After the Seraph: The Nonhuman in Twenty-First Century Russian Literature

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After the Seraph: The Nonhuman in Twenty-First Century Russian Literature

A dissertation presented

by

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Abstract

This dissertation looks at works from the 2000s and 2010s by three Russian authors: Maria Stepanova, Fyodor Svarovsky, and Linor Goralik. The work of these three authors often stages encounters and transformations between human and nonhuman beings—animals, robots, supernatural creatures—whose presence in the text leads both to an examination of the uses of language and a deep consideration of how the social body can include otherness. The main inquiry of this dissertation is how the nonhuman allows these writers to frame their thinking about the present moment as a historical period with complex social and literary challenges. As Russian-speaking writers who were born before the fall of the Soviet Union and who started publishing in its aftermath, the three of them are attentive to how historical myth and narrative functions in multiple areas of speech: literary-poetic, political, everyday. The compounded historical traumas of the twentieth century (its wars, the dissolution of one world order, the fall of the Soviet Union, and the subsequent revival of its more oppressive rules and beliefs) and their continued presence in contemporary life are reflected in their writing. In their work, the nonhuman embodies an unresolved past as well as the potential for a future built around new ethical and affective communities. The difference of the language and body of the nonhuman serves as an occasion to imagine an alternative social, political, and emotional life.
Table of Contents

Introduction

Chapter One: Maria Stepanova and the Voices of the Past

Chapter Two: Fyodor Svarovsky’s Laws of Robotics

Chapter Three: The Bestia Rasa of Linor Goralik

Conclusion

Bibliography
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Introduction

The Horse and the Seraph

How do the creatures who surround us make us aware of the limits of our language? Where can we find new words to describe our beautiful, sometimes terrifyingly complex world? The poet Nikolay Zabolotsky, whose countryside childhood shaped his interest in the natural world as a transcendent poetic space, made these questions central to his work as a member of OBERIU, a grouping of poets and artists often called the last Soviet avant-garde.¹ While his fellow oberiuty Daniil Kharms and Aleksandr Vvedensky played with the foundations of language and logic, Zabolotsky remained close to a tradition of metaphysical natural poetry in the vein of Tyutchev. But in keeping with OBERIU’s more radical pursuits, Zabolotsky also examined the notion of a lyric subject (and the Russian tradition of verbal skepticism) from new angles.

His 1926 poem “Лицо коня” (“The Face of a Horse”) presents a night scene in which the bodies of animals are as solid and eternal as the very landscape. They inhabit a kind of mythic time of the rural/natural world, filled with the sights and sounds of trees, birds, stones. Within that marvelous setting, the poem focuses on a horse — a handsome, magical animal that hears, sees, knows everything. Who can benefit from the horse’s wisdom? “И зная всё, кому

¹ A thorough account of Zabolotsky’s poetics and how they relate to the circumstances of his life, including his early years in Kazan, Kukmor and Sernur, is presented in Darra Goldstein’s Nikolai Zabolotsky: Play for Mortal Stakes (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1993). Sarah Pratt’s Nikolai Zabolotsky, Enigma and Cultural Paradigm (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2000) pays close attention to the metaphysical and religious strands in the poet’s work, including its indebtedness to the nineteenth century poetic tradition. For more on the different poetics and personalities within OBERIU, see Aleksandr Kobrinskii’s Poetika “OBERIU” v kontekste russkogo literaturnogo avangarda (Moscow: Izdatel’stvo Moskovskogo kul’turologicheskogo lytiea, 2000); and Graham Roberts’s The Last Soviet Avant-Garde: OBERIU – Fact, Fiction, Metafiction (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1997).
And should a man but see
the horse’s magic face,
he would tear out his own pathetic tongue
and give it to the horse. In truth,
this magic beast is worthy of it.
Then we would hear words.
Words, big like apples,
thick, like honey or curds,
words that penetrate like fire,
and once within the soul, as in some hut,
illuminate the wretched trappings,
words that will not die,
and which, in song, we celebrate.\(^2\)

Surrounded by subjunctive clauses, the words “человек” and “слова” appear abstract and undefined amidst the concrete natural imagery, less real than the landscape and the animals.

What is the relationship between this imagined “person” and the speaker of the poem; how does the poem relate to the “words” that would result from this sacrifice? The subjunctive, “what if”


framing puts distance between the poem and its meta-poetic meanings (after all, it is a poem that describes how poetry can come to be); to connect the two, we must consider the encounter that the title points us to. We must look at the face of the horse.

But first, let us take one step back. Looking directly at an animal, considering its features, movements, or inner life and seeing a limited set of associations and interpretations, is a strategy continuously taught to readers within a human-centered framework: in alphabet books with alliterative poems about animals, in fables and myths that explore ethical questions on grander and smaller scales, in all kinds of works of “realism” where animals retreat into the natural background or in works of speculative fiction where they join the main cast. In each instance, the text asks us to recognize both similarity and otherness, and to read ourselves within the animal body. This strategy is very common, yet, as Zabolotsky knows, and Derrida discusses at length in *The Animal that therefore I am*, our imagination and our ethics suffer when we use the broad, generic concept “animal” and define it simply as animals who are not human. So, to go back to my previous point, let us not look at the animal; let us look at the horse.

Looking at the horse happens on two different planes of the poem. There are two central encounters here (not counting the brief consideration of the less intelligent cow): the careful account of the poem in its wondrous entirety, and the “what if” possible encounter encapsulated within it, in which a person is moved to tear out his tongue and gift it to the horse. Let’s look at the latter more closely. The man, the poem seems to say, would certainly feel compelled to “tear

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4 “This agreement concerning philosophical sense and common sense that allows one to speak blithely of the Animal in the general singular is perhaps one of the greatest and most symptomatic asinanities of those who call themselves humans.” Jacques Derrida, *The Animal that therefore I am*, trans. David Wills (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), 41.

5 “Рогами гладкими шумит в соломе/ Покатая коровы голова./ Раздвинув скулы вековые,/ Ее притиснул каменистый лоб,/ И вот косноязычные глаза/ С трудом вращаются по кругу./ Лицо коня прекрасней и умней.” Some animals are more equal than others.
out his own pathetic tongue’’6 (the word “бессильный” neatly captures the aesthetic and ethical implication of that weak human tongue) so the “worthy” horse can speak. So immediately obvious is the need to grant comprehensible human speech to the animal, its face so magical, so obvious its intelligence, its words so necessary. The desired goal—the reason for the sacrifice—is actually the language that will follow this act of mild martyrdom: words like apples, honey, milk. Zabolotsky’s choices here point to a concreteness (“кругое молоко”) which the “powerless” human tongue lacks. Apples, honey and milk summon the simple gustatory pleasures of nature and language converging. They also point to a collaborative effort between nature and its human inhabitants (orchards, beekeeping, dairy farming), conjuring a world in which these elemental foods are all the sustenance one needs. This work is not taken for granted and its pleasures are not mundane; these words “penetrate like fire” and “in song, we celebrate [them].” These are words that will not die; they offer the potential of eternal renewal, they will not be worn out by use, or fall prey to the cynicism of familiarity. Moreover, the sacrifice is made by an unnamed “человек” but it will benefit us: “Мы услыхали бы слова” (“Then we would hear words”). The words themselves cannot be imagined, and are described indirectly, through comparisons — but their effect is felt keenly, and thought to be universal. This individual encounter can lead to a new language, and with it, a collective transformation is also possible.

The frame encounter, the very occasion of the poem, positions this rapt fantasy about the horse’s language within the beautiful, quiet setting of the wakeful animals at night. Thus, the affect of the marvelous imagined language lingers on in the poem, transferred onto the more

6 Daniel Weissbort’s translation of “бессильный” as “pathetic” introduces a layer that is not in the original text; the reader’s/observer’s presumed pity for the weakness of the human tongue enters the line, confirming the great affective charge of the poem.
“real” setting. As a result, the very bodies of the animals become charged by the potential unveiled in this imaginary encounter. In their silence, they are just as compelling as the words we could learn if the horse could speak. We don’t need to tear out our tongues to be unmade in their presence.

Let’s return to the image of the “[powerless] tongue.” The gesture of tearing it out is both surprisingly violent and tender, bloodless, submissive. It is also, of course, a clear reference to Aleksandr Pushkin’s 1826 poem “Попорок” (“The Prophet”), which also considers the language that can come out of a violent encounter with a strange creature.

Pushkin’s poem is written from the first person, but the speaker seems strangely passive, and throughout his transformation at the hands of the seraph, he is represented only obliquely: through the metonymy of his body parts, and syntactically in the dative case. In keeping with the borrowed Biblical story (from Isaiah 6:1-10), the poem narrates the encounter using Slavonicisms, which, to a contemporary reader, make the body as described doubly strange. The re-making of the human figure begins with his ability to see:

Перстами легкими как сон  
Моих зениц коснулся он.  
Отверзлись вещие зеницы,  
Как у испуганной орлицы.

---

7 I use affect here because it places the focus on the relational nature of the feelings/sensations that emerge during this encounter. “Affect is in many ways synonymous with force or forces of encounter,” write Gregory J. Seigworth and Melissa Gregg (in “An Inventory of Shimmers,” _The Affect Theory Reader_ [Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010], 2), and as this dissertation aims to show, affect is one of the forces defining encounters across the boundary between human and nonhuman, especially when they challenge structures of language or kinship.

8 For a reading of “The Prophet” as part of the poet-prophet tradition in Russian literature, see Pamela Davidson, “The Moral Dimension of the Prophetic Ideal: Pushkin and His Readers,” _Slavic Review_ 61, no. 3 (2002), 490-518. A detailed reading of the poem should also consider Pushkin’s responses to Adam Mickiewicz and the role of the poet-prophet in the Polish Romantic tradition/nation-myth. This is beyond the purview of my work.

9 The mix of Church Slavonic (high) and middle register Russian signals Pushkin’s engagement with an ongoing discussion of how contemporary poetic language should use registers from traditions popular in the past. For a recent detailed discussion of the Russian intertexts of this poem, most notably Kiukhel’beke, see Michael Wachtel, _A Commentary to Pushkin's Lyric Poetry, 1826-1836_ (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2011), 26-30.

With fingers of dream  
He touched my eye-pupils.  
My eyes, prophetic, recoiled  
Like a startled eaglet’s.  

The image is very precise: the seraph’s fingers, light as a dream, touch the pupils, which open like those of a startled female eagle. This simile introduces animal features (and female ones!) into the (presumably male) human body. The next touch/transformation is of the speaker’s ability to hear; sound acquires a physical fullness, the skies shudder, the flight of the angels can be traced. What the speaker perceives is all physical motion: of the heavens and angels above, of the creatures and plants below. His senses are heightened beyond belief, and he does not interpret this experience through the categories of the mind and spirit, but just indulges in its unrestrained physicality.

After hearing comes speech, and here we see the source-text for Zabolotsky’s imagined sacrifice:

И он к устам моим приник,  
И вырвал грешный мой язык,  
И празднословный и лукавый,  
И жало мудрыя змеи  
В уста замершие мои  
Вложил десницею кровавой.

He forced my mouth wide,  
Plucked out my own cunning  
Garrulous evil tongue,  
And with bloody fingers  
Between my frozen lips  
Inserted the fork of a wise serpent.

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11 I am using Ted Hughes’s translation, famously the last poem he ever wrote, because he foregrounds the violent elements of the poem. I also want to point out that his interest in Pushkin is probably related to his friendship with the poet and translator Daniel Weissbort, whose translation of Zabolotsky I am also quoting. See “The Prophet,” translated by Ted Hughes, in Selected Translations (London: Faber and Faber, 2006), 222.
12 Pushkin, 338.
13 Hughes, 222.
This is also where “Пророк” gets really violent (the segment that follows is a kind of open heart surgery). Another animal feature is introduced into the transforming body of the speaker, whose hybrid shape starts to resemble that of the seraph. Pushkin takes special care to describe the “before” state of the tongue—“грешный,” “празднословный и лукавый,” the most adjectives used to describe a single object in the poem. If we briefly set aside the religious-moral connotations of these words, Pushkin’s speaker is faulting his own language for being false, devoid of meaning, aesthetically and ethically weakened. This language is in need of renewal.

The encounter and metamorphosis happen at the intersection of cognitive, sensory, moral and natural processes (e.g., cognitive and sensory experiences: “сон,” “испуганный,” “шум и звон,” “содроганье,” “трепетный”; moral: “грешный,” “празднословный и лукавый”; natural: “испуганная орлица,” “тад морских подводный ход,” “жало змеи”). But these groupings are not entirely distinct; they borrow and acquire meanings from one another.

The most active of the senses at the end of the poem is that of hearing; it is also the sense which was transformed the most by the intervention of the seraph. His body has been exhausted by the attack of the divine being; he is left for dead in the desert, his surroundings unchanged by his heightened state. At this moment, God’s voice and instructions come unbidden. In Isaiah, the prophet volunteers to do God’s work. In “Пророк,” the prophet barely makes it out alive, and he is compelled to obey the instructions of the seraph. There is no real relief or resolution to the tension caused by the violence of the transformation, and the last lines read like a prompt for an endless, onerous journey.

In both poems, the encounter with a nonhuman creature remakes the body of the human being, and also makes a new kind of language possible. Both poems show this metamorphosis in physical as well as cognitive and abstract terms. Both of them show intimate encounters that, the
poems suggest, can ripple outward. Both introduce an element of aesthetic and moral compulsion. The new language forged by them affects many beyond the immediate moment of the encounter, possibly remaking them in turn, signaling a new beginning which leaves the almost-mythical time of the poem and enters common usage.

Encounters with the nonhuman can turn more sinister, signifying an end rather than a beginning; the unmaking of the human can lead to madness. Pushkin’s work contains other moments when nonhuman creatures disrupt a tired order, leaving a new language in their wake. The Bronze Horseman, for example, is a main character in its own right, a free-wheeling man-horse-history assemblage (or, to borrow Jakobson’s turn of phrase, an “epic realization of a sculptural motif”) at the center of a disruption of the urban space, natural world, and a character’s sense of self. The poem is full of hybrid constructs: the interweaving of narrative and lyric devices, history and myth, natural disaster and mental turmoil, bronze and flesh. The nonhuman element is at the center of this hybridity, the focal point of its creative force; the sculpted replica of the creator of the city comes to marvelous life. A grandiose metaphor for state power infiltrates the workings of an ordinary, private self, and pushes it further yet from the comfort of safety and reason. And once it has been set into motion, it cannot be stopped:

И, озарен луною бледной,
Простерши руку в вышине,
За ним несется Всадник Медный
На звонко-скачущем коне;
И во всю ночь безумец бедный,
Куда стопы ни обращал,
За ним повсюду Всадник Медный

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15 As Jakobson points out, the Horseman, not Evgenii, is the main character of the long poem. Roman Jakobson, Puškin and His Sculptural Myth, trans. John Burbank (The Hague: Mouton, 1975), 4.
16 Ibid., 34.
С тяжелым топотом скакал.\textsuperscript{17}

Illuminated by the pale moonlight,
With arm outflung, behind him riding
See, the bronze horseman comes, bestriding
The charger, clanging in his flight.
All night the madman flees; no matter,
Where he may wander at his will,
Hard on his track with heavy clatter
There the bronze horseman gallops still.\textsuperscript{18}

The bronze horseman is ever-present: “во всю ночь,” “повсюду.” The spatial and aural dimensions of the city are measured against the shape and sound of the statue; Evgenii’s movement along this new map is fueled by maddening fear. As in “Лицо коня” and “Пророк,” the individual encounter with the nonhuman comes to define the way human and nonhuman creatures inhabit a much larger space, and the way its particular order compels them to act.

After the Seraph: The Ethical Dimensions of the Encounter with the Nonhuman

These poems are just three canonical instances of the nonhuman taking center stage in Russian literature, reflecting contemporary ideas about old and new language, old and new ways of relating to the surrounding world and to one’s own history. Present-day Russian literary discourse on these themes, and artistic work featuring the nonhuman, inevitably draws on these older sources and ideas. (Pushkin has not ceded his spot as a lodestar, and Zabolotsky is part of a legacy of Soviet-era poetry that is being rediscovered and reworked in the present moment; the genealogies connecting both of these poets to the present draw on various kinds of family resemblance; e.g., Vvedensky’s use of Derzhavin, Aronzon’s and Sedakova’s interest in

\textsuperscript{17} A. S. Pushkin, \textit{Sobranie sochinenii v desiatи tomakh} (Moscow: Izdatel’stvo akademii nauk SSSR, 1957), v. 4, 396.
Zabolotsky, etc.) The current instantiation of increased interest in the nonhuman — of which this dissertation is an example — comes out of this tradition. Let’s look at the questions at its heart a little more closely.

All of these poems are, in part, about how an encounter with the Other can remake you, and, by extension, about the ethical dimensions of such transformations, and the limits of individual knowledge and agency (the powerless/sinful tongue acting metonymically on behalf of a powerless/sinful subject). Zabolotsky’s poem in particular raises the question of the sacrificial element of the encounter as a problem of ethics; the human encounters the worthy animal and is compelled to act generously. Though there are other aspects of this exchange we could focus on: the generosity of the human speaker asserts his power to grant things to the domesticated animals, reinforcing an existing hierarchy. Or: it is far too easy to look at the face of the horse and draw unsubtle, totalizing conclusions about the nature or language of the animal. And finally: we should be wary of our biases, which often favor expressive language and intelligence over their perceived absence.19 The encounter with the horse, the metapoetic aspects of the poem, Zabolotsky’s charismatic language, as well as the many interpretative and aesthetic judgments we can draw from all of these elements—these are all problems of knowledge which become tangled up with complex and open-ended ethical questions. Looking at the nonhuman, we see proof of the shortcomings of our own human faculties.

Scholars working in the field of animal studies have proposed ways to move theories of human ethics and knowledge beyond a firm (and unsustainable) distinction between human and non-human animals. Cary Wolfe, for example, argues that Vicki Hearne and Stanley Cavell do

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19 Here is Vicki Hearne’s blunt analysis of the danger of this bias: “We want our leaders to be able to give good speeches. This is so deep in us that we are bewildered when we discover that the professor may be a murderer, or that the Nazi can discourse beautifully on the music of Mozart. And we have still failed to come to terms with Ezra Pound’s fascism.” Vicki Hearne, *Adam’s Task* (New York: Skyhorse, 2007), 20.
not go far enough in using Wittgenstein’s theory of language to unsettle our hierarchical understanding of human-animal interactions because they fail to move beyond a humanist framework.\textsuperscript{20} In \textit{Zoographies}, Matthew Calarco expands the framework of Levinas’s discussion of ethics to accommodate the animal as an Other:

That [Levinas] focuses on what he takes to be the specificity and priority of the human face is, if not wholly defensible in philosophical terms, certainly understandable. But there is no need to restrict our attention in the same manner. What would ethics look like, then, if we took seriously Levinas’s definition but lifted the idiosyncratic restrictions he places on the ethical encounter? Simply put, ethics would become rigorously and generously agnostic.\textsuperscript{21}

Calarco concludes that “we are obliged to proceed from the possibility that anything might take on a face. And we are further obliged to hold this possibility permanently open.”\textsuperscript{22} He calls this agnostic (setting aside preconceived notions and leaving open the possibility of both knowing and not-knowing) view of the Other an “ethics of universal consideration.”\textsuperscript{23} Both Wolfe and Calarco try to expand the frameworks and concepts we use when approaching the animal other so that they can accommodate inquiries into a diverse array of beings and our interactions with them—and, in turn, shed light on our own rights, behaviors, language, and cognition. The agnostic encounter with the nonhuman is a chance to interrogate the world of the human, and the structures that define and regulate human life.

What would Calarco’s ethics of universal consideration look like when applied to lyric subjectivity or narrative forms? How do literary texts balance agnostic not-knowing with a

\textsuperscript{20} “And yet, in both Hearne and Cavell, […] a kind of humanism, a palpable nostalgia for the human, returns through the back door to severely circumscribe the ethical force of the shared world building with animals that seems at first glance promised by their appropriation of Wittgenstein, leaving the animal ethically if not phenomenologically bedarkened and the human insufficiently interrogated by the encounter.” Cary Wolfe, “In the Shadow of Wittgenstein’s Lion: Language, Ethics, and the Question of the Animal,” Cary Wolfe, ed., \textit{Zoontologies: The Question of the Animal} (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 6.
\textsuperscript{22} Ibid., 178.
\textsuperscript{23} Ibid., 184.
search for a particular kind of knowledge of self and other? Contemporary Russian literature, which engages with personal and historical crises outside the framework of religious or ideological certainty, can provide interesting answers to these questions.

The nonhuman beings in Pushkin and Zabolotsky — seraphs, horses, lifelike statues come to terrifying life — are agents of physical, affective and poetic transformation, and they challenge the human subjects and readers to consider the ethical implications of the encounter. Whether “real” or “unreal,” the compelling, fundamentally unknowable nature of the nonhuman draws in the lyric subject, poetic characters, and readers alike. Literary thought and writing, particularly the malleable body of narrative poetry, is open to the ethics of universal consideration proposed by Calarco. The dynamics of the encounter between human and nonhuman beings are at the center of these works, and our effort is directed toward parsing the movement, shape, language and affect of all creatures involved, making us reexamine our usual frameworks for doing so. This becomes the occasion for rethinking the language available to us for describing both personal and historical experiences.

This dissertation looks at works from the last twenty years (the 2000s and 2010s) which stage similar encounters and transformations between human and nonhuman. The authors I have chosen—Maria Stepanova, Fyodor Svarovsky, and Linor Goralik—are all prolific writers and members of the same generation, born in the USSR in the 1970s.24 Their work is marked by a sustained interest in other kinds of beings—animals, robots, supernatural creatures—whose

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24 There are two relevant corollaries to the decade of their birth: the first is that they spent their entire childhood (but not their adulthood) as Soviet citizens, the second is that they grew up at a time when notions of artificial intelligence and (widespread access to) popular, visually striking media with speaking animals, were part of mainstream culture. Without generalizing too much, we can still note the particularity of this background/experience compared to that of authors from previous and later generations.
presence in the text leads both to an examination of the uses of language and a deep consideration of how the social body can include otherness.

A central concern of their work, and the main inquiry of this dissertation, is how the nonhuman allows these writers to frame their thinking about the present moment as a historical period with complex social and literary challenges. As Russian-speaking writers who were born before the fall of the Soviet Union and who started publishing in its aftermath, the three of them are attentive to how historical myth and narrative functions in multiple areas of speech: literary-poetic, political, everyday. The compounded historical traumas of the twentieth century (its wars, the dissolution of one world order, the fall of the Soviet Union, and the subsequent revival of its more oppressive rules and beliefs) and their continued presence in contemporary life are reflected in their work. An uncertain and ambiguous relationship toward past and present social structures is a major theme in the writing of all three authors, and the nonhuman is a central element of how this theme is expressed. In their work, the nonhuman embodies an unresolved past as well as the potential for a future built around new ethical and affective communities. The difference of the language and body of the nonhuman serves as an occasion to imagine an alternative social, political, and emotional life. In doing so, these authors combine an affirmation of the values of humanism (in contrast with the former Soviet interpretation of it, and against the backdrop of a continued absence of humanist values in Russian state policies) with a rethinking/critique of subjectivity informed by post-humanist thought.

This introduction will cover the starting points of the inquiry of my dissertation. I will begin by elaborating what I understand as “the nonhuman” and show how this concept is a useful lens through which to read some of the major thematic concerns of contemporary Russian literature. As one of my main interests when it comes to the nonhuman is how we conceptualize
the affect of the encounter, and how that informs our understanding of the moods and emotional settings of contemporary life, I will briefly introduce some useful terminology from affect theory, which will be used throughout the dissertation. Then, I will offer an overview of the humanism/posthumanism question as it relates to aesthetic and political thought in twentieth century and contemporary Russian culture. This will lead me to a discussion of the role of poetic and literary form in the works I am studying, and how the body of the text accommodates the different bodies — human and nonhuman — which inhabit it.

This dissertation takes as its starting point an ongoing cultural moment of increased attention to our kinship with and difference from other beings, be they “real,” mythical, or virtual/mechanical. \(^{25}\) Tropes that have existed in art for centuries are being amplified, restructured, and reconsidered in art and media; their meanings expanded to accommodate new political and social structures, as well as new forms of knowledge acquisition and transmission. At the same time, the nonhuman retains its central mystery, the core fact of its otherness, which we, humans, cannot fully know through our senses, our language, or our imagination. In that way, the trope of the nonhuman continues to center our anxiety about not knowing — including not knowing how we came to be and what we will or could become, and the profound uncertainty of being subject to power structures beyond our control — which is transformed into an urge to seek new connections or draw firm boundaries.

Not knowing can feel like stasis, like being trapped. The nonhuman, which is not governed, historicized, or socialized in the same way as human beings, can make us newly aware

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\(^{25}\) This extends both to academic/scientific and popular literature; human-animal relations, robots, the posthuman, monsters and myths are on book covers, movie posters, and in academic CFPs. For good overviews of the “animal turn” in literary studies, see Jennifer McDonell, “Literary Studies, the Animal Turn, and the Academy,” *Social Alternatives* 32, no. 4 (2013), 6-14; and Cary Wolfe, “Moving Forward, Kicking Back: The Animal Turn,” *Postmedieval: A Journal of Medieval Cultural Studies* 2, no. 1 (2011), 1-12.
of our troubled relationship to the currents of history: to what extent are we carried by them, progressing at a steady pace? To what extent are we driven back to a point we were trying to escape? How do we speak of all this, and is our language and awareness of it individual or shared? The uncertainty and doubt expressed in these questions are an extension of historical and cultural trauma — resulting in an inability to talk about both past and present without encountering the outlines of a crisis or traumatic event. They are sometimes transformed a “knowing” cynicism which refuses to imagine or invest in a better possible outcome. With that in mind, I consider texts that present the contemporary moment as a conversation with a recent or distant past, and I will examine how they imagine a future in relation to the past and present.

Then again, in the works of the authors I have chosen, there is an aspect to the agnostic encounter with the nonhuman which is liberating, thrilling. Not knowing can be a way out of (or around) cynicism, leaving the possibility of hope or progress open. Unburdened by conventional language and gestures, the encounter with the nonhuman can usher in a new kind of relation to the surrounding world. It opens up a space where feelings and beliefs, or the work of the imagination, can flood in.

In the work of Stepanova, Svarovsky, and Goralik, the traumas and disorders of the past and present are experienced by both individual bodies and larger social structures. The texts I look at implicitly or explicitly theorize a relationship between mind and body, between self and community, and between order and crisis. The encounters between human and nonhuman happen at times of birth and rebirth, death and unmaking. Liminal affective and physical states are understood through the prism of the nonhuman other, and they often extend beyond the single individual that the text chooses to focus on.
Finally, all three writers are especially attentive to the material of language, though in different ways: Stepanova’s poetry is complex, highly structured and referential, Svarovsky’s is deceptively clear and light-hearted, while Goralik’s stories brim with realia and conversational rhythms. All three of them mostly stage their work in a contemporary, Russian-speaking setting. Thus, they are perfect test cases for how different literary styles use the nonhuman for their specific purposes.

**Definitions of the Nonhuman**

I use the nonhuman as an umbrella category that includes real and imaginary beings — animals, robots, but also supernatural creatures such as angels, vampires or ghosts. What they have in common is a set of similarities to and deviations from what we think of as human; they are either physically real, living creatures who inhabit our world but whose intelligence and language differs vastly from ours, and with whom we have complicated relationships; “man-made” beings whose intelligence and language is a product of our own technological design acquiring a life of its own; or the imagined inhabitants of fairy tales, folkloric or religious texts, who convey ideas and anxieties about our personal, social, political and spiritual lives. In the works I study, the encounters and physical transformations between human and nonhuman focus on sites of physical/linguistic similarity and difference, they all elicit strong affective responses, and they all variously appear in literary investigations of a particular contemporary structure of feeling (more on that term later). Thus, while I consider the individual features of each category of nonhuman (supernatural beings in Stepanova’s “Проза Ивана Сидорова” or Svarovsky’s
robots), I find that the umbrella category of the nonhuman is universally useful because it lets us see similarities that are otherwise elided.

Since the category of the animal appears in the work of all of these authors, and since animal-human relations are theorized most thoroughly in contemporary post-humanist thought, my reading is often based on that framework for thinking about the nonhuman. The most common encounter with the nonhuman (at least in the age before Siri and Alexa) is the encounter with the animal, and our thinking about the nonhuman comes out of that. The different beings that fit under the nonhuman umbrella in this study have been examined separately — animals within visual art/literature; robots and the technological/sci-fi visions of the future; supernatural beings and the gothic/romantic imagination, angels and religious faith. The nonhuman is an open, generative trope, that adapts to the needs of the text. I posit the idea that the different kinds of nonhuman beings have a lot in common, especially in the way that they distort the poetic text to accommodate their difference, to signal it to the reader, to invite a reading that can accommodate the tension of not knowing and not speaking. They all heighten our awareness of embodiment, cognition, language, of our positioning within society and history, and the limits of our knowledge. And at a time in Russia following social and political upheaval, they come to represent the provisional nature of social order as well as the way political upheaval can shape/unmake the psychic and physical body of a person.

The literary encounter with the nonhuman links reader and author in a very specific manner. The writer’s description of the encounter more speculative than most encounters.

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27 I don’t mean to discount the reality of the creatures central to religious and folk belief; I have in mind the material reality of the animal world, which encompasses (and builds, and nourishes) the human world.
between two human beings; it presents an attempt to translate language, gestures and affect
between beings that use and conceptualize them in profoundly different ways. Within this setup,
the reader is faced with a translation and tasked to reconstruct the original text, or at least to
attempt to fill in some additional nuances. As readers, when we imagine ourselves as part of the
encounter with the nonhuman, both positions present a specific challenge. If we mentally inhabit
the position of the human, we are faced with a creature who challenges our frameworks for
communication and understanding. If we choose to imagine and inhabit the body of the
nonhuman (or if the text urges us, tricks us into doing so), we are made to look at a human from
an unusual distance. In either case, the usual formats of interacting with and experiencing the
presence of another being are defamiliarized, and the reader is invited to re-learn/re-set the terms
of their own subjective positioning.28 (Of course, many fictional and poetic premises stage
similar processes of defamiliarization; however, it acquires a new dimension when one of the key
subjectivities explored is not akin to ours.)

Yet it is important that the nonhuman is similar enough to the human that, in an
encounter, communication seems possible, desirable, as does the potential to transform into the
nonhuman shape, to create or imagine a process with the two different bodies as its end points.
The human observer sees the nonhuman through a framework of resemblances—similarities,
analogies, metaphors, possibilities—which can relate to the physical body or the affective state
of both beings. At the same time, the nonhuman is different enough that the relationship is
complex, fraught, unresolved, anxious. The question of the possibility of translation, of the
irreconcilable difference in language, arises, as does the need explore the different cognitive

28 In her essay “Zabolotskii dvadtsatykh godov,” Lidia Ginzburg points out how animals allow Zabolotsky to use
the language of the elegy without sounding old-fashioned. In Literatura v poiskakh real’nosti: Stat’i, esse, zametki
(Leningrad: Sovetskii pisatel’, 1987), 139-140.
processes—and the difference in cognition—at the heart of the encounter. This exploration is not likely to yield definitions that will work across the board (hence the need to examine each encounter separately), but it is a necessary and compelling quest just the same.

The nonhuman is also often a symbolic stand-in for a human other, for the many kinds of difference seen and experienced across the social body.\(^{29}\) In that context, the us/ours mentioned above becomes a political formation, part of a power structure that is negotiated in each interaction with the other (whatever kind of other it may be). This kind of reading — any kind of reading of the nonhuman, really — is usually anthropocentric, part of our tendency to see the larger world as an extension of our own needs and preferences. I am not interested in interrogating the inherent value or accuracy of the anthropocentrism that inevitably rears its head when we study texts which imagine other kinds of beings. My focus is, rather, on how contemporary literature engages with anthropocentrism while also addressing specific political and social structures, and how the tropes through which this happens carry an affective potential charged by the very uncertainties at the heart of anthropocentrism. This movement through the nonhuman back to the limited imagination of the human can still be instructive about aspects of human experience that are otherwise insufficiently clear, underarticulated, or unarticulated.

Looking at the nonhuman is a way to examine a kind of difference that, on the one hand, de-centers the human/anthropocentric point of view — it reaches out into a space of imagining and not knowing which cannot be mapped or narrated in a conclusive way. On the other hand, because the question of how exactly the nonhuman being is different, how it exists in the world, cannot be resolved, when we return to the human speaker/observer/reader, we can now examine them with a newly acquired openness and uncertainty. The text inevitably serves as a reflection

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\(^{29}\) This kind of use of the nonhuman as metaphor is the most common one: e.g., animals as a different kind of human other, or as “human subjects-in-the-making.” McHugh, *Animal Stories*, 8.
of their place in an anthropocentric society, but the provisional nature of this arrangement is revealed to us. In a similar way, these texts also bring us back to their own form and construction; the questions we ask about the encounter with the nonhuman are shaped by—or answered by—a particular literary convention: lyric elements evoking states of mind and individual points of view, narrative elements exploring the dynamic between disparate beings. The affect, language, dynamics of the encounter run parallel to the affect, language, dynamic of the verse or prose segment that harbors it.

**Affect and Structures of Feeling**

The texts I have chosen are all, in one way or another, examinations of heightened emotional or physical states, and I will draw on affect theory to account for the value and function of the feelings expressed or implied by the text. For the purposes of this study, affect is not considered entirely separate from cognition or meaning—I take to heart Ruth Leys’s critique of the field of affect studies (as advanced by Silvan Tomkins, Eve Sedgwick, Brian Massumi) and the “alleged disjunction between emotion and cognition.”30 I choose the term affect over feeling or emotion, because affect is more relational and transformative. Here, I am influenced by Jonathan Flatley’s work in *Affective Mapping*, a study of how modernist melancholia can be “the opposite of depressing, functioning as the very mechanism through which one may be interested in the world.”31

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Flatley uses the work of Henry James, W.E.B. DuBois and Andrei Platonov to study what he calls affective mapping: the means by which knowledge of the historical origins of melancholia(s) allows one to share it with others and transform a depressive melancholia into a way to be interested in the world, or, in short “the historicity of one’s affective experience.” Flatley’s concept comes out of Benjamin’s study of melancholia as a “definitely historical problem related to the experience of modernity. In this view melancholia is no longer a personal problem requiring cure or catharsis, but is evidence of the historicity of one’s subjectivity, indeed the very substance of that historicity.” Affective mapping links individual affective experience to historical processes, and thus allows one to find commonality with others experiencing the same (or similar) affects in response to these processes; it also depends on the reader’s investment in following the map and engaging with the affective content of the text. The affective map, Flatley says, “shows one how one’s situation is experienced collectively by a community, a heretofore unarticulated community.” It “is not a stable representation of a more or less unchanging landscape; it is a map less in the sense that it establishes a territory than that it is about providing a feeling of orientation and facilitating mobility.” Following Benjamin, Flatley notes that self-estrangement is another aspect of aesthetic experience that has the potential to transform and heighten affective experience, linking this term to the mechanics of ostranenie or Brecht’s alienation effect: “My own emotional life must appear unfamiliar, not-mine, at least for a moment, if I am to see its relation to a historical context. The idea is to allow

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32 Ibid., 2-4.  
33 Ibid., 3.  
34 Ibid., 4.  
one’s emotions to lose their invisibility and necessity and become instead contingent, surprising, relative.\textsuperscript{36}

Flatley also borrows the term “structure of feeling” from Raymond Williams to describe “those structures that mediate between the social and the personal that are more ephemeral and transitory than set ideologies or institutions” which exert force on our affective lives:

When certain objects produce a certain set of affects in certain contexts for certain groups of people— that is a structure of feeling. And sometimes structures of feeling are personal and idiosyncratic, but more often they are not: a social group of which the subject is a member shares them. Thus we can talk about particular working-class structures of feeling, or masculine ones, or Russian ones. Generational style, class tastes, shifts in linguistic usage— these are the elements of “practical consciousness” that Williams wants to be able to describe.\textsuperscript{37}

My work is not exclusively focused on melancholia, or the experience of modernity, but it does study shared affective experience—and how it attaches to certain literary tropes—in the aftermath of a crisis which introduced a new historical and aesthetic period. I find affect a particularly helpful lens to study how the authors in my dissertation rethink narratives, myths, and tropes from Russian history and literature, because they grew up during a time with a heightened sense of dissonance between the political affect of the state (and its expression in officially-sanctioned literature and culture) and the daily experience of living in that state, followed by a collapse of the structures that upheld this false Soviet affect.\textsuperscript{38} The notion of a “structure of feeling” as an ephemeral construct rather than a retroactive labeling of a fixed grouping seems very helpful for the study of the contemporary period, without the benefit of temporal remove and a clear sense of an ending. With the caveats that our social and affective

\textsuperscript{36} Ibid., 6.
\textsuperscript{37} Ibid., 25-6.
\textsuperscript{38} See Ilya Kukulin on “the late-Soviet cynicism of the 1970s, which was fueled by a latent delegitimization of communist ideology, and a perception of morality as a purely discursive phenomenon.” Ilya Kukulin, “Cultural Shifts in Russia Since 2010: Messianic Cynicism and Paradigms of Artistic Resistance,” \textit{Russian Literature} 96-98 (2018), 221-54, p. 231.
lives are influenced but not determined by historical processes, and that affect has meaning, Flatley’s theoretical framework is helpful for studying how Stepanova, Svarovsky and Goralik weave individual experiences and encounters with the nonhuman into a larger open-ended narrative about contemporary societies and their struggles to find a language to talk about themselves or a way of being in the world, and for understanding the implication of having the nonhuman be the focal point of questions about human language and human political and social relationships. When I talk about the contemporary crisis of language and its political and psychological aspects, I think of it as a particular contemporary structure of feeling.

