it is both

[...]

By insisting on a comprehension of every word I am free to signify place though not to represent it

So I must oppose the opposition of poetry to prose

Just as we can only momentarily oppose control to discontinuity, sex to organization, disorientation to domestic time and space, and *glasnost* (information) to the hunt²⁶⁵

While the oppositions do not seem to be perfect relations, each relates to the other in a way that does embody some of the chief in the text and its attempt to “be both.” “Control,” normally contrasted with lack of control, is here contrasted with “discontinuity,” which thus establishes a new version of the subject/object relation, or person/essence, as Edmondson has it, which opposes the willful act of “control” as the will to order and dominance of subject over object, against “discontinuity,” here a matter of the inadvertence and seeming randomness of time and event constituting both the narrative and the strangeness of life in a very different culture. “Disorientation,” normally contrasted with “orientation,” is given a specific form, displacing any greater notion of orientation, by emphasizing that the only form of orientation is the private and secure, stable location of the domesticity. It is as well significant for anyone who has traveled in a strange land and marked one’s location and orientation by the domestic world of hotel or friendly apartment. “Sex,” which here can be taken as referring to male/female, to the act, or to what I will explore as Hejinian’s “erotics,” is not something that necessarily has a natural opposite. Organization is certainly something that may stymie or stop it, but they are not opposed, as sex can in many ways be organized. *Glasnost*,” on this occasion, is not truly opposed to the hunt, insofar as Hejinian’s hunt is not in pursuit of a government policy or “information.”

²⁶⁵ Hejinian, Lyn. (2019) *Oxota: A Short Russian Novel*, Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, p. 87.

Rather *Glasnost* is present here as a context or reality in which the hunt is embedded and occurs. Each of these “oppositions,” then, are not opposed, but occur simultaneously, they are “both.”

The author, traveler, or reader’s natural desire for control struggles within the general sense of discontinuity. Domestic time and space exist within a greater disorientation and cannot truly orient it, only represent brief feelings of orientation. The hunt exists within *Glasnost*, openness, and can never fully plumb it, finish it, close it. Sex, following along these lines, goes beyond organization and becomes, in Hejinian’s text, a matter of “erotics” wherein the emphasis on disorganized particulars, details, and contexts, becomes a guiding epistemological feature of Hejinian’s engagement with the strangeness and confusion of Russia with its discontinuity, disorientation, and *Glasnost*. Indeed, the epistemic and ontological language of part and whole, fragment and totality, so significant in Hejinian’s poetic and theoretical use of metonymy, is explicitly considered in the “novel-in-verse” through the language of erotics and romantic relationship: “She longs for something whole, complete, entire, but when she encounters disintegration she greets it like her lover.”²⁶⁶ Despite the longing, there is no clarity, only the ambiguities of details and contexts, an encounter with “disintegration” that is nevertheless “greeted like a lover.”

Critics have approached Hejinian’s body of work as a whole by emphasizing a reading of her poetry through an “erotics, rather than a hermeneutics,” following theoreticians such as Susan Sontag and Roland Barthes.²⁶⁷ Such an emphasis can easily and explicitly be found in

²⁶⁶ Hejinian, Lyn. (2019) *Oxota: A Short Russian Novel*, Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, p. 91.

²⁶⁷ “Susan Sontag’s now famous call for an erotics, rather than a hermeneutics, of art has been often reiterated but rarely heeded (14), and readers still frequently look for some meaning when they should have been satisfied with events. A text such as Hejinian’s does indeed, as I have tried to show, make sense in comprehensible (if unconventional) ways, but its ultimate rejection of closure is like a tease: suggesting, evoking, deferring, suggesting. There is pleasure in that tease as a process in and of itself, rather than as a means to an end, and in *My Life* that process is the focus. Readers who follow the threads but become puzzled because the future would never be revealed can let the inaccessibility of the meaning intrigue them even more and allow themselves, untroubled by the distortion, to give in to that inaccessibility, that fragmentation, and the evocative and provocative play of language

