Detki v kletke: The Childlike Aesthetic in Soviet Children's Literature and Unofficial Poetry

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Detki v kletke: The Childlike Aesthetic in Soviet Children’s Literature and Unofficial Poetry

A dissertation presented

by

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to

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Since its inception in 1918, Soviet children’s literature was acclaimed as innovative and exciting, often in contrast to other official Soviet literary production. Indeed, avant-garde artists worked in this genre for the entire Soviet period, although they had fallen out of official favor by the 1930s. This dissertation explores the relationship between the childlike aesthetic as expressed in Soviet children’s literature, the early Russian avant-garde and later post-war unofficial poetry. Even as ‘childlike’ devices were exploited in different ways in different contexts, in the post-war period the characteristic features of this aesthetic had come to be a marker for unofficial art.

The introduction presents the notion of the childlike aesthetic, tracing its recent history from Russian modernism and the avant-garde. Chapter One, “Detki v kletke: The Underground Goes into Children’s Literature,” traces the early development of Soviet children’s literature and introduces the work of the OBERIU poets, the “first underground” to be driven by circumstance to write for children. Chapter Two, “‘Playing with Words’: Experimental Unofficial Poetry and Children’s Literature in the Post-war Period,” fast-forwards to the late 1950s-70s, describing the emergence of a more substantial unofficial literary scene alongside still-rigid boundaries within official literature, including children’s. The final two chapters present detailed comparative studies of the work of two post-war unofficial poets from each of the Soviet ‘capitals,’ Moscow and Leningrad: Igor Kholin and Vsevolod Nekrasov, and Leonid Aronzon and
Oleg Grigoriev. All of these poets worked in children’s literature and experimented with the childlike aesthetic in their unofficial work.

With its roots in folklore, nonsense poetry and nursery rhymes, the childlike aesthetic challenges established notions of logic, propriety and order. Through childlike form and content, unofficial poetry could distinguish itself starkly from its official counterpart. Furthermore, unofficial writers who worked in children’s literature could demonstratively ignore the strict generic boundaries of official literature by blurring them through their own, openly childlike poetry. This dissertation attests to the expressive power, resilience and ongoing relevance of the childlike aesthetic in art, while showing the curious intermingling of literary experiment and children’s literature in Soviet literary history.
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THANK YOU!
For Ruth, avkors
INTRODUCTION

The Childlike Aesthetic in Soviet-era Unofficial Poetry

Петя Перов (мальчик 1 года):
Что я могу сказать. Я могу только что-нибудь сообщить.¹

There is a famous story of Nikolai Khardzhiev’s about taking the OBERIU poet Alexander Vvedensky to meet Aleksey Kruchënykh in 1936. Upon hearing Vvedensky read one of his poems, Kruchënykh read a poem “written by a five or six year old girl” and asserted that her work was much better. When they left, Vvedensky, ordinarily known for a total lack of personal and professional modesty, sighed sadly to Khardzhiev: “Her poem really is better than mine…” Khardzhiev concludes his account by noting that “you had to know Vvedensky’s arrogance” to understand the significance of this reaction.² What could have so impressed these talented and critical representatives of Russia’s brilliant and provocative early and late avant-garde? What made a poem written by a child seem better than Vvedensky’s rigorously inquisitive and provocative adult poetry?

Like most early twentieth-century modernisms, the pre-revolutionary Russian modernist and avant-garde movements were fascinated by the artistic and philosophical possibilities represented by the child’s viewpoint. After the 1917 revolution, these

¹ From the play “Elka u Ivanovykh.” Aleksandr Vvedenskii, Polnoe sobranie proizvedenii (Moscow: Gileia, 1993), vol.2, 61.
² N. Khardzhiev, Stat’i ob avangarde (Moscow: RA, 1997), vol.1, 380.
possibilities acquired a political dimension as well. In a 1923 essay, “On Literature, Revolution, Entropy and Other Things,” Evgeny Zamiatin wrote:

Right now literature needs enormous, mast-height, airplane-level philosophical horizons, it needs the very latest, the most terrifying and fearless “why?” and “what's next?” These are the kind of questions children ask. But children are, after all, the boldest philosophers. They come into life naked, uncovered by a single leaf of dogma, absolute or faith. This is why their questions are all absurdly naïve and so frighteningly complex.³

Zamiatin’s praise of naïvely fearless, ingenuously complex “children’s questions” reflects this widespread trend, the roots of which certainly transcend both the avant-garde and the Russian context.⁴ But the implicitly youthful, utopian impulse shared by the avant-garde and the Bolshevik revolution made the 1920s a time extremely receptive to the childlike aesthetic in art and literature. Not unrelatably, this period also saw the birth of Soviet children’s literature.

In poetry, the primary genre for my study, the childlike aesthetic manifests in elements like formal simplicity, lexical inventiveness, loose or nonexistent logic, silliness, naïveté (and its plainer sibling, ignorance) and verbal and philosophical nonsense. The epithet “childlike” is suggested as a unifying term by the fact that many of these features and devices are directly associated with work written for (and sometimes

³ From the article “O literature, revoliutsii, entropii i o prochem” (1923). Evgenii Zamiatin, La boi's': literaturnaia kritika, publitsistika, vospominaniia (Moscow: Nasledie, 1999), 97. Here and elsewhere translation is mine unless otherwise noted – AM.

⁴ While concentrating on the particular interest in the infantile (“overdetermined focus”) of early twentieth-century Russian avant-garde and modernist movements, Sara Pankenier Weld also acknowledges the importance of the child as subject and object for twentieth century developments in art and psychology worldwide. See her Voiceless Vanguard (Evanston, IL: Northwestern UP, 2014), 12-16. Also see Andrew Wachtel, The Battle for Childhood (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford UP, 1990) and Catriona Kelly, Children’s World (New Haven: Yale UP, 2007) for the importance of child/childhood in the earlier Russian tradition.
by) children. The phrase “childlike aesthetic,” meanwhile, points to the more complicated relationship between the “original” (the child and its way of thinking and using language) and the poetry here to be discussed, which uses childlike features as a rhetorical device. Rarely seeking to actually impersonate a real child, the childlike aesthetic gestures rhetorically in the direction of the child or the forms of children’s literature. The childlike aesthetic always involves some kind of stylization.\(^5\)

For some avant-garde artists, the child was essentially a synonym for the primitive, while others were expressly interested in specifically infantile modes of visual expression and language. In any event, the fundamental and ongoing value of the childlike aesthetic lies in the freedom it offers from linguistic, philosophical, artistic and social convention. Such liberation was a stated aim of Russian avant-garde movements, and accordingly, later twentieth-century manifestations of the childlike aesthetic are often explicitly associated with avant-garde art and literature. Some aspects of the childlike aesthetic also overlap with Russian folklore, another major source for avant-garde inspiration (this coincidence is reflected in the frequent use of “primitivism” and “infantilism” as synonyms).\(^6\) Children’s language and folklore alike are, however, marked by their own structures and conventions. In keeping with their priority of ultimate artistic freedom, avant-garde artists tended to overlook or bypass these conventions,

\(^5\) My thinking here owes much to the basic distinction between “primitif” and “primitivism” that constitutes the starting point in Danila Davydov’s extensive investigation of the naïve and primitive aesthetic in contemporary Russian poetry. See Danila Davydov, “Russkaia naivnaia i primitivistskaia poeziia: genezis, evoliutsiia, poetika” (PhD dissertation, Tverskoj gosudarstvennyj universitet), 2004.

\(^6\) See Weld for an in-depth discussion of the conflation of these two concepts in the Russian context. *Voiceless Vanguard*, 19-31.
instead picking and choosing features at will for application and adaptation in their work.  

Enormous political and social changes had taken place in the years between Kruchënykh’s early publications (in the 1910s) and his meeting with Vvedensky in 1936. Yet Vvedensky’s reaction to the little girl’s poem indicates that the childlike aesthetic was at least as relevant for the “last avant-garde” of the OBERIU poets as it had been for the early, pre-revolutionary avant-garde. What is more, this aesthetic can be traced all the way into the late Soviet period (the 1950s-60s “Thaw” and beyond). In the postwar period, the childlike aesthetic appears most vividly in the work of unofficial poets, that is, writers who were either barred from or declined participation in official, state-sanctioned publication of their work. Many of them felt an artistic and practical connection to the OBERIU poets, who have also been called the “first Soviet underground”: the latter designation refers to their having been blocked from publishing any ‘adult’ work in the official Soviet press during their lifetimes. The childlike aesthetic in postwar unofficial

7 This is despite an obsession with authenticity; the latter is attested in Aleksey Kruchënykh’s children’s collections and Daniil Kharms’s fascination with estestvennye mysliteli (both discussed in this chapter).

8 The ‘last avant-garde’ comes from Graham Roberts (The Last Soviet Avant-Garde: OBERIU – Fact, Fiction, Metafiction (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP, 1997).


10 I use the term “unofficial” to refer to poets with extremely limited or no official Soviet publications of their own work (children’s and translated work excluded). For a different term, and a great discussion of unofficial aesthetic and practical concerns, see Ann Komaromi, Uncensored: Samizdat Novels and the Quest for Autonomy in Soviet Dissidence (Evanston, IL: Northwestern UP, 2015).

11 “The emergence of the Leningrad independent cultural movement [underground], including the phenomenon of samizdat, would have been unthinkable without the
poets’ work, then, can reflect both an ongoing engagement with avant-garde modes of
writing and a self-conscious homage to the work of their repressed predecessors.

Another important connection between unofficial poets of the later Soviet period
and their late-avant-garde forebears lies in their curious means of economic subsistence:
while publishing none of their own work officially, unofficial poets were often the
authors of Soviet children’s literature. On the one hand, in context this circumstance was
almost unremarkable: children’s literature and translation had been known from the early
Soviet period as an economic and social refuge for writers otherwise unable to publish.
On the other hand, for writers whose unpublished or illegally-published “adult” work
engaged with the childlike aesthetic, the question of an interrelationship between the two
genres is more complex. As it turns out, unofficial poets’ children’s production is
sometimes remarkably similar to and sometimes remarkably divergent from their
unofficial work. The intertwined fates of experimental, neo-avant-garde unofficial
poetry and official Soviet children’s literature, and the role of the childlike aesthetic in
both areas of activity, is the subject of this study.

existential and poetic experience of Vvedensky and his fellow chinari, who were
effectively the first unofficial organization to exist in the conditions of Soviet
censorship.” Aleksandr Skidan, “Pre-vrashchenie: Poeticheskie mashiny Aleksandra
Vvedenskogo,” Vtoraia kul’tura: Neofitsial’naia poeziia Leningrada (St. Petersburg:
Rostok, 2013), 53.

Existing scholarship has addressed the work of “non-traditional children’s authors”
with an emphasis on the ambiguity of the messages their work conveys to potentially
multiple addressees. Although in a number of cases there is certainly reason to believe in
the double or triple messages of texts in which the “naïve reading” is only one of several
possibilities (see Loseff on Chukovsky, Zoshchenko, Kharms: Loseff, On the
Beneficence of Censorship (Munich: Verlag Otto Sagner, 1984)), I am interested in the
childlike aesthetic as a more fundamental discursive position. For more on ‘Aesopian
language,’ see chapter two.
The Childlike Aesthetic and Soviet Children’s Literature

In the first years after the revolution, the bold and brave child as a symbol of the radical new Soviet state enjoyed much currency. Vladimir Mayakovsky, with his audaciously adolescent, authority-challenging verses, went from being an avant-garde provocateur to the poster-child of the new Soviet art. Mayakovsky’s contemporary (and early advocate of Futurism) Viktor Shklovsky was meanwhile arguing for ostranenie – itself a sort of formalized aesthetic naïveté – as the foremost literary device. The 1920s also saw groundbreaking developments in child psychology and the science of education, as well as the emergence of a new, state-supported, specifically Soviet children’s literature. The realized metaphor of the Soviet state’s “infancy,” and the need to indoctrinate its youngest citizens in a completely new ideology and world order, lent an unprecedented political significance to children’s literature as a genre. Zamiatin’s essay thus belongs to that heady but brief period in which the interests of the new Soviet state were broadly seen as coinciding with various aesthetic projects of the avant-garde.

In the late 1920s, the poet and literary scholar Kornei Chukovsky – also one of the first critics to accept and analyze Futurist aesthetics13 – wrote an influential book on the child’s inventive, experimental relationship to language and the world, in which he pointed to the fundamental kinship between the child’s viewpoint and folklore (“the people’s literature”) and encouraged Soviet children’s writers to learn from both examples.14 Chukovsky’s book reflects the heightened interest in children’s literature on

the part of the still-forming Soviet state: the 1920s saw influential literary-political figures such as Maxim Gorky decrying the deplorable state of pre-revolutionary children’s literature and calling for a new, exciting and educational Soviet children’s literature.

To many, the initial political support for experimental art and literature in all areas of public life seemed like a long-awaited recognition and confirmation of the contemporary relevance of the avant-garde moment, both at home and abroad. (Children’s literature was also in higher demand at this time than difficult, experimental literature for adults, and could provide much-needed income.) The new Soviet children’s literature set out to be dynamic, progressive, educational and genuinely appealing, contrasting itself favorably with both pre-revolutionary Russian production – derided as saccharine and dull – and Western literature for children, which was considered ideologically doubtful (if not entirely inimical to Soviet values). The popularity of the new children’s literature – in its own time and subsequently – owed just as much to the visual artists involved as the writers.15 Children’s books produced in the years immediately following the revolution, illustrated by major artists like Lidia Popova, El

15 Many of these observations apply to visual art as well as literature; as is known, avant-garde art explicitly involves the mixing of genres, and the visual aspect of avant-garde literary experiment was very important (see Gerald Janecek, *The Look of Russian Literature* [Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1984]). There were a number of fruitful collaborations between writers and artists in children’s literature, such as those between Vladimir Lebedev and Samuil Marshak, and Vladimir Mayakovskoy; Vladimir Konashevich and Kornei Chukovsky; Sergey Radlov and multiple writers; and many more. For more on contemporary avant-garde art, see the classic text by Camilla Gray, *The Russian Experiment in Art, 1863-1922* (New York, NY: Thames-on-Hudson, 1986); for a fine selection of early Soviet children’s book art, see *Inside the Rainbow: Russian Children’s Literature 1920-1935: Beautiful Books, Terrible Times*, ed. Julian Rothenstein and Olga Budashevskaia (London: Redstone Press, 2013).
Lissitsky and Vladimir Lebedev, are revered today for their gorgeous and cutting-edge appearance. The artists and writers often worked closely with one another, and the resulting books often demonstrate a syncretic unity typical of earlier avant-garde book art, such as the collaborations between Goncharova, Larionov, Kruchënykh and Khlebnikov on books like *A Game in Hell* [*Igra v adu*] (1912) and *Worldbackwards* [*Mirskontsa*]) (1912).

The very first examples of new children’s literature are the most immediately related to avant-garde and modernist experimentation. Accordingly, they are arguably the least successful as children’s literature per se. Some, like the collection *Elka* [*The Christmas Tree*] (1918), featured an impressive roster of well-known prerevolutionary writers and artists (a mere smattering includes Aleksey Tolstoy, Valery Briusov, Maksim Gorky, Kornei Chukovsky, Alexander Benois, Ilya Repin and Mstislav Dobuzhinsky) providing, meanwhile, an impossibly eclectic mix of rather adult compositions and inside-jokes, visual and verbal alike. Likewise, much of the other early children’s fare was highly and rather bluntly politicized, often violent, coarsely humorous and not specifically child-oriented (see, for example, Mayakovsky’s *Soviet Alphabet* [*Sovetskaia azbuka*] (1919)). Later recommendations on children’s literature would condemn excessive visual and verbal abstraction both for alienating children and obscuring important ideological messages.

16 See, for instance, *Inside the Rainbow*.
Discussions of Soviet children’s literature went hand in hand with discussions of the new Soviet literature and culture overall. Children were seen as the beneficiaries but also the hope of the new nation and ideology: untainted by pre-socialist memories, they were empty vessels waiting to be filled with an entirely new worldview. Prerevolutionary children’s literature was mostly purged, mainly for promoting “bourgeois” values and failing to represent the experience of the proletariat, along with other aspects of the new reality. The priority of the new children’s literature was thus ideological correctness, and the boom in children’s literature was due in part to practical factors like the real shortage of product that resulted when most existing literature was declared unacceptable. Still, the huge flowering of children’s literature in the 1920s also reflected the overall artistic ferment and support for innovation of the NEP period.

Consistent efforts to harness the avant-garde aesthetic for the furthering of Soviet children’s literature came only toward the end of the decade, after Samuil Marshak took over as director of the Leningrad-based State Children’s Publishing House, housed in the famous Singer building on the corner of Nevsky Prospekt and the Griboyedov canal. Marshak had begun working with “Raduga” and other privately funded children’s publishing outfits in the early 1920s; he also founded several journals for children’s literature during this period. Detgiz would be officially instituted in 1933 as the sole state children’s literature publishing house and was also responsible for publishing the


19 Known at different points as DetGiz, Detizdat, Detskaia literatura.
magazines *Chizh* and *Ezh*, for small children and older “pioneers.” Toward achieving his vision for the new children’s literature, Marshak recruited a number of young poets and artists. He sought them out partly in the interest of molding young talent, and partly because he was interested in the technical abilities of the post-Futurist generation.

Many of the young writers hired by Marshak – including Nikolai Oleinikov, Yuri Vladimirov and Evgeny Shvarts – were experimentally-inclined; most were involved in various loose “avant-garde” groupings like the OBERIU. Although Marshak had hired these poets precisely for their skill at fanciful wordplay, their work for children was carefully edited and published only when deemed suitable. Many of the younger artists and writers came to children’s literature not because of any passion for children or education, but because by the late 1920s it was clear that other literary means of employment were closed to them. This also meant, meanwhile, that it was relatively easier to “stay out of trouble” through employment as a children’s writer. For writers like Kharms and Vvedensky, Detgiz was essentially a convenient day-job that provided the means of existence and the crucially important proof of employment. Their relative success as children’s writers, as we shall see, can be seen as a corollary to the importance

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20 The children’s book illustrators too, including the artists Tatiana Glebova, Alisa Poret and others, had been students of avant-garde giants like Pavel Filonov, Kuzma Petrov-Vodkin and Kazimir Malevich.

21 There were a few other “gray areas” of official literary production in which unofficial writers were able to work: most prominent was literary translation, and later in the 1960s-70s a number of unofficial writers and artists worked in the film industry making cartoons and educational documentaries.

22 Proof of employment would remain a key factor in unofficial poets’ ties to children’s literature throughout the Soviet period.
of the childlike aesthetic in their work as a whole, more than reflecting any special individual initiative for creating excellent children’s literature.\(^{23}\)

The Soviet state remained quite concerned with questions of child-rearing and early education throughout its existence, but by the late 1920s it clearly no longer supported Zamiatin’s thesis about the value of naïve and fearless children’s questions. By the time the OBERIU poets found their way to Soviet children’s literature, the modernist and avant-garde experiments and aberrations of the post-revolutionary and NEP years were giving way to a more streamlined and ideologically correct product. The increasingly volatile political atmosphere – the late 1920s saw Stalin’s consolidation of power and the introduction of radical new policies for Soviet agriculture and industry – brought with it increasingly conservative aesthetic standards, most directly expressed in the doctrine of socialist realism (declared official state policy in 1932). In addition to discouraging avant-garde formal experimentation, the new doctrine effectively mandated seriousness of the artwork’s content (its “message”). True, Zamiatin’s vision of the rigorously truth-seeking child had leaned toward solemnity; but other early Soviet proponents of the childlike aesthetic had focused as well on its elements of nonsense, play, hilarity and irreverent humor.

By the early 1930s, nonsense, the absurd, and even humor were largely unwelcome in adult and children’s literature alike. Advocates of seriousness had complicated efforts to create a new Soviet children’s literature throughout the 1920s;

\(^{23}\) Though Kharms is consistently recognized as an extraordinary children’s poet. As early as 1928 Chukovsky singles out his “Ivan Ivanych Samovar” for particular praise in his *Malen’kie deti* (pp. 202-203); see also Marshak’s letter to Makedonov (*Sobranie sochinenii*, vol. 8, 509).
particularly brutal debates raged throughout the late 1920s over the fairy tale and imaginary content in general. As early as 1931, Daniil Kharms and Alexander Vvedensky were arrested and sentenced to a year of internal exile for “anti-Soviet activity in the sphere of children’s literature.” Among other accusations, it was said that their “books separated the reader from contemporary concrete reality and acted in a destructive way on the imagination of the child.”⁴ Although the poets were allowed to continue working at Detsgiz after serving their time, it became increasingly difficult for them to get commissions; and in 1937 the entire office was purged “of anti-Soviet elements” and effectively shut down for a number of years.

Although children’s literature continued to be published throughout the war years and the immediate post-war period, the childlike aesthetic kept a low profile until the post-war, post-Stalin “Thaw” period (1954-1968).⁵ This period saw a resurgence of the “bold youth” as a symbol for a nation reevaluating itself and once again posing terrifying questions about the preceding Stalinist decades.⁶ The figure of Mayakovsky enjoyed a

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⁵ Chapter Four offers a brief discussion of the poems (sometimes markedly childlike) written during the Siege of Leningrad by Gennady Gor. For Siege poets including Gor, Dmitri Maksimov, Vladimir Sterlígov and Pavel Zal’tsman (among others), see Written in the Dark: Five Siege Poets, ed. Polina Barskova (Brooklyn: Ugly Duckling Presse, forthcoming 2016).

⁶ The period known colloquially as the Thaw is often considered to begin with Stalin’s death and Khrushchev’s ‘secret speech’ at the Twentieth Party Congress; Ilya Ehrenburg’s novella The Thaw [Ottepel’] came out in 1954. There is less consensus regarding its end date, but the Soviet invasion of Prague in 1968 is often pointed to as a decisive end to the hopes and optimism associated with the Thaw. For a variety of perspectives on the Thaw phenomenon, see Denis Kozlov and Eleonory Gilburd, eds.,
major revival at this time, with youngsters gathering around his monument in downtown Moscow to declaim new and reclaimed poetry. Soviet avant-garde art came back into vogue, with art exhibitions and republications of many previously repressed artists and writers. The social and political environment of the Thaw proceeded from a much more firmly established order than the one that prevailed in the 1920s, and the avant-garde revival was subject to careful supervision. As the 1960s wore on, however, the expanding availability of Russian and foreign literature in samizdat and the formation of an unofficial community of artists and writers created the sense of a parallel social order with its own aesthetic categories, distinct from official Soviet values.

A number of post-war unofficial poets combined keen interest in the repressed avant-garde heritage with an updated skepticism toward contemporary literary, behavioral and societal norms – the official avant-garde revival, featuring “approved” poets like Mayakovsky, wasn’t radical enough for them. Some of these poets took upon themselves the serious, implicitly conservative task of piecing together the literary process that had been so violently interrupted in the 1930s, while others began to seek new forms of expression in the post-war context; many did some version of both. One of the sources for the avant-garde heritage and for interesting aesthetic devices alike was children’s literature. Although writers like Daniil Kharms, Alexander Vvedensky, Nikolai Oleinikov and many more had been arrested and murdered for alleged anti-Soviet activities, generations of Soviet children still grew up reading their poems and stories in journals and republications. That seemingly small detail of everyday, family life had

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much larger consequences: I argue that reception of these poets’ work was shaped by their association with children’s literature, and that this association was also important for innovative unofficial poetry after the war. For many of these writers, the avant-garde had become implicitly associated with children’s literature and the childlike aesthetic.

By the 1950s, the center of children’s literature production had shifted from Leningrad to Moscow. As a rule, unofficial Moscow poets found their way into children’s literature through artist friends with more respectable educational pedigrees. Thus most of the poets later to be known as the “Lianozovo School,” including Igor Kholin and Vsevolod Nekrasov (to be discussed at length in Chapter Three), enjoyed more and less gainful employment in the industry. Although Leningrad publishing houses produced less children’s literature, even that icon of problematic unemployment, Joseph Brodsky, could boast of an official children’s publication: his “The Ballad of the Tugboat” was published in the children’s journal Kostër [The Campfire] in 1962.

Similarly, Leonid Aronzon managed to publish a few poems in children’s poetry collections in the 1960s. This tradition continued into the 1970s and 1980s: the extremely marginal Oleg Grigoriev saw his first book-length publication for children, Chudaki [Weirdos], in 1971. These poets’ employment in children’s literature was significant for the childlike aesthetic evident in their unpublished adult work.

27 Moscow-based children’s-book illustrators included later well-known conceptualists like Erik Bulatov, Ilya Kabakov, Viktor Pivovarov, Oleg Vasil’ev and others. For more on these relationships, see Chapter Two and the individual poet studies.

It is important to note that the childlike aesthetic in post-war unofficial poetry was not limited to the work of writers employed in children’s literature.\textsuperscript{29} Post-Soviet Russian poetry shows, if anything, even more incidences of a childlike lyric subject than Soviet-era poetry, as Ilya Kukulin convincingly demonstrated in his review of 1990s poetry.\textsuperscript{30} By limiting my study to poets who worked in children’s literature, I strive to underscore the importance of the historical relationship between this genre and the childlike aesthetic as it came to appear in poetry.

A particularly interesting aspect of the childlike aesthetic in conjunction with children’s literature is the suggestion of blurred boundaries between genres which, in the official Soviet context, existed in strict hierarchical order and were kept rigorously separate. As we shall see, most writers employed in children’s literature adhered to and perpetuated this hierarchy, even those who through unofficial literary activity expressed opposition to the Soviet system; Kholin and Aronzon fall into this category. Some writers, however – like Nekrasov and Grigoriev – sought explicitly to blur the dividing line. In this way, a poet’s decision to make his or her adult poetry formally and/or semantically indistinguishable from “children’s” could be another way to express an implicitly political position.

\begin{quote}
Leningrad’s loose affiliation of “Malaya Sadovaya” poets, which included at various points Konstantin Kuzminsky, Aleksey Khvostenko, Anri Volokhonsky and the “Khelenukty” group, demonstrates the wide purchase of aspects of the childlike aesthetic among poets sometimes quite far from any kind of official literary employment. The poet Elena Shvarts, drawing to no small extent on Marina Tsvetaeva, played provocatively with a childlike lyric subject in her otherwise very adult work. The case of Shvarts, as well as some younger poets in the 2000s, suggests that the coincidence of the childlike and the female lyric subject in Russian poetry is an important subject for further consideration.
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\textsuperscript{30} Kukulin, “Aktual’nyi russkii poet.”
The Childlike Aesthetic: What is She?

What did the childlike aesthetic offer to Soviet-era poets? First and foremost, elements like naïveté, absurdity and nonsense open up questions of logic, sense and order in children’s and adult literature alike. As we learned from Lewis Carroll’s Wonderland, nonsense challenges the tyranny of the rational: it questions and undermines established logical systems, while opening up unsuspected pathways of meaning. Through its tendency to disregard or break down order, nonsense is connected with freedom and the thrilling pleasure that attends it. In his study of jokes and the comic, Freud declared that

the child…connects words without regard for their meaning in order to obtain pleasure from the rhyme and rhythm. Gradually the child is deprived of this pleasure until only the senseful connection of words is allowed him. …in its further development the child indulges in [these games] fully conscious that they are nonsensical and derives pleasure from this stimulus which is interdicted by reason. It now makes use of play in order to withdraw from the pressure of critical reason.

Freud allows for this kind of freedom only in the learning child, the insane and the intoxicated. But the broader artistic potential of playing with nonsense has been amply demonstrated by not only Carroll and his contemporaries like Edward Lear and Wilhelm Busch, but also several subsequent generations of authors associated with “literature of the absurd,” such as Eugene Ionesco, Samuel Beckett and Daniil Kharms. Their work

31 “We may […] consider absurdity and disorder as varieties of nonsense; for, as Bergson pointed out in Les deux ordres et le desordre, disorder and absurdity are ‘merely the want or absence of a particular variety of order’ that is the order of common sense.” Susan Stewart, Nonsense (Baltimore, MD, 1978), 16.
shows that reasonably sane and sober adults may also wish to “withdraw from the pressure of critical reason,” toward aesthetic, philosophical and other critical ends.

Nonsense in poetry shows how language can be used as a tool for destabilizing perception and experience overall. Susan Stewart has written about nonsense as a sort of dark twin of common sense: it is “an activity by which the world is disorganized and reorganized,” in contrast to the ordering and organizing function of sense.33 Because of the capacity of nonsense to reorganize, poetry that distorts or dispenses with accepted forms of language and logic can be a “poetic critique of reason,” in Alexander Vvedensky’s memorable formulation.34 The early Futurists advanced zaum (happily translated as “beyonsense”35) as a means of reaching beyond the apparent rules of language. In his book on the topic, Gerald Janecek points to zaum’s potential to “reveal or improve the capacity of the human mind to deal with extreme ambiguity…[to] highlight the open-endedness of language, that language is not a closed system, but one in which humanity is constantly breaking out of rules and limitations it has created for itself.”36 At the level of poetics, Marjorie Perloff has described indeterminate or “undecidable” poetry as that in which “the relationship of the word to its referents, of signifier to signified” is no longer intact: “the symbolic evocations generated by words on

33 Susan Stewart, “Preface,” Nonsense, vii. Stewart’s book presents a typology of nonsense, detailing specific methods or “operations” of nonsense including reversals and inversions, play with boundaries, surpluses and deficiencies of signification, playing with time (including the concepts of infinity and causality), discontinuity, the pun and many more, most of which can be found in the work of the poets discussed in this dissertation.
34 Leonid Lipavsky, “Razgovory,” in A. Vvedenskii, Vse (Moscow: OGI, 2010), 593.
the page are no longer grounded in a coherent discourse, so that it becomes impossible to decide which of these associations are relevant and which are not."  

The childlike aesthetic provided a framework, and a kind of generic motivation, for poetic experiments with the borders of sense.

Freud was not the only Western scientist curious about the multifarious implications of the primitive or child’s viewpoint. According to the early 20th-century Dutch anthropologist Johan Huizinga, poetry – *poësis* – is fundamentally play: “a social game of little or no aesthetic import” (he refers to activities such as antiphonal singing, the competitive poem, the singing contest, impromptu versifying and riddles). In his discussion of poetry, Huizinga downplays the aesthetic or euphonious significance of devices like metaphor, simile, rhyme or assonance, claiming instead that in poetry-play these features are important insofar as they make the poem more or less successful in competition with other poems: “The rhythmical or symmetrical arrangement of language, the hitting of the mark with rhyme or assonance, the deliberate disguising of the sense, the artificial and artful construction of phrases – all might be so many utterances of the play spirit.”

Susan Stewart talks about play as a “manipulation of context” that enables

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39 Ibid., 132. Huizinga also replicates the Formalist critique of automatization: “Whereas the language of ordinary life – in itself a working and workmanlike instrument – is continually wearing down the image-content of words and acquiring a superficial existence of its own (logical only in appearance) [...] What poetic language does with images is to play with them” (134).
the production of both common sense and nonsense. In a 1966 diary entry, the unofficial/children’s poet Igor Kholin mused about children’s poetry in a similar vein:

Children's poetry is built around performance. Children are made to memorize poems. They're made to recite them in front of grown-ups. This has to be taken into account. In children's poetry, rhyme has a completely different purpose than in grown-up poetry, you could even say the opposite purpose. It's bad if you can guess the rhyme in grown-up poetry. In children's poetry it's good. It makes kids happy when they can guess the rhyme. It becomes a kind of game.

Huizinga recognizes poetry as an activity essentially distinct from “ordinary life” and the latter's laws of logic and causality; he sees it as an activity associated more with the worldview of the child: “[Poetry] lies beyond seriousness, on that more primitive and original level where the child, the animal, the savage and the seer belong, in the realm of dream, enchantment, ecstasy, laughter. To understand poetry we must be capable of donning the child's soul like a magic cloak and of forsaking man's wisdom for the child's.” Huizinga is talking about all poetry, though most of his examples come from ancient or primitive societies. His statement usefully foregrounds for us many of the key aspects of the “childlike aesthetic” here under discussion: its elements of the primitive and infantile (pre-conscious); the central importance of humor; and a humor that goes “beyond seriousness” and, in “forsaking man’s wisdom,” embraces the simple and the absurd.

When examining the childlike aesthetic in the Russian tradition, we can observe a rift between the creative inspiration taken by artists from notions of the child, and scientific/quasi-scientific studies of the child (both popular pursuits in the early Soviet

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40 *Nonsense*, 27-40.

41 Note that the word *igra* in Russian can mean both ‘game’ and ‘play.’ Entry for 22 August 1966. Igor Kholin, “Dnevники,” *Zerkalo* no. 41 (2013), 34.

42 *Homo ludens*, 119.
period). The question of logic and rationality proves to be a major point of contention: artists tended to hold up the child as blissfully immune to the dull and monotonous rationality of the adult world (and eminently capable of seeing through/implicitly criticizing it), while science often claimed the child to be a rigorously rule-governed creature, even wont to create new rules where none are evident.

The scientific perspective is evident in a number of studies of the early Soviet period, which sought to elucidate language and psychology in part through studying children. Scholars like Alexander Luria, Nikolai Rybnikov and Lev Vygotsky produced groundbreaking research on children’s language and psychology. In his study *Thought and Language* [*Myshlenie i rech’*] (1934), Vygotsky asserts that “thought and word are not connected by a primary bond.” The meaning of words must be sought in the union of word and thought, he argues, which itself occurs as a complex process. But, as many poets have lamented, this union can only ever come to be in a roundabout way, as “thought must first pass through meanings and only then through words” (Vygotsky even quotes Khlebnikov, comparing his “futuristic poetry with the construction of roads connecting one valley to another”). This consideration in turn points toward the essential mutability of word meanings, and by extension, to “the way in which reality is

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43 It should be said that Vygotsky drew heavily on the groundbreaking work of Jean Piaget in child psychology and development. For more on the early Soviet interest in the topic, particularly the rise and fall of Soviet paedology (*pedologiia*), see Alexander Etkind, *Eros of the Impossible* (Boulder, CO: Boulder UP, 1997), as well as the following chapter.


45 Ibid., 251-252. Vygotsky seems to have been aware of the implications of his theories for contemporary writers: his chapter on “Thought and word” opens with an epigraph from Mandelstam’s poem “Ia slovo pozably / chto ia khotel skazat’…” and many of his examples come from Russian literature (from Pushkin and Krylov to Tolstoy and Khlebnikov).
generalized and reflected in a word.” It is useful to study children’s linguistic development in this connection because children go through prelinguistic and preintellectual phases in which thought and speech are necessarily disconnected; at a later point, the child has gone so far as to conflate the semantic and the phonetic, and must learn to distinguish between the word and the object it names.⁴⁶ Vygotsky thus provides psychological and linguistic reinforcement for the idea that the young child’s grasp of language and thus reality is fundamentally different from the adult’s, and moreover possessed of a certain poetic potential.

In the early Soviet context, these studies were often geared toward the practical end of providing optimal circumstances for education and personal development. Vygotsky also wrote on children’s aesthetic education; he defends the child’s natural need to make art and the undeniable psychological usefulness of children’s artistic practice. Meanwhile, he warns against the “excessive exaggeration and admiration of children’s art”: “this art is of a very specific kind; it is a sort of transitory art that creates no objective values at all and is necessary more for the child itself than for anyone else.”⁴⁷ The work of many contemporary artists and writers demonstrates that these warnings fell on deaf ears.

Even amateur studies of children strove for scientific validity in their language and presentation (as was broadly characteristic of the new Soviet approach). For instance, the children’s literature section of the Leningrad State publishing house was known in the 1920s-30s as Samuil Marshak’s “laboratory.” In the Russian Formalists’ attempts to

⁴⁶ Ibid., 221-222.
⁴⁷ Lev Vygotskii, Pedagogicheskaia psikhologiia: kratkii kurs (Moscow: Rabotnik prosveshcheniia, 1926), 241.
found a new science of literature, the naïve or childlike viewpoint was an important
device for creating *ostranenie*. This “making strange” involved up-ending the depiction
of something, such that the familiar and predictable object or concept be perceived as if
for the first time, cut loose from its sensible place in the order that otherwise allows for
conventional or automatized reception. In “Art as Device,” Shklovsky cites young
Natasha’s first impressions of an opera performance in *War and Peace* as a classic
example of Tolstoy’s use of *ostranenie* toward defamiliarization. While not claiming to
study children per se, the Formalist critics also made reference to studies of children’s
language, which, along with that of madmen and sectarian glossolalia, proved particularly
illuminating in discussions of experimental poetics and zaum. Shklovsky, like
Chukovsky, was an early supporter of the Futurists’ language experiments; the former’s
“Resurrection of the Word” (1914), first given as a lecture in St. Petersburg’s notorious
Stray Dog cabaret, provided an early scholarly framework for understanding the
linguistic aberrations, errors and neologisms of Futurist poetry.

In 1928, Kornei Chukovsky published a study of children’s language and literary
impulses, *Little Children* [*Malen’kie deti*], which directly points up the apparent parallels
between child language acquisition and early usage and avant-garde practice, particularly
zaum (the book includes direct references to Khlebnikov and to the OBERIU poet Daniil

48 Viktor Shklovskii, “Iskusstvo kak priem,” *Gamburgskii schet* (Moscow: Sovetskii
gosudarstvennaia tipografia, 1919), 20-21.
Chukovsky provides a wealth of examples of children’s innate fondness for zaum-like, nonsensical language and soundplay. At the same time, he paints the child as a strictly prescriptive linguist, driven by nature to correct the arbitrariness of natural language – in his view, the child’s language and speech errors reflect an iron-clad logic recalling Khlebnikov’s conception of zaum as a complex linguistic and cosmogonic system. Meanwhile, Chukovsky’s “logical” explanation for the emergence of zaum suggests an impulse to chaos more reminiscent of Kruchënykh:

One time an unfamiliar child appeared beneath the balcony at my dacha, yelling ecstatically and showing me some kind of thin stick: “Unky gimme this stik! Unky gimme this stik!” [Eku piku diadia dal/Eku piku diadia dal!] But his rapture evidently carried him beyond the bounds of human language, because after a few minutes this song of his already sounded quite different: “Unky-gumky-disty-tik! Unky-gumky-disty-tik!” [Ekikiki didi da/Ekikiki didi da!] The poet had freed his song from sense, as if sloughing off an unnecessary weight, and found that afterwards he liked it even better.  

Chukovsky goes on to extend this explanation to cover English nonsense-rhymes, citing a study that traces rhymes like “Eenie-menie-miny-moe” to entirely sense-filled ancient Celtic roots. There is, of course, a strong political dimension to Chukovsky’s book: in keeping with the populist spirit of the new regime, he praises the practical reason and simplicity of folk genres and dialect-speech, and condemns the “philosophizing” tendency instilled in children of the intelligentsia. But he also stands up for the free-standing validity of nonsense: “But the Celts have disappeared, their language has been forgotten, and if a few of the old sounds have been preserved in children’s songs, it is precisely because these sounds have lost their meaning and become dear to children only

50 The book was republished as the immensely popular and influential Ot dvukh do piati (first published Leningrad: Izd–vo sovetskikh pisatelei, 1933) in a sequence of expanded versions between 1933-1955.

51 Chukovskii, Malen’kie deti, 107.
in their free-standing melody.”⁵² This statement nearly exactly reproduces what Freud says about children’s nonsense; it also provides a good example of the use of scholarly rhetoric to defend some dearly held opinions about literature.

The notion that people (including poets!) might want to break out of self-imposed rules and limitations goes against societal convention, as per Freud’s observation: mature adults are not supposed to enjoy contradictions of reason and logic. Stewart argues convincingly for the “threat of nonsense” in all societal contexts: “it is the realization of the possibility that the discourse of everyday life could become totally conscious of its own procedures: it is the dispersal of attention from a purpose at hand, a halt to the ongoing nature of social discourse, and an extreme movement away from any conception of such discourse as natural […] The focus of its attack is members’ confidence in a mutual understanding underlying common-sense procedures.”⁵³ Insofar as nonsense is a major device of the childlike aesthetic, it would seem that the Soviet context would at various points be particularly vulnerable, and thus ready to ward off, this threat: the seamless totality of the “Gesamtkunstwerk of Stalinism” did not welcome the baring of its devices.

The Childlike Aesthetic for the Early Russian Avant-garde

Many aspects of the childlike aesthetic as it appears in literature and art of the Soviet era can be traced to practices of the prerevolutionary avant-garde, particularly the various subsets of Russian Futurism like Hylaea and Cubo-Futurism, but also including

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⁵² Ibid., 108-110. Emphasis in the original.
⁵³ Stewart, Nonsense, 88-89.
the work of Symbolists (particularly Andrey Bely), the Acmeist Osip Mandelstam and other modernists. The Russian avant-garde was certainly aware of their western counterparts’ interest in primitivism, and many modernist European writers’ experiments with language were also oriented toward indeterminacy. In what follows, I will examine the specifically childlike aesthetic of several early avant-garde poets. As we shall see, these poets would turn out to be very influential for later developments in Russian poetry both broadly and symbolically (as “the Russian avant-garde”) and in more intimate dialogue with individual poets of later periods.

With the exception of Mayakovsky’s heavily propagandistic post-revolutionary work for children, the Futurists did not produce children’s literature – rather, they were drawn to non-canonical, “primitive” art forms (those produced by ancient peoples, contemporary peasants, insane adults, or children) as a primary source. As Sara Pankenier Weld demonstrates in her discussion of the work of Larionov, many visual artists of the avant-garde found their inspiration in the drawings of children; likewise, Futurist poets like Khlebnikov and Kruchënykh were particularly drawn to the possibilities for new sounds and perspectives presented by children’s use of language. For forward-thinking artists, the openly subjective and idiosyncratic perspective of the


55 On Mayakovsky’s children’s poetry, see discussion below and in the next chapter, as well as Ekaterina Sokol, Russian Poetry for Children (Knoxville, TN: UT Press, 1984), 152-166. It should be said that for the Futurists, the authenticity of the child’s work was sometimes secondary to its aesthetic force: some of their published “collaborations” with children, like Kruchënykh’s Sobstvennye rasskazy i risunki detei, may not have involved many actual children.

56 Weld, Voiceless Vanguard, 65.
child would be part of a new aesthetic model, replacing that of canonical, “literary”
writers like Pushkin or Tolstoy.\textsuperscript{57}

Among the early Hylaea Futurists, Elena Guro had perhaps the most
straightforwardly modernist version of the childlike aesthetic; her attempts to recreate an
authentically child- or infant-like perspective in poetry sometimes recall Andrey Bely’s
methodical efforts to depict pre- and neonatal consciousness in \textit{Kotik Letaev}.\textsuperscript{58} The most
complete collection of Guro’s work, \textit{Baby Sky Camels} [\textit{Nebesnye verbliuzhata}]
(published posthumously in 1914) contains a whole cycle of “found poems” called
“Children’s jabber” [\textit{Detskaia boltovnia}]. In most of her poetry, Guro cultivated a
markedly “childlike” voice, which often recalls nursery rhymes in its “domestic” coloring
and unobtrusive neologisms.

\textbf{СЛОВА ЛЮБВИ И ТЕПЛА}

У кота от лени и тепла разошлись ушки.
Разъехались бархатные ушки.
А кот раски-ис...

На болоте качались беловатики.
Жил-был
БОТИК-ЖИВОТИК:

Воротик
Дуратик
Котик-пушатик.

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\textsuperscript{57} Rather ironically, Tolstoy himself had earlier recommended that writers learn from
peasant children’s attempts at writing, because of their gift for straightforward and
unmediated expression. See Kelly, \textit{Children’s World}, 456, 531, etc., and Wachtel, \textit{The
Battle for Childhood}.

\textsuperscript{58} \textit{Kotik Letaev} (1914-15), narrated from the perspective of an infant growing into early
childhood, is the most obvious example of the childlike aesthetic in Bely’s work. His
many sonic, formal and narrative experiments link him generally to the Futurists’
innovations; see the chapter on Bely in Janecek, \textit{The Look of Russian Literature}, 25-67.
Пушончик,

Беловатик,

Кошурачник —

Потасик...  

[WORDS OF LOVE AND WARMTH // The cat’s little ears have gone wonky from laze and warmth./The velvet ears have slid apart./The cat’s gone lii-imp...//The cattails are waving in the bog./Once upon a time there was/A little bootie-belly://A cooing little/Fooling little/Fuzzy little kitty./A fluff-ball,//A cattail,//A cat-duster – // A scuffler]

The aptly-named poem is essentially a succession of gently mocking endearments, though framed by a realistic introduction (the cat being stroked) and a fairy-tale like setting of the scene (“[in the bog] once upon a time…”). Unlike most of the other Futurists, there was no hint of the abrasive or scandalous in Guro’s artistic persona (“What would she need slaps and slurs for?” asked Chukovsky), though her poems could be as formally innovative and inventive as those of her Hylaean comrades.

Most of the Futurists and many other verbal artists of the period experimented in different ways with some version of the idea of zaum, a “transrational” or “beyonsensical” language of made-up words or phonetic segments meant variously to clarify the muddle of existing natural languages or render it indeterminate (if not entirely anti-sensical). The term was coined by Velimir Khlebnikov and Aleksey Kruchënykh,

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59 1913. Poeziia russkogo futurizma, 266-267.
61 For more on Elena Guro, see Nina Gourianova and Anna Ljunggren, eds., Elena Guro: Selected Writings from the Archives (Stockholm, 1995).
62 For scholarship on zaum, see Janecek, ZAUM; Al’fonsov, “Poeziia russkogo futurizma,” Poeziia russkogo futurizma, especially 53-60.
though there were fundamental differences in the way the two poets understood the concept. For Khlebnikov, zaum was connected to his infinitely precise Ur-language (alphabet), in which each letter (sound) had a range of specific associations.

If you take a single word, let’s say, teacup [chashka], we don’t know what the meaning of each individual sound is for the whole word. But if you gather together all the words that begin with Ch (goblet [chasha], skull [cherep], vat [chan], stocking [chulok], etc.), then all the other sounds cancel each other out, and the general meaning that these words have will be the meaning of Ch. When we compare these Ch-words, we see that they all mean “one body encased by another”; Ch means casing. And thus beyonsense [zaum] language ceases to be beyonsensical.63

This passage comes from the essay “Our Foundation” [Nasha osnova], in which Khlebnikov explains that ordinary words with their conventional connection between signifier and signified are like toys, rag dolls made of arbitrary scraps of sound – using ordinary language is like playing with these dolls. But zaum language allows for a meaningful connection between signifier and signified, which in turn renders communication more accurate, more logical and more harmonious. His construction of a complex and rigid linguistic (actually, cosmogonic) system recalls Chukovsky’s description of children as prescriptive linguists. “After all, two- and three-year-olds have such a powerful sense of language, of all its inflections and suffixes, that the words they invent do not at all seem to cripple or distort language – on the contrary, they are apt, eloquent and natural.”64 But Khlebnikov’s system was – even more than his poetry – idiosyncratic and unfinished, such that its actual effect is more magically bewildering than clarifying.

64 Chukovskii, Malen’kie deti, 15.
For Kruchënykh, meanwhile, the point of zaum was to make less sense, to complicate and break down existing systems of logic and meaning. He places more theoretical and practical emphasis on this moment of destruction, rather than describing the utopian language expected to emerge on the far side of sense, as Khlebnikov had done. Thus the formal innovations of zaum are linked directly to the audacious positioning of manifestos like “A Slap in the Face of Public Taste” (1912), with its demands that poets not only expand the dictionary with random and invented words, but also express “insurmountable hatred toward language as it has existed until now” and do their part to stamp out the concepts of “common sense” and “good taste.” Children’s language is favored in this system because of the child’s natural tendency to neologism and nonsense, and its ignorance of socially conditioned concepts like taste.

Although Kruchënykh did not attempt to write directly for children, his early publications included a collaboration with an eleven-year-old identified as “Zina V” on a book of poetry and prose, Porosiata (1913); he published a compilation of “children’s own drawing and stories” the following year. Zina’s work takes up most of Porosiata and contrasts favourably with Kruchënykh’s own contributions to the volume, which come across as polemical and heavy-handed in comparison with the light absurdity of pieces like the following: “V karmane u menia byli 4 svin’i. Ia ochen’ gordilas’. Vizzhat

65 “Poshchechina obschestvennomu vkusu,” Poetika russkogo futurizma, 617.
66 Markov, History, 46.
67 Aleksei Kruchënykh, Sobstvennye rasskazy i risunki detei (Petrograd: EUY, 1914) and Porosiata (Petrograd: Tipo-lit. t-va “Svet,” 1913), co-authored with Zina V. Porosiata came out a second time in 1914 and Sobstvennye rasskazy was reissued in 1923.

Zina’s *pièce de résistance* is a tragicomic short story about a bear and a catfish that, plant-like, live happily rooted in an extraordinary garden until the cruel hand of fate ends their bliss.

рос в поле медведь. он пил утреннюю росу, купался в лучах солнца — его вскормила природа. И он был великолепен во всей его красе. Ему природа дала особый знак в отличие от прочих медведей: он благоухал как майская роза. Солнце дало ему подарок — золотой блеск на кончике хвоста. Жизнь его протекала в полном благополучии до 9 месяцев. […]

[a bear grew in the field. he drank the morning dew, bathed in the rays of the sun – he was reared by nature. And he was magnificent in all his glory. Nature gave him a special marker distinct from other bears: he was as fragrant as a May rose. The sun gave him a present – a golden sparkle at the end of his tail. His life flowed on in utter prosperity until 9 months.]

In addition to nonstandard punctuation, freely nonsensical descriptions and plot elements, the story also features a cheerfully unreliable narrator and abrupt, unfinished conclusion.

One of the attractions of the childlike aesthetic in poetry is the child’s apparent ignorance of previous tradition: when Zina V. writes “*ros v pole medved’,*” the word “bear” might just mean “bear” (however physiologically unusual a bear it might be) – the animal is unburdened by literary associations. In this connection, Yuri Lotman noted of Kruchënykh that he was interested in creating “subjective, fluid, individualized meanings in opposition to the ‘frozen’ ordinary language meanings of words.” The child’s apparent ignorance of previous tradition and ultimately fresh perspective was certainly one of the attractions of the childlike aesthetic for avant-garde artists.

68 Kruchënykh, *Porosiata*, 4. Markov notes the possibility that Kruchënykh is the real author, given Zina’s shared fondness for both toilet humor and pigs.

69 Ibid., 3.

The following year, Kruchënykh published a collection of children’s poems and drawings (also, incidentally, featuring work by Zina). Again, this book was not written for children, although one of the poems is subtitled “Imitation of the Futurists,” suggesting that some children were reading and being inspired by the Futurist movement.\footnote{In my view, this is one of a number of clues pointing toward the dubious originality of Kruchënykh’s “children’s” texts. At the same time, some of the children in his collection are identified as belonging to other Futurists, and as such might be more likely to have a particular artistic orientation (the poet Yan Satunovsky claimed that in 1967 Kruchënykh told him Zina B. was Trotsky’s daughter) (Ian Satunovskii, \textit{Stikhi} (Moscow: Virtual’naia galereia, 2012), 623; confirmed by editor I. Akhmet’ev in notes, 722).} The book opens with the following poem by two-year-old Muscovite Lilya-Elena, “publishing under the name Il’i”:

Ноча черная поди,
Юна поди сюда,
Часы динь-динь,
Поя ба-бай…
День поди – поя тавьять.\footnote{Stressed syllables given in bold (in original). Kruchënykh, \textit{Sobstvennye rasskazy}, 5.}

Kruchënykh supplies the poem with clarifying commentary, noting that the stressed vowels have been printed in bold and explaining that \textit{iuna} means moon (\textit{luna}), \textit{poia} means “it’s time” (\textit{pora}) and \textit{tavat’} means “to get up” (\textit{vstavat’}). In other words, the poem’s apparent neologisms are actually loose phonetic renderings of childlike pronunciation, which render the poem’s meaning very clear and prosaic: “Come black night/Come here moon/The clock bongs/It’s time for beddy-bye…/Come day – it’s time to get up.” Kruchënykh then suggests a more radical phonetic rendering for the poem (explaining that the existing version was written down by the little girl’s mother), presumably one that more accurately still reproduces the distortions of lisping toddler-speak, with the first line reading: “Ноч(ц)я ч(ц)ейная пади.” Kruchënykh’s
recommendation that the poem’s orthographic representation be moved further away from normative seems mostly motivated by his desire to obscure the poem’s banal content and create a cipher.\textsuperscript{73} This tendency seems to justify detailed analysis of some of Kruchënykh’s own zaum poems, such as the notorious “dyr bul shchyl,” as containing the skeleton of some fixed meaning rather than being “completely beyonsensical” as advertised.\textsuperscript{74}

Khlebnikov also placed a high premium on actual children’s writing: he begged publisher Mikhail Matiushin to include two pastoral poems by “thirteen-year-old Militsa from Ukraine” in the 1914 collection \textit{A Trap for Judges} [\textit{Sadok sudei}].\textsuperscript{75} Chukovsky writes that in the course of his research on children’s language, he wrote down a great deal of “children’s beyonsensical poems” for Khlebnikov, “who regarded them with great respect.”\textsuperscript{76} In his efforts toward creating a universal \textit{Ur}-language, Khlebnikov sought its roots in the speech patterns of child and uneducated speakers. Furthermore, Khlebnikov’s own poetry abounds in strikingly childlike features on the level of grammar, logic and worldview. As Yuri Tynianov noted:

\begin{quote}
The child’s viewpoint [\textit{prizma}] and infantilism of the poetic word proclaimed themselves in his poetry not through “psychology” but in its very elements, in the smallest phrasal and verbal segments. The child and the primitive were a new face
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{73} Although the interest in primitivism meant that some avant-garde artists appreciated precisely banality, as in the text accompanying some of Mikhail Larionov’s paintings (for a discussion of the latter, see Weld, \textit{Voiceless Vanguard} 41-50).

\textsuperscript{74} See Janecek’s chapter on “dyr bul shchyl” in \textit{ZAUM}, 49-69.

\textsuperscript{75} Account reproduced, among other places, in A. Kobrinskii, \textit{Poetika OBERIU v kontekste russkogo literaturnogo avangarda} (Moscow: Izd-vo Moskovskogo kul’turologicheskogo lytsieia, 2000), vol. I, 121. Militsa’s poems are rather pedestrian but it is easy to identify the features that attracted Khlebnikov: naïvete, simplicity and charmingly inept handling of literary commonplaces.