I find that the nonhuman is particularly helpful trope to trace in this context, because it foregrounds the dynamics of affect: the transformations of one’s way of being in the world, the recalibration of one’s subjectivity, the way we relate/attach to objects and beings in order to know them. While I don’t mean to separate affect from other cognitive and emotional processes, I want to consider it as an important layer to foreground, whose relational nature makes space for the agnostic nature (including all the ways in which knowledge and certainty are made difficult or impossible) of the encounter with the nonhuman. In my study of these three authors, I will use affect to account for elements of the encounter or transformation between human and nonhuman for which language (which is rich in emotional expression) or the cognitive/physical body of the human is insufficient.39

39 Before we continue: the idea of the insufficiency language brings us, of course, to the tradition of verbal skepticism in Russian letters. As Sofya Khagi discusses in Silence and the Rest: Verbal Skepticism in Russian Poetry (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2013), the antinomy of logocentrism and logoskepticism has been a central theme in Russian poetry, and the particular nature of Russian logoskepticism, influenced by the Orthodox tradition of apophatic theology and hesychasm, is markedly different from parallel “Western” versions of it. The authors I study bring into play different aspects of verbal skepticism – religious and romantic ineffability, absurdist logophobia – to different degrees. What matters most to my analysis is that their examination of the insufficiency of language has to do with the challenges this insufficiency poses to social, political, and affective relations; the limited possibility of expressing one’s personal experience and/or relationship with the divine is part of that challenge, but not its central concern.
One of the defining dimensions of the human body, which all of these texts address, is how it is molded and controlled by the family and the state apparatus. Stepanova, Svarovsky, and Goralik are all interested in how these structures regulate relationships and affects; how they influence what kind of material reality is made possible, or possible to imagine; how they enforce physical and emotional uniformity and compliance; how they set the terms for what kinship and belonging look like; and, importantly, how they are part of the narrative of individual and collective traumas. Affect is relational and deeply attuned to these structures of power; it becomes a central element in how they are conveyed in the body in the literary text.

In the works of these three authors, the state apparatus is represented by the military and the police. Both are a foundational part of the contemporary Russian national imaginary, ever-present in public and private spaces. The official mythology of military victory and sacrifices is continuously deployed in public spaces and public discourse for all kinds of political purposes. And the deep-seated historical trauma brought about by the violence of wars (both official and unofficial) and the (Soviet and post-Soviet) police state is a central feature of the collective unconscious. And, given the total nature of both wartime mobilization and police control over the civilian population, there is a large area of overlap between family and state structures, especially as they relate to the affective dimensions of individual and collective history. The state works to erode other structures of kinship, and the narrative of national history leaves little room for divergent family (and individual) histories.

These themes, as we will see later, are closely linked to an attempt to imagine what the humanistic values could look like within the context of a state and political culture traditionally deprived (or opposed) to them. That entails a reimagining of the social body on many different levels: different models of the family, different forms of governance and civil society. The three
authors I study use the nonhuman to estrange the familiar patterns of existing power relations in an attempt to construct altogether different ones, which challenge military triumphalism or the state’s reliance on violence. In doing so, they reference anxieties and discontents shared by many of their readers regarding the illusory, precarious nature of concepts like order and safety (as embodied by the family and the state): this, too, is a specific Russian structure of feeling of the contemporary moment.

Post-humanism?

Russia also has a particular relationship to the current of posthumanist thought that has been part of a foundational post-Cartesian philosophical shift in the twentieth century. In their introduction to the volume The Human Reimagined: Posthumanism in Russia, editors Colleen McQuillen and Julia Vaingurt offer a thorough overview of the main questions of the posthumanist turn and trace specifically Russian (as well as Soviet) cultural movements and ideas that preceded and informed it, most notably Cosmism and the biopolitical projects of the Soviet state. Humanism and posthumanism carry different meanings in the Russian context compared to (more) Western uses of the terms:

As we have already established, the discourses of posthumanism emerged in part as a critique of the idealistic humanism of the European Enlightenment. In The Russian Idea, Nikolai Berdyaev explains that humanism in Russia was conflated with humanitarianism, an attitude toward one’s fellow man colored by the Christian values of compassion and pity. Writing on the contrast between Russian humaneness (chelovechnost’) and European humanism (gumanizm), Berdyaev asserted, “Humanism in the European sense of the word formed no part of the experience of Russia. There was no Renaissance among us, but we did experience, and it may be with some particular sharpness, the crisis of humanism, and its inner dialectic was disclosed.” The crisis of humanism, as Berdyaev saw it, was the conflict between the charitable values of Eastern Orthodoxy and the Russian imperial state’s tendency toward cruelty, violence, and oppression.40

40 Colleen McQuillen and Julia Vaingurt, eds., The Human Reimagined: Posthumanism in Russia (Brighton, MA:
Growing out of a tumultuous and violent twentieth century, the “radical negative thrust” of posthumanist thought extends to the way it challenges humanist notions of time; in this, it is related to the rich tradition of eschatological thought in Russian writing. Berdiaev’s assertion of the special mission of the Russian people, which holds individual (rather than communal) salvation as impossible, and Fedorov’s inquiry into resurrecting one’s ancestors as a means to overcome death, are both part of that current of thought.

Another notable element of posthumanist thought is its attention to the materiality of the body:

The issue of embodiment is a major point of contention in posthumanist discourse. Humanism prioritized the mind and spirit over the body, marking them as the loci of human uniqueness and superiority, and embroiling them in its discriminatory practices against non-humans and those deemed subhuman. The body charged with natural, animalistic impulses was on the contrary the element of human beings that incorporated them into the surrounding environment. Thereby, many posthumanists and anti-humanists came to underscore the importance of human materiality. At the core of posthumanist thought is the desire to break through the isolation of the human that came about as the result of anthropocentrism and to treat the body as the point of convergence, networking, and connection with the environment.

In the poems and prose pieces I study, the materiality of the body becomes a site of transformations that reflect both internal, affective states, and changing social orders. These transformations often put bodies into liminal states: crises, deaths and resurrections abound, affecting individual bodies and family structures.

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41 Ibid., 2.
42 Ibid., 16.
43 Ibid., 8.
Posttraumatic Humanism and Historical Knowledge

I want to borrow another term, posttraumatic humanism, to complicate the notion of humanism as it plays out in the texts I study. The authors included in my dissertation worked in the decades following a radical political and cultural shift, which had an effect on notions of personhood and identity, and was also connected to a rapidly changing urban and natural environment. Their nonhuman characters are marked as subjects not beholden to the same political categories, even as they inhabit the same spaces and their changing economies. In these texts, the nonhuman offers the (limited) possibility of a different social, political, but also emotional life — at a time when the human capacity to cope with change or catastrophe is being tested. In their works, historical trauma is compounded by contemporary forms of violence and repression.

In a 2017 article, Ilya Kukulin introduces the term posttraumatic humanism to describe a movement in post-Stalinist Soviet culture, which used images from the European Renaissance and late Middle Ages “to legitimize the psychological complexity of the contemporary self (granting it the right to a tragic worldview) and to present, obliquely, the period of the 1940s to the 1960s as an epoch of ideological and existential crisis resembling the religious and existential crises of the Renaissance.”\(^{44}\) The works that Kukulin sees as representing posttraumatic humanism all use “implicit comparisons between a historical episode and the recent past or the present. These analogies represent history as filled with unpredictable and unjustifiable violence.”\(^{45}\) There are collective and individual traces of the totalitarian consciousness borne by


\(^{45}\) Ibid., 346.
Soviet society under Stalin, and of the trauma of state terror. The ideology of the state (its “proletarian” humanism) had been discredited by its reliance on dehumanizing violence; this led to “the disidentification of a person with the social majority and with the history embodied in a collective will.” There was an urgent need “to invent new images of the relation between the individual and the universal, or, to be more precise, between the individual and the collective.” This quest to invent new terms for how the individual relates to the collective is another historical instantiation of the process still underway in parts of contemporary Russian culture, and Kukulin’s examination of it, coming from the present moment, demonstrates a keen awareness of these parallels.

One of the works discussed in Kukulin’s article is Alexei German’s film *Hard to Be a God*. The film was conceived in the 1960s, work on it began in the late 90s, and it opened in 2013, after the director’s death. As Kukulin notes, “[the] film was completed during Putin’s presidency, and it is tempting to consider its gloominess an expression of anti-authoritarian protest. But its social meaning is broader. It demonstrates the tragedy of an enlightener in a society that consistently rejects humanism and trust between people.” This creates a link between the posttraumatic humanism of the Soviet period and the more recent post-Soviet attempts to define the relationships between self, society and history. Kukulin picks up the thread of historical reenactment, the individual’s relationship to society/ideology, and the lingering emotional aftereffects of the terror/war trauma and ideological oppression in the 2018 article on contemporary trends in Russian culture cited earlier. The starting point is an ongoing crisis:

I submit that 2010s Russian society has been drawn into a deep crisis of its symbolical orders. This crisis is used and strengthened by state-backed propaganda, but it is too deep

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46 Ibid., 350.
47 Ibid., 348.
48 Ibid., 342-3.
49 Kukulin, “Cultural Shifts in Russia Since 2010: Messianic Cynicism and Paradigms of Artistic Resistance.”
to be considered exclusively an effect of propagandist influence. Its most important
trends are, first, the propagandistic appropriation of the transgression of norms and the
shift of norm-violation into a paradoxical form of loyalty and, second, the erosion and
decay of existing socio-cultural models of interpersonal communication and
autocommunication.50

One of the features of this crisis, which Maria Stepanova also discusses in her essay
collection *Tri stat’i po povodu (Three Articles on the Matter, 2015)*,51 is the squeezing out of an
idea of plurality of norms (both ethical and aesthetic), which was a feature of the decade
following the dissolution of the USSR, and replacing it, Kukulin continues, with a “single
common and united Norm” that privileges an assumed majority that agrees with the conservative
orientation of the state.52 Elements of this new order which are relevant to my study are (a) its
suppression of “social communication as an interaction between different people searching for a
common language,”53 and (b) an “open cynicism,” which Kukulin calls “messianic cynicism” as
it is used “as a defense of Russia’s unique historical mission to implement universalist moral
values forgotten by the West.” One of its features is that it “blocks differentiated, complicated
communication. It is an anti-communicative attitude, which does not acknowledge the Other as
an interlocutor (Other in this context can only mean Alien), and denies the presence of otherness
in individual or social consciousness.”54 The presence of the nonhuman in literary texts is a way
to push back against these tendencies: to invite, assert, even celebrate otherness and the Other,
and to give the Other a voice that can counter the cynical, anti-communicative mode of the state.

The intersection between contemporary political reality and psychological attitudes
works on very deep levels. Here is what Kukulin says about the function of this cynicism:

50 Ibid., 222.
51 Maria Stepanova, *Tri stat’i po povodu* (Moscow: Novoe izdatel’stvo, 2015).
52 Ibid., 223-6.
53 Ibid., 226.
54 Ibid., 230-1.
This cynicism is a form of collective psychological defence, which allows its practitioners to ignore the lack of shared social meanings. It could thus be seen as a continuation of the late-Soviet cynicism of the 1970s, which was fueled by a latent delegitimization of communist ideology, and a perception of morality as a purely discursive phenomenon. The current spate of cynicism is further motivated by a need to defend against the feeling of living in an undeclared state of emergency. [...] One of the main goals of Russia’s current propaganda is to make extraordinary situations seem routine and, moreover, centuries-old.\(^55\)

The sense of emergency (which is in fact a normalized state of perpetual crisis), and the delegitimization of political and social structures, brings us back to the current of eschatological thought in Russian writing. It involves a warping of how historical time is presented and experienced, another continuation/result of the breakdown of Soviet models:

In Stalin’s time, the present was regarded and represented as the highest point of history, a point of breakthrough to the “shining future.” In today’s Russia, the present, while not considered less valuable, is not considered more valuable than the past; thus, the encounter between present and past turns into an endless \textit{mise en abyme}, where each new action appears as a symbolic re-enactment of the past.\(^56\)

Many literary works address or play with this problematic, nostalgic gaze toward the past while still retaining a critical distance from it. Kukulin lists aesthetic practices which can counter the crisis of the symbolical order in contemporary Russia (among them “experimentation with the modalities of language” and “imagining of new modes of communication”;\(^57\) while neither of these is radically new in itself, the rapidly changing technologies of language, publishing, and communication provide new mediums for such project) and notes poets whose work reflect different kinds of discourses, among them Maria Stepanova. Her work, he says, elaborates “the idea of a transpersonal subjectivity (not collective but ‘shared’) that transgresses the borders of the private ‘I’.”\(^58\) This transpersonal subjectivity embodies more open standards of

\(^{55}\) Ibid., 231.
\(^{56}\) Ibid.
\(^{57}\) Ibid., 240.
\(^{58}\) Ibid., 243.
communication and community-building. As I will show later, Stepanova’s work also enacts this turn toward the past, but it counters simplistic, ideology-driven nostalgia with a narrative (and lyric) structure that foregrounds linguistic, affective and experiential complexities.

Stepanova and Kukulin are among several contemporary writers and theorists who are discussing, with great urgency, the way the values and priorities of a variety of historical pasts are evoked in order to keep the present within a limited political framework—while in the meantime, as these writers point out, the more relevant analogies concern a mounting sense of danger (in anticipation of the inevitable crisis at the end of the Putin years) and increased military activity, with patriotic affects mobilized to support and justify the latter. There are challenges to this line of reasoning: it is hard to argue for the specificity of this moment of crisis (as Kukulin pointed out earlier, the sense of crisis has become entirely normalized). What period in Russian history has not been experienced as a crisis, its works of art subsequently read through that lens? In dealing with a large political apparatus affecting a large population, and in covering a complex historical period, these authors can hardly avoid broad arguments and generalizations.

It helps, then, to consider the context of how their works are written and published, as well as the kinds of spaces they are observing and participating in. Their arguments observe processes in the political and public spheres, mediated by a technology of instant global access (whose own parameters, for example its centralization and the nature of its users and contributors, are rapidly changing). The scale and quality of the available information, and readers’ access to it, is very specific to the contemporary moment—rendering all historical analogies between present and past crises the product of a very contemporary kind of
knowledge, specific to the Internet age of the 2000s and 2010s. Moreover, these writers’ interest in the past (and in working out details of the Soviet period as it relates to the present) comes out of an urgent sense that recent history must be preserved before it recedes from view and becomes inaccessible to subsequent generations. (This is why it is important to note that Svarovsky, Goralik, and Stepanova are members of the same generation, and that Kukulin, as well as theorists like Serguei Oushakine and Dina Khapaeva, whom I will quote later, are also members of the same generation.) These questions of changing forms of knowledge and changing social orders enter literary works and literary language in many different guises; one of the ways they are realized is through the figure of the nonhuman. The nonhuman, as we will see, is both subject to the same historical processes as humans, and not part of the groups and structures that shape them. It thus comes to embody the disconnect between personal and collective history.

The danger that historical memory will be overwritten to fit ideological goals is not an overstatement. In an essay on post-millennial public rituals of remembering the Great Patriotic War, Serguei Oushakine examines the recent turn toward “affective management of history” in remembrances of the war and their attempt to build “synchronized collective emotions.” These rituals, he says, are no longer ordered through narrative structuring but mainly through emotional encoding:

Traditional historical formats are perceived as ontological and affective barriers, as screens that obfuscate rather than facilitate access to the past, as history that “lost its human touch.” As a result, the alternative is associated not with questioning/deconstructing the dominant narrative and representational strategies of

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59 The experience of navigating virtual spaces of knowledge/information during ongoing crises—and the affective relations of readers contributing to the creation of these spaces—is also a particular structure of feeling, with a chapter for each language or country. We should also note that many of the texts discussed in this dissertation, like Stepanova’s Prose of Ivan Sidorov, poems by Svarovsky and stories by Goralik, first appeared on their own websites or in online publications.

symbolization of the war but with attempts to establish direct and perceptible connections with the military past—through authentic objects, human remains, or documentary footage. […] The production of a new version of history is not entirely absent here but it is significantly bracketed off by a desire to use the past as a source of emotional experience."

Like Stepanova and Kukulin, he points out that this affective turn toward the past poses a problem: it makes it impossible to construct new material, new futures out of this investment: “Mnemonic formations and affective objects offer symbolic containers and repeatable scripts but they cannot generate new content.”

The focus on the Great Patriotic War is significant (for both contemporary Russian writing and the purposes of this study) because, as Dina Khapaeva notes, remembrances of the War were among the few occasions that allowed people open mourning, and thus became an outlet for expressing pent-up feelings surrounding the compound trauma of the Soviet period. On the flip side of this is the fact that the War myth itself was meant to solidify a version of history in which the war was the exception to an otherwise peaceful period:

To oppose the horrors of the war to the “peaceful prewar days” of the Bolshevik purges was the main function of the war myth. Evocation of the Great Patriotic War masked—and still masks—the everyday tragedies of life under Soviet rule. […] Indeed, the war myth was constructed to suppress memory of the Gulag, to rename and suppress the memory of the irrational, unjustifiable sufferings of the victims of the Soviet system.

Khapaeva links the examination of that past, and the complex feelings surrounding it, to the current dominant trope of the nonhuman in post-Soviet fiction:

The human being who used to be center of the anthropocentric universe inherited from the Enlightenment has been pushed to the periphery. A nonhuman—a vampire, a werewolf, a witch, a magician, a dragon—has taken man’s place in contemporary culture. This shift of the cultural dominance—from anthropocentric to nonhuman—makes the figure of the monster so crucial for our understanding of contemporary culture.

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61 Ibid., 279.
62 Ibid., 301.
64 Ibid., 372.
These analyses of contemporary Russian culture by Kukulin, Oushakine, and Khapaeva all suggest that it is borne back ceaselessly into the past—both out of a need to understand that past and by political/ideological design (also operating on the level of affect, among other things), which leads to a dangerous cultural inertia. The disorienting effect of this inertia and the captive gaze toward the past on notions of the self and individual/collective history is often channeled, in literary texts, into the trope of the nonhuman.

**Historical Knowledge about Today**

Let us look at how literary texts conceptualize these same issues. Maria Stepanova’s 2015 book of essays, *Three Articles on the Matter*, takes on a broad subject that is also present as both theme and practice in her poetic work: she tries to diagnose the complicated relationship that contemporary Russia, its language and cultural imagination, has to its more recent and distant past. The matter is also, in part, the 1914 centenary, and the upheaval of the early twentieth century.

The first essay in the book, “Позавчера сегодня” (“Today before Yesterday”), uses Blok’s “Петроградское небо мутилось дождем” (“The Petrograd sky was blurred by rain”) and Auden’s “September 1, 1939” as examples of poetry’s ability to address and describe the contemporary moment — and, by extension, to create it as a unit separate from the past, an investment toward a different future. (Though not explicitly, the essay poses this as a kind of moral obligation and necessary contribution on the part of poets—which is in keeping with a traditional understanding of the poet’s role in Eastern Europe. Similarly traditional is the porous boundary between problems of language, culture, and politics; they are deeply interlinked, and
Stepanova addresses them as one unit.) Writing in 2014, Stepanova reflects on the present—the hybrid war with Ukraine, the rise of nationalist rhetoric, the way it is used to curtail freedoms—through the lens of that past, and voices her concerns about the limits of that kind of analysis, which is in itself a symptom of the problem she is describing:

Лихорадочная обращенность к прошлому, одержимость совершившимся до нас, могут быть знаком уклонения от будущего, неверия в него. Беньяминовский ангел истории движим ветром, сносящим его вперед, в неизвестность; его горестное лицо обращено назад, к руинам и грудам обломков, возникающим на пути, отделяющем его от утраченного (рая, бывшего). Но в каком-то смысле постоянная потребность во взгляде назад, попытка опереться на уже совершившееся, говорит о большем — об отсутствии настоящего. И как реальности, и как картинки, что эту реальность изображала бы. 65

The feverish turn to the past, the obsession with what has already been, can signify a turn away from the future, a lack of belief in it. Benjamin’s angel of history is moved by the winds that carry him forward, into the unknown; his sorrowful face is turned back, toward the ruins and wreckage that emerge along a path that separates him from what has been lost (paradise, the past). But in a sense the constant need to look back, the attempt to rely on what has already taken place, speaks to something bigger—the absence of a present. Both as a kind of reality and as the picture this reality would paint for us. [Italics added]

The obsession and identification with the past, Stepanova suggests, is also an inability to inhabit the present (as separate from the past) or imagine and create a future unburdened by these same preoccupations. In spite of the essay’s (and the book’s) overall poetic tone, the political actors and factors responsible for this cultural crisis do not go unmentioned (the other two essays are more explicit in naming them), though Stepanova is writing largely for a likeminded audience that can catch her more oblique references to current events. (Here, too, the present becomes obscured by the difficulty of language.) When she talks about the angel gazing toward the past, searching for a lost paradise in spite of the wreckage that’s actually there, her reader can easily

65. Stepanova, Tri stat’i po povodu, 10. All translations of the essays from this book are mine. Versions of these translations will be included in an as-yet-untitled volume of Stepanova’s work, edited by Irina Shevelenko, forthcoming from Columbia University Press in 2020.
recognize a politicized nostalgia that rewrites a violent and oppressive twentieth century as a peaceful order to be reinstated. But the problem is not just that time passes in spite of our orientation toward the past. Sure, time will continue regardless of how we conceptualize it; it is our concepts that are lagging behind, stuck. How does one object to this stifling nostalgia?

The sense is that our working vocabulary does not have the words or constructions that would allow us to speak of what is happening today without using a complex past tense or a portable quote book. The public space—from official statements to social media—is full of exclusively borrowed speech, full of gaps and erosions, all long past their expiration date. Whenever the need for speech arises, whenever a mouth opens to agree or dissent, to appraise or name, a quotation lies at the ready (often intonational, and mostly forgetting the source it was borrowed from), and the event immediately loses its primacy.

Stepanova describes the language used in the present—to talk about the present, to try to challenge its hierarchies and describe the effects of its governing order—as uncomfortably linked to or outright borrowed from the past. It is someone else’s language, it is incomplete, it deflects, it effectively silences those who wish to speak against it. It denies speakers their agency and contributes to a political, social, and cultural stasis. Whose task was it to prevent that?

We are forced to somehow explain to ourselves what exactly is being done to us, and it

66 Ibid., 11.
67 Ibid.
turns out that there are no new words for it. We— I— did not make them in the 1990s and
the 2000s; it seems like the only work that was done then was exhuming and reviving the
past. And so it is today; we are silent while it speaks, whatever and however it can speak.

[emphasis added]

The 1990s and 2000s, that is, the time between the collapse of the Soviet Union and the present
day, were spent doing the (necessary) labor of “exhuming and reviving the past”—by which
Stepanova means re-integrating/re-constructing a canon of writers and works/language created
outside official institutions, trying to make sense of a cataclysmic end to those institutions,
untangling the myths and realities of the Soviet period. That work, it seems, did not allow for yet
another arduous task. So much attention was paid to the old language that the new language was
never created, and with it, no new sense of the self in time. The way Stepanova describes it, this
lack of language/imagination that can will a future into being is experienced as a malaise that
seeps into all layers of contemporary culture and public life, contributing to a political and social
affect that leaves people cynical, unstable, uncertain, anxious. This structure of feeling is
understood as a kind of psychic rift: “[Мы] сами перестали быть собственными
современниками, если современность— это язык, которым о ней говоришь” ([We] are no
longer our own contemporaries—if the contemporary is made possible by the language you use
to talk about it).

In the third essay of the book, “Предполагая жить” (“Intending to Live”), Stepanova
discusses one of the symptoms of this, in her view particularly Russian, pathological
preoccupation with the past, and the complex relationship with what is real and what is possible
—the prevalence of fantasy/sci fi tropes across all literary genres:

Диковатая, клюковатая архаизация, о которой говорят сейчас все и которую
приходится наблюдать и описывать прямо по ходу того, как почва осьется под
ногами, имеет в России занятный фон. […] У всех или нет, но значительная часть
tекстов, воспринимаемых широкой публикой (мы ведь сейчас говорим не о
словесности, а скорее об этнографии с антропологией, где работают законы
The wild, tattered process of archaization that everyone is talking about, which we observe and describe even as the ground is crumbling underneath our feet, has a peculiar backstory in Russia. [...] Even if it’s not quite everywhere, a significant portion of the texts that a broad audience (here we move away from literature per se, and toward ethnography and anthropology, where the laws of large numbers are at play) would recognize as written to the point, as having to do with reality, are really about the lives of vampires, foxes and saints. [...] That is, the [Russian] incredible is very much credible in Russia – and it is a product not meant for export, one you couldn’t easily dress up in a pinafore appropriate for the outside world. All of this has little to do with the books themselves -- but it says a lot about what the Cyrillic alphabet and those who use it have to contend with.

Stepanova proposes a kind of unified theory of Russian realism (in a broad sense of the word), in keeping with work done by literary scholars,69 claiming that one of its characteristics is the frequent appearance of sentient beings who are not human, and who carry immense symbolic value. In her view, there is something specifically Russian about this, something that doesn’t make immediate sense to other readers and other audiences, which makes this kind of fantasy believable and realistic. The only recognizable reality is one that leaves the door open for “unreal” elements to enter and interrupt. These texts are perceived as written “по делу” - which sounds almost euphemistic, like an unspoken shared agreement, easier to recognize than to

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68 Stepanova, Tri stat’i, 19.

define (“I know it when I see it”). In a sense, this identifies a quality of the text that is beyond just plot, character, genre—it is about the way the elements of the text fit together and the way the reader is invited to account for any discrepancies, it is the resulting mood and affect, the recognizable structure of feeling. Why is realism (without magic, religious beings, talking animals) not “по делу”—how is that kind of “reality” insufficient? And what experience of the readers does it reflect?

Общая вера в то, что любой, самый дикий, поворот жизненного сюжета возможен и неизбежен. Общая боязнь чересчур притереться к теплому боку этого мира, а потом рухнуть в ледяную неизвестность.70

There is the common belief that any, even the wildest possible, plot twist in one’s life is both likely and inevitable. As well as the common fear that one will get too comfortable on the warm side of this world, and then crash into the freezing unknown.

It seems that realism cannot convey the sense that anything is possible, that the worst is inevitable.71 This fatalism is described in sensory-emotional terms: a fear of adapting to warmth and comfort, lest one falls into the cold. Stepanova does not draw a straight line between this fear and the need to embed “incredible” elements into otherwise “realistic” works, but an inference is made. Nonhuman beings remind us that reality is not as stable and solid as we would like it to be, that there is a parallel, much worse, reality that could engulf ours at any moment. The awareness of this, in fact, determines our existence in our own reality.

To summarize, Stepanova identifies two important cultural currents, or problems, in contemporary Russia. One has to do with language: the pervasive inability to extricate oneself from the language of the past while also attempting to counter established historical narratives,

70 Stepanova, Три стат’и, 19.
71 Realism, of course, is a relative concept and always in need of contextualization (see Roman Jakobson, “On Realism in Art,” in Jakobson, Language in Literature, ed. Krystyna Pomorska and Stephen Rudy [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987], 19-27). Here, Stepanova seems to suggest that the incredible is seen as realistic (while still understood as fundamentally not “real”) by both readers and authors.
the absence of a separate language to describe the present, and the consequent inability to work toward the future—which, in political/social terms, becomes an inability to counter the forces preserving the status quo, their strong conservative impulse, their fear of change and otherness. The second has to do with collective feeling (or, in Flatley’s terms, a structure of feeling): it is a sense of instability and danger bred from past experience, which alters one’s relationship to how “reality” is experienced and how it should be depicted. This is why nonhuman beings are such a generative trope in Russian literature: they represent a run in the fabric of reality, a reminder of how reality is constructed by a language oriented toward, and burdened by, the past.

In an interview with Igor’ Gulin from 2013, reprinted in her 2014 collection Один, не один, не я (One, not one, not I), Stepanova talks about the significance of OBERIU poet Aleksandr Vvedensky on the occasion of a Moscow staging of his play Ёлка у Ивановых (Christmas Tree at the Ivanovs). The play, the discussion of it in a major publication (Kommersant), its subsequent inclusion as an honorary essay (titled “О Введенском” [“About Vvedensky”] in the book) are all part of the ongoing interest in the work of the Oberiuty (which has also reached US-based publishers and Slavic scholars). In the interview, the questions about literary legacy serve double duty as questions about how to look at the 1920s and 1930s (their aesthetic movements and political tragedies) from the vantage point of the 2010s. Gulin

72 Maria Stepanova, Odin, ne odin, ne ia (Moscow: Novoe Izdatel'stvo, 2014), 85. The translation is my own.
74 The main focus has been on works by Daniil Kharms and Aleksandr Vvedensky. English-language editions of Kharms’s work include I Am a Phenomenon Quite Out of the Ordinary: The Notebooks, Diaries and Letters of Daniil Kharms, translated by Anthony Anemone and Peter Scotto (Brighton, MA: Academic Studies Press, 2013); Today I Wrote Nothing: The Selected Writing of Daniil Kharms, translated by Matvei Yankelevich (London: Duckworth, 2007); A Failed Performance: Short Plays & Scenes, translated by Emma Winsor Wood and C. Dylan Basset (Pittsburgh, PA: Plays Inverse Press, 2018); Russian Absurd: Selected Writings, translated by Alex Cigale (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2017). As of 2019, the main English-language edition of Vvedensky’s work is An Invitation for Me to Think, edited and translated by Eugene Ostashevsky and Matvei Yankelevich (New York: NYRB, 2013). In 2017, one of the two panel streams at the AATSEEL conference focused on “OBERIU and its Afterlives in Russian Culture.”
writes that, when it comes to politics, we “[live] in a time that somehow parodies the period when Vvedensky’s main texts were written.” Stepanova counters that identifying the present as a parody of the past is part of the problem; there is an abundance of tools and analogies for thinking about the current situation, which are of no real use to anyone. She then contrasts how the 1920s and the 2010s see the relationship between the status quo and imagined possibilities:

В этом смысле опыт интеллигенции двадцатых-тридцатых годов совсем не похож на наш. Как это было с ними? Они родились в неподвижном мире, его хотелось раскачивать. […] Разница с нами состоит, кажется, в том, что нет перемены, к которой мы не были бы внутренне готовы (которой не ждали бы с привычным ужасом). […] Семейная история и история страны учат такому; в реальности, которую мы знаем, может произойти все, что угодно.

In that sense, the experience of the intelligentsia of the twenties and thirties is very different from ours. What was it like for them? They were born in a static world, they wanted to shake it loose. […] The difference from us, I think, is that there is no change which we haven’t already braced ourselves (which we wouldn’t anticipate with the usual dread). […] Family history and the country’s history teach us just that: anything at all could happen in the reality which we are familiar with.

This is the same sentiment we saw earlier: that there is a consensus—a feeling more than an articulated thought—that any sense of order and control is illusory. It includes a kind of survivor’s guilt whose roots go back to the Terror:

Русская речь как чужая квартира, куда заселяют новых людей (как в тридцатые и сороковые – в дома арестованных). В ней можно жить, зная, что в лучших своих проявлениях являешься паллиативом, замещаешь чье-то место. Мы, в общем, и делаем буквально это – живем в мире, образовавшемся после того, как этих вот людей убили: живем буквально вместо них. То есть мы – уже тем, что живы, – бенефициары случившейся катастрофы.

The Russian language is like someone else’s apartment where new people are moving in (the way people were moved into the apartments of those arrested in the thirties in forties). You can live in it, knowing that your best actions are merely palliative, that you are taking someone else’s place. That is literally what we are doing—living in the world that came together after these people were murdered, literally living in their stead. That is, we—by the very fact that we are alive—are beneficiaries of the catastrophe that

75 Stepanova, Odin, ne odin, ne ia, 85.
76 Ibid.
77 Ibid., 84.
happened.
The very fact of living is a kind of complicity with the cover-up of murders and dispossession — though here, she is talking about language more so than real estate. (Language is real estate.)

For Stepanova, language’s adherence to patterns and analogies from the past prevents us from inhabiting the present, which is a symptom and/or a cause of a political and cultural crisis. For Vvedensky, what is of interest is language’s fundamental inability to describe reality. Eugene Ostashevsky notes Vvedensky’s astonishing “[conception] of poetic composition as research into the relationship between language and reality.” Often, this inquiry takes the shape of objects and nonhuman creatures which allow the lyric to disperse among non-cohesive points rather than gather in one cohesive center.

At the heart of Vvedensky’s poetic project was finding ways to disrupt the continuity of language and thought so that the real centers of gravity—his three major themes of god, time, and death—can be revealed. Geoff Cebula explores how this preoccupation with death and time resulted in the poet’s 1930s work in the elegiac tradition — with a twist on its coordinates, the lyric subject and time frame: “If the elegy often treats death as its subject, its attitude toward death implies a certain temporal distance - as in the already-complete death of a friend or an anticipated horizon for the poet himself. Vvedensky attempts to stage an encounter with death not as a future contingency but as a fundamental incoherency in our thinking about life, one that becomes evident primarily in the dissolution of the lyric subject.”

An example of death as a dissolution of the lyric subject can be seen in Vvedensky’s philosophical elegy “Ковёр гортензия” (“Rug Hydrangea,” a title taken from one of the poem’s most striking rhymes), which begins:

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78 Eugene Ostashevsky, “Alexander Vvedensky, an Invitation for Us to Think,” An Invitation for Me to Think, xvii.  
Мне жалко что я не зверь,
бегающий по синей дорожке,
говорящий себе поверь,
а другому себе подожди немножко,
мы выйдем с собой погулять в лес
для рассмотрения ничтожных листвьев.\textsuperscript{80}

I regret that I’m not a beast
running along a blue path,
telling myself to believe
and my other self to wait a little,
I’ll go out with myself to the forest
to examine the insignificant leaves.\textsuperscript{81}

From the get go, the speaker defines himself against an imaginary animal, which then enters into
a dialogue with the two beings that split off from it. The poem presents a fragmentation and
dispersal of the self through unceasing movement across natural and abstract landscapes, all the
while looking inward, defining the self apophatically through what it is not and what it wishes it
could be. The nonhuman aids this process, providing alternate forms of embodiment:

мне страшно что я двигаюсь
не так как жуки жуки,
как бабочки и коляски
и как жуки пауки.
Мне страшно что я двигаюсь
непохоже на червяка,
червяк прорывает в земле норы,
заводя с землей разговоры.\textsuperscript{82}

What scares me is that I move
not the way that do bugs that are beetles,
or butterflies and baby strollers
and not the way that do bugs that are spiders.
What scares me is that I move
very unlike a worm,
a worm burrows holes in the earth

\textsuperscript{80} In Aleksandr Vvedenskii, \textit{Vse}, ed. A. G. Gerasimova (Moscow: OGI, 2010), 273.
\textsuperscript{81} “Rug Hydrangea,” translated by Matvei Yankelevich, in \textit{An Invitation for Me to Think}, 212.
\textsuperscript{82} Vvedenskii, \textit{Vse}, 274.
making small talk with her.\textsuperscript{83}

A striking feature of “Rug Hydrangea” is the repetition of dative affective constructions: “мне жалко,” “мне нравится,” “мне трудно,” “мне страшно,” “мне обидно.” This kind of direct statement linking a self (albeit fragmented, provisional) and affect is rare in Vvedensky’s work.\textsuperscript{84}

Here the very existence of specific animals or their generic category (“зверь”) carries the affective investment of the speaker. Feelings (usually absent from the poet’s work) can be articulated because they have become attached to the nonhuman. This affective relation is not one of aesthetic or ethical judgment—it is not what Zabolotsky wants us to see in the face of the horse. Instead, Vvedensky uses the nonhuman as a form of open identity without the tired specificity of human experience, a generative trope of pure creative freedom.\textsuperscript{85}

We’ve seen how Vvedensky and Zabolotsky, two very different poets who were part of the same poetic project (as core members of OBERIU), used animals to complicate lyric subjectivity, divesting it from the site of the human. The relative “fuzziness” of lyric thinking (compared to scientific empiricism or the logic of philosophy and theory) allows us to see how subjectivity and intersubjectivity are not necessarily limited to the position of the human speaker or observer.