numerous passages from the text, and one short line almost directly echoes Sontag's famous call for an "erotics, rather than a hermeneutics:" "She felt relationship rather than existence."²⁶⁸ The line, given without direct indication as to who, precisely, "she is," emphasizes the shifting and open-ended linkages of "relationship" to the ontological structures of "existence" that the hermeneutic existentialists foregrounded. This notion of "erotics" as a resistance to closure and singularity of meaning, to a passion for rupture and play through relationships and directionless inclusions of detail and particulars consistent with the strained "oppositions" analyzed above, is played out through the text of *Oxota* in a variety of ways. Intentional, theoretically-motivated use of this "erotics" range in the text from an engagement with the narrative forms of the novel-in-verse's precursor, Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin*, with an excitation and evasion of sexual love and 19th century romantic intrigues, through to "erotics" as epistemology, a mode of sensually receiving and coming to know the new and strange world of Soviet Russia without any will to order it into a coherent narrative.

In one of the poems this "erotics" becomes a mode of self-reflection on the body through what could be interpreted as both biological sex and the sexual act. The poem, significantly titled "Away from the Center of the Scene," undertakes this titular move as a transition away from a center-focused depiction of the body as a whole and from the scene in which the body exists as a coherent structure, toward a peripheral, marginalized focus on particulars that becomes metonyms of the body, the sexual act, and the narrative scene. The poem seems to stage a romantic scene echoing the liaisons and intrigues of Tatiana and Eugene Onegin in Pushkin's novel, invoking the theme of possible romance in *Oxota* between the American narrator and the

and narrative through the text." Dworkin, Craig Douglas. (1995) "Penelope Reworking the Twill: Patchwork, Writing, and Lyn Hejinian's "My Life."" *Contemporary Literature* 36.1, p. 79.

²⁶⁸ Hejinian, Lyn. (2019) *Oxota: A Short Russian Novel*, Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, p. 102.

Russian poet named only, “Arkadii.” At the same time, the poem decenters the scene of romantic liaison and makes way for a meditation on the body, incorporating as well a decentralized and non-linear “erotics” of perceiving and knowing:

I caught the new phrase flowing out in a whisper
 Eros will begin again without ever having come to an end
 A bench began
 What talk we took in hand
 But one doesn't care what to do in a rain
 One can say that sex has featureless density
 It's true
 But it's true too- sex is all feature and has no destiny
 An enormous toe, a dusty skin, breast hairs
 Eyes open at the edges- we have eyes between our legs
 Nothing is unblinking
 Where else is your face
 At such an age the features fatten
 Our mouths are not moths anymore and our eyes are not ants²⁶⁹

The poem involves a description of a romantic scene, one subtly invoking the romances of Pushkin's “novel-in-verse” through the possible yet undeveloped relationship between the narrator and Arkadii in the text, which forms some of the only recognizable plot connecting many of the poems. This “romance” can easily be taken as a reference to the relationship between Lyn Hejinian and the Russian poet Arkadii Dragomoschenko. Their relationship, which began with Hejinian's visit in 1983, resulted in many years of collaboration through letters, mutual translations, a film script bearing the Skhlovskian title *Letters Not About Love*, and a deep and lasting influence on one another's work and thought. The scene, then, marks a moment

²⁶⁹ Hejinian, Lyn. (2019) *Oxota: A Short Russian Novel*, Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, p. 122.

of possible yet unrealized sexual contact in an otherwise platonic seeming connection, where an impulse to turn the relationship sexual becomes a moment of reflection on the purpose and nature of this contact, as well as the parameters of discovery that it would entail as an epistemic act of the hunt. All of this is then filtered through a very real reflection on the sense of one's age and the changes of the body and experience that it entails, grounding this open sequence of metonymic connections into a specific existential timeframe, if not of a specific place.