\textsuperscript{76} Chukovskii, \textit{Malen’kie deti}, 106.
for poetry, one that suddenly brought the fixed “norms” of word and meter into collision. The childlike syntax, the infantile “vot,” the pinning-down of fleeting and non-obligatory successions of verbal series – all these devices struggled with the uttermost naked honesty against that dishonest literary phrase that had grown distant from people and the present moment.\footnote{Yuri Tynianov, “О Khlebnikove,” in \textit{Sobranie sochinenii V. Khlebnikova}, vol.1 (Leningrad: Izd. pisatelei v Leningrade, 1928), 23.}

The huge influence of Khlebnikov’s work on subsequent experimental poets, but also the ambiguity and confusion that still plague scholarship on Khlebnikov’s work, have much to do with its childlike qualities. Markov calls Khlebnikov’s frequent elevation of “pariahs of literature” like the palindrome and the children’s riddle to pathos-filled heights a weak point in his work, as well as his tendency to use rhymes “precise to the point of banality” and abrupt conclusions.\footnote{Vladimir Markov, “O Khlebnikove (popytka apologii i soprotivleniiia),” in \textit{Sobranie sochinenii v trekh tomakh}, vol.1 (St. Petersburg: Akademproekt, 2001), 6-40 (32, 25).} But these elements are precisely what Tynianov has in mind when he talks about a “new face for poetry,” a new set of aesthetic priorities. The following excerpt from the long poem “Zangezi” exemplifies Markov’s concerns:

\begin{verbatim}
Эр, Ка, Эль и Гэ —
Воины азбуки —
Были действующими лицами этих лет,
Богатырями дней.
[...]
И тщетно Ка несло оковы, во время драки Гэ и Эр,
Гэ пало, срубленное Эр,
И Эр в ногах у Эля!\footnote{Khlebnikov, \textit{Tvoreniia}, 479-480.}
\end{verbatim}

\[Er, Ka, El and Ge —/Warriors of the alphabet/Were the actors of those years,/The bogatyr's of days/[...]/And it was in vain that Ka wore chains, during the fight of Ge and Er;/Ge fell, cut down by Er;/And Er was at the feet of El!\]
The heroic vein of Khlebnikov’s descriptions of battle is undercut by the somewhat silly associations evoked by the symbolically named alphabet-wARRIORS. Similarly, the following excerpt from “Razin” (1920) shows the martial theme in combination with the faintly ridiculous restrictions of the palindrome.

Шишака шиш
У сел меч умер дремучем лесу.
К
Городу судорог
Топора ропот
Летел.
Шорох хорош.
Щелка — клец.
Мор-те, ветром.
А палача лапа\(^80\)

[The flipped bird’s bird/The sword died in ancient forest by the village/To/The city of convulsions/The clatter of axe/Flew./The rustle is fine./A chink is a tick./A plague on you, by wind./But the executioner’s paw!]

Alexander Zholkovsky also has in mind stylistic collisions when he refers to Khlebnikov’s “bad writing” (graphomania) as a primary device used toward challenging and breaking down traditional literary techniques and canons.\(^81\) The fact that Markov and Zholkovsky can accuse Khlebnikov of performing ineptitude (even while acknowledging his greatness and place in the canon of Russian literature) suggests that the “revolution” of the Russian avant-garde did not bring about a total paradigm shift (a hypothesis borne out by the ongoing relevance of neo-avant-garde practice, as we shall see in subsequent chapters). At the same time, Zholkovsky basically concurs with Tynianov: Khlebnikov’s

\(^{80}\) Ibid., 284.

\(^{81}\) A. Zholkovskii, “Grafomanstvo kak priem,” Bluzhdaiushchie sny i drugie raboty (Moscow: Nauka-Vostochnaia literatura, 1994), 54-68.
poetry uses the childlike aesthetic – “childlike syntax, the infantile vot” and seemingly unmotivated diction – to find a new way for poetry to do its work.

Contemporaries linked Kruchënykh’s interest in the work of children to his own consciously performed, capricious “little-boy” persona (which provided a certain behavioral motivation for his aesthetic provocations). The portrait of Khlebnikov conveyed in the poet’s particularly vivid biographical legend also contributes to a certain fusion of the childlike features of his poetry and his personage. Vladimir Alfonsov suggests a psychological-biographical explanation for the overall tendency toward contradiction in his poetry: “‘Eurasia’ (as a literal junction, border, joining-point) was his childhood home, and Khlebnikov, in his own way a wholly undivided person, had no need to ‘abandon’ or repudiate his childhood.”

The childlike aesthetic in poetry has often been ‘explained’ with reference to the personality of the poet – another bid for authenticity, but one that subsumes the aesthetic function of childlike elements. For Khlebnikov, children’s language was a source of primeval wisdom; this attitude of the earnest pupil should explain why he never thought of writing for children. Meanwhile, his beloved banal or “poor” rhymes, abrupt endings and seeming nonsense would resurface a generation later in the adult and children’s work of the OBERIU poets.

Markov asserts that the interest in infantilism and primitivism is most characteristic of the early Hylaea stage of Futurism, to be subsequently overshadowed by

82 Al’fonsov, Poetika russkogo futurizma, 39.
83 “Poor” or overtly forced rhymes would become a crucial device in Vvedensky’s poetry; consider the poet’s dictum “respect the poverty of language” [uvazhai bednost’ iazyka], in “Nekotoroe kolichestvo razgovorov,” Sobranie sochinenii v 2-kh tomakh, vol.1, 196.
the louder, more aggressively “modern” urbanist orientation of the Cubo-Futurists.84 Although virtually contemporaneous with Guro, Khlebnikov and Kruchënykh, the Burliuk brothers and Vladimir Mayakovsky demonstrated something closer to the juvenile-delinquent aesthetic. When around 1914 the Futurists became a public and to some extent nationwide sensation, it was largely due to the Burliuks and Mayakovsky placing as much emphasis on public scandal and buffoonery as on innovative developments in poetry. Their verses could be hard to appreciate outside of the lively circumstances of their clowning around with costumes, face-paint, props, assaults on the audience, etc. At the same time, these escapades were calculated to have approximately the same effect on societal mores as Khlebnikov’s language experiments were to have on the norms of poetry-writing: the emphasis in both was on anti-aestheticism, coarseness and a shaking-up of the old order. The rude and youthful viewpoint, ignorant of or at least unencumbered by social convention, proved just as useful behaviorally as formally. What is more, the two aspects were linked: lay audiences came for the circus but listened to the poems of both brash Mayakovsky and shy, ill-spoken Khlebnikov.

The infantile and juvenile-delinquent lines of the Futurist avant-garde are brought together through unifying concepts like zaum: “Words die, the world is ever young.”85 Kruchënykh was perhaps the most consistent practitioner of zaum as indeterminate language (to use Janecek’s definition). Janecek shows how exhaustive analysis of Kruchënykh’s more obscure texts will hint at possible interpretations, but the point is less

84 Markov, History, 36-37. Markov includes interest in the work of actual children and uneducated adults.
about finding a solution than about the intentional absence of fixed meaning (or the effective delay of the reader’s arrival at that meaning, however provisional). Janecek’s definition of zaum coincides neatly with one of Susan Stewart’s definitions of nonsense (‘an undermining of the basis of the procedures used in manufacturing common sense’).\textsuperscript{86} as Janecek says of Kruchënykh’s poem “Dyr bul shchyl,” the poem’s “meaning, even for the author, is indeterminate, indefinite, deliberately undefined and undefinable.”\textsuperscript{87} In addition to basic indeterminacy, both Stewart and Janecek emphasize the self-reflexivity of zaum/nonsense, its resistance to “integrity and univocality” and “diffuse identity,” all of which points to the paradox of any definition by exclusion or closure.\textsuperscript{88} These features are all present in the conception of the childlike aesthetic here described.

Thus the prerevolutionary literary and artistic experimenters found a host of ways to use the child, but children did not yet have much use for them – even when avant-garde exhibitions displayed children’s drawings or writers published children’s poems, the children themselves were not the intended audience. The idea of the usefulness of avant-garde devices for children’s art and literature would be put into practice only after the 1917 revolution.

\textbf{The Childlike Aesthetic in Soviet Times}

\textsuperscript{86} Stewart, \textit{Nonsense}, 89.
\textsuperscript{87} Janecek, \textit{ZAUM}, 53.
\textsuperscript{88} The aversion toward closure and completion is a key element in subsequent manifestations of the childlike aesthetic, perhaps most memorably and consistently expressed in Daniil Kharms’ ubiquitous conclusion \textit{BCÊ}. 
Later avant-garde literary experiments continued to demonstrate a childlike aesthetic, but were no longer directly inspired by the work of children. Indeed, we find something more like scorn toward children in the work of many later writers: for instance, among the OBERIU poets, Kharms makes overt, extravagant declarations of child-hatred; more subtly, Vvedensky produced some very poor, blatantly propagandistic children’s writing. From this point on, the childlike aesthetic breaks free of its (already tenuous) ties to actual children, even as political and economic circumstance tied its practitioners to producing work for children.

Established in the early 1930s, the political status of children’s literature as a refuge for unofficial writers remained in force for most of the rest of the Soviet period. After the Terror of the late 1930s and the dark years of the Second World War, children’s literature once again employed many writers otherwise considered politically unsound. During the Thaw period, the rehabilitation and revival of avant-garde aesthetics was reflected in children’s literature as elsewhere in contemporary Soviet culture. The fact that experimental poets were still limited to working in this area meant that children’s literature often demonstrated more examples of avant-garde and experimental aesthetics than other officially published literature. A number of unofficial writers and artists of this period, whose work circulated only through clandestine channels, worked and were even well known as official children’s writers and illustrators: Grigorii Ball, Erik Bulatov, Oleg Grigoriev, Igor Kholin, Ilya Kabakov, Yuri Koval’, Viktor Pivovarov, Genrikh

89 Although Kharms expresses a clearly related interest in “foolishness [glupost’] and “natural thinkers” [estestvennye mysliteli] (“people ‘from the street,’ particularly those with a certain inherent alogism in their style of thinking […]”). See L. Lipavskii, “Razgovory,” in Vvedenskii, Vse, 583 [n. 653].
Sapgir, and many others. The relationship to this kind of work remained the same as for previous generations: it was first and foremost a source of income for individuals barred from publishing or showing work in official venues. At the same time, the rediscovery of children’s poetry by OBERIU poets around this time was hugely influential, and led to a sense of both aesthetic and institutional solidarity on the part of the new generation.

To the extent that the childlike aesthetic is associated with breaking down boundaries and normative ways of thinking and using language, it stands to reason that different kinds of radical literary practice would emerge in the markedly different political, social and literary norms prevailing in the Soviet 1960s. Official Soviet aesthetics during the Thaw period (cautiously) welcomed the image of optimistic, highly principled youth, and supported a (supervised) ‘return to playfulness’ in children’s literature. But naivete, alogism and nonsense remained for the most part proscribed in official and approved literary practice.

Even as the post-war period was a time of new beginnings, there as a strong impulse toward the recovery, rehabilitation and revival of an artistic process widely perceived as snuffed out before its time. For unofficial writers, this legacy included writers like the OBERIU poets, whose adult work would not be published until perestroika. It is thus no accident that the work of many unofficial writers emerging at this time was distinctly marked by a childlike aesthetic: in addition to the intrinsic qualities that had attracted earlier experimental artists, this aesthetic had also become attractive through its historically-determined value in the Soviet context.

In his 1928 book *Little Children*, Chukovsky asserts that the linguistic errors and spontaneously invented constructions of young children – like the quaint peculiarities and
divergences of non-standard, “folkloric” or provincial dialect – are a source for a higher truth “hidden in the depths of language” – thus, children’s writers should “learn from children, learn from the people.”90 As early as 1923, however, Evgenii Zamiatin had questioned the value of higher truth: “The answers [to nonsensical, ‘children’s’ questions] might be incorrect, the philosophy might be erroneous – the error is more valuable than high truth: high truth is machine-like, the error is alive; high truth comforts people while the error unsettles them.”91 Zamiatin’s statement brings together the childlike, the erroneous and nonsense as a powerful trio opposed to automatized, irrefutable and predetermined certitudes – an opposition crucial to the argument of this dissertation.92

Plan of the Dissertation

The first chapter takes up the tumultuous early days of Soviet children’s literature and the phenomenon of unofficial writers working as official children’s book authors. Scraping by in this capacity, Leningrad’s OBERIU poets – Daniil Kharms, Alexander Vvedensky and Nikolai Zabolotsky – wrote unpublished adult work brimming with the childlike aesthetic, even as their children’s poetry was sometimes devoid of such elements. Through a comparative analysis of adult and children’s poems, I show the significance of the childlike aesthetic in each poet’s work, as well as their different practical attitudes to their métier. I also demonstrate differences in the form and meaning

90 “Uchit’sia u detei, uchit’sia u naroda” is the title of the last chapter in Chukovsky’s Ot dvukh do piati (210-217).
91 Zamiatin, Ja boious’, 98.
92 Zamiatin’s statement also calls to mind Futurist paeanst to the typo, the mistake and the purposefully unfinished work of art. See Khlebnikov, “Nasha osnova,” Tvoreniia, 624.
of the childlike aesthetic, as inherited from the early avant-garde, in the OBERIU poets’ work.

The second chapter leaps ahead to discuss the literary situation of the postwar, post-Stalin period, through the 1970s. After the years of the Terror and the Second World War, children’s literature experienced a renaissance of both form and content. Yet the model of children’s literature being produced by unofficial, otherwise unpublished writers continued unchanged. At the same time, the 1960s saw the emergence of unofficial literary communities, made up of individuals aware of their experimental work as a conscious alternative to official Soviet literature. Part of the renaissance in children’s literature was the republication of classic children’s books by poets like Daniil Kharms; adult work by Kharms and Vvedensky also began circulating in samizdat in the mid-1960s. Contemporary unofficial poets working in children’s literature thus felt a practical connection with their avant-garde predecessors; this sense of connection adds another layer of significance to the childlike aesthetic as it appears in their work. For later unofficial poets, the childlike aesthetic retained its intrinsic qualities (naïve, wondering, playful, alogical), while gaining historically and politically conditioned referential meaning; they could and did play with both levels.

The third and fourth chapters present in-depth readings of four postwar unofficial poets, divided by home city: Igor Kholin and Vsevolod Nekrasov, of Moscow, and Leonid Aronzon and Oleg Grigoriev, of Leningrad. All four poets’ work can be characterized as experimental and engaged with the poets and poetics of the Russian avant-garde. The poets were also all employed in some capacity in Soviet children’s literature, from Kholin’s solidly respectable several dozen books published in the 1960s-
70s, to Grigoriev’s highly-regarded three volumes, Nekrasov’s work as a book reviewer and his multiple rejected children’s book manuscripts, and finally Aronzon’s ‘unofficial’ children’s poems (barring a paltry few published in children’s journals). The studies of their work present comparative analysis of their children’s and adult poetry; I also incorporate some of the poets’ own reflections on the phenomenon of children’s literature. The studies show four different manifestations of the childlike aesthetic as a major poetic phenomenon, one that moreover affiliates these poets with their avant-garde predecessors and with the legacy of repressed art.
CHAPTER ONE

*Detki v kletke:* The Underground Goes into Children’s Literature

The early Soviet period (1918-1941) saw the development of an entirely new Soviet children’s literature – it was new in the Russian context but also highly innovative for contemporary children’s literature generally. While the larger project of creating a new Soviet literature built on the existing Russian and international literary canon, even as it reassessed it exhaustively, it was widely believed that the new children’s literature had to start from scratch: the existing selection – Russian and foreign alike – was considered almost completely unacceptable on both ideological and aesthetic grounds.

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1. *Detki v kletke* is the name of a very popular children’s book about baby zoo animals by Samuil Marshak, illustrated by Evgenii Charushin (first published in Leningrad, 1923).


3. It should be said that repackaged prerevolutionary literature was sold quite successfully during the NEP period – see Maria Balina and Larisa Rudova, “Preface,” *Russian Children’s Literature and Culture* (NY/London: Routledge, 2008), 6-7. And even at the ideological level, Lunacharsky, Gorky and Marshak all argued at various points that not all prerevolutionary children’s literature should be abandoned. See, for instance, A.V. Lunacharskii, “Puti detskoj knigi,” *Knigi detiam*, no. 1 (1930), 4-15.
Avant-garde conceptions of the “childlike aesthetic” and opinions about its place in children’s literature were also subject to radical reassessment at this time.

In the rosy light of hindsight, early Soviet children’s literature appears, like other areas of artistic production, to reflect the happy, heady convergence of the building of a brand-new state and the experimental artistic energy of the pre-revolutionary artistic and literary avant-garde. However, this convergence occurred variously over the course of the years following the revolution, and by the late 1920s, a hierarchy could be discerned in which avant-garde and modernist writers and artists were rather close to the bottom. They ultimately played a limited role in the actual establishment and ongoing development of children’s literature as an official institution. As we shall see, the brief association of experimental poetry with children’s literature in the early Soviet period was more significant for later developments in ‘adult’ poetry than it was for the children’s literature per se.

By the late 1920s, Soviet children’s literature had become an established institution. Samuil Marshak was directing the children’s-book section of the Leningrad-based state publishing house (Dtgiz) and forging ahead with his vision of the new Soviet children’s literature. Toward this, Marshak had recruited a number of young poets and artists – he sought out youth partly in the interest of molding young talent, and partly because he was interested in the technical abilities of the post-Futurist generation. A number of the young writers, who included Nikolai Oleinikov, Alexander Vvedensky, Daniil Kharms, Yuri Vladimirov, Evgeny Shvarts and Nikolai Zabolotsky, were experimentally-inclined; many of them were involved in various loose “avant-garde” groupings, including the OBERIU group (Kharms, Vvedensky and Zabolotsky). The
younger children’s book illustrators too, who included Tatiana Glebova, Alisa Poret, Evgeniia Safonova, Vladimir Sterligov and others, had been students of avant-garde classics like Pavel Filonov, Kuzma Petrov-Vodkin and Kazimir Malevich. Though often hewing necessarily close to the party line in terms of story, the children’s books produced by these individuals regularly demonstrated striking formal features both visually (illustrations) and verbally (lively, bright and colorful verses). This aesthetic was a direct legacy of the Futurists’ experiments with the childlike aesthetic, and came to be essentially representative – even, a stereotype – of early Soviet children’s literature.

Despite Marshak’s enthusiasm for children’s literature and his insistence that its production required just as much literary skill as adult literature, even at this time children’s literature was seen as less prestigious and important than writing for adults. Although many of the artists and writers in Marshak’s “Academy” felt a strong aesthetic affinity with the pre-revolutionary avant-garde and had direct ties to its representatives, they were young enough to have a more cynical perspective on Soviet society and attitudes toward artistic production. To wit, poets like these came to children’s literature not because of any passion for children or education, but because by the late 1920s it was clear that other literary means of employment were closed to them. As Lydia Ginzburg wrote at the end of 1929, “For many people now, historical novels and children’s books are a means of writing under one’s breath [vpolgolosa]. The self-restriction of these genres calms the conscience of the writer who has not yet said everything he intends to say to the world.”

Ginzburg’s description of writers biding their time and holding back

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would stand for the rest of the Soviet period, along with the idea of children’s literature as a kind of half-fledged literary activity.

The low status of children’s literature also meant that it was relatively easier to “stay out of trouble” through employment as a children’s writer.\(^5\) Children’s literature came to be seen as a haven for writers otherwise troubled by conflict with the censors: paradoxically, one and the same writer could be barred from adult publications while being allowed to write and officially publish literature for children, sometimes remarkably innovative. “In the 30s and 40s the epic novel occupied the top of the genre-pyramid, while ‘entertaining’ comedies and children’s things were relegated to the very bottom… The vigilance of censorship was also allotted in strict accordance with these hierarchies.”\(^6\) Unfortunately, in the years of Stalin’s “Terror” even the bottom of the pyramid was occasionally subject to serious scrutiny, as is evidenced by the arrests, imprisonments and executions of many of the writers here discussed.

The childlike aesthetic thus went from being an avant-garde inspiration, evoking freedom from logical and societal rules, to a set of enforced conventions marking a top-down official genre. At the same time, low status rendered children’s literature a space of greater aesthetic freedom than other areas of literary production in the Soviet period – a

\(^5\) There were a few other “gray areas” of official literary production in which unofficial writers were able to work: most prominent was literary translation. Later in the 1960s-70s a number of unofficial writers and artists (including Leonid Aronzon, discussed in what follows) also worked in the film industry making cartoons and educational documentaries.

freedom some writers embraced, regardless the real risks present.\footnote{Consider the fact that the Kharms and Vvedensky returned to children’s literature after being convicted and exiled for alleged anti-Soviet activities in that area.} Meanwhile, the adult work of the OBERIU poets at this time demonstrates many aspects of the childlike aesthetic, including devices important for the early avant-garde (such as childlike lexicon, syntax and nonsense language) and innovations related to the younger poets’ work in children’s literature (such as the forms of children’s poetry) and otherwise (the alogical).

This chapter explores the early development of Soviet children’s literature, with a view to its longer-term implications as an institution, and the development of the childlike aesthetic in both the children’s and adult work of the OBERIU poets Daniil Kharms, Alexander Vvedensky and Nikolai Zabolotsky. Their status as official Soviet children’s poets, in conjunction with the childlike aesthetic as developed in their unofficial work, would have long-reaching consequences for subsequent generations of Soviet unofficial poets.

The Early Days of Soviet Children’s Literature

Futurists like Aleksey Kruchënykh, Velimir Khlebnikov and Elena Guro had been keenly interested in the work of actual children; however, none of them ever published anything for children. The immediately post-revolutionary examples of the new children’s literature conspicuously reflect a specific kind of avant-garde experimentation: highly and bluntly politicized, they featured a lot of violence and coarse humor, and were child-oriented in a rather abstract way (see Mayakovsky’s \textit{Soviet Alphabet [Sovetskaia Alphabet]}.}
azbuka] or Lebedev’s ROSTA window posters). In contrast to prerevolutionary Futurist experiments with the infantile perspective or childlike alogical language, early Soviet propaganda was interested in primitivism only insofar as it could provide maximally simple and direct presentation of messages.

There were obvious parallels between the “infancy” of the new Soviet state and the educational and entertainment needs of its youngest citizens – virtually for the first time in Russia, children’s literature was taken seriously. But the architects of the new Soviet children’s literature were perplexed by the many paradoxes innate to their subject: on the one hand, everyone agreed that Soviet children needed a new literature, specifically Soviet and specifically for children, that would replace the poor-quality and ideologically unacceptable prerevolutionary variety. This literature would be more entertaining, aesthetically valid and politically responsible. But, in keeping with the relevance and sanctity of the nation’s new political project, it also needed to be serious and deeply rooted in the real world. Debates roiled in the late 1920s over the validity of fairy-tales, i.e. of the fantastical and imaginary in children’s literature. The defenders of fantasy – predictably, writers and artists at the more experimental end of the spectrum – were essentially arguing for artistic freedom, which was coming under pressure in all areas of Soviet artistic production. The conflicts over children’s literature thus reflected the larger and thornier question of the place of a non-utilitarian and non-ideological art in a society increasingly saturated by ideology.

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The latter half of the 1920s was when Soviet children’s literature was taking more coherent shape – as a state-supported industry and an important vehicle for the propagation of state ideology. As children’s literature struggled to find a balance between ideological correctness and aesthetic innovation, aspects of the childlike aesthetic like the silly, nonsensical and alogical were necessarily reassessed and often found suspect. In this chaotic environment, the childlike aesthetic still appeared in children’s literature, but sometimes found a happier home in the ‘adult’ work of poets otherwise employed as children’s writers. In what follows, we will compare the (published) children’s and (unpublished) adult work of three poets of the 1920s-30s (Alexander Vvedensky, Nikolai Zabolotsky and Daniil Kharms). But first, a quick look at the children’s work of some of the other avant-garde poets of the time.

Of the prerevolutionary Futurists, Vladimir Mayakovsky was the only one to achieve success as a children’s writer, and this success was relatively short-lived: with the exception of the aforementioned Soviet Alphabet, he only produced work specifically for children in the years between 1925 and his death in 1930. Mayakovsky’s children’s poetry is a mixed bag. When it is present, the fast-paced youthful energy of Mayakovsky’s poetry for children is the same energy that dominates Mayakovsky’s poetic art as a whole. But many of his “topical” children’s poems are propaganda of the first order and, eschewing “excessive verbal invention,” they are widely considered

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9 Following a resolution of the Central Committee in January 1924. See Balina and Rudova, Russian Children’s Literature and Culture, 9.

weaker and duller than his prerevolutionary work. The folkoric *Tale about Petya the Fat Child and Sima Who Was Thin* [*Skazka o Pete, tolstom rebenke, i o Sime kotoryi tonkii*] (1925) explicitly reflects contemporary political positions while embodying some of the appeal of Looney Tunes cartoons – fat bourgeois Petya, for instance, explodes upon devouring half the city. *What is Good and What is Bad* [*Chto takoe xorosho i chto takoe plokho*] (1925), meanwhile, sacrifices nearly everything at the altar of propaganda:

Этот
в грязь полез
и рад.
чтo грязна рубаха.
Про такого
говарят:
он плохой,
неряха.
Этот
чистит валенки,
мoет
сам
галоши.
Он
хотя и маленький,
но вполне хороший.

[This one/crawled in mud/and is glad/that his shirt’s all dirty./Kids like that/they say/are bad/even slovenly./This one/cleans his boots,/washes/his galoshes/all by himself./Even though he’s small/he’s/certainly a good one.]

In this context, the familiar “stairstep” [*lesenka*] layout certainly works to “make sure that the naïve reader puts the pauses in the right places and thus interprets the words correctly,” as Mayakovsky had explained in his 1926 manifesto “How Verses are Made.” But it seems like unnecessary effort, given the exaggeratedly simple and

12 Janecek, *The Look of Russian Literature*, 228.
predictable content and relatively pedestrian rhymes. Despite its apparently total devotion to the Soviet cause, Mayakovsky’s work for children was effectively banned following his suicide in 1930; it was criticized for “coarseness, poor quality and outdated ideological content.”\(^\text{13}\) Stalin himself reinstated Mayakovsky as State Poet No. 1 in 1935, and the children’s poetry was republished in enormous press runs, but Mayakovsky’s enduring popularity with readers today rests more on his truly ingenious prerevolutionary and early-1920s work.\(^\text{14}\) Still, even Mayakovsky’s children’s poems would be remembered fondly by subsequent generations of avant-garde-oriented poets.

Even books with relatively little upfront ideological content still tended to represent a world with recognizable Soviet characters, situations and implicit values. For instance, in *The Stroll* [*Progulka*] (1930) by Sergey Neldikhen (a primitivist poet who would be exiled as a class enemy the following year, he was hardly a strong representative of Soviet values), the arguments in favor of staying at home include, in addition to avoiding spitting camels and strong winds, concerns about bread and long lines:

– А вдруг по дороге тетка Нюша встретится да в кооператив за ситным пошлет?

[...]

– А если прохожие всю шипучку из синего сифона выпили? Всегда они гуськом около будок выстраиваются.\(^\text{15}\)

\(^\text{13}\) Evgeniia Putilova, *Ocherki po istorii kritiki sovetskoi detskoi literatury, 1917-1941* (Moscow: Detskaia literatura, 1982), 58.

\(^\text{14}\) For instance, a 1963 “Shkol’naia biblioteka” edition for younger readers put out in 100,000 copies by the State Children’s Literature Publishing House does not include any of Mayakovsky’s poems for children. V.V. Maiakovskii, *Izbrannye proizvedeniia* (Moscow: Gos. izdat. detskoi literatury, 1963).

\(^\text{15}\) Sergei Nel’dikhen, *Progulka* (Leningrad: Detgiz, 1930). For more on Nel’dikhen, see Danila Davydov, “Sergei Nel’dikhen: Poeziia i reputatsiia,” in *Organnoe mnogogolos’e*
[“But what if we run into Miss Nyusha on the way and she sends us to the co-op for bread?” / “But what if passers-by already drank up all the soda from the blue siphon? They’re always making long lines up to the kiosks.”]

The path of development of Soviet children’s literature over the 1920s shows the transition from works of pure propaganda, their content effectively indistinguishable from that of contemporary posters and billboards, to more sophisticated fare aimed at supporting a Soviet world and worldview. Although some postwar children’s writers would opt for a more escapist paradigm, something like Neldikhen’s documentary approach appears consistently in children’s literature throughout the Soviet period, particularly in the work of Oleg Grigoriev (to be discussed further).16

In addition to representatives of the avant-garde who had actively supported the revolution, like Mayakovsky, many ‘fellow traveler’ writers and artists tried their hand at children’s literature in the early 1920s: these experimenters included a surprisingly broad range of writers, from Osip Mandelstam, Boris Pasternak and Aleksey Remizov to Ilya Ehrenburg, Yuri Olesha and many others. Children’s poetry was one of the few things Mandelstam managed to publish during 1924-26 – he released four books of poems for children during this time. Contemporary and subsequent accounts attest to the poet’s lack of emotional commitment to this work, which was undertaken first and foremost as a

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16 The extent to which reality should be depicted ‘as is’ or ‘varnished’ remained a central debate in children’s literature throughout the Soviet period, particularly in the late 1940s-early 1950s. For a 1970s perspective, see Oleg Grigoriev’s poem about lines in the introduction to Chapter Four.
The children’s poems are certainly less interesting than Mandelstam’s adult work, although not entirely without imagination and pleasing sound-play, as in “Balloons” [“Shary”] (1926):

Дутые-надутые шары-пустомели
Разноцветным облаком на ниточке висели,
Баловали-плавали, друг друга толкали,
Своего меньшего брата затирали.

- Беда мне, зеленому, от шара-буяна,
От страшного красного шара-голована.
Я шар-недоумок, я шар-несмышленыш,
Приемыш зеленый, глупый найденыш.

All blown-up, full of hot air, the windbag-balloons/Hung like a multi-colored cloud on a string/Floating and frolicking, shoving each other,/Blocking in their littlest brother. // “Poor green me, bullied by the ruffian balloon./By the terrible big-headed red balloon./I’m a little half-wit balloon, a silly little balloon./A little green foster-child, a foolish foundling.

Meanwhile, I would argue that Mandelstam’s adult poems of the early 1930s demonstrate an ongoing interest in the formal possibilities of the childlike aesthetic, a tendency arguably bolstered by his foray into children’s literature. The paradoxical situation wherein the childlike aesthetic is more successfully applied in non-children’s literature was evident in the prerevolutionary avant-garde, and it will resurface in the work of the experimental 1930s poets discussed below.

17 Sokol quotes Nadezhda Mandelstam, recalling her husband’s rather unenthusiastic efforts. Russian Poetry for Children, 170.
18 O.E. Mandel’shtam, Sobranie sochinenii v 4-kh tomakh (Moscow: Art-Biznes-Tsentr, 1993), 65.
19 Consider poems like “Kuda kak strashno nam s toboi…” (1930), “Ia skazhu tebe s poslednei priamotoi…” (1931). The childlike aesthetic in Mandelstam’s earlier work is very pronounced (“Tol’ko detskie knigi chitat’” (1908), “Dano mne telo” (1909), etc.), his autobiographical essays about childhood, and so on.
In a 1931 essay extolling the new Soviet children’s books (and scandalizing her fellow émigrés in Prague), the poet Marina Tsvetaeva wrote: “An abundance of incontestable qualities. First and foremost, this is almost exclusively poetry, that is, these books are given in a language not only beloved by children but created by them – their native tongue. […] The second quality (without which the first one, that is, the poems themselves, are a sin) is the extraordinary quality of the poetry itself. […] This is the high culture of verse at work.”

While expressing admiration for the selfless anonymity of most of the children’s book producers, Tsvetaeva gives special praise to her friend, the onetime Futurist Boris Pasternak, who published two book-length children’s poems in 1924 (“The Carousel” [Karusel’] and “The Menagerie” [Zverinets]). But Pasternak made very little visible effort to adapt his established poetic voice to an audience of children – the vocabulary and syntax in these poems can be as dense and impenetrable as in the poet’s adult work.

Погружая в день бездонный
Кудри, гривы, кружева,
Тонут кони, и фестоны,
И колясок кузова.

[Plunging into the unfathomable day/Curls, manes and lace,/Sink the steeds and the festoons,/and the bodies of the carriages.]

This excerpt from “Carousel” shows Pasternak adhering to the notion that trochees, with their galloping and energetic rhythm, make the best meter for children’s poetry; but the convoluted syntax, abstract images like “unfathomable day” and improbable phrases like

21 Boris Pasternak, Sobranie sochinenii v 5-i tomakh (Moscow: Khud. literatura, 1989), vol. 1, 495.
“bodies of the carriages” require multiple readings to unravel and seem to work directly counter to the straightforward, marching meter.  

Thus the children’s work of poets like Pasternak and Mandelstam remains curiosity pieces: symptomatic of the cultural moment and interesting in the larger context of the poets’ work, but without significant influence on the subsequent development of Soviet children’s literature. At the same time, these poets’ efforts in children’s literature, which demonstrate their individual poetics in a deliberately adapted form, could be productively read alongside their adult work in future investigations.

**Ideological Debates and Artistic Freedom**

Many of the arguments over children’s literature merged with contemporary arguments over education and child psychology. A particularly vicious debate over fairy-tales dragged on through the 1920s, with participants ranging from rural schoolteachers to Lenin’s widow Nadezhda Krupskaya, the influential linguist-psychologist Vladimir Vygotsky and prominent modernist writers – eventually even Gorky weighed in. In the early twentieth century overall, fairy-tales were a hot topic far beyond their role as fodder for young readers. Outside of Russia, the connection between fairy-tales and the archetypes and myths of human psychology had been recognized by Freud and Jung; in Russia, the artistic merit of the tales had been rediscovered by the Symbolists and early modernists in the late nineteenth century. In the 1920s, the Russian Formalist scholar

22 For a more detailed account of Pasternak’s and Mandelstam’s forays, see Sokol, *Russian Poetry for Children*, 167-173.

Vladimir Propp used the fairy tale to demonstrate a productive theory of structural literary analysis in his seminal study, *Morphology of the Fairy-tale* (*Morfologiia skazki*) (1925). But in the narrow ideological reading, fairy-tales often came out looking suspiciously reactionary: frogs turned not into shock-workers but princes, and lucky tricksters who scorned their modest working-class origins ended up in pleasure-gardens rather than on collective farms.

The other major argument against fairy tales went along with the aggressive emphasis on fact and contemporary reality characteristic of Proletkult and successor organizations like RAPP. According to this view, children would only be confused and misled by the fantasy worlds depicted in fairy tales; their natural cognitive development would be misdirected and fundamentally stunted by the likes of talking animals, flying carpets and other such impossibilities. In a 1928 “Pravda” article, the formidable Krupskaya condemned Kornei Chukovsky’s long poem “Krokodil” (1916) as monarchist, “bourgeois filth” that moreover failed to provide adequate factual information about crocodiles.  

24 Sokol has a translation; original is “O Krokodile Chukovskogo,” *Pravda* (2 February 1928), 5.

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24 The logic of this argument easily extended to condemn fanciful language (nonsense rhymes, made-up words, soundplay) and even nature-themed works like Vitaly Bianki’s or Evgeny Charushin’s stories of woodland life (the pastoral idyll being seen as a form of escapism).

Defenders of the fairy-tale (and of imaginative literature more broadly) like Marshak and Chukovsky cautiously stood up for the importance of developing the child’s imagination through both content and form. Even Vygotsky ultimately defended the
fairy-tale on psychological grounds, asserting that children need to develop the imagination as a way of organizing their emotional experience. Fairy-tales are fine and even useful as long as it is made patently clear to the child that the world depicted in them is completely unreal. Chukovsky offered a similar argument with reference to the very popular Adventures of Baron Munchausen: “After all, it is through its fantasies and fairy-tales that [Munchausen] affirms realism for the kids. The very chortles with which they greet every one of Munchausen’s adventures bear witness to the fact that his lies are clear to them.” Chukovsky also pointed to the usefulness of inventive language in child language acquisition. Marshak meanwhile defended the fairy-tale for its kinship with legend, folktale and the epic relationship to time and place; he suggests that the inherent rightness of the Soviet way of life ought to easily fulfill the simple and straightforward moral and didactic aspects of the fairy-tale. But the fantasy elements are also key, for the writer as much as the reader: “It is not enough to simply register [reality]; we must also compose and imagine.” Marshak’s argument rests in no small part on the need for skilled and talented writers able to write fairy-tales adequate to the new era.

The argument over fantasy in children’s literature thus reflected the predominance of a view of literature as fundamentally utilitarian, existing first and foremost to guide the development and education of children. Yet it also allowed for dissenting voices to mount

25 V. Vygotsskii, Pedagogicheskaia psikhologiaia, 248-251. Kelly comments, however, that the role of scientists like Vygotsky in Narkompros was marginal with respect to figures of more traditional pedagogy like Krupskaya. Children’s World, 68.
a defense of artistic freedom, and to advocate for a non-utilitarian and non-ideological art. In other words, children’s literature was yet another battleground in the war raging in all areas of artistic production in the 1920s. As Viktor Shklovsky put it: “The greatest woe of our time is that we are regulating art without knowing what it is […] The greatest woe of Russian art is that it is not allowed to move organically, the way a man’s heart moves in his chest: it is being regulated like a train schedule.”

A crucial moment in the resolution of the children’s-literature debates came with several prominent articles published by Maksim Gorky, in which he defended the fantastical on nearly evolutionary grounds: “That which we call culture is through-and-through human ‘fantasy’ [chelovecheskaia vymysel]. Art lives through fantasies […] It is fantasy and conjecture that elevate man above the animals.” Gorky’s defense, though temporarily effective because of his political prestige, did not in any final way resolve the fundamental question of artistic freedom.

Meanwhile, denunciations in the press in connection with these debates actually led to the arrest of a number of writers and artists working in the industry.

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28 Viktor Shklovskii, Khod konia (Moscow/Berlin: Gelikon, 1923), 16-17.

29 “Eshche o gramotnosti,” Izvestiia (21 April 1928). Quoted in Putilova, Ocherki, 22. Similarly, Chukovsky quotes Lenin on the utilitarian value of the imagination: “People think in vain that only poets need the imagination. This is a foolish prejudice! It is needed even in mathematics, even the discovery of the differential and integral calculus would have been impossible without the imagination. The imagination is hugely valuable quality…” V.I. Lenin, “Zakluchitel’noe slovo po politicheskому otchetu TsK na XI s’ezde RKP (b), 28 March 1922, in Polnoe sobranie sochinenii, vol. 45, 125. Quoted in Chukovskii, Ot dvukh do piati, 98.

30 For a discussion of the critical articles and some of their consequences, see A.B. Ustинov, “Delo detskogo sektora Gosizdata 1932. g.,” in Mikhail Kuzmin i russkaia kul’tura XX veka, ed. Gleb Morev (Leningrad: Sovet po istorii mirovoi kul’tury AN SSSR, 1990), 125-136 and Hellman, Fairy Tales, 354-362.
Kharms and Vvedensky (along with five other people) were arrested in connection with their work for Leningrad’s Detgiz. The reports from the subsequent interrogations reveal the putative existence of a “monarchist, counterrevolutionary, anti-Soviet literary group,” allegedly led by Kharms, which aimed to systematically corrupt Soviet children through the production of intentionally poor-quality and/or subversive, anti-Soviet children’s literature.\(^3\) The language of the reports is a hodgepodge of Soviet officialese, political clichés and rarefied literary terminology (including various interesting definitions of zaum) – the ‘confessions’ were clearly a collective effort involving much input from the interrogators. Some parts seem to have been cribbed verbatim from the editorials in “Pravda” and elsewhere: thus Kharms says of one of his poems that it “tears children’s attention away from the active social elements of Soviet life,” and also designates a number of poems as “particularly bad hack-work, done exclusively for money.” Echoing Krupskaya’s condemnation of Chukovsky, he claims that his book Theater contains “absolutely no useful information.”\(^3\) Although socialist realism had not yet been adopted as state aesthetic policy at the time of the arrests, the writers’ crimes are textbook examples of the kind of “prerevolutionary,” “anti-Soviet” aesthetics socialist realism sought to eradicate.

**Socialist Realism and Children’s Literature**

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\(^3\) Mal’skii, “Razgrom OBERIU,” 176.
Socialist realism was declared official state policy in 1932 and affirmed by the newly formed Union of Soviet Writers at their first congress in 1934. This put an end to the fairy-tale debates – indeed, the official adoption of the doctrine was greeted with enthusiasm by many who saw it as a welcome alternative to the Proletkult-esque aesthetics promoted by organizations like RAPP, whence had come some of the most virulent condemnations of fantasy and experiment in children’s literature.\textsuperscript{33} Moreover, the early days of socialist realism saw the doctrine still being articulated and tested as a method, so its early enforcement could be partial and inconsistent: this led some to perceive it as representing a kind of “artistic freedom.”\textsuperscript{34}

The terms in which socialist realism was first articulated emphasize its pedagogical, improvement- and growth-oriented aims for Soviet citizens of all ages: a key phrase in descriptions of socialist realism is “education/upbringing in the spirit of socialism” \textit{[vospitanie v dukhe sotsializma]} (my emphasis — AM), meaning the reconditioning of adults according to the norms of the new system. The early Soviet literacy campaign, which combined very basic adult education with ideological re-education (“political literacy”), also employed methods traditionally reserved for school-age education. Even as revolutionary rhetoric elevated workers and peasants as the heart and soul of the Soviet nation, there was an unavoidable infantilization of these citizens at the level of literacy primers and propaganda in its many forms. Although state-sanctioned

\textsuperscript{33} For more on Proletkult and RAPP, see Lynn Mally, \textit{Culture of the Future: the Proletkult Movement in Revolutionary Russia} (Berkeley: UC Berkeley Press, 1990).

artistic production for adults became more sophisticated over the years of the Soviet experiment, productions of socialist realism – due to its populism and insistence on accessibility – continued to be both bland and didactic.

Samuil Marshak’s official report on Soviet children’s literature at the 1934 congress attested to his position as an established literary authority, although his own poems for children had been roundly dismissed and even blocked from publication during the late 1920s. By 1934, a compromise had clearly been reached: Marshak’s comments tread a careful line between defense and offense, as he insists on the importance of inventive language and validity of genres like the fairy tale, but also on the responsibility of children’s writers to teach proper values to the littlest communists. Alongside the obligatory potshots at pre-revolutionary children’s production, Marshak’s speech also excoriates bad, boring and irrelevant Soviet writing for children. Still, he focuses on the aspects of children’s literature that adhered to the new requirements of socialist realism: the depiction of real life, genuine contemporary challenges, political triumphs, scientifically accurate depictions of agriculture and industry, etc. Poetry – particularly its formal and sound-related aspects (i.e. the focus of Chukovsky’s inquiry) – is practically ignored, even though these features were key to Marshak’s children’s poetry as well. Tellingly, the concept of “children’s language” had undergone a considerable shift. When


36 Marshak mentions Chukovsky once early in the speech; this is also a rare mention of poetry: “But the kids needed action, they needed the rhythm of song and dance, they needed humor. […] Indeed, Kornei Chukovsky was the first or at any rate one of the first prerevolutionary writers who combined these conflicting lines – of the childlike and the literary – in his poetry for little ones.” Ibid., 22.
Marshak recommends that writers learn to write “in children’s language,” he means a way of writing for children that avoids condescension while being compelling to young readers. Writers should not, however, themselves attempt to speak the language of children or tap into more primitive ways of thinking. In other words, the socialist realist version of children’s literature did not feature much of what we have described as the childlike aesthetic.

Although filled with references to children’s direct feedback (Soviet children’s letters to Maksim Gorky with specific demands for literature), Marshak’s speech certified an end to the experimental inquiry characteristic of pre-revolutionary and Soviet-era “research” into children as a source of aesthetic (literary) inspiration. He articulates instead a basic kinship between the tenets of socialist realism and of writing for children. It should be noted that the utilitarian view of children’s literature expressed in the late-1920s debates (and, in a milder form, by Marshak) was not unique to the new Soviet children’s literature. Even outside the Soviet context, children’s literature is quite often didactic, moralistic, optimistic and future-oriented (utopian), with a central narrative of positive character development through the overcoming of some hardship or obstacle, in a world with clear divisions between good and evil, right and wrong. These features show up in various traditions preceding and contemporaneous with the early

Soviet period, from the mid-nineteenth-century fairy-tales of Hans Christian Andersen to early twentieth-century classics like Kenneth Grahame’s *The Wind in the Willows*.\(^{38}\)

The central socialist realist categories of *narodnost’, ideinost’* and *konkretnost’* can also be found in children’s literature across national boundaries. The dependence on folklore and fable models likewise transcends the Russian context – thus *narodnost’,* which in the doctrine of socialist realism referred to the accessibility of the work to ordinary lay readers. The heroic (epic) element in children’s literature is also linked to the folk and classical models it draws on; it shares with socialist realism the strong didactic and moralistic promotion of such positive character values as sharing (non-individualism), selflessness, self-improvement, sacrifice (hence *ideinost’*), as well as a tendency to be formulaic. Consider the following sarcastic but accurate characterization of the socialist realist protagonist by Andrey Sinyavsky:

…it’s hard to list all the merits of the positive protagonist: *ideinost’,* bravery, intellect, strength of will, patriotism, respect for women, readiness to self-sacrifice, etc. etc. […] He knows firmly what is good and bad, says only “yes” or “no,” doesn’t mix up black and white, knows no inner doubts or hesitations, unresolved questions or undiscovered secrets, and he always easily finds the way out of the most confusing situation…\(^{39}\)

Children’s literature is supposed to promote good social and interpersonal relations. It tends by necessity to be rooted in a recognizable world – even in fairy tales and fantasy stories, the details in children’s literature are usually concrete and correspond to recognizable realia (*konkretnost’*). Meanwhile, like socialist realism, children’s literature


\(^{39}\) Tertz, *On Socialist Realism*, 48. In this connection, recall the black-and-white depiction of good and bad behavior in Mayakovsky’s *Chto takoe khorosho i chto takoe plakho*. 

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usually shies away from the depiction of excessively brutal or devastating aspects of the surrounding reality. Finally, as in Sinyavsky’s definition, the pedagogical function of children’s literature would seem to require a total lack of ambiguity with regard to everything from morality to language.

Marshak’s 1934 speech championed the idea that the relationship between socialist realism and Soviet children’s literature would be a naturally harmonious one. And some unofficial writers’ willingness to work in children’s literature was due precisely to the fact that the genre requirements of “normal” children’s literature and socialist realist children’s literature seemed less at odds with one another than those of the “normal” adult novel or poem – the aesthetic compromise required seemed less devastating. As Lydia Ginzburg reasoned,

When freedom is impossible, the surrogate for freedom becomes convention. It turns out that conventional topics are less conventional, because they have fewer points of contact with reality. The writer flees from real topics to conventional ones. Along the way he keeps hitting his head against lots of closed doors until he flies into the half-opened door of children’s literature, behind which there are fewer dangerous contact points.40

However paradoxical it may sound in the children’s literature context, the half-opened door of children’s literature increasingly entailed a rejection of most of the literary devices and approaches we have associated to the childlike aesthetic. While formal experimentation of this variety had thrived in most areas of artistic production in the 1920s, including children’s literature, it subsequently met with ever-greater opposition in the official sphere. The childlike aesthetic became increasingly the provenance of unofficial literature.

40 Ginzburg, Zapisnye knizhki, 111.
OBERIU, the Childlike Aesthetic and Soviet Children’s Literature

The OBERIU group was the Russian avant-garde formation most directly involved in children’s literature. They were also the “first Soviet underground”: although they were not the first Russian poets to circulate their work orally and in homemade, handwritten form, they were the first to systematically seek employment in a “minor” area of official literature while continuing to pursue their own literary paths in a distinctly non-official way. Their story provides a great illustration of the strange consequences of shifts in official policy: they were drawn into children’s literature in part because of the childlike aesthetic evident in their unpublishable work for adults, but these very features would ultimately get them into big trouble in children’s literature. The OBERIU poets’ experience as experimental writers in an environment increasingly hostile to experiment laid the foundation for a model of social and literary behavior that remained relevant for later generations of unofficial poets throughout the Soviet period.

The poets we now refer to under the “OBERIU” umbrella were a loose and shifting collective of young men, mostly born in the first five years of the twentieth century, who came together in the mid-1920s. The work of the group’s three central


42 The acronym OBERIU, the “Association of Real Art” [Ob’edinenie real’nogo iskussstva], appears in a manifesto published in January 1928 and written mostly by Nikolai Zabolotsky, then one of the central figures in the group. For a good discussion of the terminological confusion around the name OBERIU, see Eugene Ostashevsky,
poets, Daniil Kharms, Alexander Vvedensky and Nikolai Zabolotsky, is marked
distinctly by the childlike aesthetic, including a great deal of unmotivated wordplay,
including made-up words (linguistic zaum) and disrupted grammar and syntax, apparent
naïveté, alogism, absurdism, nonsense or meaninglessness [bessmyslitsa], humor (dark,
juvenile and generally silly) and literary and behavioural buffoonery.

Part of the OBERIU mandate was the evocation of the concrete (as opposed to the
ephemerally literal), in part via a studied ignorance of accepted grammatical, lexical and
philosophical conventions. “The concrete object, sloughed of its literary and everyday
husk, becomes the property of art.”43 Early on, the OBERIU poets had plans to
collaborate with the Formalists,44 who shared their concern with the deadening and loss
of meaning of “real,” palpable phenomena (“Automatization eats up things, clothes,
furniture, one’s wife and the fear of war”).45 One aspect of the “real” and concrete in
OBERIU poetics is evident in their attention to contemporary colloquial language (vs.
“antiquated literary gilding”), particularly its “lower” registers (although it is often mixed
with higher and more arcane registers to comic and/or grotesque effect).46 The raw

“Editor’s Introduction,” OBERIU: An Anthology of Russian Absurdism (Evanston, IL:
Northwestern UP, 2006), xiii-xiv.

43 OBERIU declaration, Vanna Arkhimeda, ed. A. Aleksandrov (Leningrad:
Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1991), 458. Curiously, this emphasis on the concrete was
essentially in line with official Soviet aesthetics, although the OBERIU poets took it ‘too
far.’

44 Documented by Igor Bakhterev in “Vstrechi (s V.B. Shklovskim),” in Vanna
Arkhimeda, 441-444.


46 Katerina Clark discusses the centrality of “the ‘living speech’ of the urban proletariat”
to avant-garde artists and writers of the 1920s (and its expungement in the 1930s, by
Gorky in particular). Petersburg, Crucible of Revolution (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP,
1995), 286.
material employed by the OBERIU poets in their adult work was a language and a reality already irrevocably transformed by the Soviet experiment. Still burdened with the clichés of the previous epoch (against which the Futurists had struggled so energetically), this language was also rapidly developing new conversational and literary clichés of its own.

As one contemporary and edinomyslennik Andrei Egunov put it,

> The agony of experiences, due to a peculiar bashfulness, is masked by jokiness [shutlivost’]. Street-carnival rhyming (stipulated, meanwhile, by the word-stock of the language), cheap puns, and occasionally, the jolly rattle of rhythms from old-fashioned comic operas – all of this is prompted by the very nature of the language, and this suggests that linguistic buffoonery [iazykovoe shutovstvo] is a method for revealing and catching hold of the metaphysics hidden in the depths of the language.^[47]

Egunov evokes the non-age-specific genres of the joke and the street carnival, but the OBERIU poets also drew on the wealth of material available to them through children’s literature. As Vladislav Kulakov observes, “The OBERIU poets were the first to recognize the purely poetic possibilities of the play aesthetic [igrovaia estetika].”^[48] Play and playfulness, along with other aspects of the childlike aesthetic, rhetorically disarm the reader, playing a trick with potentially serious consequences. A childlike lyric speaker or cheap, silly poetic form can signal a lightness and frivolity profoundly at odds with the true movement of the poem.

The OBERIU poets initially identified with the post-revolutionary leftist avant-garde, although their closest and most important literary predecessors were pre-revolutionary figures including Futurists like Khlebnikov and Kruchënykh and modernist poets like Boris Pasternak and Alexander Blok. Although their 1928 manifesto


demonstratively rejected Futurism, some of their most significant literary ties were to later-generation Futurists Alexander Tufanov and Igor Terentiev. Furthermore, their early collective works involved public performances aimed to shock and confuse audiences in a way quite reminiscent of the Futurists.\(^\text{49}\) Meanwhile, the zaum, wordplay and overall worldview of the OBERIU poets are distinct from those of Futurists like Khlebnikov and Kruchënykh.\(^\text{50}\) While acknowledging their debt to Khlebnikov in particular, Kulakov points to the younger poets’ anti-utopian orientation: “Khlebnikov’s new poetic vision, the vision of ‘the child and the savage’ (Tynianov), distorted the image to the extreme, but at the same time recreated a palpable unity of the world and of man by inserting the latter, in pagan fashion, into a nature and universe anthropomorphized by myth… The OBERIU poets, while fully adopting Khlebnikov’s infantile-barbarian grotesquerie, rejected the direct lyrical orientation of his new vision.”\(^\text{51}\) And Sarah Pratt writes that “for this younger group, the revolution per se was rarely an issue […] [it] simply supplied the reality within which their maturation as authors took place.”\(^\text{52}\) For the younger poets,

\(^{49}\) As “OBERIU,” they did manage to stage a dramatic performance in Leningrad’s Press House, but there were other groups and bonds and fallings-out, such that OBERIU as such did not last beyond the 1920s. For more on this performance, “Three Left Hours,” see Vanna Arkhimeda, 463-64; “Introduction” in OBERIU: An Anthology, xvii; Kharms, “I Am a Phenomenon…” 249-251.

\(^{50}\) Although echoes of Futurist voices, first and foremost that of Khlebnikov, certainly remain audible, especially in the earlier work of the younger poets. See Kobrinskii, Poetika OBERIU v kontekste literaturnogo avangarda, Aleksandr Etkind, “Khlebnikov i Zabolotskii,” in Tam, vntri (St. Petersburg: Izd. Maksim, 1996), and Igor’ Loshchilov, “‘Igra na graniakh iazyka’: Nikolai Zabolotskii i ego kritiki,” in Zabolotskii: Pro et Contra (St. Petersburg: RGKhA, 2010).


\(^{52}\) Sarah Pratt, Nikolai Zabolotsky: Enigma and Cultural Paradigm (Evanston, IL: Northwestern UP), 9.
linguistic experiments were not utopian; and as the 1930s wore on, experiment for experiment’s sake would be overshadowed by the crisis of real everyday language, and a parallel crisis of the logical organization of the real everyday world.