As we saw in Stepanova’s essays, one of the problems contributing to the crisis of the symbolic order (to use Kukulin’s term for it) has to do with an abundance of analogies which

\textsuperscript{83} An Invitation for Me to Think, 214.
\textsuperscript{84} Cebula points out Lipavsky’s response upon hearing the poem: “В других твоих вещах бывает, что равнодушие настолько властвует над ними, что они почти перестают быть искусством. Тут же есть особое благородство или изящество. Это элегия.” Vvedensky responds that he spent three days, much longer than usual, working on this poem. Cebula, “Left Flank,” 143.
\textsuperscript{85} For a great reading of this poem, see Tatyana Iovovitch, “‘Mne zhalko chto ia ne zver’ A. Vvedenskogo” in Korneliia Ichin and Sergei Kudriavtsev, eds., Poet Aleksandr Vvedenskii: sbornik materialov, belgrad-moskva (Moscow: Gileia, 2006), 172-181. “Trapped inside his body, man can only imagine the freedom of the untamed natural world, which exists and lives outside the bounds of reason. His awareness that this knowledge is impossible to obtain makes him feel more powerless. Freedom is either the complete absence of knowledge of the beings and objects mentioned by the lyric subject, or an absolute knowledge, which man cannot attain” (174).
become unhelpful, lacking in meaning. The way the present is (or, more accurately, is perceived as) similar to the past leaves no room to maneuver out of its predicament. Moreover, using similarity as an organizing principle is reminiscent of a Soviet affect and (cultural/political/artistic) aesthetic, which has also run its course. In this context, the question of embodied difference—the question of the nonhuman—is also a question of how ideas are framed, and how texts are constructed.

In an essay titled “Narrative poetry,” Kukulin analyzes the work of several contemporary poets (among them Stepanova and Svarovsky) in the context of the narrative poetry tradition in Russian literature, whose development coincides with historically significant periods:

[P]oetic narrative in Russian literature became relevant when the development of society abruptly sped up, but the results of this development among the producers of cultural products were considered unreliable, risky, or at a minimum, shocking in their novelty. The biography of a person was regarded in this case not as individual and private but as included in the historical process.86

Kukulin also points out the synchronicity of this narrative turn with the Anglophone turn toward “storytelling” in discussions of different genres of communication.87 The material that the new poetic narratives draw on comes from a broad range of other texts and areas, and it serves a process of rethinking history:

Contemporary narrative poetry facilitates the development of historical and social reflection, the elaboration of a nuanced attitude towards the collective traumas engendered by the Soviet past. Usually such reflection is considered the prerogative of novelistic prose, but in contemporary Russian literature this function has passed on primarily to poetry. This redistribution of functions has possibly influenced an important aesthetic shift: in contemporary Russian literature a deconstruction of the boundaries between poetry and prose is occurring. In the 2010s several authors published, at the same time, books in which a narrative poetic work was given a “pointer” to a prose genre.88

87 Ibid., 244-5.
88 Ibid., 247.
This type of poetic story-telling creates a narrative whose fragmentary nature feels like an accurate reflection of the contemporary experience of history, “[allowing] the author and reader to see meaningful plots and aesthetic value within the chaos that history appears to be for contemporary man.”  

Kukulin points out that these works cannot be classified as either epic or lyric, though it retains features of both: sustained attention to notions of subjectivity and the texture of language, as well as a reliance on narrative for the structure of the poem.

As we’ve already seen, a main feature of the nonhuman body within the body of the text is its malleability: it can transform, it can fit any space it is allowed to occupy, and it can bring in the signifiers of other bodies, other genres, with it. It facilitates—or foregrounds—literary hybridity; it is a sure sign that a text is never firmly planted within a single genre. It is a catalyst of the narrative elements of the work, but it also enhances the lyric elements, as it poses questions about subjectivity and the texture of representation. It reframes the question of individual and collective experience. And, most importantly, it signals the need to find a new language to address the contemporary structures of feeling.

I will now turn to three authors whose work explores questions of subjectivity, the individual and social body, as well as personal and historical narratives using the trope of the nonhuman. The first chapter will look at Maria Stepanova’s long poetic narrative Проза Ивана Сидорова (The Prose of Ivan Sidorov), and the poem “Война зверей и животных” (“War of the Beasts and the Animals”). The second chapter will look at poems from Fyodor Svarovsky’s

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89 Ibid., 265-6. Narrative is the central feature of these poetic works, and it is what allows the nonhuman to inhabit the genre so successfully. As Susan McHugh notes in Animal Stories: Narrating across Species Lines (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), narrative is “a zone of integration, one that does not end in literary studies so much as it begins to explain how story forms operate centrally within shifting perceptions of species life. Through their very indeterminacy, narrative processes thus appear to concern the very conditions of possibility for human (always along with other) ways of being.” Quotation on p. 2.
poetry collections Все хотят быть роботами (Everyone Wants to Be a Robot) and Слава героям (Glory to Heroes). The third chapter will look at a selection of Linor Goralik’s work: her recent novel Все, способные дышать дыхание (All Who Breathe Breath), stories from the collections Вроде того (Something Like That) and Говорим (She Said, He Said), and the novella Валерий (Valerii). The conclusion will restate the main points of these chapters and propose other ways we can read this contemporary moment and its preoccupation with nonhuman creatures.

Let us turn to the poetry of Maria Stepanova.
Chapter One: Maria Stepanova and the Voices of the Past

As we saw in the Introduction, Maria Stepanova is deeply engaged in the ongoing discussions about the political and cultural crises of contemporary Russia, and the language used to describe them. She is wary of the ease with which these conversations resort to analogies with, and analyses of, the crises of the twentieth century, thus limiting the vocabulary of the collective imagination and narrowing its possible paths toward a different future. Yet her own work also engages with the past to an obsessive degree. In 2018, she published Памяти памяти (In Memory of Memory), an expansive (the Russian edition is over 500 pages long) prose work that combines family lore and meditations on the nature of memory, analyzing the residue of the past on the present as it appears in works of art and in the author’s own life. Stepanova’s poetry turns these same obsessions into the foundational elements of a distinctly contemporary poetics. Her idiolect includes references to the Russian literary canon (quotations are so deeply embedded that there is rarely a marked tonal shift to alert the reader that she is traveling through literary time), as well as to lowbrow and popular culture; the intonations of spoken language, including mat, appear alongside echoes of Eliot or Tsvetaeva. These layers are built into complex syntactical constructions, and long and complex, and sonically rich, poetic forms.

90 And as the editor of Colta.ru, she often hosts these very discussions.
91 In a review of her 2012 collection Киреевский (Kireevskii), Grigorii Dashevskii characterizes Stepanova’s use of citations as almost anonymizing both the speaker and the original sources: “На мгновение мелькающие в его волнах ритмические или словесные цитаты, какая-нибудь рифма ‘комик-домик,’ не требуют опознания (‘ага, это из Пастернака!’), не объединяют опознавших в сообщество наследников и знатоков высокой культуры. Эти цитаты не служат паролем какому-то кругу, а входят в никакому кругу не принадлежащий ничейный язык, и потому они требуют лишь самой мимолетной и слабой реакции — ‘а, что-то знакомое.’” Grigorii Dashevskii, “Непреодолимое отсутствие гранитов,” Kommersant’ Weekend, 13 April 2012, p 10, online at https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/1911683.
Stepanova’s poems are often organized around a narrative, and she has been studied as part of the “narrative shift” in recent Russian poetry. However, the plots are rarely central to what the poem is doing—and, because of the nature of her complex poetics—her details can be obscured by metaphors, citations, or other disruptive devices. The narrative elements of Stepanova’s work are anchored by a grounding in the lyric tradition and a deep concern with questions of subjectivity and embodiment. Her work is attuned to the experience of the self, and the full emotive register of lyric poetry, but any individual insight is always part of a broader picture of social narratives and historical events. Stepanova’s poems observe, in great detail, the living texture of everyday life in public spaces—describing, for example, the women’s locker room at a gym, or the television broadcast of the wedding of Prince Charles and Camilla Parker Bowles—which sometimes ripples with the voices and bodies of the dead. Then, her poems borrow from literary traditions where the dead, and reflections on the past, feel at home.

Stepanova often works with the ballad genre, referring both to its nineteenth century Romantic incarnations and its twentieth century reworkings in popular culture (e.g., by figures like Vysotsky and Galich). As Ilya Vinitsky has noted in a review of her work, the ballad allows Stepanova to draw both on “high” poetry (elaborate stanzaic structures, references to Pushkin) and “low” culture (the language and violence of sensationalist crime plots). The omnivorous

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nature of the genre can accommodate elements from all manner of different sources, which makes it uniquely suited to both reflect on older poetic material (by referencing it as such) and to find new directions poetry can take (by picking up influences from the literary margins). For Stepanova, the ballad also allows a blurring of the distinction between folklore and history: the supernatural world and the Soviet period are two realms where the dead have not been laid to rest. And when her poetic narratives cross the border between the living and the dead, the lyric elements in her work allow a full exploration of attendant affects: grief, fear, guilt.

The two signature traits of Stepanova’s poetry are the way she removes the locus of lyric subjectivity from the individual self, and the way she draws attention to the fact that the past (including histories both large and small) is the domain of the dead, and that one of the tasks of poetry is to work through all the implications of that state of affairs. Both of these are often enacted through the presence of the nonhuman, which is used as proof that the human self is mutable, much less definite than the structures that seek to define it (like the state or the family) would like it to be, and that the border between the human world and that of other beings, be they “real” or not, is porous at best (if not entirely fictive). To use Flatley’s terms, Stepanova’s poetry investigates the historicity of the affective experience of individuals and communities by constructing a poetic language rich in historical layers, and by incorporating history—in the form of living or undead bodies—in the plots of her poems.

In Stepanova’s poetry, statements coming from an “I” are never left to echo in the minimalist silence of the blank page; instead, they become embedded in contexts that show the ways in which each self, and each statement, is part of a community, a language, a time and place in history. In the social structures and orders that make up the context for the lyric self, nonhuman beings appear as counterarguments—blurring boundaries that seek to keep species
and groups distinct, subverting established hierarchies. The individual self can only be understood in its relationship to others, and in Stepanova’s poetry, the category of “others” includes sentient creatures, such as animals, or other embodiments of cultural memory and imagination, such as supernatural creatures—all of whom prove to be inextricable from human thought and language.

This chapter will discuss two long poems by Stepanova in which the nonhuman is a central device that illuminates the intrusion of a traumatic past into the language and physical reality of the present. In the long poem Проза Ивана Сидорова (The Prose of Ivan Sidorov, 2006), which I will discuss at length, the narrative revolves around several incomplete families trying to protect or rescue their missing members. Motherhood and monsterhood are shown as sites of transformation that highlight the porous border between the living and the dead, and as places where historical traumas shape personal experiences. The family narratives in The Prose are incomplete and often contested, but it is still possible to trace their outlines. In “Война животных и зверей” (“War of the Beasts and the Animals,” 2014), which I will turn to briefly, narrative gives way to a collage of fragments and references. Citations from medieval, modernist and Soviet-era depictions of war appear alongside one another, blurring the distinct features of each historical period or event, and contributing to a sense that the present is entirely flooded by the ghosts of this past. In both texts, the encounter with the nonhuman turns the uneasy coexistence between past and present into a question of how language and bodies change in order to accommodate suppressed historical trauma.

Mourning and Trauma

The Prose of Ivan Sidorov is perhaps the most striking, and popular, example of Stepanova’s interest in nonhuman beings as markers of the tenuous borders between genres and
communities, between the self and society. The long narrative poem first appeared online, on Livejournal, in 2006. Its title plays with the notions of genre and authorship: the long narrative poem is marked as “prose” (in a nod to Pushkin’s novel in verse *Eugene Onegin*, from which it will borrow several elements), and it is attributed to an anonymizing male name, used as a pseudonym by filmmaker Kira Muratova. Like many of Stepanova other longer works, it is built on the foundations of the ballad genre, allowing her bring disparate elements and influences into the loosely structured narrative. The story of the poem connects the losses of three families: a detective is looking for her missing daughter, a husband is mourning his dead wife, and a group of supernatural beings is trying to protect their mother figure from a hostile police force. Liminal states and metamorphoses blur the borders between dream and reality, animal and human, dead and undead. The levity and playfulness of the narrating voice is undercut by moments when the grief and fear of the characters is shown in sharp detail. There are many sources of danger, and its victims are inevitably families, more specifically mothers and children.

Critical responses to the poem noted the abundance of references (e.g., Vysotsky, Pushkin, Fet, Brodsky, Mandelshtam) and the resulting immense linguistic joy of the text.

Grigorii Dashevskii finds a poem hidden behind the poem:

> Stepanova has the rare ability to suggest to the reader that her verse is in place of a different text that should, but cannot, be there instead, as if you saw a mirror on the wall and realized that it hangs there in place of a clock. And her new book is like “Ruslan and Lyudmila” told instead of “The Twelve” or “Duma about Opanas,” that is, a fairytale replacing a poem about a social catastrophe.\(^97\)

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\(^96\) Muratova asked that her name not be included in the titles for a movie whose final cut (over which she had no control) was unacceptable to her; the anonymizing pseudonym “Ivan Sidorov” appeared instead. The choice of this pseudonym in Stepanova’s work is thus a nod to Muratova and to the idea that excising key parts of a narrative can render it unrecognizable. Larisa Gersova, “Rezhisser Ivan Sidorov: Kira Muratova sredi serykh kamney,” *Zhurnal “Okolo”*, April 29, 2017, online at https://journal-okolo.ru/rezhisser-ivan-sidorov-kira-muratova-sredi-seryih-kamney. Accessed August 1, 2019.

His idea that this work exist in the place of another work, one more directly concerned with the traumatic experience of political violence, and that, furthermore, this is obvious to many readers, makes *The Prose of Ivan Sidorov* an example of mimetic mourning (to use Alexander Etkind’s term); that is, a symbolic reenactment of a loss that can take a purely imaginative form. Etkind’s discussion of the difficult pathways of Soviet and post-Soviet mourning practices also illuminates many of the narrative and stylistic choices in the poem, which can be read through the lens of mourning: Alyosha’s grief after the death of his wife, major Kantaria’s desperate search for her long-missing daughter, even the supernatural creatures’ mission to free the black hen (if the undead are trying to recover someone they’ve lost, is it an act of mourning?). These plotlines do not offer clean resolutions, their details do not line up neatly—an example of the deep uncertainty inherent to post-Soviet mourning practices. The mourners on the two sides of the conflict include both victims and perpetrators of violence: Kantaria, for example, is both a grieving mother and a high-ranking policewoman. However, the people who are mourned—Alyosha’s dead wife and Kantaria’s missing daughter Nina—are entirely innocent, seen and known only as family members. Mourning a wife or a daughter makes perfect narrative and emotional sense; yet the poem surrounds that simple core with narrative twists and a destabilizing uncertainty. The poem thus allows grief both its simplicity (missing a loved one) and its complexity (acknowledging the real feelings of people who are not on your side).

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98 Etkind, *Warped Mourning*, 1. Interestingly, Etkind also brings up the so-called “Fifty-Year Effect,” proposed by Stephen Greenblatt in his study of Shakespeare (*Hamlet in Purgatory* [Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001], 248), which denotes the amount of time between a traumatic event and the point when artistic works can process it and turn it into a historical narrative. *The Prose of Ivan Sidorov* appeared in 2006, fifty years after Khrushchev’s “Secret Speech” to the 20th congress. Is the devotion of the supernatural creatures to their “сама-она” black hen leader an example of the cult of personality? Is the special police force, which targets supernatural creatures, engaging in unjustified repression? In Stepanova’s magical landscape, all kinds of echoes are possible.


100 Here, we should note again Etkind’s observation that it is particularly difficult to remember and mourn the victims of Soviet-era repressions because many of them were also perpetrators of the same violence, and there were few clear categories on which to structure the public process of mourning. Ibid., 8.
Mark Lipovetsky’s review of the poem focuses on its supernatural elements, positioning *The Prose of Ivan Sidorov* among other recent Russian works in which vampires and dark forces infiltrate the everyday (for example, the *Night Watch* and *Day Watch* movies, which were released around the same time). Lipovetsky draws on Dashevskii’s review and Etkind’s work on the legacy of the Soviet experience on the post-Soviet consciousness, and proposes a reading of the poem as a way of processing trauma. The bulk of these vampire-inflected works, he observes, are haunted by the Soviet past (thus the dead return as monsters and vampires), but keep it at a distance that allows all sides and all victims to look sympathetic. Stepanova’s poem takes a different approach in considering our own relationship to these victims:

In its essence, the uncanny is the opposite of xenophobia: it is the fear not of the other, but of one’s own. Stepanova’s work uses the logic of the uncanny, the logic of the native becoming foreign (and vice versa), the logic of trauma, returning in the shape of monsters, plays out very distinctly. […] Of course, in Stepanova’s story the uncanny embodies not only (and not as much) the un-lived historical trauma as the constant, tense, habitual and thus automatized *proximity to death*. More specifically: for *The Prose of Ivan Sidorov* what matters is the *guilt* before the dead, the murdered and tortured in our immediate vicinity, right next to our *normal* life. Our guilt before them, the guilt of betrayal, is unwitting, unconscious. The guilt, strengthened by a feeling of kinship and intimacy with these people, at the same time strengthening that very same feeling—this must be what Stepanova, or more precisely Ivan Sidorov, is trying to show.101

Lipovetsky’s analysis is sensitive to Stepanova’s play with the nonhuman as both foreign and familiar, part of a network of kinship but also purposefully kept at a distance from what is understood as human.102 Moreover, he focuses on the fact that the reader recognizes a particular

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102 The poem “Зоо, Женщина, Обезьяна” (“Zoo, Woman, Monkey”), in which a pregnant woman observes the behavior of human and nonhuman animals at the zoo, and reflects on questions of reproduction, similarity, and difference, is a good example of how Stepanova approaches that topic beyond the frame of traumatic historical events—though this poem also includes lines comparing the busy, noisy zoo to WWII battles.
affective experience in this use of the nonhuman: the interplay between guilt and a kind of love. In Lipovetsky’s reading, the monsters are the ones who need to be comforted (rather than the human beings afraid of them), and the source of anxiety driving the poem is that there is a force which seeks to confine them instead. Stepanova invites the reader to move beyond fear in their encounter with the nonhuman, and to process the feelings of guilt and kinship that arise in its stead.

Etkind’s argument, in *Warped Mourning*, specifically rejects readings through the lens of trauma because trauma (unlike mourning) is connected to representational inability, and Soviet/post-Soviet works (of mourning, in his analysis) abound in representation. Lipovetsky, on the other hand, draws on the concept of trauma. Both readings are possible; the affective and narrative representation of mourning is there in quotations from ballads and elegies, and in scenes of explicit grief, as is the fragmented traumatic experience of events that cannot be explained, let alone depicted. The presence of the nonhuman allows these two approaches to coexist. It serves both as a familiar representation (borrowed from folklore) and as an embodiment of that which is impossible to comprehend and represent. The encounter with the nonhuman allows human characters to acknowledge not knowing and not understanding, but also to consider the ways in which it is familiar, and perhaps knowable.

**The Drunkard and the Hen**

From its very beginning, the poem plays with what kind of knowledge is possible, and it involves the narrating voice as arbiter of what kind of knowledge will be made available to the reader. The first of the poem’s twenty-three sections begins by introducing Alyosha, a seemingly

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unremarkable character, in an urban fairytale setting: “В городок провинциальный […] приезжает пьяница-мужик.” (“In a small provincial town […] a drunk man arrives.”) For the remainder of the poem his experience frames the plot, while his drunkenness increases the sense of fantastical departures from reality. The narrating voice announces how it is structuring the story, noting: “почему пьяница — будет ясно из нижесказанного” (“why a drunk will be clear from what follows below”). This is overt foreshadowing, promising that the details of the plot will fall into place; once Alyosha’s backstory is revealed, it becomes apparent that this line glosses over a tragedy (he drowned his sorrow in alcohol after his wife’s untimely death) with a tongue-in-cheek meta-comment. This play with knowledge continues in how he is described, announcing the presence of the narrating voice as a character in their own right:

Что на нём: пальто итальянского кроя, костюм спортивный, то и это сырое. Сумка с надписью, вижу я только das, но легко додумаю остальное.106

What’s he wearing? An Italian style coat, sweat shirt and sweat pants, both of them damp. A bag with words on it: I see only das but can easily think out the rest.

The narrator announces their presence through a first-person verb that suggests both problem solving and the creation of a fictional narrative—in order to fill out the details of the half-visible “Adidas” logo on Alyosha’s bag. The writing of the story becomes part of the story; the acquisition of knowledge is part of its quest. This play on limited vision and limited knowledge continues throughout the poem, as detectives work on different cases involving supernatural

104 Maria Stepanova, Proza Ivana Sidorova (Moscow: Novoe izdatel’stvo, 2008), 4. Also online at http://www.vavilon.ru/texts/stepanova6.html. The unpublished translation I am using is by Sibelan Forrester, with some changes made by me.
105 Ibid.
106 Ibid., 4-5.
creatures, said creatures try to rescue one of their own, and drunk Alyosha trying to regain his memory. Alyosha’s inebriated state, the limited perspective of the narrator, and the environment collude to obscure: “Город, положим, Под Снежною Пеленою”107 (“A city, let’s say, Beneath a Layer of Snow”). Stepanova’s language also works to obscure and mislead: as more and more details accrue, the outline of the plot remains difficult to pin down, covered up by virtuosic poetic tricks which leave the reader unprepared for twists that reveal the full measure of grief motivating different characters.

In the first third of the poem, the plot moves between states of impaired consciousness, and Alyosha, a black hen, and a little girl all end up in a strange little house where they sleep for a long time. The narrator suggests what a sober and wakeful outsider, like the mailman who stops by on Wednesdays, could notice about this unusual scene:

отчего в gazете времен Хрущева,
где пропитано маслом любое слово,
пистолет лежит вороненой стали,
отчего-ка его не сдали?

Отчего не спрашивают прописки?108

why’s there a newspaper from the Khrushchev years
where every word is soaked with oil,
wrapped round a pistol of raven-black steel?
Why didn’t somebody turn it in?

Why don’t they ask for their residence permit?

These details are both menacing and entirely ordinary. The greasy newspaper contains a literal weapon, as well as a figurative one: the language of Soviet ideology. Conveniently enough, Khrushchev allows a rhyme with the word “слово,” but the mention of his name also brings to

107 Ibid., 5.
108 Ibid., 12.
mind the process of destalinization and the failed reckoning with the Soviet past. Hence, under the flimsy oil-soaked paper, the gun is solid and dangerous. The reasonable questions to ask, the narrator suggest, all concern the proper social order under these circumstances: the weapon must be turned in, the people must present their documents. But the newspaper, the gun, and the documents are the very weapons of the police state, and the poem soon shows what happens when the social order is actually enforced, and whose weapons are to be feared.

The action speeds up when a beautiful woman, dressed in all black, stops by and finds Alyosha and the hen hiding under a bed. She tries to grab them, but they escape—and Alyosha realizes that he has turned into a rooster. Right then, the police come in and arrest the two birds. They are taken to the station, interrogated and put into separate jail cells. Suddenly, an opening appears in the rooster’s jail cell and a strange creature, who can make doors appear on walls using his magic pencil, sneaks in and takes Alyosha back to the house, which is now a hideout for a diverse group of magical beings:

А за тем столом, а за тем столом –
да лучше б век не видать, кто за тем столом!
Три медведя, пахнувшие псиной.
Бледный юноша, повенченный с осиной.
Пара моложавых упырей –
у блондина зубы повострей.
Кто с клешней, кто с козьей мордой, кто с зеленой бородой,
кто сидит-переливается туманом над водой,
кто шипами ощетинился как ежик,
а уж тех, неупокоенных, но позванных к столу...
И стучат копыта об пол, и теней на том полу
лишь четыре, по числу столовых ножек.109

But at that table, but at that table –
well better never see that table!
Three bears that smell like dog.
A pallid youth, wed to an aspen tree.
A couple of young-looking vampires—

109 Ibid., 41-2.
the blond one’s teeth are the sharper. 
One crab-claw, one goat-face, one green-beard, 
one sits and dissolves like the mist over water, 
one’s spines are on end like a hedgehog’s, 
never mind those, undead, but called to the table…
And a hoof bangs the floor, and that floor shows only, 
From the legs of the table, four shadows.

Some of the presences around the table are not animate, including the leader of the pack—a radio:

там, украшенная кружевом, была 
примитивная видна радиоточка, 
в вазе пруток без единого листочка, 
рюмка — полная, но, видимо, ничья.110

visible there, bedecked with lace, 
was a primitive radio receiver, 
a switch in a vase without a single leaf, 
a shot-glass—a full one, but sort of nobody’s.

Disparate creatures come together, as if embodying the different borrowed elements that make up the “omnivorous” ballad and the pure joy of poetic composition (the sound orchestration in this section is particularly showy), or as a reminder of the impossible task of organizing the victims of Soviet-era violence into distinct categories. Some of these nonhuman beings are seen in their entirety, some only as individual body parts—another play on the limited vision and knowledge of both Alyosha and the narrator. Some are heard but not seen, and others are seen but do not cast a shadow. Each detail suggests a different kind of presence and embodiment, including a state of constant transformation (from mist to water).

This playful remake of Tatyana Larina’s dream in Eugene Onegin is free of the menacing (to the dreamer) undertones of the original. The power dynamic is comically reversed: instead of a maiden being chased by a bear, a drunkard is saved by a vampire and his motley crew.

110 Ibid., 44-5.
Stepanova borrows Pushkin’s folkloric dream tableaux and uses it to represent a different kind of suppressed emotion. Whereas the bear and his friends in Onegin are embodiments of Tatyana’s infatuation, the supernatural creatures have rescued Alyosha because they share his grief and because he can help them with their rescue mission. Moreover, this is not a dream Alyosha can wake up from; instead, a more expansive version of reality has been revealed to him. At the same time, as Etkind points out, Eugene Onegin is also a work that deals with issues of guilt over senseless violence, and Stepanova’s borrowings from it draw on moments where the characters’ relations to one another are tested or revealed, allowing the question of guilt or kinship to come up.111

The meeting of the supernatural creatures represents a turn in the narrative, as the stakes of the plot are gradually revealed, and more voices enter the space of the poem. Until then, Alyosha has either been moving through Moscow and its suburbs in drunken silence, or has been paralyzed by fear and incomprehension during his police interrogation. The supernatural gathering offers a sense of safety and community—especially to a man who is now in the body of a rooster. Alyosha has more in common with the vampires and bears than with the human police officers. The nonhuman gathering is a healthier social body than the bleak human world of enforced order.

The choice of the radio, an inanimate object, as the speaker and commander of the gathering draws our attention to how hierarchy can be established within a (seemingly) chaotic, diverse group, and to the difference between embodiment and voicedness. It privileges sound and the voice as markers of power, and it also raises the question of where that power is granted. The radio allows the voice of the state to enter the domestic space (the lace covering provides a

111 Etkind, Warped Mourning, 13. Stepanova also includes two letters (by a character who does not appear in the actual narrative) in the poem.
nostalgic detail of the domestic aesthetic) of its citizens; whose voice is this radio transmitting? The function of this ordinary device becomes estranged; at the same time, the assortment of objects of the table suggests that the same magic that brings these creatures to life also suffuses everyday objects. The radio highlights the fact that the shelter of the supernatural group exists on a periphery (the poem begins by describing Alyosha’s journey away from Moscow, and ends with everyone returning to a town just outside the capital). Moscow is the seat of another kind of dark power, and the special police units fighting supernatural crime comes from there. But the supernatural is everywhere, spread out away from the center. When the detective calls out to the force pulling all the strings and transforming the characters, she says: “Слушай, те или то, что ведает их судьбой,/ звон в ушах, пятно на обоях!”112 (“Listen you, who or what are guiding their fates,/ ringing in the ears, spot on the wallpaper!”) The supernatural power is background noise, a speck on the walls, somewhere on the border between interior and exterior. It can be sensed but never located; it is diffuse and all-powerful.

The radio announces their plan to rescue the black hen, who is their holy mother figure, their “сама-она.” She has sacrificed herself for all of them countless times and protects them from harm. The description of her care references Mandelshtam’s Stalin epigram:

Мы живем, как прах в водяной пыли,
под собой не чуя родной земли,
но забота самой-она
согрывает нас, ограждает нас
от серебряных пуль и нелетных трасс.
И за это мы ей должны.113

We live like ash in a watery dust,

112 Proza Ivana Sidorova, 73.
no longer feeling ground under us,
but the concern of her-herself
warms us up, covers us with her wing
from the silver bullets and unflying routes.
And we owe her one for that.

The playful Onegin-like dream clashes with the pathos of Mandelshtam’s Stalin epigram. As we find out later, a member of the police task force fighting supernatural creatures has infiltrated this gathering, and the choice of this poem, which reached its subject and had severe consequences for its author, foreshadows that revelation. It also allows a tongue-in-cheek use of “we live” to describe the existence of creatures, some of whom are not technically alive or do not walk on the ground in the way Mandelshtam’s metaphor suggests. Before the quotations turns to the point that references Stalin, the radio-speaker summons the protective force of the black hen, the mother figure and leader of the supernatural group. Thus, her love is shown as the direct opponent of the violence—like the silver bullets, which are used by the police—that threatens their lives. Stepanova’s quotations are both deeply funny and entirely serious. They estrange familiar texts to a comic degree by putting them into this magical detective story, but they also reveal the high emotional stakes of the plot. The rescue mission is a matter of life or death: without the protection of the black hen, this entire community will be captured by the police force. The exaggerated tone of the radio’s announcement is entirely appropriate.

The following day, the police raids the house with the hen in tow, and a quick altercation results in several transformations: the hen is freed, both hen and rooster regain their human form, and the beautiful woman holds them hostage and destroys the radio, causing an explosion—“происходит бесшумный оглушительный взрыв. / Поглядим, кто остался жив”114 (“A soundless deafening explosion takes place. / Let’s look and see who has survived.”)—which

114 Proza Ivana Sidorova, 67.
turns all other bystanders (including the police force) into glass and cigarette ashes. The former hen and Alyosha the rooster embrace; they are husband and wife:

и долго они, обнимая друг друга,  
стояли по центру незримого круга,

и щеки ему целовала она,  
как зерна клевала, когда голодна.  
And for a long time, embracing each other,  
they stood in the midst of an invisible circle.  
And she kissed him on the cheeks  
the way she’d pecked grains when she was hungry.

Here, again, Stepanova combines a deeply moving moment with a comic detail, which also serves to make the entire magic transformation more plausible: after all, the hen and the wife have so much in common. This precedes a series of moving revelations. Alyosha finally remembers what happened: his wife passed away, he drank himself into a stupor, and was told that there were people who could “help” as long as he did their bidding. The beautiful woman threatens to kill them if the powers in control of the whole situation do not return her daughter, who has been missing for a year. The former hen and rooster agree that “человеку худо быть без дочек,” ("it’s hard to wind up without daughters") and the little girl wakes up from her cot on top of the stove, and jumps into her mother’s arms. The dead wife is transformed back into her nonhuman shape. At the very end of the poem, the drunkard has a tearful goodbye with his wife, who now has half-human, half-bird features. She tells him to stop smoking, to look after

\[\text{115 The end-stage of this transformation is material that is either entirely transparent (glass) or destroyed (ashes). Stepanova points us to two opposite ends of how this complex story of remembering and forgetting can be narrated. Making it perfectly clear or rejecting it altogether are both dead ends. The motif of dust, ashes, and powder appears throughout, like in the reworking of the Stalin epigram, and in the reference to gunpowder towards the end of the poem.}
\[\text{116 Proza Ivana Sidorova, 70.}
\[\text{117 Ibid., 73.}]}\]
their daughters, and to find a new wife. After that she soars awkwardly over the winter landscape:

И не в белоснежном пух-и-пери,
не ракетою на огненных снопах,
не под детское и ангельское пение
"День Победы порохом пропах",
а неловкими, неровными кругами
над домами, поездами, над снегами,
заносящими уазик ментовской,
над вокзальным зданием стеклянным,
над далеким гробом деревянным,
высоко над нашей тоской.118

And not in snowwhite down-and-feathers,
nor like a rocket on clusters of fire,
not to children’s and angels’ singing
“Victory Day smells of gunpowder,”
but in awkward, uneven circles
over the buildings, the trains, over the snows
drifted against the cops’ little jeep,
over the glassy station building,
over the distant wooden coffin,
high over our sorrowful longing.

This ending presents another movement between comedy (“stop smoking and find another wife”) and tragedy, as well as different affective ranges along the way. Some are only evoked to be discarded: the wife’s flight is not like a kitschy Romantic drawing, or a marvelous rocket, and it is not accompanied by angelic voices singing a song overloaded with historical affects (another example of Stepanova’s quotations being both funny and deadly serious). Instead, it is awkward and uneven, moving back in a circle before it can move forward. From that (figurative and literal) bird’s eye view, we are shown the snowy landscape, which is revealed to be our own affective state. We see the city through the eyes of the nonhuman, and we are met with our own grief and longing.

118 Proza Ivana Sidorova, 83-4.
The plotline of Alyosha, the black hen, and the supernatural creatures, makes up most of the poem; there are three other texts interrupting it. The first two are interludes in the form of letters to Dina—who is most likely the beautiful woman searching for her daughter, because both letters appear right after sections that end with her speaking—written by a fellow police officer who specializes in supernatural criminals. He mentions the disappearance of a Nina, suggesting that the missing girl is his daughter, too. The third interruption is a report from the crime scene describing the victims that turned into glass and the actions by the authorities (the supernatural unit) handling the investigation.

The intricate plot of *The Prose of Ivan Sidorov* only becomes comprehensible (as it is never entirely clear or obvious) upon rereading, partially because important details are obscured by all the stylistic flourishes of the text: the wordplay, the elaborate similes, the unusual rhymes. Details are obscured on two levels: from the character’s limited point of view, and from the point of view of the narrator, or voice, guiding us through the story. The poem actively manipulates the relationship between reader and plot. In keeping with the detective/mystery strand of the text, it is up to the reader to put clues together. It is never stated outright that the beautiful woman is Dina; she introduces herself as major Kantaria, the name of one of the soldiers who hoisted the Soviet flag over the Reichstag.119 All we know about her character is that she is looking for her daughter; the rescue of the child is, by association, as momentous as the Soviet victory over Nazi Germany. The interlude chapters, which are letters from a man to his wife, mention the disappearance of a Nina, and their shared work history. Nina, the little girl, says only two things while sleepwalking: “мама” and “деда,” leaving Alyosha to wonder if he might be her grandfather. Toward the end of the poem, when they are all on the train back to the Moscow

119 Thus Soviet heroism is both reenacted (she is a powerful figure in the poem) and subverted (she is a mother looking for her daughter, and her work on behalf of the state is oppressive at best and murderous at worst).
suburbs, it is explained that “деда” means “мама” in her language—Nina is speaking Georgian. A lot hinges on this mistranslation (on Alyosha’s part): it reframes the entire narrative that preceded it, and adds another layer of the unfamiliar to it.

Another significant yet small detail is revealed when the mother-hen ascends to the heavens and her story finally becomes clear. We find out that she has two daughters, one of whom is “неродная,” her husband’s from another relationship, and one who is nine weeks old. She talks about a cut that was badly done and healed even worse—implying that she died of complications relating to childbirth. Those two aspects of her motherhood reveal why the supernatural creatures have invested her (or the version of her that is the “сама-она”) with such power and significance. She cares for those who are not her own blood, and she represents those who have been hurt and were unable to heal. Her vulnerability also makes her powerful; once it is acknowledged, a community can be formed and support can be found. Here, Stepanova suggests that a reparative path out of mourning and trauma might be possible.

With these final revelations, the parallels on which the poem is built start to emerge. It centers on three broken families struggling to be made whole again: the drunkard Alyosha is doing favors for dark forces in order to be reunited with his deceased wife; the family of cops are looking for their daughter (who was kidnapped by the same supernatural syndicate they are fighting), and the father presumably dies in the process. Lastly, we have the “chosen” family of the supernatural syndicate, which is trying to liberate one of their own, literally their mother-hen. The needs of all these families are at odds with each other, as are their worlds, and even the languages they speak.