But the most significant aspect of the scene and its relation to the entirety of *Oxota*, is how the poem as a meditation on the romantic scene and its anticipation of sexual contact becomes a moment in which the two individuals, the body, and the world, are revealed as denuded and open to one another in a way that is less bounded and closed than as a relation of subject to subject or body to body. Bodies, selves, and world become open and entangled in a larger set of relations as metonymic particulars in a scattered state. They are not present as enclosed entities existing in relation to one another, but as multiple points of contact that blend self and world into one homogenous space of the text. And in this space, there is no guiding telos, no "organization," no "destiny" for the processes that begin in the poem or that long ago began and now move through it, whether as the words of the romantic scene "flowing out in a whisper," the bench as the place of its unfolding, the anticipated physical act of love-making, the larger context of the relationship, or even the aging of the body. With multiple or absent beginnings and endings, time is seen as moving through body and space, gathering them into the moment as an extreme and indiscernible proximity of features, as "featureless density" on the one hand, or the nagging insistence of particulars on the other.

Body, narrative, and space are therefore comprised solely of constituent and incoherent elements, of details and particulars that are focused on and "missed" for the whole that can't be

grasped and seen from the inside, be it the scene of romantic liaison, travel in a foreign country, or of being in the world itself. And in this position of never being able to step outside of the scene to define it, things (“a bench”), multiple scenes, and the “eros” of romantic love and experience all begin commensurately without ending, without coming to climax, narrative closure, or understanding. The body, the text, and the world are rendered as parts of the same continuum, considered through the same homogenous lens and drift of self-reflection through contiguity and across gaps of knowledge, a continuum wherein each thing is a part of and becomes or infers the next. Each part becomes a metonym for a coherent meeting of bodies, a narrative, and a world that never manifests and becomes transparent from the external viewpoint of “destiny.” And in this way the whole or essence is displaced and the body-text-world is situated exclusively within fragmentary details and pieces that remain objects of focus, fascination, and concern, as mental sticking points or memories of “an enormous toe, a dusty skin, breast hairs.”

But this lack of coherence and emphasis on particulars is not taken in the poem as something negative, rather it is an opening up of the possibilities of experiencing and engaging with the world and others in ways not bound by subject/object distinctions or hierarchies of the senses: “eyes open at the edges- we have eyes between our legs/ nothing is unblinking/ where else is your face.” Rather than privileging the more typical epistemological apparatus of the head, the assemblage of mind, eyes, ears, nose, and even the touch of the lips, or more broadly the old binary of the head and heart, reason and emotion, Hejinian’s emphasis is on the manifold particulars of the body, which themselves become apparatuses of perception “between our legs” and along the peripheries as “eyes open at the edges,” which are considered as equal, or as equally perceiving without final coherence and order, as the head and the heart. In this way the

fragments, details, and particulars refer beyond themselves and relay more information than they alone entail. And as the sexual organs become a way of knowing the world, of feeling connection and relationship, so too does Hejinian's metonymic construction of reality allow for all details and particulars to speak of a greater mode of experience that does not cohere into a meaningful and "necessary" whole. Her method, and the method required to read her work, then, becomes an erotics of momentary contact, scattered knowing and experiencing, of fleeting "relationships" rather than of any ordered understanding. And by means of this method, as she claims in a later poem, "a situation" becomes "erotic at many points," such that "there is sex at intersections and at vanishing points,"²⁷⁰ allowing her to extend the meaning of sex and relationship far beyond any singular concept into a broader, sensually epistemological framework.

It is in these scattered peripheral details, then, metonyms comprising a mutually signifying body-text-world, that the title of the poem "Away from the Center of the Scene" becomes most pertinent. Hejinian's unstable metonymic world is one without the external imposition of any order or destiny that would make the world coherent, one that would assume a vantage or privileged position outside of the text-world. The details and fragments, then, become the basic construction of a reality that resists the clarity of a separate, heterogenous position from which to orient, organize, and locate oneself in a text or world, such that these details might become anything other than endless "relationships," brief points of contact, moments in which "this time" only "we are both." These "relationships," furthermore, lack any definite and lasting coherence, and therefore they fail to form a mode of "existence" as an external and comprehensive structure. Instead there is a mode of contact with the world along multiple, scattered points, each as equal and capable of containing and revealing the world as the next.

²⁷⁰ Hejinian, Lyn. (2019) *Oxota: A Short Russian Novel*, Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, p. 251.

They thereby create a scattershot, unfolding reality without definite horizon or foundation, in which all is peripheral to a literal and definite center and point of orientation. Hejinian's is then a world of homogenous particulars capable of open-ended participation and significance within the text, be it as bodies in romantic union or peoples spanning the myths and physical distances implied by the Iron Curtain.