Kharms, Vvedensky and Zabolotsky found their way to Marshak and children’s literature through their friendship with Nikolai Oleinikov, who was already employed as an editor at Degtiz and in 1928 invited them to join him in working on the new journal Ezh (they would also all contribute to Chizh, a journal for younger readers, which opened in 1930).\(^5^3\) Years later, Marshak recalled hiring the three young poets, who had earned a reputation in Leningrad for their raucous and openly absurdist public performances: “At one time I enlisted this group of poets who had made their mark in formal – really more like ironic-parodic – explorations. The most I could expect from them at first was their participation in making up the palindromes, tongue-twisters and little ditties so necessary for children’s poetry. But they all turned out to be capable of much more.”\(^5^4\) Marshak’s praise of the OBERIU poets’ talents (of Kharms he continues in an even more effusive vein: “a person with perfect pitch and taste and a certain – perhaps subconscious – classical foundation”) seems to conflict, however, with the poets’ own assessment of their efforts in children’s literature.

Many contemporaries refer to the distaste Kharms and Vvedensky expressed toward their metier; others corroborate the notion that Vvedensky in particular evinced a cynical willingness to produce poor-quality work purely for the sake of the money earned. “Vvedensky’s work in children’s literature was very shoddy: he wrote some

\(^{53}\) These are both cute animal names – “Siskin” and “Hedgehog” – and acronyms standing for “chrezvychaino interesnyi zhurnal” and “ezhesiachnyi zhurnal.”

\(^{54}\) Marshak, Sobranie sochinenii, vol. 8, 509.
awful books, there are very few good ones. He was a card-player and needed money, so he did tons of hack work [khaltura], though never in poetry. But Kharms wrote only something like six children’s books, all very good – he didn’t like doing it, but he wasn’t capable of writing badly.” Zabolotsky achieved a fairly solid position in the children’s journals – Marshak praised his adaptations of Gargantua and Pantagruel and Till Eulenspiegel – while Kharms purportedly turned down the chance to do the same for Don Quixote: “I can’t do it to Cervantes.” All three poets contributed translations (and/or adaptations) as well as original prose and poetry, sometimes published under pseudonyms.

While always taking into account the problematic nature of police records as historical documents, a general sense of lassitude and condescension toward children’s literature on the part of Kharms and Vvedensky is evident in their interrogation reports (even when these are read as ‘co-productions’ with the interrogators), as well as in accounts of contemporaries like Khardzhiev and Ginzburg. In the report following his 1931 arrest, Kharms states: “We considered our children’s work, unlike our work intended for adults, inauthentic [ne nastoiashchimi], and pursued therewith only the

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56 See Marshak, op. cit., and Lidiia Ginzburg, Zapisnye knizhki, 83-84.


58 Kharms published under his primary pseudonym, Daniil Kharms; Zabolotsky published a number of poems and prose pieces as “Ia. Miller.”

59 For a thoughtful discussion of the usefulness of police documentation to literary scholarship, see Valerii Shubinskii and Gleb Morev, “‘Pust’ menia rasstreliaut; no formu ia ne odenu’: Valerii Shubinskii i Gleb Morev o tom, mozhno li verit’ sledstvennym delam Kharmsa i Vvedenskogo,” published on colta.ru 4 February 2014 (http://www.colta.ru/articles/literature/1918) [5 February 2014].
achievement of material gain.” He goes on to explain that the “counterrevolutionary group” which he allegedly led produced a great number of poetry and prose books for children that “should be subdivided into the categories ‘hack work’ and ‘anti-Soviet.”

Of his own work, Kharms confesses: “In those instances when I for the sake of material gain tried to adapt to the declared societal requirements for children’s literature, I produced obviously shoddy work,” but clarifies:

I am very pleased with my most senseless poems, such as “O Toporyshkine” (sic!), which given their extreme senselessness were ridiculed in even the Soviet humorist press; I considered them to be poems of extraordinarily high quality, and the knowledge that they were indissolubly connected to my unpublished zaum work brought me greater inner satisfaction.

Kharms goes on to point out the differences between Vvedensky’s hack work and openly zaum pieces for children as well. Unsurprisingly, Vvedensky’s interrogation reports contain essentially the same information found in Kharms’, mostly expressed in exactly the same words and phrases – the fact that these confessions were written and edited by the interrogators is almost certain. Yet, although Vvedensky admits to producing zaum and otherwise counterrevolutionary, anti-Soviet work for children, he never brings up the aesthetic quality of his work. For Vvedensky and his associates, children’s poetry sometimes seemed like a completely separate, inherently inferior aesthetic enterprise; as we will see in the following studies, however, this was not universally the case for them.

60 Mal’skii, “Razgrom OBERIU,” 175.
61 Ibid., 177.
62 Ibid., 175.
63 In general, the tone of Kharms’ confession is strikingly recognizable as “Kharmsian” – the plethora of official/political commonplaces reads like a farce. Vvedensky’s significantly longer interrogation records, meanwhile, demonstrate a kind of earnest Sovietude and conclude with a statement of total repentance and desire for rehabilitation.
The childlike aesthetic is arguably more evident in the OBERIU poets’ unpublished adult work than in the poetry they wrote for children. Although the poets did not as a rule attempt to realistically emulate children’s language or the child’s viewpoint in their adult work, child-figures (and speaking animals) often appear as lyric personae, alongside language and forms typical of children’s poetry (in their work for children, we more often find something more akin to Marshak’s omniscient, sympathetic adult narrator). Comparing the aesthetics of OBERIU work for children and adults is complicated by the fact that their children’s work was always subject to substantial editing, often conducted by Marshak personally and at all stages of production. Nevertheless, I believe that a recognizable poetic voice in each poet’s children’s work remains perceptible, regardless of the smoothing effects of editing.

In the following brief studies, I will discuss and compare examples of the published children’s work and unpublished adult work of Alexander Vvedensky, Nikolai Zabolotsky and Daniil Kharms. My aim is to demonstrate the various manifestations of the childlike aesthetic in their work – not always where one might expect to find it – and thus the tendency of this aesthetic to transcend (or blur) generic boundaries. There are undeniable commonalities in the work for children and adults written by all three poets, although each poet displays a different degree of intersection. Although notorious for propagandistic and unimaginative hack work in children’s literature, Vvedensky wrote some children’s lyrics whose upending of logic and classical simplicity recalls his adult work; his adult work abounds with childlike features on the level of diction, speaker and

64 See Chukovskaia, “Marshak-redaktor,” V laboratorii redaktora (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1963), 219-334; Kharms also writes about frequent editing visits to Marshak in his diaries.
form. While naïve lyric personae figure prominently in Zabolotsky’s adult work, he drew a fairly sharp distinction between his adult and children’s poetry, adhering closely to generic standards for the latter. Finally, Kharms’s highly regarded children’s poetry is often practically indistinguishable in form and mood from his adult poems. Collectively, the OBERIU poets represented a model for poetic practice and official literary activity would become highly influential for unofficial poets in the later Soviet period. Examining the relationship between the OBERIU adult and children’s work is illuminating both because many later unofficial poets would also find themselves working as children’s writers, and also because of the limited availability of OBERIU texts in the late Soviet period.  

Although some adult material began circulating in samizdat after the mid-1960s, the officially-published children’s books remained an important source for grasping the principles of OBERIU poetics.

**Alexander Vvedensky (1904-1941)**

Vvedensky wrote about his work as “a poetic critique of reason”; his critique of language is, if anything, still more profound. The childlike aesthetic helped him with both areas of critique: childlike language pushes the limits of grammar and sense, while the child’s viewpoint serves to defamiliarize objects, words and causal relationships. Such deformations of language and logic sometimes seem like a continuation of zaum. But Vvedensky was most interested in the aspect of nonsense that does not mirror common sense (does not present an alternative system), but rather fundamentally breaks down

65 This is true for Kharms and Vvedensky, whose adult work was not published in the Soviet Union until perestroika.
habitual ways of seeing and thinking, leaving only a shimmering [mertsanie] in place of fixed meaning. The lyric subject in Vvedensky’s poetry is likewise destabilized through a variety of means both thematic and grammatical (to take one example, Vvedensky’s speakers often narrate their own deaths). The resulting weakness and confusion of this subject in and of itself can appear distinctly childlike, and Vvedensky often uses a child or childlike speaker. Such childlike features are less apparent in much of Vvedensky’s work written for children, but, as we shall see, a muted version of the critique of logic and language appears there as well.

The question of zaum, and of their Futurist forbears in general, was fraught for the OBERIU poets. Despite his early affiliation with the zaumnik Alexander Tufanov, however, by the time of the OBERIU manifesto (1928) Vvedensky had renounced any association with zaum. His poetry is described as working with “…the appearance of nonsense [bessmyslitsa]. Why the appearance? Because obvious nonsense is what zaum is, and there is no zaum in Vvedensky’s work.” This and similar statements in the manifesto must be read as rhetorical and equivocal, conditioned by factors including Zabolotsky’s strong anti-zaum stance and the infighting among different avant-garde groups at the time. Vvedensky’s earliest poetic efforts show Futurist-influenced

66 Alexander Skidan goes so far as to say that in Vvedensky’s case one can’t speak of either a lyric speaker or a lyric ‘I.’ “Pre-vrashchenie: Poeticheskie mashiny AleksandraVvedenskogo,” in Vtoraia kul’tura, 80-83.
68 Vanna Arkhimeda, 458.
69 See also Zabolotsky’s open letter “My objections to A.I. Vvedensky, authority on nonsense” [Moi vozrazhenia A.I. Vvedenskomu, avtoritetu bessmyslitsy] (1926), reproduced in Vse, 393-395.
linguistic and orthographic zaum, from non-standard punctuation and capitalization to made-up words and very long unbroken columns of text of one hundred and more lines. Still, his poems rarely contain truly meaningless words and images: even the most absurd and grammatically/syntactically incorrect constructions usually reveal a graspable meaning, at least in the context of Vvedensky’s wider oeuvre and his persistent philosophical preoccupations. Eugene Ostashevsky insightfully suggests that, for Vvedensky, bessmyslitsa is “no mere poetic device but a verbal tool for understanding – or rather, actively not-understanding – the world.” In other words, Vvedensky used bessmyslitsa in his efforts to deautomatize the habitual pathways of cognition. In the following passage, from about a third of the way through the 1929 poem “Two little birds, woe, the lion and night” [Две птички, горе, лев и ночь], we can observe a kind of authorial meta-commentary on some of the more obscure images and collocations that arise earlier in the poem:

tут птичка первая сказала
я одного не понимаю
она частицами летала
над пышной колокольней леса
она изображала беса
я одного не понимаю
неясно мне значение игры
которой барыня монашка
со словом племя занялась

70 Though Vvedensky denied the influence of Futurism and particularly Khlebnikov, while grudgingly acknowledging Kruchénykh. See Janecek, ZAUM, 334-338.


и почему игра ведро
спрошу я просто и светло

[then the first bird said/there’s just one thing I don't get/she was flying in particles/above the sumptuous belfry tower of the forest/she was portraying a demon/there’s just one thing I don't get/I don't understand the meaning of the game/that the maiden nun/got into playing with the word tribe/and why is the game a bucket/I ask simply and brightly]

The bird’s questions are in response to other speakers in the poem (the second bird and ‘woe’); like many of Vvedensky’s poems, “Two little birds…” is structured around dialogue, though without the “stage directions” found in other “conversational” poems. The bird’s questions are perhaps the reader’s questions as well, but at the same time the description of the bird introduces new questions – how was she flying in particles? How was she portraying a demon? Even as they contain a mass of seemingly arbitrary elements presented in a formally flat manner, many of Vvedensky’s poems are built of intricately intersecting levels of discourse that build on each other in a way reminiscent of mathematics (not to mention the complexity and “beautiful disorder” of eighteenth-century poetry). At the same time, the playful animal personae are reminiscent of children’s literature, and the apparent randomness of the poem’s many components also suggest a lightness associated with children’s and humorous verse.

“Two little birds…” is already representative of Vvedensky’s recognizable style, which had become progressively cleaner and leaner in presentation and more classical in form by the early 1930s. Still, his early tendency to simple and simplified form – minimal

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73 Vvedenskii, PSS, vol. 1, 88-89.
74 See also “Zerkalo i muzykant,” “Krugom vozmozhno bog,” and many others.
punctuation, poor rhyme, absence of stanza breaks and traditional meters – remains constant in his later work as well. The lack of capitalization and punctuation is radical for the formally conservative Russian poetic tradition, and the resulting uniformity of line does have the effect of speeding up the pace of reading, making the reader a little breathless. But Vvedensky’s meters are usually those most commonly encountered in the Russian poetic tradition – mostly iambic or trochaic, with lines rarely longer than four or five feet – and present little “difficulty of form.” The deautomatization performed by his poetry is directed self-reflexively at language and logic, and to some extent, poetics: “Two little birds” implicitly asks whether the bird depicts a demon because ‘demon’ rhymes with ‘forest’ [lesa/besa], while simultaneously asserting that the forest and the demon are both important constituents of the poem’s philosophical direction. In this way, Vvedensky foregrounds randomness as a principle (of language and poetry alike) even as he stands by the finished perfection of his poems (and this can be contrasted to the Futurists’ use of randomness as a means of exposing the inner deterministic logic of language).

Formally and semantically, the childlike aesthetic in Vvedensky’s adult work diverges from its manifestations in the Futurists’ writings. Children are not valorized, and no attempt is made to represent or emulate the child in a realistic fashion. For instance, seven of the eleven major characters in the play “Christmas at the Ivanovs” [Elka u Ivanovykh] (1938-39) are “children,” but they range from “Petya Perov, one-year-old little boy” to “Dunya Shustrova, eighty-two-year-old little girl.” Their language and behavior in the play can be childlike, but some of the children act like depraved adults,
and Petya has to remember periodically that he does not yet know how to speak. A different example of the childlike is “The Soldier Ay Bee See” [Soldat Az Buki Vedi] (1937-38), a sort of fairy-tale poem-in-prose about a soldier who, wandering along the seashore by evening, encounters some fishermen:

Их рыбаков было пять человек. Они пристально ели суп с рыбой. Их звали: Андрей, Бандрей, Бендрей, Гандрей, и Кудедрей. У них у всех были дочери. Их звали: Ляля, Таля, Бяля, Кяля и Сяля. Они все вышли замуж. Был вечер. Солдат Аз Буки Веди не зашел в дом к этим огородникам. Он не постучал к ним в дом. Он шел погруженный в свою мысль, основную им руководящую мысль об орехах.

[They the fishermen were five in number. They intently ate soup with fish. Their names were Andrey, Bandrey, Bendrey, Gandrey, and Kudedrey. They all had daughters. Their names were Lialya, Talya, Balya, Kialya, and Salya. The daughters had all gotten married. It was evening. The soldier Ay Bee See did not stop by the home of these garden-patch minders. He did not knock on their home door. He walked deep in his thought, the main directing him thought about nuts.]

This piece plays more with the forms and language of children’s literature. There are fairy-tale elements (fishermen and their daughters, all with fantastical and childlike rhyming names), songs evocative of children’s nonsense rhymes and lullabies, and a tendency to long, repetitive lists. The syntax, diction and character names all strongly evoke the childlike, and even more specifically, the language and space of school. At the same time, the mood of this late poem is one of melancholy philosophical inquiry.

78 Vvedensky, An Invitation for Me to Think, 121.
79 Consider Stewart on the nonsense of the list: “…it can threaten infinity by open form, by the addition of an unrestricted number of elements […] When the elements of the list have equal status, they can work like those numerical compositions that align the world to themselves. The list threatens an exhaustiveness that is lyric, that offers an interchangeability of elements across a horizontal temporal axis.” Nonsense, 135-36.
Echoing Zamiatin’s statement about ‘children’s questions,’ Anna Gerasimova claims that “the childlike quality of Vvedensky’s ‘adult’ work is in no way connected to his poems for children. It is not a reconstruction of the ‘child’s’ worldview, but rather the straightforwardness of questions that according to the grown-up rules of the game cannot be asked, because they have no answers.” Although Gerasimova’s comment demonstrates the remarkable continuity of this modernist position, the relationship of Vvedensky’s children’s and adult work is not so black-and-white. But Vvedensky’s fondness for “simple questions” is undeniable (well demonstrated in the excerpt from “Two little birds…”). In the poem “The Mirror and the Musician” [Zerkalo i muzykant] (1929), a dialogue between the two titular characters (the opening “stage directions” indicate that “Ivan Ivanovich is in the mirror”), ends with the musician asking four “simple” questions:

Музыкант Прокофьев
чем же думать?
чем же жить?
что же кушать?
что же пить?

Иван Иванович
кушай польку
пей цветы
думай столько
сколько ты

[Prokof’ev, Musician//so how do we think?/how do we live?/what do we eat?/what do we drink?//Ivan Ivanovich//eat polkas/drink flowers/think only/as much as you]

80 Anna Gerasimova, Problema smeshnogo v tvorchestve oberiutov (kandidat dissertation, Literaturnyi Institut imeni A.M. Gor’kogo, 1986), 212.
81 Vvedenskii, PSS, vol. 1, 96.
82 Vvedensky, An Invitation for Me to Think, 8.
In form and directness, the musician’s questions are simultaneously naïve and introspective – the two qualities exist in tension with each other, the philosophical pathos balanced by the wholly practical concern of “what do we eat and drink?” The answers are similarly balanced (indeed, they appropriately “mirror” the questions), with the silliness of eating polkas and drinking flowers presented side-by-side with the enigmatic “think only/as much as you”: even as proper grammar and syntactic parallelism would strongly suggest completing the last line with the verb “live” [zhivesh’], in Vvedensky’s peculiar grammar of poetry, this might just as likely be a complete sentence (the rhyme backs up this interpretation). In any event, the pared-down vocabulary, simple grammatical rhymes and counting-rhyme-like trochaic dimeter are formally evocative of children’s poetry, as is the question-and-answer format. At the same time, the lack of punctuation and the absurd situation (in Ivan’s stanza, the semantic bessmylitsa of the first two lines proceeds to the grammatical collapse of the following lines) make the poem distinct from anything that could be published as official children’s poetry.

There is a fairly significant disconnect between Vvedensky’s writing for children and adults. Vvedensky was prolific as a children’s writer, and it is easy to agree with the accounts of many contemporaries and subsequent scholars that dismiss most or all of his work for children as hack work done for money. Poems like “Four Braggarts” [Chetyre khvastuna] (1933) seem to support this viewpoint entirely:


84 See Khardzhiev, op.cit.; Sokol, Russian Poetry for Children, 144-145; et al. Although the authorship of the 1931 interrogation reports is clearly shared with the interrogators, Kharms refers to Vvedensky’s producing khaltura there; in his own interrogation Vvedensky confesses to anti-Soviet conspiracy but not to khaltura.
Ребята,
Подобные хвастуны
Будут помехой
Во время войны.
Чтобы с врагами
Биться
Умело,
Надо учиться
Военному делу.
Должен, ребята,
Каждый из вас
Знать винтовку
И противогаз!85

[Hey kids,/Braggarts like this/Will make trouble/During wartime./If you want to
fight/Your enemies/Well,/You have to study/The craft of war./Each one of
you/Kids has to/Know your rifles/And gas-masks!]

Vvedensky wrote a lot of children’s books that sound like this (including a great deal of
prose), but he also wrote a few interesting children’s poems. These display more of the
recognizable formal and semantic features of his adult work (the question-and-answer
format, soundplay, hints of the absurd and/or tautological) and resemble it more in tone.86

For instance, the children’s poem “Clever Petya” [Umnyi Petya] (1932), in addition to the
familiar question-answer exchange, also includes a meditation on the nature of time
entirely in line with some of Vvedensky’s radically unorthodox writings on the topic.

Evidently, it qualified as children’s poetry thanks to the conceit of Petya being a liar,
even as Petya’s falsehoods seem rather to represent a reversed logic and world upended:

85 Ezh No. 2-3 (1933), 43.
86 A lukewarm defense of Vvedensky’s children’s poetry and some good analysis of
individual poems can be found in Liudmila Zubova, “Stikhi Aleksandra Vvedenskogo
dlia detei,” in Aleksandr Vvedenskii v kontekte mirovogo avangarda, ed. Kornelija Ičin
and Sergei Kudriavtsev (Belgrade/Moscow: Gileia, 2006), 193-221. Lidia Chukovskaya
praises Vvedensky as a great lyric poet: see Chukovskaiá, V laboratorii redaktora, 272-
275.
- Видишь, стали дни короче
И длиннее стали ночи?
- Почему, ответь потом,
Вся река покрылась льдом?
И ответил Петя:
- Дети! Так и быть уж, объясню.
Рыбы в речке строят дом
Для своих детишек
И покрыли речку льдом –
Он им вроде крыши.
Оттого длиннее ночи,
Оттого короче дни,
Что мы стали рано очень
Зажигать в домах огни. 87

[You see how the days have grown shorter/And the nights longer?/So then, tell us, why/The whole river has iced over?/And Petya answered:/Kids! What can I say, I’ll tell you./The fish in the river are building a house/For their little ones./And they covered the river with ice/It’s like a roof for them./The nights are longer./The days are shorter./Because we have started lighting/The lights at home very early.]

Other children’s poems reveal ties to Vvedensky’s adult work through the presence of animals endowed with speech and a kind of otherworldly wisdom, as in “Dreams” [Sny] (1935). 88 The narrator, an obnoxious child, accosts a series of sleeping animals with questions about their dreams. When he approaches a cow, she responds:

А она мне: - Сделай милость,
Отойди и не мешай.
Не тревожь ты нас, коров:
Мы, коровы, спим без снов.

[But she said to me: Do me a favor,/Go away and don't interfere./Don't bother us cows:/We cows sleep without dreams.]

The frosty dignity and mysterious depth of the cow’s answer recalls the opening lines of Vvedensky’s most programmatic adult poem, “Rug Hydrangea” [Kover Gortensiia] (1934): “I regret that I’m not a beast.” Another thought-provoking interaction between

87 Chizh No. 9/10 (1932), 1.
88 Ezh No. 4 (1935), 1.
man and beast can be found in the late children’s poem “About the Fisherman and the Walleye” [O rybake i sudake] (1940). The poem has a hypnotic, sleepy lyricism that confirms Lidia Chukovskaya’s praise of Vvedensky as a great lyric poet:

Вот рыбак сидел, сидел
И на удочку глядел,
Вот рыбак терпел, терпел,
Не стерпел и сам запел.
По реке плывет членок,
На корме поет рыбак,
На носу поет щенок,
Песню слушает судак.
Слышит дудочки звучанье,
Слышит пение петушка,
Стадо громкое мычанье
И плесканье членока.
И завидует он всем:
Он, судак, как рыба нем.

[And so the fisherman sat and sat/And gazed at his pole,/And so the fisherman waited and waited,/Lost his patience and burst out singing./The canoe floats down the river/The fisherman sings at the stern,/The pup sings at the prow,/The walleye listens to their song./It hears the sounding of the pipes,/It hears the rooster's crow,/The loud lowing of the herd/And the plashing of canoe./And it envies everything:/The walleye is mute as a fish.]

The hypnotic quality comes from the simple grammatical rhymes and multiple repetitions, which mimic the near-absence of movement of the fisherman’s boat quietly rocking. Although the fisherman bursts into song despite himself, the noises that follow are somehow muted, which fact calls into question the meaning of the poem’s striking last line (the tautological comparison, extremely common in Vvedensky’s adult work, appears only rarely in his poems for children). The poem is also implicitly connected to Vvedensky’s adult work through the figure of the fisherman, recalling the fishermen in “The Soldier Ay Bee See.”

The childlike aesthetic in Vvedensky’s work is most evident in the simple,
somewhat distorted diction and syntax, the apparent leaps in logic and the use of
commonplaces of children’s literature including animal and child speakers and ‘childlike’
poetic forms. On the whole, it would seem that Vvedensky took more from children’s
literature than he gave back: these features appear much more frequently in his adult than
children’s poetry, and his children’s poetry only occasionally seems to benefit from the
austere beauty of his adult work. Turning to Zabolotsky, we find a similar division
between adult and children’s production, and a somewhat different manifestation of the
childlike aesthetic in the adult work.

Nikolai Zabolotsky (1903-1958)

The childlike aesthetic in Zabolotsky’s adult poetry was actually acknowledged
by contemporary critics: Zabolotsky alone of the OBERIU poets saw a book-length
publication of his adult work during their heyday in the late 1920s, Columns [Stolbtsy]
(1929); reviewers accused Zabolotsky of intentional infantilism and holy-foolery
(iurodstvo). The elements that contribute to the childlike aesthetic in Columns and other
contemporary poems include primitive pastoral settings, awkward, sometimes random-
seeming phrasings (somewhat reminiscent of Vvedensky) and a lyric speaker/lyric

89 N. Zabolotskii, Stolbtsy (Leningrad: Izd-vo pisatelei v Leningrade, 1929). Zabolotsky
also published poems in periodicals of the time, see for example “Torzhestvo
zemledeliia” (Zvezda 2/3 (1933), 82-99). Konstantin Vaginov also saw several
publications during the 1920s and early 1930s, but his period of association with the
OBERIU was brief and somewhat circumstantial.

90 E. Usievich, “Pod maskoi iurodstva,” Literaturnyi kritik no. 4 (1933), 90-91, and V.
Also see Pratt’s discussion of Zabolotsky’s holy foolery in Nikolai Zabolotsky, 107-148.
personae overtly naïve in voice and perspective. The presence of a primitivist aesthetic recalling the *lubok* (illustrated popular pamphlets, often humorous) is strong: “The lubok is the childhood of painting; lubok art with its naïveté, lack of flexibility and three-dimensionality, the awkwardness of its static figures and cheerful absurdity is akin to children’s art.” This aesthetic approach, rooted in the pre-revolutionary avant-garde, is relevant to the OBERIU poets’ work in general; Zabolotsky’s version of the childlike aesthetic in particular is distinct from that of both Vvedensky and Kharms in its more exaggerated, sometimes openly parodic quality. Zabolotsky also makes less use of the forms of children’s poetry in his adult work than his colleagues do. Indeed, even more than in Vvedensky’s case, Zabolotsky’s poetry written for children shows few intersections with his pre-war adult work.

Zabolotsky’s adult poetry often eschews an adult lyric speaker for standby characters of children’s literature such as animals, children and infants. Consider “Immaturity” [*Nezrelost’*] (1928):

Младенец кашку составляет
Из манных зерен голубых.
Зерно, как кубик, вылетает

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91 Consider “Litso konia” (1926), “Bezumnyi volk” (1931) and “Torzhhestvo zemledeliiia” (1933).


93 Gerasimova, *Problema smeshnogo*, 94.

94 While asserting that many of the deeper aspects of Zabolotsky’s poetics remain evident in his work after the camps, Pratt acknowledges that Zabolotsky “came to eschew the means and methods of Obriu art” (*Nikolai Zabolotsky*, 150), including the childlike form and lyric personae.
Из легких пальчиков двойных,
Зерно к зерну – горшок наполнен,
И вот, качаясь, он висит,
Как колокол на колокольне,
Квадратной силой знаменит.
[…]
И девочки, носимы вместе,
К нему по воздуху плывут.
Одна из них, снимая крестик,
Тихонько падает в траву.
Горшок клубится под ногою,
Огня субстанция живая,
И девочка лежит нагою,
В огонь откинув кружева.
Ребенок тихо отвечает:
"Младенец я и не окреп!
Ужель твой ум не примечает,
Насколько твой замысел нелеп? [...]."

[An infant is constructing porridge/from pale-blue grains of semolina./A grain goes flying like a block/From his light two little fingers./Grain goes to grain – the pot is full./See how it hangs a-swinging./Like a bell in the belltower./Famous for its square strength.[...] And little girls, carried along together/Come floating toward him through the air./One of them, taking off her cross./Falls gently to the grass./The pot is swirling underfoot./The substance of fire alive./And the girl is lying naked,/Having thrown her lace into the fire./The child answers quietly:/
"I’m an infant and not yet strong!/Does your mind really not notice/How absurd your plan is?]

“Immaturity” is hardly a poem written for children, rife though it is with elements of the childlike aesthetic. The figure of the wise child (more often referred to here as an “infant,” mladenets), engages in his curious cookery in terms of the childlike activity of building with blocks. Nevertheless, he is beset by crude sexual advances, and then proves to be self-possessed enough to rebuff them – even on logical grounds. There is a plethora of diminutives and “children’s” words: the infant is cooking porridge (kashka) as if playing with blocks (kubiki); even the neutral word for “pot” (gorshok) is

morphologically a diminutive, and moreover in connection with babies carries the connotation of a potty. The little girl-seductress (devochka) takes off her little cross (krestik) and falls gently (tikhon’ko) to the grass. All of these elements in combination create the hilarious absurdity of the seduction plot and the farcically serious response of the child, who ultimately insists that his seductress “cover her legs with white cloth” [zakroi zhe nozhki beloi tkan’iu] before returning to “wisely stirring his porridge.” This poem is thus a fine example of childlike elements – speaker, character, language and logic – employed to striking effect in a non-childlike context.

For all of its childlike elements, the adult themes of “Immaturity” render it something quite far from children’s poetry. This is true of much of Zabolotsky’s poetry. Another adult poem, “Questions for the Sea” [Voprosy k moriu] (1930) likewise makes use of forms familiar from children’s poetry in terms of tone, rhythm and rhyme scheme, while maintaining a markedly adult philosophical intensity.

Хочу у моря я спросить,
Для чего оно кипит?
Пук травы зачем висит,
Между волн его сокрыт?
Это множество воды
Очень дух смущает мой.
Лучше бы выросли сады
Там, где слышен моря вой.
Лучше бы тут стояли хаты
И полезные растенья,
Звери бегали рогаты
Для крестьян увеселенья.
Лучше бы руду копать
Там, где моря видим гладь,
Сани делать, башни строить,
Волка пулей беспокоить,

96 The reference to Valery Briusov’s famous one-line poem “O zakroi svoi blednye nogi” (1895) seems unmistakable.
Разводить медикаменты,
Кукурузу молотить,
Деве розовые ленты
В виде опыта дарить.
В хороводе бы скакать,
Змея под вечер пускать
И дневные впечатления
В свою книжечку писать. 97

[I want to ask the sea,/Why does it rage?/Why is there a tuft of grass
hanging,/Concealed between its waves?/This multitude of water/Very much
troubles my spirit./It would be better for gardens to spring up/Where we hear the
howling of the sea./It would be better for huts to stand here/And useful plants,/For
horned beasts to run around/For the amusement of peasants./It would be better to
dig mines/Where we see the smooth surface of the sea,/To make sleds, build
towers,/Bother wolves with bullets,/Grow medicines,/Thresh corn,/Give girls pink
ribbons/As an experiment./We'd leap in ring-dances,/Fly kites in the evening/And
write down the day's impressions/In our little book.]

Zabolotsky’s fantasy of an idyllic utopia replacing the sea’s distressing quantity of water
reads like rather like a demented, distorted piece of communist propaganda. The childlike
aspects of this poem begin with the title, setting a “questioning” tone. In fact, so tentative
is the speaker that he only manages to ask two questions, both of which – about the sea
raging and the tuft of grass hidden in the waves – approach absurdity because of the
implied significance attached to entirely unremarkable phenomena. The subsequent two
lines justify an abandonment of the line of questioning – the speaker is too concerned by
the multitude of water – while bolstering the sense of his great naïveté. This naïveté then
conditions the description of a utopian society that follows, even as elements of that
description are themselves distinctly naïve in meaning and form of expression (i.e. to
“bother wolves with bullets” and “leap in ring-dances”).

97 Zabolotskii, Sobranie sochinenii, vol.1, 90.
Zabolotsky’s work for children is distinct from his adult work, often to the point of unrecognizability. Probably because he had distanced himself from Vvedensky and Kharms, Zabolotsky was not arrested along with them in 1931 and continued steadily producing work “to order” for the children’s journals, including a number of stories and poems on patriotic (revolution and Civil War) and production themes. Another significant type of contribution (to Ezh) came in the form of serialized adaptations of various world classics. Most of Zabolotsky’s poetry for children is distinctly bland and uninspired, almost to the point of seeming intentionally so.

Слава людям и машинам,
И густому молоку,
И бидонам, и кувшинам,
И коровам на лугу!

[Hail to people and machines./And the thick milk./And the cans and ladles./And the cows in the meadow!]100

Май! Май! Первомай!
Ноги выше поднимай,
Из рядов не выходи,
Вместе с звёздочкой иди,
Мы — ребята-
Октябрьта.
Мы повсюду впереди.

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98 Lidia Ginzburg’s comments from 1930: “Zabolotsky is just sitting over there at Ezh. He’s dressed very solidly. He’s become completely smooth and plump (but not at all flabby), soft and rosy. He’s unpleasant to interact with. We talked for about fifteen minutes. He obviously doesn’t want to talk about literature and doesn’t want to read poetry. I was struck by the combination of this rosy-golden physiological well-being and inner coldness and depression. He goes to work, sits at home with his wife, doesn’t even see Kharms and Vvedensky, seems to be occupied with chemistry and math.” Zapisnye knizhki, 84.

99 Notably, Zabolotsky began using the pseudonym “Ia. Miller” for children’s poems and stories published after 1930, but continued to use his own name in the translation/adaptations.

100 Ia. Miller, Maslozavod (Moscow/Leningrad: Detgiz, 1931), 8.
[May! May! The first of May!/Lift your feet up higher,/Don’t step out of line,/Go in step with the star,/We’re the kids,/The Octobrats./We’re out in front everywhere.]\textsuperscript{101}

Both the poem about the creamery and the First of May poem seem to completely lack any features that might betray the author’s identity – and Zabolotsky is certainly a poet with a recognizable voice. Even poems on more neutral topics seem to have been engineered for maximal anonymity and “passability,” as in the following summer-vacation-themed “Hiker’s Song” \textit{[Pesnia turista]} (1933). If anything, the poem sounds like Marshak (indeed, there is a kind of standard Marshakian sound to a lot of the 1930s poetry produced in “Marshak’s Academy” at Detgiz):

\begin{verbatim}
 Есть на Кавказе
 Большие горы,
 В горах тропинки,
 Ущелья, норы.
 Под облаками
 У самых звёзд
 Найду я кручи
 Орлиных гнёзд.
\end{verbatim}

\textit{[In the Caucasus there are/Big mountains./Trails in the mountains/Gorges, burrows./Beneath the clouds/Right by the stars/I’ll find steep slopes/Of eagle’s nests.]}\textsuperscript{102}

Another example of the “Marshak style” is the surprising “About How We Talked in Tram-Speak” \textit{[O tom, kak my na tramvainom iazyke razgovarivali]} (1935). In this bracing trochaic poem, the fervently anti-zaum Zabolotsky has a noisy bunch of trams declare to a detachment of children: “Goum, Boim, Bium, Baum,/Bruvu, Ruru na ‘Chizha’!” This nonsense-speak is quickly decoded into an advertisement for the journal \textit{Chizh}; as an

\begin{footnotes}
\textsuperscript{101} Ia. Miller, “Pervomai,” in \textit{Chizh} no. 5 (1931), 1.
\textsuperscript{102} Ya. Miller, “Pesnia turista,” in \textit{Ezh} no. 6 (1933), 1–2. Compare Marshak’s opening “Est’/za granitsei/kontora/Kuka,” as well as the staccato rhythm and one- or two-word lines. Marshak, \textit{Sobranie sochinenii v vos’mi tomakh}, vol.1, 419.
\end{footnotes}
added precaution, the poem is carefully subtitled “a joke” [shutka]. In general, children’s poetry in the 1930s allowed nonsense as long as it could be broken down into a reasonable (onomatopoeic or foreign-language) explanation (although Kharms, as we will see, pushed the limits of this unwritten rule).

One of Zabolotsky’s best-known (and best-regarded) children’s poems is “How the Mice Went to War with the Cat” [Kak myshi s kotom voevali] (1933), subtitled “a fairy tale.”¹⁰³ The poem demonstrates significantly more inventive sound-play than his other work for children: the mice have general Kul’tiapka, who is assisted by seryi Tushkanchik: “Barabanit Tushkanchik v barabanchik”). The poem is full of folklore-like epithets and rousing imperatives:

Жил-был кот,
Ростом он был с комод,
Усы с аршпин,
Глази с кувшин,
Хвост трубой,
Сам рябой,
Ай да кот!

[Once there was a tomcat,/Big as a dresser,/Three-foot whiskers,/Eyes like pitchers,/Tail like a chimney,/All pockmarked/What a tomcat!]

Despite its success as a children’s poem, the overall tone and formal resolution is still quite distant from Zabolotsky’s non-children’s work. I was only able to find one children’s poem that in its awkwardness and strangeness of topic and tone recalls his adult work: “A Ski Trip” [Progulka na lyzhakh] (1933). Ostensibly a hymn to the healthful effects of skiing, the poem describes various afflicted and unhappy children:

Почему у нашей Тани
То припадки, то мигрени.

¹⁰³ First published in Chizh no. 10 (1933), 10-12.
Ходит Тания как в тумане
По второй своей ступени.
Чуть немного почитает —
Полстраницы и не более —
Целый день потом страдает
И лекарство пьет от боли.  

[Why does our Tanya/Have fits and migraines./Tanya walks as if in a haze/Through her middle school./If she reads just a little/Half a page or less/She’ll suffer for a whole day afterwards/And take medicine for the pain.]

The description of Tanya’s depression-like illness seems curiously adult; throughout the poem, the standard tetrameter lines and speculative content seem to have nothing to do with the motion of skiing. After describing the curative effects of skiing on these unfortunate souls, the poem’s narrator addresses the reader directly, prescribing skis and a hat as a panacea to these and other ills in strangely broad yet intimate terms:

Кто бы ты ни был, мой читатель,
Но когда на сердце скука,
Помни: лыжи — твой приятель,
Шапка — верная подруга.

[Whoever you are, my reader,/When you have a heavy heart,/Remember: skis are your friend,/Your hat is a faithful girlfriend.]

The hat as “faithful girlfriend” almost evokes Akaky Akakievich and his beloved overcoat.  

Perhaps the oddest part of the poem is its phlegmatic tone, which contrasts sharply with the expected activity and verve of the shorter refrains in particular. This


[105] Thanks to Aleksey Berg for pointing out another possible reference to classical Russian literature: the address and (rhyme) lexicon of this passage recalls Eugene Onegin (chapter one, verse three): “Онегин, добрый мой приятель,/Родился на берегах Невы,/Где, может быть, родились вы/Или блестали, мой читатель” (11). An ironic background for vernaia podruga is also perhaps echoed in the admonitory lines “Так ваша верная подруга/Бывает вмиг увлечена;/Любовью щути сатана” (32) (chapter four, verse twenty-one). A.S. Pushkin, Sobranie sochinenii v desiaty tomyakh (Moscow: GIKhL, 1959-1962), vol.4.
sluggishness is conveyed in no small part through the punctuation. The concluding lines
(like earlier refrains) would work quite differently with the simple addition of a couple of
exclamation points, but instead there are conclusive, nearly wistful periods.

Ну-ка с горки,
По оврагу
Побежали,
Полетели.

Лыжи вылечат беднягу

В самом деле.
В самом деле.

[Down the hill we go,/Along the ravine/Let’s run/Let’s fly./Skis will heal the poor guy//They really will./They really will.]

The significance of this odd punctuation, meanwhile, remains somewhat ambiguous,
since these poems were published in children’s journals and subject to outside editing
(we will have occasion to again examine the particulars of punctuation in children’s
poetry in the following discussion of Vsevolod Nekrasov). As far as the skiing poem is
concerned, the disconnect it represents between apparent affect and content – which can
waver between appearing intentional and indicating lack of literary skill – is a hallmark
of Zabolotsky’s adult work, where it is often used to deliberately absurd effect (leading to
accusations of holy foolery). Again, we can recall the avant-garde’s reproductions of the
authentically primitive, yet innately stylized lubok form.

Unlike Kharms and Vvedensky, Zabolotsky lived into the postwar period,
although he was far from unscathed. After his return from a prison camp, he began
publishing poetry again in the late 1940s. This controversial later poetry is in tone and
form quite distinct from Zabolotsky’s early work (his largely propagandistic later 1930s
poems are often seen as transitional), although thoughtful scholarship has sought to
demonstrate the continuity of Zabolotsky’s life of writing. Accordingly, I read the post-camps work as entirely in keeping with Zabolotsky’s poetic worldview; still, it is nevertheless distinct precisely in the total absence of the childlike aesthetic, which was previously so evident. The diction and form are fully classical; the lyric speaker is a fixed and, though tentative and willing to express doubts, nevertheless authoritative poetic ‘I.’ For officially-published poetry, this is unsurprising, as we shall see in the forthcoming discussion of the childlike aesthetic in unofficial post-war poetry.

**Daniil Kharms (1905-1942)**

As we have seen, the children’s work of both Zabolotsky and Vvedensky, though thematically and often formally quite distinct, nevertheless shows some continuity with their adult poetry – the disconnect is a matter of degree. Of these three, the work of Kharms demonstrates the greatest unity between the children’s and adult poems. Other than obvious surface-level formal differences resulting from the editorial requirements for published material (i.e. the normative punctuation, orthography and capitalization found in the published children’s poems), many of Kharms’ poems for children are essentially indistinguishable in form and content from those he intended for other audiences, and vice versa. The childlike aesthetic is ubiquitous in his work, ranging

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106 For post-camps Zabolotsky, see Pratt, Nikolai Zabolotsky; Igor’ Loshchilov, Fenomen Nikolaia Zabolotskogo (Helsinki: Institute for Russian and East European Studies, 1997); and the essays by Kekova, Volokhonskii, Etkind, Igosheva, and Anninskii in Nikolai Zabolotskii: Pro et Contra.

107 In the 1932 interrogation reports, Kharms lists a number of his more “to-order” children’s poems as insincere hack work (he mentions “Million” and “Theater,” among others). However, I was only able to find one Kharms children’s poem that in both form and content approaches the “unrecognizability” of Vvedensky’s or Zabolotsky’s patriotic
from transparent devices, such as children’s forms like counting rhymes, to more subtle elements of form and voice akin to what we have seen in Vvedensky and Zabolotsky. A great number of all of Kharms’ poems from the mid-1920s to early 1930s end with the eminently childlike “VSE” [that’s it]; wordplay approaching zaum or nearly-zaum language is also fairly common in his work. Consider the following excerpt from the poem “The Water and Khniu” [Voda i Khniu] (1931), not written for children:

Хню:
Прощай, вода.
Ты меня не любишь?

Вода:
Да.
Твои ноги слишком тонкие.
Я ухожу. Где мой посох?

Хню:
Ты любишь чернокосых?

Вода:
Жырк, жырк,
лю-лю-лю.
Журч, журч.
Клюб,
клюб,
клюб.

В с ё

[Khniu:/Farewell, water./You don’t love me?//Water:/Yes./Your legs are too thin./I’m leaving. Where is my staff?//Khniu:/You like dark-haired girls?//Water:/Zhyrk, zhyrk, liu-liu-liu./Gurg, gurg./Kliub, kliub./THAT’S IT]

As in other poems, the “vse” that ends the poem is essentially a stage direction that (like the indications of dramatis personae), by being included in the body of the poem,
emphasizes the conventionality of the narrative described. This excerpt from the end of the poem shows the water switching to its zaum-like “water language” (referred to earlier in the poem), thereby underscoring the failure of communication between itself and Khniu (as well as the other characters featured earlier on). Unlike Zabolotsky’s tram language, of course, the water-speak is not “translated” in the space of the poem.

Kharms used a fair amount of zaum-like language in his children’s poetry as well. The play “Shardam Circus” [Tsirk Shardam] (1935) features a Filipino juggler named Am gam glam Kaba laba Saba laba Samba gib chip lib Chiki kiki Ikiuki Ikiuki Chukh shukh Sdugr pugr Of of Prr, who speaks in zaum poetry (at one point he even offers the lines “Dyr dyr dyr/Bul’ bul’ bul’”). Zaum serving yet another different purpose can be found in the children’s poem “The Jolly Old Man” [Veselyi starichok] (1940):109

Жил на свете старичок
Маленького роста,
И смеялся старичок
Чрезвычайно просто:
"Ха-ха-ха
Да хе-хе-хе,
Хи-хи-хи
Да бух-бух!
Бу-бу-бу
Да бе-бе-бе,
Динь-динь-динь
Да трюх-трюх!”

[There once lived a little old man/Who was short/And the little old man
laughed/Extraordinarily simply:/“Ha-ha-ha/And heh-heh-heh./Hee-hee-hee/And
bukh-bukh!/Bu-bu-bu/And beh beh beh./Ding-dong-ding/And triukh-triukh!”]

The sounds of the old man’s maniacal laughter grow increasingly less recognizable as such throughout the subsequent two stanzas. The laughter’s wacky and complicated

109 Ibid., 75.
quality – it is anything but simple! – is underscored by the near-total lack of motivation for laughing (the following stanzas show the old man laughing out of fear at the sight of a spider and anger at the sight of a dragonfly). This flaunting of expectations of causality and motivation is generally characteristic of Kharms’s work. Meanwhile, Kharms’s use of zaum in this poem recalls Chukovsky’s reference to sounds that have lost all recognizable meaning and are valued for their “free-standing melody.” Again, no explanation is offered (other than laughter itself). At the same time, both the old man’s laughter and the “water language” in the Khniu poem contain recognizable sounds from Russian that do evoke meaning, however vague. For instance, the zhurch of the water’s language clearly comes from the zhurchanie or babbling, murmuring of a brook; in the old man’s laughter, bukh is the sound of a plop, and din’ din’ recalls the ringing of bells. The resulting indeterminacy of meaning (rather than total lack of it) is certainly a key element in Kharms’ (admittedly limited) use of zaum.

More than for Zabolotsky and Vvedensky, the mode of play is important for Kharms’s poetics (indeed, when a collection of Kharms’s work for children was finally republished in 1962, it was entitled Igra [play or game] after one of the poems included). Gerasimova posits a childlike quality to Kharms’s very character that meant he often simply replicated the child’s mindset in his work: “[Kharms’s bessmyslitsa] is not the result of imitation, but the product of a certain state of consciousness that in its frank and unprejudiced quality is close to that of a child.” Such a personality-based

110 For Kharms’s children’s work see PSS, vol. 3: Proizvedeniia dlia detei. Igra was edited and sponsored by Lidia Chukovskaya and published by the Moscow publishing house Detskii mir.

111 Gerasimova, Problema smeshnogo, 213.
hypothesis is of limited validity in discussing poetics, especially when discussing a poet whose deliberately fashioned public personality was as an avowed child-hater. Still, a poem like “I ran, ran, ran…” (1929) does seem to convincingly represent both the frenetic activity and the concrete fixation of reality typical of a small hyperactive child:

>[I ran and ran and ran/and got tired./Sat down on a stool, and stopped/running./I see overhead there’s a jackdaw/flying,/and then another jackdaw/flying,/and then another jackdaw/flying,/and then another jackdaw/flying./Why can’t I fly?/Oh, what a shame!]

The repetitions of the verb “ran” really seem to indicate intense activity, just as the four-times-repeated jackdaw means that four jackdaws flew by overhead, one after another.

This concrete orientation can be contrasted to the deliberately absurd repetitions of old ladies falling out a window in the famous short prose piece “The Tumbling Old Ladies” [Vyvalivaiushchiesia starukhi] (1936-37). And yet, the two pieces are quite similar in perspective: while the old ladies may well go on tumbling after the narrator gets bored

\[^{112}\text{Kharms, PSS, vol. 3, 16.}\]
\[^{113}\text{Kharms, PSS, vol.2, 331.}\]
and wanders off, the jackdaws recorded by the child ‘I’ may also be only the first four of infinitely many.

Play, and the magic of devices like repetition, can also take complex form: Kharms’s diaries reveal an obsession with myriad systems and rituals, ranging from foreign languages and religious practices to mystical traditions like Kabbalah and tarot, which regularly spills over into his poems and stories. In a move that takes magic out of the margins, Jonathan Culler has argued convincingly for greater attention to the ritualistic dimension of lyric poetry, referring to “the principle of iterability – lyrics are constructed for repetition – along with a certain ceremoniousness, and the possibility of making something happen in the world (practitioners of ritual hope they will be efficacious). The concept of ritual encourages concentration on the formal properties of lyric utterance, from rhythm and rhyme to other sorts of linguistic patterning.”¹¹⁴ This way of reading, with its focus on form and on the lyric as event, seems particularly compelling for Kharms and the other OBERIU poets. For example, the poem “Notnow” [Neteper’] (1930)¹¹⁵ enacts something like a cross between a problem of symbolic logic and an incantation:

Это есть Это.
То есть То.
Это не есть Это.
Остальное либо это, либо не это.
Все либо то, либо не то.
[…]
Мы смотрели, но не видели.
А там стояли это и то.
Там не тут.
Там то.

¹¹⁵ Kharms, *PSS*, vol.1, 127.
Тут это.
Но теперь там и это и то.
Но теперь и тут это и то.
Мы тоскуем и думаем и томимся.
Где же теперь?
Теперь тут, а теперь там, а теперь тут, а теперь тут и там. […]

[This is This./That is That./This is not This./The rest is either this or not this./Everything is either that or not that. […] We looked but did not see./And there were standing this and that./There is not here./There is that./Here is this./But now this and that are there./But now this and that are here too./We are yearning and thinking and languishing./So where is now?/Now here, but now there, but now here and there.]

The uncharacteristically “serious” tone of this poem is tempered by the tongue-twister-like syntactic and semantic absurdity it creates in navigating between otherwise transparent demonstrative pronouns and adverbs. Yakov Druskin, a philosopher and close friend of the OBERIU poets, like Gerasimova pointed to the childlike aspects of Kharms’s social, philosophical and linguistic critical inquiries, comparing him to the little boy who declares that the emperor wears no clothes.116 Druskin also noted Kharms’s propensity for “situational bessmyslitsa” (in contrast to Vvedensky’s semantic bessmyslitsa).117 While “Notnow” plays in a more semantic space of abstract concepts and the words that designate them, most of Kharms’s work indeed presents concrete, everyday situations that over the course of the poem or story break down into open absurdity as apparent rules or guiding principles are stretched to the limit of sense. Like “Notnow,” most of Kharms’s work for children tends to be rule-governed, or perhaps

more precisely, to demonstrate the creation and testing of a system. Consider “Ivan Toporyshkin” (1928):\textsuperscript{118}

Иван Топорышкин пошел на охоту,
с ним пудель пошел, перепрыгнув забор.

Иван как бревно провалился в болото,
а пудель в реке утонул, как топор.

Иван Топорышкин пошел на охоту,
с ним пудель вприпрыжку пошел, как топор.

Иван повалился бревном на болото,
а пудель в реке перепрыгнул забор.

Иван Топорышкин пошел на охоту,
с ним пудель в реке провалился в забор.

Иван как бревно перепрыгнул болото,
а пудель вприпрыжку попал на топор.

[Ivan Toporyshkin went out on a hunt, his poodle came along, jumping over the fence.//Ivan fell into the swamp like a log, and the poodle drowned in the river like an axe.//Ivan Toporyshkin went out on a hunt, his poodle came along, hopping like an axe.//Ivan toppled over the swamp like a log, and the poodle jumped over the fence in the river.//Ivan Toporyshkin went out on a hunt, his poodle fell into the fence in the river.] //Ivan like a log jumped over the swamp, and the poodle hopping along fell onto an axe.]

The poem plays a simple substitution game that nevertheless creates a series of recognizable situations; like many of the short prose pieces in the “Incidences” [Sluchai] cycle (1934-38),\textsuperscript{119} the situations are mostly violent and frightening, even in their increasing absurdity. This poem is an example of silliness and absurdity smoothing the way to publication rather than hampering it (although it would be one of the poems

\textsuperscript{118} Kharms, PSS, vol.3, 10.

\textsuperscript{119} For the “Incidences,” see Kharms, PSS, vol. 2, 330-364. Around the mid-1930s Kharms largely switched to writing prose, although he continued to write poems for children until 1940.
attacked in the 1931 arrest reports).

With Kharms, it is possible to talk about a real blurring of the boundaries between the genres of adult and children’s poetry. In the previously mentioned children’s play “Shardam Circus,” besides the overt reference to Kruchënykh’s zaum, there is a clear dialogue with one of the “Incidences” miniatures, “The Mathematician and Andrei Semenovich” [*Matematik i Andrei Semenovich*] (1933). Written in the form of a dramatic dialogue, the latter piece features the two title characters arguing insistently and repetitively to the point of absurdity.²¹

Математик:
Вот я и победил!
Вот я и победил!
Вот я и победил!

Андр<ей> Семен<ович>:
Ну победил и успокойся!

Математик:
Нет, не успокоюсь!
Нет, не успокоюсь!
Нет, не успокоюсь!

[Mathematician: See, I’ve won!/See, I’ve won!/See, I’ve won!/Andr<ei> Semen<ovich>: So you’ve won, now calm down!/Mathematician: No, I won’t calm down!/No, I won’t calm down!/No, I won’t calm down!]

At the end of the piece, Andrei Semenovich says “I’m sick of squabbling with you,” to which the Mathematician responds: “No, you’re not sick of it!/No, you’re not sick of it!/No, you’re not sick of it!” The stage directions have Andrei Semenovich wave his hand dismissively and walk offstage, at which point “The Mathematician, having stood

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²⁰ Ibid., 338-340.

²¹ Using Stewart’s typology, the nonsense here is just as much that of superfluous signifying as of repetition, with its implications of infinity.
for a minute, walks off after Andrei Semenovich. [Curtain].” Compare to the relationship between the Director and Vertunov in “Shardam Circus”:

Директор. Ну, вы мне голову не морочьте. Человек летать не может.
Vertunov. Нет, может.
Директор. Нет, не может.
Vertunov. А я говорю, может!
Директор. А ну, полетите.
Vertunov. Вот и полечу!
Директор. Ну, летите, летите!
Vertunov. Вот и полечу!
Директор. Ну что вы не летите?
Vertunov. Я умею по-собачьи лаять. 122

[Ringmaster. All right, don’t try to pull one over on me. People can’t fly./Vertunov. Yes they can./Ringmaster. No they can’t./Vertunov. I say they can!/Ringmaster. Well, fly then./Vertunov. I will right now!/Ringmaster. Well, go on, fly!/Vertunov. I will right now!/Ringmaster. Why aren’t you flying?/Vertunov. I can bark like a dog.] 122

The adult version appears as simply a more concentrated, distilled version of the absurdity of argument (the opening exchange between the Mathematician and Andrei Semenovich is the former’s statement “I have taken a ball out of my head/I have taken a ball out of my head/I have taken a ball out of my head” and the latter’s response “Put it back in!/Put it back in!/Put it back in!”). The children’s play, meanwhile has been outfitted with more “realistic” trappings to justify such exchanges in a real-life (albeit circus) setting (here, Vertunov has appeared at the circus and is begging the ringmaster to let him perform in some capacity).