Kantaria is also the one who infiltrated the supernatural group and effectively wiped them out (along with the police force she worked for) in order to find her daughter. The significance of her and Nina being Georgian might not go beyond the reference to the Soviet soldier and the play on the word “деда,” but it also inevitably brings to mind Stalin.
The Two Plots

In his review of the poem, Mark Lipovetsky concludes the following about its use of genre: “‘The Prose of Ivan Sidorov’ is not a ballad but a story in verse growing out of the foundation of the ballad. It is called ‘prose’ because it is a story.” The useful organic image of the poem growing out of the garden plot of the ballad accounts for both its roots in the genre and its branches reaching in different directions. The two main elements of The Prose of Ivan Sidorov—its main branches—are a fairytale plot (or folkloric plot) and a detective (or crime) plot. One is descended from the Romantic ballad, the other from the Blatnaya ballads of the twentieth century.

The two intersecting plots rhyme with each other in a lot of ways. They are both driven by a lack, a loss. The two borrowed genres are, ultimately, different ways of dealing with that loss, of healing a rupture in the body of a family or community, or restoring order and balance. The detective is looking for her daughter, and Alyosha wants to bring his dead wife back to life. The police force is on one side, and the supernatural syndicate on the other—two larger-than-a-family but family-like structures that aid the characters and seek to restore order and balance. And the two sides, the two plots, treat the nonhuman beings in the poem very differently. The fairytale plot embraces them and nurtures them, they are native to it; it does not want to resolve their difference or difficulty, but to preserve it, because it is an entry point into affects that the reader needs to investigate or resolve. The detective plot, on the other hand, treats them as a problem to be solved and an opponent to be conquered, thus destroying the possibility for transformational affective encounters between human and nonhuman creatures. The supernatural

121 “‘Проза Ивана Сидорова’ — не баллада, а стихотворная повесть, вырастающая на балладной почве. Потому-то и ‘проза,’ что повесть.” Lipovetskii, “Rodina-zhut”. “
beings are either allies, a welcoming and safe community, or they are abject creatures to be controlled and destroyed. This conflict is what shapes the interaction between the two plots.

The fairytale plot invokes the tropes of fairytales and folktales: a dead mother, magical objects (the radio), supernatural helpers and rescuers, metamorphoses (human into chicken, cops into glass), a sleeping child, a simple protagonist traveling aimlessly, a feast of great plenty, and, of course, death, which cannot be outwitted, and which demands sacrifices with each exchange. The fairytale plot begins alongside the detective plot. The detective barges in and the drunkard realizes that he is no longer quite human:

Пьяница смотрит круглым золотым глазом и, голыми лапами быстро перебирая, бежит от нее половицей, теряя разум, сиплым горлом прокрикивая "кукареку". "Куд-куда", не отстает вторая. Крылья мешают, как не своё пальто, голос пропал, вместо него икота. Пьяница думает: што-то со мной не то. Думает: вроде я превратился в што-то.122

The drunk looks with a round gold eye and, quickly moving his naked paws, runs away from her over the floorboard, losing his wits, shouting out all hoarse “cock-a-doodle-doo!”

“Keep-a-coop,” the hen’s right behind him.

The wings interfere, like someone else’s coat, he’s lost his voice, he’s hiccoughing instead. The drunk thinks: somethin’s wrong wit me. He thinks: like I’ve been turned into somethin.

The transformations that the characters undergo—Alyosha becomes a rooster, his wife is a hen, and then a half-bird half-woman—suggest porous borders between modes of existence, a spectrum or even a field, on which being human is just one position among many. The language

122 *Proza Ivana Sidorova*, 23.
of the poem reflects that, comically, with plentiful puns on birds and hens. All of the transformations happen within a very domestic realm—they take place in a little house, and people turn into domestic birds. For Alyosha, the supernatural creatures are allies; they help him escape the police, and they want to rescue his wife. And they are described in warm, sympathetic terms. Even though the poem is often described as a horror ballad, there is no real horror in the encounter with the supernatural on its own terms. The supernatural beings are domestic creatures, cast as a family of sorts, even as their physical appearance varies greatly across a spectrum of matter and energy. Kinship, the poem suggests, is not based exclusively on family resemblance. It is formed in interactions, it is a kind of mixed genre.

Lipovetsky points out that the locus of kinship and guilt—what is owed to the ancestors—falls square on the female characters in the poem, the mothers and daughters. He relates that to Soviet iconography, which presents a cult of the Great Mother, goddess of war and death. Thus we have the black hen at the center of a deadly conflict, and the cunning female detective causing an explosion that takes lives on both sides. But, as Lipovetsky notes, these mothers are also warm and loving, and the poem does not question the other characters’ allegiance to them, their need for them. Motherhood is at the center of the plot. It functions on three separate levels in the poem: as an intimate, domestic role, as a central unit in a larger network of beings/kin, and as a symbol of the psychological needs and (sometimes) political values of an entire society. No wonder that the grief for the lost wife, a mother who died in

123 Lipovetsky, “Rodina-zhut’.”
124 Elena Fanailova, “Marii Stepanovoi,” Vozdukh, no. 4 (2008), online at http://www.litkarta.ru/projects/vozdikh/issues/2008-4/stapenovoy/view_print/ Accessed August 1, 2019. “Я бы рискнула сказать, что одним из главных источников вдохновения и центральным образом поэзии Степановой является самый древний универсальный женский архетип. Это Богоматерь, Дева Мария, верховное жестокое божество, которое проявлено в её балладах и поэмах в разных ипостасях.” “I would say that one of the main sources of inspiration and a central poetic image in Stepanova’s work is the oldest universal female archetype. The Mother of God, Virgin Mary, the supreme goddess take on various roles in her ballads in poems.”
childbirth, is strong enough to reshape the fabric of reality, temporarily bringing the dead back to life. And no wonder that the grief of a mother, the detective, allows her to cross over into another world, infiltrating the supernatural syndicate. Her status as a mother makes her one of their own by default. In both cases, private loss reshapes a larger unit. But the way this is done is dictated by the rules and tropes of the folkloric plot: in domestic and nonurban spaces, using magical transformations and circular movements that cover long periods of time, through the liminal states of sleep and death and beyond.

The poem also borrows from the genre of crime fiction and the stylization of the blatnaya song genre—characters, plot elements, and even specific vocabulary. It features a police force, a detective working independently, an interrogation, a jail cell, a police report and two letters from a police officer, which both serve as “evidence” for the reader, and the vocabulary of crime and policing is scattered throughout the text. There is also a pattern of parallels between adversaries: a mother and a father are investigating the disappearance of their daughter, who is in the hands of another set of parents (the hen and rooster); the police force is mirrored by the supernatural syndicate.

And yet, within that framework, the crime driving the plot is not made known until halfway through the poem, when the police interrogate the rooster. It is impossible to piece all the clues together until the climax, the explosion, when the beautiful woman reveals herself as a detective/double agent. The two active forces from the crime plot, the police and the woman detective, seem to be working independently, even as they are working toward the same goal.

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125 Stepanova considers herself a devoted fan of Vysotsky, and her latest collection of essays, Против нелюбви (Against Notlove; Moscow: AST, 2019), includes her 2015 essay on him titled “На послесмерть поэта” (“On the Afterlife of a Poet” pp 63-67). Her description of Vysotsky is reminiscent of the actions of the vampire who can go through walls by drawing doors on them with his pencil: “Его место ничье, его территория нейтральная — и все это очень напоминает его способ жить: проходя сквозь стены, игнорируя советскую реальность.” “His place is no man’s land, his territory is neutral—and that resembles his way of living: walking through walls, ignoring Soviet reality.” Quotation on page 63. Translation mine.
The limited perspective of drunk Alyosha, and the obscuring properties of the narrative, combine to leave us lost in the detective plot. Instead of the cerebral pleasure of solving the mystery, the reader is granted a moment of emotional release when mother and daughter are reunited.

The detective plot does not provide a rational explanation for the magical dealings of the supernatural; the existence and threat of dark forces is taken for granted—the police even have special procedures in place and personnel trained to handle such creatures.

И сказал полковник: “Живая плоть!
Вы попрятались в пух и перья.
Только нам таких не впервые колоть,
невзирая на суеверья.

У меня в районе раскрытых дел
do сих пор процент запредельный.
Да на этой лавке упьёр сидел,
а потом пошел по расстрельной.

А сейчас как раз у нас из Москвы
gлавный спец по таким, как вы”.

И потом молчал, нелегко вздохнув
и в упор на героя глядя,
так что тот в подкрылья упрятал клюв,
от испуга на лавку гадя

And the colonel said, “Living flesh!
You’ve hidden out in down and feathers.
Not the first time we’ve cut up your kind, regardless of superstitions.

There’s an overload percentage of cases
that got resolved in our region.
A vampire was sitting right on this bench
before we gave him the maximum penalty.

But now we have just the specialist
for the likes of you, here from Moscow.”

And then he went quiet, a heavy sigh

126 Proza Ivana Sidorova, 27.
and looked point blank at the hero,  
so he hid his beak under his wing,  
and crapped on the bench from fear

The phrase “такие как вы” is euphemistically disdainful. The poem does not shy away from casual vulgarity, but it resorts to the absence of description for this conflict. The task of the police is to capture the supernatural syndicate and its many members, rendering them invisible and nondescript. Within the poetic abundance of the text, it aims for orderly erasure. The central presence of the police force reveals the common beliefs underlying the society described in the poem, the forms of surveillance and punishment it deems normal and necessary, and the cultural traumas they are meant to suppress or replicate.

One expression of these traumas is the sleeping girl, whose kidnapping is the starting point of the events of the plot. Nina, the most passive and quiet character, has incredible symbolic power. She is the daughter of two policemen who capture supernatural beings, and she was presumably taken from her parents as a form of revenge. Her parents’ task—and the task of the organization they represent—is to surveil and control the supernatural. Following Lipovetsky’s reading of the poem, we see that the police is the force trying to suppress the subconscious, to keep the lid closed on vast amounts of unprocessed trauma, to refuse the encounter of self and the other within the self. The police thus perpetrates xenophobia, rejects what it sees as the abject, and denies the ghosts of the past an afterlife in which they are seen and remembered, and the guilt of the living towards them is acknowledged. The “security” forces that keep the living safe are in fact endangering them by refusing them outlets for their guilt. This critique of how order is imagined and implemented is hidden in plain sight, barely masked by the ornaments of different genres.
The main units of the two plots mirror each other: there are two broken families, and two larger opposing forces. In both families, the mother is a shape-shifter, moving between life and death, or moving from the police camp to the supernatural camp. There is even an echo in their main monikers and their features: the black-eyed “красавица” and the black “курица.” However, the poem stays close to the point of view of the fathers: it mostly follows Alyosha’s experiences, and the two letter interludes are written by the father-policemen, who, like Alyosha, is desperate for a drink. And the two groups in opposition both share similar goals. The police is in charge of restoring order. The man who helps the rooster escape from jail describes the role of the supernatural syndicate in the following way: “Уж такая, говорю, у нас профессия —/ поддержание равновесия.” (that’s the nature, I say, of our profession—/it’s all in the supporting of balance.)

The intersection of the two types of plots suggests that for every linear movement forward, there is also a circling back, a return to a pattern of magical thinking about death and loss, which leaves matters unresolved. And the difference in the two plots has to do with generations: the mother is sacrificed, lost, but the sleeping child is eventually saved. The detective plot wants to move on, it is linear, driven to resolve a problem. However, the fairytale plot is circular, the mother dies again at the end, the return to the ghosts of the past is inevitable.

After the “climax” of the poem, when the explosion destroys both the police force and the supernatural beings, the tropes of the two intersecting genres recede. This is when the affective peak of the poem takes place. The reunion between husband and wife, first, and mother and

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128 Proza Ivana Sidorova, 37.
daughter, second, catches the reader unawares — this is when the plot reveals how all of its characters are connected. The language is simplified and childlike:

И, потягиваясь да зевая,  
и, нечесаная да босая,  
слезла с печки девочка живая.  
И глаза впервые открывает,  
на майорской шее повисая.  
Вот оно на свете как бывает!  
Миленькая, только чуть косая.  
Знать не знает про бывшие беды.  
"Мамамама" говорит и "деда" —  
так по-ихнему и будет мама,  
obъяснили позже, в Балашихе.  
... а в руках у мужика, такая жалость,  
ровно с ним и не бывало ничего,  
снова курица в корзинке оказалась.  
Очень маленькая, черного пера.129

And, stretching and yawning,  
and, uncombed and barefoot,  
a living little girl gets down off the stove.  
And, draping herself on the major’s neck,  
for the first time she opens her eyes.  
That’s how things can go in the world!  
Sweet little thing, just a tad cross-eyed.  
She has no clue about past misfortunes.  
“Mamamama,” she says and “deddy”—  
that’s how they say mama in their place,  
he found out later, back in Balashikha.  
…and in the man’s hands, quiet pity,  
as if nothing had happened to him at all,  
and the hen was back in her basket.  
Very little, feathers all black.

Both genres lose some of their definition as they are grafted onto the poem, the resulting hybridity, or in-betweenness, mirrors the many creaturely transformations in the poem. The fairytale loses its happy ending; as Lipovetsky points out, catharsis is withheld, not granted. And the outline of the detective plot (which does get a fairytale ending of sorts) is obscured by poetic

129 Proza Ivana Sidorova, 74.
detail and the affective interference of the fairytale. There are countless instances where the
description of the landscape or an environment is either so rich in detail and metaphor that it
distracts from the clues of the plot, or casts doubt over the powers of sense perception in general.

From the beginning of the poem:

Город, положим, Под Снежною Пеленою.
Огни погашены.
Осторожно-окрашены
темным заборы, и даже на площади ни мента.
Дышит периной новая пустота.
Московский скорый,
ночной который,
вот-вот
отойдет.¹³⁰

A city, let’s say, Beneath a Layer of Snow.
Lights turned out.
The fences carefully-
painted with dark, and no cops even on the square.
New emptiness, redolent of feather pillows.
The express train to Moscow,
that night-time one,
just about
to depart.

The image of the empty town under a snow blanket evokes Fet’s poem “Никогда.”¹³¹ This nod
to the elegy is not just made in passing. Grief is a central force in the poem; it is only natural that
the genre built around structuring grief would make an appearance. Alyosha is the character
stuck in the elegiac mode; grieving and wandering, talking to the dead and trying, but failing, to
recover the past. He starts out the poem looking at the empty landscape, and ends the poem in
much the same way, looking up at the sky as his wife flies away. The affect of the elegiac mode
is there in those descriptions, but is actually much less pronounced in Alyosha as a character.

¹³⁰ Ibid., 5.
¹³¹ “Селенье спит под снежной пеленой,/Тропинки нет по всей степи раздольной.” А. А. Fet, Polnoe sobranie
stikhovorenii (Leningrad: Sovetskii pisatel’, 1959), 106.
Yes, he is grieving, but the grief and his drunkenness build a cloud of confusion around him, which only lifts at the very end, when we get his backstory.

The other grieving man in the poem is the officer writing the two letters. Those two epistolary interludes bring lyric poetry, refracted through a parodic lens, into the mixed-genre narrative poem:

Милая Дина, не сплю, и уже светает.
Жизнь как помадка, сладко и сразу тает.
Здесь не Москва, и курицы здесь летают.

Скоро я лягу на снег и уже не встану.
Будет у нас операция утром рано.
Местный полковник, с ним и его бараны.

Я оставляю тебе мои наработки.
В сейфзе заметки, в столе рапорта и сводки.
Кончилась вodka – а мне бы хотелось вodka.132

Dear Dina, can’t sleep, and it’s getting light already.
Life’s like a candy, sweet and melts immediately.
It’s no Moscow here, and the chickens here can fly.

Soon I’ll lie down in the snow and never get up.
We carry out the operation tomorrow morning early.
The local commander, and with him his rams.

I leave you my store of working information.
Notes in the safe, in the desk reports and summaries.
The vodka’s all gone, and I’d really like some vodka.

While pathos spills into wonderful parody (another instance of her working with Pushkin’s repertoire of tricks from Eugene Onegin), the undercurrent of sadness remains steady and legible to the reader—which is also partially a function of our natural identification with the “I” speaker professing his feelings. The language of the lyric speaker is melancholy, and it is significant that the lyric voice belongs to a police officer, that it comes from within the structures of power. It

132 Proza Ivana Sidorova, 61.
functions as a counterpoint to the vivid, sympathetic supernatural beings (no matter their
criminal leanings)—both sides are “humanized” when their relationships and motivations are
illuminated, and the perpetrators of violence are revealed as victims themselves. Stepanova’s use
of the lyric mode through the perspective of the two grieving men is a kind of examination of the
legacy of lyric poetry: what can it do within a context too complex to be represented by
individual voices? What are the limitations of resorting to its default structures? What else can it
do, especially when it is grafted onto a longer, decentralized poem? The first-person moments in
the poem—when the reader stays close to Alyosha’s point of view, or encounters the police
officer’s letters—are marked by obscurity and wrongly-calibrated pathos. They only work
because there are other characters and points of view stepping in to complete the plot and the
economy of affect.

An answer to these questions appears in an essay in Stepanova’s collection Один, не
один, не я (One, Not One, Not I, 2014), which is about the problem of lyric poetry and uses of
the “I” in contemporary verse. She asks what would happen if we remove all instances of “I” and
“we” from the poetic vocabulary—she sees this as a central question of contemporary Russian
poetry, one that many younger poets are actively engaged in. She looks at possible solutions,
including stripping down the excess of poetic form and language, but she finds more potential in
leaning into excess and multitudes:

Противником (тем, что должно измениться, подвергнуться обработке и
перерождению) оказывается тогда не языковая ткань и не материя поэтического, а
собственные границы. И чувствую: “я” для меня мало. Исчерпанность и
конечность “я” (при объеме задач, которые стоят перед человеком и текстом)
представляются мне главной ловушкой, в которой обнаруживает себя лирика,
подошедшая к очередной финальной черте — где, чтобы выжить, поэту нужно
стать хором.133

133 Maria Stepanova, “Peremeshchennoe litso,” in Stepanova, Odin, ne odin, ne ia (Moscow: Novoe izdatel’stvo,
2014), 16-22. Quotation on page 19; translation is mine.
The adversary (the thing that needs to change, to be reworked and reborn) turns out to be not the fabric of language and the material of poetry, but the borders of one’s own self. So I feel: “I” does not suffice. The exhausted and limited “I” (given the tasks that are facing both people and texts) seems to me the main trap that lyric finds itself in, having come to the latest boundary—where, in order to survive, the poet must become a choir.

The most pressing poetic tasks cannot be accomplished by a single voice and a single point of view. The different voices in a choir can sing very distinct parts that are still part of the same piece. We saw how this relationship of conflicting voices and parallel plots works in The Prose of Ivan Sidorov. The polyphonic choir of which Stepanova speaks is present and active in the poem. Its narrative gives structure to the voices of the many characters, as do the conflict between the two communities and the vectors of interaction within them. The language of fairytales and police slang overlap in the poem, their two very different registers coming together. This collage of registers and voices is the place where the encounter between humans and supernatural beings takes place; it makes the unknown (the suppressed trauma, the strange bodies of the nonhuman beings) legible to the reader in a context that is already familiar to her.

The reader experiences the different types of beings, the different languages, and the different historical and affective experiences associated with them all at once. This historicizes the present, as it is described in the poem, and suggests the far-reaching roots of its conflicts and its imagined social order. The choir imagined by Stepanova points to a shared experience (or the possibility of a shared experience) and the fact that each individual being can access the same structure of feeling—for example, the same pressing guilt related to the unmourned dead.

In Stepanova’s more recent work, voices from the past have continued to infiltrate and overwhelm the present, and their choir functions as a counterpoint to a political imaginary that continues to wield a simplified narrative of the past in order to retain power. The war with Ukraine has added a new urgency to Stepanova’s poetic work, and here, too, the nonhuman has
allowed her to explore the encounter with the dead, and the complex language we can use to express and work through our grief and guilt. And since these poems deal with an ongoing catastrophe as well as the unfinished work of mourning the past, their structure shows the fragmentation of traumatic experience.

The Beasts and the Animals

In 2015, Maria Stepanova published the poem “Война зверей и животных” (“War of the Beasts and the Animals”); it was received as a “поэма” and a poem cycle) at a time when the conflict in Eastern Ukraine had become increasingly violent and had taken over the news. Unlike The Prose of Ivan Sidorov, this poem does not have a central narrative or cast of characters; it addresses an active crisis that defies neat representation. It enacts Stepanova’s idea of the poet as a choir by examining questions of language, identity, and violence, through a collage of voices (and quotations from literary and cultural sources) describing scenes of war. The occasion for the poem is the ongoing war between Russia and Ukraine, but its content points not just to this particular conflict but, more generally, to the ways in which war and loss are both normalized—celebrated in poetry, song, cultural symbols—and repressed, reframed as cliche and propaganda rather than as lived experience. In his review of the poem, Mikhail Yampolsky says that the central inquiry of the poem is an attempt to find meaning in


135 We can turn to Ilya Kukulin’s work on montage to illuminate aspects of this choice; he traces the ways montage has been used for different purposes during the Soviet period (including as a critique of utopian project and as a way to historicize the ruptures of the twentieth century) as well as its contemporary uses, which are connected to the use of digital and virtual spaces and media. Kukulin notes the way montage is used, in contemporary Russian literature, to combine individual statements (for example, blogposts or other writing on the internet) into a collective/communal voice. Kukulin, Mashiny zashumevshego vremeni (Moscow: NLO, 2015).
death, especially in death as a collective experience, if such meaning is even possible. He reads the choir-like assembly of voices and fragments in the poem as proof that war does not deliver on the collective experience that is promised by the texts that glorify and mythologize it. It just leads to individual death and suffering, and an entropic dissolution into the natural world.  

The title of “Война зверей и животных” points the reader in the direction of the fable, or the beast epic, which uses the conflicts between animals to allegorize human traits. The animals and beasts themselves are not described in the text of the poem. And what is the distinction between the two sides? The difference between “животные” and “зв”и “звери” is one of language and projection: the human viewer ascribes a certain morality to animal behavior, drawing a distinction between tame and wild, neutral and aggressive. Thus, the title asks the reader to interpret their own position, their own reading of which behavior reads as “neutral.” In the text itself, there are some references to animals, but far more references to people, living and dead, different nationalities and professions (which are also distinctions only present in language and not by “real” biological difference). All of that makes the framework of the fable too narrow for what this poem is actually doing; the elements of the fable are decorative, pointing to a moral that will not present itself, making the reader aware of the need for (and lack of) a resolution.  

At the very beginning, the poem presents an encounter not between animals and beasts but between the living and the dead:  

Видишь, духи собрались у постели,
Залетейскими цитатами кивая
Тили-тили, говорили, как там в теле?
Чем живая? 138

Look, the spirits have gathered at your bedside
Speaking in Lethean tongues
Hush-a-bye, so flesh and fine,
For what do you long? 139

This places the poem in the realm of the hyperbolic: the supernatural, the mythological, and the self-reflexive literary mode. The ghosts ask questions about embodied experience, about being alive, instead of the living asking the dead about death; the guilt that was part of the subtext of The Prose of Ivan Sidorov acquires a new urgency here, as the dead literally confront the living.

From that starting point, the entire poem can be read in relation to these two questions: “как там в теле” (“how is it in your body”) and “чем живая” (“how do you live”). There is an explicit challenge in these questions: how can you bear to live like this, when you know about the dead? Or: how do you dare live like this? The literary references and the poetic devices, then, appear as answers to the question of embodied experience. The many voices in the many sections that follow are either answers to “как там в теле” (from the living) or the “залетейские цитаты” (from the dead).

The poem is built on many explicit literary references, which involve the overlap between historical events, their psychological impact, and the way they are mythologized. Two of the most prominent sources for the text are Eliot’s “The Waste Land” and the “Слово о полку Игореве” (“The Lay of Igor’s Campaign”) which provide historical and literary reference points

138 Maria Stepanova, Spolia (Moscow: Novoe izdatel’stvo, 2015), 23.
139 Translated by Sasha Dugdale, in Modern Poetry in Translation, Issue 3 (2017), 183-210. Dugdale worked on this translation (which she calls a “triangulation”) with Stepanova and had the poet’s permission to use references that would resonate with British readers. Quotation on page 185. I will use both Dugdale’s translation and my own, more literal, version when discussing specific lines.
for Stepanova’s use of mixed registers and polyphony.\textsuperscript{140} The first quotation transports the reader to the early twentieth century:

\begin{quote}
Я улыбалась
он мне сказал: марусь
крепче держись марусь
и мы полете\textsuperscript{141}
\end{quote}

I smiled
He said, Marusya,
Marusya, hold on tight.
And down
We went \textsuperscript{142}

This is a reworking of lines that appear shortly after the first foreign quotation in “The Burial of the Dead”: “Bin gar keine Russin, stamm’ aus Litauen, echt deutsch,” which is followed by “He said, Marie/ Marie, hold on tight. And down we went.”\textsuperscript{143} Russian translations of “The Waste Land” keep the name Marie, which is Russified here to “Маруся,” with all of its echoes and associations: NKVD cars, the given name of the poet herself (which Stepanova often plays with), but also, in this shortened vocative form, ма-русь, an echo of Русь, a response to “bin gar keine Russin.” This introduces the question of chosen, contested, and undetermined identities, which reappears throughout the poem. The most striking example is a section that examines the theme of muteness, and begins with words broken up into syllables: “мы не не мы/ мы не нем цы” (“we not mu te/ we not ger man”).\textsuperscript{144}

\textsuperscript{140} The “Lay of Igor’s Campaign” covers a territory very similar to the one Stepanova is writing about in her poem, and from its long list of place names, she picks (and quotes) two that are both in Crimea: Surozha and Korsunya. She also rewrites the beginning of the epic—“Не лепо ли ны бяшетъ братие, начяти старыми словесы трудныхъ повестий о пълку Игореве”—into a request for silence rather than commemoration of this battle, so that its rhetorical weight is not used in service of yet another conflict and further loss of life: “не лепо ли, граждане/ старыми словесы/ начати молчати” (“were it not seemly, citizens/ to begin in ancient diction / to stay silent” Dugdale, 191).

\textsuperscript{141} Spolia, 23

\textsuperscript{142} Dugdale, 185.


\textsuperscript{144} Spolia, 32. Dugdale, 190.
Stepanova uses Eliot as an example of how previous poetic movements have tried to account for both large historical events and private psychological experiences, and the use of collage and quotation to suggest the unraveling of central cultural narratives in the face of conflict. The way Eliot’s lines are adapted immediately limits the collage method to sources from within the Russian/Soviet tradition. The historical and mythological content is almost all Russian/Soviet; unlike “The Waste Land,” pointing to it does not require endnotes, because the poem can count on the fact that its readers share the same language and references, as well as the same contemporary structure of feeling. Stepanova asks her readers to reinterpret lines they already know from childhood, or things they have just recently read in newspapers, in this estranging poetic environment. She makes them look for violence hidden in plain sight: for example the “ухарь-купец” (“handsome merchant”) who went to the market is just the first item in a litany of possible deaths: “помещик пиф-паф застрелился/ вагон офицера увёз…” (“the landowner shot himself/ a train took the officer”). Or later: “дети на даче играли в богов олимпийских/ после играли в гестапо – да разницы нет” (“children in the yard play at being olympian gods/ and then at gestapo interrogation – tbh it’s much the same”). Children’s games and children’s rhymes are not separate from the culture and language they draw on; they carry all of its sinister meanings.

Halfway through the poem comes the following section:

чужое слово, как башмак,
без выбора обуй –
и, позабыв свой старый шаг,
оно пойдёт с тобой

оно ссыхается у губ,

146 *Spolia*, 27. Dugdale, 188. Dugdale’s choice to use the “textspeak” abbreviation “tbh” (short for “to be honest”) neatly transpose the poem into the linguistic realm of online debate and commentary on current events.
когда произнести, как лягушачий голый труп под солнцем на пути

она створожится во рту покуда на замке и дай-ка я его утру. и вот она в платке

и ты его, и ты его и тяжестное м не полудачат ничего. они умрут совсем.

рассинув синие крыла под тягостью небес орел плывёт как камбала переплывая лес

уже безалфавитный

say the word that don’t belong put it on and march along forget the old and step anew and the word will march with you

that word, it curls up and dies at your lips as it emerges like the spread-eagled toad it lies in the heat on the verges

it clots sticky in the mouth froths issues here let me wipe out it’s in the tissue ugh with it e u and gagging om they don’t half-mean anything when they die they’re gone

blue wings thrown wide under the weight of the sky the eagle floats over the forest undulating in the air like a plaice

divested of alphabet

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147 Spolia, 28.
148 Dugdale, 194.
Here we find the iambic tetrameter that was carefully avoided in the title of the poem. The play on words of “чужое слово, как башмак, без выбора обуьй” is a literalized simile, which draws our attention to the Tatar word “башмак,” using it as a reminder of Soviet crimes against national minorities, and more recently, of events surrounding the annexation of Crimea (the sinister “без выбора обуьй” can refer to both linguistic and territorial dispossessions). The word, which stands for an experience, or a memory, dries on the lips, becomes a spot that can be erased. It moves from subject to object to substance to something lost altogether. Once the language has been successfully lost—erased—the human figure disappears, and an eagle is seen instead. This animal image evokes both the symbolism of Russian heraldry and a distancing from human embodied experience as a result of language loss.

The last three stanzas of the poem return to the framework of the fable and the moral that will not present itself:

Рыба рыбу поймала

Это так
Холм под сугробом
Ничего не значит
Надпись на табличке
Никого не видит
Надпись на камне
Ничего, читаем
Его нет

Но здесь149

fish hooks a fish

like a hill
under a snowdrift
means nothing
writing on a tomb

149 Spolia, 37.
sees no one writing
on a stone
nothing, we read
it not

but it is

The title of the poem announces a war between two sides that are different based on the point of view of the observer, and the language used to describe them. The last section does away with the nominal difference: the fish has caught a fish. These are mute animals; the loss of language has been completed. The conflict, too, is complete yet unresolved. What is the difference between them, other than one is the predator, and the other the prey? The final stanza describes an act of commemoration that is there-but-not-there. The physical remnants of the dead are there, there is writing on the tomb, but that writing does not produce meaning; not even the act of reading can produce that meaning. The presence of “надпись” is rejected by a repeated negation: “никого,” “ничего,” “нет.” And then, finally, the assertion “но здесь” appears as a counterpoint. Stepanova ends the poem, which is obsessed with the disappearance of language and the looming presence of the past, with a condensed form of here-and-now, “здесь” and “есть.” Even if there is no language to describe it, and no audience for it, it still exists—and precisely because there is currently no language for it, it is important to confirm that it exists.

The two long poems in this chapter both propose an encounter or exchange—a conversation or a transformation—between the living and the dead. Stepanova uses the nonhuman to signify the crises of language and embodiment that are part of the structure of feeling in contemporary Russia, bound up as it is in narratives and organizations from the past that do not offer adequate outlets for grief, mourning, and meaning-making. The nonhuman allows Stepanova to approach the task of building a multivoicedness, of forming a choir, in her

poetry, in order to work toward an adequate language for the collective experience of the present. The ghosts and monsters in her work are figures of the returning past, but they also help her imagine what a community can look like, and what kind of interpersonal relations are possible once suppressed affects have been properly expressed.
Chapter Two: Fyodor Svarovsky’s Rules of Robotics

In a 2008 issue of Vozdukh, Fyodor Svarovsky (among other contemporary poets) contributed comments and praise for Maria Stepanova’s work and the recently-issued The Prose of Ivan Sidorov. He wrote that he appreciates the way their poetics bear certain stylistic similarities, and that, more importantly, The Prose is “one of the few poetic works of the last fifty years to evoke such strong and complex feelings in [him], both as an emotional and aesthetic experience.” He goes on to say that this kind of complex experience is why he would label that work as “the kind of truth that only art can convey.”

Svarovsky’s reading of Stepanova points to two of the central features of his own writing, which also finds truth far beyond the borders of the everyday (though, unlike Stepanova, he is more likely to find aliens rather than ghosts in that space) and depicts characters who find clarity in moments of heightened emotion. However, the truth or truths in Svarovsky’s work try to counter a crisis that is understood in spiritual rather than political terms. Svarovsky’s writing is deeply informed by his Orthodox Christian faith; when asked to discuss his work or his life, he offers the story of his faith as a key turning point. But even though Svarovsky frames the contemporary structure of feeling differently (as a profound spiritual absence and disconnect from the world), in his work it surfaces by means of devices and thematic concerns that are very similar to those of

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152 In a 2015 interview, the poet said: “The absurdity of what is happening in the country is not really reflected in my poems. Of course, I also laugh about what’s happening, and I’m scared of the future. Like everyone else, probably. But I only have a couple of poems, which were written while I was in the hospital, which somehow address what is going on. But even they are not about the current situation, but about responding to cataclysms, I would say.” Interview with Maria Ul’ianova, Etazhi, 21 October 2015, online at https://etazhi-lit.ru/publishing/literary-kitchen/122-fedor-svarovskiy-ya-pobyval-blizko-ot-granici-smerti.html.
153 In an interview with Linor Goralik, Svarovsky talks about how he stopped writing poetry for several years after he became religious because he had to find a way to reconcile his writing with his faith; all of his published books of poetry came after that watershed moment in his life. In Linor Goralik, Chastnye litsa (Moscow: Novoe izdatel’stvo, 2013), 240-270.
Maria Stepanova and Linor Goralik. Questions of identity (including family lore), contemporary
byt and historical narratives all intersect in the trope of the nonhuman. Encounters with robots
and animals allow the human a perspective beyond the limitations of his own narrow
subjectivity, as well as the possibility of a different kind of embodiment. This chapter will
explore how these themes appear in poems from his first book Все хотят быть роботами
(Everyone Wants to Be a Robot, 2007) and the more recent collection Слава героям (Glory to
Heroes, 2015).

Svarovsky’s poetry, like Stepanova’s, is an example of what Kukulin calls the narrative
turn in contemporary Russian poetry, and it also draws on the ballad tradition.154 Unlike
Stepanova, however, Svarovsky’s handling of the past is reparative; the work of memory in his
poetry is not restricted by the burden of a politically contested history or present. His focus is on
individual stories, family narratives, and speculative visions of the future, in which the
disconnected, disaffected contemporary structure of feeling is overcome. When political or
historical concepts are referenced in his work, they are above all part of the cultural vocabulary,
their significance matched (or represented) by banal everyday objects and actions, not
necessarily central to the plot of the poem or the affective state of the lyric voice. The
complexity, violence and trauma of history and the present are acknowledged, but Svarovsky is
less concerned with finding the right language to describe them than with imagining what kind of
poetic paths can lead to a space beyond them. His poetry works toward a joyful eschatology
rather than a mournful reckoning with the past. At the same time, as the poems describe the
transformative potential of other worlds and other modes of existence, they also take stock of the

154 Kukulin, “Narrative Poetry.”
people and things that will be transformed: the fraught communities that already exist in the world, and the people that inhabit them.

In a foreword to Svarovsky’s collection Путешественники во времени (Time Travelers, 2009), Natal’ia Samutina identifies the feature of his work which makes it so inviting and exhilarating: it creates a “fantazирующее сообщество,” (“fantasizing community”) a community built around a shared imaginary space, which is open to characters of all backgrounds (both organic and inorganic) and which is also, by default, extended to any reader encountering these poems. Here, the act of fantasizing does not mean making up things that do not exist (that very distinction is almost irrelevant), but being aware of the constant presence of a different dimension which exists alongside the here and now.155 This awareness is not just implied; the poems openly invite the reader to enter these other spaces. The defining characteristics of the fantasizing community are its shared experience of multiple realities (a not-fantastical, lonely everyday reality, and another one populated by robots and extraterrestrial beings) that are treated as equally real and plausible, and its central tenet of receptivity toward and communication with the “other,” a sense of togetherness across material, national, temporal divides. The latter feature results in the strong affective dimension of Svarovsky’s poetry—the sense that each detail can open up into a world that offers an emotional and spiritual freedom that cannot be accessed elsewhere. Both characteristics depend on and are expressed through the nonhuman beings present everywhere in his poems: robots, aliens, animals. The real and imaginary encounters between human and nonhuman beings are proof of the simultaneous existence of many possible worlds, languages, and ways of navigating them. His poetry thus

makes the imagination a necessary complement to any other cognitive process; one cannot perceive the world without also looking beyond it, expanding it to include other kinds of beings.