And, finally, this homogenous body-text-world is the space within which the hunt occurs as a gathering of details, an accumulation of variously signifying particulars. In one poem near the end of the novel, Hejinian describes the hunt with a hitherto absent clarity and concreteness, defining the basis of her poetic method through a depiction of the hunt in a coherent moment of space and dialogue, one which points to the inspiration and origin of the method and name of the hunt as coming from Zina, Arkadii's wife.²⁷¹

The hunter knows the resource

The hunter resorts

She doesn't think and then decide

She follows word to word in words' design

An order of boots, coats hooked near the door, and above on the shelf three carrying bags

A padded door against the smell of cold

A shell of ice on the bucket for garbage

A cat running two flights below

You shouldn't believe for an instant, said Arkadii, that we still live with the gypsies and play
billiards with colonels

He was already a floor ahead

That life is now just a dream subsumed, as soggy as steam rising from tea or muddy straw in
rain

²⁷¹ "It is the poem directly following the poem beginning "The hunter knows the resource" in which the origin of the concept "hunt" is given: "Unextracted paradoxes, breathless empty icy streets, anticipated catastrophes with no one approaching, love not provided with intrigue/ It was Zina who called it *oxota*/ The hunt" Hejinian, Lyn. (2019) *Oxota: A Short Russian Novel*, Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, p. 279.

The hunter in course finds what she gets
 In the hunter's reverse, the witch takes the milk
 The moon takes the butter²⁷²

In distinction from the majority of the poems in the text, this one describes a fairly coherent space and time. It is winter, as it is for most of the novel, and Arkadii is leading the narrator up a flight of stairs that is recognizable as a typical St. Petersburg apartment building, with its lengthy stairwells, “padded doors,” loose cats, and “boots, coats,” and “carrying bags” arrayed right inside the door. For the novel, it is a rare moment of coherence, of “domestic space and time,” which Hejinian contrasted earlier with “disorientation.” In fact, the hunt can be characterized here as a movement away from and back to this “domestic space and time,” where the “disorientation” that is the determining and characteristic factor contours the space of the hunt outside of it. The highly significant pronoun *she*, though, functions in this poem as a similarly productive ambiguity the same way it has in earlier poems. This time, though, rather than metonymically signifying multiple contexts operating in prior poems, this pronoun is loosened to include both the poet-narrator and the character Zina, instantiating here the principle of sameness in the phrase “This time we are both.” As such, Hejinian does not simply draw inspiration from Zina in her domestic hunt for resources in the situation of *perestroika* scarcity and “information” saturation, she makes their respective methods of the hunt equal in what is a rare use of metaphor for her. And through this metaphor, similarity and identity are emphasized over contiguity and spatial relationship through the presentation of a writing method transferred to the target figure of someone hunting for “resources.”

²⁷² Ibid. p. 278.

For both Zina as Late-Soviet citizen as well as Hejinian as foreign poet, the process of gathering resources is a matter of “resorting” and is not something that comes by way of plan, schema, reason, bias, or preconception. It is, instead, something of an intuitive, meditative process in which things are received and recognized as significant while they arise within the field of view, based on the needs and patterns that have slowly become established in the past. This is, then, a precise manifestation of “erotics” as a mode of experiencing, reading, and writing. In this way, Zina resorts for supplies and discovers what is significant based on what is present, as Hejinian does in terms of the particulars, details, and impressions that fill her experience of life in Russia without cohering into a stable vision or conception that confirms or denies any prior ideas, myths, or illusions of Russians and their status as a Cold War enemy. And so, while this process remains highly rational in its intuitiveness, governed by analysis and scrutiny, it is defined by its flexibility, its openness to things without any rigid hierarchy or selectivity in its hunt. It allows for meaning to arise rather than to be forced into a structure, a whole, or any kind of “judgement,” as is described at length in the subsequent poem:

This lack of confidence is as interminable as the converging smells of repetitious days of
 summer lingering in the corners of a room whose windows have been closed despite the
 heat because of a torrential rain that’s buzzing like a nest of wasps furiously humming
 under the eaves, a smell of mint and mud, of warm slices of pepper and monotony and
 oily rags
 Indefinable by definition and incomparably yellow, it spreads, until one finds oneself stuttering
 desperately, as if to evoke the gods of punctuation, begging them to partition the
 vastness, to enumerate objects, to gather what’s worthy of attention, and to separate
 this from that
 Begging, in effect, for judgement²⁷³

²⁷³ Hejinian, Lyn. (2019) *Oxota: A Short Russian Novel*, Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, p. 279.