Of the OBERIU poets, Kharms’s children’s work is by far the best known and most admired today. And the contrast between his often violent, dark work for adults and the cheery slapstick humor of the children’s books has led the reading public and scholars

alike to read Kharms’s work as sharply split between official and unofficial, children’s
and adult. Reading Kharms’s work as a unified whole through the lens of the childlike
aesthetic offers a way to see the strong connections between Kharms’s adult and
children’s work, and how the genre distinction could be productively elided toward a
sense of aesthetic continuity in one’s work. This aim will be addressed further in the
context of postwar unofficial poets working in children’s literature; for all of them,
Kharms (and to some extent, the other OBERIU poets) would be a figure of significance.

Marshak’s speech at the First Congress of Soviet Writers in 1934 marked a
watershed in the life of Soviet children’s literature. Although Detgiz continued to publish
the work of the young Leningrad avant-garde writers for a few more years, in 1937 the
entire operation was purged. Nearly everyone was fired and a number of its employees
were arrested; Marshak fled Leningrad for Moscow. The following years saw the
untimely deaths of many Detgiz writers and artists, including Kharms and Vvedensky.

123 The division is most directly expressed in publications, which usually divide
Kharms’s children’s work from everything else (see Daniil Kharms, PSS; Polet v nebesa
(Leningrad: Sovetskii pisatel’, 1991); Vanna Arkhimeda, etc., as well as scholarly
publications on Kharms’s work – Weld’s chapter on Kharms in Voiceless Vanguard is a
welcome exception). Also see Jean-Philippe Jaccard’s brief remarks on Kharms’s
children’s writing in Daniil Kharms i konets russkogo avangarda (St. Petersburg:
Akademprekt, 1995), 70-74, and Gerasimova, “Esteticheskii i eticheskii eksperiment

124 Chukovskaia, V laboratorii redaktora, 321-323.

125 Zabolotsky was sentenced to hard labor in Siberia in 1938, the same year Oleinikov
was executed. Vvedensky left for Kharkov in 1938, where he would be arrested and die
in 1941; Kharms was sent to a prison for the mentally ill in 1941 and died there the
following fall. For more on Zabolotsky, see Pratt, Nikolai Zabolotsky: Enigma and
Cultural Paradigm; on Vvedensky, see Aleksandr Vvedenskii v kontekste mirovogo
avangarda; on Kharms, see Jaccard, Daniil Kharms i konets russkogo avangarda and V.
After Marshak’s departure, Detgiz production dropped in both quantity and quality; unsurprisingly, the 1940s did not see very much new literary production for children, as the publishing houses were hard pressed to publish anything given the shortages of supplies and writers during the post-Terror and war years. The particularly bad conditions in Leningrad did not improve much even after the end of the siege and the war: the 1946 initiation of the “Zhdanov doctrine” targeted Leningrad in particular, and began with specifically literary attacks against the city’s famous surviving authors Mikhail Zoshchenko and Anna Akhmatova.\textsuperscript{126} Subsequently, a lot of literary and artistic production would be based in Moscow, even after both Zhdanov and Stalin left the scene.

In the next chapter, I will discuss the ongoing relationship between unofficial poets and Soviet children’s literature during the post-war period. The experience of the OBERIU poets suggested a model for literary behavior – being an unofficial poet and an official children’s writer – that could provide for both literary and material survival on the part of later generations. For many Thaw-era poets, official children’s literature remained, as before, a source of income rather than inspiration. Yet, the example of the OBERIU poets’ work for children proved inspiring for many writers. Kharms, because he did not draw the boundary between children’s and adult poetry that Vvedensky and Zabolotsky did, was particularly influential on later generations in their continuation and re-energization of the childlike aesthetic.

Some postwar writers were, at least briefly, enthused about creating high-quality work for children, even as they pursued their adult writing through unofficial channels.

\textsuperscript{126} About the Zhdanov doctrine and the attacks on the Leningrad cultural scene, see Aleksandr Rubashkin, “K 60-letiiu postanovleniia TsK VKP(b) ‘O zhurnalakh Zvezda i Leningrad,” in Zvezda no. 8 (2006).
The idea of publishing one’s (unpublishable) adult work as children’s poetry appealed to some, including Vsevolod Nekrasov: “I selected my ‘children’s’ poems to be published for children, but I didn’t write them as children’s poems – sometimes I write things like that now too – and I take full responsibility for them now and like them just as much as the rest of my work. If not more.”¹²⁷ Nekrasov, who greatly admired Kharms, was opposed to the idea that writing for children had to be somehow essentially different from writing for adults. His opinion and his work – as well as that of many of his contemporaries, the subjects of the chapters ahead – support the generic instability we have seen in the examples of this chapter.

¹²⁷ Vsevolod Nekrasov and A.I. Zhuravleva, Paket (Moscow: Meridian, 1996), 215.
“Playing with Words”: Experimental Unofficial Poetry and Children’s Literature in the Post-war Period

The culture of the Soviet 1960s has historically been discussed mainly in terms of the post-Stalin “Thaw” and its attendant relative freedoms in literature and the other arts. Poetry in particular enjoyed a big boom, with earnest, young, state-sanctioned lyric poets reading their work to stadiums full of screaming fans. An important strain of Thaw-era poetry, however, lay outside the mainstream, was not published in the official press and mostly did not coincide with the buoyant and patriotic optimism of official Soviet culture of the time. These unofficial poets were preoccupied with questioning, opening up and exploring the nature of language and existence, and employed toward this end various aspects of the childlike aesthetic, including naïveté, foolishness and nonsense. As before, the childlike aesthetic was associated with breaking down boundaries and normative ways of thinking and using language, but the markedly different political, social and literary norms prevailing in the Soviet 1960s naturally meant that poets were finding different ways to be radical in their literary practice. The story of these unofficial poets constitutes a crucial chapter in the history of cultural innovation in the Thaw and in subsequent developments in Russian poetry.

In its various guises, the childlike aesthetic was one of the distinguishing features of unofficial literature. Of course, the worlds of official and unofficial literature were always (and of necessity) closely intertwined. A case in point is the fact that, like their
OBERIU predecessors, many of the unofficial poets to be discussed found literary employment as children’s writers.¹ I argue that the childlike aesthetic exhibited in much post-war unofficial poetry draws on the awareness of similar poetic strategies employed by the Futurist and OBERIU poets (in their work for both children and adults), intensifying and adapting them in order to navigate the complicated literary and socio-political environment of the post-Stalin Thaw. The devices of the childlike aesthetic identified in the work of early Soviet children’s poets remain largely the same in the work of these post-war unofficial poets (in whatever work they appear, children’s or otherwise), but the significance of employing this aesthetic – and its function as a rhetorical position – changes and takes on different meanings in the later context. Even as the later poets were referring to their avant-garde and OBERIU predecessors, the childlike aesthetic in their work moved further away from both the genre of children’s literature and from actual children, becoming more of an organic part of their poetics and blurring the formerly rigid boundaries between genres.

**Thaw-era Literary Byt: Practical Matters**

Official Soviet literary life in the post-Stalin period did show a softening of aesthetic (formal) strictures and a greater tolerance for artistic experimentation in all genres.² These freedoms initially inspired a number of younger writers to try to work

¹ I follow Eugene Ostashevsky in using the term OBERIU as a catch-all to describe this group of poets and their work, despite the terminological controversy surrounding it. See “Editor’s introduction,” *OBERIU: An Anthology*, xiii.

within official structures. But there was also a forty-year gap separating young and experimental authors from the last time experimental writing had been published in the official press. For writers coming of age in the 1950s-60s, the arcane workings of the Soviet literary world were firmly established and clearly known; socialist realism was a phenomenon with familiar if occasionally moving boundaries, and writers had grown used to working in fields adjacent to but outside of their actual areas of interest (“ne v svoem dele,” in Lidia Ginzburg’s formulation). This also meant that for many unofficial writers, literary experiment was somewhat normalized in work assumed never to be published. In any event, there was plenty of evidence that the “new freedoms” following Stalin’s death were relative: the intelligentsia followed the 1958 campaign against Boris Pasternak with great concern, and many people had a friend or relative who’d done time for ideological crimes. Although people no longer feared for their lives, the fact of the censorship of culture had been deeply internalized.

After Stalin’s death, the 1954 Second Congress of the Writers’ Union and the 1956 Twentieth Party Congress heralded the appearance of new, essentially anti-Stalinist principles in the regulation of culture. The publication of Alexander Solzhenitsyn’s *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* in *Novyi Mir* in 1961, with its open portrayal of life in the gulag, was greeted by many readers as an unprecedented turning point: now the floodgates could open. But socialist realism and state censorship had not been abandoned (as the fall of *Novyi Mir* editor Alexander Tvardovsky soon evidenced). Moreover, the

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3 Leiderman and Lipovetsky succinctly demonstrate the back-and-forth negotiations of the authorities with artistic freedom during the Thaw period, showing how Tvardovsky’s liberal editing practices were balanced by Kochetov’s Stalinist ones at *Oktiabr’. Russkaia literatura XX veka*, vol. 1, 91-92.
ideology and functioning of Soviet literary institutions remained outdated and arcane, with enforcement inconsistent yet unbending. There were so many ways to be incompatible with this system that even writers whose aesthetic practice was fairly unobjectionable by official standards could find themselves excluded from gainful employment in Soviet literature and state-sanctioned publication.

The writers here referred to as “unofficial” were those consciously opposed to or incapable of fitting their work into the existing strictures of official publication, and whose adult publications during the Soviet period were officially illegal, i.e. appeared only in samizdat or tamizdat. One contemporary poet and self-styled historian of unofficial culture, Viktor Krivulin (1944-2001), later described a break between official and unofficial literature occurring during the Thaw period:

I would say that the phenomenon of modern poetry emerged [...] around twenty years ago. The starting point was the death of Boris Pasternak and the shutdown in Leningrad of the last official poets' competition, at which Joseph Brodsky's poems had first been heard. It was then that the chasm between “new” (official) and modern (unofficial) Russian poetry became obvious. That was the spring of 1960. That was the beginning of the complicated and protracted process of stratification of Russian-language poetry.⁴

While it can be hard to argue for an absolute aesthetic distinction between official and unofficial literature, the existence of a fundamental difference was an important and cherished principle for most unofficial writers.⁵ Furthermore, Krivulin’s statement reflects the widely-held feeling that, given the extreme difficulties and limitations of the

⁴ Aleksandr Kalomirov (Viktor Krivulin), “20 let noveishei russkoi poezii,” first published in the samizdat journal Severnaia pochta, no 1/2 (1979), pages not numbered [FSO fond 37].

⁵ A number of essays in Vtoraia kul’tura attempt to define and classify the distinguishing features of unofficial literary production. Komaromi’s Uncensored also posits some formal and thematic features unique to samizdat (unofficial) prose of the postwar period.
official literary scene, writers would do better to stop beating their heads against the wall of officialdom and focus on forging a writing career exclusively amidst their peers (through clandestine readings and samizdat publications) and/or abroad (through tamizdat).

With few exceptions, none of the postwar poets to be discussed in this dissertation ever saw any of their work in official print. Igor Kholin and Vsevolod Nekrasov had selections of their work published in the first samizdat literary journal, Sintaksis, in 1959. Other journals followed – one denizen of mid-1960s Leningrad, Vladimir Erl’, introduced his Fioretti in 1966, and Leningrad became known in the 1970s as a center for samizdat literary journals. The 1964 trial of Joseph Brodsky in Leningrad (for tuneiadstvo) and the 1966 trial in Moscow of Andrei Sinyavsky and Yuli Daniel (for publishing works abroad) constituted a watershed moment for samizdat production nationwide, essentially bringing this clandestine activity much more into the public view. For most writers, samizdat publications were implicitly of lower status than the official version; the material limitations also meant that writers had little control over the

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8 John and Carol Garrard, Inside the Soviet Writers’ Union (NY/London: The Free Press/Macmillan, 1990), 143.
reproduction of their texts once loosed into the whirlpool of illicit publishing.⁹ On the other hand, as time went on samizdat publishing became more sophisticated, and readers came to place more trust in the reliability of uncensored texts. By the 1970s, publishing principally in samizdat had become a legitimate alternative for some unofficial writers.¹⁰ I will return to the complicated institutional phenomenon of unofficial literature, and the question of its unique aesthetic features, in what follows.

Most writers in the Soviet Union, including some widely-published members of the exclusive Writers Union, knowingly produced different kinds of work: a writer might write some things for “the drawer” and others for official publication, maybe even publishing illegally in sam- or tamizdat (although this would be risky for a writer with a good Soviet reputation).¹¹ A few writers did opt out of official publishing entirely, but this still necessitated some kind of other job because of the official obligation to be employed: “As a result of the Soviet claim of full employment, no male (unless he is a full-time student) is permitted not to work, that is, not to be engaged in ‘socially productive labor.’”¹² Being a full-time student was also not uncomplicated: students were accepted as full-time (day-section) or part-time (evening section), according to exam

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⁹ For example, see Ann Komaromi, “The Material Existence of Samizdat,” Slavic Review, vol. 63, no. 3 (2004), 597-618; as well as the website she curates: http://samizdatcollections.library.utoronto.ca/

¹⁰ It should be mentioned that tamizdat was more unambiguously considered a respectable and strategic move for writers seeking recognition outside the Soviet system. For more on choosing samizdat as a conscious alternative, see Komaromi, Uncensored.

¹¹ For a short list, consider writers as disparate as Boris Slutsky, Alexander Solzhenitsyn, and Boris Pasternak, who wrote work for quite different audiences or publication channels.

¹² Garrard, Inside the Soviet Writers ’ Union, 5.
results and other factors. Part-time students were required to work “according to specialization” alongside their studies. Thus, even a student of literature was bound by a program’s requirements to be additionally employed in some literary capacity.

The implications of being shut out of the official literary process went beyond the mere limitation of success in literature. In May 1961, a new decree was adopted aimed at reinforcing the struggle against “individuals (idlers, freeloaders, parasites) evading socially useful labor and engaging in an anti-social, parasitic way of life”: a person without an employment record or established place of employment/official credentials was at risk of being branded a parasite or “freeloader” [tuneiadets]. Although unemployed writers were not the primary targets of this law, the category of “idle youth” into which they easily fell was certainly one of the groups under scrutiny. Parasitism could be punished by time in a corrective labor camp, though the usual punishment was exile from urban areas. This problem was famously reflected in the 1964 trial and conviction of Joseph Brodsky, although many others were tried and convicted along similar lines. Occasionally employed writers (“of no fixed profession”) and artists living

13 State-sponsored anti-Semitism meant that aspiring students of Jewish origin were often only able to study part-time. Private interview with Mikhail Yasnov (Gurvich), 18 August 2014.

14 For instance, Mikhail Yasnov worked for four years as an editor at the Shipbuilders’ Press [Izdatel’stvo korablestroitelei]. Ibid.


16 Fitzpatrick, “Social Parasites,” 401-403. Fitzpatrick points out the greater significance (and sheer quantity) of alcoholic vagrants and small-scale economic criminals like black-marketeers as targets of the law.

17 Garrard, Inside the Soviet Writers’ Union, 5.
with gainfully employed parents or wives slipped under the radar, but they too could find themselves vulnerable to prosecution. The best-documented example is, again, Brodsky’s:

Judge: [...] Tell me, why were you not working?
Brodsky: I was working. I was writing poems.
Judge: This does not interest us. We want to know what institution you were affiliated with.
Brodsky: I had agreements with the publisher.
Judge: You can live off of agreements? List them: what contract, on what date, for what amount?
Brodsky: I can’t remember exactly. My lawyer has all my contracts.
Judge: I’m asking you.
Brodsky: Two books with my translations came out in Moscow... (lists them).
 [...]
Judge: What is your specialization anyway?
Brodsky: Poet. Poet-translator. 18

The line of questioning reveals the danger of having a spotty employment record and lack of institutional affiliations – a situation shared by many of Brodsky's contemporaries – should one be put on trial or otherwise come under state scrutiny. So most writers sought employment and/or official affiliation, even as some of them went on publishing work in unofficial channels.

There were more and less practical solutions to the employment problem, adopted variously according to needs and convictions. Some people did nothing; they risked (or were frequently subjected to) arrest. Living “outside the system,” however, liberated one from the obligation to perform as the good Soviet citizen, a freedom sought explicitly by some. Aleksey Khvostenko’s song “June is pouring rain” [L’et dozhdem iun’] became an anthem of sorts for these freewheeling types:

[We have no reason to stand here under the rain/We want to go to a bar but we don’t have the money/If only someone would invite us to go eat with them/But in this country if you don’t work you don’t eat//And we most certainly don’t want to work/The salary couldn’t buy us cognac anyway/And as aesthetes we don’t want to drink vodka/And that is why we don’t work.]

Fitzpatrick’s remark on tuneaidstvo is appropriate here: “The concept at the heart of the anti-parasite law was: ‘He who does not work, does not eat.’”\(^{20}\) Khvostenko indeed managed to live mostly unemployed until his emigration in 1977, but he was frequently arrested for tuneiadstvo and periodically institutionalized in mental hospitals (a punitive practice that became nearly as common as ordinary arrest).\(^{21}\) Still, prior to the 1970s, the notion of demonstratively avoiding participation in official Soviet life had not caught on very widely.\(^{22}\) Although it was difficult to get work officially published, there existed venues for public readings that were tolerated by the authorities, and many young writers

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\(^{19}\) Aleksei Khvostenko, Anri Volokhonskii, \textit{Berloga pchel} (Tver’: Kolonna, 2004), 6. Boris Dyshlenko is credited as a co-author for “June…” (95). This song has its own fascinating history – it sung to the same tune as “Poiut tsygane u vorot,” which was a translation of a British folk song, “The Raggle-taggle Gypsy,” by Khvostenko’s father Lev Khvostenko (1915-1959), a well-regarded translator from English.


\(^{21}\) For more on Khvostenko, see “Krug Alekseia Khvostenko” in T.L. Nikol’skaia, \textit{Avangard i okrestnosti} (St. Petersburg: Izd-vo Ivana Limbakha, 2002), 274-282.

\(^{22}\) For more on the “drop-out” phenomenon, see the discussion of living “vnye” in Alexey Yurchak, \textit{Everything Was Forever Until It Was No More} (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2006), 126-157; also Krivulin/Kalomirov, “20 let noveishei russkoi poezii.”
entertained the possibility of “making it” in official literature.

Indeed, despite the restrictions on aesthetic freedom implicit in official literary life, many writers at this time would have been delighted to be accepted into the Writers’ Union. And the Union itself had acknowledged, by the late 1950s, its need for new blood. But most young writers simply were not under consideration: heavy bureaucracy and a nepotistic old-boy system made it difficult for younger writers just starting out to meet the entrance requirements. They were steep: in order to be considered for membership in the Writers’ Union, a poet, for example, needed to have published at least one book, which in order to be published had to have passed through a protracted and exceedingly non-transparent system of censorship and approval. Thus most of the “younger writers” eventually admitted to the Union were in their 40s.

As had been the case in the early Soviet period, there were a number of different ways for writers to eke out a living “through literature,” while not belonging to the Writers’ Union or enjoying any of its allowances and benefits (such as the freedom not to ______

24 Ibid., 28-29. Garrard notes that prose writers would need to have published two books, and translators five or six, before applying for admission. Garrard, Inside the Soviet Writers’ Union, 111.

A case in point: Brodsky was only able to submit a book manuscript for publication after his arrest and exile, that is, on the wings of the fame that it brought him (as one of the editorial board members, M.I. Dikman, reasoned: “It would be useful for the general reader to find out what ‘Brodsky’s poetry’ is; this will help to break down the legends that have sprung up around his name.”). The book, Zimniaia pochta, was seriously considered by the publisher – Brodsky made a number of changes in response to their suggestions – but failed to pass the second round of reviews. Proceedings from the “Sovetskii pisatel’” editorial meeting 26 July 1966 and letters from the head editor to the Leningrad branch of the Writers’ Union were published in the Leningrad samizdat journal Severnaia pochta, no.6 (1980), pages not numbered [FSO, fond 37]. Also see Losev’s account in Joseph Brodsky: A Literary Life, trans. Jane Ann Miller (New Haven: Yale UP, 2011), 122-124.
have other employment). Although money was not an insignificant factor, the more important benefit of having literary contracts was official proof that one was employed and not a parasite. Scores of part-time or freelance “literary slaves” [literaturnye negry] – the derogatory term is significant – were menially employed in the publishing houses and at literary journals as copy-editors, crib-translators, readers of manuscripts and readers’ letters, and many other tasks that, while paid, never entailed the author’s name appearing in print.25 Some young writers got more plum jobs as “personal secretaries” for well-placed literary notables (among other benefits, members of the Writers’ Union were allowed a personal secretary/assistant).26 And some (and these are intersecting and overlapping groups, at various times in a writer’s life) turned to an area of literary production easier to break into because less high-stakes: children’s literature.27

Children’s Literature in the Postwar Period

The post-Stalin period saw the return of the remarkable tradition of aesthetically radical, officially unrecognized poets authoring the books aimed at educating and enriching the lives of young Soviet citizens. Along with other art and literature of the early Soviet avant-garde, at this time early Soviet children’s literature also experienced a renaissance at the official level. (Indeed, the aesthetics of the Thaw period overall can be characterized by a strong orientation on youth and the youthful qualities of daring, idealism and boldness). At the same time, early Soviet children’s literature – much of it

26 Some examples of this kind of arrangement: Sergei Dovlatov worked for Vera Panova, Mikhail Iasnov – for Efim Etkind, Alexander Kushner – for Lidia Ginzburg.
27 Interesting that when Yasnov was eventually inducted into the Writers’ Union, it was as a literary translator – although he had published many children’s books at that point.
produced by writers of dubious political legitimacy – had become an important source of inspiration for Thaw-era avant-gardistes in their own, unpublished work (written for adults). In this way, the childlike aesthetic was being interpreted and exploited on a number of different levels at the same time.

As in the pre-war period, children’s literature could be a useful “middle ground” for writers otherwise not able to publish in the official press: though its generic requirements resembled those of socialist realism, fulfilling them seemed less of a moral compromise than doing so in adult literature. For many post-war writers, Lidia Ginzburg’s musings (over her experience writing a young-adult novel in the 1930s) still held:

A real piece of work is expression and the search for previously unknown methods of expression. Here [with children’s literature] the conditions are given, really all the elements are given which one would be searching for in the process of real creation. Here you just have to do something with these elements – and you get a work that is not your own, but that actually interests you; it’s a special kind of creative satisfaction. The satisfaction comes from seeking out the right correlation between existing elements. It almost seems to you that that correlation itself already exists somewhere: like the right solution to a problem on the final page of a textbook.28

To be sure, some post-war writers wrote children’s literature from a purely practical, sometimes rather mercenary perspective.29 Tatyana Nikolskaya recalls Lev Losev’s cheerful acknowledgment of this attitude: “Lyosha [Losev] wasn’t particularly ashamed of his hack-work […] One time in my presence little Mitya asked his father why he had written bad children’s poems. Lyosha answered honestly: ‘To keep you and Masha

28 Ginzburg, Zapisnye knizhki, 110.
29 Lygo, Leningrad Poetry, 58, and author’s interview with Mikhail Erëmin (1 August 2014).
This willingness to knowingly produce subpar material was not universal. In the early period, we can recall Kharms’s refusal to adapt Cervantes; in the postwar period, Vsevolod Nekrasov protested mightily against many aspects of the official criteria for what children’s literature should be (and was not published as a result).

It should be mentioned that children’s literature was also a haven for visual artists otherwise excluded from official Soviet artists’ organizations. Many of the unofficial groupings of the 1950s-60s combined both writers and visual artists; they would often collaborate on books. Interestingly, the artists tended to benefit more from these arrangements than did the writers: they were more likely to work under contract and could thereby get access to much-needed supplies, otherwise in short supply. Unofficial writers, of course, did not need supplies, but lacked the institutional connections of many of the visual artists.

By the late 1950s – early 1960s, children’s literature had become fairly attractive to writers and readers alike. Konstantin Kuzminsky asserted: “…children’s poetry, folk rhymes [chastushki – AM], jokes and, finally, literary references. These were the linguistic areas that, along with the classics, were left completely free from the pernicious

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30 T.L. Nikol’skaia, Spasibo, chto vy byli (St. Petersburg: Iulukka, 2014), 82.
31 Lianozovo, for instance, was first and foremost a gathering of painters, as was the late 1950s Ar’ev Circle in Leningrad. Artists later well-known as Moscow Conceptualists including Erik Bulatov, Oleg Vasil’ev, Viktor Pivovarov and Ilya Kabakov collaborated on books with Igor Kholin and Genrikh Sapgir (Kabakov was especially prolific).
32 The current study would be beautifully expanded by further investigation of the visual arts connection. See Erik Bulatov’s comments on these collaborations in a 2014 interview with Anna Tolstova: “Vse prostranstvo propitano slovami” Kommersant-Weekend, 12 September 2014, http://www.kommersant.ru/doc/2559716 [12 September 2014].
effects of socialist realism.” Many contemporaries echoed this sense that children’s literature, especially that of the early Soviet period, was something of an oasis and as such preferable to the mass of other official Soviet literature for its muted ideological content and/or higher aesthetic quality. Indeed, the high quality of Soviet children’s literature relative to adult literature was even acknowledged at the official level: at the Second Congress of the Writers’ Union in December 1954, Ilya Ehrenburg “complimented the Section for Children’s Literature for producing many worthy works, then said he often wondered, when he read recent Soviet novels, whether it might not be a good idea to create a Section for Adult Readers.”

By the same token, some of the standard generic features of children’s literature drew in writers of an experimental aesthetic orientation. Vsevolod Nekrasov wrote that the “road of children’s literature” was trod by many unofficial writers of his generation as a way of freeing oneself – one’s language – from “Soviet literariness.” Children’s poetry in particular allowed for more formal experimentation (within bounds) and less of a clear narrative line [siuzhetnost’, or ‘plotted-ness’] than either adult poetry or children’s prose. So, if one must write “work that is not your own,” as Ginzburg put it, children’s poetry might present a task “that actually interests you,” even an aesthetic challenge.

Various accounts of Thaw-era editorial policy refer to the “return to playfulness” and the “playful” niche that opened up for unconventional authors. Moscow’s Detskii

33 Kuzminsky is describing the poetics of Yan Satunovsky. Antologiia u Goluboi laguny, vol.1, 323.
34 Garrard, Inside the Soviet Writers’ Union, 68.
Mir publishing house created a splash in 1962 with the publication of a collection of Daniil Kharms poems entitled Play [Igra].

Irina Vasich worked as an editor at Detskii Mir in the early 1960s and recalled the resurrection of “long forgotten traditions of literary mischievousness [ozorstvo].” Her examples link long-unpublished work by OBERIU authors Kharms and Vvedensky, republications of Chukovsky’s nursery rhymes and new work by writers like Genrikh Sapgir and Igor Kholin. Writing on the same topic, Vsevolod Nekrasov noted that he, Sapgir and Kholin were invited to work in children’s literature precisely “because we play with words.” Wordplay had been, of course, precisely the “formalist” crime for which early Soviet children’s writers had been persecuted, but in the post-Stalin environment its essential value in poetry for children was recognized anew. In a widely-read and controversial series of articles (published in the later 1960s), the critic Miron Petrovsky declared that a playful relationship to reality and “circus-like thinking” must form the foundation for children’s literature: he suggested the “circus criterion” as crucial for children’s writers, who should take into account its atmosphere of unlimited human potential, the phantasmagorical, optimistic and the importance of the imagination.

In the early 1960s, meanwhile, the line between “official” and “unofficial” writers had not been firmly established. The Leningrad prose writer Vladimir Maramzin recalls

his experience as a children’s writer at that time: “None of us was considered ‘unofficial’ – we were thought of rather as beginning and promising writers. […] My children’s books were very well-received, the editors – all women, many of them even young – thought that with time we would all become normal Soviet writers.”40 Indeed, a 1968 article in the journal Detskaia literatura featured Maramzin among five other young authors, with positive reviews of their work and its implications for the future of children’s literature.41 Genrikh Sapgir recalled that he and Igor Kholin traveled a great deal around the country, reading their work to young fans: “In some region, can’t remember which one, we were even admitted as honorary pioneers, they tied red handkerchiefs onto us… We weren’t members of the Writers’ Union and were paid only half as much for our readings. But they would find extra readings for us so that we could make a living.”42 One of the other writers reviewed in Detskaia literatura, Sergei Volf, became a member of the Writers’ Union that very year (1968); Maramzin was forced to emigrate in 1974 following his participation in publishing a samizdat edition of poems by Joseph Brodsky.

Many writers who found themselves willy-nilly working in children’s literature professed a sort of code of honor – thinking they actually could and should produce good, high-quality children’s literature. The tradition of Soviet children’s literature was seen by some as a worthy one to continue (more than most other areas of Soviet literature). The OBERIU poets, along with other early Soviet children’s classics like Nikolai Oleinikov, 40 From email correspondence with Maramzin, 7 October 2015.
Evgeny Shvarts, Samuil Marshak and Kornei Chukovsky, were respected literary predecessors both inside and outside of their work in children’s literature, and in official and unofficial circles alike. On the one hand, for unofficial writers the repressed OBERIU poets in particular were seen not only as colleagues but as brothers-in-arms, fellow victims and resisters of the unjust Soviet regime: as Eduard Limonov wrote, “Thank you, children and children’s books, for keeping Kharms and Vvedensky fed, and now for feeding Sapgir and Satunovsky…”43 Yet income was not the only consideration. as Mikhail Erëmin put it, recalling the work of the “Filologicheskaia shkola” poets for children’s publications: “We wrote naturally [estestvenno], without insincerity or hypocrisy [bez fal’shi]. We couldn’t have had a negative relationship to children’s literature, we respected the work and tried to do a good job [with relation to the task at hand], to work well with the editors.”44

In any event, the material and social benefits of working in children’s literature were fewer. This was partly because of the lower status of both children’s literature and children’s authors; it was mutually self-perpetuating. The low prestige of children’s literature dates back to the earliest days of Soviet literature: in her reminiscences of working at Detagiz, Lidia Chukovskaya praises Marshak for struggling against this prejudice by “not inviting writers to deign to write a children’s book, but rather to see if they were good enough to do so.”45 Still, the prejudice remained firmly in place in the post-war period, reinforced by both the literary establishment and the writers themselves.

44 Private interview with the author. See Erëmin’s continuation of this thought in the discussion of Oleg Grigoriev below.
45 Chukovskaya, *V laboratorii redaktora*, 277-278.
By the 1960s, there was an implicit understanding that children’s writers were people frustrated in the pursuit of their primary purpose.46 Igor Kholin’s friend Edmund Yodkovsky declared, “I think that his literary fate is to remain a second-rate children's poet, because he'll never have the courage to publish his adult poems abroad.”

No unofficial poets that I am aware of appear to have consciously preferred working in children’s literature. However, Kuzminsky suggests that some writers were attracted by the clear-eyed immunity of child readers to Soviet ideological propaganda, and by their particular appreciation for the irrational, beyonsensical and absurd:

...the reason for the popularity of Kharms, Shvarts and Vvedensky, Oleinikov the black humorist, Sapgir, Satunovsky and Kholin – is the truth. Children have a filter for falsity, you can’t hoodwink ‘em. I sat down to reread my old childhood favorites “Old Man Khottabych” and “Buratino.” Mamma mia! Khottabych is full to bursting with dirty pro-Soviet propaganda, “Buratino” is practically all about the class war – and how did that all go over my head?48 [...] But what I do remember is the episode with all those balls on the soccer field, the ice cream, cheating on the geography exam – though of course I didn’t take away from all this what Lagin was trying to force down my throat, that is, “you shouldn’t cheat” or the absurdity of ancient geographers’ ideas about Earth, or hatred of capitalism [...]. What I took away was the merry absurd, the beyonsense [zaum’].49

Kuzminsky posits that the didactic and moralizing elements in children’s literature, when present, were easy for children to ignore, allowing them to appreciate other levels of the text – in the case of the prose works he mentions, the absurd or irrational plot elements.

46 Savitsky attributes this attitude to the largely modernist conception of art as pure form, widely held in the unofficial literary scene. See Andegraund, 45 (fn 52).
48 “Buratino” is a Soviet reworking of the Pinocchio story published in 1936 by A.K. Tolstoy. “Starik Khottabych” (first version 1938), by Lazar Lagin, was a Soviet fairy tale with an Eastern flavor, featuring good Soviet boys and a djinn who fulfils their wishes but also is gradually converted to a Soviet viewpoint.
49 Kuz’minskii and Kovalev, Antologiia u Goluboi laguny, vol.1, 331.
In this way, children are just as adept at “reading between the lines” for aesthetic satisfaction as were adults schooled in deciphering the “Aesopian language” of politically subversive messages.

Kuzminsky’s comments reveal a conception of the irrational as “more true” that was fairly common among his like-minded contemporaries, but which also stretches back into earlier, pre-revolutionary periods of Russian literary history. We can separate out two important aspects of this conception: the irrational is more true in the sense that it can transcend the strictures of the rational mind in search of deeper and more genuine truth (this harks back to some of the early Futurists’ arguments for zaum). And for Thaw-era readers and writers, the irrational might seem more true in the sense of being more humane – an irrationalism opposed to the aggressive, deterministic and totalitarian “rationalism” of the Soviet system. Both aspects point to the usefulness of the (often irrational) childlike aesthetic for those essentially opposed to the strictures of official Soviet culture.

The notion of Soviet children’s literature as a haven for the irrational and unusual is further supported by some of its repeating character types. The figure of the non-productive, confused-and-confusing outsider had been frequently encountered in children’s literature from the early Soviet period on. “Beginning from the 1920s, the ‘distracted person’ or eccentric becomes one of the protagonists of children’s poetry (as a counterweight to the ‘heroes of the day’) – first and foremost, this protagonist’s ordinary everyday behavior is opposed to society, he exists on his own and for his own sake,
according to his own seemingly strange rules.” From Chukovsky’s “Mish-mash” [Putanitsa] (1926), Marshak’s “What a Scatterbrain” [Vot kakoi rasseyanyi] (1930) and basically everything written by Kharmes, to Vladimir Zheleznikov’s very popular The Weirdo in 6B [Chudak iz 6-B] (1962) and Oleg Grigoriev’s debut book Weirdos [Chudaki] (1971), the eccentric misfit was represented consistently and for the most part positively in children’s literature throughout the Soviet period.

The weirdo figure also helps us in tracing some extraliterary manifestations of the childlike aesthetic in unofficial literature of the Soviet period. Some of the eccentric’s typical visual and behavioral features changed over time, from Kharmes’s edgy Sherlock Holmes persona of the 1930s to the meditating, bearded and shirtless 1960s hippie Leonid Aronzon. Oleg Grigoriev’s near-total identification with a homeless alcoholic was another manifestation of eccentricity (in the more literal sense of being detached from the normal center). Seen broadly, the eccentric professes a loose attachment to the rules of society and of logic, suggesting in word and deed the possibility of alternative ways of thinking and existing. The range is wide: logic and societal norms can be flouted through


51 Consider “Ivan Toporyshkin,” “A man left his house” [Iz doma vyshel chelovek], “Professor Trubochkin,” not to mention Kharmes’s own literary personality.

52 To be sure, eccentrics appear as the heroes of children’s literature outside of the Soviet context as well. Even within the Soviet context, two enormously popular heroes of 1970s translated children’s literature were the animals in A.A. Milne’s Winnie-the-Pooh and Karlsson in Astrid Lindgren’s Karlsson on-the-Roof. For more on the characteristics of postwar children’s heroes see the articles in Ilya Kukulin, Mark Lipovetsky and Maria Maiofis, eds., Vesëlye chelovechki: kul’turnye geroi sovetskogo detstva (Moscow: NLO, 2008).
ignorance, as in the case of small children, holy fools and other innocents; or they can be deliberately ridiculed, an attitude more typical of the court jester, teen punk and other hooligans. As we will see in the coming chapters, this kind of persona in some form – whether in the poetry itself or spreading freely between art and life – is nearly ubiquitous in the work of the poets here under discussion.

Even as unofficial writers feared the legal consequences of being branded a tuneiadets, or freeloader, the association of this term with writers and artists has a curious literary resonance. The idle individual who spends all his time thinking and dreaming recalls the “superfluous man” of nineteenth-century Russian literature, “a creature of different psychological dimensions, inaccessible to computation and regulation […]”

While the whole world, having defined itself with regard to the [Soviet] Purpose, is divided into two antagonistic camps, he feigns not to understand this and keeps mingling his colors in vague and ambiguous schemes.” Another, related association, also with a long literary pedigree, is the holy fool. In 1933, Lidia Ginzburg wrote of Mandelstam that [he] is said to be insane and indeed seems insane amidst people used to hiding or obscuring their impulses. […] His everyday gestures are strikingly impractical, [but] Mandelstam’s “holy foolery” [iurodstvo] indicates the sacrifice of a person’s everyday aspect. It means that not one iota of volitional exertion is wasted outside of poetic work. […] Everything is directed toward that, and in everyday life there remains an eccentric with unregulated desires, an ‘insane person.'

In the utilitarian Soviet context, being impervious or oblivious to practical matters implied a kind of moral and even aesthetic superiority. Ginzburg’s evocation of the

53 For the more hooliganish end of the spectrum, see groups like Moscow’s SMOG and Leningrad’s Khelenukty; for the latter, see in particular Stanislav Savitsky, “Khelenukty v teatre posvednevnosti,” NLO no.23 (1998), 210-259.
54 Tertz, On Socialist Realism, 66.
55 Ginzburg, Zapisnye knizhki, 120.
Orthodox concept of *iurodstvo* is significant, since this model of behavior would enjoy a real renaissance in unofficial circles during the later Soviet period.\(^{56}\) The holy fool figure, with its religious associations and vagrant’s appearance and lifestyle, certainly fits the bill for targets of the 1961 anti-parasitism law. In the context of art, the holy fool position for these writers could be seen as implying total devotion to one’s art (rather than to God). Furthermore, there is a clear connection between the holy fool – demonstrably ignorant of the rules of society – and the childlike aesthetic in its “the emperor has no clothes!” aspect.

In this way, aspects of the childlike aesthetic show themselves to be relevant to the larger context of unofficial artists’ lives, in addition to their importance within the confines of their artistic and literary production. Although this study focuses first and foremost on the childlike aesthetic as it appears in poetry, it should be noted that lifestyle and the many forms of literary and artistic self-fashioning were also significant modes of expression for people in unofficial Soviet-era communities, and that aspects of the childlike aesthetic also informed some behaviors.

**Digression on Aesopian Language**

Soviet children’s literature is sometimes portrayed as a loophole in the system of socialist realist art, insofar as its lower prestige allowed it to slide under the radar of state censorship and control.\(^{57}\) In the early Soviet period, however, there was considerable

\(^{56}\) In this connection see Marco Sabbatini, “Pafos iurodstva v leningradskom podpol’е,” *Toronto Slavic Quarterly*, no. 28 (Spring 2009), [https://www.utoronto.ca/tsq/28/sabbatini28.shtml](https://www.utoronto.ca/tsq/28/sabbatini28.shtml) [1 November 2011].

\(^{57}\) See Losev’s account in Evgenii Shvarts’s *Memuary*, cited in Chapter One, fn. 6.
surveillance of publications for children, and the late 1930s brought huge numbers of arrests and executions of people working in the industry (for instance, the aforementioned 1931 arrests in Leningrad – and the even more dramatic purge of the Detgiz editorial staff in 1937).\(^{58}\) Furthermore, the work that went on in Marshak’s “laboratory” was just as much focused on normalizing and regulating the experimental young poets as it was on exploiting their elemental poetic energy: “I am convinced that children’s literature and the Leningrad publishing house had a therapeutic influence on Kharms, Vvedensky and, through them and directly, on Zabolotsky,” reminisced Marshak; “in any case, it was important that they had something to do and had work with the journal [\textit{Ezh} and subsequently \textit{Chizh – AM}].”\(^{59}\) Thus children’s literature offered not so much greater artistic freedom as simply laxer entry standards – writers inclined to formal experimentation usually had no hope of officially publishing books for adults (or in higher profile, “grown-up” journals).

The “loophole” hypothesis holds a bit more water for children’s literature during and after the Thaw period. Although censorship remained in force in the postwar period as well, the consequences for violations were considerably lighter. For instance, the artist Erik Bulatov recalls being blacklisted for six months when he and fellow artist Oleg Vasilev crossed the line of acceptable formal experimentation: “An article appeared in ‘\textit{Pravda}’ about formalism in children’s illustration, mentioning our names… After that

\(^{58}\) For a full account of the 1937 Detgiz purge, see Chukovskaia, \textit{V laboratorii redaktora}, 321-324.

\(^{59}\) A letter from Marshak to A. Makedonov (20 December 1963), Marshak, \textit{Sobranie sochinenii}, vol. 8, 509. Also see Chukovskaia for a description of Marshak’s editorial work. In his interrogation report, Vvedensky refers to Marshak as “co-author” of much of the Detgiz-released literature. Mal’skii, “\textit{Razgrom OBERIU},” 189.
we started being more careful making books, so as to accommodate both ourselves and the bosses. “Bulatov’s contemporary and friend Vsevolod Nekrasov’s only near-success in children’s literature was dashed when his book manuscript was rejected in 1974, as it included a poem that allegedly revealed an insufficiently reverent attitude toward the 1917 revolution. The Thaw also saw progressive children’s literature editors reviving the Marshak tradition of seeking out experimentally inclined young poets to liven up children’s poetry.

The notion of lesser genres functioning as a loophole is also important given the widespread perception of Soviet children’s literature as a venue for the propagation of coded, “Aesopian” messages. Although some writers did fill their children’s work with politically provocative allegories and satires of Soviet life, I believe that some of the best and most original work of the Soviet period – children’s, unofficial or otherwise – is that which “can only be perceived as what it is,” rather than as an allegory or symbol corresponding to a fixed message. In the nursery-rhyme-like “Antistikh” (1960), not written for children, Vsevolod Nekrasov comments on the dangers of an overly binary interpretation of the world:

61 See Vsevolod Nekrasov, “Chto eto bylo,” in Paket, 210-211, and the discussion in the next chapter.
62 Leiderman and Lipovetsky characterize Aesopian language as a major cultural phenomenon of the Thaw period. Russkaia literatura XX veka, vol.1, 94. For an exhaustive account of Aesopian language (including a chapter on children’s literature), see Loseff, The Beneficence of Censorship.
63 This is the position of Michael Holquist in his discussion of nonsense and experimental modern fiction. “What is a Boojum? Nonsense and Modernism,” in Yale French Studies 43 (1969), 100-117.
This admonition is particularly important to bear in mind when discussing poetry that is patently experimental and innovative. Janecek reminds us that the “indeterminacy of meaning” such poetry brings to the fore is a positive feature, since it opposes “clarity and monovalency” and encourages openness of thinking and multiplicity of perspective. The fact that these poets employed the childlike aesthetic in work that they did not even attempt to publish officially points to the limited usefulness of viewing children’s literature as a screen. Throughout the Soviet period, the childlike aesthetic appears in work by unofficial writers who both did and did not publish children’s literature. On the one hand, this shows the far-reaching influence of aesthetically innovative Soviet children’s literature on later generations – the childlike aesthetic could act as a symbolic mark of solidarity with repressed “children’s writers.” On the other hand, the multiple meanings of the childlike aesthetic can make it difficult to designate children’s literature as a distinct genre in the context of these writers’ work. This additional level of

64 Translation by Ainsley Morse and Bela Shayevich. Vsevolod Nekrasov, I Live I See (Brooklyn: UDP, 2013), 41-42.
65 Janecek, ZAUM, 4.
indeterminacy calls into question the particularly rigid categories of Soviet artistic production, also imposed from the outside by authorities far from poetry.

**On Post-war Unofficial Poetics**

This study deals with unofficial poetry, a Soviet-era phenomenon that, in the post-Soviet period, can seem like a rather ill-defined entity. The only unequivocal difference between unofficial and official literary production is legal publication. For this reason, some scholars prefer to use the term ‘uncensored’ (there is an even more specific term used in Russian, ‘not subject to censorship’: nepodtsenzurnaia) to distinguish literature said to be written without a thought of official publication. As Mikhail Erëmin explains, some writers paid “absolutely no attention to publication,” while remaining concerned that their work be ‘realized’ [osushchestvit’sia]: “That is, get written down on a piece of paper, be declaimed by friends, make the rounds in samizdat, take up residence in someone’s archive, get quoted in a newspaper editorial, end up published abroad or in KGB archives […] – that’s all ‘realization.’ […] And that realization was much more important than any kind of publications.”66 On the other hand, this position was not characteristic of all unofficial poets, as Vladimir Erl’ memorably attested: “No idiot wouldn’t want to be published” [Net takogo duraka, kto ne khotel by pechatat’sia].67

But many practitioners, chroniclers and scholars of unofficial literature assert that, outside of its publication status, unofficial poetry constituted a distinct genre with unique


67 Author’s interview with Vladimir Erl’, 12 July 2012.
aesthetic characteristics.\textsuperscript{68} To be sure, the extremely various work of each of the unofficial poets to be discussed here – Igor Kholin, Vsevolod Nekrasov, Leonid Aronzon and Oleg Grigoriev – all demonstrates formal and thematic features incompatible with official strictures. As we will see, many of these features are related to the childlike aesthetic, supporting my argument that the childlike aesthetic is one of the distinctive characteristics of unofficial poetry.

As Maramzin noted, the line between official and unofficial took time to become firmly established. The political, social and aesthetic freedoms associated with the post-Stalin period meant that some officially published literature could demonstrate (relatively) more aesthetic boldness and diversity; the doctrine of Socialist Realism had also become more amorphous and thus difficult to enforce in a completely consistent way.\textsuperscript{69} This period also saw official literary bodies, such as the Writers’ Union, making a concerted effort to raise the status of lyric poetry and to improve its quality.\textsuperscript{70} In this connection, it was also recognized that the Writers’ Union needed younger, fresher voices. This meant that some ultimately unofficial poets in the 1950s and 60s (including

\begin{footnotes}

\footnotetext{68}{There is a large body of literature on this topic. See Vladislav Kulakov, “Bronzovyi vek russkoi poezii” (96-117), “Otdelenie literatury ot gosudarstva” (134-156), “Posle katastrofy” (241-274) in Poeziia kak fakt; the essays in Vtoraia kul’tura: Neofitsial’naia poeziia Leningrada v 1970 – 1980-e gody; Elena Shvarts, “Russkaia poeziia kak hortus clausus,” in Wiener Slavistischer Almanach no. 62 (2008), 47-56. For a comparative discussion of distinctive features of official and unofficial 1960s poetry, see the chapters on legal’nye shestidesiatniki (277-287) and Genrikh Sapgir (289-293) in Il’ia Kukulin, Mashiny zashumevshego vremeni (Moscow: NLO, 2015).}

\footnotetext{69}{As Garrard puts it: “In the post-Stalin period, Socialist Realism lost whatever literary coherence it might have originally possessed, but partynost and narodnost retained their force.” Inside the Soviet Writers’ Union, 226. Emily Lygo also offers an in-depth discussion of the fuzzy and shifting boundaries between official and unofficial literature during this period in Leningrad Poetry, as do Leiderman and Lipovetsky in Russkaia literatura XX veka.}

\footnotetext{70}{Lygo, Leningrad Poetry, 14-20.}
\end{footnotes}
the poets to be discussed in the next chapters) entertained, for a time, the possibility of an official literary career.

At the same time, most writers had a fairly clear sense of what constituted unacceptably experimental work, an awareness that complicated inclinations to make one’s career through official channels. Most formal experimentation (including the resurrection of old forms) still risked the damning accusation of “formalism,” and another taboo practice was the unvarnished, documentary presentation of less-than-ideal contemporary realia. Thus both formal invention and a documentary approach constitute significant characteristics of much unofficial literary production. Most of the paths taken by unofficial poets fell between two main categories: roughly speaking, the first revolved around the resurrection of past practices, with particular attention toward developments in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century modernist poetry like that of the Symbolists and Acmeists; the second proclaimed a search for unprecedented new methods of poetic expression. The second camp ended up overlapping with the revivalist tendencies of the first insofar as the search for a brand-new aesthetic led these poets back to similar searches on the part of early Soviet and pre-Soviet avant-gardes, particularly the Futurists.

A surprising number of links with the previous era had remained intact. In Moscow, the younger poets of the Lianozovo Group “studied” under Evgeny Kropivnitsky and Yan Satunovsky, contemporaries of the Futurist and Constructivist...

71 Though the extent to which reality should be depicted was another topic of hot debate during the Thaw period. Unsurprisingly, given the climate of ‘razoblachenie,’ the excessive varnishing of reality was condemned at the official level as well. See Leiderman and Lipovetskii, Russkaia literatura XX veka, vol.1, 93-94.
movements. Nikolai Glazkov, who invented the term “samizdat” and produced it throughout the 1940s, remained a presence in the unofficial literary scene through the 1960s. In Leningrad, Yakov Druskin survived to save the manuscripts of Kharms and Vvedensky during the Siege, and eventually granted young scholars access to them in the mid-1960s. At the same time, the youngest surviving OBERIU poet, Igor Bakhterev, passed on old stories and continued to write poetry in a distinctly OBERIU vein (he died only in the mid-1990s). Many literati of the prewar generations held regular salons for younger visitors. Aleksey Kruchënykh lived in Moscow until his death in 1968, and received pilgrimages of young poets with his characteristic eccentricity and prickly humor. Today it seems strange that neither Bakhterev nor Kruchënykh enjoyed much popularity – forgotten by officialdom, they were of limited renown even among outsider poets. In his memoirs, Slava Len recalls attending Kruchënykh’s funeral: “Limonov and I took part as well as we could in the burial of the ‘great zaumnik’ at the Donskoe cemetery. Striding beside us were Khardzhiev, Kozovoi, Voznesensky – 10-12 people at best. It was raining.”72 Despite the obscurity that met Kruchënykh and other sometime legends later in life, contacts with the “elders” were an important conduit for knowledge, legends, different versions of history and aesthetic contact with past masters.

A major precedent for unofficial poets in the 1960s and beyond, which had no parallel in the official sphere, was the work of the OBERIU poets and their associates. Alongside its debt to Futurist experiments in language, performance and slapstick, OBERIU poetics is characterized by a linguistic, poetic and philosophical probing of

various kinds of logic, which has led to comparisons with the “literature of the absurd” that emerged slightly later in Western Europe. In his review of 1960s-70s unofficial poetry, Viktor Krivulin writes:

[In the mid-60s] the work of the “oberiuty” was “discovered” anew, and familiarity with Kharms, Vvedensky (and Vaginov) is one of, if not the most substantial factor in the evolution of poetic language during the second half of the 1960s. The poetics of the absurd to one or another degree captivated all of the unofficial Moscow and Leningrad poets and became the starting point for subsequent development. The “contraction” of poetic language only really became possible after modern poetry became acquainted with the reduction of language that had been produced by the “oberiuty.”

Access to OBERIU texts is a fraught question. Most sources agree that Druskin only began sharing his treasure-trove of rescued manuscripts in 1966; from this point on, work by Vvedensky and Kharms began circulating in samizdat. Meanwhile, the rediscovery of the OBERIU poets coincided with the official publication of many of the Western absurdists for the first time in the Soviet Union, so comparisons were inevitable. Mid-1960s groups like Leningrad’s “Khelenukty,” whose work is explicitly absurdist, drew as much on English and German avant-garde sources as on what little was then available of the OBERIU legacy. Poets extrapolated from this minimum to great effect. Among the aesthetic legacies of the OBERIU, the childlike aesthetic evident in their children’s and adult work alike would be particularly influential.

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73 This comparison, which can probably be traced to the early English-language publication of George Gibian, *Russia’s Lost Literature of the Absurd. A Literary Discovery* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1971), has been challenged by OBERIU scholars who seek to explain the difference from the Western variety (Beckett, Ionesco, Kafka, Sartre).

74 Kalomirov/Krivulin, “20 let noveishei russkoi poezii.”

Unofficial poets’ relationship to literary predecessors was further complicated by official appropriations of the Russian literary heritage. Although official approval of one or another poet or literary movement did not preclude unofficial poets’ also showing interest (in, for instance, Mayakovsky, Blok, Pushkin; folk lyric), unofficial poets often found it necessary to vigorously assert their essentially different relationship to the given phenomenon. For example, from its earliest origins Soviet official aesthetics demonstrated a vested interest in folklore and the folk aesthetic: besides its obvious direct ties to “the people,” the folk aesthetic was appealing because it was also inherently non-elitist, accessible and formulaic. When unofficial poets incorporated elements of folklore and/or folk stylizations into their work, they made efforts to underscore the essential difference between their use of the folk aesthetic and officially approved use. Compare the first stanzas of a 1942 wartime song-poem by Mikhail Isakovsky, “Partizanka”:

Я весь свой век жила в родном селе,  
Жила, как все,— работала, дышала,  
Хлеба рastiла на своей земле  
И никому на свете не мешала.

И жить бы мне спокойно много лет,—  
Женить бы сына, пестовать внучонка...  
Да вот поди ж нашелся людоед —  
Пропала наша тихая сторонка!

[I lived my whole life in my home village/Lived like everybody else – working, breathing/Raising the grain on my land/And not bothering anyone./And I would have lived a long time in peace, ---/Married off my son, cherished my little grandson/Then, don’t you know it, that ogre came knocking --/That’s it for our peaceful little corner!]

76 See Kukulin’s comparison between Evtushenko and Voznesensky’s (official) and Sapgir’s (unofficial) use of early Soviet avant-garde devices, particularly montage. Kukulin, Mashiny, 284-287, 289-293.

The speaker mourns a simple (Soviet) village life “like everyone else,” interrupted by the German invasion. Despite the tragic theme of the song, the simple, regular rhyme and meter are comforting and familiar. The rhyming words are grammatical and unchallenging: verbs rhyme with verbs and nouns rhyme with similar nouns, like the folksy diminutives “little grandson” [vnuchonka] and “little corner” [storonka]. The very regularity and clarity of the song’s presentation and message reveal it to be a stylization; in the passage given above, the only hint of provincial colloquialism comes in the conversational phrase “Then, don’t you know it” [Da vot podi zh] and the old-fashioned verb “to cherish” [pesto vat’], while the rest of the lexicon is standard Russian.