Svarovsky’s use of “fantasy” elements has two interrelated goals: the effective literary device and the transformative spiritual experience. In his interview with Ul’ianova, he says that “in [his] poetry the cosmos is just a device, an imaginary setting far away from everyday reality, allowing [him] to show things in their ‘primeval’ state.”156 In another interview, he remarks that “until they enter the Kingdom of God, people are alienated. They feel that they cannot fully explain themselves or fully know the other.”157 The act of estrangement from reality by means of poetry thus offers a glimpse of an unalienated (in the spiritual and affective sense) state, in which the other can be fully known, the self fully expressed. Oftentimes, this moment of estrangement—leaving behind the here and now and communing with the other within a wholly different space—happens during an encounter with the nonhuman, or through a transformation into the nonhuman. Oleg Pashchenko notes an additional benefit of the use of the nonhuman: it introduces a very visible distance between the poet and the lyric voice, and shields the poetic utterance from the destructive forces of irony or deconstruction. The poem can preserve its status as evidence that there is an additional dimension to reality, one in which our world is pervaded by the divine, and that fact makes the mediocrity of what we already know and perceive more bearable.158

156 Interview with Ul’ianova for Etazhi.
158 “Человек сидит перед экраном и пишет (или читает) — и, одновременно с этим, разбежавшись, прыгает в умозрительное море, плавает и ныряет; так и эсхатологическая реальность в этой картине мира не альтернативна явлению, но существует как дополнительное её измерение, как ещё одна степень онтологической свободы: мир бытийствует и содержит в себе бытийствующего (пишущего или читающего, сидящего или плывущего) человека — и, одновременно с этим, здесь и сейчас этот мир уже полностью спасён, восстановлен и обожен вместе со всем содержимым. Хотя ранее — когда о нём впервые зашла речь — он мог быть исчерпан красным и оценён на три с минусами.” “A man sits in front of the screen and writes (or reads)—and, at the same time, jumps into a sea of contemplation, diving and swimming; and so the eschatological
Ilya Kukulin notes that, in the process of leaving behind the here-and-now, Svarovsky’s characters all undergo a kind of kenosis—an emptying of the self as a result of humiliation, powerlessness, or significant losses suffered. This is reflected in the simplicity and directness of the language of Svarovsky’s poetry, which is never opaque or burdened by excessive metaphor. The living, emoting robots in Svarovsky’s first collection are examples of the grotesque, borrowed from the genre of science fiction and (often) patched together, steam-punk style; this sci-fi grotesque, Kukulin argues, takes the place of the Gothic in Svarovsky’s versions of the ballad. Here, the grotesque is not abject; instead, encountering it allows you to remake yourself in its image. As in other examples of contemporary Russian narrative poetry, “the kenotic and grotesque nature of the characters allow the text to be an allegory for trauma.”

This kenosis of Svarovsky’s characters, their “emptying” of the self, coupled with the aesthetic/ethical reorganization of the self made possible by the grotesque, amounts to a challenge to the idea that a stable self is possible, or desirable, within the context of an unstable social or political body. This compelling challenge invites the reader to respond, to recognize or embody the cathartic experience of kenosis, to fill in the outline of the empty self with

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160 Kukulin, “Ot Svarovskogo k Zhukovskomu i obratno.” Note the sentence that follows it: “А поскольку прямого указания на субъект в тексте нет, репрезентированная в нем травма воспринимается не как личная, а как собирательная, обобщенная, прежде всего — историческая.” We see the outline of this trauma more clearly in poems like the decidedly earthbound “what happened in sudan” (“что случилось в судане”), in which a veteran describes the supernatural monsters that his regiment was sent to fight, and the existential threat to all of mankind: “после спецоперации/ в гористых болотах Судана/ у Сергея не заживает в душе/ и на теле большая рана.” Here, as in other poems, physical and spiritual changes are closely related. Fedor Svarovskii, Vse khotiat byt’ robotami (Moscow: Argo-risk, 2007), 66.
projection, or to participate in the imaginative construction of a new self through the grotesque. This mode of participation is an avenue for recognizing and processing shared experiences (and, as Kukulin suggests, shared trauma: be it corporeal, psychic, political, or metaphysical).

Svarovsky provides for all kinds of emotional needs: from identifying the kenotic, humbled, wounded self, to imagining an alternate version brimming with love and joy, and with steel limbs and sparkling circuitry to boot. As both Samutina and Kukulin point out, Svarovsky suspends the border between actual and alternate realities, and erases any hierarchy between them. This allows his poetry to create a productive space of affect, in which the self is emptied and remade, and its connections with others established anew. Svarovsky recognizes the way affect functions as a kind of social regulation—the organization of the social body limits the scope of what the individual can know and experience—and constructs a world in which this regimentation is temporarily suspended.

Both of these features of Svarovsky’s work—the kenosis and transformations of his characters, and the shared affect in the community of readers—reflect the underlying Christian themes of the work. Leaving behind the human body is also a way of approaching things that its material knowledge cannot account for. A body that is not preoccupied by thoughts of mortality or the need to eat is a body that has more energy to spare on matters of the soul.

**Nobody wants to be who they were born to be**

Despina Kakoudaki describes the persistent cultural fascination with the robot as an extension of our interest in creation myths and origin stories, and the desire to bypass the vulnerability of childhood — fantasies of animation, and of artificial birth.\(^{161}\) Svarovsky’s robots

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show these fantasies at work in a post-Soviet Christian context, in which a crisis of identity (individuals faced with greater and greater uncertainty; fragmented groups in conflict with each other) makes the need for a new framework of self and knowledge that much more urgent. His robots allow a return to the vulnerability of childhood (which is closer to innocence and joy) and a re-animation, or rebirth without the burden of being assigned various identities. In these poems, the revelatory moment of transformation (closely associated with a Christ-like death and a rebirth) is more important than the moment of birth. Robots are useful avatars for this cluster of distinctly Christian ideas because they are also tied to a whole other set of allegories, courtesy of their etymological and literary lineage. The motivations behind the transformative work of the poems can remain hidden in plain sight.

Of course, robots also allow the fantasizing human to experience feelings more fully because they allow an estrangement from one’s own physicality and embodiment, from seeing oneself the way one is seen by others. When Svarovsky’s characters imagine themselves as robots, they describe the physical aspects of this embodiment in language borrowed from technology and science fiction, and the precision and clarity of that terminology also extends to an ability to name feelings and experiences—as robots, these characters name their sadness more often than as human beings. Physical and emotional revelation follow each other; suggesting that the inability to write about the non-robotic, fully human body also makes it impossible to explore its emotional experiences.

Svarovsky’s writing (like Goralik’s, and to a lesser extent Stepanova’s) often finds its first home on the Internet, and his readers interact with it through a screen before it appears in bookstores. But more so than any other contemporary Russian poet, Svarovsky is associated with virtual and mechanical bodies. In a 2015 Facebook post, Svarovsky wrote:
ВОТ ГОГОЛЬ
написал кое-что про нечистую силу.
Пушкин про скучающего хорошо обеспеченно деньгами бессердечного типуса.
Стивенсон написал про пиратов.
Лев Толстой про войну с французами.
Гумилев про охоту на экзотических животных.
Это все очень известные писатели и поэты. Их произведения известны всем. И я
завидую им. Но не потому, что ищу подобной им славы и успеха, а потому что
никто не считает, что они писали всю свою жизнь на одну и ту же тему, т.к. они
писали на разные темы.
Почему большинство людей, принадлежащих к узкому кругу моих читателей,
думают, что я всегда хотел писать только о роботах и сейчас пишу только о
роботах, и лишь иногда к собственному удивлению пишу не о роботах?
Неужели пара десятков стихотворений, написанных 9-10 лет тому назад, навсегда
определили мою жизнь, как жизнь исключительно ради роботов? В чем я
провинился?
(это риторические вопросы, это плач по Святой Руси, свободной от роботов)

So Gogol wrote some stuff about evil spirits. Pushkin wrote about the bored, wealthy,
heartless type. Stevenson wrote about pirates. Lev Tolstoy about the war with the French.
Gumilev about hunting exotic animals. These are all very famous writers and poets.
Everyone knows their work. And I envy them. But not because I seek their fame and
success, but because no one thinks that they spent their entire lives writing about just one
thing, since they wrote about many different things. Why does the majority of people
who belong to the narrow circle of my readership think that I always wanted to only write
about robots and I now only write about robots, and only sometimes, to my own surprise,
do I not write about robots? How come a couple dozen poems, written ten years ago,
forever defined my life as a life devoted to robots? What did I do wrong? (these are
rhetorical questions, this is a cry for Holy Rus’, free of robots)  

This is a sentiment he has expressed repeatedly—he wrote just one book about robots, so why
can’t he shake them off—in interviews and, indirectly, through the thematic shift in his recent
work, which features more animals, more scenes grounded in daily life, and fewer intergalactic
robot battles (though his characters still travel through time and space). His statement mocks the

162 Fyodor Svarovsky in a Facebook post from 3 November 2015
Translation mine.
absurdity of reducing writers to their most famous work, but it also places him in the company of Gogol, Pushkin, Tolstoy, Gumilev (and Stevenson, because genre literature and adventure stories are just as important in his canon). There he is, alongside poets and novelists who all left their mark on the Russian literary imagination, on our concepts of genre and language. Their works are abridged into themes of global importance, themes that move across borders: evil spirits that seep into our world, wars that spread across countries, travel to faraway lands, different social strata interacting. The silly robot label placed on Svarovsky is a kind of side-effect of the privilege of fame, of being widely read with varying degrees of attention and care. Complex works can be reduced to thematic buzzwords when they become woven into our cultural memory; general statements about the work of Pushkin or Tolstoy are a form of great recognition. And, by extension, Svarovsky’s poems about robots start to take on a thematic heft beyond the modest size of the collection Everybody Wants to Be a Robot. What is it about these poems, and these robots, that has so firmly taken root in readers’ minds?

Svarovsky wonders about “the majority of [his] narrow circle of readers” and cracks a joke about “Holy Rus’, free from robots,” and these seemingly offhand details offer insight into dynamics at play in the background of his statement. There is the issue of drawing borders—around the social body/self-made community of readers, or the body of a country, with its national, ethnic, religious, political or historical tensions and traditions. There is the anxiety of being able to define oneself, of feeling the pushback that ensues. There is the productive imprecision of literary work, always in conversation with majority and minority opinions, always negotiating the value of conventions. There is also the ease with which broad statements, hyperbole, and rhetorical tics are used to support a cluster of affects — disappointment, bewilderment, and a striving to remake the self in a more accurate image. “I envy them. […]"
What did I do wrong?” These are the very same sentiments that weave in and out of the collection *Everyone Wants to Be a Robot*, and that are often resolved by the human body transforming into a robot body, accompanied by a previously unknown—and often fleeting—emotional certainty. And, by repeatedly asking us not to think of him in conjunction with robots, Svarovsky inevitably conjures a specific image in our minds—that of the robot.

Reading *Everyone Wants to Be a Robot* a decade after it was published means reading it partially through the lens of its fame and resonance with readers[^163] — which suggests a tacit agreement with the sentiment expressed by the title, or perhaps with a follow-up statement in the eponymous poem which opens the collection: “никто не хочет быть тем, кем родился” (“Nobody wants to be who they were born to be”).[^164] The transformations and leaps of the imagination—physical, affective, social, political—by means of which people imagine robots, love robots, become robots, are the driving force behind this collection, and traces of them can also be found in Svarovsky’s subsequent work. These transformations occur in response to a need, keenly felt but not clearly articulated, to address a world that feels increasingly off-kilter. These transformations happen on three levels, with different nuances and aftereffects: individual, social/political, and literary. On the individual level, the person-become-robot strives for a new kind of embodied experience, for access to a broader field of affect. These are imagined and seen through the lens of science fiction, but they are also a kind of religious experience that draws on the imagery of Orthodox faith (and insofar as science fiction explores the structures of religious faith, those two sets of images are often aligned with each other). On the social/political level,


[^164]: Fedor Svarovskii, “Vse khotiat byt’ robotami,” in Svarovskii, *Vse khotiat byt’ robotami*, 3. Also online at http://www.vavilon.ru/texts/svarovskyl.html. All translations of Svarovsky’s poems are my own.
the person-become-robot either acknowledges and leaves behind the social body that constrains him, or imagines a new one, built to fit his needs. Here, the science fiction tropes in the poems point to the genre’s potential for political or historical writing. But Svarovsky does not propose a new political reality for his characters; he provides them with bodies that are better able to liberate them from whatever oppressiveness the surrounding world holds for them. The poems in the collection are also, finally, a specific kind of literary experience for the reader, in which recognizable sci-fi tropes undergo a metamorphosis to fit their adoptive poetic genre, thus changing their affective impact.

The intersections of the individual, social, and literary levels move between recognizing the anxiety of both readers of the poem and characters in the poem, embodied in the disparate materials and beings brought together in the text—and attempting to dispel it, transform it into levity by positioning these same elements in comedic arrangements. The poems move from regarding the clashes between reality and imagination, organic and inorganic natures (clashes that point us to a historical conflict, or its literary reflections), as a source of anxiety, a source of hope, a source of laughter, and a source of religious experience—a broad spectrum of affective movements. Svarovsky uses the nonhuman as the site of a reconciliatory narrative with strong nostalgic and conservative strains, while also regarding it as being in and of the future. The robot is a projection of the uncertainty and inaccuracy of the past and present as they are experienced together.

The titular poem of Everyone Wants to Be a Robot serves as a blueprint for many of the narratives in the book. Svarovsky’s poems often trace the life of a character from his childhood to the present day, from the life of his grandparents to his future (sometimes time-traveling)

165 The character is usually male.
self or grandchildren. Thus the historical past or a character’s childhood become a starting point against which later developments are measured. The biographical scenes move quickly, snapshot by snapshot, and this montage has a comedic effect, glossing over the details of both fantasy and trauma:

один
в 10 лет мечтал дружить с роботом
в 14 представлял, как женится на девушке-андроиде
в 20 думал о том, как со временем сменит органику
на сверхпрочные углеродные материалы

one guy
at 10 dreamt of being friends with robots
at 14 he imagined marrying an android girl
at 20 he thought about how he will eventually exchange organics
for heavy-duty carbon-based material

Starting from the point of this character’s anonymity, singularity, loneliness—“один” substitutes other identifying features and even stands alone in the first line—the poem builds up his imagined vision of a future with companionship, love, and a kind of material immortality.

учился на инженера
входил в комитет искусственного интеллекта
каждое лето проводил не у моря
а у монитора
ходил в турпоходы только в виртуальном пространстве
вот, значит
как мала человеку земля
и даже близкие ему – обуза

he studied engineering
joined the AI committee
spent every summer not at the beach
but in front of a screen

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166 Svarovsky, “Vse khotiat byt’ robotami,” 5.
167 Ibid.
went only on virtual cruises
look
how small the earth can be to a human
and how burdensome your loved ones

The contrast between real and virtual is strengthened by consonance—“море”/
“монитор,” “турпоход”/”виртуальное пространство”—which turns the natural into a longer
and more complex virtual, and creates a false etymological lineage between the two,
restructuring the body of language to mimic (or hasten) the restructuring of the physical body.
These juxtapositions also highlight a tension between individual and collective experience, the
solitary “один” and the “комитет.” The poem rephrases this as a kind of proverb which
diagnoses a feeling of constrictive insufficiency (“близкие ему - обуза”). The vastness of our
planet can feel small, and our human relationships can be a burden rather than a comfort. The
move from particular to proverbial, from micro to macro, is followed by another, larger swing to
a global declaration. This anxiety and discomfort are not particular to any “один” but are instead
a common malady—the use of “каждый” here evokes both singular and collective experience—
of all humanity.

никто никем не доволен
китайцев раздражают индийцы
русских ненавидят поляки
[…]
каждый ищет чего-то другого
чего-то каждый стыдится

no one is happy with anyone
the Chinese are annoyed by the Indians
the Poles hate the Russians
[…]
everyone is looking for something else
everyone is ashamed of something

168 Ibid.
Svarovsky’s poetry repeatedly returns to this template. A poem follows one or two characters, and the collection assembles these case studies into a kind of demographic report. The big picture, the poem “все хотят быть роботами” suggests, is a world in which no one is content, and tensions are rampant. The same principle of unhappiness operates on all levels; the jump from individual to global conflict is immediate and intuitive, which, in turn, only amplifies the original grievance. Everyone has dreams, which are made impossible by circumstances beyond anyone’s control; everyone is thus unhappy, and compensating by seeking something else, a dream to replace their original dream, or a way of being in the world to replace the body and life they were born into.

The language Svarovsky uses to describe this pattern, which appears in personal and societal narratives, is one of affect: of picturing and wanting happiness; of being ashamed, in the end, of one’s failure to procure it. The personal experience of unhappiness doubles as a binding social force; it is either shared or rejected, always part a larger dynamic. Many of the verbs used to propel the narrative, or the adjectives that bring it to vivid life, refer to cognitive and affective processes: thinking, imagining, loving, disliking, telling, seeking. And it is through these processes that the individual is linked to the social/political body.

When focusing on a single character, Svarovsky’s short lines present a linear narrative. In places where the poem expands beyond that spotlight, each line comes to represent a fragment of a multitude of contemporaneous experiences: “китайцев раздражают индийцы/ русских ненавидят поляки.” In these sections, the poems start building a list, which unifies and catalogues diverse experiences of anxiety and displeasure. But the voice doing this accounting is tied to the singular character introduced, and within the frame narrative that focuses on the
“один,” this diversity of people, opinions and experiences becomes a building block of his personal landscape of anxiety:

немец всё время в чём-то винит француза
арабы говорят, что они боливийцы
эфиопы
приехав в Европу
рассказывают, что они, на самом деле, кенийцы
европейцы вообще
делают операции, заменяют уши, волосы, лица
каждый ищет чего-то другого
чего-то каждый стыдится
никто не хочет быть тем, кем родился
с удовольствием забывают родную речь
свой город, где кто гулял, учился
белому подавай обязательно жену-таитянку
мотоциклист за бешеные деньги переучивается на водителя танка
и этот тоже опять за своё:
tолько роботы умеют любить

the german is always blaming the frenchman
the arabs are calling themselves bolivians
ethiopians / having arrived in europe
claim that they are, in fact, kenyan
and the europeans just
get surgeries, new ears, new hair, new faces
everyone wants something different
everyone is ashamed of something
no one wants to be who they were born
they are happy to forget their native language
their hometown, where people strolled and studied
the white guy wants a wife from tahiti
the motorcycle guy spends crazy money to learn to drive a tank
only robots know how to love

This section of the poem shows how individual affect is absorbed by group affect, and how that is channeled into political and cultural anxieties about appearance, language, labor, relationships, belonging. In a small globalized world, which gives everyone access to unfiltered

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169 Ibid., 5-6.
information about everyone and everything else, this multivalent exchange does not automatically lead to empathy, understanding, cooperation, or peace—it can also lead to an exacerbated alienation of the self from its immediate community, and a more pronounced drawing of borders between separate communities. Following these conservative impulses, a turn to science fiction as a form of emotional conflict resolution (or escape) can bring out the aspects of the genre that are an extension of authoritarian political fantasy, of older colonial exploration, of uncomplicated hierarchies that affirm some beings and experiences over others.

And yet Svarovsky draws back as soon as the poem reaches this brink, and shifts toward exploring the definitions of feelings rather than identities. Maybe, the poem continues, the problem is as banal as the constraints of human biology. Humans are bound to be unhappy with who they are, trapped by unhappy introspection, alienated from others, while:

только роботы умеют любить
им в голову не приходит мысль об измене
что может быть крепче привязанности неорганического материала
бесстрастного, неподкупного этого сцепления
неорганических молекул?
что проникновеннее электрона?
они
не хотят ни есть, ни пить
смерти не знают
искусственное сердце ничем кроме любви-то и не занято даже
только любят, надеются
скучают, страдают

only robots know how to love
the thought of betrayal wouldn’t occur to them
what can be stronger than the bond of inorganic material
the dispassionate, uncorrupted connection
of inorganic molecules?
what is more profound than an electron?

170 Ibid., 6.
they
don’t need food or drink
you don’t know death
the artificial heart doesn’t even engage in anything other than love
they only love and hope
long and suffer

Before we look at these lines more closely, let us note, again, what prompts the observation that robots are less corruptible than humans: “им в голову не приходит мысль об измене,” a betrayal that constitutes all kinds of border crossings, like people changing their nationalities, forgetting their native languages, surgically altering their appearance. These betrayals happen right where individual choice shapes or responds to collective identity, where each one person can put the cohesion of the political body at risk. The anxiety underlying all of these statements, when expressed differently, could become a kind of strident nationalism. But the poem (and Svarovsky’s work in general) does not reveal any real affective investment in the concept of national borders: it merely marks them as a feature of the landscape.

This section shows Svarovsky’s weaving of everyday language (shorter words, more verbs) with scientific jargon (more nouns and adjectives, introduced as rhetorical questions that perform the certainty of science) to defamiliarize and diagnose common emotional ailments. The ability to love (“умеют любить”), the poem suggests, is a property specific to inorganic materials. The argument grows through negation (“не приходит мысль,” “неорганического,” “бесстрастного, неподкупного,” “не хотят ни есть, ни пить/ смерти не знают,” “ничем кроме любви-то и не занято”), thus combining two rhetorical gestures — praising robots as loving and true, and bemoaning the fallible nature of the human heart. The human body is corruptible, it has to eat, drink, and die (sins and punishments of the flesh), which, the poem suggests, gets in the way of the work that should keep us busy instead: love, hope, suffering.
If you come to this text expecting robots to be creatures driven by a rationality that excludes matters of the heart, Svarovsky’s claims can be confounding. This play with expectations has the effect of making all the sci-fi tropes in the poems feel both familiar and new at the same time. Here, the significant difference between humans and robots comes down to what material they are made of, and if these materials allow for affect or behavior that disturbs the social bond, like hatred and betrayal. Robots are good at love, better at it than humans, because they are immortal by design—and here the tenets of Svarovsky’s robotics align with a Christian idea of what makes humans weak and fallible. The mortal flesh of the human body, defined by its daily needs and desires, is poorly suited for transcendent love.

This short robot manifesto is followed by another personal narrative, which sees the poem through to its finale, and sketches out the fantasy of a better self enshrined in a better body:

а тут, значит, мальчик один
сын друзей
сломал себе руку
расколол себе локоть
врач сказал: это конечно
не подлежит лечению
вставили металлический
сам
живее некуда:
никаких там клонов в роду
наполовину татарин, наполовину еврей
а ходит гордый
хвастается:
я же теперь как киборг
(и это только начало)
во мне уже 124 грамма
неизменного
неорганического материала
дедушка его по матери
(между прочим, мулла)
плачет
всё время головой кивает
смотрит телевизор
ничего не понимает
спрашивает: это что всё значит?
ай, говорит, обидно
что же это такое?
ничего не понимаю, что люди друг другу говорят
и всё такое
какое-то никакое
ни добра тебе
ни настоящего даже зла

and so, here, a young boy
the son of friends
broke his arm
busted his elbow
the doctor said: of course
we cannot cure this
they put in metal
he
is as alive as can be:
no clones in his family tree
half tatar, half jewish
but he walks around proud
bragging:
I am a cyborg now
(and this is just the beginning)
I now have in me 124 grams
of immutable
inorganic material
his grandfather on his mother’s side
(who by the way is a mullah)
cries
always shaking his head
watching television
he doesn’t understand
he asks: what does it all mean?
oh, he says, this is upsetting
what is this supposed to be?
I don’t understand anything people are saying to each other
and it’s all just

171 Ibid., 6-7.
some kind of nothing
nothing good
but also nothing truly bad

The poem returns to its beginning, but here the singular “один” is more specific; it refers to a young boy who gets surgery to fix his broken elbow and becomes, to his great pride and delight, a kind of cyborg. This is not the only aspect of his identity where boundaries get blurred: he might not have any clones in his family tree, but one side of it is Jewish, and another Tatar. In the previous sections, these identities would have been placed in opposition as part of a litany of strife. Here, they have already met, and reconciled—organically. This is not necessarily proof that conflicts can be resolved, or a blueprint for how that should be done—as the poems repeatedly demonstrate, adulthood has a way of diminishing the joy and promise of childhood dreams—but it is another data point in the chaotic demographic report of the poem.

But we cannot end with this kind of uncomplicated optimism. The poem (as well as this section) begins with the fantasies of a child and ends with the reality of an old man, interacting with the world through a machine that remains separate from and threatening to his being. The boy’s grandfather—a mullah, an example of the religious undertones of the text rising to the surface—is watching television, and does not understand what is happening, what people are saying. All he sees is a gray zone outlined by the absence of its black and white bookends: “ни добра тебе/ ни настоящего даже зла,” another reality described by negatives alone. The distracting difficulty of scientific language is gone, as is the momentum of the litany of places and communities in conflict. Instead, we have a general uncertainty about all people, all things—voiced by the mullah without the flourishes of markedly poetic speech, the specificity of his voice still quite vague.
While looking ahead to a future—equally plausible and imaginary—in which the boy becomes even more cyborg-like, the poem also looks backward. Where the younger boy sees hope and possibility, the older man sees an alienating uncertainty, now spelled out not just in affective but also in ethical terms. The promise of positive changes to the individual body is threatened by inconclusive changes to the social body.

“Robots don’t have angels”

In Svarovsky’s poetry, the metamorphosis (imagined and deeply felt) from human to nonhuman being is what allows affect to be freely transmitted. In this sense, it is a kind of transfiguration, and it reveals the deep roots of Svarovsky’s poetry in Christian thought. Often the metamorphosis/transfiguration will allow the speaker to fully inhabit a moment of trauma or imminent death. These liminal states—the changed body, the impending loss of life (even that of an inorganic life form)—make it possible for him to open up, to speak freely. In some poems, even robots can die. The transformation into a robot can soothe the human obsession with, and anxiety about, death in two ways—by dispelling it altogether, if inorganic embodiment makes one immortal, or, if the robot dies, by experiencing it fully, cathartically, from the safe distance of someone reading or imagining it.

“The Battle of Madalbakhan” (“Бой при Мадалбахане”) from Everyone Wants to Be a Robot is an example of this kind of transfiguration and articulation of feelings. A character named Vova, a drunkard unhappy with the dull confines of his daily life, dreams of an epic battle in space. The climax finds him, now a robot, alone and close to death. The monologue of the dying robot extends over several segments of the poem, which ends with Vova briefly waking up with a fever before sinking back into the battle/dream:
ты – робот
один в пустыне
после 121-й атаки
и твои кислотные баки
совсем пустые
[…]
всё
никто не придёт на подмогу
его начинают
беспокоить тяжёлые мысли
кажется, слишком поздно
что-либо делать
и он по подпространственному интеркому
молится не тому, кто его создал
но кому-то
другому172

you are a robot
alone in the desert
after the 121st attack
and your acid reserves
are entirely empty
[…]
that’s it
no one is coming to help
heavy thoughts are starting
to bother him
it seems to late
to do anything
and on the intercom
he is praying not to the one who created him
but to someone
else

This solitary prayer is an interesting inversion of a previous scene, which shows Vova
singing karaoke by himself. The precise language of the battle (the 121st attack, the “кислотные
баки”) clashes with the vague awareness of his predicament and the limited verbal range of his

172 “Boi pri Madalbakhane,” Vse khotiat byt’ robotami, 17.
interiority: “тяжёлые мысли,” “что-либо делать,” “не тому […] но кому-то/другому.” Even among the particulars of this sci-fi register, death is difficult to articulate, divinity is best understood and approached apophatically — he is praying not to his creator (a human) but to someone else. There is an emptiness, an emptying, of both interior and exterior; he is in the desert, his reserves are nearly gone.

The next section begins with the actual words of the prayer, also formulated through negation:

– знаешь
у роботов ангелов нет
никто не беспокоится
не летит
не закрывает
невидимыми крыльями
нас в пути
потому в тяжёлый момент мы обращаемся напрямую
и вот я прошу
кислоты и воды 
но
главное
я тоскую
мне кажется, я умираю
но как полностью неживая
особь
не получу никакого рая
я знаю
что мы с тобой не близки
и возможно
не можем
быть близки
у меня вместо носа
неприглядные
анализаторы газа
и обонятельные волоски173
[…]

173 Ibid., 18-9.
you know
robots don’t have angels
no one worries about us
no one flies above
protecting us
with invisible wings
in our travels
this is why when things get tough we address directly
and here I am asking
for acid and water
but
most of all
I am sad
I think I am dying
but as an entirely unloving
being
there is no heaven for me
I know
that you and I are not close
and possibly
can never
be close
instead of a nose
I have unsightly
gas analyzers
and scent-detecting filaments

The poem switches between second person ("ты - робот"), third person ("его начинают/ беспокоить тяжёлые мысли"), and first person singular and plural, in a specific construction ("я знаю/ что мы с тобой не близки"). This suggests the shifting perspective of the dream, with the character Vova as an amateur science fiction writer/dreamer, imagining himself (as a robot) from different perspectives, both inhabiting the body and observing it, narrating the situation and experiencing it. The first-person position is not immediately available or comfortable for him; it is difficult to settle into a full identification with this dying self. These shifts also position the reader in different ways; we are caught up in the same cinematic motion that keeps us at a specific distance before pulling us in.
This science fiction-infused poem might view death—even the death of a robot—through a distinctly Christian lens, but it will not go as far as to bend doctrine. The line “у роботов ангелов нет” is both funny and tragic, juxtaposing two powerful nonhuman beings (both just as real as they are imaginary), and enforcing a hierarchy between their respective genres. Robots cannot fully cross into the territory inhabited and cared for by angels. Earlier we saw humans try to overcome their deficiencies by becoming robots; here the robot is analyzing the limitations of his own body, which is “entirely nonliving” (but also aesthetically deficient) and will thus keep him out of heaven (in Svarovsky’s short lines, the rhymes “умираю,” “неживая,” “рая” really draw attention to themselves).

Once again, an individual feels excluded from a larger community; a hierarchy is reinforced to keep him out. And yet Vova is much more articulate as the robot version of himself, much more capable of recognizing and naming his feelings. The prayer continues, and robot-Vova seems to speak on behalf of his human self:

я – на пороге вечности
кончается моё приключение
но если это возможно
господин живого
и неживого
послушай вот это слово:
спаси меня
избавь меня
от этой тяжести мыслей
от этой тупой некрасивой жизни
от жира
и от прыщей
от ежедневных супов
борщей
от оков
dай мне новое тело
другое дело
чтобы всё было не напрасно
научи меня одеваться по самой последней моде
сделай так
чтобы все оставили меня в покое
или чтобы все считали прекрасным

I am on the brink of eternity
my adventure is coming to an end
but if it’s possible
lord of all living
and not
hear my plea
save me
release me
from these heavy thoughts
from this stupid ugly life
from the fat
and the pimples
from daily soups
and borsht
from chains
give me a new body
another matter
let this all be not all in vain
teach me to dress fashionably
please make it so
that they leave me alone
or that they all find me wonderful

The language of byt and the language of prayer join forces here. The connotations of
“господин” point to both religious leadership and to owning people as slaves — the etymology
of robot resurfaces alongside the Christian symbolism. The robot prays to a master of all things
living and not, organic and inorganic, and the binary of “живого” and “неживого” rhymes with
“слово,” which blurs the boundary between them. Language is not only in the domain of the
living.

\[174\] Ibid., 21.
A huge tonal shift follows. The human-become-robot begs to be relieved of burdens both metaphysical and mundane: shackles and sadness, but also acne and soups (as if aiming for a theosis, transforming the body through prayer and granting it a saint-like death with no hard feelings and no foul odors). Once again, humor serves to relieve anxiety for both speaker and reader. If the desire to be saved “от этой тупой некрасивой жизни” has a bitter truthful ring to it, the lighthearted spoonful of “от ежедневных супов/ боршей” makes it more palatable. The inner torment of the speaker is banal and vain, but also deeply felt. And so are his proposed solutions — people should either love him or leave him alone. He wishes for an uncomplicated inclusion in the social body, for a reduction of the vagueness, the complexity of interactions with others.

In an interview from 2015, Svarovsky comments on this poem and on the way sadness permeates his work:

If you think about it using a Christian framework, this is, above all, the sadness of the created being. Each being will become complete when it is joined with the Logos in the Kingdom of God. The Logos will appear to everyone, and everyone will find meaning. But right now, each person is a mystery to himself, disoriented, he lacks a complete identity and his desires are not met, there is nothing complete about him. This is an existential sadness. Everyone experiences this, and it is not just Christian writers that write about it—but the fact is that Christian writers can explain it.175

The general sentiment of this statement aligns neatly with many of the narratives in the collection. Imagining or becoming a robot is one of the pathways by which one can access logos

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175 Interview with Sergei Sdobnov. Following up, Svarovsky talks about how fully knowing the other is also not possible outside the Kingdom of God: “Это очень интересный опыт — принять Другого в себе, ощутить себя Другим. Возникает чудесное опьянение от того, что ты можешь оказаться Другим, а Другой — тобой. […] Люди, пока они не войдут в Царствие Божие, разобщены. Им кажется, что они не могут объясниться и познать Другого до конца. Прежде всего, они не могут до конца познать себя, но это будет преодолено: человек сможет присутствовать во всех, кому надо.” “It’s a really interesting experience—to accept the Other within yourself, to feel oneself as Other. A wonderful intoxication arises from the fact that you could turn out to be Other, and the Other can be you. […] Before people enter the Kingdom of God, they are estranged from one another. It seems to them that they cannot fully explain themselves to the Other or fully know the Other. Moreover, they cannot fully know themselves, but that can be overcome: those who need it will be able to be present.”

114
and shed the uncertainty of daily/earthly life. But the specifics of how the poems embody and dispel anxieties is more complex. As Kakoudaki points out, robots are an extremely versatile trope, because they can contain a vast set of meanings and anxieties about purpose, creation, and embodiment. They can contain meanings that remain unresolved, questions that are active, urgent, compelling.176 Some of the ethical quandaries introduced by science fiction are beyond the ken of theology, though both speculative fields can try to contain the affect of uncertainty that joins robots, poets, and readers. Holy Rus’ will not free itself easily from the robot horde.

“We will be happy”

In Svarovsky’s more recent work, there is a marked preoccupation with history and the afterlife as seen through the natural landscape. The mix of levity and pathos is similar to that in Svarovsky’s earlier poems, but the religious themes are closer to the surface, supplying a joyful eschatological framework for thinking about death and the promised afterlife. The 2015 collection Слава героям (Glory to Heroes) begins with a poem called “Когда растают льды” (“When the Ice Melts”) whose emotional tenor has only gotten more dissonant against the zeitgeist of the last four years.

когда растают льды Антарктиды
мы будем счастливы

пройдут многочисленные дожди
сухие кости станут влажными

зацветут сады
на земле королевы Мод

на полуострове королевы Виктории —
на ветру палатки белые

от воды до воды — луга
рыбу и хлеб птица выхватывает из рук
всё нормально будет
все мёртвые оживут
все хорошие
кроме плохих
о, стеклянные города
о, поднявшаяся изо льда земля
gосударь император
по щиколотку в тёплой воде
вдоль зелёного берега
навстречу качаясь идёт
простой пингвин
императорский
when the ice melts in the Antarctic
we will be happy
many rains will pass
dry bones will become moist
gardens will bloom
on the land of Queen Maud
on Queen Victoria’s peninsula
white tents in the wind
meadows from water to water
the bird will snatch fish and bread from your hand
everything will be all right
all the dead will come to life
all the good ones
except the bad ones

177 Slava geroiam, 17.
oh, glass cities
oh, land rising out of the ice

the lord emperor
up to his ankles in the warm water

along the green shore
comes rocking toward you

a regular penguin
emperor

The poem imagines an end of the world at the end of the world—the ice of the Antarctic melts away to reveal a lush Edenic space, and the dead come back to life. The juxtaposition of natural and spiritual concepts creates the sense that the two worlds are deeply interconnected, and that it is somehow plausible that climate change can bring about a resurrection. The remnants of the Antarctic ice appear as glass cities over the rising land. The rulers of this territory are the land itself (its different corners named after queens) and a waddling emperor penguin (both priestly and lordly). There is an implied human point of view in the line “we will be happy,” but it describes an affective state rather than an embodied presence. Halfway through the poem, the human body is metonymically present through a hand, but the scene presents the other elements (the bird, the fish, the bread) as whole and more central. The combination of fish and bread creates a parallel between the speaker feeding the birds and Jesus feeding a hungry crowd; however, the animal is taking what it wants rather than being given something. The encounter with the nonhuman is both divine touchingly comic. The emperor penguin waddles towards the viewer/speaker, up to his knees in warm water. The animal approaches the human and not vice-versa; this serves as an invitation into this Edenic state. The immersion in warm water suggests a cleansing, a baptismal font, or even a return to an earthly in utero state if renewed possibility. At the same time, as poet and reader both know, the melting Antarctic is
part of an irreversible process of damage and habitat destruction. The poem asserts that “everything will be all right” while describing a complete transformation of the landscape.