Neither Zina nor Lyn take, impose, or will, they only resort, follow, and get what they get. Meaning and resources in their respective hunts are therefore not the result of a willful imposition, organization, or “judgement,” but an intuitive cultivation and allowing to be of those things that come into one’s world, one’s text, in whatever way they are discovered or arrive. The difficulty of this process was designated like a sign-post in the fourth line of the very first poem: “we must learn to endure the insecurity as we read.” Hejinian’s hunt, then, is a mode of open-ended, unstable, and uncertain navigation, of finding rather than simply “taking” or imposing from without. The hunt occurs for and within an externalized world of brief and shifting signification, in which the external contexts and wholes to which details and particulars refer do not organize and make a coherent and stable textual world or finalized and “closed” vision of the other, of Russia and Russians. Rather this disoriented world is comprised of numerous particulars as of the body in the earlier poem that can become “dense,” insistently present, but never organized by an external “destiny.”

Thus, the world of Hejinian’s text, to refer briefly back to Eliade’s binary of profane and sacred space, is a positive, poetic vision of the profane, insofar as it is “homogeneous and neutral” and “no break qualitatively differentiates the various parts of its mass. Geometrical space can be cut and delimited in any direction; but no qualitative differentiation and, hence, no orientation are given by virtue of its inherent structure.”²⁷⁴ There is, then, no external “judgement” or orientation which can divide and define, and no poetic alchemy of inner worlds and visions that would bring the particulars together into a synthetic whole. There are only brief periods of familiarity in the comforts of “domestic space and time” and the scattered points of contact on common ground: equalized and hard-fought spaces of mutual understanding when

²⁷⁴ Eliade, M. (1963) *The Sacred and The Profane: The Nature of Religion*, San Diego: A Harvest Book Harcourt, Brace and World, Inc. p. 22

biases, myths, misconceptions, and heterogeneously privileged positions are reconsidered and broken down into the homogeneous space of equal, horizontal “relationships,” allowing for like-minded people, “this time,” for this brief moment of attunement, to “be both.”

Conclusion: The Poetry of the Hunt

For both Lyn Hejinian and Elena Shvarts, poets animated by their own highly unique quests, worldviews, and rhetorical modes of representing the world, the idea of a hunt as a pursuit of something greater and fundamentally difficult to grasp is definitive. Despite their distinct differences, both poets seem to explore women's roles within particular areas of culture through the varied desires of a poetic hunt and the possibilities of a creative hunter, or huntress, as protagonist. There occurs in both poets' work an extensive reflection on the nature of willing and desiring, and on the very ability of poetry to attain its targeted object, to capture the "Real," as Czeslaw Milosz claimed, whether it be a deep and detailed understanding of the Cold War other across the Iron Curtain, or a transcendent connection with the divine beyond the limits of the individual ego and everyday mundane existence.

In each poets' work, this desire is at times sexualized and seen through the lens of temptation. For Hejinian's hunter, there is a subdued subplot of desire for the married figure of Arkadii; and for Shvarts's nun, there is a radical complication of any sexuality and its connections with secular life. But desire in the context of the hunt is only marginally connected with this sexualized notion. Rather, it is primarily associated with the will as aspiration, and with the poet's desire to represent and understand, to feel connection and belonging. Each poet, in their own way, seeks to master their creative pursuits in such a way that they master themselves, critiquing the very nature of desire and the will. As such, while the seemingly vast and antithetical differences between these two poets make of them a strange comparison, their works operate along similar lines. Confronted with an unfamiliar or alienating world, Hejinian and Shvarts both develop approaches to poetic creation in which figurative language, especially

metaphor, metonymy, and symbol, enable a mode of relating to the world that is not contingent upon domination, conquest, and capture. Rather they pursue the objects of their quest through attunement and receptivity, flexibility and a radical, passionate desire to connect with something beyond oneself. And they do so in such a way that their poetic personae remain active, balanced, and engaged as the creative protagonists of their lives and stories.