In the mid-1950s, unofficial poet Igor Kholin wrote a cycle of poems chronicling the lives of people living in hastily constructed temporary workers’ housing outside Moscow, “Barracks Dwellers” [Zhiteli baraka]. Kholin’s exploitation of the folk aesthetic works differently:

Жизнь прошла, как во сне.
Завод.
Магазин.
Барак.
Муж погиб на войне.
Работала
Не покладая рук.
Надежду
Возлагала на сына:
Все же мужчина.
Вырастет,
Начнет помогать.
Вырос,
Стал выпивать.
Заявил:
— На мать наплевать!78

[Life went by as if in a dream./The factory./The store./The barracks./Husband died in the war./Worked/Without a break./All hopes/Lay in my son:/A man, after all./He’ll grow up/Start helping./He grew up/Commenced to drinking./Declared:/ “To hell with my mother!”]

Kholin also uses grammatical rhyme (pomogat’/vypivat’/naplevat’) and simple diction to tell a similar kind of life-story to that of Isakovský’s heroine – a hard-working Soviet woman living in difficult times. However, the jerky, irregular rhythm, laconic, conversational register and stark visual layout of Kholin’s poem all diverge from Isakovský’s more traditional stanzaic form and change the tone from tragic-heroic to something more like satirical – even before the harsh “punch line” of the poems’ final four lines (in terms of rhythm and lexicon, Kholin’s poem is actually closer to genuine folk lyric). Like most of the “Barracks Dwellers” poems, this poem documents and lampoons the “enemy within” ordinary people and ordinary lives, suggesting that “simple (Soviet) village life” was never particularly idyllic. In this way, Kholin’s poetry is immediately marked as subversive (although his exploitation of folk themes at times recalls that resurrected darling of the Soviet literary establishment, Nikolai Nekrasov).

Like many of his friends and literary-artistic colleagues, Kholin scraped by financially as a children’s writer. Although his barracks poetry shows more of a folkloresque aesthetic, his adult poetry of the 1960s demonstrates a real exchange with the material of his day-job (as will be discussed at length in the next chapter). To be sure, certain ‘childlike’ elements, such as simplicity, accessibility and didacticism, were encouraged by the requirements of official socialist realist literature for adults and children alike. Yet unofficial poets could also be inspired by aspects of the childlike aesthetic that challenged rather than upheld official values. For instance, childlike diction
and rhyme patterns associated with children’s literature could be productively applied to a distinctly “adult” topic, toward a new invigoration of a tired theme. In the following poem by Oleg Grigoriev, childlike speaker and form alike work to evoke an unexpectedly lyrical kommunalka scene:

Утром соседка голая
На кухне усердно мыла
Под краном квадратную голову
Круглым розовым мылом.

Знай, что она тут голая,
Я не вставал бы так рано.
Соседка отдернула голову –
И отломала полкрана.

[One morning my neighbor, naked,/Was in the kitchen washing/Her square head most intently/With round pink soap./Had I known she was naked in there/I wouldn’t have got up so early./The neighbor jerked back her head/And broke off half the faucet.]

As is frequently the case in his poetry, Grigoriev uses an uncomplicated form (two rhyming quatrains), with a dactylic-leaning dol’nik cheerily leading the reader to the final ‘punchline.’ The words in the poem are few, basic and childlike in their domesticity; also evocative of the child’s viewpoint is the unusual image of a ‘square head.’ This image is balanced and justified by the detail of ‘round soap,’ as well as the head’s rather mechanical power to break off half the sink faucet (and the ambiguous hint of slapstick lurking in the whole scene). The position of the lyric speaker is also childlike: the revelation of the first line sounds rather like it belongs to someone peeping, and the second stanza finds the speaker slightly guilty and contrite, having become the indirect cause for an accident. Grigoriev’s poem, like Kholin’s and Isakovsky’s, presents a kind of “Soviet realism.” Grigoriev’s poem crosses the simple (but not stylized) language and
 naïve speaker of Isakovsky’s folk stylization with the black humor of Kholin’s barracks to make something powerfully disarming in its simplicity.

Kukulin writes that official poetry in the 1960s sought, through its evocation of the revolutionary past and its rejection of (recently-imposed) norms, to create a new language-identity for the new generation of Soviet youth, to articulate a new way for the intelligentsia to be (loyal) Soviet citizens.79 Unofficial poetry, meanwhile, often sought to question the coherency and validity of the surrounding society and world and sometimes it was able to step aside from these essentially non-literary tasks and focus its attention on problems innate to language and poetry. This latter capacity, which smacks of formalism, is another of the distinctive features of unofficial poetry.

Moscow and Leningrad

In the Russian cultural imagination, the city of Leningrad/Petersburg is pregnant with history. Moscow is known for burning to the ground and reinventing itself anew every time; Petersburg floods, and when the waters recede it is the same as always. The myth of Petersburg and its literary complement, the Petersburg text, have together generated reams of scholarship.80 During the Soviet period, the Moscow-Petersburg division seemed to preoccupy residents of Petersburg/Leningrad rather more than Muscovites. For some residents of Leningrad, the period following the Second World

79 Kukulin, Mashiny, 280-281.
War saw a sharpening of that city’s sense of itself as distinct from Moscow (which, particularly after the devastation of Leningrad, was confirmed as the true center of Soviet power). The repressions and increased censorship following the 1946 “Leningrad affair,” which saw Mikhail Zoshchenko and Anna Akhmatova publicly condemned and the literary journals Zvezda and Leningrad heavily censured, deepened the city’s sense of victimhood and estrangement from the Soviet project, particularly horrifying after the “hero-city’s” survival of the 1941-44 Siege. In subsequent years, some dissident Leningraders came up with a new twist on the city’s traditional “Western” orientation, drawing a parallel between their city as the westernmost geographical point on the Soviet map and its innate sense of democracy (as opposed to Moscow’s “Asiatic” communism). The term “vtoraia kul’tura” also emerged in Leningrad, underscoring the sense that the city’s unofficial culture was a free-standing alternative to the official one.

The notion of a “Petersburg” or “Moscow” school of poetry is another way the cities’ myths have been drawn into everyday practice. Moscow poet Kirill Medvedev describes this rough division of schools with regard specifically to poetic language and

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81 Clark writes: “As Moscow became the center of an authoritarian culture, Petersburg changed its function from seat of power to that of significant other. The various alternatives to ‘Moscow’ culture […] have tended to come out of, or be published in, or to identify with, ‘Petersburg.’” Petersburg: Crucible of Cultural Revolution, xi. Also see Krivulin, “Ia boius’ Moskvy, lishennoi protivovesa,” in Okhota na mamonta (St. Petersburg: BLITs, 1998), 67-75.


tradition: the “Petersburg line” aims to continue “interrupted traditions,” which could include “underappreciated writers of the Golden Age, repressed writers of the Silver Age or the OBERIU poets.” The “often paradoxical synthesis” that resulted from appropriating all this past material is contrasted to the “Moscow line,” characterized by the “sense of exhaustion and defamation of any language and the need to begin anew, to start from zero.” Yuri Orlitsky has also argued for the presence in Leningrad unofficial poetry of unique formal tendencies, tied first and foremost to the modernist tradition. In practice, of course, Muscovite poets were also in thrall to tradition, and Petersburg poets were just as likely to seek new forms and new poetic language.

All of the poets examined in this dissertation took note in poetry of their home cities, and can thus be said to have some conscious awareness of belonging to the place. In both cities, the experience of older poets with decades of writing “in the genre of silence” under their belts was important for younger poets experimenting with bold new forms. In Leningrad, Igor Bakhterev made appearances on Malaya Sadovaya street, Café Saigon and other unofficial gathering-places; other pre-war literary figures, such as Andrey Egunov, a contemporary of Konstantin Vaginov and the OBERIU poets, invited...
young writers to unofficial salons at their homes. The Moscow-area poets who came to be known as the “Lianozovo School” in the late 1950s included three younger poets (Igor Kholin, Genrikh Sapgir and Vsevolod Nekrasov) and two a generation older (Evgeny Kropivnitsky, and Yan Satunovsky); while collegial, there were acknowledged elements of apprenticeship in their relations.

Given the explicit or implicit prohibition on publishing their work, these writers had to seek other ways to make a living; many of them settled in children’s literature. Official children’s literature had been based in Leningrad for as long as Marshak was in charge of Detgiz, i.e., until the entire staff was purged in 1937. From then on, there were more publishers and more of an industry in Moscow. This was partly because Moscow was the larger city and the political and administrative capital, home to substantially more publishing houses, literary journals, etc. Print runs in Moscow publishing houses were always larger, and literary undertakings sponsored or directed by centrally-organized state publishing started in Moscow. For instance, the Leningrad-based translator and children’s writer Mikhail Yasnov recalls that harder and less desirable translation jobs were often kicked over to Leningrad. For unofficial poets interested in finding work as children’s writers, it was Moscow’s Detskii Mir publishing house that explicitly sought out “playful” rhymesters in the early-to-mid-1960s.


88 Clark notes that, although Moscow had been the Soviet capital city since 1918, in the 1930s “Moscow’s status as the capital became in official rhetoric a matter not of historical accident but of necessity.” The cult of Moscow that emerged at this time “became central to the entire culture system.” Moscow, the Fourth Rome, 15.

89 From the author’s interview with Mikhail Yasnov, 18 August 2014.
Beginning in the early 1960s, four of the five Moscow-based “Lianozovo” poets were employed in one capacity or another in official Soviet children's literature.\textsuperscript{90} Genrikh Sapgir was a prolific and well-regarded children's book author and translator; Igor Kholin and Yan Satunovsky were more minor figures with fewer publications, but also fairly steadily employed in this area throughout the 1960s and 1970s. Although Vsevolod Nekrasov was a reviewer for the children's publishing house Malysh, for the duration of the Soviet period he saw only a handful of poems published in anthologies; at one point he submitted an entire volume of poetry for children, but it was ultimately rejected by the publisher. Nevertheless, all of these poets maintained some relationship to the official children’s literature industry.

Post-war Leningrad offered fewer opportunities for writers of all stripes, particularly those in-between spaces for writers without official credentials. Meanwhile, existing opportunities for publishing of any variety in Leningrad were overshadowed by the city’s more vigilant censorship boards. This followed from Andrey Zhdanov’s notorious 1946 crackdown on artistic production in the city. Nevertheless, a more muted version of the Moscow situation did persist in Leningrad, with writers seizing whatever opportunities came their way.

In 1956, the poet Aleksei Lifshits – an affiliate of the unofficial neo-Futurist ‘Filologicheskaia shkola’ group, better known by his literary pseudonym, Lev Losev –

\textsuperscript{90} Even Kropivnitsky had a couple of children’s poems published (see, for instance, his six poems in the anthology \textit{Mezhdu letom i zimoi} (Moscow: Detskaia literatura, 1976), 29-31.
began working as an editor at the children’s journal *The Campfire* [*Kostër*]. In this capacity, Lifshits/Losev was able to engage many of his (mostly unemployed) friends and acquaintances in freelance work for the journal. While some writers got poems or stories with full billing in the table of contents (Evgeny Rein, Joseph Brodsky), the work of Losev’s unknown fellow “filologi” (Vinogradov, Erëmin, Ufland) was usually published in sections like “Funny Poems” [*Vesëye stikhî*], “The Jolly Archivist’s Corner” [*Ugolok vesëlogo arkhivariususa*] or the back page, and much of it attributed collaboratively, if not anonymously. Tatyana Nikolskaya fondly remembers being commissioned to collect old jokes in library archives for the journal; nothing was ever attributed to her by name. Another sympathetic editor, Boris Nikolsky, helped writers get things published in *Kostër*, the youth journal *Avrora* and the almanac *Druzhba* (Leonid Aronzon was published in the latter through the aid of another editor, Alexander Puzikov, a family friend). This kind of arrangement continued into subsequent decades. In the early 1970s, *Avrora* began publishing a humor column known as “SLON.”

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91 The group, named after the fact, included Vladimir Ufliand, Leonid Vinogradov, Mikhail Erëmin and Sergei Kulle; also affiliated with them were Mikhail Krasil’nikov, Aleksandr Mikhailov and Aleksandr Kondratov. The name apparently comes from the fact that the poets all got to know each other while studying at Leningrad State University’s philological faculty. L. Losev, “Krasil’nikov” (227-238) and “Tulupy my” (279-288), in *Meandr: memuarnaia proza* (Moscow: Novoe izdatel’stvo, 2010).

92 Nikol’skaia, *Spasibo…*, 82. The journal paid 100 rubles per joke. On other occasions Losev was able to send friends on all-expenses-paid “business trips” to write stories commissioned by the journal.

93 From the author’s private correspondence with Pyotr Kazarnovsky, 4 October 2015. Many thanks to him, Vitaly Aronzon, Larisa Khaikina and Vadim Bytensky for their reconstruction of Aronzon’s efforts to be published (as well as his wife’s ongoing efforts following the poet’s death).

94 The acronym officially deciphered as “Satiricheski-liricheskoe obozrenie nравов” or “Smekh – lekarstvo ot nedugov,” though the post-Solzhenitsyn Soviet public would probably also think of the notorious Solovki prison camp (Solovetskii lager’ osobogo
writers with officially published children's work, like Oleg Grigoriev and Vladimir Maramzin, “SLON” published material by semi-official deceased writers like Kharms and Zoshchenko, as well as contemporary unofficial writers and artists including A. Nik, Anri Volokhonsky, Vagrich Bakhchanian, Yuri Galetsky and others.

In this way, many unofficial writers with no published adult work nevertheless found themselves living and working in close proximity to the institutions of official Soviet literature. Although many of them drew a sharp distinction between their children’s or translation work and the work they wrote ‘for the drawer’ or circulated in samizdat, the fact of proximity is evident. In the case of writers working in children’s literature, various forms of the childlike aesthetic loom large. As we turn to close readings of some of these poets, we will ask: what was the relationship between the work they produced for official children’s literature and their own adult work?

A Close Look at Some Postwar Poets of Moscow and Leningrad

The preceding chapter outlined some aspects of the societal and political background against which the poets here considered were forging their aesthetic paths. The following case studies will explore in greater depth the poetics of these selected authors from Moscow and Leningrad. The Moscow/Leningrad binary is traditional but also somewhat contentious, and the close readings to follow seek in part to expose its limited usefulness in making strong aesthetic distinctions. Nevertheless, the cultural mythology opposing the two cities is significant and persistent enough to justify using it

to divide the case studies. Some interesting contrasts as well as continuities between the cultures of the two cities will also emerge.

Under “Moscow,” I discuss the work of Igor Kholin (1920-1999) and Vsevolod Nekrasov (1934-2009), sometime colleagues in the loose affiliation later dubbed the “Lianozovo School,” but poets with quite distinct poetics. The childlike aesthetic is evident in Nekrasov’s abundant puns, sound effects and other wordplay; Kholin’s work demonstrates a juvenile sense of humor and the absurd, and abundant use of childlike poetic forms, like rhyming quatrains ending in punchlines. Kholin enjoyed some success as a children’s writer, publishing a total of twenty-five books between 1961-1974; Nekrasov attempted a similar career but was ultimately unable to publish more than one nine-poem selection, buried in a 1976 anthology.

“Leningrad” features two poets, Leonid Aronzon (1939-1970) and Oleg Grigoriev (1943-1992), neither of whom belonged to any literary grouping; they are rightly seen as aesthetic outliers even within the context of Leningrad’s unofficial culture. Aronzon saw two small publications in the children’s almanac “Druzhba,” but wrote other children’s poems unofficially (to be published later) and cultivated a childlike aesthetic in much of his dreamy, classical- and avant-garde-inspired “adult” work. Grigoriev’s official and unofficial work alike developed a nonsensical critical logic and language in ways that both engaged and disengaged his concrete surroundings. While he had three children’s books published in his lifetime, the lengthy gaps between these publications were marked by serious money problems, prison time and ostracization by literary officialdom and society at large.
In the studies, I examine both the published children’s poetry and the unpublished work designated for children by these four poets alongside their unofficial “adult” work (without exception, none of the four saw any adult work published in the official Soviet press). Recalling the experience of their predecessors Kharms, Vvedensky and Zabolotsky, I ask: where is the childlike aesthetic in this work? How does it manifest? Is there a difference in the way it appears in the poetry written for children (and official publication) and the poetry written “for the drawer”? And, evoking the poets of the 1930s in a different way: how is the earlier poets’ experience reflected in the work of their younger successors? What relationships of influence, inspiration, homage or competition might be evident?

In my estimation, these later manifestations of the childlike aesthetic are linked to some or all of the following factors: an implicit homage to early Soviet children’s writers; an argument for a kind of critical, unvarnished (non-socialist!) realism; a critique of “serious,” systematic thinking (often – but not exclusively – thinking of the official Soviet variety) and of the authoritative stance of the poet. The childlike aesthetic was employed by post-war poets in ways specific to their concrete time and place, while retaining the generally radical associations it had in the avant-garde period.
CHAPTER THREE

Moscow: Igor Kholin and Vsevolod Nekrasov

I tried to seize the moment, but couldn’t catch it and only managed to break my watch. Now I know that it’s impossible. It’s just as impossible to “Seize the era,” because it’s the same kind of moment, but there’s more of it. But it’s different if you say “Capture what’s happening at this moment right now.” That’s something different entirely. For example: One, two three! Nothing happened! There you go – I captured a moment in which nothing happened.

Daniil Kharms

In this chapter, I discuss the work of two Moscow-based poets, Igor Kholin and Vsevolod Nekrasov, with attention to the significance of the childlike aesthetic in their children’s and adult work. Kholin and Nekrasov were contemporaries and sometime colleagues in the “Lianozovo School” of poetry, a collective of innovative unofficial poets with neo-avant-garde leanings. As was typical for their milieu, neither poet saw any adult publications until the perestroika era. Another point of contact between them was employment in official children’s literature: Kholin was fairly steadily employed throughout the 1960s-70s, producing work that thematically (if not formally) differs strongly from his poetry written for adults. Nekrasov, meanwhile, repeatedly failed to get children’s book manuscripts accepted and mostly worked as a reviewer for children’s publishing houses. The adult work of both poets shows many features of the childlike


2 Unusually for Russian poets, Kholin and Nekrasov both lived long lives; after their early association, they moved in quite different literary circles, although they all toured Europe together in the 1980s, when the German-speaking world discovered the Lianozovo phenomenon. See Ilja Kukuj, “Starting Point Lianozovo: The Path of 1950s-70s Russian Unofficial Literature in German-speaking Areas” (Writing on the Outskirts panel, ASEEES National Convention, November 2014, San Antonio, TX).
aesthetic; this to some extent reflects their engagement with children’s literature, but, as was the case for some of the OBERIU poets, the childlike aesthetic is often more noticeable in work written not for children.

In the early part of their writing lives, Kholin and Nekrasov were both associated with a group of unofficial writers and artists that came subsequently to be known as the “Lianozovo School,” or “Lianozovo Group.” The designation is contentious – at one point or another, all of its members denied the existence of any such defined collective, and the first use of “a certain Lianozovo Group” indeed belongs to a 1963 KGB report accusing Evgeny Kropivnitsky, the group’s mentor, of anti-Soviet activity.\(^3\) Lianozovo is the name of a village on the northern outskirts of Moscow, connected by light rail to the city and to neighboring settlements such as Dolgoprudnaya and Vinogradovo, in which several of the participating writers and artists lived.\(^4\) Of the poets involved (core members also included Genrikh Sapgir and Yan Satunovsky), Kropivnitsky lived in Dolgoprudnaya, where he met Kholin in the early fifties; Sapgir had known Kropivnitsky since 1944, when he began attending writing classes the older man taught in Moscow.

\(^3\) See Kulakov, “Lianozovo,” in *Poeziia kak fakt*, 11. The name resurfaced in the perestroika period and was adopted uncomplainingly by several members of the group; an evening of “Lianozovo poetry” was organized as early as 1991 (see Nekrasov, *Paket*, 397-399). Consider also the German tours (Kholin, Sapgir and Nekrasov) and publication of *Lianosowo*, ed. Günter Hirt and Sascha Wonders (Munich: [no publisher indicated], 1992).

\(^4\) These settlements were technically in Moskovskaia oblast’, not a part of the Moscow municipality until 1960 – an important distinction in terms of the citizens’ rights of its residents. Kropivnitsky lived in Dolgoprudny for lack of a Moscow residence permit; his daughter and son-in-law Rabin settled in Lianozovo for the same reason; Kholin had done time at the prison/work camp in Lianozovo and lived there before moving to Moscow. For a recap of these various movements, see the recent interview with Oskar Rabin: “Tabu tol’ko odno: sovremennoe iskusstvo” at [http://www.colta.ru/articles/art/5562](http://www.colta.ru/articles/art/5562) [5 December 2014].
Kropivnitsky’s son-in-law, the painter Oskar Rabin, began living in Lianozovo in the late 1950s and hosted unofficial, informal gallery shows at his house there. The poets were frequent attendees and often read their work aloud at these gatherings. After the KGB report (which had mostly to do with the unofficial art shows held at Rabin’s apartment), Kropivnitsky was ejected from the Artists’ Union and the gatherings in Lianozovo ceased, though the socializing continued unabated in different locales. This is where the beginning and endpoints, 1956-1963, of the “Lianozovo School” come from.

The legacy of these poets as a group lies in the development of a recognizable and to some extent shared poetics characterized by direct, documentary engagement with the language and realia of their historical moment: “After all, we could see all the ins and outs, how awful Russia was, how poor and how expressive!” This kind of “exposé” of lies, tearing off of masks, was very much in the spirit of the times, in step with the shocking revelations of Stalinist crimes at the Twentieth Party Congress. At the same time, the Lianozovo poets’ focus on the material and spiritual poverty of workers living

5 It is significant that the name for a group of poets comes from the physical residence of one of the painters of their circle (there were always more visual artists than poets in the group).

6 “‘Razvit’ besposhchadnogo pokaza”: interview with Genrikh Sapgir about the work of Igor Kholin, by Ilya Kukulin (7 Oct 1999), Nezavisimaia gazeta, 15 October 1999 http://ruthenia.ru/60s/lianozovo/sapgir/interview.htm [12 November 2015]. Although in some respects the Lianozovo poets’ work was formally unprecedented in Russian or Soviet poetry, they drew openly on contemporary official Soviet writers like Alexander Tvardovsky, Boris Slutsky, Leonid Martynov and others.

7 For instance, Nekrasov repeatedly used the words “verification” [proverka], “verify” [proverit’] and “fact” in discussing his and his fellow poets’ efforts to find a workable poetic voice. And this was an explicitly political project: “What’s more, I think that at that time, after ’53, the time had come for a general acknowledgement of art as fact, and of the rights and dignity of that fact, that we should defend them and take them into account. […] And it was a priority to be able to distinguish fact from non-fact…” Interview with Anna Al’chuk, 20 February 2007 http://vz.ru/culture/2007/2/20/68908.html [23 February 2013]
literally on the margins of society did not jibe with official declarations of accomplished, ripe socialism.

A spare lexicon plus an equivocal, documentary-style flatness of affect characterizes the “barracks poetry” of Igor Kholin, aimed at capturing the seedier sides of life in post-war Moscow and its suburbs:

Обозвала его заразой.
И он, как зверь, на эту фразу
Подбил ей сразу оба глаза.
Она простила, но не сразу. 8

[She called him a pestilence./And in response, just like an animal,/he gave her two black eyes at once./She forgave him, but after a while.]

The form of this short poem – many of the “barracks poems” are single or grouped quatrains – recalls the four-line chastushka of Russian folklore. The chastushka, a typically four-line rhyming poem addressing topical issues from a linguistically inventive and irreverent perspective, was a form entirely appropriate to the earthy, messy, often crude scenes of life in postwar suburban Moscow. 9 There is a lightness to this form, with its bouncy rhythm and springy rhymes, moreover, that can contrast sharply with the brutality and violence depicted – a tension also exploited in uses of the childlike aesthetic. Obviously, Kholin’s barracks poems were not written for children, but his children’s poetry tends to be similarly lean and laconic, as will be discussed further.

8 Kholin, Izbrannoe, 23.
All of the poets named had some dealings with official children’s literature, often in collaboration with the artists they associated with. Aspects of the childlike aesthetic are present in much of the work of the Lianozovo poets, often doing the work of defamiliarization with regard to the ugly reality being depicted, and/or “deheroicization” of the lyric speaker. They were conscious inheritors of the tradition of OBERIU children’s literature, and of the “playful [igrovaia] poetry” and parodic experiment of the latter poets’ work overall. For some of the Lianozovo poets, harnessing the playful OBERIU aesthetic also included rejecting the sole lyric speaker in favor of the dialogic play of others’ voices and linguistic masks.

One other important reason for the bristling around the name “Lianozovo School” is the fact that the individual writers each demonstrate a distinct poetics. This can be demonstrated in terms of genetics: of the five poets mentioned, only Kholin and Sapgir trace a clear lineage to Kropivnitsky, whom they refer to as a “teacher” (meanwhile, both contend that they became poets in earnest only after “moving past” Kropivnitsky’s influence). Though great admirers of Kropivnitsky as poet, artist and friend, Nekrasov and Satunovsky came to know him later and arrived with already-formed individual poetics (Nekrasov made his way to the painting shows first in 1959; Satunovsky, a generation older, had been writing poetry since the 1930s). At the same time, in the small world of unofficial poetry, the Lianozovo poets had more in common with each other

10 The artists Ilya Kabakov, Erik Bulatov and Oleg Basiliev collaborated with Kholin and Sapgir on a number of published children’s books.
11 For “deheroicization” see below; I borrow the term from Kukulin, “Aktual’nyi russkii poet,” 278.
than with anyone else – and furthermore, their years of close “workshopping” clearly led to mutual inspiration, if not direct influence. Nekrasov dedicated an early poem, “Good Weather” [Khoroshia pogoda] (1959-60) to Kholin:

ХОРОШАЯ ПОГОДА
Холину
Окна все распахнутые
А цветы как пахнутые
А люди как ахнутые

[GOOD WEATHER/For Kholin//The windows all agape/And the flowers like a-gas/And the people like a-gasp] Nekrasov’s poem demonstrates the documentary viewpoint typical of Kholin’s work of the 1950s (the time of his “barracks poetry”), while retaining Nekrasov’s own close attention to wordplay and the poetic potential of morphology.

Some of this poetry is so experimental that even much later critical reception has been uneven. In a 1988 article in the official Soviet journal Oktiabr’, the critic Mikhail Epstein continued his efforts to introduce perestroika-era readers to new developments in unofficial Soviet poetry. Epstein provided a lengthy and favorable description of the main poets associated with the Moscow Conceptualist movement, Dmitri Prigov and Lev Rubinstein, and mentions Nekrasov as well, though his comment on Nekrasov is brief:

13 The way the Lianozovo collective worked was that everyone would gather to look at the artists’ paintings, and the poets would read their work to the assembled company. Of course, they also hung out in other settings as well – Kholin and Sapgir drank a lot together and wrote poems to and about each other.


15 “Kontsepty... Metaboly… O novykh techeniakh v poezii,” Oktiabr’, no. 4 (1988), 194-203. In a 1986 article in Voprosy literatury, “Pokolenie, nashedshee sebia (o molodoi poezii 80-kh godov),” no. 5 (1986), Epstein was able to get a number of unofficial poets into print for the first time, although not necessarily with the authors’ permission.
It would seem that poems like [Vsevolod Nekrasov’s] — lavishly garnished with “like,” “this here,” “after all,” and “well, you know” — could well have been written by Akaky Akakievich. This is the vocabulary of a poor man, a “little man” of our time, stuck deep in a muttering, unintelligible muck made up of bureaucratese, and capable of turning even words like “spring” or “blue” into bureaucratese. They are repeated 10–20 times in a single poem and are themselves transformed into an abstract element of speech, into a conjunction or particle. The poetry of V. Nekrasov is a poetry of official words pronounced with a grumbler’s carelessness and a stutterer’s insistence; a fading and exhausted speech which aesthetically takes on the very quality of monotony, poverty and the minimal.\textsuperscript{16}

Although issue can and should be taken with the dismissive tone of Epstein’s assessment and the fact that he does not illustrate it with any poems, the critic does accurately describe some aspects of Nekrasov’s formal method. More interestingly, the article points toward some general problems in talking about reception of unofficial poets’ work (consider: “Here and subsequently we will cite a series of poems that have yet to appear in our press, but which represent typical trends in new poetry and are therefore necessary to its analysis”\textsuperscript{17}). When the article came out, the Lianozovo poets had been writing and unofficially disseminating their work for nearly thirty years, but Epstein was one of the


\textsuperscript{17} “Kontsepty… Metaboly…,” 203. Epstein discusses Nekrasov as a conceptual poet and does not mention any of the other Lianozovo poets in this article.
first critics to write about any of them for a Russian audience.\textsuperscript{18} It would still be another
year before these poets had any official publications or further attention from critics.\textsuperscript{19}

In the following studies, I will examine the work of Kholin and Nekrasov with
particular attention to the childlike aesthetic. Even as the poetry of both Kholin and
Nekrasov evinces a strong presence of these aesthetic features, their significance is
somewhat different for each poet. Somewhat like Vvedensky, Kholin mostly uses the
themes, simple language and characteristic tone of official children’s literature in
combination with “adult” elements to create hybrid texts that, meanwhile, no one could
mistake for children’s poetry. For Kholin, the childlike aesthetic mostly as it appears in
children’s poetry provides an aesthetic toolkit applicable elsewhere. Nekrasov, on the
other hand, staunchly opposed the notion of “child-specific literature”; his own
statements on his work suggest that the childlike aesthetic – simple language, a childlike
lyric speaker, word play – was innate to all of his poetry. In different ways, the childlike
aesthetic for both Kholin and Nekrasov also served as a marker (of naïveté, vulnerability,
unseriousness) distinguishing their unpublished poetry from official Soviet lyric.

I. Igor Kholin.

\textsuperscript{18} It is significant and symptomatic that work by Nekrasov, Kholin and Sapgir (like many
other unofficial Soviet poets) was published and analyzed abroad by foreign scholars long before it was accorded the same treatment at home. The Lianozovo poets enjoyed particular attention in German-language contexts, with a 1973 publication in the Austrian journal \textit{Pestsäule}. For more on the warm and long-lasting reception of Lianozovo in German see: Kukuj, “Starting point Lianozovo.”

\textsuperscript{19} Beginning in 1989 and continuing throughout the 1990s, Kulakov published a series of seminal articles acquainting readers with the work of unofficial post-war poets and the implications of unofficial circumstances of production and dissemination, with particular attention to the innovations of the Lianozovo poets. These essays have been collected in the volume \textit{Poeziia kak fakt}.
Kholin had a wild youth, spent variously in orphanages (after his father’s death in the Civil War), early military service and a host of odd jobs. He found his way to Lianozovo around the age of thirty and began writing poetry then (around 1950), and had his first samizdat publication in the first issue of Sintaksis in 1959. Kholin was quite prolific and wide-ranging in terms of materials produced. More of his work was published in tamizdat over the ensuing decades, notably selections of poetry in the Viennese journal Pestsäule (1973), a Swiss book-length survey of underground Soviet poetry, Freiheit ist Freiheit (1975), the Parisian Apollon-77 (1977) and the Israel-based journal Leviathan (1979-80).

From the 1970s until shortly before his death in 1999, Kholin, who had already shifted from his trademark short lyrics to long-format epic poems, began writing prose, which remained almost entirely unpublished during the Soviet period. He did have one Soviet publication of poetry, during perestroika: his first mature cycle, Barracks Dwellers [Zhiteli baraka], was published in 1989, more than thirty years after being written. Around the same time, the Lianozovo poets began to read their work publicly in official venues. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Kholin lived to see a few more publications, including a substantial collection of his poetry; a companion volume of prose came out the year after his death.

20 Sintaksis, no. 1 (December 1959). The first issue of Sintaksis, copies of which were destroyed in the Soviet Union, was republished in 1965 in the Paris-based tamizdat journal Grani (no. 58).

21 Further publications in German-speaking countries continued throughout the 1980s and early 90s.


23 Izbrannaia proza (Moscow: NLO, 2000).
Kholin was fairly regularly employed (and published) as a children’s writer between the early 1960s and mid-1970s. In addition to writing children’s literature, Kholin sought out other forms of literary employment, including working as a literature tutor at Moscow’s Pioneer Palace and even writing poems for the Traffic Regulation Office.\(^{24}\) One of his poems, originally published in the children’s section of the journal \textit{Ogonyok}, eventually made it into a Russian-language primer and as such was read by probably millions of children.\(^{25}\) Perhaps because he had already been employed in a plethora of pursuits not traditional for Russian writers, Kholin was not ashamed of being a children’s poet: “Maybe this sounds fantastic, but as a children’s poet I was totally official […] And I can’t say that the poems were bad.”\(^{26}\) Kholin’s regard for his own work for children recalls Kharms, as quoted in the arrest report: “I consider the quality of my poems to be excellent.” Indeed, Kholin’s friend Edmund Iodkovsky even compared him to Kharms, with regard to a certain “quality of alienation from ordinary everyday culture.”\(^{27}\)

Despite his generally positive assessment of his own work, Kholin – again like Kharms – considered children’s literature to be a necessarily limited form. He sums up the activity in terms that strongly recall the basic tenets of socialist realism: “1. Children’s literature in its current state is unequivocally an applied art, insofar as it has a prescribed moral. And unvarying form, and a fixed set of subjects.”\(^{28}\)

\(^{24}\) Kholin, “Dnevники,” 42.
\(^{25}\) Kukulin interview. “Umnye mashiny” was published in \textit{Ogonyok}, 13 May 1962, 12.
\(^{26}\) Kulakov interview, \textit{Poeziia kak fakt}, 323.
\(^{27}\) Kholin, “Dnevники,” 44.
\(^{28}\) Ibid., 34. Translated by Ainsley Morse and Bela Shayevich.
given in a neutral tone that suggests he is getting a sense for a set of existing rules within which to work. “Children's poetry is built around performance,” he writes: “Children are forced to memorize poems [and] recite them in front of grown-ups […] In children’s poetry, rhyme has a completely different purpose than in grown-up poetry. In children's poetry it’s good [if you can guess the rhyme].” We can recall Lydia Ginzburg musing on the same topic: “Here you just have to do something with these [given] elements – and you get a work that is not your own, but that actually interests you; it’s a special kind of creative satisfaction […] It almost seems to you that that correlation itself already exists somewhere: like the right solution to a problem on the final page of a textbook.” At the same time, there are few formal distinctions between Kholin’s work for children and not for children, and close similarities in theme and viewpoint can be discerned as well.

The unofficial poetry scholar Vladislav Kulakov has stated explicitly that the Lianozovo poets’ work in general does not demonstrate a sharp division between ‘adult’ and ‘child’ poetry. As we shall see, though, this boundary between genres can be blurred in different ways for different poets. For Kholin, the childlike aesthetic manifests mostly in the rhetorical and formal features of the adult poems drawing on the conventions of children’s poetry. Sometimes, however, there is also an exchange in the other direction, when Kholin’s children’s poetry recognizably reflects devices of his adult work. (Here the chronological dimension is relevant: Kholin’s “barracks” poems predate his involvement with children’s literature.) In what follows, I will examine a number of

29 Ibid. For full quote, see Introduction, 19.
30 Full quote in Chapter Two, 118.
Kholin’s poems for children and adults, aiming to determine what differences of kind and degree exist between the two genres in his work.

Many contemporaries and admirers have referred to Kholin as an “epic” poet. This designation clearly draws more on a colloquial understanding of “epic” than the actual conventions of the classical genre. Asked how an epic quality could be attributed to Kholin’s usually short-form poems, Genrikh Sapgir opined: “It’s the epic viewpoint [vzgliad]. Behind the small stuff you get a sense of the enormous world. He takes note of trivialities, like Chekhov and the bottle glinting. A symbol that points to something bigger. It’s not mocking, it’s a demonstration. A merciless demonstration.” It would seem that epic, in a colloquial sense, is also being applied to Kholin’s inscrutable, “invisible” authorial voice, which, especially in the early poetry, often appears to be recording rather than narrating. In any event, the lyric speaker in Kholin’s early poetry is certainly a chronicler. The following poem, from Kholin’s first and most celebrated “barracks” cycle, presents an event, plot and resolution:

Под забором куча сора.
У забора разговоры:
«Каково, жена Егора
Навалила кучу сора».
После ссоры у забора
Бабы бьют жену Егора.

[Bunch of garbage by the fence/And the neighbors take offense:"Wouldn’t you know it, Egor's hussy/Went and left the yard all messy."/From the fence the women flew./Egor's wife was black and blue.] 33


33 Kholin, Izbrannoе, 17. Translation by Ainsley Morse and Bela Shayevich.
The incident is related briefly and tersely; furthermore, a third of the poem’s short narrative is given in direct speech of participants in the incident, their words set off in documentary-style quotation marks. The bleak reality of the poem’s subject is, however, rather strongly mediated by the tongue-twisting repetitions and deliberately simple rhymes. The repetition of entire rhyming phrases – *kucha sora/kuchu sora* and *zhena Egora/zhenu Egora* – contributes on the one hand to the linguistic [black] humor of the poem, while also hinting at the cyclical nature of the problem depicted. Indeed, formally speaking (in its length, topicality and trochaic meter) the poem more closely resembles a chastushka than, for instance, the somber lyricism of a poem by another chronicler of societal woes, Nikolai Nekrasov.\(^34\)

Indeed, many of these early “barracks” poems are reminiscent of (if not wholly in line with) the form of the humorous folk *chastushka*. Interestingly, Kholin’s barracks poems demonstrate more of a kinship with folkloric forms, with their “funnier” meters and rhyme schemes, than does his poetry written for children, although other contemporary poets drew explicitly on folklore for officially published children’s literature.\(^35\) In general, Kholin’s poems almost always have a “punch line”; among the many aspects of the childlike aesthetic manifest in his adult work, humor – the aim to amuse – is quite significant. This humorous dimension is evident in the work of all the

\(^{34}\) Kukulin has pointed to Nikolai Nekrasov as an interesting predecessor to the Lianozovo poets, particularly the documentalist, “barracks” aesthetic. See his “Documentalist Strategies in Contemporary Russian Poetry,” *The Russian Review* no. 69 (Oct. 2010), 587-588.

\(^{35}\) See, for instance, the children’s books of Yuri Koval’ (Russian folklore) and Kholin’s friend Ovsei Driz (Jewish folklore).
poets examined in these studies, and something that sets their work apart from more mainstream contemporary poetry.

In addition to seeming omniscient, the lyric speaker in Kholin’s poem is most often naïve, rather than ironic or overtly absurdist. The voice reports on events impartially, relating only what is apparent to the naked eye (or ear) – like Zoshchenko’s narrators, the speaker often seems to be embedded in the environment he describes (while the writer is necessarily at a distance). The combination of “naïve” and “epic” is novel: traditionally, the epic narrator is omniscient, while the essence of naïveté is the absence of knowledge (hence Kulakov’s well-chosen epithet: “inscrutably epic”). “Kholin is no absurdist; the world is absurd.” Vsevolod Nekrasov described Kholin’s poetic stance in the following way:

[Kholin’s poetry says]: you can all go to… See, I'm not a poet. I'm Kholin, and if I want to I'll write poems not like your poets do, better than all your poets – like a simple regular guy… And my rhymes are like that too, simple – just words that look alike. Or even simpler: one and the same words – repetition. Can't get simpler than that -- maybe it's not for everybody, but it works for me…

The humor and, by all means, irony, emerge in these poems first and foremost through form and diction. At the same time, the selection of subject matter is of major significance: the speaker in the poem, however naïve, nevertheless has a keen eye for scenes of disarray and disaster. As his friend Sapgir commented, Kholin’s “primitivism” is “subtle, deliberate and conscious.” Of himself, Kholin said, “I am a satirist, after all. I

36 For an interesting discussion of Zoshchenko as “imaginary proletarian writer” see A. Zholkovskii, “Iskusstvo prisposobleniia,” Bluzhdaiushchie sny, 36-39.
39 Kukulin interview.
only notice imperfections.” He gives an example from when he was called in for a chat with the authorities following the illegal publication of his work in Sintaksis. Kholin pointed out to the investigator how funny it was that there was an inventory slip hanging on the wall next to the portrait of Dzerzhinsky – “you come here every day and don’t notice it, and I’m here for the first time and I saw it right away.”40 Kholin’s example is highly characteristic, encompassing his embodiment of the naïve viewpoint (the child who sees right away that the emperor is naked), a surprisingly subtle sense of humor, his sensitivity to phenomena implicitly charged with political significance, and his tendency to downplay that significance by calling what he notices merely “imperfections.”

Дамба. Клумба. Облезлая липа.
Дом барачного типа.
Коридор.
18 квартир.
На стене лозунг:
МИРУ МИР!
Во дворе Иванов
Морит клопов,
Он бухгалтер Гознака.
У Романовых пьянка,
У Барановых драка.41

[A dike. Flower beds. A wilted linden./A barracks-type house./A hallway./18 apartments./Slogan on the wall:/PEACE TO THE WORLD!/Outside Ivanov’s/Exterminating bedbugs./He’s an accountant for the State Mint./The Romanovs are boozing/The Baranovs are brawling.]

This poem, also part of the “Barracks Dwellers” cycle, appears to be just “showing things as they are,” in this case, ugly, poor and seemingly unremarkable. At the same time, the specific details, conveyed with documentary precision, are carefully selected and not without political significance. This is concrete reality, but presented in high-definition

40 Kulakov interview, Poeziia kak fakt, 320-321.
41 Kholin, Izbrannoe, 27.
detail and with special attention to grime, disorder and debauchery. In discussing parallels between the OBERIU and Lianozovo poets, Kulakov notes that just as the OBERIU poets made a poetic spectacle of randomness, the Lianozovo poets “hyperbolized the concrete.”\(^{42}\) Among the poem’s many notable formal features, the rhymes are particularly telling: the sweepingly idealistic political slogan “PEACE TO THE WORLD” rhymes with the quietly claustrophobic “18 apartments,” and the State Mint is made to rhyme with the brawling of the final line. The semantic work done by the rhyming words is shared by the pauses, created by short, clipped phrases like those found in the opening line: these pauses “lend additional weight to [the] word, concentrate the information it bears.”\(^{43}\) And yet the narrative voice remains distanced, drawing no explicit connections between the details reported, as if not suspecting the larger significance of the whole.

As we have seen, rhyme is a key device in Kholin’s poetry: where it is exact and grammatical, as in “Pod zaborom kucha sora…,” it can evoke folkloric or childlike forms and convey a mood contrary to the ostensible subject of the poem. Where it is more approximate and unpredictable, as in “Damba. Klumba…,” it throws the rhyming words into sharp relief (here we can recall Kholin’s remarks on guessing the rhyme-word in children’s poetry). In the latter poem, the rhythm is changeable, suffusing the poem and occasionally transcending the visual logic of the line breaks. This technique recalls some of Marshak’s children’s poetry; Kholin certainly used it himself in children’s poems, such as the following:

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\(^{42}\) Kulakov, “Lianozovo,” 16.
\(^{43}\) Ibid., 20.
Мчится троллейбус
По улице Мира.
Едут
и едут
На нем пассажиры.
Домохозяйки
На рынок
Спешат.
В отпуск
Торопится
Бравый солдат.
С толстым портфелем
Сидит
Счетовод.
Парень-
Механик
Спешит на завод.
Ночью троллейбус
Стоит,
Отсыпается,
Утром
Холодной водой
Умывается.
Любит он
Смазку,
Любит он
Краску,
Любит он
Ласку.
Если за ним
Никудышный уход,
Он
Никого
Никуда
Не везет.44

[The trolley is dashing/Along Peace Street./Riding/and riding/Along go the passengers./Housewives/Hurry/To market./Rushing off/On leave/Go the brave soldier./Fat briefcase in hand/Sits/The accountant./A young/Mechanic/Hurries to the factory./At night the trolley/Gets/A good rest./In the morning/Cold water/Gets it clean./The trolley loves/Lube/And also loves/Paint,/And it loves/Love./If it’s not/Treated nicely./No one/Will get/To go/Anywhere.]

The snappy staccato of the line breaks recall the avant-garde aesthetic of early Soviet

children’s poetry. At the same time, the pauses between lines ensure that an attentive reader (or listener) could certainly guess a lot of the rhymes (consider the lines approximately halfway down the column: Noch’iu /trolleybus/stoit/, /otsyapaetsia/, /utrom /kholodnoi vodoi /umyvaetsia/). And the frequent references to the Soviet way of life are unmistakable, from characters like the “young mechanic” and the “brave soldier” to the overarching image of a bustling city full of busy, working citizens. Still, this is immediately identifiable as a Kholin poem: characteristic moments include the preoccupation with anthropomorphized machines (as we shall see further) and the particularly crisp, even edgy, rhymes.

Kholin’s later, 1960s poetry (written not for children) is arguably the most similar to his children’s poems in both formal and thematic terms. The mid-1960s cycle of “Cosmic” poems demonstrate a major preoccupation with anthropomorphized objects (aliens appear occasionally, but generally take second stage to machines, household appliances, etc.). They also mark a shift away from the folklore-esque barracks aesthetic in both viewpoint and form. There is a clear connection with the cult of objects and machines in early Soviet literature, including children’s. At the same time, the obsession with outer space was very much of the moment in the 1960s, with the space race raging and the ultimate hero of the day being the Soviet cosmonaut. Kholin’s choice of outer space and the future as a theme and anthropomorphism as a device combine with narrative techniques established in the barracks poems. But while the barracks poems pointed to the grotesque forms of recognizable everyday life, the fantastic images of the

45 Consider Chukovsky’s famous “Moidodyr” (1923), which in turn strikingly resembles the opening theme of Olesha’s Envy [Zavist’] (1926).
cosmic poems cast serious doubt on the possibility of any space-age utopia, suggesting that the bright future will only have space-dwellers being stupid in the same way people are stupid on earth.

As in the poems of the barracks cycle, this poem contains an element of social critique. There is understated irony in the first line’s declaration of “bad luck”; the rest of the poem methodically drags spectacular space realia down to an ultra-mundane level, through straightforward juxtapositions like that of a “cosmic dust-jam” with “late for work.” At the same time, images like an outer-space dacha are essentially cartoonish.

Indeed, many of the cosmic poems, especially the ones featuring non-human actors and other commonplaces of children's poetry, become essentially larger-than-life cartoons, technicolor fables of anthropomorphized machines.
The 1960s poems become more formally experimental and visually lean (although, as we have seen, many of these features are standard in children’s literature of the time). Increasingly in these poems, the lines reduce to minimal length (sometimes just one word per line), at which point the word becomes the minimal semantic unit and the poem becomes a series of words. Here “the significance of syntax is reduced to a minimum, and words are free to interact with all of their unreduced contexts”; taken to its ultimate expression, this technique approaches that of collage. The following poem demonstrates both the machine theme and the semantic and syntactic flexibility of the poems of this period:

Автомат
Делает доклад
Тема
Живопись космического века
Вот полотно
Художника
Созвездия Рака
На нем ничего не изображено
Кроме
! знака
Безобразие
Халтура
Однообразие
Фактуры
Вздор
Бред
Вред
Включите другой автомат

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46 Kulakov, “Lianozovo,” Poeziia kak fakt, 21. For more on both machines and the significance of collage/montage in Soviet avant-garde literature throughout the twentieth century, and on Kholin’s contemporary Genrikh Sapgir in particular, see Ilya Kukulin, Mashiny, 289-293 (Although he doesn’t address Kholin’s work, Kukulin writes on Sapgir’s early Golosa cycle, the poetics of which are quite close to Kholin’s work of the same time).

Kholin’s cosmic poems resemble the barracks poems in their tendency to depict a concrete incident, often essentially off-color or violent. The attachment to “concrete reality,” though, obviously becomes more abstract – hence the cartoonish quality. The first-person speaker becomes more common, and along with it, the tendency to a dialogic structure or even multiple narrators (see, for instance, the “responses” in the second half of the above poem). The barracks poems, with their snippets of street signs, drunken roars and screeches, featured a kind of polyphony – but the various voices were all mediated by the invisible reporting subject.

In contrast to the barracks poems, the cosmic poems – in their formal features, particularly the length and number of lines and rhythm, more closely resemble Kholin’s children’s poems of the time. This is also true of other contemporaneous cycles, such as the “Kholin” poems, a loose cycle of poems featuring a first-person speaker whose identity with the constant subject, “Kholin,” is deliberately foregrounded as ambiguous. By making their subject larger-than-life, omnipresent and mostly reprehensible, the Kholin poems play with and radically undermine the notion of the Poet. Consider the following poem, which also demonstrates interacting, possibly competing voices:

У Холина рога
На пояснице
Вы что
Хотите в этом убедиться
Внимание
Снимаю брюки
Прочь
Руки
The speaker begins by stating a claim about Kholin, at which point Kholin himself (the Kholin of the claim) cuts in and abruptly takes over the narration, not only responding to the claim, but aggressively demanding listeners’ attention (“Heads up”). Although many of Kholin’s children’s poems feature a traditionally omniscient “narrator,” some of them show dialogic experimentation of the variety seen in the “Kholin” poem just cited. In a surprisingly similar fashion, the “grandpa” (poplar) in the following children’s riddle-poem interjects, ultimately rejecting the title “grandpa” imposed upon him first by the grass and subsequently repeated by the unseen narrator:

[The grass whispered/These words:/ “Our neighbor,/An old grandpa,/Has hair ever so shaggy/And gray.”/The grandpa/Hearing this/Replied:/ “I’m no grandpa,/And not gray either./I’m just dressed/In White/Fuzz.]  

This poem diverges from Kholin’s guess-the-rhyme precept because it is supposed to be a

48 Kholin, Izbrannoe, 188.  
49 Igor’ Kholin, V gorode zelenom (Moscow: Malysh’, 1966).  

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riddle. The two poems are similar in their short lines with one-word rhymes and their call-and-response device. The most striking difference is diction – the Kholin poem, with its “adult” language, would obviously never be published in a venue aimed at children. At the same time, children of a certain age might well be mischievously delighted by the poem: in thematic terms, the typically “juvenile” fixation on rear-ends never ceases to be popular with children and adults alike. In formal terms, the poem is highly “accessible,” really indistinguishable from the other children’s poems examined here, and featuring a spectacular bang-bang finish with the double-rhyme *ruki/suki*. So what does it mean to write patently adult poetry using patently childlike forms? The disruptive, experimental force of the “Kholin” presence is surely made even more shocking by being presented in this way; meanwhile, the “Kholin” persona is lent a disarmingly childlike quality that complicates the seeming aggression of his stance in the poem.

Yet another element in the “Kholin” poems that could be considered childlike, but which is far more evident in the adult poems, is a hyperbolic egocentricity – understandably muted in official Soviet children’s publications, with their emphasis on the collective! But unapologetically hyperbolic egomania is a common thread in the work of many unofficial poets; Kholin is particularly methodical in devoting an entire cycle to the theme. And yet he and his contemporaries were hardly the first to plumb the rhetorical depths of this device. In the prose vignette by Daniil Kharms from which the epigraph for this chapter was taken, the speaker – also Daniil Kharms – explores what seems to be every possible expression of his astonishing superiority:

I, for instance, do not shove in everybody’s face the fact that I possess, as they say, a colossal intellect. I have all the data needed to consider myself a great man. And, actually, I do indeed consider myself great. For this reason I am grieved and pained to find myself among people rated lower
than myself in terms of intellect, perspicacity and talent, and yet do not feel accorded the appropriate respect.
Why, why am I better than everyone else?50

It seems almost unnecessary to point out the profound and fundamental irony implicit in the rhetorical positioning of texts like these, written as they were by a writer occupying the lowest possible rungs of both the official literary world and society more generally. In this connection, Vsevolod Nekrasov wrote about Kharms as an antidote to the “literaturo-centric” tendency of Russian literature, and in particular its cult of the “Main National Poet” as an aesthetic and even moral authority.51 Kholin’s position vis-à-vis society and the contemporary literary scene – as a small-time children’s writer and unknown experimental poet – was quite similar to Kharms’s; moreover, the latter’s work was first circulating precisely in the years that Kholin was writing his wildly self-centered Kholin poems.

Я свою фамилию
Выставляю напоказ
Я готов
Повторять ее
Миллионы раз
Холин Холин Холин Холин
Холин
Холин
Холин
Холин
Холин бессмертный
Холин мгновенный
Холин
Первый
Поэт Вселенной

50 Kharms, Menia nazyvaiut kaputsinom, 106.
Poetically speaking, egomania is not at all the most interesting feature of this poem. The major device is repetition, as heralded by the speaker (whose declared readiness to repeat his last name “millions of times” suggests that the eleven “Kholins” in the poem are merely the beginning of an endless series). As we will see even more in the work of Vsevolod Nekrasov, the device of repetition is multifarious (pun intended!): the emphasis can be on the act of repetition itself; the estranging effect repetition can have on the sound and meaning of the word repeated (particularly interesting in the case of a proper noun), and/or the implication of a concrete and palpable multitude (millions of Kholins).

A children’s poem of the same period, “Our Valyas” [Nashi Vali] – incidentally, another good example of the 1960s outer-space fixation – plays with the same device, albeit in a more reserved fashion:

Вали,
Вали,
Вали,
Вали!
Сколько их?
Сочтешь едва ли,
Валя -- токарь,
Валя -- пекарь,
Парикмахер
И аптекарь,
И пилот,
И ткач,
И шофер,
И врач.
Вали сеют,
Вали пашут,
Вали варят

52 Kholin, Izbrannoe, 186.
Cup
And porridge,
But one
Of the Valyas
Flew off to
the/Stars./However many/Valyas there are/They all dreamed/Of such a flight. […]

[Valyas./Valyas./Valyas./Valyas!/How many are there?/You can hardly count ‘em./Valya the lathe operator/Valya the baker/Hairdresser/And pharmacist/A pilot/And a weaver,/A truck-driver,/And a doctor./Valyas sow./Valyas plow,/Valyas cook/Soup/And porridge,/But one/Of the Valyas/Flew off to
the/Stars./However many/Valyas there are/They all dreamed/Of such a flight. […]]

The repetitions in this poem are meant to evoke countless concrete people, as clarified by
the distribution of useful professions in lines seven through eighteen (note also that Valya is gender-neutral until line 21). At the same time, a faint note of the absurd is evident in
the very premise of the poem and the senselessness that is a necessary consequence of
repeating not just a proper name, but a plural proper name. This is especially clear in the
hilarious rhyme of Val’ – the genitive plural of “Valya” – with the poetic Vdal’. There is
also an inherent contradiction in the poem’s celebration of one very special Valya – the
first female cosmonaut – whose accomplishment explicitly overtakes all of the sowing
and porridge produced by the countless faceless Valyas.