How many people will be left at this point? What would the happiness promised in the second line look like if we do not share the poet’s belief in the resurrection? Does this entire scene take place in an afterlife, in which animals and people happily share the newly remade earth? Or is this an earth where people are entirely absent, remaining only as a linguistic remnant to suggest that the wild animals are tame?

Svarovsky deals with a different kind of fantasy here, as fantastic as the robotic battles in outer space. In the scenario of this poem, the damage done by a culture of material excess and depletion of resources will ultimately yield an excess of natural beauty and spiritual contentment. The poem tries to redirect anxiety into comfort and to imagine a rapprochement between man and nature. It lets the birds take the first step toward us, but it leaves us out of the frame. There is a striking simplicity and certainty in the abstract adjectives used in the poem: “счастливы,” “нормально,” “хорошие,” “плохие,” “простой.” It is as if any nuances and complications had melted away along with the ice, leaving behind clear categories. This certainty could be a projection, a product of hope rather than knowledge. The poem hopes that, when it comes down to the wire and the ice has melted, the animals will want to approach us, and those who were good will be rewarded with eternal life. The ending waits for the penguin, ruler of the warm shore, to pass judgment.

Another poem in the collection also imagines what is buried under the ice, this time finding remnants of history within a non-Edenic present:

“Слоны Ганнибала”

все газеты взрываются новостью:
шестнадцать нелегалов-ливийцев пытались перейти границу Швейцарии

ночью застияг их буран произошёл сход лавины до границы не дотянули

утром замёрзшие арабы обнаружили себя среди поля огромных глыб серого цвета

лавина сдвинула слой ледника обнажив какое-то давнее содержимое недр ледяных

велико же было удивление африканцев если они, не подумав о депортации и аресте вбежали в ближайшую деревню с нечеловеческими криками

местным жителям казалось, что они кричат "фуй-фуй" но это было на самом деле "альфуль-альфуль"

прочитав об этом случае в прессе я чуть с ума не сошёл бросил всё

купил билет и уже к вечеру был в Турине взял машину

ночью ехал в горах заблудился

ранним утром нашёл это поле оно было оцеплено полицией обернуто специальными лентами

я показал одно из фальшивых удостоверений и просёл их было семеро

как живые и неживые
ледяные
блестящие
покрытые инеем
с кое-где просевшей плотью

большинство сидели на заду
один с поднятыми вверх бивнями
и даже волоски на голове сохранились

уже очищенные ото льда и снега
от мелких камней
на белой площадке

я щупал твёрдые столбы ног
неподвижные удавы хоботов
стучал в доски ушей

трогал
щитки и украшения
da

это слоны Ганнибала
оставшиеся в холоде гор
вмёрзшие в тот
италийский лёд

наши
мои слоны:

Змей
Длиннонос
Племянник
Корабль Двухпалубный
Ун
Хартум
и Гобобо178

“Hannibal’s elephants”

the papers are on fire with the news:
sixteen illegal Libyans
tried to cross the Swiss border

at night they got caught in a snowstorm

178 Slava geroiam, 60-62.
there was an avalanche
they did not reach the border

in the morning
the freezing Arabs
found themselves
in a field of giant clods
all gray

the avalanche broke
a layer off the glacier
revealing
what the icy depths
had kept hidden for so long

the Africans must have been really amazed
since they, not thinking about deportation or arrest,
rang to the nearest town

the locals
thought they were yelling “phooey-phooey”
but it was actually “al-fil-al-fil”

when I read about this in the papers
I almost lost it
I dropped everything
bought a ticket and arrived in Turin the same night

I drove around the mountain at night
I got lost
in the early morning I found the field
it was guarded by the police
cordonned off with special tape

I showed them one of the fake ids
and they let me through
there were seven of them

both living and not
icy
sparkling
covered in frost
here and there you could see the skin

most were sitting on their hind legs
one had his tusks pointed up
and even the hairs on the head were preserved

already cleaned of the ice and the snow
the little stones
on a white platform

I touched the hard columns of their feet
the immobile boas of their trunks
I knocked on the boards of their ears

I touched
the shields and the ornaments
yes

these are Hannibal’s elephants
left behind in the cold mountains
frozen in this
Italian ice

our
my elephants:

Dragon
Longnose
Nephew
Two-deck Ship
Ui
Khartoum
and Gobobo

The beginning of the poem dates it and provides a lens through which to read the latter part. The poem references the refugee crisis in Southern Europe and the inhumane treatment of people from African and Asian countries who try to enter (or move across) the continent in search of safety. Libyan refugees are trying to cross the border between Italy and Switzerland; they nearly die after an avalanche; they discover a sight so striking that they put themselves at risk by going into town; newspapers sensationalize the outcome of this failed journey. Svarovsky’s poetry often turns to the sea as a place of solace; thus, the dangerous journey is
transposed from the Mediterranean to the Alps, where it retraces Hannibal’s crossing of the Alps with war elephants (an enormous effort, hindered by snow and landslides, which cost the lives of both people and animals). There is a striking contrast between the perils of the journey through the mountains and the ease with which the narrator travels to Turin within a day and bypasses the police line with fake documents. The free movement of the speaker puts him in an entirely different category (one with access to safety and ease), as if he were an entirely different species of being. But the speaker and the Libyan refugees have an important thing in common. The refugees nearly freeze to death, their lives are at risk from the authorities, and they are unable to communicate—and yet their amazement overpowers all of these other feelings. The encounter with the remnants of the elephants is transformational for them. The speaker experiences none of the discomfort and all of the awe of recognition: deciphering what the Libyans were trying to tell the townspeople (“al-fil” means elephant in Arabic), recognizing and naming the creatures found in the ice.

The paths of the refugees and the speaker do not intersect; he reads their story in a paper and knows enough to fill in the details. They disappear once the headlines are done with them. The list of the (imaginary) names of the elephants appears in place of the names of the people who discovered their remnants—or those of many anonymous victims trying to cross the Mediterranean into Europe. The skeletons of Hannibal’s elephant army serve as a reminder that the postwar Fortress Europe is a dangerous, conservative, and historically illiterate political project, that the continent has always been visited and inhabited by a variety of people of different origin (and it is also a reminder of what happens when you leave someone behind in a hostile environment). The North African army from two millennia ago has become embedded into European history (as well as the continent’s landscape), and the speaker gets to claim these
elephants as “ours” and then his own, and to give them whimsical names. Meanwhile, in the present day, defenseless refugees are treated as an invading army.

The fraught political context coexists with a strong, reparative religious current in the poem. The encounter with the nonhuman is spiritually transformative—and physically overwhelming—for both the refugees and the speaker. For the Libyans, the storm and the avalanche bring about a liminal state near death, and the sight of the elephants in the morning is a revelation. The speaker also wanders, lost in the mountain, before he finds the animals in the morning light. For him, the awe of recognition is aided by the physical experience of touching the legs, ears, tusks of the elephants. The solid presence of their remnants serves is a kind of miracle, real proof of his knowledge and his faith. The dead and the lost are returning—if not coming back to life, then at least to the surface of the world. The speaker can also be read as a figure like Daniel, able to recognize the remnants for what they are (the elephants in replacing the writing on the wall), predicting the destruction of an empire. There are other signs pointing to its downfall: its borders cannot hold, its glaciers are breaking in two.

As in “Когда растают льды,” the language of “Слоны Ганнибала” turns the living and the dead part of the elements of the natural world. The prophesy in Ezekiel 37 (the Valley of the dry bones) and the threat of climate change point to an imminent transformation of the world. As the landscape is changing, and storms are breaking the glaciers (like the rains that melt the Antarctic ice and wet the dry bones), the nominal physical border between the living and the dead will also disappear. Nature supplies evidence that the expansive, fantastical realm—the one which will provide us with a sense of community and the affect of pure joy—really does exist at the same time and in the same space as our here-and-now. And this certainty serves as a counterpoint to any anxiety we might have about death or climate change. Will those who die at
sea or in the mountains share in the awe of this other world? The poem seems to hope so, and it also wants us to think about what they might see on their journeys, and the words they might use to describe them.

Svarovsky engages the reader in a conversation, which runs as an undercurrent in the poems—an attempt at diagnosing the condition of uncertainty, of insufficiency, which inflects both private life and the social fabric. Svarovsky thinks of this crisis in spiritual terms, but depicts it using tropes that remain legible outside of a religious framework because they draw on other genres in which a realm beyond the everyday human world holds a greater truth. The natural world and outer space provide a setting for transformative encounters with nonhuman creatures, and for moments of pure communion through affect: a glimpse of what the life of the soul can look like in the Kingdom of God. In Svarovsky’s work, the nonhuman represents the potential for a different kind of embodiment, for a way of being in the world that is not solitary and disaffected. Robots and animals are part of our world, but they prove that other worlds exist as well, and that we can access them. The poems describe battles and catastrophes, but also hold out just enough hope to support the reader looking for signs that joy is still possible; science fiction and Christian theology both agree that you are not bound to the realities of your body—and its feelings—for the rest of time.
Chapter Three: The *Bestia Rasa* of Linor Goralik

If you read contemporary Russian literature, you will definitely encounter Linor Goralik in one of her many guises. She started out as a popular blogger in the early days of the *runet* blogosphere (an account of that can be found in the 2010 book *Рунет: сотворенные кумиры* by Yuliya Idlis;\(^\text{179}\) in a nod to the early days of the internet, Goralik also publishes almost all of her texts on her website, which is built using the most basic html code), and she has published extensively in Russian-language periodicals as a columnist, interviewer (her ongoing series of interviews with contemporary writers is being serialized in book form under the title *Частные лица; Private persons*, 2013), graphic artist (her biting comic strip *Заяц ПЦ* (*Bunnypuss*, 2008) offers vulgar quips about contemporary life) and scholar (she has published a book on the cultural history of the Barbie doll, *Полая женщина; The Hollow Woman*, 2005). Aside from that, there is also her prolific work as an artist, fiction writer, as well her poetry (the latter holds a special place in her oeuvre, as she herself admits). Several of her books are set in Israel—including *Библейский Зоопарк* (*Biblical Zoo*, 2012), which consists of dispatches from Israel thematically organized around encounters with animals, and the children’s book *Бестиарий* (*Bestiary*, 2014), a collaboration with Aleksei Tsvetkov and Leia Liubomirkskaia, which combines verse about animals with notes on how these same animals feature in stories in Jewish religious texts, and how they are part of the landscape of contemporary Israel. Goralik divides her time between Israel, where she spends most of the year, and Moscow, where she teaches

\(^{179}\) Idlis’s book includes interviews with popular bloggers from the *runet*, reflections on their style and legacy, and excerpts from their posts. In her section on Goralik (the heading is Goralik’s most popular username, “snorapp”) Idlis points out that one of Goralik’s many side-blogs from the early 2000s was titled “Дневник шиншиллы в изгнании” (The diary of a chinchilla in exile). Iuliia Idlis, *Runet: Sotvorenye kumiry* (Moscow: ANF, 2010), 201.
courses on the theory and semiotics of fashion. Most of her fiction work uses the setting of big-city Russia or Israel as a background for brief narratives of almost-realism inflected by moments of unreality, sometimes going all out into the terrain of speculative fiction. And since both of the countries she lives in are heavily invested in the structure and symbolism of the military, her stories often touch on the experience of war and everyday violence.

Linor Goralik is a member of the same generation as Stepanova and Svarovsky (she was born in Dnipropetrovsk in 1975, and some of her writing focuses on the experiences of this last generation to spend its childhood in the Soviet Union), and is similarly popular among readers of contemporary literature; she is representative of its trends and concerns, and of its broader scope. She captures the tone and rhythm of contemporary language—with its borrowings from English and other languages, its growing reliance on the Internet as a public space, its particular pauses and repetitions—in a way that shows a deep interest in how this material is changing and shaping the speakers who use it. Her work often features the trope of the nonhuman, weaving it into short (and longer) narratives about contemporary daily life, the imaginative inner lives of unusual characters, or even specific historical periods. Her effort to capture other people’s voices extends to the unvoiced encounters with nonhuman beings; her work as a scholar of fashion is an extension of that same interest in analyzing the symbolic and social codes of the body and its physical presence in everyday exchanges.

This chapter will look at a small selection of her large body of work. I will begin by looking at excerpts from the historical “novella” about WWII Вроде того (Something Like That, 2014), excerpts from her flash fiction series Говорит (She Said, He Said, 2004), and excerpts from her novella Валерий (Valerii: A Short Novel, 2011), and I will then focus on her 2018 novel Все, способные дышать дыхание (All Who Can Breathe Breath), which combines
themes and techniques from her short fiction in a compelling speculative account of what happens when animals gain the ability to speak to humans.

Goralik’s prose uses the same set of techniques across different genres. The first is a brevity of the shape and span of her narratives (which can constitute the entirety of a work or an individual segment in a longer work) which often lack exposition or resolution, and a notable segmentation of longer narratives. The second is her stylistic mimicry of spoken, “overheard” language, which effectively erases the line between characters and narrator, and makes the act of writing almost invisible to the reader (that invisibility is then belied by footnotes, parentheses, and other comments). The third is citing or commenting on popular media discourse (including television, newspapers, government publications), showing the degrees to which its languages have infiltrated daily casual speech, and the political ramifications of that infiltration. A fourth is her usage of a great amount of physical detail (describing objects, people or movements) and a lesser amount of figurative language; she also consistently references real cities, streets, establishments, persons, technologies, historical events. Goralik’s language provides an excess of information, sometimes from the perspective of an observer, and sometimes from the point of view of a first-person narrator telling a story.

To an extent, these stylistic choices reflect the author’s familiarity with her audience, most of whom will immediately recognize the settings, speech patterns, historical references, social realities and political opinions present in Goralik’s fiction. The incompleteness of the narrative directs the reader’s attention to filling out a frame based on shared knowledge and assumptions; one becomes invested in adding context and interpretation to Goralik’s scenes. Reading her prose is akin to a kind of sociological inquiry. The presumption of shared knowledge leads to an even more interesting effect when the recognizable flow of images and
speech is disrupted by an event outside of the usual bounds of realism. This sometimes reads as humor, and sometimes lingers as a profound/disturbing disruption of the fabric of meaning. Critics have remarked that they struggle with this aspect of her work, finding it too similar across different genres and mediums, too deceptively easy to read. Kirill Korchagin and Lev Oborin, in a discussion of *Valerii*, connect her recognizable style to the disorienting effect of the so-called “stability” of the Putin age. Korchagin says:

> It is true that Goralik makes up for the stability (that word again) of her language with the fact that the unreal enters her world easily: the laws of existence have not been established in advance, and anything can change at any moment. Here, of course, the analogy with Putin’s “stability” is entirely accurate: the consistency of the speech is combined with the absolute unpredictability of reality.\(^{180}\)

The unpredictability in question is often a result of the tension between how words and actions are conceived in private and perceived in public. Each detail Goralik describes is part of a network of communicative gestures—the setting that gives vital information to the reader, the verbal tics that reflect the inner lives of her characters. Her characters struggle to convey their experiences through speech or gestures, or they struggle to make sense of them, expressing surprise or annoyance. Within the context of recognizable similarities, Goralik often focuses on marked differences and otherness in her characters, be it visual, behavioral, or otherwise a matter of identity. There is often a communicative barrier between her characters and the world surrounding them.

The work we do as contemporary readers of Goralik—“hearing” the speech of her characters and deducing a social setting, a physical location, a frame of mind—doubles as a kind of practice of recognition, attention, empathy. It binds author and reader as participant in a particular structure of feeling. In her work, the nonhuman appears as a border case for this practice of reading and recognition. Does our gaze move over, or linger on, animals at the same rate as it does over the humans we encounter every day? Where do they fit within the clearly structured system of interactions? Do we “read” them using the same methods we apply to human characters whose language and presence deviates from the standard in any way? If the shared contemporary vernacular almost anonymizes some of the human characters, what happens when we encounter beings who don’t share our language—or who don’t share the capacity for verbal language at all? In some of the texts I will look at, the nonhuman also presents a challenge to the recognition and easy comprehension of Goralik’s scenes. The more familiar and recognizable the setting and realia of a text seem, the more disruptive it is when the nonhuman is introduced. When animals and other nonhuman creatures appear in her prose, they change the mode of communication; human characters have to guess, decode, switch from language to other forms. The use of the nonhuman—as literary device, as a character in a story—allows Goralik to explore (and historicize) the affect of contemporary Russian and contemporary Russia.

Animals are everywhere in Goralik’s work, and they often appear in her interviews as well. In a 2007 interview with Katya Petrova, she changes the subject from a more serious topic and says:

I have this dream. I want a small, furry, talking animal. If I had that, I feel that all my problems would be resolved. I spend most of my time thinking about small talking animals, and I think about them whenever I am asked to answer a difficult or unpleasant question, or asked to focus on something which does not interest me. Then, I think about
dancing guinea pigs. That is, I am actually thinking about guinea pigs all of the time. Unless I’m thinking about raccoons.\textsuperscript{181}

In a 2011 interview following the release of Valerii, Martyn Ganin points out that the autistic main character of the novella is a useful device for estrangement and distancing. Goralik responds that it is the opposite of distancing—it is a way to be direct and honest, to lay bare actions and experiences. This is why, she says, she often uses characters who are children, or mentally ill, or not socialized in conventional ways. But animals belong to a slightly different category:

When I use animals in my texts, it is different from the usual set of unusual characters. For me, they are bestia rasa—characters you know nothing about except what the author tells you. As soon as you give the human character a name, you’ve introduced all kinds of categories for yourself and the reader: gender, ethnicity, sometimes even age, social status, family history: for example, Akakii Akakievich. It’s different with a gopher. If I tell you, “this gopher is a Tajik conductor,” that’s okay. If I say, “this gopher is an Orthodox nationalist,” that’s ok. Just a regular gopher. But even if I just say “a person,” you will imagine a gender and age at the very least. Plus any associations the reader has with the figure of the author or himself. Not the case with a gopher.\textsuperscript{182}

This bestia rasa makes for a compelling addition to the many devices, genres and formats Goralik uses in her work. And the potential for transformation and hybridity that comes with writing about animals is reflected in critical responses to her own work as well—reviewers have


pointed out that it is impossible to apply a single label to her, calling her work a “mysterious little beast.”

Above all, the nonhuman in Goralik’s work is an extension of her interest in how to understand and express the nuances of personal experience without relying on the shortcuts of easy markers of identity. This ties in with her own background as a writer active in the early days of the Russian blogosphere. As she points out, the legitimization of personal opinions and statements which came out of (anonymous) writing and publishing practices on the Internet has had broad repercussions in both politics and art:

[LiveJournal] legitimized the personal opinion in a cultural context. We still haven’t grasped the scope of this phenomenon; I think that we still need to plow away at this before we figure out how society has changed in response to the right to a fixed private expression. The fixed private expression does not require great responsibility. It is an entirely different approach to the text: it ceases to be an object of great labor or close attention. There is the ability to share each current moment, and sometimes the current turns out to be high art.

This private point of view, with a particular attention to the present and the current, are the framework through which she approaches grand narratives—like a fictional apocalypse, or the very real Great Patriotic War.


184 Idlis, Runet, 256. “[Живой Журнал] легитимировал в культурном контексте персональное мнение. Масштаба этого явления мы еще просто не поняли; я думаю, что нам пахать и пахать эту землю, прежде чем у нас возникнет какое-то мнение о том, как социум изменился в результате права на фиксированное частное высказывание. Фиксированное частное высказывание не требует большой ответственности. Это принципиально другой подход к тексту: он перестает быть предметом как труда, так и пристального внимания. Это возможность поделиться сионимутным, и иногда это синимутное оказывается высокохудожественным.”
Something like a war story, and other short narratives

Вроде того (Something Like That) stands out among Goralik’s collections of short fiction—the subject of each story is not contemporary urban life but scenes from the sidelines of World War II. At the same time, the frame of the narratives is firmly in the contemporary period of the 2000s. Subtitled “a war story,” the collection transposes the author’s usual format of assembling thematically similar fragments into a new setting with new patterns. In her other collections, the challenge is to use the spare glimpse of reported speech in order to reconstruct a speaker, a social environment, a specific situation. In the case of the “war story,” each fragment has two things in common: it focuses on the story of a relative, often two generations removed (mostly grandparents), and it tells a small detail of a longer story that takes place during World War II. As in her other prose fiction, the rhythm of conversational language allows for a lot of semantic ellipses, and the implied context—a conversation between people with a shared vocabulary of explicit and implicit references—leads to things being left unsaid in the text. The gesture of the title is indicative of the style of the text: the tone is conversational, highlighting the difficulty of conveying the complexities and strangeness of that historical period. And in the word “вроде,” it also suggests the extent to which these half-narratives are embedded in the genealogy of contemporary speakers of Russian.185

Something Like That exists in an interesting relation to other first-person accounts of the war. It is a work of fiction, entirely imagined rather than sought out, recorded or retold (as, for example, are some of Svetlana Alexievich’s projects). It is informed by that genre, as well as by a cultural environment, analyzed by Serguei Oushakine (see the Introduction), which produces highly conservative and nostalgic commemorative rituals which preserve the story of great

185 The word itself is a common filler in contemporary spoken Russian, used and overused like “kind of” or “like.”
military sacrifices and victories across generations in a way that yields patriotic affect for contemporary political purposes. But Goralik’s collection does something entirely different.

By imitating an oral narrative, Something Like That puts the reader in the familiar position of being treated as either the recipient of the story, and a participant in the implied conversation—or as a curious intruder overhearing it. As the stories in this novella are all part of a shared and formative historical narrative (and family history), the stakes are different compared to her other works. Each personal narrative of the war serves as a corrective/counter-narrative to the ideological framing of the official historical record, and so sharing and overhearing these stories constitutes a different kind of invasion of privacy from reading the vignettes in her other collections. Something Like That does not focus on heroism, or tragedy, and it is not interested in explicitly deconstructing the ideologies involved in the war. Instead it focuses, as Goralik’s work often does, on moments you would not usually notice against the loud background of more important events. The impact of officialese and wartime terminology—the standardized language of how the war operated and was commemorated—is diluted by the imprecision of conversational phrases and indistinct memories. By introducing an entirely surprising detail, and an unfamiliar affect, into the familiar territory of the war story, Goralik chips away at the stability of the grand narrative and brings it closer to the individual point of view.

Here is the first section of the novella, quoted in its entirety (the ellipses are part of the published text):

...Тетя Люся еще у нас была, Людмила, она хорошая пловчиха была до войны, мастер спорта международного класса. Ее завод эвакуировали, перевезли прямо целиком и поставили около Ахшабада, со всеми людьми. Завод был не очень секретный, но важный, там детали для плит делали, это что-то важное было в войну. И надо было какие-то детали перевезти через залив от завода на склад, а их было за один раз нельзя, потому что какие-то детали нельзя было везти рядом с горючим, а горючее нельзя было рядом с какими-то протирочными материалами класть, что-то такое. Ну, они придумали, как перевозить, но надо было все время
через залив туда-сюда, за один раз нельзя. И послали не очень важных для цеха людей, и мою тетю. Еще двух баб и мою тетю. У них был такой маленький категок. А в это время из Ашхабада эвакуировали начальство, потому что пошел слух, что какие-то есть у немцев самолеты, которыми можно бомбить Ашхабад. Посадили все начальство на крейсер и повезли, а завод обещали потом перевезти. И этот крейсер врезался в категок, намертво. И даже не стал останавливаться. И эти женщины стали тонуть. А тетя Люся была супер-пловчиха, и она изо всех сил пыталась выплыть, но категом ее накрыло сверху и вокруг начал цепляться этот самый протирочный материал, мокрый. И вот она поняла: все, смерть. Открыла глаза, чтобы по-смелому умереть. И видит, как на нее из воды смотрят все морские твари, все. Кругом стоят и смотрят. Такие, что она даже представить себе не могла. Ну, понятно, рыбы, но еще всякие такие, какие она даже не могла себе представить. И спокойно так смотрят, не чтобы съесть, а как дети. И вдруг между ними какое-то движение, как будто их отодвинули, и появился гигантский осьминог. И этот осьминог мою тетю вытолкал на поверхность, на ту сторону залива. И на завод она уже не стала возвращаться, осталась там жить, и бабушка от нее письма получала еще долго.186

…We also had an Aunt Lusya, Lyudmila. She was a good swimmer before the war, a high-ranking, world-class athlete. They evacuated her factory, like moved the whole thing out near Ashkabad, workers and all. The factory wasn’t top-secret, but it was important: they made plates there, which were somehow important to the war effort. And some parts needed to be moved from the factory to the warehouse across the bay, but you couldn’t do it all at once because some of the parts couldn’t be transported near the fuel, and also the fuel couldn’t be near the cleaning cloths, or something like that. Well, they figured out how to transport the parts, but they had to move them across the bay, back and forth all the time, it couldn’t be done in one go. And for this they used people who were not very important to the factory, like my aunt. My aunt plus two women. On this little tiny motorboat. And right about then, they were evacuating the top brass from Ashkabad because there was a rumor that the Germans had some kind of plane capable of bombing the city. So they put all the brass on a cruiser and sent them off, promising to move the factory later. And this cruiser crashed into the little motorboat, hard. And didn’t even stop. And these women started to drown. But Aunt Lusya was a super swimmer and she tried with all her might to swim to the surface, but she was trapped under the motorboat and the wet cleaning cloths were clinging to her. And then she realized: This is it, this is death. She opened her eyes to die with dignity. And there in the water she sees all the sea creatures watching her, all of them. Just standing around watching her. Creatures beyond what she could have imagined. Well, there were fish, of course, but also other creatures she couldn’t even have imagined. And they’re watching her calmly, not like they’re going to eat her, but like they’re children. And suddenly there’s some movement among them, like they’re moving aside, and a gigantic octopus appeared. And this octopus chucked my aunt to the surface, over to the other side of the bay. And she


The story reads like part of a longer narrative; the use of the ellipses in the beginning (they appear throughout the collection, as well as in her other books of short prose) creates the effect of an epic \textit{in medias res} adapted for the purposes of a brief, very distantly epic, war story. The opening phrase “еще у нас была” suggests a previous story about another relative, and the ending teases the possibility of many other stories (in Lusya’s letters) which we will not get to hear. In addition to this expansive frame, which suggests a multitude of untold stories as well as the implication that this bit is a continuation of something else, this very short story is also quite elaborate in the scope of its \textit{fabula}: it includes details about the priorities of wartime manufacturing, the logistics of moving an entire factory, the evacuation of party officials, and the threat of German bombers. These plot points are sketched out with the vagueness typical of a brief oral narrative—phrases like “какие-то” and “что-то такое” suggest a complexity beyond the scope of the narrative or the understanding of the speaker. The sequence of events is built mostly using conjunctions like “и” and “а,” and the passive (third person plural) voice is used to for decisions made by higher-ups (people not named or present in the narrative). Thus, considerations of causes and effects/actions and consequences become far removed from the main character(s), priming us for a suspension of rationality and the intrusion of magical realism into the narrative. Moreover, the story does not line up with the realities of the map: Ashkabad is not close to the Caspian sea or any other body of water (and there are no octopuses in the Caspian sea),\footnote{Or the Black sea, sadly.} and it was not close enough to the front to warrant that kind of evacuation. The
colloquial tone of the story glosses over these inconsistencies, priming us to accept the many imaginative flourishes as the truth of a personal experience.

Against this complex backdrop, we are told a simple story about the near-death experience of Aunt Lusya, a world-class swimmer, and her encounter with the octopus that saved her life. The story presents her in a doubly-liminal state: she has crossed beyond the surface of the water and the usual reality has been suspended, and she is on the verge of death. The repetition of words related to death—“смерть,” “намертво,” “умереть”—almost summons the animal intervention “смотрят,” “морские твари.” The magical reality of what she sees is affirmed by the fact that this is not something she could have imagined: the story tells us twice that “представить себе не могла.” The story is related with amazement but not disbelief. The encounter with these creatures is immediately analyzed in terms of the power dynamic; the fish look at her calmly, like children, not like they are going to eat her. Then the octopus rescues her with one swift motion, throwing her out of the underwater world where she is safe and helped and back into the war zone overhead. The war goes on as before, but we have seen an unexpected side of it which has little to do with the threat of the nominal enemy: the women are put in danger by party leadership, they encounter the serene and unhelpful fish, and Lusya is rescued by an octopus. Our understanding of what constitutes danger, where help can come from, and what the self and the other are capable of, has shifted.189

Korchagin’s observation about the balance between stability and unpredictability in Goralik’s work can be seen most clearly in the low-stakes narratives of daily life contained in her collections Говорим (She Said, He Said), Короче (In Short), Сквозь пальцы (The Blind Eye) and

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189 The last story in the collection is also about swimming—and someone ends up swimming into Leningrad during the siege—this fact is mentioned as a final plot twist and not elaborated on, as if the mention alone were enough to imply all the terrible consequences. The novella leaves us there, with an implied, unspoken horror. The cycle, which opens with a rescue, ends with a prolonged confinement.
Found Life. In She Said, He Said, each story captures an instance of “overheard” speech, often descriptions of mundane moments of heightened emotion. The sum total of them paints the picture of a society in uneasy transition, its underlying anxieties revealed through one significant detail. This can be done using comical brevity: “…не люблю таких людей. Получает три тыщи баксов в месяц, а кошка ее гадит в советский ’Барсик’ за семьдесят рублей.”190 (I don’t like people like that. She makes three thousand bucks a month, but her cat craps in that seventy-ruble Soviet litter.)191 Or it can be revealed more slowly:

...друзья и все остальные близкие! И мама! Я пригласил вас именно в этот ресторан, очень хороший ресторан, потому что с ним у меня связана одна история. Так вот, я ее хочу рассказать. Вон там в конце веранды видите домик? В этом домике обычно живут кролики. Но не за тем, что вы подумали, - минуточку, минуточку! - а чтобы гости могли их просто гладить и кормить. И там возле домика лежит специальное сено, чтобы их кормить. Так вот, сейчас там кроликов нет. Но не потому, что вы думаете, - ну дослушайте меня, что вы ржете! - а потому, что кроликов сейчас чистят. Вот так: посетители ресторана так их кормили, что перекормили, и теперь кроликов увезли: у них диета и детокс. Понимаете, да? В ресторане кроликов так все кормили, что перекормили, и теперь кроликам делают диету, а потом опять сюда привезут мирно жить и радоваться, и есть сено. Потому что такое сейчас у нашей страны прекрасное, мирное время. Так вот: я привел вас именно в этот ресторан очень символически, потому что это и есть мое желание: чтобы наши родители так и прожили жизнь, никогда не увидав войны.192

190 Govorit, in Eto nazyvaetsia tak, 280.
192 Govorit, 291.
particular restaurant very symbolically, because this is my dearest wish: that our parents
get to live out their lives without ever having to experience war.193

In the latter story, the speaker’s analogy is both touchingly earnest and banal, and the way the
fragment is phrased, incorporating verbal tics, repetitions, and audience responses, allows both
sides of it to unfold to full effect within the relatively short frame of the text. The banality of the
sentiment is reinforced by the setting: a family dinner, an excellent restaurant, the image of
overfed rabbits. But right behind this facade, people are overcompensating for their sense of
imminent danger with grand, protective gestures: overfeeding rabbits, organizing celebratory
feasts, using a toast as a secular form of prayer. In both stories, the heart of the narrative is how
one treats one’s closest beings, and how that generosity (or lack thereof) comes out of an
experience with history that is so common and recognizable that it need not be mentioned.

There is also another, more sinister, side to both stories. These animals depend on people to
provide for them; they receive food and shelter in exchange for their freedom (though they do
not have a choice in giving up the latter). This relationship works as an allegory for both the
Soviet and Putin’s regimes, and the closing references to the “wonderful time of peace” in which
“we are living” reads as a painful irony about both past and present, Russia and Israel.

In Found Life, which describes scenes from an outside perspective rather than capturing
speech, animals and humans inhabit the urban space in shared silence:

Немолодой человек у метро, поджидаящий кого-то. Подходит большая грязная
собака, смотрит за стеклянную дверь. Человек, поразмыслив, отворяет дверь.
Собака входит. Осматривается, поворачивается к двери мордой. Человек снова
отворяет дверь. Собака выходит. Смотрит на человека, потом с тоской на дверь.
Человек со вздохом открывает дверь. Собака входит, начинает озираться. Человек
становится поближе к двери, чтобы было удобнее.194

193 She Said, He Said, 52.
129.
An older man waiting for somebody at the subway entrance. A big dirty dog comes up and looks at the glass door. After thinking about it, the man opens the door. The dog comes in. It looks around and then turns its muzzle back toward the door. The man opens the door again. The dog goes out. It looks at the man, then mournfully at the door again. The man sighs and opens the door. The dog comes in and starts looking all around. The man moves closer to the door to make it easier.195

This human-animal encounter here is a slapstick series of partially enacted transitions through a liminal space, made possible by small acts of generosity outweighing mild inconvenience. The two characters are given some physical attributes, but the text is more interested in their state of mind: the dog’s longing, the man’s resignation. The actions are simple and repetitive—looking, opening—but enough to suggest the inner life of each participant, and the affect exchanged between them. And, looking at it from a different angle, the dog is being indecisive over the choice between freedom and comfort. Its experience of the city is framed by the same structure of feeling that defines the affective lives of the people living there.

The abundant (but minimalist in scope), repetitive and discursive nature of Goralik’s short fiction can be understood using Sianne Ngai’s analysis of the aesthetic categories of the zany and the interesting, which she links to the representational modes of comedy and realism, respectively, and to different kinds of inconsequentiality.196 For Ngai, these categories are closely linked to our relations to contemporary modes of labor and communication. The interesting, in particular, is a helpful category for Goralik’s work because it can help us analyze her use of affect and the uniformity of her tone across texts, which some of her critics find so difficult to parse. Ngai defines the interesting as having “the low affect that accompanies the perception of minor differences against a backdrop of the generic” (which seems like another formulation of Korchagin’s observation that Goralik balances stability and unpredictability) and an

“information-oriented aesthetic.” (The latter is why Goralik’s prose style is so well-suited for the tone of Internet byt.) In Ngai’s framework, the inconsequentiality of the “interesting” is contrasted with the “powerful moral and political resonances of the beautiful and sublime.”

Goralik’s effort to distance herself from grand narratives, both fictional and historical, resonates with this idea—though her work is deeply interested in the larger resonances of small gestures and small differences. She condenses the gestures and ambitions of longer forms like the epic (with the in medias res beginnings of the war stories) or the fable (the moral choices within simple interactions, defamiliarized through the device of the nonhuman) into small, deceptively “easy” stories.

**Valerii**

Goralik’s interest in animals and other nonhuman creatures is also a way for her to explore different physical and mental states in human beings. She is particularly interested in characters with disabilities or neurodivergent characters (they appear quite often in her work), imagining the specific ways they interact with and experience the world, and the barriers to communication between them and able-bodied and neurotypical people surrounding them. These characters are treated with unfetishizing interest and compassion, and their differences are not pathologized or treated as a spectacle, though they sometimes become an entry point into a world of fantasy.

Goralik’s novella *Valerii*, published in 2011, is a first-person narrative by the eponymous character, a grey-haired autistic young man of indeterminate age, both adult and childlike, who

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197 Ibid.
198 Ibid., 951.
lives with his mother and cat in a nondescript apartment building in a nondescript neighborhood. In each of the six chapters, a nonhuman creature is central to the plot, interrupting Valerii’s cherished routine with a difficult and fantastical adventure. In the first section, Valerii’s misbehaving housecat goes missing, and he rescues him from a kind of underworld that has opened up right outside his building. In the second section, Valerii finds a sickly furry creature, whom he calls a “чудище” (“beastie”) under his bed and nurses it back to health. In the third section, Valerii navigates emotional upheaval by looking at and talking to the fish at his therapist’s office and at his favorite butcher’s. In the last two sections, he is left to his own devices after the death of his mother, and together with his cat and a drunken policeman (a reference to the real-life case of Denis Evsyukov, a cop who killed two people in a drunken shooting spree in 2009), he escapes rising floodwaters on a raft made out of a rug.

In all these chapters, Valerii’s interactions with nonverbal, most often nonhuman, beings (animals, imaginary/supernatural creatures, the drunken man) are much less challenging than those with the typically-developed humans whose language betrays their impatience and non-understanding of Valerii’s intentions (which, in turn, causes him great distress, sometimes expressed as violent rage). Valerii’s inner life is based on simple rules and restrictions, and the unspoken social codes of his surroundings are challenges he works hard to parse and overcome. The nonhuman creatures offer a respite from the world of the unsympathetic humans. The novella points to Valerii’s intense attachment to, and care for, these creatures as proof of his humanity (in a society that treats disabled people as less than human) and, ultimately, proof of his ability to navigate the world and fully participate in it. There is a utopian, feel-good streak to this story (even though it takes some dark and violent turns), but it hinges on the contrast

199 Korchagin and Oborin reference the case in their discussion of the book. “Stabil’nost’ i nepredskazuemost’.”
between Valerii’s extensive efforts to do good and be good, and the static, unyielding indifference of his environment. His care goes unreciprocated, his expressions of affection are misunderstood. He is incapable of rerouting his sadness and disappointment into cynicism. With that in mind, his desperate rages make perfect sense.