In Hejinian's *Oxota*, the American poet describes her time spent in Leningrad during the *Perestroika* years of the Soviet Union, cultivating an experience of metonymic particulars, details, and contexts that emphasized an externalized public space. In as much as this emphasis on the fragmentary, empirical, and piecemeal helped break down hierarchies, biases, and myths of the poetic subject and the other, the space that her text renders can be considered profane, homogenous and without any privileging of a particular viewpoint or position. Her desire and simultaneous critique of the will to order, define, and understand this space resulted in a mode of intuitive and a-systematic creativity through an identification with the figure of a resource-hunting Zina. In doing so, Hejinian's persona realizes the significant phrase "this time we are both" and the related desire for a connection across the Iron Curtain, one held by the other American poets in her company and many left-leaning Americans before them.²⁷⁵ Such an identification, then, helped Hejinian's persona better discover and creatively engage with the "disorienting" Russia of *Perestroika* and *Glasnost*.

Near the end of the four American poets' text of *Leningrad*, one of the poets, Barret Watten, questions the worth of the four poets' journey there: "Would it matter in the same sense

²⁷⁵ The Left's desire to connect with Russians goes is connected with the origin of the 1960s political counter-culture from which the Language school of poetry emerged, and is present in the same Port Huron Statement which Ginsburg echoed: "Personal links between man and man are needed, especially to go beyond the partial and fragmentary bonds of function that bind men only as worker to worker, employer to employee, teacher to student, American to Russian." [Online] Available at: http://www2.iath.virginia.edu/sixties/HTML_docs/Resources/Primary/Manifestos/SDS_Port_Huron.html

what contemporary poets would think of the Soviet Union, now that its heroic period has ended?”²⁷⁶ What is the point, he seems to ask, of visiting the Soviet Union at a time when it no longer seemed fated to transform the world and become the bastion of progressive hopes? What is left to discover and communicate aside from disenchantment, even during the liberalizing period of *Glasnost*? For Elena Shvarts and many among her generation, disenchantment with the Soviet project fostered a trajectory beyond its confines, toward the transcendent and eternal, resulting in something decidedly other than that of the revolutionary heroism and ardor Watten is referring to.

Within Shvarts’s poems, written in the spirit of her radically devoted poet-nun, Lavinia, there lies an ardor not of early Soviet heroism, but of a hunt for the deepest and most profound aspects of reality. Conducted metaphorically and symbolically in an isolated space of interiority, of “loneliness, estrangement, isolation,” the nun Lavinia pursues answers to some of the fundamental questions about life’s meaning and a relationship to something beyond it. Moving away from the stagnating and rupturing world leftover by the feats of Soviet heroism, Lavinia strives to sacralize the spaces and experiences described in her poetic meditations. And in so doing, the nun becomes a universalized figure that transcends spaces and historical times through the recognizable depth and ardor of her pursuit. While Hejinian’s text seeks to challenge Cold War conservative biases and the experience of an overwhelmingly unfamiliar world with the active, critically minded position of her creative persona, Shvarts’s persona strives to shirk the burdens and alienations of mundane life- with all its limits of prescribed gender roles and communal duties- and connect with many deep sources of culture and meaning. For both poets the creativity of the hunt became a quest that lies beyond the differences of nation and ideology, of

²⁷⁶ Davidson, M., Hejinian, L., Silliman, R. and Watten, B. (1991) *Leningrad: American Writers in the Soviet Union*, San Francisco: Mercury House, p. 143.

time and space, sacred and profane, and even the specificity of rhetorical devices. And as such, despite their differing origins in the American counter-culture and Soviet underground, Shvarts's and Hejinian's unique forms of the hunt became a common and profound quest for different yet ultimately related sides of the "Real," made possible by their shared language of poetry.

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