In the midst of fantastical outer-space realia, the “epic viewpoint” and off-color
chastushki, it is important to note the lyrical moments present in Kholin’s work. His aptly
named cycle “Lyric Poems without Lyricism” [Lirika bez liriki] demonstrates the same

53 Multiple authors, Kalendar’ dlia oktiabriat “Zvezdochka” na 1965 god (Moscow: [no publisher indicated], 1965), pages not numbered – Kholin’s poem is under “March.” The poem refers to the historic flight of Valentina Tereshkova, the first female astronaut in space (1963).
quasi-documentary approach found in “Barracks Dwellers,” shifted in the direction of first-person narrative and with the romantic theme often predominant. The following poem plays with the convention of lyric poetry’s descriptions of nature, here exaggeratedly lyrical:

Весна, весна. Какая синь!
Везде ручьи, где взгляд ни кинь.
А я в бараке. Бос. Ботинки
Мои находятся в починке.
Пришла жена. Под глазом ссадина.
Кричит: «Подбила Шурка, гадина!»  

[Spring, spring. What a lovely blue! Streams are running wherever you look./But I’m in the barracks. Barefoot. My boots/Are being repaired./My wife came home. A gash beneath her eye./She squawked, “Shurka whacked me, that dirty shrew!”]

Kholin called his poems fundamentally “realistic”: “We always proceeded from reality.” Almost sounding wistful, he continues: “For some reason it always works out like that: no matter how fancy I try to be, no matter how inventive I try to be with form, I always end up with realistic poems.”

For the Lianozovo poets, “reality” usually referred to stripped-down, bleak descriptions of the world not usually depicted in official Soviet art and literature. Here, the breadth and freshness of the sky and streams evoked in the first two lines quickly telescope down to the cramped closeness of the barracks, which the speaker cannot leave for his lack of shoes. In another parallel, the gurgle of freshly melted flowing water is replaced by the aggressive squawk of the speaker’s wife. As we have seen before, the rhyming words are significant: the lofty ‘lovely blue’ [sin ’] devolves through the colloquial expression ‘wherever you look’ [kuda ne kin ’], signalling an ongoing devolution through the mundane ‘boots’/ ‘repair’ [botinki/pochinke] and

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54 Kholin, Izbrannoe, 40.
55 Kulakov interview, Poeziia kak fakt, 321.
ending with the ugly ‘gash’ [ssadina] and even uglier ‘dirty shrew’ [gadina]. The marked disconnect between the poem’s lyrical opening lines and crude conclusion makes the lyrical lines look ridiculous; this kind of parodic gesture was used to great effect by Kholin’s contemporary Genrikh Sapgir in a popular children’s poem, “Backwards” [Vse naoborot] (1976): “The weather was beautiful/The princess was hideous…” The deviations from a standard nature lyric here recalls Kholin’s deformations of standard children’s poetry forms elsewhere.

Another major convention of lyric poetry Kholin plays with is lyric’s age-old function as a vehicle for talking about love. The following poem from Lirika bez liriki, “Getting Acquainted” [Znakomstvo], presents a number of familiar devices – recall, for instance, the back-and-forth dialogue of the “Automatic Unit” and “Gray-haired Grandpa” poems. Read in the context of the other poems in the cycle, the question of the lyric speaker here is ambiguous – this could be a description of lovers related by an observing subject, or a personal account:

Началось с флирта
При покупке торта
Скорчил морду
Вроде черта
Она не осталась в долгу
Сказала
Могу
Съесть 10 пирожных
Не запивая водой
Невозможно
Это искусство
Проводил домой
Говорили об искусстве
Любишь
Соловьева-Седова

56 Genrikh Sapgir, Chetyre konverta (Moscow: Detskaia literatura, 1976), 44.
As evident in the explanatory English translation, the series of single words that make up lines seventeen through twenty-four have acquired a certain independence, although there is an implied conversational syntax (declared in the line “They [we] talked about art”).

The form of the poem, its rhymes, short lines and brusque, often crude lexicon (even the title is insistently prosaic), are in contrast to the essentially romantic theme and the escalating intimacy depicted. This poem is probably the best example of “lyric poetry without lyricism” in the cycle, insofar as it is arguably successful as a love lyric, despite (or because of!) its deconstruction of standard form; most of the other poems are formally and thematically indistinguishable from the poems of the barracks cycle (they were written only slightly later). The poem’s formal peculiarities (including the fact of its being titled) suggest that we can read the lyric speaker as “I,” since the later work that it resembles more often features a lyric “I.”

57 Kholin, Izbrannoe, 54.
Lyricism was highly encouraged in Soviet children’s poetry; it was an established part of the Soviet children’s literature tradition, appearing mostly in connection with nature (recall, for instance, Lidia Chukovskaya’s praise of Vvedensky as a lyric poet for children). Many of Kholin’s children’s books and individual poems touched on the nature theme; the riddle-poem about the poplar tree was part of a whole book of riddle-poems from nature, In the Green City [V gorode zelenom]. The following strikingly lyrical children’s poem was actually declined for publication:

Поплывала туча,
стуча и шепча.
Туча плакучая,
туча горячая.
Брякнула туча:
бряк-бряк.
Прокатился по небу
бак, бак.
Прошили тучу две огненные строчки.
Наплакала туча две полные бочки.
Повисла над лесом, над лесом зеленым
радуга-крона волшебного клена.58

[A stormcloud floated by/clattering and whispering./The stormcloud is weepy/the stormcloud is hot./Crash went the stormcloud:/crash-bang./Through the sky clattered/a vat, vat./Two fiery seams pierced the stormcloud./The stormcloud cried out two barrelsful./Above the forest, the forest green/hung the rainbow-crown of a magic maple.]

Kholin speculates that, for the time, the poem must have been too “formalist,” that its devices and imagery were considered too experimental and made it hard for children (or editors) to grasp. Elsewhere, in his list of reflections on the requirements for approved children’s literature, Kholin wrote: “2. Lack of personality. Any expression of

58 Kulakov interview, Poeziia kak fakt, 323.
individuality exasperates our granny-editors. More than anything else, they’re afraid of Futurist tendencies.”

I read the poem as bizarrely eclectic. It begins in a standard lyrical mode, but already in the second line the lexicon diverges from the expected: the verb *stuchat’* would normally accompany rain (as in “rain was beating against the window”), while as the euphonious complement to *tucha* it both suggests a false etymological link and evokes a confusing image. Likewise, a stormcloud is usually associated with loud noises, while this one is said to be whispering; moreover, *shepcha* is made to rhyme with *goriacha*, a pairing more evocative of love poems than a children’s poem about weather (the other adjective, *plakucha*, in conjunction with the latter two attributes also draws more on the lexicon of romantic poetry). At this point, the meter and mood shift for the next four lines, with the stormcloud now described as harshly loud and metallic, highlighted by the repeating spondees *briak*, *briak* and *bak*, *bak*. The final four lines again diverge, standing apart in terms of rhyme (as two couplets with feminine rhyme, compared to the alternating masculine rhyme of the previous two stanzas), line length and poetic device. The first line is set off from the preceding ones by its length and the complexity of its image: a striking (if not wholly successful) metaphorical evocation of lightning, its vehicle (sewing) unprecedented by anything else in the poem. The following line shifts in tone again, presenting a commonplace of children’s poetry (*tucha naplakala*) and

59 Kholin, “Dnevnik,” 34.

60 Thanks to Stephanie Sandler for pointing out that this same pair was used by Joseph Brodsky in his “Ia byl tol’ko tem,” one of the M.B. love poems: *Eto ty, goriacha/oshuiu, odesnuiu/rakovinu ushnuiu/mne tvorila, shepcha*. Though it is unlikely that Kholin intended the reference.
conversational Russian ([naplakat’] dve polnye bochki) that seems especially odd when tied as a couplet to the high poetry of the preceding line. Finally, the last couplet, while more internally coherent, employs a folkloric repetition (nad lesom, nad lesom zelenym) – the first and only folkloric element in the poem – and closes with a surprisingly gorgeous image (conflating a rainbow and a maple tree) that, although somewhat justified by the logic of the poem, is rather difficult to picture. The overall effect of the poem is bright, jarring and slightly absurd.

Kholin’s stormcloud poem is a fine example of the limits of the childlike aesthetic in published Soviet children’s poetry. Although written as a children’s poem, in a number of ways the poem more closely resembles Kholin’s adult poetry, with its spurts of blunt violence, simpering sexuality, folkloric tinge and edgy, loose relationship to logic. It is unsurprising that the editors took issue with it, on formal or other grounds.

The children’s poetry that Kholin managed to publish in the Soviet press did generally adhere to the guidelines that he himself identified in his diary (the diary also frequently shows confirmation of the genre division in entries like “wrote a children’s poem,” “wrote three poems, two of them children’s,” etc.). But the examples examined have shown that Kholin’s children’s and adult poetry should not – indeed, cannot – be understood as completely separate activities, but rather as co-existing and even interacting practices. The aesthetic system of Kholin’s work, his eye and ear for material, remained for the most part a coherent whole.

Before turning to Nekrasov, I want to quote one of Kholin’s last poems, “River flow” [Reka teki], written during the year of his death (1999) and presenting a dramatic shift to the lyrical and childlike. It was actually only in his final years that Kholin
returned to writing poetry, after a long hiatus during which he wrote mostly prose. The late poems have fully embraced the childlike aesthetic, recalling both nature-themed children’s lyric poetry and Kruchënykh’s early avant-garde poetry experiments, including those featuring “children’s own poems.”

Река теки

Я утром
Встав
Бегу
К реке
Кричу
Река
Реко
Реке
Река на это
Мне
В ответ
Реку
Рекет
Понятен
Мне
Язык реки
Река
Реки
Река
Теки

[In the morning I/Get up/Run/To the river/Yell/River/Reever/To the river/The river/Answers/Me/Rover/Rivet/I get/The river’s/Language/River/Rave/River/Flow]

Like the poems written in zaum, this poem is virtually impossible to translate. The non-dictionary words are both “nonsensical” – a babbling morning paean to the river – and bearers of distinct semantic possibilities (thus forms like reke, reki, reko and reku are declined nouns (from reka); reku and reki also point to archaic verb forms for speaking

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(*rech*), thus “I say” and the imperative “say”; there could likewise be discerned an archaic vocative form, “o river” (reko). In the two lines preceding the final imperative (“reka/teki”), the pair reka/reki could be read as more soundplay (as translated above) or, more straightforwardly, as “river/of the river.” The only fully nonsensical word in the poem’s context is reket, evidently introduced exclusively for the rhyme with otvet. In addition to the zaum-style neologisms, the lyric speaker is markedly childlike, from his distinctive running and yelling first thing in the morning, to his unabashed conversing with the river and his boast of understanding its language. This is further anthropomorphism, but gentler and less satirical.

Indeed, “Reka teki” shows a face of the childlike aesthetic somewhat rare in Kholin’s adult work, which tends to play with the conventional form of children’s literature. Here, Kholin works with the stylized viewpoint and language of a small, nearly preverbal child. By the end of his life, Kholin had long since given up writing for children, but the childlike aesthetic generally characteristic of his poetics was more evident than ever before.

II. Vsevolod Nekrasov

“I think you’d have to look a long time to find an example of poetry without a grain of the ‘child’s viewpoint’: as is well known, ‘we all come from childhood’ and we simply can’t help carrying those childhood impressions inside us, whether we’re aware of it or not, they can’t help remaining at our foundations. You could say that the work of poetry is to approach them.”

Vsevolod Nekrasov

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Nekrasov’s early years as a poet followed a path similar to Kholin’s. His first mature efforts were published in the same, first, issue of Sintaksis, in 1959; indeed, it was the journal’s publisher, Aleksandr Ginzburg, who first brought Nekrasov to Lianozovo that same year. And Nekrasov’s poems, like Kholin’s, tend to be terse and laconic and to intentionally push the boundaries of what poetry can be.

In many respects, though, Nekrasov’s poetry is quite distinct from that of the other Lianozovo poets, and, in its striking minimalism, formally unprecedented in the Russian tradition. Even in the experiment-friendly atmosphere of unofficial poetry, his work was not always accepted as poetry (although the rise of Moscow Conceptualism in the visual arts later provided more of a context for understanding some of Nekrasov’s earlier experiments). Many regular features of his work – minimal, simple diction, short and sparse form, a lyric speaker who often appears childlike – demonstrate the childlike aesthetic, which fact probably contributed to initial confusion over and opposition to his work.

Like his Lianozovo colleagues, Nekrasov remained unpublished in the Soviet Union until perestroika, although his work was published abroad beginning in the

63 Nekrasov’s publications in samizdat attest to some recognition of his work by the unofficial literary community, but some perestroika-era critics who sought to “normalize” formerly unofficial poets derided Nekrasov’s poetry as “nonsense” and “blather.” Many of them were clearly at a loss; Kulakov’s 1990s articles introducing Lianozovo poets were seminal because they contextualized the work of these poets and drew important connections with OBERIU aesthetics. Also see Epstein, “Koncepty, metaboly…” and the introductory “epigraphs” in Nekrasov’s Spravka (Moscow: PS, 1991), 1-2.
The visually striking poem can be read in a matter of seconds. But it leaves one with a number of conflicting impressions: freedom exists? Freedom exists, over and over again? The multiple repetitions of the phrase introduce the space for multiple interpretations, varying emphasis and intonations, creating possibilities of meaning that go beyond the words alone. By the end of the poem, the assertion “Freedom is freedom” becomes highly

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64 In the same places: Pestsäule (1973), Freiheit ist Freiheit (1975), Apollon-77 (1977), Leviathan (1979-80), et al. A perestroika-era publication, Spravka, also reproduces the selections of Nekrasov’s work published in tamizdat (France, Austria, Israel, Switzerland, Germany, USA). For a full publication history, see Mikhail Sukhotin, “Vsevolod Nekrasov: Notes toward a Poetic Biography,” in I Live I See, 34.

65 There is reason to think that the particular interest toward Nekrasov and the other Lianozovo poets shown by German-speaking Slavic scholars has something to do with a certain aesthetic congeniality: in the 1950s, German-language literature saw the emergence of the Konkrete Poesie phenomenon, as demonstrated by poets like Eugen Gomringer in Switzerland, Heinz Gappmayr in Austria and Franz Mon in Germany. This kinship is reflected in the shifting terminology applied to the Lianozovo poets: in Apollon-77, Nekrasov, Sapgir and Kholin are referred to as “Gruppa Konkrete” and at certain points Nekrasov – staunchly opposed to isms of all stripes – grudgingly agreed to his work being characterised as “concretism” (see below). Indeed, of all the Lianozovo poets, Nekrasov’s poetics come the closest to some of the German experiments, although all signs point to these poetics emerging simultaneously and independently rather than reflecting direct influence. A selection of work by these poets was published in the Soviet journal Inostrannaia literatura only in 1964.

ambiguous. Is it an empty tautology? Is it a machine, a feedback loop made out of words, and thus completely meaningless? Is it an affirmation of the unchanging essence of a fundamental value? By forcing such fixed attention on individual words and phrases, Nekrasov foregrounds their multivalency: this is both a nod to the ubiquitous “Aesopian language” of a public accustomed to reading between the lines, and a more profound statement about the fundamental fluidity of language, its protean ability to change according to situation, intonation and context.

Although the “Freedom” poem comes close to a conceptual exercise, Nekrasov consistently affirmed that the poet’s main task was to master the intonations of “living speech” – first his own, and then that of others. This potentially ambiguous term has been beautifully clarified by Kirill Medvedev: in an essay on Nekrasov, Medvedev writes that speech, generated by everyday communication, is “always trying to master reality, to become the most precise possible representation of it.” Nekrasov felt that the poet should try to master speech in the same way that speech tries to master reality: “the language of poetry is an engaged, precise, concentrated representation of speech […] those elements which most precisely […] indicate material and emotional reality, rather than its pre-existing written – codified, linguistic – analogues.”67 Nekrasov’s use of this concept can be traced back to NEP-era artists’ fascination with the “living speech” of the proletariat.68

This kind of language was subsequently proscribed with the onset of the propriety and

68 For more on “living speech” in the NEP-era, see Katerina Clark, Petersburg, Crucible of Cultural Revolution, especially “Revolution as Revelation: the Avant-garde,” 29-53.
classicism of socialist realism in the Stalin era; Nekrasov’s resurrection of the term should be considered in the context of the Thaw-era revival of the 1920s avant-garde.

The concept of living speech is closely tied to the childlike aesthetic in Nekrasov’s work, insofar as the “child’s viewpoint” on the world and on language is perceived as direct and unmediated (as opposed to grammatically prescriptive, in Medvedev’s terms, “codified, linguistic”). Part of the appeal of the childlike aesthetic for the early avant-garde was the unmediated, “unliterary” quality of children’s artistic production – recall Khlebnikov and Kruchënykh’s delight over the poetic efforts of small children. This kind of immediacy is what Nekrasov praises again and again in the work of Vladimir Mayakovsky and Daniil Kharms. Hailing Mayakovský as the “second discovery of speech” (after Pushkin), Nekrasov obliquely refers to his own insistence on living speech as a crucial source for poetry: “Poetry can also be defined as the endless mastering of speech. Getting cosy with speech, getting inside of speech. [...] Mastering this speech, the one you have and you know.” Nekrasov’s insistence on the “real,” “concrete” and “immediate” strongly recall other early avant-garde positions, in particular, the Russian Formalist call for “making the stone stony.”

Kharms also earns Nekrasov’s admiration for his alleged desire that poetry be palpably concrete, again, “real.” Nekrasov writes that the OBERIU poets seemed to

69 It is significant that for most of Nekrasov’s life, Kharms meant primarily the children’s Kharms available in official publications after 1962 – some of Kharms’s adult work began circulating in samizdat in the mid-1960s, but a collected works was published in Russia only in the late 1990s.
70 Interview with Al’chuk.
72 Nekrasov, “Tezisy k dokladu o meste Kharmsa v russkoi literaturnoi traditsii.”
take their cue from the line in Mayakovsky’s “Cloud in Pants”: “The street writhes, tongueless/ -- it has nothing to yell or converse with” [Ulitsa korchitsia beziazykaia — ei nechem krichat’ i razgovarivat’] (also a nod to living speech).\(^7^3\) In line with this reference to the language of the street, Nekrasov praises Kharms’ careful ear for the words, rhythms and intonations of the popular speech of his time, which he replicates authentically, not in a stylized way: “…All that is ‘literary’ fears comparison with Kharms’s texts, just as the opera fears the circus, or a school lesson fears a good riddle – to which Kharms owes quite a lot, by the way, along with the rest of rough-edged children's folklore.”\(^7^4\) This demonstrative rejection of high culture, and of “literature” as an ossified cultural institution, once again shows Nekrasov in line with the early avant-garde and Futurist literary traditions; but it also reflects his more contemporary concerns over the confusion of art with art institutions, and of artists with editors and critics, scholars and style-watchers.

Nekrasov’s insistence on the “real,” alongside the priority of “living speech,” raises the question of the lyric speaker in his poems, children’s and adult alike. His own statements about poetry are such that we can assume, even when there is no “I,” that there is always a speaker; and the authenticity of speech fully mastered would seem to demand that he, Nekrasov, be that speaker. In response to this problem, Nekrasov had recourse to “the old trick of lyric poetry”: “чем больше я – я, тем больше я – всякий.”\(^7^5\) In other words, the lyric trick is writing the self in such a way that it becomes universal, and

\(^7^3\) Ibid.

\(^7^4\) “Chto eto bylo,” Paket, 201.

writing about universal experience in a way that evokes a profoundly intimate experience for the individual reader. This is another instance in which the childlike aesthetic in his work cuts across the boundaries of “children’s” and “adult” poetry: the lyric speaker in many of the poems is consistently curious, wondering and naïve in the way that a child could be.  

Nekrasov’s efforts to be published as a children’s poet mostly fell flat, even at a time when his immediate contemporaries – Kholin, Yan Satunovsky, Genrikh Sapgir – were able to publish quite a lot in that area. Nekrasov had a grand total of two official publications: the pull-out children’s book *Seven Vehicles* [7 mashin] (1962) and nine poems in the collection *Between Summer and Winter* [Mezhdu letom i zimoi] (1976), which he compiled, and which also features work by Kropivnitsky, Sapgir, Satunovsky and Mikhail Sokovnin, along with several other otherwise unofficial poets. Meanwhile, Nekrasov’s archive contains a full manuscript of a children’s book, *Poems about All and Any Weather* [Stikhi pro vsiakuiu, liubuiu pogodu], which demonstrates the near-identity of his “adult” poetry and the poems he thought of as suitable for children (the book was reproduced in full in a 2013 publication). After years on the shelf, the *Weather* manuscript was ultimately rejected in 1976, allegedly because of the following poem, “A Poem about the Calendar”:

СТИХИ ПРО КАЛЕНДАРЬ

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76 Cf. Sukhotin’s interpretation: “Probably what makes poetry ‘children's' is an honest and trusting gaze, the gaze of someone discovering things, who has not yet begun using them.” M. Sukhotin, “Detskoe-vzrosloe v rannikh stikhakh Vsevoloda Nekrasova” (not dated) [21 March 2014]

This rather circular poem, built around a pun with both semantic and morphological (visual) dimensions, would subsequently be included in all of Nekrasov’s post-Soviet adult publications, regardless of its designation here as a children’s poem. Nekrasov’s first perestroika-era book, Poems from a Journal [Stikhi iz zhurnala] (1989) reproduced this poem under the heading “On the poem’s anniversary” [K iubileiu stikhotvoreniiia] and appended a long epigraph (Nekrasov’s term) consisting of quotes from the reviewers

78 This is the version from the children’s book manuscript. Compare to “Kalender’ (chto na chto konchaetsia)” in Stikhi, 126. Translation from I Live I See, 234-5.
and editors who rejected the manuscript, and a sort of reply to them in verse. One reviewer, Boris Begak, a respected children’s literature expert, wrote:

Sound-play is vitally important for children. But when playing with sound the poet needs to think not only about the sound, but also about the meaning of the word he is playing with. Otherwise obvious blunders can arise and be missed by the poet [as in “Poem about the Calendar”]. One need only recall what universal metaphorical meaning the word OCTOBER has for us, even for little children! Such are the fruits of “being inventive just for fun.”

Although Nekrasov fulminated at length over this politically-charged rejection, he never commented on the extent to which he himself may have anticipated the reviewer’s interpretation. If anything, the poem certainly does emphasize the equal rights of all the months, through the circularity of the calendar cycle (a theme developed further in other poems as well). In any event, despite a de facto moratorium on official publications, Nekrasov was able to find occasional work as an editor and reviewer at the Moscow children’s publishing houses, eventually editing two collections published in the later 1970s. In this way, he escaped total unemployment and was even a member of the literary workers’ union after 1973.

Despite (or perhaps because of) his lack of official success as a children’s writer, Nekrasov devoted a fair amount of time to reflecting on the phenomenon of children’s literature. He was quoted above saying that he and the other Lianozovo poets were

80 The subjective nature of Begak’s concern is demonstrated by the fact that in the month of October in the Kalendar’ dlia oktiabriat, in which Kholin’s “Nashi Vali” appeared, the revolution is not mentioned once.
81 See, for instance, the poems “God i vot,” “Pervoe maia/Potom…” (another evocation of a Soviet sacred concept!).
82 The collections were Mezdu letom i zimoi (Moscow: Detskaia literatura, 1976) and Skazi bez podskazki (Moscow: Detskaia literatura, 1981). Sukhotin, “Notes,” I Live I See, 32.
recruited in the early-1960s wave of enthusiasm for reviving children’s literature with the wordplay and soundplay that had made early Soviet children’s literature so magnificent.\textsuperscript{83} It would seem that Nekrasov’s poetry, which abounds in wordplay and succinct, rhythmic verse, could often be read as “children’s” and should have fit in perfectly to this scheme – all the more so since his “adult” work thematized first and foremost language, unlike the dark grotesque of Kholin’s or Sapgir’s barracks poems.\textsuperscript{84} But Nekrasov was effectively shut out of writing for children, a circumstance he claims resulted from his unwillingness to “learn how to write for children” in the way the publishers wished – his fundamental refusal of “child-specificity” \cite{detskaia spetsifika}.\textsuperscript{85} In his private writings, Nekrasov associated ‘child-specificity’ with other deleterious phenomena of official Soviet literature, but he defended this position in the official press as well. In an essay in the professional journal \textit{Detskaia Literatura}, Nekrasov argued that even a consummate poet like Alexander Blok could write badly when trying to fit into ‘child-specific’ parameters.\textsuperscript{86} Nekrasov reflected further on the problem in a postscript to an article about Daniil Kharms as a children’s writer:

\begin{quote}
...I think the problem lies in the fact that I know how to write in a funny way for kids – but not only for kids. But I also know how – and love – to write not only in a funny way. Not only funny and not only for kids – since in principle I don’t write for kids \textit{only}. Which distinguishes me unfavourably from the leading lights of children’s literature, who really do know how to write well in a funny way for kids – but only for kids.\textsuperscript{87}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{83} See Chapter Two, 121.
\textsuperscript{84} This observation is echoed by different readers of Nekrasov’s work. See, for instance, Kucherskaya’s interview, and Sukhotin’s “Detskoe-vzrosloe” \textit{(op. cit.)}.
\textsuperscript{85} Nekrasov, \textit{Paket}, 216-17.
\textsuperscript{87} Nekrasov, from “Chto eto bylo,” \textit{Paket}, 210-211.
This statement recalls Kholin’s and Lydia Ginzburg’s ruminations on the fundamentally conventional, “applied” nature of most children’s literature (the standard plots, characters, forms, etc.). Nekrasov suggests that successful Soviet children’s writers were those who implicitly agreed to toe the line of aesthetic conventionality per se, the idea that there was more or less one specific way of writing for children. In a 1977 letter to the children’s editor Igor Boronetsky, Nekrasov wrote: “The 7 Vehicles book […] taught me something. Not that it was noticeably bad or anything. Like, it seemed fine. But it was obviously and hopelessly different, in a bad way, from the poems I had started off with. That book – a standard pull-out book with pictures and captions – was written in poems that were, without any doubt, not real, even though the editors had approved them…”

Nekrasov’s designation of poetry as “real” or “not real” reflects a lifelong concern with this shifting and amorphous concept, which for him sometimes means “concrete” or “palpable” (close to the OBERIU concern) and sometimes “true,” in opposition to the falsity of official discourse.

In any case, Nekrasov’s refusal to designate some of his poems “only for kids” suggests that aspects of the childlike aesthetic in his work manifest utterly independently of genre boundaries. In the same letter to Boronetsky, Nekrasov declared that after his bad experience with 7 Vehicles (published in 1962), he no longer wrote anything “specially for children” and instead just suggested poems that had been written more simply, using language “comparatively closer to the usual language of children's

88 Quoted in Sukhotin, “Detskoe-vzrosloe…” My emphasis.
89 Nekrasov’s famously abrasive personality also surely had something to do with the persistent conflicts that dogged him in the children’s literature industry; none of the editors whom he lampoons seem to have left written records of their version of events. For more on the abrasive personality, see Medvedev, “Ob upriamstve liriki.”
poetry.” And in a later article, he explained further: “I selected my “children’s” poems, but I didn’t write them as children’s poems – now and then I write stuff like that now, too – and I take full responsibility for them now and consider them no worse than the rest. Maybe even better.” This statement, considered alongside Nekrasov’s selection process, reveal some nuances in his sense of what constituted good poetry for children.

Nekrasov’s public (epistolary) insistence on the identity of his work for children and adults also suggests that publishing his work for children would be too much like publishing his officially proscribed adult poetry.

As Mikhail Sukhotin points out, although compiled in the 1970s, All and Any Weather (along with another failed children’s manuscript, The Deep Woods [Les dremuchii]) consists of very early poems, those written up until the early 1960s. Even the poems Nekrasov eventually got published in Between Summer and Winter were all selected from his earliest mature work. As the collections’ titles suggest, most of the poems have something to do with nature and/or the weather. They are distinguished from some of Nekrasov’s other work by the absence of proper names and of Sovietese: the language in these poems corresponds most perfectly to what Nekrasov would later describe as that “living,” “left alive” (in contrast to the vast tracts of language rendered

90 Sukhotin, “Detskoe-vzrosloe…”
92 At the close of “Kstati,” Nekrasov presented a selection of poems that in his view demonstrate the “wordplay” that made his work amenable to children’s publishing. Paket 218-244.
93 Nekrasov described his task as poet “to dig out [language], heave away the debris and see whether anyone’s left alive, maybe among the interjections.” “Obiasnitel’nai a zapiska,” Paket, 300.
contentless – and seemingly lifeless – by Soviet usage). Some of the poems evoke the lyric speaker’s own childhood, as indicated by mentions of “mama,” “papa,” and in the Deep Woods story – the family dacha in Malakhovka. In his own way, then, Nekrasov did adhere to some notion of “children’s poetry” as distinct from poetry meant exclusively for adults; like Oleg Grigoriev, it would seem that he might be friendlier to the concept of vzroslaia spetsifika. This did not keep Nekrasov from including almost all of these poems in a much larger samizdat collection of his work compiled in the 1980s, Oatmeal [Gerkules], intended for an adult audience.

In what follows, I will discuss a number of Nekrasov’s poems with attention to specific manifestations of the childlike aesthetic. Some of the poems were included in the children’s book manuscript and/or published as children’s poems, but all of them were included in “adult” collections compiled and/or published by Nekrasov in the post-Soviet period – in other words, none of these poems were considered exclusively “for children” by the author. At the same time, the poems he selected as suitable for children’s publications were often slightly adapted for that purpose from the “adult” originals.

94 Another metaphorical description of the “recovery” of language makes clearer Nekrasov’s position that speech/poetry has to recover like a sick person after a long illness: “Maybe my movement was artificial, maybe it was not very productive, but it definitely cast off that sticky filth, maybe the poems crawled out awkwardly, maybe they hadn’t fully shaken it off, but they crawled out all the same and were on their own – a few words that were alive and could go on living.” Interview with Irina Vrubel’-Golubkina. “Vsevolod Nekrasov: ‘Iskusstvo – eto konkurs produktov,’ Zerkalo no. 24 (2004), 112.

95 In the Kucherskaya interview, Nekrasov does comment on vzroslaia spetsifika, saying that there used to be perfectly good poetry for children before there was “child-specificity” – that this poetry turned out to be good for children as a happy accident, as long as various kinds of “adult specificity” didn’t get in the way of it being good.
We can begin with repetition, a key device for Nekrasov, who uses it even more insistently and often than Kholin to push words and phrases to the limit of their meaning – making them strange and questioning their fixed essence. In some poems, repetition reveals the emptiness of Soviet (and post-Soviet) official language; in poems treating the contemporary vernacular, repetition can do similar work (poking fun at banal commonplaces), but it can also evoke “authentic intonations,” a key element in Nekrasov’s poetics, closely connected to his understanding of “living speech.” In a 1974 article, Nekrasov wrote admiringly of Kharms that the latter was able to use “the seemingly mechanical, automatic device of repetition” to reveal the “initial, foundational character of the human impulse and human interest, the human presence in the work of art,” citing the children’s poem “Petka ran along the road…” [Begal Pet’ka po doroge…], with its driving rhythm and repetitions effectively conjuring a little hellion running around:

Бегал Петья по дороге,
По дороге,
По панели,
Бегал Петья по панели,
И кричал он
ГА-РА-RAR! […]

[Petka ran along the road/Along the road/Along the sidewalk/Petka ran along the sidewalk/And he bellowed/GA-RA-RAR! ]

Another kind of repetition acknowledges the device’s ability to make words and concepts abstract, while foregrounding an opposite effect: the evocation of fully concrete phenomena in their visual and spatial dimensions. The following poem was published both in a 1961 samizdat collection and included in Nekrasov’s Weather manuscript:

The repetition of the imperfective present-tense verb vykhodit produces a distinct image of slowly waning autumn light: going-going-gone – but there’s still a sliver of light, the final objection: net (not gone yet). Elsewhere in Nekrasov’s work, the evocation is even more concrete, as in the poem “Christmas trees/Christmas trees (…one two three four
five),” which puts the reader in the position of a person counting individual trees.\(^9^8\)

Repetition of this variety necessarily activates the visual aspect of the poem as it appears on the page, a fact Nekrasov was keenly aware of: “multiple repetitions inevitably lead out into the visual: one way or another, you’re going to have to figure it out on the page.”\(^9^9\) The ongoing search for concreteness of form thus led Nekrasov to even more radical formal solutions, entering the realm of visual poetry and sound poetry. In the following poem (never selected as a children’s poem), the word at the window is the rain tapping:

\[
/ \ldots / \\
/дождь \\
кто же еще/
\]

[…/rain/who else]\(^1^0^0\)

In the rain poem, the slashes should probably be read as parentheses (a commonplace of typewritten Russian texts), and so suggest a statement and an afterthought. A number of Nekrasov’s poems take this gesture further and employ footnotes as part of the text, taking “an opportunity for discourse to deny itself visually as well as verbally,” as Stewart writes about the literary footnote.\(^1^0^1\) Of course, even as footnotes can create

\(^9^8\) Thanks to Mikhail Sukhotin for pointing out this example. “Detskoe-vzrosloe…”


\(^1^0^0\) Nekrasov, Stikhi, 530. Nekrasov’s visual poems are among his most minimalist and have been treated as such in Gerald Janecek, “Minimalism in Contemporary Russian Poetry: Vsevolod Nekrasov and Others,” in The Slavonic and East European Review, vol. 70, no. 3 (July 1992), 401-419. Nekrasov’s visual poetry also bears comparison with the work of his respected contemporary, Gennady Aigi, and the comparison suggests what difference the childlike aesthetic makes in Nekrasov’s work. For more on Aigi, see Sarah Valentine, Witness and Transformation (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2015) and the block of articles in Russian Literature no. 79-80 (2016).

\(^1^0^1\) Stewart, Nonsense, 74.
nonsense, they can also suggest scholarly writing – an opposition with productive implications.

A “children’s” poem that engages similarly with the sonic, if not the visual dimension, is the “POEM ABOUT THUNDER” [STIKHI PRO GROM], published in the *Between Summer and Winter* collection:

СТИХИ ПРО ГРОМ

Гром ударил громко:
-- Гром! …

Гром,
Гром-гром –
Гром-гром-гром-гром –
Гром…

И сказали стекла:
- Дом!..

Дом-дом-дом –
Дом!

[The thunder thundered loudly:/Thunder!…/Thunder,/Thunder-thunder –
/Thunder-thunder-thunder-thunder – /Thunder…//And the windowpanes said:/House! …/House-house-house – /House!][102]

In this poem, the thunder sounds are answered by the glass rattling in the windows of the house – the poem has room to be subjectless, but it is equally easy to imagine a child speaker watching a thunderstorm and listening to the dialogue she imagines between the threatening storm and the brave house. The repetitions draw on the onomatopoeia of the Russian word for thunder to recreate thunder inside the poem; the nine repetitions seem

entirely justified within the plot of the poem. They also play with the idea that *dom*, the Russian word for “house,” could have an onomatopoeic dimension.

Experiments with the poem’s appearance on the page and “stage directions” regarding its sonic dimension implicitly link this poetry with the experiments of the historical avant-garde (even when the point of the poem is something as mundane as rain tapping at a window). Another avant-garde mainstay evident in Nekrasov’s work, and a key element of the childlike aesthetic, is zaum. Although relatively infrequently, Nekrasov’s poems can demonstrate phonetic, morphological and syntactic zaum (using Janecek’s categories). Even as he employs zaum, though, Nekrasov implicitly challenges the exalted and “difficult” orientation of some avant-garde artists through his insistence on using experimental form in order to convey ordinary everyday experience, or language, in an accessible way. The following poem about cross-country skiing combines visual poetry with sound-play bordering on zaum:

```plaintext
лыжи лыжи
лыжи лыжи

живы живы
живы живы

хоть куда
глаза глядят

tут туда
следы следят

след
в след
```

103 I have written elsewhere about the zaum element in Nekrasov’s 1980s macaronic (German-Russian) poems in the collection *Doiche Bukh*. See A. Morse, “*Doiche Bukh*: Some Observations on Multilingual Poetry,” *Kritika i Semiotika*, no.1 (2015), 351-363.
At first glance, this poem looks like it could have been published in one of the Futurists’ early collections, but the opening columns are meant to illustrate the tracks of cross-country skis [lyzhnik], and the onomatopoeic closing lines are likewise referentially meaningful rather than transsensical. In a later article on Kharms, Nekrasov again self-referentially praises the older poet’s judicious incorporation of zaum into real-life contexts: clearly, Nekrasov seeks for zaum to “recover its essential and primeval purpose, the impulse of childlike spontaneity” in his work as well. The folkloric phrase kuda glaza gliadiat, familiar from fairy tales, and the mostly regular alternating trochaic/iambic lines also make it unsurprising that Nekrasov marked this as a potential children’s poem.

A somewhat “meta” or conceptual childlike element in Nekrasov’s work is his use of conventional forms, including references to conventional styles or genres, but also elements of form like titles. Many of the poems selected for the Weather manuscript were given titles where previously they had none; the titles are often exaggeratedly

104 Nekrasov, Stikhi, 103. Translation by Ainsley Morse and Bela Shayevich.
105 Nekrasov, “Tezisy k dokladu…”
straightforward heralds of the poem’s content (see, for example, the “POEM ABOUT THUNDER” quoted above; in other redactions, the poem is untitled). But Nekrasov’s use of titles was not limited to poems marked as “children’s”; elsewhere, titles can stand in tension with the text of a poem, dictating a certain interpretation, contradicting content or inviting ironic distance. One early poem that consists entirely of jumbled-up commonplaces of Soviet economics is entitled “VERSE” [STIKHI]; another short poem consisting of two repeating past-tense verbs (naterpelsia/natrepalsia), written in response to Alexander Ginzburg’s arrest for samizdat activities, has the much longer title “POEM ABOUT CAUSES AND CONSEQUENCES” [STIKHI O PRICHINAKH I POSLEDSTVIIAKH].

The following early poem, entitled “COUNTING RHYME” [SCHITALOCHKA] (1961), subsequently appeared as the opening poem in Weather under the title “Counting Rhyme about Winter and Summer” [Schitalochka pro zimu i leto]:

зима лето
зима лето
зима лето

коча нету

лета зимы
лета зимы

лета
легче выносимы

зима лето
зима лето

на зиме
кончать нелепо

106 Nekrasov, Avtorskii samizdat, 443.
Using some of the conventional form of the children’s counting rhyme – even foregrounding the priority of rhythm over meaning characteristic of the genre – this poem cheekily turns the passing of time and the seasons into a game like “eeny-meeny-miny-moe.” Meanwhile, the lyric speaker interjects periodically with comments rendered in a more ambiguous tone. The lines “There’s no end,” “Summer’s easier to take” and “It’s absurd to stop on winter” sound like interruptions of the game: self-conscious and literal, the first two reflect on the semantic content of the repeating words, while the third interjection is self-conscious with regard to the writing or reciting of the poem itself. At the same time, these lines are linked to the repetitions of “summer – winter” and “winter – summer” through rhyme and meter, and as such are part of the counting rhyme. The final four lines of the poem pick up on and respond to the self-conscious autocommentary of the “absurd” line, effecting the end of the poem: “I’ll end it wherever I want!” These lines also hark back to, and challenge, the earlier line “there’s no end,” changing its orientation from the seasons of the year to the construction and declamation of the poem.

107 Nekrasov, Stikhi, 18.
108 Stewart writes: “As a signal for performance and as performances themselves, counting out rhymes are both fictions and the margins of other fictions. […] Counting out rhymes, tongue twisters, and the choruses of lullabies are what they are about.” Nonsense, 91.
The childlike aesthetic is ubiquitous, from the title, the repetitions, the circular structure and down to the incorrect stress on the verb “to end” [konchU as opposed to kOnchu]. Yet, this poem can also be read as an irreverent meditation on the repeating cycle of the seasons, as well as a quasi-conceptualist demonstration of the poet’s process. The poem is held together through the tension between the conventional form of the counting rhyme and the idiosyncratic voice of the lyric speaker, as well as that between an endlessly repeating sequence and the requirement that a poem end.\textsuperscript{109}

As was evident from the first poem quoted in this chapter (“Freedom is freedom”), puns are everywhere in Nekrasov’s work – Janecek calls him a “master paronymist.”\textsuperscript{110} The punning tendency is certainly another aspect of Nekrasov’s poetics tied to the childlike aesthetic; it also connects his work to early avant-garde experimenters like Khlebnikov, as well as “low genres” and “bad poetry.” Nekrasov’s puns tend to be full-fledged tropes, often signifying much more than mere sonic coincidence and constituting the main movement of a poem. The polysemantic words that make up the “turn” of many of his poems mean that there can often be a number of different readings of a single poem. Punning entails “a splitting of discourse into two simultaneous and disparate paths”; when a given discourse is organized around puns, as is often the case in Nekrasov’s work, the splitting of the ways can become a vast

\textsuperscript{109} Stewart calls another operation of nonsense “play with infinity”: “…play with infinity involves a transformation of another aspect of members’ expectations – their sense of events as characterized by distinguishable beginnings and endings.” \textit{Nonsense}, 116.

splintering of different possibilities. But this kind of indeterminacy was unpopular with the enforcers of official dogma, for whom certainty and clarity of meaning had ideological significance. In light of this fact, Nekrasov did occasionally take steps to make his “children’s” poems less indeterminate, even in cases where misunderstandings did not carry any concrete political implications. This is most strikingly demonstrated in a side-by-side comparison of the poems Nekrasov prepared for the children’s book manuscript. The following “adult” poem is part one of an untitled pair:

I.

da

cuda
 я знаю куда

а откуда
 откуда я знаю откуда

нет

откуда
 это я знаю откуда

а куда

откуда я знаю куда

[yes//where/I know where//but how/how do I know where///no//how/I am the one who knows how//but where/where do I know how from]^{112}

Although kuda and otkuda are question words, the poem deliberately invokes their conversational meaning as well – the absence of question marks adds to this indeterminacy. Thus the phrase “how should I know?” [otkuda ia znaiu] elides the spatial meaning of otkuda while simultaneously introducing the spatial element into an ordinary everyday phrase. This kind of tug-of-war between ordinary and figurative meaning is the essence of punning. Meanwhile, as is generally characteristic of Nekrasov’s “adult” poetry, the poem’s absence of punctuation, lack of capitalization and abundant space in between lines encourages a number of different readings and interpretations.

Tellingly, the version prepared for the Poems about All and Any Weather manuscript is different:

2.

Куда?
Откуда?

Да…

Куда –
Я знаю куда.

А откуда –

^{112} Nekrasov, Stikhi, 235; translation from I Live I See, 159. The second part of the poem (II.) reads: туда/туда///туда куда/оттуда/откуда///откуда я///откуда я/знаю
The words are essentially the same (only the initial “yes”/da is missing), but the added punctuation and contracted spacing makes a world of difference; we can recall Mayakovsky’s dictum “make sure that the naïve reader puts the pauses in the right places and thus interprets the words correctly,” from “How Verses are Made.”\(^\text{113}\) In this way, the indeterminacy has been significantly reduced. It is as if someone made an “authorized recording” of a poem that could otherwise be read and interpreted in a number of different ways; the punctuation marks function as cues designating different kinds of intonations and pauses.\(^\text{114}\) The remaining ambiguity is further curtailed by the fact that, in the Weather manuscript, this poem appears as part two of a poem entitled POEM ABOUT WATER [STIKHI PRO VODU], the first part of which ends with the lines “water/flowed” [Voda/tekla]. Thus the broad field of possible interpretations for the meanings of the “adult” version of the poem (which includes spatial and linguistic dimensions and could be both concrete and entirely abstract) becomes very narrow: the ‘where from/where to’ question is shown to apply to a concrete object (water) and its

\(^{113}\) Janecek, *The Look of Russian Literature*, 228.

\(^{114}\) Nekrasov’s own manner of reading his poems would make a fascinating subject for further research. Video recordings of readings from Nekrasov’s final years show him mumbling and expressionless, but an audio recording of the poet reading, made by Janecek in the mid-1980s, demonstrates a wide range of tones, intonations, volume and voice pitch.
movement through space. In this way, Nekrasov in effect acknowledges a “child
specificity” – it is just at the level of syntax and punctuation, rather than theme.

Nekrasov had little tolerance for the isms used to describe his work, but he mostly
tolerated “concretism,” with reference to none other than Kharms: “I think concretism is
more natural [than conceptualism] and makes more sense. The same thing Kharms was
talking about: you throw a word at the window and the glass breaks.” As we have seen,
in poems like “POEM ABOUT THUNDER,” the “concrete” aspects of Nekrasov’s
poetry are most evident in his exploitation of visual and sonic effects; we can see them
likewise in the use of repetition and word series. In other words, the concrete often
coincides with the childlike. The following 1973 poem, dedicated to the painter Mikhail
Roginsky, incorporates many of these devices, while simultaneously presenting a kind of
self-conscious ekphrasis:

Рогинскому

Дорогой
мой

Январь-то
это разве трамвай

Март
это трамвай

Прощай трамвай
и здравствуй
троллейбус

dи лайт
троллейбус

115 Interview with Vrubel’-Golubkina. Actually Kharms wrote that you throw a poem at
the window (see D. Kharms, “Iz zapisnykh knizhek (publ. Vl. Erl’)” Avrora, no.7 (1974),
78).
или асфальт
и троллейбус
и телевизор

Лифт
асфальт
троллейбус
и телевизор

пожалуйста
[to Roginsky]/My/friend//How can January/be tram//March/is tram//So long tram/and hello/trolley/elevator/trolley/or asphalt/and trolley/and television//Elevator/asphalt/trolley/and television///there you go]116

Rather unusually for Nekrasov, the poem addresses a specific listener, and the background to the poem is surely Roginsky’s poster-like, deceptively straightforward paintings of everyday household objects (cans, matches) and sketchier, more elusive landscapes (including a hazy portrait of a tram). In a poem that formally and semantically resembles many of the “nature-weather” poems discussed above, Nekrasov evokes an urban scene, only to play with the elements of its composition, however unlikely-seeming. January can’t be tram, but March is; enter the trolley, elevator, asphalt – but what is the proper order for these elements? Nekrasov seems to suggest to Roginsky that words can be used toward the same ends as the blocks of color or lines in his paintings – perhaps with even greater facility. But even as the words are used to block out a painted composition, they maintain their full-fledged status as bearers of “living speech,” from

116 Nekrasov, Stikhi, 186. Translation from I Live I See, 137-138.
the friendly address to the casually triumphant finish (“there you go”).

“My dear… (to Roginsky)” is a fine example of an “adult-specific” poem – in this case, a poem written to a specific adult that refers to a complex reality (Roginsky’s paintings) outside the poem – that nevertheless makes ample use of the devices of the childlike aesthetic. The address and closing are familiar and strengthened by the slightly silly hail and farewell to the tram and trolley [proshchai tramvai/i zdravstvui/trolleibus], as well as the absurdity of favorably comparing March to January in their relationship to public transportation. Furthermore, these machines are well-known characters from children’s literature, particularly the Soviet variety (remember Kholin’s trolley on “Peace Street”). The way these elements are repeated and shuffled around in the poem recalls children’s poetry as well, as do the moments of overt wordplay and soundplay (mart / tramvai, zdravstvui/trolleibus). Indeed, why wouldn’t a child like this poem? And yet, the poem is anything but “limited” in its aesthetic and philosophical scope, instead pointing toward a subtle and complex conversation about representation in art. Nekrasov’s fifty-year body of work contains many such examples of the childlike aesthetic at work in poems that are more often than not, “not only.”

Among the poems by Kholin discussed previously, only the final, late poem (“Reka teki”) demonstrated total indeterminacy of address and form – is it a children’s poem? An adult poem? In contrast, Nekrasov’s work is broadly indeterminate in this way, often distinguished only by place of publication. Like his admired Kharms, Nekrasov “couldn’t write badly” for children (though he goes further than Kharms in

117 For instance, the Lianozovo poets alone produced the following: Sapgir, Tramvai Tramvaich (1964), and Novye slova (1966), Nekrasov’s own 7 Mashin (1962), Kholin, Mashiny takie est’ (1963), Eto vse avtomobili (1965).
refusing most of the formal trappings of children’s literature). In this way, Nekrasov’s work exemplifies the most radical effect of the childlike aesthetic: to shake the foundations of generic boundaries, particularly rigid during Soviet times. At the same time, the childlike aesthetic does the same kind of work for him in “adult” work as for poets like Kholin, foregrounding childlike language and a naïve viewpoint toward greater immediacy of aesthetic impact.

In turning now to the work of two Leningrad poets, Leonid Aronzon and Oleg Grigoriev, the question inevitably arises: is there something particularly Muscovite about the work of Kholin and Nekrasov? Or about the manifestation of the childlike aesthetic in their work? Different critics, seduced by the irresistible binary, have tried to capture the essential aesthetic differences represented by the two cities. For instance, Kirill Medvedev has suggested that Moscow poetry reveals a sense of the exhaustion of language per se, of language having been discredited as a means of expression – against the Petersburg rejection of the profanity and vulgarity of Soviet language and literature.118 Kholin’s and Nekrasov’s poetry is certainly critical toward language – especially Soviet language! – but they throw themselves headfirst into that language and work with it as best they can. There is rarely any doubt regarding the raw material of their poetic practice, although some of their contemporaries and slightly younger followers would indeed call into question the very substance of words and capability to signify.119 The childlike aesthetic, meanwhile, pledges no allegiance to cities. As we shall see, true to its tendency to destabilize fixed meanings and blur boundaries, the childlike aesthetic

118 Medvedev, “‘…Chtob iskusstvo bylo nashim…”
119 Consider the Moscow Conceptualists, a major artistic phenomenon of the 1980s that grew out of the “Lianozovo school” of visual art and poetry.
appears virtually unchanged in the work of the Leningrad poets – even when their poetics otherwise diverge from what we have seen in Kholin and Nekrasov.
In turning from Moscow poets to Leningrad poets, the question of the division by city arises again. The notion of two distinctive poetic styles attached to Russia’s two capital cities remains fraught and, I argue, is called into question by the poetics here under discussion. Yet, Moscow and Leningrad did demonstrate objective differences in literary byt, both at the official, institutional level – in how feasible it was to participate in official literary life, as a children’s writer or otherwise – and at the unofficial level – in how the unofficial literary communities were organized and functioned. As we have seen, the phenomenon of the avant-garde childlike aesthetic began with the prerevolutionary Futurists in St. Petersburg/Petrograd; that city, already known as Leningrad, also saw the birth of Soviet children’s literature and hosted its development until the upheaval of the 1930s. Although the bulk of the children’s literature industry moved to Moscow after the war, the childlike aesthetic retained a relevant presence in

1 “In order to express it all/I bang my fist against the bowl.” From the long poem “Futbol,” in Oleg Grigor’ev, Ptitsa v kletke (St. Petersburg: Izd-vo Ivana Limbakha, 1997), 240.

2 For instance, Leningrad unofficial poets tended more to gather in public spaces, beginning with “Malaya Sadovaya,” the loose collective of experimental and absurdist poets known for hanging around that side-street off Nevsky Prospekt in downtown Leningrad, and later the Café Saigon, also on Nevsky Prospekt. For more, see Kuz’minkii, “Strana Saigonia” (149-153) and “Malaia Sadovaia” (194-203) in Antologiia u Goluboi laguny, vol. 4A; Iulia Valieva, Sumerki Saigona (St. Petersburg: Samizdat, 2009).
Leningrad poetry, even through the long agony of the Terror, the Second World War and the 1941-1944 Siege.

Only fairly recently, poetry has come to light that was written during the Siege by some of its starving residents; as slightly younger men, these writers had been friendly with the OBERIU poets. One of them, Gennadii Gor, survived the Siege and went on to become a well-regarded science fiction writer and member of the Writers’ Union. Only after his death did his Siege-era poetry come to light, with its formal and semantic features reminiscent of OBERIU poetics, particularly that of Alexander Vvedensky (limited lexicon, minimal punctuation and fractured syntax):

Здесь лошадь смеялась и время скакало.
Река входила в дома.
Здесь пapa был мамой,
А мама мычала.
Вдруг дворник выходит,
Налево идет.
Дрова он несет.
Он время толкает ногой,
Он годы пинает
И спящих бросает в окно.
Мужчины сидят
И мыло едят,
И невскую воду пьют,
Заедая травою.
И девушка мочится стоя
Там, где недавно гуляла.
Там, где ходит пустая весна,
Там, где бродит весна.
Июнь 1942

[Here the horse was laughing and time was a-galloping./The river went into the homes./Here papa was mama,/And mama was mooing./All at once came the yard-keeper./Goes to the left./Carries firewood./Shoving a time with his foot,/Kicking the years/And throwing the sleepers out the window./The men sit/And eat soap,/And drink Neva water,/Washing it down with grass./And a girl pees

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3 Gennadii Gor, Krasnaia kaplia v snegu (Moscow: Gileia, 2012), 27.
standing up/Where she recently strolled./Where empty spring stalks,/Where spring wanders. June 1942]

Although the speaker is not explicitly identified as a child, the child’s-eye view suggested renders the horrors of the Siege (many of the poems, for instance, explicitly treat cannibalism) devastatingly immediate and physical, as in “The men sit/And eat soap./And drink Neva water,/Washing it down with grass.” Other childlike elements are evident in the rollicking, nursery-rhyme-like meter of many of his poems, the simple and repetitive lexicon, as well as the markedly “domestic” cast of characters (“mama” and “papa” feature in many of the poems, as well as “grandma,” “mother-in-law” and “children”). The absurd and nonsensical elements then create a tension by distancing the reader from the brutal reality depicted, as in the jolly but absurd opening: “Here the horse was laughing and time was a-galloping.” Perhaps the most powerful lines are those that express horror in seemingly absurd terms: “Here papa was mama,/And mama was mooing,” nonsensical propositions that, however, in context become upsettingly concrete.