As Martyn Ganin points out in his review of the novel, Goralik uses the trope of the yurodivyi, and her novella owes a lot to Sasha Sokolov’s Школа для дураков (which in turn was inspired by Faulkner’s The Sound and the Fury), though unlike the main characters of these novels, Valerii is not a mere storytelling device:

Valerii is an actual character, a person inhabiting his own subjectivity to a greater extent than his predecessors; a real yurodivyi—one of us, always worrying about the fish, the cat, Dina, his mother: an almost religious figure of a saint, a priest. […] Valerii is a religious figure: a certain kind of saint, naïve and righteous, who combines a suspicion of oneself with an endless trust in the hostile world that surrounds him.

The fullness of the character is due to Goralik’s use of first-person narration, which builds up the character’s particular idiolect: careful, systematic, detailed, introspective. The reader has to navigate Valerii’s world of rules and repetitions. It is an effective means of estranging the reader from the routines of daily life (marking the surprising distance between reality as we know it and reality as it is narrated by others) and pointing out how each banal moment can be rich in emotional textures and ethical choices (if Valerii is a holy fool, his religion is one of practice rather than faith, a sum total of individual encounters).

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200 Ganin, “Vnutri prostranstvo ada”: “[Валерий] действительно персонаж, человек, обладающий собственной субъектностью в большей степени, чем у предшественников; по-настоящему «юродивый» — один из нас, постоянно беспокоящийся о рыбках, о коте, о Дине, о маме: такая почти религиозная фигура святого, предстоятеля. […] Валерий у Горалик — фигура религиозная: определенный тип святого, наивного праведника, в котором сочетаются подозрительность по отношению к самому себе — и бесконечное доверие к окружающему враждебному миру.”

201 In an essay for University of Toronto Quarterly, Ian Hacking proposes that the boom in autism narratives in the late 2000s and 2010s is indicative of how the Internet is allowing new modes of writing about the self and communicating with others, thus giving neuroatypical people a means of representing their own experience, and making readers more familiar with autistic narratives. Ian Hacking, “Autism Fiction: A Mirror of an Internet Decade?,” University of Toronto Quarterly 79, no. 2 (2010), 632-55.
The encounters with nonhuman creatures provide Valerii with a measure of control over his responses that he otherwise lacks. He knows how to train his cat, he knows how to take care of the beast, and he knows to use the mental image of fish to calm himself down:

От рыбок мне делалось ужасно хорошо, так хорошо, что я даже не могу про это разговаривать. Может, это было потому, что они так медленно плавали и были такие равнодушие, или потому, что они совсем меня не боялись, или потому, что они начинали светиться, когда на аквариум попадало солнце, и мне становились видны их косточки, такие тоненькие-тоненькие и мягенькие, как волосинки. […] Еще Дина научила меня представлять себе, что я смотрю на рыбок, как они красиво плавают и шевелят губами, даже если рядом нет никаких рыбок. От этого я правда начинаю сердиться гораздо меньше. Это очень мне помогает, потому что я очень здоровый и сильный, и когда я всерьез сережусь, у меня в глазах становится белым-бело, и мне очень трудно не наброситься на человека. Я закладываю руки за спину, закрываю глаза и начинаю представлять себе, как рыбы смотрят на меня и двигают губами. Когда я открывал глаза, человек, на которого я сердился, уже успевал убежать, или мама успевала меня увести.202

The fishies made me feel awfully good, so good that I don’t even have words for it. Maybe it was because they swam around so slowly and were so aloof or because they weren’t afraid of me at all or because they would start to glow when sunlight fell on the aquarium and I could see their little bones through their skin, bones teeny-tiny and soft like little hairs. […] Dina also taught me to imagine that I’m looking at fishies swimming around all lovely and moving their lips even if there aren’t any fishies around. That actually helps me feel way less mad. It helps a lot because I’m really sturdy and strong and when I get seriously mad my eyes go all white and it’s really hard for me not to attack people. I put my hands behind my back, close my eyes, and start imagining the fishies looking at me and moving their lips. When I open my eyes, the person I’m mad at usually has had time to run off, or Mom has had time to take me away.203

Here, in an intertext rhyme with the rescue scene in Something Like That, the fish are salvific—when encountered, or called to mind, they provide comfort or a means of rescue. The difference between the agitated, physically strong Valerii and Aunt Lusya (an excellent swimmer) and the fearless, indifferent, delicate fish is a matter of both the size and ability of their bodies and their affective state. The fish are inscrutable, and the encounter with them leaves

202 Linor Goralik, Valerii, in Goralik, Eto nazyvaetsia tak, 296-7.
the humans transformed. Their calm is contagious, almost estranging Valerii and Lusya from their own feelings and the experience of their bodies.

**After the ason**

*Все, способные дышать дыхание (All Who Breathe Breath)*, published in November 2018, is Goralik’s first full-length novel without a co-author. It is her longest and most ambitious work, and it builds on themes and devices used in her collections of short fiction. The title is a reference to the novel *Все, способные держать оружие* by Andrei Lazarchuk (*All Who Can Hold a Weapon*, first published in 1993 as *Иное небо; Another Sky*), which imagines a world in which Nazi Germany won the war and conquered the USSR. Goralik’s novel is divided into 103 chapters of varying lengths — some are no more than a sentence long (most of these mini-chapters report on Arabic-language graffiti found on half-destroyed buildings in post-war Israel), others span about twenty pages. The novel addresses one of the questions of this dissertation head-on: how does the encounter with the non-human change our understanding of the potential of language, and how does it reflect difficult, sometimes traumatic, social changes? It does so through the lens of the dystopian/disaster novel genre, which explicitly links social and philosophical issues.

*All Who Breathe Breath* is a postmodern dystopian disaster novel which trades in everyday realistic detail and fantastical twists in equal measure. It uses a mix of languages and discourses, reflecting on the multiplicity of perspectives within a single historical event, and presenting a barrier to a reader unfamiliar with some of its many registers. It is rich in paratexts that convey key details and structure the experience of reading the text — footnotes with translations of Hebrew and Arabic words, commentary by characters or by the “author,”
parenthetical asides that foreground the act of composition. The plotting of the novel is also distinctly postmodern: the timeline is not presented in a linear way, and it is up to the reader to piece together the sequence of events from clues embedded in various sections.

As a disaster novel, *All Who Breathe Breath* is both comprehensive and fragmented: it touches on the different social, infrastructural, political, physical aspects of the catastrophe from different angles while also reflecting its complex, traumatic nature by never providing a complete overview of events or locations. The effect of these choices is that the reader is set up for moments of recognition – of realia, setting, discourses, references – as well as disorienting incomprehension – when the species of the speaker is not named, when the timeline remains incomplete and key events are referred to but not explained. The novel also fits the pattern, analyzed by Eliot Borenstein, of catastrophe novels informed by the Chernobyl disaster: the main catastrophic event is poorly understood, much of its aftermath is invisible, it has led to mass evacuations and the establishment of a de facto exclusion zone (as all of Israel becomes isolated from the rest of the world). It clearly references the eschatological obsession of much of Russian literature, it also inhabits Israel as both a very real and very mythologically-charged landscape in a manner that Goralik’s readers will recognize from her other work set in her adopted homeland. Moreover, the novel describes an apocalypse (of sorts) with very different global and local effects; it is neither a manifestation of one national destiny, nor something that befalls all of mankind in the same way. Like much of Russian-language speculative fiction, it also engages with the trauma of war (and touches on the Second World War in particular), but it is not interested in historical narratives as much as individual emotional responses and related questions of personal and social identity.

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The fact that many elements of the novel can be traced back to Goralik’s previous work shows how the idea of the nonhuman, specifically animals, is among the central devices she uses to investigate how language structures our social environment and how it reflects our ability to connect to others. In fact, the novel is part of a kind of Goralik extended universe; Andrei, one of the minor characters in the novel, is the son of Sergei, the compiler of Устное народное творчество обитателей сектора М1 (The Folklore of the Residents of Sector M1), and brother of Agata, the main character of a trilogy of children’s books.205

The premise of the novel is as follows: a catastrophe/disaster has occurred (in Israel, people argue whether this ason followed the devastating war they engaged in and lost, or whether the outbreak of the war was merely the first stage of the disaster) in the near-future (the year is 2022), affecting different parts of the world in different ways. In Canada and the US, entire cities have disappeared. Elsewhere, a rainbow-colored dust coats everything, making all living creatures physically and mentally ill, and dependent on painkillers for survival. Terrible dust-storms cause intense feelings of guilt and shame. There are also physical and cognitive changes that affect creatures in certain parts of the world: in Russia and Israel, animals can now speak, and plants are changing as well (nettle is now harmless whereas dandelions have grown spikes). The speaking animals don’t think or act as humans do, but they express themselves using human language, and they constantly pick up new words from their human interlocutors. All of these features of the ason have taken place in Israel (the only place in the world where these features are all concentrated) and this disaster has been compounded by the fact that all international efforts to offer help during the war—by sending troops, supplies, communication devices, humanitarian aid—have failed, sealing off the country from the outside world. The

205 The first book in the series is Agatha возвращается домой (Agatha Returns Home).
military is running shelters and distributing food and medicine to all survivors. The infrastructure and disaster preparedness for the aftermath of a nuclear war is being used for life after the ason; caravan camps have been set up as most cities are no longer habitable, and food and drug rations are distributed to those who could not or would not evacuate the ruins of their old buildings. Of course, the question of food has become complicated in many ways — now that animals of all shapes and sizes can talk, humans can only eat ersatz meat and the old canned tuna from the military rations. We should note here that the disaster imagined in the novel does not bring about total ecological collapse. It restructures the way humans relate to the natural world without annihilating it as a source of shelter and sustenance, or threatening the existence of an entire species.

This complicated premise is not laid out all at once. Instead, details are peppered over the course of many chapters, and some key information about the timeline of the ason is only presented toward the very end of the novel (told from the point of view of a wild cat). A clear sequence of events never appears; neither is there a through-narrative connecting all of the sections. Characters cross paths and reappear, and while these condensed scenes always offer great insight into the way individual traumatic experiences set the stage for societal and political dysfunction, each character’s presence is mostly episodic. Chapters switch between first-person narratives (often narrated by animals, e.g., a vain peacock), limited or omniscient third-person, sections styled like newspaper articles, children’s educational materials, or scientific studies.

Over the course of the novel, we see the effects of the new-found line of communication—and subsequent reshuffling of social and power relations—between humans and their fellow

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206 Early versions of some chapters were published on Colta.ru (https://www.colta.ru/articles/literature/9648-1-rayok) and snob.ru (https://snob.ru/entry/163807/) starting in 2016, and Goralik prefaced these excerpts with a summary of the premise, which is much clearer than anything offered in the novel.
animals. At first, humans are eager to help animals affected by the *ason*, acting out of guilt for their previous lack of interest in the lives of “lesser” creatures. People try to bring animals into the structures of their human social lives in different ways. Jehovah’s Witnesses nurse animals back to health and baptize them, army commanders train them to obey orders, hippies teach them yoga and meditation. (There is a separate group of “отказники,” or *refuseniks*, who refuse to accept the new reality and seek to live independent of institutions that acknowledge the new status of speaking animals.) Towards the end of the novel, frustrated because they are not consulted on major decision and are treated with condescension, some animals organize to demand inclusion and representation in the councils that govern camp life, while others reject this meek political approach and the indignities of camp life altogether. Noticing these tiny signs of unrest, the human military leaders (all of them traumatized by disaster and war, dangerously depressed and resentful of having to accommodate creatures they still consider inferior) arrest and kill trouble-making humans and animals, and set in motion a propaganda effort that paints animals as plotting to steal food and medicine from human children in need. Medical care is then only offered to seriously ill animals, who are separated into special veterinary camps. A new rigid social structure emerges. The novel ends with the execution of a black panther named Karina, who has defiantly refused to make herself seem less threatening around human beings. The future of the post-*ason* multi-species state looks bleak.

The novel also presents us with glimpses of the post-*ason* life in Russia through the newspaper columns by Mikhael’ Artel’man, a cynic with little regard for the inherent value of human life. Since Russia was not affected by the more damaging aspects of the event, its infrastructure and cultural habits are still in place, and animals gradually enter the local economies of labor, governance and affect.
The first chapter of the novel takes place at the Jerusalem zoo six days before the ason. It is narrated by an unnamed soldier, who dies after being attacked by a rhino named Ngozi, furious because his wife has been killed. The very first exchange between human and animal happens when another officer (angry that veterinarians sacrificed their lives to care for the zoo animals during the siege) kicks Ngozi—at this point we don’t know what his species is—and the animal responds by insulting her. Both creatures are traumatized, they have suffered great losses and harbor great resentment. Human-animal relations are thus tense and unequal from the get go: the humans in this scene wear the uniforms of the state violence apparatus, and the animal has lived his entire life in confinement. As he dies, the narrator (who returns, now a voice from beyond the grave, toward the very end of the novel to narrate another section) reflects on the legacy of this conflict:

Так закончилась для меня эта война. Обойдемся без дешевого саспенса: шестью днями позже она закончится и для всех остальных. После нее останутся детки — маленькие и большие слова; война нарожает их кучей, как хорьчию хорьчат; многоголовый слизкий помет, кто помельче, а кто потолще, кто совсем ледащий, а кого поди прибей еще. Будут в этом помете и слова про «постыдное, но героическое поражение», и слова про «пochtное, но героическое поражение»; и «историческая неизбежность» будет в этом помете, и «Божья кара»; родятся и маленькие конспириологические ублодочки — глухие, трехногие, наглые и визгливые олигофрены; выйдут с последом сутульные, подслеповатые, обреченные изнурять себя чтением, онанизмом и рефлексией сиамски сестры — вина и невинность, а в целом никто и помнить не будет, что среди всего выпавшего нам была еще и война, короткая маленькая война; она растворится в том, для чего появится на свет жирное, огромное, дряблое, как желе, огромное, дряблое, как желе, липкое, как зверьные слюни, слово «асон». Остатки моего глуда заберут отсюда — в некоторую пятницу. Что же касается мирного населения на территории, которую мы удерживали в течение одиннадцати дней, — в живых останутся четырнадцать подлежащих каталогизации особей. Смысла в их перечислении я не вижу.207

That’s how this war ended for me. Let’s do without the cheap suspense: six days later it will also end for everyone else. It will leave behind offspring—little words and big words: the war will birth many of those, like a ferret with its large litter; a many-headed, slimy brood, some tiny, some fat, some sickly, some strong as an ox. This litter will

207 Linor Goralik, Vse, sposobnye dyshat’ dykhanie (Moscow: AST, 2018), 13-14. All translations from the novel are my own.
include words about the “shameful, yet heroic defeat,” and words about the “honorable, yet heroic defeat,” and “historical inevitability” will also be part of this litter, and also “God’s punishment.” It will also birth tiny conspiratorial mongrels—deaf, three-legged, insolent and shrill imbeciles. Then—stooping, weak-sighted, doomed to wear themselves out with reading, masturbation, and self-reflection—the Siamese twin sisters of guilt and innocence will follow, and in the end no one will even remember that, among everything else that befell us, there was also a war, a tiny brief war; it will dissolve and in its stead will emerge the greasy, gigantic word ason, flabby like jelly, sticky like animal spit. The remains of my unit will be evacuated some coming Friday. As for the peaceful inhabitants of the territory which we defended over the course of eleven days—only fourteen individuals subject to cataloging will remain alive. I don’t see the point in enumerating them.

This grotesque section brings together the three main concerns of the novel: the annihilating reality of war; how the language we use to commemorate and make sense of war (and conceal its many horrors) distorts us; and the awareness that our selves and our ideas are contained and shaped by embodied experience. The section also refers to the main organizing structures within the novel: animal bodies and subjectivities, the rules and structures of the military, and the conflicting points of view of different kinds of discourse. It also announces the resonance between the novel and Biblical stories about Israel and/or disasters (the final sentences reference the story of the flood, a disaster that remade the earth but maintained the hierarchy between man and animals). These organizing themes and structures—war/the military, language/discourse, and human/animal bodies and subjectivities—ground the novel and drive its conflicts. They provide consistency and function as a counterbalance to its challenging, experimental formal structure.

Each chapter in the novel focuses on a different character (or set of characters) and usually provides some important details from the overarching narrative, which are embedded among scenes that mostly serve one of several purposes: to elaborate the setting (the camps and destroyed cities, etc.); to offer psychological insight into individual human and animal characters; or to show how the characters interact with each other after the ason. Some characters
appear entirely separate from the main plot and timeline of the novel (for example, a reindeer in
the Moscow zoo), while some crucial plot points (for example, when the commanders arrest the
animals they believe to be plotting an insurrection and the state’s policy toward nonhuman
creatures changes once again) are not shown or described—instead, we see only their lead-up or
aftermath. At the same time, many of the chapters end at a smaller climactic, emotionally-
charged point—after an act of aggression or a verbal punchline that can be funny or tragic, or
both—which is a device familiar from Goralik’s flash-fiction collections. Individual moments
are described in great detail, while the larger narrative remains incomplete. In effect, there is a
narrative disconnect between individual experiences and larger (historical) events; or, these large,
consequential events are only internalized in small segments that accompany individual
narratives.

As a counterpart to these individual narratives, the novel offers many other kinds of
discourse: scientific language, journalism, pedagogical texts. They are among the few instances
of writing within the novel, but most of these preserve conversations and oral narratives:
journalism that reports on rumors and overheard stories, children’s literature heavy on dialogue,
collections of oral literature, studies conducted at a speech clinic. Goralik is much more
concerned with what happens to language in the moment of speech, language as breath (hence
the title of the novel) and a direct exchange between creatures, than with the lasting power or fate
of the written word.208 Animals cannot read, and the question of their literacy is not important in
the novel (the Jehovah’s Witnesses manage to proselytize using blocks covered in pictures). In
all examples of print-centered discourse in the novel, Goralik shows how their supposed facticity

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208 Here, Goralik deviates from the tradition of Russian catastrophe novels/dystopias which explicitly address the
role of books and literature, expressing an anxiety about the (underappreciated, overadvertised) role of literature in
Russian culture. See Borenstein (“Dystopias”), who analyzes this theme in Tolstaya’s Kys’ (The Slynx, 2000) and
also obscures events, creates its own set of euphemisms, and limits access to a broad and accurate understanding of the ason. Each set of recorded facts lacks a contextual framework to illuminate it — we see the texts of folk songs composed by soldiers (who are depressed because they do not suffer from PTSD, which makes them worry that they have lost their conscience) or even camels, but we do not know what exactly took place during the war. There are records from a speech clinic studying animals in Moscow, but no sense of what the scientific community is saying about how these animals acquired speech and how they use it. Within each chapter, and within each kind of writing, the individual interactions and experiences remain central, and their broader context remains inaccessible.

This has the effect of making the reader pay closer attention to the interiority of the characters and the kind(s) of language they use — which presents its own challenges when their identity is difficult to parse. In one chapter, the exact same birth scene is described twice using the exact same language with only a few minor differences (the word used to describe the offspring and the location of the birth) that alert us to the fact that the first mother is a cat, and the second one human. In another chapter, an elephant complains at length about his nemesis Jerome, describing their fraught history as colleagues in a Russian circus, listing Jerome’s many faults—and it is many pages later before we are told that Jerome is a bear. This creates a deep sense of uncertainty about what we, as readers, invest in the process of understanding characters in fiction, and the assumptions this process is built on. Our uncertainty mirrors the experience of humans after the ason, rethinking their assumptions about how to face creatures they once considered simple and familiar. After all, in Goralik’s own words, the main subject of the novel is empathy—so the fraught, complex process of understanding and imagining the other by reading gestures, words, or actions, is central to her endeavor.
Goralik has mentioned in interviews that her goal was to make parts of the novel particularly difficult and slow to read. (She connects that to her interest in the textual density of poetry; one of the texts she used as an inspiration for the novel is contemporary poet Elena Fanailova’s cycle about the ongoing war with Ukraine, “Troia vs Lysistrata” [“Troy vs Lysistrata”].) While the physical setting of (most of) the novel is Israel, its familiar landscape changed after the ason (one character notes how the small country seems much bigger now that roads have been destroyed and communication systems are malfunctioning), its material setting is also the Russian language, both familiar and estranged as it’s adopted by chatty peacocks, raccoons, elephants, stag beetles.

One of the first few chapters in the novel describes the daily routine of a mute man, Daniel’ Tamarchik, who fields daily unwelcome interruptions by Jehovah’s Witnesses looking for souls to convert, and worries that they will eventually find out about Yonatan Kirsh, who lives in his kitchen. Both are in constant pain from the aftereffects of the ason and their day consists of managing that pain and planning the one meal they are entitled to. Daniel’ comes up with an elaborate plan to invite his neighbor over for lunch, and to communicate with him using gestures and a notepad, in order to figure out if that neighbor knows about Yonatan. It takes some time before it is revealed that Yonatan Kirsh is a parrot who can’t speak. The chapter keeps referring to the two characters using their full names (Goralik uses this device throughout the book, overloading sentences with long names that establish the characters’ identities without revealing key information about them), which has a disorienting effect—the characters are

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indeed equal in this new, post-ason world, especially since they have the same disability, but because we cannot imagine what one of them looks like, reading a simple scene with the two of them interacting is like solving a puzzle.

In the latter half of the novel, Yonatan Kirsh reappears and makes a difficult journey to Jerusalem, with the help of many animals who marvel at his speechlessness and feel compelled to share their stories with him. In his impaired inability to communicate with his environment, and in his attempts to understand the layout of the landscape he’s passing on his travels, the parrot becomes a stand-in for the reader at a point when the novel is already winding down. As he’s traveling, we get the rare bird’s eye view of Israel post-ason: Yonatan sees the ruins of different cities, walls and signs covered in dense Arabic script, and notices a drawing (which is shown elsewhere as a stand-alone chapter) of a dog with a machine-gun as its tail. Arriving in Jerusalem, which has been taken over by sick animals, Yonatan Kirsh finally has access to codeine—it flows on the streets like milk and honey—and overdoses on it.

The chapters describing Yonatan Kirsh are representative of how Goralik builds her characters, and how these characters drive the patchwork-narrative of the novel. The limited third-person narration (which does not dominate the book, but is used in many of the chapters that focus on animal characters) traps us within a perspective of half-understanding. We experience characters through their own interior narrative (whose patterns and complexity change with each species), or through the distorting lens of other characters. Since new social and conversational codes between animals and humans are still emerging, each gesture and phrase becomes estranged from its intended meaning. The texture of Goralik’s writing reflects that challenge: an excess of adjectives and prefixed verbs add layers upon layers of detail, and it up to us—readers and characters getting used to a new means of communication—to parse
everything. The usual strategy of deciphering the identity and motivation of characters from their speech and behavior, which is what Goralik’s short fiction often asks of us, becomes more difficult.

The challenge of parsing the plot and identifying its characters leaves us focusing on the novel’s use of language as its foundational structural element. As readers of Goralik who are also her contemporaries, we can appreciate the extent to which her prose is organized around sound; more specifically, capturing the rhythm and texture of contemporary Russian in all of its official, neutral, casual, vulgar forms. Recognizing the tonality of a speaker—their use of mat, diminutives, imperatives, filler words, speech impediments and other peculiarities—is often the most reliable way of narrowing down their identity or social context in both this novel and in her flash fiction pieces. Here, too, Goralik often highlights how speech is an embodied medium by introducing characters who relate to it altogether differently—characters who are deaf or mute (like Tamarchik and Kirsh), who have developmental disabilities or mental illnesses. Placing these speakers, with their innate differences, within the same context of a shared language, highlights, in turn, the connections between embodied experience and social environments. (In another nod to that link, and to the way language changes to accommodate new social norms around different bodies, the novel repeatedly discusses the new, not always politically correct, terminology for referring to speaking and non-speaking animals, and the struggle to rid Russian and Hebrew of slurs that use animal imagery.)

Another side of Goralik’s interest in social and political identities are the unsubtle parallels to existing conflicts within minority groups: the (literal) black panther Karina rejects the respectability politics that the other animals are trying to establish and is killed by the government; the Jerusalem-based members of a clan of stag-beetles blame their demise on
relatives who did not heed the call to live in the holy city (a nod to the way some Zionists treated Jewish diaspora victims and survivors of the Holocaust). There are several chapters which consist of a line of graffiti written in Arabic, the location where it was “found” and a footnote translating it into Russian. These regular “foreign” intrusions into the Russian text acknowledge the conflict and dividing idea of otherness at the heart of the contemporary state of Israel.

Within the novel, Palestinian Arabs never appear. Did they “win” the war that started the ason and then disappear altogether? Or were they effectively annihilated by this war, which is still considered a loss for Israel because another country won? The novel does not say. It acknowledges this complex subject—hence the graffiti, which are given in Arabic and translated into Russian, preserving the visual difference of the language\(^2\)—but does not engage with it in a direct manner. This relates to the author’s own ambivalence toward the political realities of contemporary Israel; in interviews, she acknowledges the violence of the Israeli state, while still expressing love and support for the country and its citizens as a whole, as well as a deep-seated fear for its safety. It also brings to mind her wish to avoid difficult questions and think about animals instead—it is easier to construct this dystopian world of speaking animals and imagine their relations to the human world, than to address (or imagine resolving) a conflict that defines one’s immediate environment. The conflict is still there, its violence metonymically displayed and performed in a different setting, but the absence of its victims is striking considering the abundance of social, ethnic and religious groups (to say nothing of species) featured in the novel.

The question of how language is acquired and used—by both humans and nonhuman animals—extends to the different worldviews and ideologies that appear in the novel. Here too, Goralik looks at individual, often marginal, cases whose pursuit of order and meaning runs the

\(^2\) Then again, graffiti is often perceived as a violent form of language, which disrupts the proper social/urban order.
gamut from comedy to tragedy, and from utopian to sinister. An atheist hippie named Miri, whose Pollyannaish good intentions grate on all the humans who know her, tries to foster a sense of community in her camp by teaching yoga and meditation to the animals; when that does not solve the political discontent brewing among them, she despaires and goes off to teach meditation to plants in the wilderness.²¹¹ Several chapters explore how the Jehovah’s Witnesses preach to animals using toys, and how they hold meetings that accommodate a wide variety of different creatures (one of them, a purebred dog named Sophie, is deeply traumatized by the loss of her sister and is hoping to avenge her before she is baptized and forced to live without sin). Another side plot follows a Hasidic rabbi who brings food to the bats living in a tree and talks to them about his faith, inadvertently converting them. Their early encounters are touchingly simple:

(У упорного рабби Арика Лилиенблюма есть теория: он считает, что это не звери говорят на том языке, на котором с ними заговаривает человек, а что вообще установился какой-то единый язык и все говорят на нем. Однажды он приходит с банкой ананасов, ползает на колениях среди египетских летучих собак, раздает кусочки, осторожно будит пальцем спящую мелочь и им тоже дает кусочки, некоторые воротят мордочки, но сейчас ничего не поделать, для фиников не сезон, на земле почти нет еды, наверху скользко, и вдруг они начинают этими своими маленькими пальцами брать его за палец, берут его за палец и спрашивают: «Завтра тоже так?» Он, растроганный: «Я постараюсь». «Нет, — говорят, — завтра тоже так?» «Ну, — говорит, — я постараюсь». «Нет, — говорит, — не ты; завтра — тоже так?» И тут он понимает и говорит: «Я не знаю. Это как Господу будет угодно, мы молимся, но может оказаться, что завтра тоже так». И тут одна из них тихонько взвывает, потом еще одна, и вот они все тихонько воют.)²¹²

(The stubborn rabbi Arik Lilienblyum has a theory: he thinks that it’s not that animals speak the same language that humans use to speak to them, but that in general some kind of common language has been established and everyone speaks that now. One day he arrives with a tin of pineapples, crawls on his knees among the Egyptian fruit bats, hands out pieces of fruit, carefully wakes up the little ones with his fingers and gives them some too, some of them turn their little snouts away, but there’s nothing to be done, it’s not the right season for figs, there is almost no food on the ground, the branches are slippery, and

²¹¹ A tantalizing, and underexplored, aspect of the novel is the suggestion that the plants were transformed as well. Miri’s breathing exercises invite creatures to think of themselves as grass, and when she is shown intoning that mantra to the actual grass, the novel both mocks her misplaced good intentions and suggests another post-ason world to be imagined and explored.

²¹² Все, способные дышать дыханием, 148.
suddenly they start grabbing onto his finger with their little fingers, they grab his finger and they ask: “Same thing tomorrow?” He answers, touched: “I’ll do my best.” “No,” they say, “same thing tomorrow?” “Well,” he says, “I’ll do my best.” “No,” they say, “not you; same thing tomorrow?” And he finally understands and says: “I don’t know. God will decide. We pray, but it may end up being the same thing tomorrow.” And then one of them starts to wail quietly, and then another one, and then they are all wailing quietly.)

This scene, set off from the rest of the chapter by parentheses, contains the only grand theory of animal speech in the entire novel, which is both plausibly universalist (nonhuman animals did not acquire human language, but all animals are speaking a new shared language) and quite vague (“какой-то единый язык”). As the scene shows, this language is not free from misunderstandings. The bats’ simple question is misconstrued: they are not expressing their need or their gratitude, they are trying to express their despair, which they end up doing using their own language. The rabbi assumes that the animals would be focusing on the food and unable to generalize their condition in the abstract. The simple pronominal reference (“так,” or “same thing”) has two contextual meanings, one a specific kindness, one a general tragedy: the food the rabbi offers the bats, and the endless crisis after theason. The kindness cannot outweigh the tragedy, and the misunderstanding makes the despair of the animals feel more urgent, the rabbi’s kindness smaller and less impactful. The rabbi’s good deeds and good intentions cannot change how these animals feel, and his prayers cannot change god’s mind about what tomorrow will bring.

Later on, this same rabbi has a moving conversation with a snake who has been rescued—and is about to be baptized—by the Jehovah’s Witnesses. The rabbi believes that this snake might be agilgul, a reincarnated soul as described in the teachings of the Kabbalah. The snake is willing to consider converting to Judaism if need be, and is then surprised to hear how complicated the process is—wouldn’t God want as many souls as possible?
Religion is limited to these small domains and exchanges. For most characters in the novel, the most consistent (which does not mean successful) source of meaning and ideological direction is the military. In the post-ason world, it comes to replace both the state and the family as the central social and political structure. The military provides food and shelter to the traumatized survivors of the disaster, and an orderly system of relations to creatures who have lost their kinship ties. But the military is always in need of an adversary, and it is fundamentally incapable of fostering empathy and accommodating any kind of difference or disagreement. It channels the fear and disorientation of traumatized survivors into paranoia and aggression, and provides cover for petty vengefulness. After the ason and its many negative emotional repercussions, the militarized social body is even less capable of acting rationally.

One of the most powerful military commanders in the novel, general Gideon, is stuck taking care of an unpleasant orphaned teenager, Marik Roinshtein. Ignored by all the humans around him, Marik starts acting like the leader of his own army of rats:

Генерал-фельдмаршал главнокомандующий войсками Марик Ройнштейн остановился и всмотрелся в новичков.
– Кто тут сирота – встать на задние лапы, – приказал он.
Встала вся шеренга.
– Хорошо, – удовлетворенно сказал генерал-фельдмаршал главнокомандующий войсками Марик Ройнштейн. – Теперь вы не одни, запомните это. Я – ваш отец и мать. Это Израиль, у нас сирот не бывает. Получите ли вы от меня еду?
Тирон номер один напрягся и глянул на своих. На левом фланге кто-то тихо сказал:
– Нет.
«Молодец, – подумал тирон номер один. – Давай».
– Нет! – довольно громко сказал подопечный тирона номер один с левого фланга.
– Нет, – поспешно сказал тирон номер один. Сердце у него колотилось.
Генерал-фельдмаршал главнокомандующий войсками Марик Ройнштейн повернулся к нему на каблуках и смерил его тяжелым взглядом. Сердце тирона номер один упало. Оставалась одна надежда — на подготовленный сюрприз.
И тогда тирон номер один вззвизгнул: «Сейчас!» – и двенадцать кандидатов, приведенных им в строй, прокричали так стройно, как умели:
– Честь, порядок, слава!
Генерал-фельдмаршал главнокомандующий войсками Марик Ройнштейн помолчал.
– Честь, порядок, слава. – сказал он. – Вам повезло, молодые люди. Я прожил тринадцать лет, и никто никогда не предложил мне это: честь, порядок, слава.213

The general-field marshal commander in chief Marik Roinshtein stopped and looked at the new recruits.
“Whoever here is an orphan—up on your hind feet,” he ordered.
The entire rank and file got up.
“Good,” the general-field marshal commander in chief Marik Roinshtein was pleased.
“Now you are no longer alone, remember this. I am your father and mother. This is Israel, there are no orphans here. Will I give you food?”
Soldier-in-training number one tensed up and looked at his group. Someone on the left said quietly:
“No.”
“Good job,” thought soldier-in-training number one. “Come on.”
“Louder!” ordered general-field marshal commander in chief Marik Roinshtein.
“No!” said the ward of soldier-in-training number one from the left side.
“Correct,” said general-field marshal commander in chief Marik Roinshtein. “Will I give you warm burrows and soft beds?” This was incomprehensible to them, so the rank file stayed silent.
“No,” soldier-in-training number one said hastily. His heart was pounding.
General-field marshal commander in chief Marik Roinshtein turned to him on his heels and looked him up and down with a stern expression. The heart of soldier-in-training number one fell. They had one last chance — the surprise they had prepared.
“What will I give you?” asked general-field marshal commander in chief Marik Roinshtein.
And then soldier-in-training number one yelped: “Now!” and the twelve candidates he had lined up in a file yelled, as orderly as possible:
“Honor, order, glory!”
General-field marshal commander in chief Marik Roinshtein was silent.
“Honor, order, glory,” he said. “You’re lucky, young men. I’ve been alive for thirteen years and no one has ever offered me this: honor, order, glory.”

213 Ibid., 322-3.
The ridiculousness of Marik’s chosen title, repeated over and over again as if to convince himself and others, infects the other platitudes he offers: that there are no orphans in Israel, that the army offers honor, order, glory. This echoes the grotesque image from the beginning of the novel, in which the idea of the honorable defeat is one of the many repulsive children borne by the brief and forgotten war. Marik is clearly wrong—every creature in this scene is an orphan, and since the text withholds descriptions of the animals, we read them as human and (nonhuman) animal, and the category of orphan bridges any border between them, reaching both beds and burrows. The repetition of orders and pat phrases does nothing to alleviate the fear of the survivors, or the loneliness of the orphan Marik. But it is the only language that seems accessible to him, and so it is the language he must use.

The intersections of family life and military life are also explored through the (human) character Yasya Artel’man. We first encounter him as a child—he is the younger son of Mikhael’ and Il’ya Artel’man, a regular middle-class Russian-Israeli intelligentsia couple.214 Their other son, Yulik, is an autistic teenager, and the sections describing Yulik’s love of routine and rigid sense of justice and order are very reminiscent of the novella Valerii (whose main character is also autistic); in both cases, Goralik constructs a particular idiolect that reflects how these characters perceive the world differently from others. Both fathers are resentful of the difficulty of raising an autistic child in their own way—Mikhael’ withdraws from responsibility and eventually leaves the family, Ilya throws himself into enforcing elaborate pedagogical methods and puts extra effort into fostering the talents of his younger, “normal” child. Later chapters follow each family member after the ason. Each member of this typically neurotic-intelligentsia, typically fragmented, neuroatypical family is looking for a sense of belonging. Mikhael’ is in

214 Of course, in the context of Russia, their same-sex marriage makes them less than typical, but their eventual divorce puts them firmly back in the majority.
Russia, writing articles and feeling relief because Yulik can no longer send him detailed responses to every factual error he spots in his father’s writing. At the end of the novel, Mikhael’ steals a fortune-telling chinchilla because its comforting presence reminds him of his children. Il’ya is forced to remain in the ruins of their city because Yulik could not adapt to life in the camps; he scavenges items and observes the strange and sometimes violent behavior of other survivors, all the while reflecting on his old obsession with pedagogy and child-rearing. Yulik eventually finds his way to the Jehovah’s Witnesses. And Yasya becomes obsessed with protecting the rabbits at a petting zoo (after surviving the siege there). He talks to his soldier friends using language that is mostly *mat*, and then he switches to using baby talk with the bunnies (the same words Mikhael’ uses with the chinchilla) and mimicking his own parents’ obsessive caretaking:


Крольчонок (оглядывая себя в изумлении). Я? Я?.. 215

Yasya Artel’man (petting the large six-day-old fluffy black baby rabbit sitting in his palm; a second baby rabbit, dark-brown, is nursing from Sixth-bet, his half-blind eyes closed). Who’s a silly little rabbit? You’re a silly little rabbit. Who has paws? Who has tiny paws? Who has cute tiny paws? Who’s a wummy-dummy rabbit? You’re a wummy-dummy rabbit, you’re a hoglet-woglet rabbit, yes? Yes, you’re a hoglet-woglet! You’re a shrieky-piggy-bunny… You’re a poopy-kitty-bunny…

Baby bunny (looking at itself in amazement). Me? Me?...