Gor’s highly experimental Siege-era poems were a well-kept secret until their recent publication; up to his death in 1985, he was a respected Soviet writer and


5 The logic-defying, unbelievable physical realities of the Siege – including gender reversals of this type – have been attested by eyewitnesses and analyzed by scholars. See, in particular, Lidia Ginzburg, Zapiski blokadnogo cheloveka (in Prokhodiaschchie kharakterey (Moscow: Novoe Izd-vo, 2011), 311-422), and Irina Sandomirskaiia, Blokada v slove (Moscow: NLO, 2013), especially “Gorod golod: distroficheskoe pis’mo i ego ‘gladkii’ sub’ekt,” 173-264.
apparently did not share his poetry with anyone. Despite the tremendous loss of life during the war, Thaw-era Leningrad had plenty of literary figures who had witnessed and participated in the lively experiments of the early Soviet period, including other OBERIU comrades like Igor Bakhterev, Vladimir Sterligov and Andrey Egunov, the critic Lydia Ginzburg, the modernist legend Anna Akhmatova, and many others. Even as these living relics of pre-war literature provided a valuable link to seemingly lost traditions, they also sometimes cast a long shadow over the new generation of writers, born during or just after the war.

The idea of Petersburg being suffused with history and “culture” (meaning a somewhat idiosyncratic selection of Russian and Western European “high culture” literature and art) has been absorbed and self-consciously appropriated by generations of the city’s writers – hence the “Petersburg line” Medvedev refers to. Viktor Krivulin, a poet of the self-described “Petersburg School” (which included poets like Andrei Mironov, Elena Shvarts and Sergei Stratanovsky) provides a textbook demonstration of this mentality: “My youth, as far as I can remember, was spent in the Hermitage… We would get together there, drink to the Tauride Venus, in the Greek Hall [laughs] and have these wonderful conversations about how to build the new man, how one should live… In Moscow they’d go to, like, the Sanduny [bathhouses – AM], while we’d go to the

6 For more on Gor, see Polina Barskova, “V gorod vkhodit smert’” in Seans no.10 (27 January 2015) and the introduction to Written in the Dark (9-23); for a linguistic-psychological approach to Siege poetics, see Sandomirskaia, Blokada v slove, 173-264.

7 Medvedev, “…Chtob iskusstvo bylo nashim…”
Hermitage… That’s a qualitative difference, after all.”

Krivulin’s slightly off-color jibe at the Muscovites is characteristic of some writers’ self-conscious identification with the Petersburg myth and its corollary, the rivalry with Moscow.

For many post-war Leningrad writers, the modernist sentiment described by Osip Mandelstam as “longing for world culture” combined with a more local sense of longing for the literary tradition repressed by Stalinism in the 1930s. This tradition was first and foremost associated with the beauty, intellectualism and formal complexity of the work of repressed poets like Akhmatova, Nikolai Gumilev, Mikhail Kuzmin and Osip Mandelstam, but for some incorporated lesser-known writers like the OBERIU poets as well. Their significance for the literary tradition became more broadly acknowledged in the later 1960s, after lost texts began circulating in samizdat. The revelation of non-children’s texts by Vvedensky and Kharms, with their critique of language and logic, was one of many lost treasures recuperated in the years after Stalin’s death and during the Thaw.

The OBERIU texts also featured many manifestations of the childlike aesthetic. This aesthetic intersects in an interesting way with the Petersburg myth, insofar as it proffers demonstrative naïveté (toward much-vaunted literary tradition, among other things) and, through the alogical and absurd, a break with historical linearity and continuity. Yet, the unavoidable pathos of time is still present: Vvedensky famously

9 Krivulin says of his milieu that they consciously rejected Akhmatova’s pathos in favor of the edgier OBERIU aesthetic. Ibid.

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declared that his main three preoccupations were “time, God and death.” 10 Childlike questions and poetic forms offered a kind of suspension of disbelief, a way of approaching topics otherwise impossibly weighty, finding new ways for language to be adequate to its subject. And the primitivist and intentionally anti-professional, “bad” esthetic of the OBERIU poets’ work was also prized and emulated by some unofficial writers for its vaunted independence from official writing (with its cult of the professional, card-carrying Author). 11

Until his untimely demise, for most of Vvedensky’s writing life “time, God and death” were primarily philosophical preoccupations; meanwhile, for Gor, the break with history and the emptying-out of time’s meaningfulness can be understood as palpably rooted in his real surroundings. Gor’s poem anthropomorphizes ‘time,’ making it gallop alongside a giggling horse, and then treats it as an object of disdain, shoved aside, its ‘years’ kicked by a listless janitor. The childlike aesthetic in his poems thus makes it possible, as in Vvedensky, to say unsayable things, but also reflects historical trauma: victims of the Siege sometimes lost not only the ability to speak as adults, but even as people (“mama was mooing”). In Gor’s poems, the childlike aesthetic can both create a sense of the grotesque – the bouncy form of the nursery rhyme enclosing images of naked horror – and convey the strange immediacy of the experience, unalleviated by the familiar forms of adult poetry.


11 See Savitskii, Andegraund, 79, and Medvedev, “‘Chtob iskusstvo bylo nashim…’”
The childlike aesthetic in Gor’s ‘lost’ Siege-era poems, touched on briefly here, illustrates the continuity of this aesthetic over the years between the OBERIU poets’ demise and the post-Stalin period. The following studies, which are concerned with the postwar period, I will continue to explore the uses and meanings of the childlike aesthetic in the children’s and adult work of two poets, roughly contemporaries, whose work spans the 1960s-70s. Leonid Aronzon (1939-1970) wrote from the late 1950s until his death in 1970; scholars date his mature work from 1964. Although present in the literary and artistic scene from the mid-1960s, Oleg Grigoriev (1943-1992) is associated more with the 1970s and 80s. Unlike Kholin and Nekrasov, who knew each other and belonged to the same circle for a time, Aronzon and Grigoriev were not close associates, and their poetics are quite distinct. I have been unable to document that they met, although the Leningrad literary scene in the 1960s would have afforded them opportunities to do so. It should be said that other critics have linked the two poets before me; although these links have been emotional (Ponizovsky) and vague (Yurev, Shubinsky), some aesthetic connection has been acknowledged.

12 Several scholars of Aronzon, including Aleksandr Stepanov and Elena Shvarts, have identified the poem “Poslanie v lechebnitsu” (April 1964) as a turning point in Aronzon’s work. See Aronzon, Sobranie proizvedenii (St. Petersburg: Izd-vo Ivana Limbakha, 2006), vol.1, 63-64.

13 Ponizovsky links Grigoriev with Aronzon, saying that they (along with Evgenii Mikhnov) are, for him, the three most important dead poets. Iur’ev and Shubinsky also both refer to a poetic kinship between Aronzon and Grigoriev (Shubinsky in “Ochen’ khotelos’ by obradovat’sia” in Oleg Grigor’ev, Stikhi. Risunki (St. Petersburg: Notabene, 1994), 232, and Iur’ev in Oleg Grigor’ev, Dvustishiia, chetverostishiia i mnogostishiia (St. Petersburg/Frankfurt: Kamera khraneniiia, 1993), 115.

14 Both Aronzon and Grigoriev were closer to artistic circles than literary ones; Aronzon’s best friend was the painter Evgenii Mikhnov-Voitenko, and Grigoriev studied painting at the State Art School before being kicked out for formalism.
Aronzon wrote a fair number of children’s poems (relative to his small body of work), but only managed to have a few published in journals and children’s literature almanacs during his lifetime; he also worked as a screenwriter for documentary films. Grigoriev, meanwhile, was highly regarded as a children’s writer, but the circumstances of his life were such that he published only three children’s books in his lifetime (along with many more smaller-scale journal publications).¹⁵ Unlike Nekrasov and Kholin, neither poet left behind much auto-commentary regarding their work in children’s literature. Aronzon’s children’s work has been mostly ignored by critics and scholars; Grigoriev’s children’s work has been widely assumed to be indistinguishable from his adult poetry. Neither Aronzon nor Grigoriev had any “adult” work published in the Soviet Union until perestroika.¹⁶

Writers of this generation, born in the 1930s and 40s, had been “raised” on a combination of contemporary Soviet poetry and recuperated avant-garde and Silver Age authors (after 1953). Leningrad in the early 1960s was abuzz with literary activity. Despite official strictures, much of it unfolded in public space: the café “Malaya Sadovaya” (and later, “Saigon”) was a gathering-place for artistically-inclined people of all stripes.¹⁷ Although publication was restricted, experimental writers still had

¹⁵ The same issues of the almanac Druzhba in which Aronzon’s two children’s publications were published (in 1967, three poems, and 1969, one poem), also featured children’s poems by Grigoriev, prior to his book-length publications.

¹⁶ There was a flurry of perestroika-era publications of both poets. For more publication information, see the following studies.

¹⁷ See Valieva, Sumerki Saigona; also see Zdravomyslova for an attempt to read these café-gathering spaces as “public sphere” after Habermas. Elena Zdravomyslova, “Leningrad’s Saigon: A Space of Negative Freedom,” Russian Studies in History, vol. 50, no. 1, (Summer 2011), 19-43.
opportunities to read their work to audiences – in the cafés, on the sidewalk and sometimes in semi-official settings.\textsuperscript{18} The next, slightly younger generation of Leningrad poets would more demonstratively reject official Soviet poetics in favor of a narrower, more selective canon, composed of repressed Russian authors, foreign literature and each other. We can probably point to increased restrictions on public activity as related to the tenor of poetic experiment in this later period.

Per Medvedev’s rough definition, poetic innovation in Leningrad tended to look back to forms that were perceived as insufficiently exploited/developed, cut short before full development, “for reasons distant from art.”\textsuperscript{19} Given the methodical nature of the pre-war repressions, this impulse was necessarily not limited to one city. Moscow-based Vsevolod Nekrasov used a survival metaphor to describe his poetic practice, referring to the minimal words and half-words that, once dug out of the ruins created by the Soviet experiment, might be capable of meaning something straightforward and sincere. In terms strikingly familiar to Nekrasov’s, the critic Valery Shubinsky posits that in Leningrad, poets also sought out usable bits from the wreckage, but this was the wreckage of literature rather than language per se. And the survivors were not minimal elements left miraculously untouched by the tank-treads of history, but rather out-dated and hackneyed literary castaways: “Banalities, cheap prettiness, ‘shop-language’

\textsuperscript{18} See the highly entertaining, though scathing review of a public reading by Aronzon and Vladimir Erl in B. Bel’tiukov, “Kogda Apollon netrebovatelen,” \textit{Smena}, 15 February 1965. Also Kuzminsky’s account of the “Kafe poetov” and other venues, nominally supported by official organizations like the Komsomol, in Kuz’minskii and Kovalev, \textit{Antologiia u Goluboi laguny}, vol. 4A, 149.

\textsuperscript{19} “po prichinam, dalekim ot isskustva”: Vladimir Erl’s laconic phrase, used to describe the end-date (1931) of the OBERIU group’s existence. \textit{S kem vy, mastera toi kul’tury?} (St. Petersburg: Iulukka, 2011), 31.
[galantereinii iazyk] (L. Ginzburg) and various kinds of cliché were usable not because they retained their initial, lofty meanings. As if! But if some of these worn-out scraps survived the fire that destroyed all of the complex and refined tools of art, who knows, maybe they might be capable anew of meaning something.”

Shubinsky’s observation can be applied to Aronzon’s peculiar brand of neoclassicism, as in the following poem dated to summer, 1969:

Вокруг лежащая природа
метафорической была:
стояло дерево — урода,
в нем птица, Господи, жила.
Когда же птица умерла,
собралась уйма тут народа:
— "Пошли летать вокруг огорода!"
Пошли летать вокруг огорода,
летали, прыгали, а что?
На то и вечер благородный,
сирень и бабочки на то!

[The nature lying all around/was metaphorical:/there stood a tree – a monsteree,/and God, there was a bird living in it./But when the bird died,/a ton of people gathered here:/ “Let’s go fly around the kitchen garden!”/They went to fly around the kitchen garden,/they flew, they leapt, so what?/That was what the noble evening was for,/for that the lilacs and the butterflies!]

The poem is in a pastoral mode and uses with hyperbolic demonstrativeness commonplaces recalling early nineteenth-century “light poetry” (lilacs, butterflies, a stunted narrative of a bird living in a tree and its funeral). The poem cannot, however, be called a parody of that earlier poetry, because its references to it are too minimal and too overtly distorted. The phrasing of the opening line is noticeably odd (the word vokrug used in a non-customary [slightly “off”] way is characteristic for Aronzon’s mature

20 Valerii Shubinskii, “Poetika Leonida Aronzona (Tezisy),” http://www.newkamera.de/aronzon/aronzon_03.html [accessed 20 December 2015]
21 Leonid Aronzon, Sobranie proizvedenii (henceforth - SP), vol. 1, 184.
poetry), even before the second line’s metapoetic suggestion that the nature in which the poem plays out is metaphorical.

The lyric speaker is distanced from the goings-on in the poem by many metapoetic elements: its location is unclear, since the opening lines suggest an omniscient narrator, but the indexical *tut* in the sixth line inserts the speaker into the action. The closing lines also constitute something like stage directions addressed to the poet. Other points of disconnect include the traditional words of light poetry interspersed with words that would never be found in light poetry, such as *uima* and *ogorod*. The stability of the lyric speaker is further undermined by the introduction of other voices, in the quoted “Let’s go fly around the garden!” – not to mention the absurdity that frequently intervenes in the “narrative,” wherein the bird is introduced only to die, and the funeral party goes off flying and leaping around the kitchen garden. In these respects, the poem recalls Zina V.’s tale of the bear related in Kruchënykh’s co-authored *Porosiata*, discussed in the second chapter. Aronzon’s poem is hyperbolically “childlike” in its ineptitude, the absurd inventiveness of plot and lexicon, but also in its relationship to literary tradition. That is, Aronzon evokes the child without attempting to embody one: while a child might have come up with a silly story about a bird who dies, we do not expect her to be playing with the conventions of Romantic poetry.

The poetry of Oleg Grigoriev also makes use of seemingly worn-out forms. The title of one posthumous collection, *Two-line, Four-line and Multiple-line Poems* [*Dvustishiia, chetverostishiia i mnogostishiia*], demonstrates the poet’s preference for miniatures; with ubiquitous rhyme and simple diction, his poetry looks and reads like
children’s poetry. In no small part because of the simplicity of its form, some of this poetry crossed the line into anonymous “urban folklore” (particularly the “kid-shocker” [детская страшилка] genre). As such the poems were entirely dissociated from their author (as a children’s writer or otherwise) and often distorted in various ways. But children’s and folkloric forms are known for their constancy more than for getting tired, i.e. requiring deautomatization, in the same way as literary forms like the elegy or love sonnet.

In his eulogy for Grigoriev, Genrikh Sapgir recalls meeting the younger poet for the first time in Lianozovo, outside Moscow: “As a poet Oleg Grigoriev is closest to us, the Lianozovo poets.” Grigoriev can be seen as having in common with the “Moscow line” a tendency to poetry that does not directly refer to the preceding literary tradition or depend on literary references to be understood (although many of his poems do yield multiple layers of nuanced readings), but his relationship to language is more curious than fraught. Both Grigoriev’s children’s and “adult” poetry are very accessible, though the occasionally violent and debauched content of the adult poetry can set it starkly apart thematically. But many of Grigoriev’s poems defy categorization by intended age-group:

Люди куда-то стоят —
прям, потом назад,
В подворотню, сквозь дом,
В угол и снова кругом.

Мы проверили с другом:
Ни лавки, ни продавца.
Люди просто стоят друг за другом

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22 Many of his poems also take the form of “school genres” like the riddle, the arithmetic problem and the composition.

Без начала и без конца.24

[People are standing in line -- /first moving straight ahead, then behind,/Into an archway, through the courtyard,/Toward the corner and then around again./My friend and I checked:/Neither store nor seller./People are just standing one after the other/Without beginning or end.]

The poem is written in transparent language, with regular rhyme and an unchallenging three-stress dol’nik. It features a typically Grigorievan economy of diction (in eight lines, four words repeat at least twice). It is easy to hear the poetic speaker as a child: the wondering intonation, the investigative impulse and the fact that a friend is brought along all evoke the childlike. The situation, however, is that of an endless line that leads nowhere, in which countless people stand waiting. And this situation is conveyed elliptically – the word “line” is not in the poem, and it doesn’t need to be, because the peculiar circumstances of Soviet life enabled the verb “to stand” to grow a directional meaning. Of course, the childlike speaker also knows what a line is, but the meaning of a mysterious line that goes nowhere forever might be different for adult and child readers of the poem.25

Leaving aside their surface commonalities (unofficial poets employed in Soviet children’s literature), bringing Aronzon and Grigoriev together is both an obvious and a curious choice. The poets share a similarly mythologized space in the hearts and minds of readers and critics alike.26 Together, their mythic presence covers the whole late Soviet

24 Grigor’ev, Ptitsa, 222.
25 With a nod to how rooted much of Grigoriev’s work is in its specific time and place, Mikhail Yasnov’s introductory article to Ptitsa v kletke is entitled “In the Wake of the Departing Era” [Vosled ukhodiashchei epokhe]. Ptitsa, 7-19.
26 Another interesting point of contact for the poets was visual art: Grigoriev studied in art school until he was ejected for “formalism,” and Aronzon’s poetry manuscripts abound in drawings and sketches. They were also associated posthumously: “Kamera
period in Leningrad: Aronzon’s first poetic efforts come in the late 1950s, Grigoriev’s first children’s book, *Weirdos [Chudaki]* (1971), was published just after Aronzon’s death, and Grigoriev himself died along with the Soviet experiment, in 1992. Aronzon’s death had also been interpreted as “the end of an era,” seen as heralding the close of the Thaw period; Grigoriev has in the popular memory become a martyr of the dreary and hopeless years when “everything was forever,” the “untimely era.” Both writers posthumously became the center of cults of memory that to this day condition the reception of their work.

Even as the poets have fit into a traditional biographical model of the poet-martyr (arguably a specialty of Petersburg in particular), the childlike aesthetic in the two poets’ work has proved to be something of a stumbling block on the road to their canonization. On the one hand, Aronzon and Grigoriev both wrote themselves into the illustrious OBERIU tradition, more successfully than some of their contemporaries. On the other hand, the strange, naïve and simple qualities of their work – qualities that have everything to do with the childlike aesthetic – have prevented them from being taken seriously as lyric poets (this is particularly true of Grigoriev who, like Kharms, is often reductively associated with exclusively “ironic” miniatures). In what follows, I take both poets

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khraneniia,” a St. Petersburg publisher, included both of them in a very small series of early 1990s poetry publications.


28 Aronzon’s hermetic lifestyle and early death meant that his poems were read as emblematic of productive creative isolation and prophetic of his untimely death. Likewise, Grigoriev’s poems have been read as embodying the tension between his self-destructive transient lifestyle and his childlike innocence and surprising erudition.
seriously: I examine Aronzon’s and Grigoriev’s poetry written for children and adults, elucidating the childlike aesthetic that suffuses their work and showing its remarkable function.

I. Leonid Aronzon

A поэзия, прости господи, должна быть глуповата.
Alexander Pushkin

Leonid Aronzon is, of the poets examined in this dissertation, the most obviously engaged with the literary tradition and the most formally traditional (recall the poem quoted in the introduction to this study). Although some of his work is markedly experimental (see the palindrome poem to follow), much of Aronzon’s mature poetry is written in rhyming verse, and often in strict forms like the sonnet. The childlike aesthetic in Aronzon’s work is thus less evident in the form of his poetry, and more in the naively estranged position of the lyric speaker with regard to lexicon, grammar and mood – and in its striking instability. Writing on the poetry of the 1990s, Ilya Kukulin refers to the “childlike, weak, bewildered [poetic] ‘I’” as a legacy reaching back to poets like Aronzon, the Lianozovo poets and their OBERIU predecessors. In his assessment, 

30 In her discussion of unofficial late-Soviet lyric poetry, Olga Sedakova points out the distinction between the “traditional” [traditionnyi] and “restorative/conservative” [restavratorskii] orientation, claiming that 1970s unofficial lyric favored the former. Citing T.S. Eliot, she says that true innovation can only emerge out of an awareness of tradition, and that poets were not so much trying to return to a lost paradise as to revive the productive relationship with tradition that had been negated by the eternal present of socialist realism. It should also be mentioned that Sedakova is herself quite traditional in this sense, and that she deeply admired Aronzon. “Muzyka glukhogo vremen (russkaia lirika 70-kh godov),” first published in Vestnik novoi literatury, no. 2 (1990), 257-265.
childlike features paradoxically render a lyric speaker more sincere and ultimately more responsible for its utterance – in contrast to an "adult," ready-made and firmly fixed poetic "I," whose position was seen as deadening and inherently ideologized. While Aronzon’s work demonstrates a number of childlike elements familiar from the avant-garde repertoire as discussed, it is primarily the naïve lyric subject that marks his work as childlike.

Aronzon’s younger years were spent experimenting with a fairly wide range of poetic circles, including the loose collective of “Malaya Sadovaya” and Leningrad’s café culture; a brief but intense friendship with Joseph Brodsky, to whom he would later be contrasted; and ultimately a close-knit group of a few friends and fellow poets, self-consciously evocative of the “Pushkin Pléiade” in their tendency to address poetic epistles and epigrams to one another. Following their predecessors in the early nineteenth century, Aronzon and his friends cultivated a domestic aesthetic space characterized by an Arzamasian “devotion to all manner of jokes, impertinence, erotica,

33 Aronzon’s later 1960s poems regularly feature his wife Rita (Margarita Purishinskaia), the poet Aleksandr Al’tshuler and the painter Evgenii Mikhnov-Voitenko, along with a handful of other addressees. For more on the Arzamas group friend relations and the literary epistle, see Todd, “Familiar Associations,” in Fiction and Society in the Age of Pushkin, 55-72, and his The Familiar Letter.
impenetrably obscure allusions, intimate and inconsequential genres.”

References to sex, drug use and music in the poetry (as well as chronological coincidence) have led some scholars to liken Aronzon to the American Beat poets, but the attention to poetic form and self-consciously old-fashioned literariness of the “domestic epistle” genre are rather more evocative of the previous century.

Like many of his contemporaries who came of age as poets in the early 1960s, Aronzon initially strove for wider acclaim as a writer, including in the world of official literature. In his lifetime, though, his official publications included only a few children’s poems and a series of documentary screenplays. A larger collection of previously unpublished poems written for children, Who Dreams What [Komu chto snitsia] came out in a children’s book edition in 2011. Like many of his predecessors and contemporaries, Aronzon seems to have written children’s literature mainly with a view to financial compensation; the children’s poems have little in common with his other work.

Aronzon’s early death (in 1970, at the age of thirty-one) meant he did not live to see the relatively substantial samizdat (and tamizdat) publications of his work, organized

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34 Peschio, The Poetics of Impudence, 6. Peschio’s fascinating analysis of literary shalost’ is deeply rooted in the early nineteenth-century social and political context, yet seems strikingly relevant to the subversively innovative tendency in unofficial/underground Soviet literature.

35 See Thomas Epstein, “Notes on Aronzon,” Wiener Slavistischer Almanach 62 (2008), 42. Epstein also refers to Aronzon’s translator Richard McKane, who on the jacket of Sobranie proizvedenii (vol. 2) says: “I cannot think of a more representative poet for the 1960s in any language than Leonid Aronzon.”

36 Aronzon’s friend Irena Orlova recounts his frustrated efforts at official recognition, frequent appearances in public and some of her own futile attempts to get his work published through influential literary figures. See her interview with Ilja Kukuj, http://www.colta.ru/articles/literature/3348 [27 May 2014]

37 Leonid Aronzon, Komu chto snitsia i drugie interesnye sluchai, illustrations by A. Florenskaya (Moscow: OGI, 2011).
by his widow and friends in the later 1970s, when Leningrad’s samizdat literary journals rose to prominence.\(^{38}\) Readership of Aronzon and scholarly interest in his work to the present day have been colored by his untimely death and the cult of his memory that emerged in unofficial culture in the later 1970s.\(^ {39}\) Accordingly, the themes of death, religious quest and otherworldly beauty in his work are usually given an uncomplicatedly biographical interpretation. Despite his cult status and the generally positive assessment of his work by critics contemporary and present-day, he has yet to be fully incorporated into the canon of twentieth-century Russian poetry; this is due in no small part to the many paradoxes of his work.

Alongside the important influence of early nineteenth-century poetry (first and foremost Pushkin),\(^ {40}\) Russian avant-garde predecessors provide a crucial backdrop to Aronzon’s poetic experiments. The project of recovering and repurposing literary forms that might otherwise seem exhausted has been associated with the OBERIU poets;\(^ {41}\) Valery Shubinsky says that Aronzon is one of the first post-war lyric poets to take this

\(^{38}\) Selections published with commentaries following the 1975 Memorial Evening. See Kukuj’s preface to the Krivulin lecture. Ilja Kukuj, “‘Etot poet nepremenno voidet v istoriiu’: V. Krivulin ob Aronzone,” in Kriticheskaia massa no. 4 (2006), 57-59.

\(^{39}\) “Despite scholarly efforts launched in the 1980s, the question of what fundamental newness his poems brought to Russian poetry has yet to be clearly posed, and for this reason the cultural status of Aronzon’s work remains undetermined.” Ilya Kukulin, “Neopoznannyi kontrkulturshcik,” NLO no. 104 (2010), http://magazines.russ.ru/nlo/2010/104/ku38.html [20 December 2015]

\(^{40}\) Vladimir Erl’ writes that Aronzon introduced him to Pushkin, Derzhavin and Boratynsky. “Neskol’ko slov o Leonide Aronzone,” S kem vy..., 169.

\(^{41}\) Shubinsky writes that the classicism of the OBERIU poets was one that emerged “on the far side of the avant-garde” and that took the latter's experience into account – a “grand utopia that recreated the Golden Age of culture on the ruins of the Silver Age.” This utopia is connected to the transition in these poets' work “from the half-ironic, playful, ‘mask-like’ use of banal poetisms [compromised, as it were, by contemporary culture], to their serious appropriation.” Shubinskii, “Aronzon: rozhdenie kanona.”
approach and run with it. Studying literature at Leningrad State University, Aronzon wrote his thesis on Nikolai Zabolotsky under the direction of V. Alfonsov, a scholar of the avant-garde. Given Alfonsov’s area of specialization, and the fact that Zabolotsky was the only OBERIU poet sanctioned by official Soviet letters, we can assume that Aronzon knew Zabolotsky’s early work and probably had some familiarity with the unpublished work of his OBERIU colleagues.

Aronzon’s serious engagement with Velimir Khlebnikov may also have been furthered by working with Al’fonsov. The first in a 1966 cycle of palindrome-poems, “Az za!” is entitled “About Khlebnikov” [O Khlebnikove]:

Гром – герб, брег – морг.
Я ем змея.  
Веер Велимира долг как голод, а Рим – ил еврееv.

Рим и лев – Велимир,  
вол слов, вол слов, 
лов слов!  
Гот речи и чертог:

«То ломя лад, дал я молот, 
долом иду: язя уди, молод!»


43 For many Soviet-era poets lacking full access to the work of poets like Kharms and Vvedensky, Zabolotsky represented a sort of hazy window into OBERIU poetics – readers could extrapolate conclusions about the other poets’ work from his texts. The publication of Zabolotsky’s Stikhotvorenii a poemy in the “Biblioteka poeta” series in 1965, which included the “Stolbsy” cycle, is remembered as a significant event by contemporary poets. From author’s interview with Vladimir Erl’, July 2012.

44 In 1966, Al’fonsov published a small study of visuality in poetry, Slova i kraski (Leningrad: Sovetskii pisatel’, 1966) that included comparisons between Zabolotsky’s Stolbsy and work by Pavel Filonov, along with studies of Blok and Mayakovsky.
The palindrome form alone is enough to call to mind Khlebnikov, but Aronzon’s cycle engages throughout with the language and themes of his predecessor’s work (ancient cities and peoples, symbolic animals like the lion, the snake and the ox). At the same time, the poem rises above a mere exercise in virtuosity and reference, demonstrating recognizable Aronzonian moments such as the embedded self-quotation and the lounging, unstable lyric speaker. Aronzon’s poetic conversation with Khlebnikov continued into his last poems, such as the 1969 cycle “A Transcript of Conversations” [Zapis’ besed], in which the third and central poem is a eulogy for Khlebnikov.

Responses to Khlebnikov suffuse the whole cycle: the first line, “Chem ne ia etot sad, mokryi sad pod fonarem…?” responds directly to Khlebnikov’s “The Menagerie” [Zverinets] (1909/1911), and an earlier title for the whole cycle was “To Khlebnikov.”

Another potential title for the “Transcript” was “Nochnye besedy,” a reference to

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45 Aronzon, SP, vol.1, 115.
46 Thanks to Stephanie Sandler for pointing out the connection with Khlebnikov’s “Grob greb…” (1908).
47 Aronzon, SP, vol.1, 234-241. An earlier redaction of the cycle actually left out the dedication to Khlebnikov, allegedly because Aronzon had been accused of imitating him (ibid., 499).
48 Vladislav Kulakov, “V rai dopushchenyi zaochno,” Poezia kak fakt, 202. The final poem in the palindrome cycle is also called “Zoosad.”
the second part of Zabolotsky’s 1931 long poem, “The Triumph of Agriculture” (*I ptitsy peli nad dubravi* / *Nochnykh svideteli besed*), with its opposition of naively wise animals and the aggressively intellectual “new man.” 49 Although it remains unclear exactly what OBERIU texts and authors Aronzon knew, the affinity is obvious. Aronzon picks up on the dialogic mode of Zabolotsky’s poem, an OBERIU standby; he likewise cultivates a deliberately limited, highly charged lexicon, something particularly typical of Alexander Vvedensky. 50 Referring to the latter’s oft-cited phrase “respect the poverty of language,” Shubinsky notes that the “poverty” of Aronzon's language is not only that of his limited lexicon, but also a deliberate rejection of (unironically) supercilious poetic vocabulary: “[Aronzon] required that the word be not so much new or precise as capacious.” 51 Again, we can recall Kukulin’s discussion of the childlike lyric subject: “The ‘childlike’ is a metaphor for the way the intimate and personal details of the world carry an aura of the ‘personal’ and at the same time, the ‘unknown,’ ‘unknowable,’ that which fundamentally cannot be expressed in words.” 52 And Kulakov writes that Aronzon's perception of language was not systematic or rational but rather intuitivist, “organic,” deliberately non-instrumental: “poetry seems to emerge as it were inside of language, immanent to it.” 53 Thus Aronzon’s poetry reflects both the elementary, often alogical and yet inventive language characteristic of both Khlebnikov and the OBERIU.

49 Aronzon, SP, vol.1, 498.
50 See Erl’, *S kem vy…*, 172.
51 Shubinskii, “Poetika Leonida Aronzona.”
52 Kukulin, “Aktual’nyi russkii poet…” 277-278.
Because the form of Aronzon’s poetry is mostly classical, a straightforwardly childlike aesthetic is less obviously present in his work than in the work of the other poets discussed in this dissertation. Returning to the initial definition of this aesthetic, however, we find that Aronzon’s poetics reflects many of the devices associated with it: first and foremost, the naïve position of the lyric subject with regard to the world, to language, and to the act of making [poetry] (poeisis). The lyric subject proclaims its vulnerability and clumsiness loudly, in direct statements, and demonstratively, with markedly strange diction and seemingly alogical or absurd statements. This “new level of linguistic reflection” (which Vladislav Kulakov contrasts to more traditional lyrical reflection)\textsuperscript{54} connects Aronzon further to the OBERIU poets, with their “poetic critique of reason” and open questioning of language and its capabilities.\textsuperscript{55} Aronzon effects an estrangement of language through a naïve subject who can, in Kulakov’s formulation, “use unheard-of language to depict impossible, but obvious things.”\textsuperscript{56} In this way, the classical forms of Aronzon’s poetry are a crucial component in the defamiliarization performed by his poetry.

We can see this linguistic reflection in Aronzon’s tendency to comment on his writing process within the poems themselves,\textsuperscript{57} as well as the liberty he takes with the

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item Kulakov suggests that Aronzon’s attention to the linguistic dimension of lyric poetry was new in the otherwise conservative poetic environment of his time. Kulakov, “Krasovitskii i Aronzon: dva tsentral’nykh mifa novoi poezii,” \textit{Wiener Slavistischer Almanach} 62 (2008), 246-248.
\item Though Culler’s incorporation of the ritualistic dimension of lyric poetry – which foregrounds linguistic patterning – means that lyrical reflection \textit{is} linguistic reflection. Culler, \textit{Theory of the Lyric} 132-185.
\item Kulakov, “Krasovitskii i Aronzon,” 246.
\item Consider the final six lines of the sonnet “Ves’ den’ bessonnitsa…” (1968), which begin “Eschche shest’ strok, eshche kotorykh net,” in Aronzon, \textit{SP}, vol.1, 162. A decade
\end{enumerate}
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rules of standard Russian, particularly spatial constructions (for instance, an idiosyncratic use of the preposition *vokrug* as an adverb, as in “*Vokrug lezhashchaia priroda...*”; cf. “*Vokrug menia sidela deva*”); personal pronouns (discussed further below) and other points of ordinary usage, as well as his fondness for paradox (e.g., *Vysokim besslovesnym pen’em/Prikhodiat, vozvrashchais’, dni.*).\(^{58}\) A kind of formal paradox is also present in the frequent collision of strict poetic form and the nonstandard, even ungrammatical use of language. Aronzon’s poems definitely interrogate the language they are made of, even as they engage in a sophisticated way with the literary tradition – and yet the lyric speaker often appears awkward, naïve, and excessive in its use of language. The following poem is dated to 1963:

Не сю, иную тишину,
как конь, подпрыгивая к Богу,
хочу во всю ее длину
озвучить думами и слогом,
хочу я рано умереть
в надежде: может быть, воскресну,
не целиком, хотя бы на треть,
хотя бы на день, о день чудесный:
лесбийская струя воды
вращает мельницы пропеллер,
и деве чьи-то сны видны,
когда их медленно пропели,
о теле: солнце, сон, ручей!
соборы осени высоки,
когда я <в> трех озер осоке
лежу я Бога и ничей.

[Not this one, an other silence/like a steed bouncing toward God,/I wish to fill in

or so later this kind of game would be taken to further lengths by D.A. Prigov. Of course, lyric autocommentary has an illustrious history in the preceding Russian tradition; Alexander Pushkin’s *Eugene Onegin* is a major example.\(^{58}\) Aronzon, *SP*, vol.1, 145. Irena Orlova recalls the response of Aleksandr Mezhirov, an influential official literary figure, to Aronzon’s poems: “Come on, he doesn’t know Russian. He makes grammatical errors.” Interview with Kukuj, May 2014.
all its length/with sound that's made of thoughts and word./I want to die early/in the hope: maybe I will be revived/not all the way, at least a third/at least for a day, o wondrous day:/a stream of water as in Lesbos/turns the propeller of the mill/a maiden sees somebody's dreams/when they are sung out slowly./o body: sun, dream, rill!/tall the cathedrals of autumn/when in the sedge of three lakes I/I lie God's and no one's.] ⁵⁹

The short poem demonstrates an idiosyncratic use of language and a mobile lyric subject, in combination with a number of literary references. The opening lines present the lyric speaker meditating on the poet's craft: to give voice, through thought and word, to silence. Yet the poem opens with a negation, and the speaker does not appear in direct nominative pronominal form until line 5 (and this appearance coincides with his declared wish to die). As the ‘propeller’ of the water-mill turns, the lyric ‘I’ ducks under, replaced by a maiden, only to return with an ecstatic apostrophe: “O body!” The lyric situation is further made strange by the initially unmotivated image of the steed bouncing toward God, as well as the suggestion that silence could be various and have the physical quality of length. At the same time, however funny its movement, the steed recalls Pegasus, ⁶⁰ and this nod to classical mythology is picked up in the (also unexpected) Lesbian stream of water and the dream-songs of maidens (i deve ch’i-to sny vidny/kogda ikh medlenno propeli). ⁶¹ The references to mythology, like the pastoral setting, take the poem out of any “real life” context, suggesting an active fulfilment of the wish expressed in the first line: that the poet has filled this ‘other’ silence with thoughts and words. At the same time, the overtly naïve speaker clashes with the traditional function of classical references (a demonstration of erudition), defamiliarizing them as well.

⁵⁹ Aronzon, SP, vol.1, 119.
⁶⁰ I am very grateful to Irene Masing-Delic for this and other erudite suggestions.
⁶¹ Orpheus, also famous for giving sound to silence, is supposed to have drifted along the river Helicon to his final resting place among the nymphs of Lesbos.
The poem continues to vacillate between different registers and moods: for instance, the apparent pathos of the lyric speaker’s desire to die early (or young) is undermined both by the joking reference to Pushkin (thus his ves’ ia ne umru yields Aronzon’s [voskresnu] xotia by na tret’), and by the sudden turn at the poem’s center (line 8). “At least a third” gives way to “at least a day – o wondrous day,” at which point the poem abandons its lyric meditation for an imaginary pastoral landscape and a distinctly physical, rather than notional, orientation (o telo: solntse, son, ruchei!). The literary citations fall away, but silliness and absurdity remain in rhymes like propeller/propeli, awkward constructions like “the sedge of three lakes” and the paradox of lezhu ia Boga i nichei.

In one sense, the poem enacts a completion of its stated task: the shift in landscape can be seen to reflect the other silence sought, and the dream-songs might give it voice. Yet, the indexical ‘this’ of the first line renders the whole enterprise ambiguous: which silence is being filled? The flitting of the lyric speaker in and out of the poem may also relate to this problem: is the ia of the opening lines the same ia of the closing lines? And is the one ia capable of filling both this and some other silence? Although the end of the poem returns the lyric speaker to the spotlight, it has become destabilized through the turn, as well as the introduction of a maiden and some unspecified dreamers – this

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62 As noted by the SP editors (vol.1, 437), Pushkin’s “Moe zaveshchanie. Druz’iam” (1815) begins with “Khochu ia zavtra umret’.” The evocation of Pushkin then encourages the connection to the Exegi monumentum poem. “Moe zaveshchanie” is also a good example of the Pushkinian intimate, domestic mode favored by Aronzon and his poetic circle.
ambiguity is reflected in the strange doubling of the ia in the final two lines (although doubled pronouns can also point toward folkloric forms).  

This curiously unstable lyric subject emerged in Aronzon’s last decade of writing. Shubinsky goes so far as to claim that this instability, or as he puts it, this mobility of the relationship between “I” and “not I,” is one of Aronzon’s major contributions to the poetry of his time. The poems often resemble lyric poetry with a first-person speaker, but the experiencing “I” is a noticeably malleable entity – semantically multidirectional and grammatically liable to become second person, third person, plural.

Душа не занимает места,  
ибо бытует бестелесно.  
Скопление душ не нарушает пустоты.  
О ты,  
моя душа, к которой обращенье  
я начинаю с «О»!  
О, О,  
которое само  
есть легкой пустоты сгущенье!  
вы меня напоминаете самих себя,  
когда хочу я быть растенье.  
[...]

[The soul does not take up space/for it exists incorporeally./The accumulation of souls does not violate emptiness./O you,/my soul, to whom I open/my address with “O”!/O, O,/which itself/is a concentration of light emptiness!/you (pl.) remind me of myselves,/when I wish to be a plant.]

63 Thanks to Gerald Janecek for this observation.
64 Shubinskii, “Poetika Leonida Aronzona.”
65 Ilja Kukuj has also written about the problem of Aronzon’s lyrical “I” being too closely identified with the poet himself, because of its extreme “suggestiveness.” Introduction to interviews with I. Orlova and V. Aronzon, May 2014.
This is rhyming lyric poetry with a religio-philosophical sheen, yet it wears its naïveté and absurdity on its sleeve. The logical-philosophical mode, heralded by words like *ibo* or the grammatical parallelism of “accumulation” and “concentration,” is undermined by the grammatical instability of the subject(s) and his addressee(s), as well as the unexpected absurd simplicity of the concluding line of the stanza. Again, one cannot help but think of Vvedensky: for instance, at the very beginning of the 1934 poem “I’m sorry I’m not a beast” [*Mne zhalko chto ia ne zver’*], the lyric speaker fragments into multiple selves:

говорящий себе поверь
а другому себе подожди немного
мы выйдем с собой погулять в лес

[saying to myself believe and to my other self wait a bit/my self and I we go out to walk in the forest]

This kind of unstable lyric speaker presages many later developments in Russian poetry, and also connects to the childlike aesthetic: as Kukulin pointed out, overtly childlike speakers project naïveté, weakness and a lack of authority and certainty. A poem delivered from this perspective works differently at all its levels, becoming less a fixed and profound statement by an authoritative voice and more of a compendium of its many parts.

Another connection between Aronzon and Vvedensky is evident in the apparently random, slipshod quality broadly characteristic of Aronzon’s poetics. In line with the

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OBERIU principle of “small error” [nebol’shaia pogreshnost’], Vvedensky wrote that when two possible rhymes came to mind, he always chose the poorer rhyme, as it would be the right one. Importantly, randomness also conditions Aronzon’s relationship to the literary tradition. Even as he is in dialogue with poetic predecessors, Aronzon’s references to other poems are, as Kukulin has noted elsewhere, sort of “notes in the margins,” indirect half-references that need not necessarily be picked up or recognized for the poem to work – as indices, they point only half-heartedly (recall the Pushkinian and classical reference(s) in “Ne siiu, iniiu tishinu...”). In this way, even the intertextuality of Aronzon’s poetry has a naïve, amateurish quality, which increases the effect of immediacy and sincerity rather than anything like literary erudition.

As we have seen, indeterminacy as a poetic principle can also be seen as entailing sloppiness or a tendency to hit the wrong note – “bad writing.” Wrong notes connect Aronzon with his predecessors Zabolotsky, Vvedensky and Khlebnikov, and even extend further back in the literary tradition: a horrified Soviet reviewer of Aronzon’s

68 Shubinsky, in his chapter on the OBERIU search for “a certain balance with some error,” writes that Aronzon continues this line. Shubinskii, Daniil Kharms. Zhizn’ cheloveka na vetru, 539.


70 Another example is the phrase “Zhizn’ dana, chto delat’ s nei?” It appears in a series of 1969 poems, but the reference to Mandelstam’s “Dano mne telo” just hangs in space; the question that the phrase presents is more relevant inside Aronzon’s poem than within the frame of the Mandelstam reference. Aronzon, SP, vol.1, 196-197.

71 Recall Zholkovsky’s assessment of Khlebnikov’s graphomaniacal, “bad poet” tendencies (discussed in the introduction); the bureaucratic versifier Kozma Prutkov, whom he also discusses, was beloved by the OBERIU poets.
work suggested that in terms of bad taste and bad grammar, Aronzon was “trying to revive the style of Trediakovsky.” Apparent lack of skill, a kind of literary weakness, is also associated with the childlike. Quoting a line from the poem “A Conversation” [Beseda] (1967), “Dve korovy skhodom budd/tam lezhat i tam i tut,” this same reviewer asked sarcastically: “isn’t this just charmingly childlike?” The unusual collocation “like a gathering of buddhas,” moreover, characterizing a gathering of two (not to mention the two being cows), and the seemingly unnecessary repetition of “tam,” led the reviewer to consider Aronzon childlike in his inability as a poet. “A Conversation” consists of a pastoral introduction, followed by an erotic dialogue between a nonspecific “Olya” and “Al’tshuler,” the name of Aronzon’s close friend and fellow poet.

Где кончаются заводы,
начинаются природы.
Всюду бабочки лесные -
неба легкие кусочки -
так трепещут эти дочки,
что обычая тоска
неприлична и низка.
Стадо божих коровок
В мно́ги тыся́чи го́лово́к
украшает огород
и само себя пасет.
Обернувшись к миру задом
по привычке трудовой,
ходит лошадь красным садом,
шею кончив головой.
Две коровы сходом будд
там лежат и там и тут.

72 In line with the earlier references to Pushkin and the Arzamasians, we should also mention the cult they created around Count Khvostov and his insufferable verse. Petr Vykhodtsev, “Retsenziia na kollektivnyi sbornik leningradskikh poetov ‘Lepta’,” reproduced in Wiener Slawistischer Almanach 62 (2008), 268. On Trediakovsky, see Irina Reyfman, Vasili Trediakovsky: The Fool of the ‘New’ Russian Literature (Palo Alto: Stanford UP, 1990).

73 Vykhodtsev, “Retsenziia,” WSA, 268.
[Where the factories stop, / the natures start. / Woodland butterflies all over - / light bits of heaven - / these little daughters quiver so, / that ordinary sadness / is indecent and base. / A herd of ladybugs / many thousand head strong / decorates the garden / and herds itself. / Turning its butt to the world / by working habit, / a horse walks along the red (lovely) garden, / having ended its neck in a head. / Two cows like a gathering of buddhas / are lying there and there and here.]

The typical pastoral description in this poem is mostly upended by the unusual phrasing and slightly bizarre variations on ordinary elements. Thus the wordplay of a herd (a “thousand [little] head”) of ladybugs [bozhiie korovki, literally, divine little cows], is accentuated by the collocation “a herd/decorates” [stado/ukrashaet], as well as the herd herding itself (eliminating the shepherd typical for a pastoral landscape). The butterflies are made strange by being referred to as “little daughters,” which is also a kind of poetic joke (nodding to the necessity of finding a rhyme for kusochki). Likewise, the horse turns its rear-end to the world (and, as it were, to the “viewer” of this scene) and, ambiguously walking along (or embodying) the red or beautiful garden, having uncannily ended its neck in a head [sheiu konchiv golovoi] (recall Kulakov’s designation: “using an unheard-of language to depict impossible, but obvious things”). This poem is full of examples of what Aronzon himself called “humor of style” [iumor stilia], the use of awkward and alogical constructions to enforce a lightness of mood or register often (though not here) in contrast with the more serious questions at play in the poem.

The presence of iumor stilia, as well as the naïve lyric speaker in Aronzon’s mature work represents a very conscious aesthetic position. We can observe a clear

74 Aronzon, SP, vol.1, 138-139.
75 Aleksandr Stepanov, “Zametki o poetike Leonida Aronzona,” SP, vol.1, 43. Erl’ identifies Aronzon’s iumor stilia as “allowing him to insert a particular kind of ostranenie into his work.” “Neskol’ko slov,” S kem vy..., 186.
progression, evident in a comparison of his late 1960s poetry with the more conventional and classical experiments of the early poems. The lyric speaker in the later poems is demonstratively weak, even when the poem itself may be a success. Loshchilov characterizes this position as a rejection of authorial irony: “The line ‘I netu sily zarifmovat’ Evropu’ declares a rejection of the ironic, ‘masked’ position, a refusal to allow elements of everyday witticisms [bytovoe ostroumie] into poetry.”\(^7\) This is how Aronzon drew a line between “real” poetry and the scribblings of a poetaster – for he was also capable of the latter activity. The second volume of his collected works includes a section featuring poems written in the domestic mode, i.e., not intended for publication of any kind: “Comic poems; poems written ‘in albums’ and ‘occasional poems.’”\(^7\) These poems, which are often obscene and scatological (in accordance with the Pushkinian mode of discourse to which they refer),\(^7\) are also devoid of the kind of “linguistic reflection” evident in the Aronzon canon.

Бонжур, мосье. Мерси, мосье. Вино, что пили мы, всю ночь я ссал в окно. После беседы вы, подопьянев, вдруг возжелали мяса местных дев. Пока я был фонтаном “Мальчик пис…”, вы девушку ласкали сверху вниз.

\[\ldots\]\(^7\)

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\(^7\) Loshchilov, “O stikhovoreni Leonida Aronzona,” 203. The line is from the “Sonet dushe i trupu N. Zabolotskogo” (Aronzon, SP, vol.1, 163)

\(^7\) That is, unpublished according to the author’s wishes, not because they couldn’t be published due to censorship. Aronzon, SP, vol.2, 128-168.

\(^7\) Loshchilov points out that in these same, private genres (the “friendly epistle”), Zabolotsky and the other OBERIU poets were known for similarly scatological escapades. Loshchilov, “O stikhovoreni Leonida Aronzona,” 204 (fn 18).

\(^7\) Aronzon, SP, vol.2, 149. The “Manneken Pis” [Little boy peeing] is a fountain in Brussels.
Bonjour, monsieur. Merci, monsieur. The wine/that we drank, I pissed all night out the window./After our chat you, a little squiffy,/suddenly desired the flesh of local maidens./While I was the fountain “Manneken Pis,”/you caressed your girl up and down.]

These poems are witty and rather affected, featuring foreign words and high-style archaisms, and play in a familiar way with the grotesque results of mixing registers. But they do not break the rules of grammar, they feature no pleonasms or strange collocations, and do not recall either OBERIU aesthetics or the childlike aesthetic more generally – they do not feature much *iumor stilia*. This circumstance suggests that the childlike aesthetic in Aronzon’s work, and specifically the childlike stance taken by his lyric speaker, was felt by him to be a powerful aesthetic tool in the furthering of his poetic project – and one far from the posturing silliness of comic verse.

Aronzon’s children’s poetry also provides fewer examples of the childlike aesthetic than the mature adult poetry. It is also generally unremarkable as children’s poetry. One of the very few poems he saw published (in the almanac *Druzhba*) literally breaks down mid-poem; it almost recalls the self-conscious stance of inability that we see in the adult poems.

**ВЕТЕР**

Ветер тучи к нам пригнал,  
долго бился у окна  
и стучал и хлопал дверью,  
гнул траву, ломал деревья  
и, свистя, ревел от злобы.  
Нарисуй его!  
Попробуй!80

The wind drove the stormclouds over here,/beat at the window for hours/knocked and pounded at the door,/flattened the grass, tried to break the trees/and whistling, roared angrily./Draw it!/Just try!]

The almanac helpfully provides an illustration to this poem: a blank piece of paper with a pencil poised, having drawn a question mark on it. The poem, like the two others published alongside it, is not particularly compelling and does not recognizably reflect Aronzon’s mature poetics. Perhaps only the metapoetic gesture of the final line – which comes as an afterthought – might suggest a hint of Aronzon’s adult poetics.81

The delayed publication of Aronzon’s other children’s poems (the book came out in 2011, largely through the efforts of Aronzon’s brother) was due more likely to lack of opportunity than to any aesthetic indiscretion in the poetry. Most of it is transparently written to Soviet children’s literature standards, featuring such topical commonplaces as the gratification of hard work, the need to get good grades and the problem of getting along with siblings. One cycle, although formally innocuous, seems doomed to editorial red ink because the poems depict the painterly exploits of a suspiciously bohemian “artist”: “Not a wizard, but an artist/lives behind our wall./If he wants –/it’ll rain/tangerines!” etc.82 The few moments of linguistic ingenuity seem openly borrowed, such as the poem “Kogda razdelim my ‘fasol’” (1966?), in which the notes of the major musical scale are attributed to ordinary words, e.g. “When we divide fasol’ [beans]/what do we get? Fa and Sol” (recalling Kharms’s “The Liar” [Vrun], discussed in Ch.1). Still, there are notable exceptions, such as the oddly sensual image of a mouse’s armpits:

Без отдыха трудится Мышка,

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81 Many thanks to my colleague Phil Redko for pointing this out.
82 In the table of contents, the cycle is entitled Khudozhnik (kniga) (Mart, 1968). Aronzon, Komu chto snitsia, 46.
Mousie’s (puny) sweaty armpits remain the only remarkable image in the poem, which goes on to reveal the futility of her labours: she encounters a Mole who declares that the burrow is already occupied. Another slightly more interesting text, the final one included in the 2011 collection, is a long prose passage of unprecedented formal and lexical difficulty, evidently intended to be read in one long breathless rush:

[and that’s not all: eyes here, here, here and here, and each one like a spyglass, one pair of eyes like binoculars one way, the second – like binoculars the other way, the third set squints to the right, the fourth to the left, the fifth wherever it wants; wings inside and out, no ears – it can hear anyway;]

When read through to the end, the passage eventually reveals itself to be a description of a child’s imaginary dog, thematically linked to an earlier, much more pedestrian poem. But its delirium and passion link it rather with some of Aronzon’s incantatory adult poems (including the insistent repetitions of “A Transcript of Conversations,” discussed earlier), while its imaginatively alogical quality seems bolder than the careful doses of play allowed into the other children’s poems.

84 Marked (1969?). Ibid., 68.
85 Consider the following excerpt from the second poem in the cycle, “Partita No. 6”:
Многократное и упорное: не то, не то, не то, не то
Многократное и упорное: то, то, то, то, то, то, то, то,
One of the few children’s poems that sounds somewhat like Aronzon’s adult poetry is actually a translation from the Polish children’s writer Jan Brzechwa (very well-loved and widely translated in the Soviet Union). In the poem, all the gnomes gather to discuss six important questions, including “where does the crawfish winter?” and “could Tuesday be Wednesday?” When the time comes to answer the questions, confusion takes over:

[The eldest took the floor and with passion/scratched his head for a whole hour./The very youngest right out loud/started talking such nonsense,/that the Dumb One answered him,/only that which he did not know./And the Deaf One, quieter still/Repeated all that he had heard.]

In addition to the openly paradoxical and absurd propositions in the poem, Aronzon contributed (or replicated Brzechwa’s) concise and simple diction, punctuated by

Смолчал: ужели я — не он?
Ужаснулся:
    сурров рождения закон:
    и он не я, и я не он!

Aronzon, SP, 235.

86 Vadim Bytenskii, a friend of Aronzon’s family, recalls a selection of the poet’s children’s poems being published in Literaturnaia Rossiia in 1971, after his death, through the intercession of Sergei Mikhalkov, a prominent children’s writer. Mikhalkov liked another of Aronzon’s Brzechwa translations and asked for more of his children’s poems, saying meanwhile that there was no way he could help with publishing any of Aronzon’s adult work. From private correspondence with Bytenskii, 8 October 2015.

marching trochees and exact rhymes. Still, this is one of only two Brzechwa poems translated by Aronzon (he is not known to have translated other poets, children’s or otherwise), and is not characteristic of his children’s work overall.