215 Ibid, 399.
This string of melodic and nonsensical babtalk and diminutives is an example of how Goralik lets us spend great amounts of time hearing each character’s idiolect, absorbing its rhythms and patterns, imagining each scene as a language sound-scape where meaning is almost secondary.

This particular segment is a reversal of all previous scenes featuring adult Yasya, in which almost every single word exchanged between him and his friend is an obscenity, sometimes projecting strength and sometimes fear and despair. The *mat*, too, conveys meaning through sound and affect rather than semantics. The chapters focused on Yasya at the zoo are all laid out like dramatic texts with stage directions, building tension before the explosive final act, which arrives soon enough. Yasya goes in and out of the rabbit room, playing with the bunnies but often ignoring the older rabbits’ pleas for more food or water. He builds a special play cage for the bunnies, and brings it in. Placing the bunny inside, he talks to it about his big plans for its future:

Ты ж головой не в маму с папой пойдешь, да? Нееет, вы с братиком будете у меня умненькие, я вас развивать буду, лабиринт вам сделаю еще, только не сыйте в него...
(Осторожно вынимает.) Где братан твой? (Заглядывает под стол, роется у живота Шестой-бет.)
Шестая-бет. Что?
Яся Артельман. Где второй мелкий? Черный где?
Шестая-бет. Съела.
Яся Артельман. Что?
Шестая-бет. Съела.
Яся Артельман. Что?
Шестая-бет. Я съела. (Затихающим голосом.) Ты водички не принес... Я пить хотела и съела...
Яся Артельман (отступая на два шага). Что?
Сорок Третий (затихающим голосом). Ты же водички не принес...
У Яси Артельмана начинают дрожать руки.
Яся Артельман (севшим голосом). Что, блядь?
Сорок Третий (испуганно пытается что-то сказать, но от страха заикается). Атя-тятятятя...
Яся Артельман молчит.
Сорок Третий. Атятятятятя...
Яся Артельман (холодно). Вдохни глубоко. Выдохни.
Сорок Третий вдыхает и выдыхает.
Яся Артельман. Вдохнул-выдохнул.
Сорок Третий вдыхает и выдыхает.
Яся Артельман. Теперь сосчитай до трех и говори: «Я хотел сказать...»
Сорок Третий (очень испуганно). Раз-два-три...Я хотел сказать...Я хотел сказать—есть еще!
Яся Артельман молчит.
Сорок Третий (испуганно). Есть еще! Тебе надо? Есть второй! Бери!
Шестая-бет (испуганно). Бери! Бери второго!
В следующую секунду Яся Артельман хватает жестяной домик и с размаху бьет им Шестую-бет по спине.
Яся Артельман (нанося удар за ударом по верещащей от боли и ужаса Шестой-бет). Вы звери! Вы звери блядские, блядские твари, вы звери поганые, вы звери!216

You won’t take after mom and dad, right? Noooo, you and your brother will be smart, I will help you thrive, I’ll make you a maze, just don’t pee in it… (He takes him out carefully.) Where is your brother? (He looks under the table, checks the belly of Sixth-bet.)

Sixth-bet. What?
Yasya Artel’man. Where’s the other little guy. Where’s the black one.
Sixth-bet. Ate him.
Yasya Artel’man. What?
Sixth-bet. Ate him.
Yasya Artel’man. What?
Sixth-bet. I ate him. (Her voice grows quiet.) You didn’t bring water… I was thirsty and I ate him…
Yasya Artel’man (taking two steps back). What?
Forty-third (quietly). You didn’t bring water…
Yasya Artel’man (his voice breaking). What the fuck?
Forty-third (tries to say something but stutters in fear). Th-th-th-th…Th-th-th-th…
Yasya Artel’man is quiet.
Forty-third. Th-th-th-th…
Forty-third breathes in and out.
Yasya Artel’man. Inhale, exhale.
Forty-third breathes in and out.
Yasya Artel’man. Now count to three and say: “I want to say that…”
Forty-third (very scared.) One-two-three…I want to say that… I want to say that — there is another!
Yasya Artel’man is quiet.
Forty-third (scared). Take! Take the other!
In the next second Yasya Artel’man takes the tin house and slams it into Sixth-bet’s back.
Yasya Artel’man (slamming Sixth-bet who is screaming in fear and horror.) You’re beasts! You fucking beasts, fucking animals, you filthy beasts!

216 Ibid., 430.
This is similar to the exchange between the rabbi and the fruit bats, though with intense verbal and physical violence added: Yasya is a soldier who is trained to resolve conflict using violence, and his methods of dealing with emotional difficulty are insufficient. The animals’ actual needs are not being met, but the human assumes they must be grateful anyway, and kills one of them in his rage. Yasya’s care for the bunnies is based on a childish (or parent-like) impulse that is not informed by who they really are and what they require (anyone who has taken care of rabbits would know that a thirsty mother will eat her young). The techniques he uses with them—building educational toys and planning activities—come from his own parents, and so do the commands he gives the tongue-tied rabbit: deep breaths and “I want to say that” are what his parents taught Yulik to do to control his temper and channel his opinions more productively. Yasya intuitively understands that this pedagogical trick was also a way to enforce control and even punishment over a weaker creature. He erupts in a rage and kills the mother rabbit, screaming vulgarities, his soldier training overtaking his impulse for caretaking.

Yasya’s response projects human values onto the mother-rabbit’s actions; the text provides evidence of how he failed to prevent the death of the bunny and implicitly (partially) exonerates the mother-rabbit. It is easy to agree with this evidence: Yasya’s behavior is both overbearing and unhelpful, and the rabbits are clearly limited in what they can communicate using human language. Speech alone does not bridge the gap between the species or make their moral principles align. But the death of the bunny adds to the tally of innocent victims of the ason, and serves as another echo of the speech about the children of the war. The bunny dies, and its death pushes Yasya, an older child of the war, toward retributive violence. The shifting of blame and the escalation play out the familiar scenario of other wars and other conflicts.
Storms of guilt and shame

In interviews and promotional materials for the book, Goralik has repeatedly stated that its subject—its main character, even—is empathy: what makes it possible, what makes it difficult. The details of the war which precipitated the ason are beside the point, as are the actual details and causes of the disaster (this is why the tropes of disaster fiction, war fiction and speculative fiction are all present, but are ultimately secondary to the purposes of the novel). For the creatures living in Israel, there is no hope of rescue or resolution; the only actions—and plot—available are different ways to handle their overwhelming physical and affective experiences. Thus, the political, ecological and social catastrophe is experienced as an emotional catastrophe. What matters is the emotional aftermath of the events: the feelings about the war and the catastrophe, which all creatures can express using the same language. Thus, processes of identification and understanding, and exchanges of words, gestures, and affect, are all loaded with a narrative task. Mental states are central to various plots: soldiers misbehave because they are terrified that they are not experiencing PTSD after the war, humans and animals navigate memory loss and mental decline. But the main mental states, shared by all creatures in the novel yet still isolating them from one another, are guilt, grief, and the physical pain caused by the ason.

The dimension of emotional responses to other people and the environment is so central to the novel that it becomes externalized as a literal force of nature—the storms called “буша-ве-хирпа” (“busha-ve-hirpa,” Hebrew for shame and disgrace), which everyone fears, because they strip one’s skin and attack one from the inside out, causing one to feel enormous guilt and shame. One of the main purposes of the camps is to provide shelter from these storms, which
affect both humans and animals. One chapter explores camel folklore which describes the storms, and notes that scientists disagree about the nature of the camels’ guilt; some see evidence of what they call “cumulanism”—an expansion of the animal soul as a result of the acquisition of language—while others argue that the guilt in animal folklore is false, mere language that does not refer to actual experience. In most cases, the feelings of guilt are isolating. They do not bring about a reckoning with individual or collective actions, they do not provide any kind of narrative, they are entirely affective and overwhelming. And because, like a force of nature, the storms of guilt will appear over and over again, their trauma can hardly be mastered. Here, Goralik enacts another transformation, making certain emotions appear as external to the creatures who experience them, and showing these creatures will build an environment to control these emotions. Both trauma and defense mechanisms are manifested in the physical geography of the novel.

Grief functions differently in the novel. The human characters struggle with conceptualizing and expressing it; the animals, especially the ones who live in communities, find outlets for it. When Miri, the well-meaning hippie, organizes an event in commemoration of all creatures who died in the ason, people sneer when she keeps going back in time, adding more and more victims to the list, eventually reaching the Holocaust. The saturation of (human) narratives of grief has turned human survivors of the ason cynical. The animals, on the other hand, have a different sense of the precarity of their own lives (subject to the whims of human violence) and are unselﬁsh about mourning their loved ones.

Both guilt and grief offer the possibility of individual narratives aligning with a collective narrative; they can be useful components in the work of empathy. Yet Goralik depicts them as isolating each (human) individual in their own experience. The guilt of survivors and
perpetrators is suppressed and turns into inward and outward violence; the grief of human and nonhuman animals is compounded by the uncertainty of the events surrounding the death of their loved ones. These feelings are common but not shared. There is a failure to provide direction and outlets for these overwhelming feelings. The new social body is governed and supported by the military, whose limited imagination can only birth language and concepts like the ones quoted earlier—about honorable defeat, innocence, historical inevitability. It is incapable of constructing an emotional grammar that will deal with the trauma and grief of the ason in a productive manner; moreover, it is not in its interest to do so. Even if the military leaders had not been themselves traumatized by the ason, and thus incapable of leading, the institution they represent is made possible by the transformation of fear and grief into an aggressive political affect.

The one emotional experience that is being addressed collectively is physical pain. In the aftermath of the ason, the entire country has been covered in an iridescent dust ("радужная пыль"), which causes terrible headaches and, if left untreated, a disease called “радужка” which gives creatures beautiful iridescent eyes while slowly killing them.217 The military hands out daily doses of rokaset (an actual brand name for pain relief medicine sold in Israel, containing paracetamol, codeine and caffeine), the only preventative measure against the illness. The economy of pain relief is central to the plot: camp officials resent that some of the larger animals require larger doses, several chapters describe the production of the medicine (which involves the hard work of teenage lizards), the plots of other chapters are driven by creatures roaming the ruins of a city looking for a dose on the black market (which is dominated by a network of

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217 The reality-altering headaches also come from the author’s own experience. Goralik often speaks about the relationship between her mental health (she has bipolar disorder and suffers from persistent migraines) and her work habits. Her productivity is, in part, a matter of distracting herself from living with disabling pain: “Потому что я невротик. Потому что я испытываю сильное чувство тревоги, когда ничего не делаю. Потому что я очень люблю мои игрушки, — смущенно улыбается она. — Потому что это отвлекает меня от головной боли. Потому что историю с головной болью я лучше переношу, когда чем-нибудь занята, чем когда я остаюсь с ней наедине.” In Idlis, Runet, 253.
enterprising raccoons). The headaches are a constant background noise for human and nonhuman characters alike, accompanying every conversation and every action. The mental and physical burden of that pain is conveyed by the texture of the language—long sentences made up of short, simple clauses, which layer similar parts of speech causing cognitive overload. Additionally, the physical dimension of the pain, and the scarcity of the resources available to treat it, reasserts the fact of physical difference, thus working against the possibility of a community where physical difference is of secondary importance. Humans start thinking of animals as creatures who steal medicine, or require inordinate amounts of medicine, and competition for resources makes empathy harder to access.

**How stars appeared on the fuselages**

If the animals in the novel were not dependent on the humans (and human industry) for pain management, their relationship to the militarized structure of society would be very different. A late chapter of the novel, titled “Как на фюзеляжах появились звезды” (“How stars appeared on the fuselages”), imagines this scenario, which does not apply to either Russia (where the military does not structure everything) or Israel (where everyone needs pain medication) post-ason. This chapter stands out because it does not clearly intersect with any of the other plotlines. It shows the treacherous overlap between family and military structures from the point of view of nonhuman animals, using the story of a reindeer and his Sami human companions who are all sent to the Karelian front. It brings together Sami mythology and WWII family lore (reminiscent of *Something Like That*, with which it has clear parallels). It begins in the future tense and immediately switches to the past tense, where the suspension of disbelief allows wartime imagery to blend in with magical folklore:
The grandfather of the grandfather of the grandfather of the reindeer Crystal, who will be born in the Moscow zoo in the 2019, fought on the Karelian front. One day people arrived on a dirty white plane, they yelled and shot in the air, and then they made everyone leave, and everyone headed out, and dragged their sleds. They walked a hundred and fifty kilometers on foot, this took several days, and it was night all day long; and Luot-hozik, the grandfather of the grandfather of the grandfather (from now on we’ll just call him “grandfather,” everyone in that war was a “grandfather,” “our grandfathers fought”) could see her clearly, and the farther they went from their homes, the larger she appeared, each hair of her fur was now probably the length of grandfather’s muzzle, and through her thin pale ears grandfather could see the sky, and the stars in the sky, and a pale green light.

The animals are forcefully thrown into the violent affairs of the human world: they are forced to join the Soviet army, made to walk for days with little food, board a train where many of them die after a plane crashes into it, then, arriving at the front, they are put to work rescuing the wounded. The grandfather reindeer is covered in white paint which leaves him feeling cold and angry. The noaidi, the Sami shaman, refuses to disobey the politruk;\footnote{\textit{Ibid.}, 378. The Luot-hozik is a human-like spirit and leader of the reindeer in Sami folklore.} he tells the grandfather reindeer that he cannot leave with him because his sons are party members currently fighting in the war. The reindeer loses his patience and, through some trickery, enlists Luot-hozik in helping him attack the noaidi and the politruk. The climax of this battle blends Soviet and Sami mythology:

\footnote{The \textit{politruk} (“policheskii rukovoditel’”), or \textit{political commissar}, is an officer in charge of the political and ideological education of an army unit.}
And Luot-hozik went to the tent of the politruk, and the ground shook under her feet, and this woke up the politruk, the youngest son of the noaidi, and he understood that this was the end of him. On each of his sleeves he had a star with a hammer and sickle on it. The politruk ran out of the tent and waved his arms, so that the sky would pull the stars towards it and lift him up, but there were two planes in the sky, piloted by the middle son and the older son of the noaidi. One of the sickles caught the first plane, the second one caught the other; Luot-hozik grabbed the politruk, pulled him down and tore him in two, and the stars from his sleeves clung to the fuselages. Then the middle son told the older son, “Look, where did these stars come from on our fuselages? Maybe our father managed to absolve his guilt before the party.” And everyone was running in circles around the body of the politruk, grandfather left the camp and went home, and in the spring he went and looked for a wife, and found one, and before the war was over he had two daughters, white as snow, and they were not afraid of bombs, and when planes flew overhead and grandfather saw stars on the fuselages, he would tell his wife: “One less politruk.”

The animistic ritual overpowers the inhumane wartime protocol, and the story ends with a punchline that is reminiscent of the Russian/Soviet anecdote tradition (subversive in relation to power hierarchy), and typical Goralik (glossing over death with a quip). She foregrounds the Soviet symbols: the hammer and sickle, the term politruk. This dates the chapter within the framework of the novel, and functions as another insertion of a species and its specific idiolect. We have learned about bats and beetles, what they say to humans and why they act the way they

220 Ibid., 379.
do, and now we learn about the species of the *politruk*, who is also a species that has adopted a new language: coming from a Sami family, he now speaks Soviet officialese. In the end, the violence of the military apparatus backfires. The grandfather’s children, rather than exhibiting epigenetic trauma from this wartime experience, are born not fearing airplanes. But this is what the future holds for the family: Crystal will be born at the Moscow zoo in 2019, and several years later, the *ason* will allow him to share this story using a language comprehensible to humans.

And yet what this chapter highlights (as do other brief sections of the novel) is that there is a rich spiritual and cultural tradition of speaking animals and speaking to animals, much of it lost as a result of violence between peoples. Some of it is preserved as folklore which turns into simplified children’s stories (the same kind of translation that allows Goralik to weave Sami terminology into her novel). This simplification of meaning mirrors the way the complexity and violence of war gets reduced to a more bearable amount of human suffering, no more than the story of a single person (a grandfather fighting at the front) can bear.

This episode shows Goralik’s ongoing interest in how stories about the wars of the twentieth century are continually reworked in the Russian cultural and political imagination. This chapter mixes references to the Great Patriotic War (“grandfathers fought”) and a plot that suggests the Soviet-Finnish war, fought in Karelia, which is not considered part of World War II in Russia but a separate conflict, much like the brief war before the *ason* is sometimes forgotten against the backdrop of the larger catastrophe. The indigenous human population (and the animals and mythological creatures that are part of their culture) is forced to adopt language and behavior that is foreign to them: to use Soviet terminology, to fight for the USSR against people

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221 It is also a war between neighboring countries, like the ongoing war with Ukraine (which is both central to, and on the margins of, the political crisis in Russia).
who (presumably) share their culture. The reindeer’s relation to the Sami land and their own identity is different, not routed through language. The noaidi betrays the Sami by siding with his family, which includes the politruk and two fighter pilots. But the reindeer’s family is back in the forest, and he does not have the terminology of military offices to assign him a new identity. Goralik presents a clash between grand patriotic symbolism (deflated by the punchline of the chapter) and powerful mythology, which seems reinforced by the outcome of the story (the reindeer escapes) but is also shown to be fragile by the very premise of the chapter (the backstory of a reindeer born in captivity in Moscow).

The reindeer who refused to fight in the war and celebrated the death of the politruk brings us to the novel’s relationship to contemporary Russia and Russianness. In a conversation accompanying the launch of the novel, Goralik remarked that All Who Breathe Breath has more to do with Russia than Israel. In a different interview, she says that she began writing it in 2014, when the conflict with Ukraine first got started. The war with Ukraine is on the geographical margins, not “claimed” by the Russian government as a war it is fighting (an orphan of a war), and the military symbolism of the country is organized around nostalgia for the past. The novel transposes everything into the present and into the open: the crisis is here and everywhere, it is at the center of everyone’s lives, and the military is clearly involved in each aspect of daily life. What if, the novel seems to suggest, the war in eastern Ukraine functioned in

223 See Pisareva, “Linor Goralik.”
much the same way? We could either treat it as such, or recognize that this has been the case all along.

The novel shows stark differences in the way that the Russian and Israeli settings accommodate the consequences of the *ason*. The sections of the novel that are set in Israel show how the speaking animals are integrated into the structures that determine and organize the country—they are taken care of (in all senses of the word) by the military, they are approached by different religions. The religious and mythological narratives centered on this territory accommodate them with ease. The chapters which consist of Mikhael’ Artel’man’s columns for a Moscow newspaper suggest that the same is true of the speaking animals in Russia—they have been fully integrated into the systems that govern the country. The columns are formatted as a series of anecdotes all beginning with “…рассказывают” (“they say,” their overheard nature nicely mirroring Goralik’s own writing practice) accompanied by lengthy footnotes: supposed facts mediated by a fictionalizing frame and elaborated of a second layer of the same. (One of the footnotes draws explicit attention to the overall effect, pointing out that the genre of the Russian anecdote has acquired a new life now that animals can say pithy things that resonate with everyone’s feeling of existential despair.) Some of them report on how the Russian language is dealing with the challenge of speaking animals (for example, non-speaking animals are being imported from Honduras and are referred to as “лирики”), others describe encounters with panhandling dogs in Moscow, who all offer the same tearjerker story about needing medicine or food for their children. The most telling columns show how the government apparatus responds, slowly and inefficiently, to the new state of affairs:

...Рассказывают, что эксперимент с поголовной регистрацией провалился в Уфе очень смешным образом: регистрироваться-то зверюшки как бы и регистрируются, но живут впятером по одному паспорту, лишь бы цвет совпадал.224

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224 *Vse, sposobnye dyshat’ dykhanie*, 382. This is perhaps a satirical reference to the institutionalized racism against
They say, that the universal registration experiment in Ufa failed hilariously: the beasties are registering alright, but they get by five to a passport, as long as the color matches.

Artel’man describes a famous case—a man was killed by a reindeer in a workplace accident, his family’s lawsuit against the company that hired it got nowhere, so, desperate for justice, they sued the animal itself—all before the Duma had managed to pass legislation regulating such cases. The judge boldly allowed the case to go forward. This minor tragedy becomes a spectacle:

Транскрипты этих заседаний до сих пор читаются в Театре имени Лены Греминой в качестве verbatim-спектакля «Морошка», очень, говорят, хорошего. Фразу «А вы под язык капайте», кажется, вся Москва знает.225

The court transcripts are read to this day at the Lena Gremina Theater in the form of the verbatim-spectacle “Cloudberry,” which everyone says is very good. All of Moscow can quote the line “Just pour it under your tongue.”

Goralik’s novel plays with the fact that the courtroom drama—some of it fictional, some of it real—has been a central part of the canon of contemporary Russia. This brief anecdote contains so many layers and elements: the background of the tragedy, the banality of a workplace dispute, the dysfunctional nature of the courts and the legislative body, the pretty title of the play (which refers to the Karelia region, where cloudberrries grow), the found-art nature of the performance, the memorable (meme-able) line that stays with certain residents of the city.

Goralik’s ability to condense all of this in a brief side-narrative is what allows the short sections based in Russia (compared to the volume of the novel) to suggest with quick persuasiveness the particular quirks of the local dystopia.

(and abuse of) Central Asian immigrants working in large Russian cities.

Ibid., 383. The theater is named after Elena Gremina, “documentary” playwright and founder of Teatr.doc, a Moscow theater targeted by the government for its work opposing and mocking Putin and his regime, and known for the kind of courtroom drama Goralik imagines in this excerpt. Gremina died in May 2018, six months before the novel was published.
These condensed glimpses of post-ason life in Russia are powerful because they provide a pattern that a reader familiar with contemporary Russia can easily expand to cover the map of the country and all of its structures. Animals become involved in all the absurdities of organized and petty crime, the criminal-justice system, the chaos of daily life. The estranging effect provides refreshing novelty where there is usually bleakness—but bleakness is implied. But there is something exhilarating about the absurd twist of animals becoming new Russians:

Дума задыхается, подо все это надо подводить законодательную базу, с одним оскорблением чести и достоинства уже совершенно непонятно, что делать, а волки в городе Тайга есть-то теперь никого не едят, но отжимают телефоны, сумки с вещами и потом по каким-то своим каналам куда-то толкают, а в Краснодаре два лабрадора выбросили вора из окна. А гневливый Михаэль Артельман читает-читает про это и все больше изумляется — не всему вот этому (помилуй, Господи, матушку нашу Россию), а себе, себе: ни малейшей гневливати не вызывают у него ни волчакры с телефонами, ни превысившие то и это лабрадоры, только посмеивается Михаэль Артельман, причем даже когда речь идет о кобелях (а про сучек речь особая, в жизни Михаэль Артельман на женщину руку не поднял, ни на сучку, ни на несучку). Нет, даже кобели почему-то не бесят Михаэля Артельмана.226

The Duma is gasping for breath, all of this needs a legislative basis, even with something as simple as the law about offenses to honor and dignity things are in a state of total confusion, and the wolves in Taiga no longer eat people but rob their phones and bags and then sell them somewhere else using their own private channels, and in Krasnodar two labradors threw a thief out the window. And the usually angry Mikhail’ Artel’man reads and reads about this and is more and more amazed—not by the entirety of all this (may God have mercy on our dear mother Russia), but by himself, his own self: not a single spark of anger in response to the wolves and the phones, nor the labs with their excessive self-defense, Mikhail’ Artel’man just chuckles to himself even when it comes to hound dogs (and bitches are a whole different conversation, Mikhail’ Artel’man has never laid a finger on a woman his whole life long, bitch or otherwise). No, not even hound dogs can anger Mikhail’ Artel’man.

Let’s parse Mikhail’ Artel’man’s response. His laughter, and his lack of anger, can be seen as a symptom of shock and surprise, a kind of amused alienation of the self from the realities of its environment. They are also an expression of empathy, inflected by cynicism, for

226 Ibid., 327.
the animals involved. If you think of them as animals who are incapable of adapting their behavior to suit human morality, then they have no choice but to act the way they do; this is the kind of world that has been made available to them, this is what they have learned by speaking the local language. (This line of thinking does not take into account the very real suffering of their victims.) The last time Mikhael’ Artel’man appears in the novel, he steals a fortune-telling chinchilla because its softness reminds him of his family; his grief and his guilt combined spur him into action. He has abandoned them but not lost them altogether; they are alive but he cannot reach them in Israel. He has kept himself safe, far from the epicenter of the catastrophe, at the expense of the wellbeing of his children: another example of war creating orphans and distorting families. Like so many other human feelings in the novel, his emotions are still unproductive, isolating; he only feels safe processing them wordlessly in the comforting presence of the animal. We have seen in earlier chapters that the language available to Mikhael’ Artel’man—the wry journalistic idiom and the mocking or sappy self-righteousness of online message boards—is not suited for the emotional work he needs to do. He is disgusted by online spaces where people wring their hands about the situation in Israel because they have very distant cousins there; his own family has been cut off from the world, and he is not saying anything about it. In conversations and in his work, his pain will be masked by cynicism and quotes from popular plays. But at least he has a chinchilla, and whatever comfort the small animal and its beautiful fur are able to offer.

Yet the overall pessimism of Goralik’s novel—the disaster further entrenches existing structures and divisions in both Russia and Israel—is countered by all the moments of connection between people and animals, and within communities. Here, too, we see Goralik strike the familiar balance between stability (of systems indifferent to the wellbeing of most
creatures) and unpredictability (moments of care and kindness, and empathy). The novel is deeply interested in what it means to be good and do good, given that individual actions seem tiny in the face of a catastrophe (like the rabbi feeding the bats or Miri teaching animals to meditate), and it goes through many different discourses and formal devices looking for direction. Just as with Stepanova and Svarovsky, in Goralik’s work the breakdown of formal cohesion, and sharp engagement with the overlap between social, military and family structures, is not an aesthetic gesture that denies humanist norms and principles altogether; this novel is deeply concerned with the reach and potential of humanism, and the many systems that stand in its way.

Goralik’s novel, as well as her previous work featuring nonhuman creatures, shows the ebb and flow of empathy and ethical decisions made within the context of fraught interpersonal or political situations. Animals and other nonhuman creatures illustrate the difficult choices people make between comfort and safety on the one hand, and freedom of self and expression on the other. Encounters between human and nonhuman challenge the framework that humans use to accommodate (if not outright ignore) otherness. The references to contemporary Russia in the novel reveal the increased urgency of Goralik’s concerns with these questions. Her work with twentieth century war mythology shows that the available models for understanding conflict are not conducive to resolving contemporary conflicts—they were meant to reinforce hierarchies rather than reconsider or abolish them.

Goralik’s recognizably contemporary language and the excess of everyday detail in her work create a false sense of stability and security—when the unexpected appearance of violence, or destabilizing humor, or a speaking animal interrupts the text, we realize that the reality described provides neither stability nor security. The encounter with the nonhuman forces us to
acknowledge the limitations imposed on us in exchange for that false stability, and the moral implications of that choice. And by interrupting the flow of familiar, excessive, automated language, the nonhuman introduces a way of being and speaking that does not automatically accept the terms of our compromise.
Conclusion: “Nothing bad will happen to us”

This dissertation examines the nonhuman, a versatile trope with a long tradition in Russian literature, which is at the intersections of questions of subjectivity and embodiment, language and other interpersonal codes. Encounters with the nonhuman estrange conventions of language and behavior, and help the human see what kind of social and interpersonal affect is possible, how the social body can be restructured and repaired. The nonhuman is part of the repertoire of many genres: the ballad, the fable, religious and scientific texts, speculative fiction and Gothic horror. Thus, the body of the nonhuman, when introduced into a text, can announce literary and generic hybridity along with sustained engagement with political and philosophical questions about social hierarchies and individual and cultural memory. Within the context of contemporary Russian literature, the nonhuman allows an exploration of the unprocessed historical and affective legacy of the twentieth century, and an expression of anxiety about the conflicts of the present and the uncertainty of the future. We have seen how the works of Maria Stepanova, Fyodor Svarovsky and Linor Goralik address the present moment with increased urgency, depicting it as politically fraught, laden with cultural nostalgia that privileges the hierarchical, violent, non-humanist values of war and the military. Their work uses the nonhuman to examine how these larger political and societal forces strain and destroy structures of kinship.

In Goralik’s All Who Breathe Breath, the post-ason shared language does not bridge the hierarchical divide between humans and nonhuman animals. Humans are forced to acknowledge the pain and trauma of other creatures, but that does not constitute the full spectrum of empathy. The fear of scarcity after the catastrophe reinforces old divisions. In Stepanova’s The Prose of
Ivan Sidorov, both the police and the supernatural creatures are turned to glass and ashes by a mother desperate to find her missing daughter. The conflict between the creatures who embody unprocessed grief and the forces that suppress it remains unresolved.

Another possible reading of all of the texts studied in this dissertation is that they are anticipating a new kind of shift, a new kind of collapse, in which our relationship to our environment and our own bodies will drastically change. If we project ahead to that future and then look back, these poems and stories will be read through the lens of anxiety about the legacy of the human body and human presence on earth, anxiety about climate change. Humans who were careless about the signs this crisis were coming (and humans who issued warnings) will be the ghosts that haunt poems in the near future. Russia’s military and political conflicts are closely tied to the future of the oil industry in the Arctic region (it is true that, when Svarovsky’s poem comes true and the Antarctic melts, someone will be happy about it), and the Russian Federation borders countries that will see increased political unrest as the climate changes. What will happen as the ice keeps melting? When more refugees will travel through the mountains of Europe, and the glaciers will recede to show the remains of the dead from millennia ago? What will happen when we learn more about what animals are saying, in the wild and in captivity? When specific communities are threatened with increased state violence? When the orphaned children grow up?

“Everything strives to be human”

What happens if we get rid of the humans altogether? What if they went away? A poem in Svarovsky’s collection Glory to Heroes, called “Мы здесь люди” (“We Are the People
Now”) imagines a joyously sinister eschatological scenario with not a single human being in sight.

“Мы здесь люди”

Солнце скоро взрывается
все люди уже улетели

оставили кучу животных и роботов
всех, которые не уместились

оставшиеся радуются: ура
теперь мы здесь люди

всё нам ерунда по колено
с нами ничего не будет

(согласно закону антропному
всякое стремится стать человеком)

радуются, летают по воздуху
устраивают фейерверки

называют друг друга Татьяна Петровна, Аскольд Тимофеич
Антон Павлович, не хотите ли выпить чай?

умирают от страсти
устраивают поножовщину

верность ставят превыше чести
собирают марки и старинные монеты

в последние шесть часов
do самого
последнего момента

“We are people here”

The sun is about to explode
and all the people have flown away

leaving behind all these animals and robots

227 Svarovsky, Slava geroiam, 83. The translation is mine.
anyone they had no room for

those left behind cheer: hooray
now we are the people here

that nonsense is no big deal
nothing bad will happen to us

(according to the anthropic principle
everything strives to become human)

they fly around, joyous
they set off fireworks

they call each other Tatyana Petrovna, Askold Timofeich,
Anton Pavlovich, would you like some tea?

they die of passion
they have knife fights

they put loyalty far above honor
they collect stamps and ancient coins

in the last six hours
before
the very last moment

The poem begins with the promise of the world ending soon, and ends with a phrase that repeats the word “last.” The reader joins the countdown. The humans have left and only robots and animals remain on earth. Does that mean that we, the readers, are among the robots and animals? Have the humans departed without us? Why isn’t the poem telling its readers where the people went? Why are the nonhuman creatures so happy to be rid of humans; what does that say about the usual state of affairs? Can we fully understand their joy?

The six hours before the sun explodes is enough time for the world to go topsy-turvy and become a carnival of animals and robots imitating human behavior. The departure of the people is cause for celebration, and the nonhuman earthlings fully inhabit their joy. They get to act as humans: they believe they are invincible, they are violent and passionate, they use patronymics
and drink tea (they are characters from Lermontov and Chekhov, Romantic and bourgeois). The things that bring these creatures joy are the ordinary and extraordinary events of daily human life, the minute and the grandiose. (In a similar broad sweep, the poem moves between the generic—the categories human, animal, robot—and the specificity of first names and patronymics.) The end of the world is nonsense, “ерунда,” but so is our human daily life, which the animals and robots embrace. One wonders if the humans will get to experience these same things, and so joyously, wherever they go next, or if they knew to appreciate them in the past.228

The poem explains the behavior of the nonhuman creatures with the anthropic principle—that the universe is compelled to produce sentient life, the kind of consciousness and cognition that humans understand as their own. But if the universe has formed so that conscious life can appear, what does it mean when the sun is about to die, or much of the sentient life on a planet? Do our moral actions reflect these questions and that knowledge? What about our interactions with other beings?

The poem asks—who is brave enough to face a certain ending? What does that ending even look like? What would it be like to escape it? What would it be like to face it, but remain in denial? And what would it mean to not share our knowledge about the end of the world with other creatures, to not treat them as our equals? The setup is sinister, realistic and yet fantastical.

228 In his interview with Goralik, Svarovsky talks about his long periods of illness, and how they have shaped his philosophy about what he can do and what he enjoys: “Я был болен тяжелым довольно психозом, депрессией. Как бы у меня не было жизни вообще. И вот болезнь сошла на нет. И мне теперь все очень нравится, просто любая данность мне кажется прекрасной.” “I was very sick, suffered from psychosis, depression. As if I had no life in me at all. And then this illness went away. And now everything seems great to me, any given thing is just wonderful.” (In Goralik, Chastnye litsa, 260) About his time in a refugee camp in Denmark, he says: “Не было никакого будущего. Что-то происходит такое, катастрофа, ну и живешь как-то. И начинаешь ценить текущий момент. Все происходит сегодня.” “There was no future. Something happens, a catastrophe, and you keep living somehow. And you start to appreciate the present moment. Everything happens today.” (Ibid., 255) There are two different philosophies of living in the moment here, one about relief and contentment in the absence of pain, the other about simple perseverance in the face of catastrophe. Both are at play in the poem: the only way to get through these last six hours is to make the most of them, to fully inhabit the joy and relief of a world without humans.
Climate change will wreak havoc long before the sun explodes (a gradual end of our own making rather than a sudden end caused by the physical laws of the universe). Humans are currently exploring ways to escape to other planets rather than rescue the planet we have. Any future spaceships will certainly leave some creatures behind. Our vast imaginative and industrial resources are no match for our short-sightedness. What does it mean to say “мы здесь люди” given what humans have done and not done? What have we taught others about ourselves if the animals, having become “people,” drink tea and indulge in knife fights in the last hours before the sun explodes?

If we gave a human tongue to the horse, it would speak words as perfect as apples and honey, Zabolotsky claims. If we left all of the animals and robots to their own devices, they would set off fireworks, says Svarovsky. If we made space for otherness, the world would be transformed in unpredictable ways. Are we open to this kind of uncertainty? Can we look beyond existing templates for how to speak, how to interact, how to remember the past?

**After the Human**

This dissertation explores only three authors who are members of a generation that came of age right after the collapse of the Soviet Union; there is work to be done on how a younger generation explores the nonhuman in relation to the virtual and natural worlds, as a political and philosophical concept, as a device that enhances new lyric or narrative strategies. This topic can be studied comparatively across languages and territories with similar political and social histories, as well as across media, as it is particularly prominent in the visual arts. The nonhuman should also be studied, in greater detail, in relation to changing discourses around illness and
disability, especially as a means for authors to describe their own experiences with physical and mental illnesses. But above all, the nonhuman must be considered as a long-standing presence in our imaginative responses to a changing world, charted by science and contained by political structures, but in the end impossible to define, summarize, and know with full certainty. The nonhuman allows a representation of embodiment and subjectivity that foregrounds uncertainty and not-knowing—about the world, about others, about ourselves. Within different frameworks, this can be a source of joy or anxiety: maybe the nonhuman offers a glimpse of a different, better kind of existence, whose coming is imminent. Or maybe the weight of historical events, of unfinished processes of mourning, is already transforming every body and every text within reach.
Bibliography