The childlike elements in Aronzon’s adult work are most evident in its simple, repetitive diction, leanings toward the absurd and alogical and, most dramatically, in the lyric speaker. Like Kholin’s, Aronzon’s speaker is occasionally boldly, unrestrainedly present: “It’s good to walk around heaven/reciting Aronzon out loud!” [Khorosho guliat’ po nebu/vsluh chitaia Aronzona!]; it can also be filled with silly, naïve wonder: “On the breast of my sorrow/ripen nipples of joy!” [Na grudi moei toski/zreiut radosti soski!], as well as express vulnerability and instability: “And who would not hide behind himself upon seeing his neighbor?/I – WE ANSWER./For the desire to go mad is indeed great” [I kto ne sprichetsia za samogo sebia, uvidev blizhnego svoego/?Ia – OTVECHAEM MY./Ved’ veliko zhelanie pomeshat’sia.]. But this speaker would never be mistaken for an actual child; Aronzon explicitly invokes “the childlike” as a rhetorical stance that projects naïveté, vulnerability and sincerity.

The last poem I’ll examine is actually two: “Two Identical Sonnets” [Dva odinakovykh soneta] (1969) published side by side as (1) and (2) and intended to be read one after the other (the poems coincide completely in form and content). Like the dialogue between Olya and Al’tshuler in the “Conversation” poem, the sonnets are unabashedly erotic, yet brimming with iumor stilia:

88 Aronzon, “Khorosho guliat’ po nebu,” SP, vol.1, 158.
89 “Beseda,” ibid., 138.
90 “Zapis’ besed (I),” ibid., 236.
1.
Любовь моя, спи золотко мое,
вся кожею атласною одета.
Мне кажется, что мы встречались где-то:
мне так знаком сосок твой и белье.

О, как к лицу! о, как тебе! о, как идет!
весь этот день, весь этот Бах, всё тело это!
и этот день, и этот Бах, и самолет,
летящий там, летящий здесь, летящий где-то!

И в этот сад, и в этот Бах, и в этот миг
усни, любовь моя, усни, не укрываясь:
и лик и зад, и зад и пах, и пах и лик —

пусть всё уснет, пусть всё уснет, моя живая!
Не приближаясь ни на йоту, ни на шаг,
отдайся мне во всех садах и падежах.

2.
Любовь моя, спи золотко мое,
вся кожею атласною одета.
Мне кажется, что мы встречались где-то:
мне так знаком сосок твой и белье.

О, как к лицу! о, как тебе! о, как идет!
весь этот день, весь этот Бах, всё тело это!
и этот день, и этот Бах, и самолет,
летящий там, летящий здесь, летящий где-то!

И в этот сад, и в этот Бах, и в этот миг
усни, любовь моя, усни, не укрываясь:
и лик и зад, и зад и пах, и пах и лик —

пусть всё уснет, пусть всё уснет, моя живая!
Не приближаясь ни на йоту, ни на шаг,
отдайся мне во всех садах и падежах.

[My love, sleep, my golden one./All dressed in satin skin./It seems to me that we met
somewhere:/so familiar are your nipple and your underclothes./O, how it suits! O, how
you! O, how becoming!/all this day, and all this Bach, and all this body!/and this day, and
this Bach, and the airplane,/flying there, flying here, flying somewhere!///And into this
garden, in this Bach, in this moment/fall asleep, my love, fall asleep uncovered:/your face
and rear, your rear and groin, your groin and face – /may it all fall asleep, may it all fall
asleep, my living one!//Without approaching an iota, not a step,/surrender to me in all
gardens and cases.\[91\]

What can be said about this collision of the naïve and the erotic? The lyric speaker in this
love poem rejects the role of sophisticated and elegant versifier, even as he performs the
traditional role of a lover addressing the beloved (object): from frequently odd word
choices (neither zad nor pakh are appropriate for a traditional love poem, and the high-
style lik sounds quite strange in their company; iota is also out of place) and pleonasm
like “dressed in skin,” to environmental non-sequiturs like the airplane and the strange
incursion of the grammatical cases [padezhi]. Crucially, the strangeness of the lyric
speaker and of the poem’s diction and syntax do not add up to irony: the function of the
poem remains that of a traditional love poem. The rapturous, often superfluous repetitions
and plethora of exclamation points create a gushing and joyous aural and semantic
atmosphere in the poem, even as they underscore the sense of a rambling, somewhat lost
speaker – the first line of the second quatrains literally breaks ordinary syntax into pieces,
punctuated by exclamation points: thus the two possible phrases “O, kak k litsu tebe!” or
“O, kak tebe idet!” become “O, kak k litsu! O, kak tebe! O, kak idet!” Further, really
extreme excessiveness comes in the repetition of the poem in toto, which is
simultaneously foolishly superfluous and the ultimate statement of love’s blind
fervency.\[92\]

\[91\] Ibid., 180-181. For a great reading of this sonnet, and discussion of Aronzon’s sonnets
in general, see Philip Redko, “‘No my sposobny smasterit’ sonet’: Form, Material and
University, 2016).

\[92\] I acknowledge the significance and possible further meanings of the repetition, which
has been discussed by many critics, including Shvarts, “Russkaia poeziia kak hortus
The paradoxes of the first and final stanzas also contribute to the dizzy confusion created by the poem. In the first, the speaker intimately addresses his (evidently well-known) beloved and then adds, almost in the vein of a coy pick-up line, “it’s like I’ve seen you somewhere before – your nipple and underwear are so familiar.” The final tercet begins with the paradoxical pairing of *usnut’* – a verb usually used as a metaphor of death, drawing on the notion of death as sleep – with the epithet “my living (*zhivaia*, literally “alive”) one.” The poem closes with the paradoxical directive to “(give yourself to me) without approaching an iota or a step.” A further hint of paradox comes in the speaker entreating his addressee, who is asleep, to sleep on, or more deeply, or forever.

But the poem works as a love poem, in part because the lyric speaker effectively performs ineptitude and what is left is breathless passion, sensual saturation and a surprisingly harmonious melody. As we have seen, the childlike aesthetic normally includes elements like childlike form, stylized childlike language and a childlike viewpoint, relationship to logic, etc. While eschewing childlike form entirely, Aronzon’s erotic sonnet features language childlike in its naïveté and ineptitude, as well as a kind of unrestrained ignorance of social and poetic norms that defamiliarizes the form of the sonnet.

Aronzon’s poetry for adults presents a subtle but powerful example of the childlike aesthetic at work in Leningrad unofficial poetry. While using for the most part strict, even classical poetic forms, Aronzon drew on and refined the childlike aesthetic of OBERIU poets and Khlebnikov to create a hybrid poetics pointing simultaneously to the

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*clausus*” and Kazarnovskii, “‘Ob’iat’ glubinnoi tishinoi’: prostranstvo teksta Leonida Aronzona” (2008), 63-91.
vaunted nineteenth-century poetic tradition and the anti-literary experiment of the avant-garde. Children’s literature per se was of less significance for Aronzon than the other poets discussed in this dissertation. As we have seen, Vsevolod Nekrasov’s poetics allowed for a fairly unbroken continuity of form, diction and lyric speaker in his children’s and adult poetry, and Igor Kholin’s adult poetry visibly drew on the formal tricks of children’s poetry and, to some extent, the brash audacity of that genre’s lyric speaker (recall Kharms’s “Petka begal po doroge”). The children’s and adult poetry of Oleg Grigoriev, whom we turn to next, provides examples of both Nekrasov’s unbroken continuity and Kholin’s clever fusion of childlike form and adult content.

II. Oleg Grigoriev

The poetry of Oleg Grigoriev presents the most prototypical example of the childlike aesthetic examined in this dissertation. Elements of the childlike aesthetic are abundantly evident in both his children’s and adult poetry; though not indistinguishable, both kinds of poem invite multiple levels of interpretation. There are few formal differences between the poetry written for children and for adults, although differences of theme and intonation are often substantial. The overwhelming majority of Grigoriev’s poems are short (many of them couplets or quatrains), written in traditional meters and in rhyme, and use uncomplicated diction. The lyric speaker often seems naïve, wondering and/or bewildered, while accepting of the incomprehensible nature of the world that surrounds him, as in this untitled poem:

Тушил я пожар зонтом.
Ну что же, гори, мой зонт.
Вместе с зонтом сгорел дом.
Впереди открыт горизонт.\textsuperscript{93}

[I was putting out a fire with my umbrella./Oh well, burn well, my umbrella./Along with the umbrella the house burned down,/The horizon spread open before me.]

The four-line poem, written in three-stress dol’nik with abab masculine rhyme, is not a children’s poem, although there is really nothing about it formally and thematically to explicitly exclude it from that category (unless the prospect of a house burning down is considered too disturbing for children).\textsuperscript{94} The rhymes, characteristically for Grigoriev, lean toward the tautological (even as this poem demonstrates impressive use of internal rhyme), and the poem contains a few nouns repeated several times.

The lyric speaker is childlike in his actions (trying to put out a fire with an umbrella), in his aesthetic wonder before the unexpected consequences of the fire (suddenly the horizon comes into view) and, arguably, in his acceptance of an absurd situation. But he is unequivocally adult, as is the philosophical and emotional arc of the poem. There is an oblique reference to the popular Soviet romance, “Burn, burn, my star” \textit{[Gori, gori moia zvezda]}; though not really essential to the meaning of the poem, it does serve as an “adult” marker of one level of the text, lending an ironically romantic tenor to the scene depicted. Yet the childlike qualities of the lyric speaker are essential for the beauty of the poem’s close to be experienced fully and sincerely. At the same time, the poem’s childlike features do not turn the poem into a children’s poem.

Because of his close identification with children’s poetry (closer than any of the

\textsuperscript{93} Grigor’ev, \textit{Ptitsa v kletke}, 161. Subsequent poems will be quoted from this edition. Note that Grigoriev’s poems are not dated in this or any of the other editions cited.

other poets discussed in this dissertation), Grigoriev turns out to be a crucial author for our understanding of the childlike aesthetic in unofficial “adult” poetry. Like some of the other poets examined, Grigoriev makes copious use of many formal and rhetorical features associated with children’s poetry. E.M. Beregovskaya sums up the essence of his style as “a tendency to bared constructions and a high, exaggerated frequency of favorite devices within a single text,” somehow managing to combine with “form that leans toward the laconic.” The essentially playful character of Grigoriev’s work is expressed through “the bared device, the hyperbolic way it is developed, and the exciting way this is all juggled together.”

95 Grigoriev’s children’s poems are funny, inventive and even ironic:

Кто съел пирог?
Мы не ели.
То есть мы съели,
но не хотели.
Это все птицы.
Они прилетели
и, если б не мы,
они бы все съели.

[Who ate the pie?/We didn’t touch it./That is, we ate it all./But we didn’t want to./It’s all the birds’ fault./They flew in/and if we hadn’t/they’d have eaten it all up.]

As in Aronzon, the lyric speaker in Grigoriev’s adult poetry performs the childlike in a specific way: he is often foolish, naïve, passive, vulnerable, confused and wondering at the ways of the world. The speaker in the children’s poems, meanwhile, though often identified as a child, is often not “childlike” in this way. In the poem quoted here, the

95 Beregovskaia, “Poet epokhi bezvremen’ia,” 86.
child speakers very confidently present an alternate line of logic to justify their misdeed. Even the rhymes of the poem are pulled into their argument: the protagonists (my) are set against the real culprits (ptitsy), and the rest of the lines drive the point home with the persistent trochaic ending -eli.

The close resemblance of Grigoriev’s children’s and adult poetry has been widely acknowledged. By including poems written both for children and adults, all of Grigoriev’s posthumous publications attest to a consensus regarding the unity of his body of work; a two of these editions take the radical position of not distinguishing between the children’s and adult poems at all. Likewise, all of the scholars who have written about Grigoriev’s work have commented on the relationship between his children’s and adult poetry (of the other poets discussed in this dissertation, this is true only of Kharms). Most of the literature on Grigoriev declares that there is no difference between the two categories at all, with the implication, meanwhile, that all of the poetry can be read as “adult” – with the attendant dark, serious and/or allegorical hidden meaning. Accordingly, many formal markers of the childlike aesthetic are designated as folkloric; Grigoriev’s own childlike or adolescent demeanor is frequently invoked as well. Thus Yasnov claims that there is no reason to distinguish the poems as ‘children’s’ or ‘adult,’ since the “children in Grigoriev’s poetry are caricatures of adults,” while the grown-ups

97 Grigor’ev, Stikhi. Risunki; Dvustishii, chetverostishii, mnogostishii; Ptitsa v kletke; Vsia zhizn’ (St. Petersburg: Iskusstvo-SPb, 1994); Vinokhranitel’ (St. Petersburg: Vita Nova, 2008); Shli vpered – prishli nazad (Moscow: Azbuka, 2010).

98 Dvustishii, chetverostishii, mnogostishii, as the title suggests, groups the poems by number of lines, and does not identify previously published children’s poems as such. Stikhi. Risunki, which Grigoriev himself helped to organize shortly before his death, presents seven vaguely thematic sections which include both children’s and adult poems.
are “ignorant, occasionally inveterately drunk children, retarded in their development.”

(The image of the “inveterately drunk child” as lyric hero is also described as fully adequate to Grigoriev’s historical moment.) Shubinsky (openly conflating Grigoriev with his lyrical personae) writes that “for Grigoriev the child and adult world were inseparable: his perception of the world was truly, like a child’s, immediate and amoral” [vneetichno]. More responsibly, Skulachëv sees Grigoriev’s children’s and adult poetry as interpenetrating; while acknowledging the variability of Grigoriev’s lyric speakers, Skulachëv perceives all of the poetry as united by a “child’s view” of the world.

The perceived similarity between Grigoriev’s work for children and adults was occasionally the reason for conflict with publishers, as in the case when Grigoriev was accused of promoting “black humor” among children, with reference to some particularly notorious examples of his adult poetry. Nevertheless, Grigoriev was and remains highly regarded as a children’s writer, although over the two decades of his activity in

102 See also: Skulachëv, “Krasnaia tetrad’ Olega Grigor’eva,” 16.
this sphere, he only managed to publish three of his own children’s books.\textsuperscript{104} Grigoriev evidently felt himself to be a children’s writer, although his attitude toward children’s literature – like that of many writers here discussed – demonstrates the widespread belief in its inferiority. Late in life, he allegedly told a friend that he had failed to succeed either as a painter or a grown-up poet: “I only made it \textit{otstoial sebia} as a children’s poet.”\textsuperscript{105} It would seem that Grigoriev’s assessment of failure refers first and foremost to his few official Soviet publications: he had had both poetry and prose published in sam- and tamizdat,\textsuperscript{106} and he left behind more than a thousand finished poems, which have been published posthumously. For our purposes, meanwhile, Grigoriev’s statement is important insofar as it expresses the clear distinction he made between children’s and adult poetry.

Only a few investigators have actually compared the poetics of Grigoriev’s children’s and adult work.\textsuperscript{107} They demonstrate that there are some formal (“aesthetic”) differences in addition to the obvious thematic ones (though it is true that many of Grigoriev’s children’s poems can be thematically matched to adult poems), singling out diction, intonation and quantity of stylistic devices.\textsuperscript{108} In Elena Khvorostianova’s view, the children’s poems can also demonstrate indirectly “educational” (but not didactic!) differences.

\textsuperscript{104} In addition to the three books, Grigoriev was fairly regularly published in children’s magazines. Memoirs suggest that his debauchery-filled lifestyle had just as much to do as opposition from above with the small number of books.

\textsuperscript{105} Ponizovskii, “On vse iznachal’no prinimal,” 111.

\textsuperscript{106} See, for instance, the selections in \textit{Ekho} no. 2/10 (1980), 71-80; \textit{Sumerki} no. 5 (1989), 38-45; \textit{Antologiia u Goluboi laguny}, vols. 2B (86-90) and 5A (89-113).

\textsuperscript{107} Beregovskaia, “Poet epokhi bezvremen’ia,” and Khvorost’ianova, \textit{Poetika Olega Grigor’eva}.

\textsuperscript{108} Beregovskaia calls the differences “aesthetic.” “Poet epokhi bezvremen’ia,” 84-85.
moments, with word choices that help explain curious facts about Russian orthography and usage, as in “Misfortune” [Neschast’e].

У Клокова Коли несчастье в школе:
Портфель он, как мячик, ногою пинал,
Задачник разорван, будильник расколот,
Утерян дневник, апельсин и пенал.

Портфеля не жалко, будильника тоже,
Пенал ещё лучше у бабушки есть,
А вот тугой апельсин толстокожий?..
Да, апельсина сегодня не есть.

[Kolya Klokov had a misfortune at school:/He was kicking his briefcase around like a ball,/His notebook’s all torn up, his alarm clock’s broken,/Lost are his journal, his orange and pencil-case./Who cares about the briefcase, or the alarm-clock,/And grandma’s got an even better pencil-case,/But what about that thick-skinned juicy orange?../Yes, he’ll eat no orange today.]

One of only a few of Grigoriev’s poems written in a ternary meter (amphibrachic tetrameter), the poem also features springy internal rhymes (Koli/shkole), grammatical parallelisms (razorvan/raskolot) and homonymic rhyme. By rhyming homonyms like pinal and penal, Grigoriev points out that they are homophones and underscores the difference in their spelling; with est’ and est’, he points to the difference in meaning of these homographs. The pairing of razorvan and raskolot highlights the meaning of the prefix raz- while showing its different orthographical manifestations.

All of these educational moments, however, come through devices that are ubiquitous in Grigoriev’s poetry for children and adults alike. And the poem is pointedly non-didactic: the speaker sympathizes with Kolya, calling his self-created predicament a “misfortune” and regretting along with him the only true loss – he has forgone a delicious

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109 Khvorost’ianova, Poetika Olega Grigor’eva, 23.
110 Grigor’ev, Ptitsa, 74.
111 Khvorost’ianova, Poetika Olega Grigor’eva, 25.
orange. Indeed, part of the poem’s charisma lies in the close (though not identical) relationship between the speaker and the lyric protagonist, Kolya, including their shared (child’s) value system. Significantly, Grigoriev’s children’s poetry features a lyric speaker who, though often identified as a child, is not markedly naïve or underdeveloped. More often, he (or rarely, she) is a creative individual, often independent from the direction of adults and given, if anything, to dislike or pity them.\textsuperscript{112} Many of the children’s poems are pronounced by speakers of indeterminate age, unmarked as either child or adult; whatever the apparent age, though, the speaker in the children’s poems is more likely to project self-confidence and assuredness in himself and the world than the speaker in the adult poems. This is a good example of the childlike aesthetic, which privileges weakness and vulnerability, diverging from “the child,” here portrayed as confident and cleverly calculating.

Many features associated with children’s poetry, such as simple diction, an insistently conversational register (and syntax),\textsuperscript{113} nearly universal rhyme and a narrative orientation and short, “small” form (poems of two to four lines), make for very accessible, “unserious” poetry. Although Grigoriev is often brilliantly inventive with language, the speakers in his poems are not, and readers are not expected to be:\textsuperscript{114}

\begin{quote}
Чернорабочий лопатой  
Закидывал в кузов мел.  
Чернорабочий с лопатой  
Был ослепительно бел.\textsuperscript{115}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{112} Ibid., 38.
\textsuperscript{113} Beregovskaia, “Poet epokhi bezvremen’ia,” 81.
\textsuperscript{114} Khvorost’ianova, Poetika Olega Grigor’eva, 79, 143.
\textsuperscript{115} Grigor’ev, Ptitsa, 30.
[A manual laborer was shoveling/Flinging chalk into the truck./The manual laborer with the shovel/Was blindingly white.]

This poem, published in Grigoriev’s 1980 children’s book The Growth Vitamin [Vitamin rosta], plays with the meaning and form of the word for manual laborer, literally “black worker” [chernorabochii]. The poem displays the poet at work, pointing out the possibility for a person described as fundamentally black to be “blindingly white.” The near-identity of the first and third lines of the poem make the linguistic discovery part of the experience of reading the poem: the reader seems to do a double take. And the adverb “blindingly” makes the discovery of the poem’s very last word extremely vivid.

Meanwhile, many of Grigoriev’s lyric speakers who appear as “I” are likewise clueless with regard to language:

— Сизов,
   Почему ты молчишь?
   — Я слушаю тишь.
   — Разве можно услышать тишь?
   — Можно, если ты помолчишь.116

[“Sizov,/Why aren’t you talking?/ “I’m listening to the quiet.”/ “Is it really possible to hear quiet?” / “It is, if you’d stop talking.”]

The speaker in this poem, essentially, encounters a poet, in the figure of Sizov. The uncomprehending speaker has to be reprimanded to shut up and try listening (and the poem suggests that he still doesn’t get it, since the speaker substitutes uslyshat’ – a perfective, one-time action – for Sizov’s slushat’, which implies extended listening).

Meanwhile, the poem itself cleverly associates “quiet” with “being quiet” (twice rhyming tish’ with molchish’), and of course, by putting the reader in the position of the speaking “I,” necessitates its own conclusion (we should also shut up already and stop talking).

116 Grigor’ev, Ptitsa, 30.
Grigoriev’s poems are simple and accessible, but in a way that does not recall the requirements of socialist realism. This quality has led to Grigoriev’s poetry sometimes being read as folklore, a kind of spontaneous natural phenomenon seen as essentially different from “serious” literary work. Scholars have also noticed the formal similarity between some poems and “school genres” like the riddle, the problem [zadacha], and composition, which constitute a kind of “children’s folklore.” But Grigoriev was known for working slowly and painstakingly on his poems. His careful work to produce texts that seemed simple has a strong literary heritage: Grigoriev called Alexander Pushkin, Alexander Blok and Daniil Kharms important predecessors; the work of these poets, too, is marked by stylistic simplicity, seemingly effortless and transparent language and by being easy to read and understand (while containing many nuanced levels of interpretation).

In the context of Leningrad unofficial literature, these popular and populist tendencies set Grigoriev’s work apart from that of many of his fellow unofficial poets, which tended to longer and/or more complicated form, arcane diction and syntax, and lofty themes (one thinks of Viktor Krivulin, Elena Shvarts, Alexander Mironov and many

117 The gruesome and shocking subject matter of some of his more notorious poems, like “Ya sprosil u elektrika Petrova” or “Devushka krasivaia/lezhit v kustakh nagoi,” forces this point. Although Grigoriev’s reputation in Russia today is closely tied to these poems, which became a part of urban folklore, they do not constitute a significant percentage of his work – although their place in the context of his oeuvre makes sense. For more on Grigoriev in urban folklore, see Belousov, “Fol’klornaia sud’ba elektrika Petrova.”
120 Beregovskaia, “Poet epokhi bezvremen’ia,” 79; Khvorost’ianova, Poetika Olega Grigor’eva, 77.
others). In this connection, Genrikh Sapgir retrospectively claimed Grigoriev for Lianozovo,\(^{121}\) with a view to aspects of the poetry that recall his and Kholin’s “barracks poems” and Nekrasov’s snippets of “living speech”: humor, short forms and recognizable (if grotesque) representation of real-world surroundings and colloquial language. Grigoriev’s poetry, however, demonstrates little of the formal radicalism and conceptual orientation typical of much Lianozovo poetry; despite its simplicity, it is also more self-consciously and traditionally “literary.”

Grigoriev and the Lianozovo poets are also linked in Leiderman and Lipovetsky’s discussion of the “neo-avant-garde”: the two groups are highlighted as continuing the linguistically critical path of the OBERIU poets, characterized here as oriented on fragmentation, a fixation on language (“linguocentrism”) and a rejection of the literary in favor of the “real” (in the OBERIU-specific meaning of “real art” rooted in concrete, non-symbolic experience).\(^{122}\) Grigoriev has been widely linked to the OBERIU tendency (especially to Kharms), and with reason; for instance, the children’s poem “I took some paper and a pen…” bows in the direction of Kharms’s famous credo about throwing a poem at the window.

Я взял бумагу и перо,
Нарисовал утюг.
Порвал листок, швырнул в ведро, —
В ведре раздался стук.\(^{123}\)

[I took some paper and a pen./And drew a heavy iron./Tore off the sheet, tossed it in a pail --/A clunk sounded in the pail.]

\(^{121}\) Sapgir, “Ob Oleg Grigor’eve,” 254.

\(^{122}\) Leiderman and Lipovetsky cite Jean-Phillipe Jaccard’s definition. Russkaia literatura XX veka, vol. 1, 392.

\(^{123}\) Grigor’ev, Ptitsa, 77.
Grigoriev certainly shares with Kharms the curious double knack for writing both good children’s poetry and violent miniatures. Yet, beyond this kind of superficial affinity, the particulars of Grigoriev’s relationship to OBERIU poetics have not been fully articulated. Grigoriev’s depiction of violence, for instance, is markedly different from that of Kharms, as is the aesthetic function of that violence. The poem “A Fight” [Draka] depicts senseless violence among communal-apartment neighbors reminiscent of Kharms’s “Incidences,” but the scene is distinctly mediated by the lyric speaker and far from absurd:

На кухне дерутся опять.  
Сизов решил поразмяться.  
Но вышел не драку разнять,  
А чтобы в нее ввязаться.

А я кальсоны стираю,  
И ничего не знаю.

Сизова удалили стулом,  
Герцу подбили глаз,  
Кота запихали в кастрюлю,  
А Комову в унитаз.

А я заправляю грыжу,  
И ничего не вижу.124

[They’re fighting in the kitchen again./Sizov decided to stretch his legs./But instead of breaking up the fight,/He went out to join in./I’m washing my underwear./And I don’t know a thing./Sizov got whacked with a chair./Herz got a black eye./The cat got shoved in the soup-pot./And Komova stuffed in the toilet./I’m hoisting up my hernia./And I don’t see a thing.]

The cartoonish violence of the third stanza – even the cat gets dragged in! – recalls

124 Grigor’ev, Ptitsa, 160.
Kharms miniatures like “The Beginning of a Very Fine Summer Day.” Thematically, the connection with the Lianozovo “barracks poems,” with their deadpan recounting of the brutality of communal living, is also apparent. Indeed, the colloquial designation of “epic” has been applied to Grigoriev in the same way as to Kholin, to describe the impartial reporting of macabre goings-on. Accordingly, Leiderman and Lipovetsky write that for Grigoriev, violence is the last resort for communication with others – in the world he depicts, other forms of communication have been devalued to the point of uselessness.

By reading the poems primarily for provocative content, many critics have overemphasized the role of violence per se in Grigoriev’s work, and also disregarded the work of the poet. “Grigoriev is consistently interested in the material itself of language.” Within this short poem, the two “action” stanzas are marked by a progression of physically vivid verbs: first three infinitives, constituting a sort of propositional prelude – porazmit’sia, razniat’ and vviazat’sia. They are mirrored by the following three sharp past-tense completed actions, like three punches: udarili, podbili, zapikhnuli. The stanzaic form of the poem is also unusual: the couplets of the speaker’s interjections form a lyrical refrain, the actions depicted slow and meditative in contrast to the busy and violent quatrains.

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125 Kharms, PSS, vol.2, 358-359. This “incidence,” subtitled in parentheses “(A Symphony)” features a series of seemingly unmotivated violent attacks by town residents on each other.


127 Leiderman and Lipovetskii, Russkaia literatura XX veka, vol. 1, 395.

128 Beregovskaia, “Poet epokhi bezvremen’ia,” 85.
The lyric speaker’s presence in the poem also mitigates the violence. In this as in many other poems with violent subject matter, the lyric speaker stands distinctly apart, but is rarely impartial. In “The Fight,” the lyric speaker’s mundane actions and mild attitude are opposed to the wild debauch of his neighbors. Rather than “epically” imperturbable, his attitude is wearily disapproving: “But instead of breaking up the fight [as he perhaps should have done – AM]/[Sizov] went out to join in.” Moreover, the speaker’s “turning a blind eye” to the goings-on reflects more of a self-protective than impartial position: after all, even the cat has been dragged into the fray, and the lyric speaker is marked as weak – he has a hernia and is clearly a loner, washing his own underwear. This weakness and vulnerability of the lyric speaker are further manifestations of the childlike aesthetic in Grigoriev’s lyric, and they stand in sharp contradistinction to the cold calculation of Kharms’s “Incidences” narrator (or the distanced condescension of Kholin’s, in the barracks poems).

Violence has been evoked as another example of the unity of Grigoriev’s children’s and adult work. Leiderman and Lipovetsky write: “The child’s viewpoint ‘cuts off’ a phenomenon from any kind of general human experience (moral norms, cultural traditions, etc.) and examines it in an extremely local context.”\textsuperscript{129} The use of the child’s viewpoint is very much in evidence in Grigoriev’s one surviving prose work, the novella “A Summer Day (A Cub’s Story)” [\textit{Letnii den’(Rasskaz detenysha)}], written in the early 1960s, when Grigoriev was still an art student.\textsuperscript{130} Though not intended for children, the

\textsuperscript{129} Leiderman and Lipovetskii, \textit{Russkaia literatura XX veka}, vol. 1, 393-394.

The novella presents a modernist-like exercise in first-person child’s narration. Told in the voice of a small boy (probably not more than five years old), the story covers a day in the life of a Soviet children’s summer camp. What results is grotesque, full of filth (flies in the breakfast porridge, lots of cow dung) and violence, mostly of a childlike variety (the hero fights with his bunkmates, gets roughed up by camp leaders and murders many insects). Yet, “Summer Day” is a sort of hybrid text, as it seeks alongside its grotesquerie to present a detailed psychological portrait of the child protagonist:

Yurka – he’s a friend of mine. He’s a bad guy, he’s a tormentor. He can put a whole worm in his mouth and not be scared one little bit. Lyonka also puts worms in his mouth, but that’s cause he’s stupid, and Yurka does it cause he’s brave. He’s the bravest one in our kindergarten. I’m the best at wrestling, then Yurka, but I’m afraid of putting live worms in my mouth, so Yurka’s braver than me. Plus he has rubber ears. The teacher can grab him by the ears and they just stretch out and it doesn’t hurt him one little bit.

A number of Grigoriev’s later children’s poems can be traced to this “parent text,” which provides an intriguing psychological background and context to these poems. The disposition of the narrator conveyed in this passage allows for an entirely logical and even positive interpretation of the following poem, “Summertime” [Letom]:

Мы летом у бабушки жили,
Соседом был Коля у нас.
Мы с Колей так крепко дружили,
Что даже подрались пять раз.  

[We spent the summer at grandma’s,/We lived next door to Kolya./Me and Kolya became such close friends,/We even fought each other five times.]

According to Leiderman and Lipovetsky, the poem’s juxtaposition of close friendship

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131 There is also an incident involving the small boys’ search for German landmines in the nearby forest. Although this is hard to call “ordinary childhood violence,” for children of Grigoriev’s generation, it actually was.


133 Grigor’ev, Ptitsa, 46.
with violence would be further evidence for Grigoriev’s using the child’s viewpoint as “psychological motivation for the absurd.”\(^{134}\) But the poem addresses a different audience and features a child lyric speaker more typical of Grigoriev’s children’s poetry. “A Summer Day” is certainly full of violence, but violence can be given a clear and compelling context (Soviet summer camp!). In this way, the child’s or naïve viewpoint in Grigoriev’s children’s poems can serve a different purpose than in the adult poems.

Just as a naïve lyric speaker provides a contrastive view of violence, so the formal aspects of the childlike aesthetic can also be used to estrange and make more palpable the depiction of violence. “The Siege” [Blokada] recalls Gor’s poem “Zdes’ loshad’ smeialas’…” discussed in the introduction to these case studies, although Grigoriev’s poem was not written in medias res. Here, the lyric speaker is directly implicated in violence, while the form of the poem belies its horrible content:

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Ем я лепешку из жмыха,
Держу наготове наган.
С криком промчался лихо
Мимо меня мальчуган.
Вырвал из рук лепешку –
Я пулю пустил ему вслед:
Разжал худую ладошку,
А лепешки уже нет.\(^{135}\)
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[I’m eating a sawdust cake./My revolver at the ready./With a cry a little boy/Came running past me./He grabbed the cake from my hands – /I sent a bullet after him:/When I unclenched the little fist,/The cake was already gone.]

The poem is a powerfully succinct evocation of the horror and futility of the siege experience, including the inhumanity of man to man (or man to child, or child to child) in inhuman circumstances. Meanwhile, the rollicking three-stress dol’nik, which inclines

\(^{134}\) Leiderman and Lipovetskii, *Russkaia literatura XX veka*, vol. 1, 393.

\(^{135}\) Grigor’ev, *Ptitsa*, 139.
toward the dactylic, along with words like *lepeshka*, *ladoshka* and *mal’chugan/promchalsia likho* make the poem’s lexical environment and rhythm cheerful and nursery-rhyme-like, much as in Gor’s poem.\(^ {136}\) In this poem, the tension is primarily between form and content\(^ {137}\) – while the lyric speaker might be a child as is his victim, and the context of the Siege certainly suggests that he is himself weak and vulnerable, the poem nevertheless provides no larger justification for his actions beyond the survival instinct.

The notion that Grigoriev’s children’s poetry is necessarily allegorical or Aesopian, really written for adults,\(^ {138}\) is challenged by the multidirectionality of many of the poems, their persistent indeterminacy. As Beregovskaia writes, in the case of allegory “the boundary between ‘children's’ and ‘adult’ poems is easy to cross only in one direction”\(^ {139}\) – but Grigoriev’s poems, like his anagrams, can be read repeatedly, front to back, back to front, left to right and upside down, without yielding a sole interpretation.

In her monograph on Grigoriev’s poetics, Elena Khvorostianova presents a cogent critique of the view of Grigoriev’s work promoted in most of the existing (emotionally charged and memoiristic) criticism. She points out various reductionist tendencies, including the assumption of hidden messages in the children’s work, the total

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137 For further discussion of the use of this kind of stark juxtaposition in poetry related to historical catastrophe, see the essays on Pukhanov and the Siege by Kukulin, “Stroficheskaia dramaturgia…,” and L’vovskii, “‘Vidit gory i lesa’…”

138 Yasnov uses the expression “adult orientedness” [*vzroslaia obrashchennost’*]. “Vosled ukhodiashchei epokhe,” 12.

139 Beregovskaia, “Poet epokhi bezvremen’ia,” 85.
identification of Grigoriev with his lyric speaker (and the situations in the poems with
Grigoriev’s real-life experience), and the straightforward association of violent and
strange behavior depicted in the poems with the literature of the absurd and the OBERIU
poets. Khorostianova suggests that a more productive way to read Grigoriev is to see
his texts as “emblematic,” a term she uses to describe a kind of reading that incorporates
multiple dimensions in a non-hierarchical way, i.e. not privileging one level of
interpretation (Aesopian, biographical, intertextual) over another, but allowing all of
them to coexist, regardless of possible internal contradictions. She offers the example of
the children’s poem “Akim ran along the river” [Vdol’ reki bezhal Akim]:

Вдоль реки бежал Аким,
Был Аким совсем сухим.
Побежал он поперек –
Весь до ниточки промок.¹⁴¹

[Akim ran along the river,/Akim was entirely dry./When he ran crosswise/He got
entirely soaked.]

Khvorost’ianova’s “emblematic” approach juxtaposes three readings: first, as a children’s
poem, with typical Grigorievian language and movement, as well as a direct reference to
a well-known children’s poem by Agnia Barto;¹⁴² second, a more referential extratextual
reading, as a poetic epigram directed at the children’s writer and official poet Yakov
Akim (a protégé of Barto); and, finally, an intertextual reading incorporating the New

¹⁴⁰ Khvorost’ianova, Poetika Olega Grigor’eva, 11-16, 49-52.
¹⁴¹ Grigor’ev, Ptitsa, 60. First published in Chudaki, 55. The existing publications do not
date Grigoriev’s poems.
¹⁴² The poem “Bunny” [Zaika] in Barto’s well-known cycle “Toys” [Igrushki] ends with
the line Ves’ do nitchki promok.
Testament figures of Joachim (Akim) and Christ’s walking on water.\textsuperscript{143} Thus the childlike aesthetic of the poem – its simple diction, trochaic tetrameter and language play – functions simultaneously in three different ways: as proper to a children’s poem, as part of the reference to Akim (a children’s writer, whose poems moreover often featured water and boating imagery) and as an enactment of religious metaphor, where childlike language is valorized as implying purity of spirit. Not all of Grigoriev’s poems are this explicitly multidimensional (though many reveal similar depth and breadth upon close reading). The point is that each of the possible readings is equally valid, and each individual dimension benefits from (rather than is canceled out by) the addition of further layers.

In this way, the childlike aesthetic ubiquitous in Grigoriev’s work also points in multiple directions. As in the “Siege” poem, it can immediately signal an unsettling gap between form and content; elsewhere, “childlike” form can signal a mood of silliness and play. Most of the poems discussed in this section, particularly poems featuring violence, have touched on the problem of Grigoriev’s lyric speaker’s relationship to the things and people around him. Like Aronzon, Grigoriev tends to avoid the ready-made and firmly fixed, "adult" lyric speaker, confident in the validity of its actions and assertions. But while Aronzon’s lyric speaker actually breaks down, dissolving into the landscape, Grigoriev’s mostly maintains recognizable borders while being open to a kind of radical

\textsuperscript{143} Khvorost’ianova, \textit{Poetika Olega Grigor’eva}, 54-59. The Akim reading refers to the unfortunate contrast between that writer’s success as a children’s writer and the lukewarm reception of his adult publications.
empathy. The downhearted lyric speaker in the poem “I-I” [Ia-Ia] recounts an unsettling encounter with his own self, set to the jolly rhythm of a limerick:

[...]  
Я впал в тоску,  
Купил треску,  
Иду домой по саду.  
Котам брошаю по куску,  
Вдруг чую — кто-то сзади.

Как говорится: сел на хвост.  
Я выскочил из сада.  
Бегу под мост — и он под мост  
За мною, вот досада.

– Схвату его, решил я, --  
Да как хлестну трескою!  
Смотрю — а это на меня  
Сам я гляжу с тоскою.  

[I fell into melancholy./Bought some cod./Head home through the park./I throw the cats a piece each./Then suddenly feel someone behind me.//As they say: he was on my tail./I leapt out of the park./I run under the bridge — and he does too/After me, what a pain.// “I’ll seize him,” I decided./And whack him with my cod!/I look – but looking back at me/Was me, looking very sad.]

The poem is serious and even reflective, but the seriousness is balanced by farcical elements recalling the cartoonish movements and slapstick humor of a Chaplin movie. The nursery-rhyme form also serves to balance the unsettling, nearly Gogolian scenario. But the poem’s closing line negates both the silly and the eerie at once, with a logical impossibility that retroactively changes the tenor of the whole poem (the first half of which contains a mournful description of a series of the speaker’s unpleasant encounters,

144 Leiderman and Lipovetsky propose that the combination of violence and disorder (both perpetrated by and recounted by the lyric persona) leads to a state of chaos in which the boundary between “I” and “other” blurs. Leiderman and Lipovetskii, Russkaia literatura XX veka, vol. 1, 396.

145 Grigor’ev, Ptitsa, 214.
the source of his melancholic guilt). Even as the appearance of a double is unusual in
Grigoriev’s oeuvre, the overall attitude of the lyric speaker – his childlike combination of
unmediated aggression and empathy – is typical.

In Grigoriev’s poems featuring violence, childlike form can diverge shockingly
from content; elsewhere, childlike form can signal a mood of silliness, irreverence and
play. The long poem “Circus People” [Tsirkachi] (published only in 2012, as part of a
rediscovered notebook the Red Notebook [Krasnaia tetrad’]), works with both of these
dimensions. The poem, which exists only in draft form, consists of about sixteen
fragments (including longer introductory and concluding passages), evidently destined to
form a whole. The editors of the notebook publication note the similarity in both time
(the late 1980s, toward the end of Grigoriev’s life) and genre (the long poem) between
“Circus People” and “Football,” a finished long poem published in Bird in a Cage. Of
course, both the circus and sports (particularly as a topic for poetry) are thematically
associated with children and youth, and both long poems contain parts that might easily
have been published as children’s poems. The following fragment comes fairly early in
“Circus People”:

Вот силач сидит на кубе
В мышцах он как в толстой шубе.

От него в двух шагах
Девочка на двух шарах…

-- Шар на шаре! как же так?
-- Что же странныго, чудак. –

Шар земля и мячик тож,

Skulachëv also points out an intriguing parallel with Zabolotsky, whose 1929 Stolbtsy
collection includes the poems “Football” and “Circus.” Krasnaia tetrad’, 140.
The fragment features an engaging description of a typical circus scene, with a strong man and an acrobat girl. The narration is interrupted by a disbelieving respondent, who questions the physical possibility of what is described – how can a girl balance on a ball on top of another ball? The speaker responds sharply, even pedantically, explaining the trick and ending the fragment with a strong assertion — almost a credo. The question-and-answer exchange (and the pedantry) call to mind riddles and other “school genres” typical of children’s poetry. As in other Grigoriev poems featuring a back-and-forth dialogue, the respondent is essentially a proxy for the reader (we have to take the speaker’s answers on faith). In this fragment, Grigoriev plays with a more standard mode of children’s poetry that assumes a naïve, uninformed (child) reader.

Recalling Khvorostianova’s “emblematic” approach, we can discern several further dimensions to the poem. Visually, the poem refers to Pablo Picasso’s famous painting “Girl on the Ball” (1905), which features a heavy strong man sitting on a square block and, nearby, a young girl balancing on a ball. She is only on one ball, but as the poem points out, the girl is actually balancing on two balls at once (if we count the round earth). There is also a reference to a story of the same name [“Devochka na share”] by another well-known children’s author, Viktor Dragunsky. The story’s hero is excited to

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147 Grigor’ev, Krasnaia tetrad’, 31.
see an act with a lady tightrope-walker dancing on a huge blue ball (Shar zemlia). Both the “adult” and child” extratextual references augment the meaning of the poem and complicate the question of its ultimate orientation (“children’s,” “adult”) without being essential to grasping it. The physical-philosophical dimension of the fragment, encapsulated in the final couplet, is “for everybody”: it recalls some of Grigoriev’s “educational” children’s poems describing physical phenomena, while simultaneously presenting a sophisticated philosophical and aesthetic proposition.

Meanwhile, much of “Circus People” diverges in tone and lexicon from the requirements of Soviet children’s literature. The concluding fragment in the cycle suggests that Grigoriev was not thinking of submitting it to his editors at “Detskaia literatura”: it reaches back from the present of individual circus acts to the circus’s antique origins.

Цирк -- древнейшее искусство.
Страх и смех -- два разных чувства

И восторг, и восторг, и восхищение, 
И какое-то смущенье.

-- Дети! если бы вы знали
Как артистов избивали

И артистов, и зверей, 
И детей, и матерей

Издевались как над ними 
В древней Спарте, в древнем Риме…

Раб -- ничтожество, лягушка, 
Раб -- живая лишь игрушка.

Разобьет несчастный вазу

148 Grigor’ev, Krasnaia tetrad’, 141.
И под меч ложится сразу
Упадет артист с каната
И на пике у солдата
Львы, пантеры, крокодилы
Пасти, морды, хари, рылы
Кабаны, козлы, быки
Зубы, бивни и клыки…
Но страшней конечно люди…

В прошлом это. Все, не будем.149

[The circus is an ancient art./Fear and laughter are two different feelings//Both joy
and delight/And a kind of embarrassment.//Children! if you only knew/How the
circus folk were beaten//The circus artists and the animals,/And the children and
the mothers//How they were tormented/In ancient Sparta, ancient Rome…//A
slave is a nobody, a frog/A slave is just a living toy.//The unlucky one who breaks
a vase/Goes under the sword right away//The artist who falls off the rope/Onto the
soldier’s pike//Lions, panthers, crocodiles/Maws and jaws and mugs and
muzzles//Wild boars, he-goats, bulls/Teeth, tusks and fangs…//But the worst of
course are people…//It’s all in the past. We won’t talk about it anymore.]

Even as the poem descends into stark descriptions of torture, murder and maltreatment,
the speaker continues to address children directly: “Children! if you only knew,” etc.,
continuing the style of address seen in the earlier fragment. The childlike orientation can
also be seen in the lists of animals (both exotic and familiar) and the overall diction
(slaves are compared to frogs and toys; the ambiguous verb izdevat’ sia is used to describe
torture, but also has a “child’s” meaning of teasing or mocking). Even the fatal missteps
are borrowed from the child’s world: thus the slave “breaks a vase” (echoing the child-
perpetrator in Grigoriev’s classic children’s poem “The Vase,” which also engages with

149 Grigor’ev, Krasnaia tetrad’, 43.
the theme of unjust punishment). The rueful final line of the poem is also entirely in the mode of children’s poetry, using a construction associated with children’s speech (cf. “I won’t do it anymore” [*bol’še ne budu*]).

Meanwhile, the childlike elements in what is patently not a children’s poem are almost exaggerated: for instance, the penultimate line about humans being the worst of all contains a didacticism foreign to Grigoriev’s actual work for children. The description of emotional experience in the second couplet seems both overly complex for a children’s poem while, in its plain-spoken presentation, atypical for adult poetry. And the final line sounds overprotective – we won’t talk about this anymore, because it would be too disturbing for you, my child addressees. As we have seen, however, Grigoriev is not one to shy away from disturbing children or adults. Instead, this line can be read as something akin to Kharms’s *VSE* endings or the famous closing of “Blue Notebook no.10” (“Uzh luchshe my o nem ne budem bol’she govorit’”). Kharms uses abrupt endings as a way of depriving a story (or a reader) of a proper ending, and in order to call attention to the artificiality of the whole enterprise of writing. Having already listed a series of grisly deaths and dismemberments, Grigoriev similarly stops short after the fact; his “vse, ne budem” actually suggests he might be convinced to keep going.

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151 Recall Vvedensky’s statement: “The novel describes life, time appears to flow there, but it has nothing in common with real time: there is no alternation of day and night, people remember their whole lives with ease whereas in fact it’s doubtful one can remember even yesterday. Anyway, any description is just plain wrong. ‘A man is sitting, he has a ship overhead’ at least has to be more right that ‘A man is sitting and reading a book.’” Leonid Lipavskii, “Razgovory,” in Vvedenskii, *PSS*, vol. 2, 163. Translation by Eugene Ostashevsky.
152 This denial, strongly reminiscent of Kharms, can be seen as a variation on the nonsense of “discourse that denies itself,” in Stewart’s terms: “These denials emphasize
Because we can only read “Circus People” in draft form, it is impossible to know what Grigoriev wanted to do with this poem and in what direction it might have developed further (the notebook is from the late 1980s, just a year or two before the poet’s death). What it does provide, though, is a window onto the poet’s negotiations with the childlike aesthetic as it manifests in children’s literature proper and Grigoriev’s own children’s and adult poems. It is tempting to see “Circus People” as, at least in part, an exercise in auto-commentary: Grigoriev, practitioner of an ancient art, juggles fear and laughter before his audience; the audience, eager to be amazed (and maybe terrified), watch the goings-on through the eyes of children.

Like many of their fellow unofficial poets, Grigoriev and Aronzon combined a life on the margins of society and literature with a complicated relationship to official Soviet literature. Their involvement with children’s literature (and in Aronzon’s case, screenplays) was thus both a practical compromise and an implicitly political stance, adding their names to the roster of experimental poets working ne v svoëm dele (Lidia Ginzburg). Meanwhile, their unofficial work employed a childlike aesthetic, stemming in part from the conventional features of children’s poetry, but in Aronzon’s case, rooted more in the naïve lyric speaker. Flaunting the childlike in adult poetry was already an act of aesthetic opposition; Grigoriev went even further, blurring and even calling into question the conventional boundaries separating children’s and adult poetry per se.

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not only the reversal of fictive status, but also the position of the fictive narrator as someone who does not have the responsibilities of the narrator of common-sense discourse.” Stewart, Nonsense, 73.
Having now examined the work of poets from Leningrad and Moscow, we can say with some confidence that the childlike aesthetic does not recognize city boundaries. Although the practical life circumstances of writers in the two cities showed some variation (Aronzon, for instance, might have had more children’s publications had he lived in Moscow), the childlike aesthetic of the poetry manifests recognizably in all four poets’ work. This ubiquity underscores the significance of the childlike aesthetic as a typical feature of unofficial poetry, regardless of its place of origin.
CONCLUSION

The Childlike Aesthetic Keeps Going

The questions asked in this project point in a number of interesting directions. To begin with, the “childlike aesthetic” is certainly not limited to the poets discussed in the dissertation itself. The emergence of Soviet children’s literature in the 1920s saw countless major poets trying their hand at writing for children, and in some cases, this involvement had lasting implications. Osip Mandelstam is a more canonical poet whose work would certainly benefit from a re-reading with specific attention to the childlike aesthetic; although she didn’t work in children’s literature, Marina Tsvetaeva could also be productively read through this lens. Prose of the early Soviet period also bears examination: alongside the writings of Yuri Olesha, who worked in children’s literature, elements of the childlike aesthetic are prominent in the prose work of Andrei Platonov and Boris Pilnyak. The writings of Siege authors affiliated with the OBERIU before the war, discussed very briefly in Chapter Four, are another rich area for further investigation. And the childlike aesthetic is certainly evident in the work of postwar poets who did not work in children’s literature, such as Leningrad’s Vasily Filippov, Vladlen Gavrilchik, Oleg Okhapkin and Elena Shvarts. Some of the poets associated with Moscow’s “Lianozovo School” were later joined by Eduard Limonov, whose early work could be read with a view to the childlike aesthetic. Lianozovo also gave rise to the Moscow Conceptualists, and work by poets like Dmitri Prigov and Lev Rubinshtein exhibits a kind of conceptual distortion of some of the aspects of the childlike aesthetic.
Looking ahead, the childlike aesthetic of both the early avant-garde and the unofficial poets of the post-war period has been equally important for more recent generations of poets in post-Soviet Russia. Contemporary critics including Ilya Kukulin, Dmitri Kuzmin and Danila Davydov have discussed primitivist and infantilist tendencies in contemporary poetry, but there remains plenty of investigative and analytical work to be done. Kukulin wrote that the circumstances of life in the 1990s gave rise to a “deheroicized” (or “postheroic) lyric speaker, whose childlike features are a kind of guarantee of responsibility. It would seem that the circumstances – poetic, social and political, as the case might be – that gave rise to this kind of lyric speaker are still very much in place in Russian poetry today.

Finally, there remains the very rich topic of avant-garde and post-war visual culture, which developed in step with literature throughout the twentieth century; unofficial visual art and literature developed in even closer proximity to each other than is usually typical for these modes, since their “underground” status often forced practitioners of both to work in the same crowded apartments, barracks and basements. The visual art provides direct illustrations of the argument about the prominence of the primitivist and naïve aesthetic for unofficial Soviet-era art, and I hope to incorporate this material into future developments of the project.

1 In his article about poetry of the 1990s, discussed earlier, Kukulin names many poets including Aleksei Denisov, Kirill Reshetnikov (Shish Briansky), Evgenia Lavut, Stanislav L’vovskii, Oleg Pashchenko, Maria Stepanova and Nikolai Zviagintsev. Kukulin, “Aktual’nyi russkii poet.” I would also consider Dmitri Strotsev, Faina Grimberg and German Lukomnikov (at least). Among younger poets engaging with the childlike aesthetic today we can mention Vasily Borodin, Dina Gatina, Alexandra Tsibulya and Vera Voinova (a short list).
Soviet children’s literature also offers great opportunities for further scholarship. This dissertation has focused on poets who had some, but not a great deal of, contact with official children's literature, and whose more prolific (and better-known) "adult" work shows the childlike aesthetic, even when their children's work doesn't. But there were also many successful children’s writers whose published work invites a re-reading in conjunction with their lesser-known unpublished work. To name just a few: Boris Zakhoder, the celebrated children’s poet and translator of Winnie-the-Pooh (among other classics), wrote some interesting adult lyric poetry; Yuri Koval' complemented his brilliantly thoughtful and introspective prose for young people with a bizarre absurdist picaresque novel, Suer-Vyer; and the immensely prolific Genrikh Sapgir would certainly benefit from a re-reading that incorporated his extremely variegated unofficial poetry with his many children’s books.

The prevalence of this model of literary activity – adult writers working in children’s literature – serves to underscore one of the major conclusions of this dissertation: that Soviet children’s literature needs to be brought out of the children’s corner and read alongside the adult work of its authors. The genre distinctions have not heretofore been called into question perhaps because they correspond to similar ones in non-Soviet literature. To invoke Susan Stewart’s binary of nonsense/common sense, it has seemed a matter of common sense to think of Soviet children’s literature as Soviet, but nevertheless children’s literature, corresponding to the norms of that genre as they might exist in any national literary tradition. Leaving aside the question of the validity of such genre distinctions across the board, I argue that in the context of top-down, ideologically saturated Soviet literature, we should not accept any generic divisions
uncritically. Children’s literature should be read alongside adult literature as an important part of the Soviet literary landscape.

Reading across generic boundaries in this way is furthermore a new way to open up and complicate the division of Soviet-era literature into official and unofficial. I have argued that the childlike aesthetic is characteristic of unofficial poetry, while showing how this aesthetic was often tolerated or even encouraged in official children’s poetry. Since children are never the only intended audience for children’s literature — and since reading parents can be incisive critics — the work of unofficial poets nevertheless did find its way to an official reading audience. In Marietta Chudakova’s formulation, “the living forces of literature quite naturally moved toward a place where the scaling-down of topics and simplification of language — which had become a prerequisite for these writers — could be motivated by genre: toward a literature that was, in fact, children's, that is, addressed to children.”² This is especially notable since the experimental adult work of many of these poets, even had they been able to publish it, would have reached a rather more limited adult audience (that is, readers of experimental poetry — never a majority, even under the most liberal cultural circumstances).

I opened this project with the contextually innocuous, yet potentially ominous title of Samuil Marshak’s 1923 poem about baby zoo animals: detki v kletke. I’ll close with another poetic evocation of children, in a poem not written for them by Oleg Grigorev:

дети бросали друг в друга поленья,  
а я стоял и вбирал впечатленья.  
Pопalo в меня одно из полений —  
более нет никаких впечатлений.³

³ Grigor’ev, Ptitsa, 139.
In the closing excerpt to Grigorev’s “Circus People,” discussed at the end of the previous chapter, the speaker seeks to provide a sobering corrective for the widely-held perception of the circus as cheerful and harmless. Here, I want to stretch a reading of this poem about kids tossing logs into a commentary on the childlike aesthetic as discussed in this dissertation. As we have seen, the “childlike” – with its immediacy, naturalness and freedom from standard pathways of thought – offers a great deal to writers wishing to liberate their language and literary imagination from the hackneyed and stifling norms of adult literature. Yet, even after all these years, it remains provocative – even taboo – so deeply conditioned and instinctual is the intellectual adult’s fear of appearing childish or naïve! Let Grigorev’s poem stand as a warning – if you get too close to the kids, you might fall into their games and get knocked out of the adult business of writing poetry.
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