Matters of Life and Death: The Living Corpse in Early Soviet Society

A dissertation presented

by

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to

The Department of Slavic Languages and Literatures

in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in the subject of

Slavic Languages and Literatures

Harvard University

Cambridge, Massachusetts

May, 2019
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Abstract

The living corpse is not merely a trope in Russian literature; as Andrew Wachtel notes, it is a “cultural paradigm” that “influenced not just Russian literature but Russian history in general.” My dissertation addresses the appearance of the living corpse in the first decades of the Soviet era as it becomes the locus of multiple discourses—including history, art, and belief—during a period of cultural disruptions. Soviet scholars have long been fascinated by the topics of immortality and resurrection, often emphasizing its intellectual origins in proto-utopian narratives or in the idiosyncratic philosophy of Nikolai Fedorov. Others have located a Gothic strain of literature conditioned by the abrupt shifts in power in the social and political world. Building on this scholarship, I argue that the trope of the living corpse is a salient metaphor for exploring what it means to be “alive” after 1917. Bound to certain defamiliarizing aesthetic strategies, it reveals how artists engaged with the promises and problems of a new Soviet life in which death would be conquered by resurrecting its subjects on earth, rather than in Heaven. This resurrection is not literal; instead, it is involved with redefining life and death as political and social categories for “conscious” and “unconscious” individuals. The dead body becomes a site for considering the rhetoric and ideologies of life and death in the aftermath of the Revolutions of 1917, and the vital role of art in elucidating these new forms of experience. To that end, I read the trope in the works of Andrei Platonov, Dziga Vertov, Vladimir Mayakovsky, and Sigizmund Krzhizhanovsky, teasing out the multiple layers of meaning given to the living corpse based on its context within the work itself, within the particular author’s oeuvre and thought, and within the historical period.
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Bibliography
Acknowledgments

I am grateful to all of those in the Department of Slavic Languages and Literatures at Harvard with whom I have had the pleasure to work during the course of writing this dissertation and my doctoral studies. Above all, I owe a tremendous amount of gratitude to the members of my committee, Justin Weir, Stephanie Sandler, and Daria Khitrova. Each one of them helped me, challenged me, and inspired me from the earliest stages of this project until the end.

There are many friends and family members that deserve a special word of thanks. In particular, I thank my parents and my brothers, Brandon and Nicholas, for always giving me their love and support; Giulia Dossi, Daniel Green, Ashley Morse, and Sarah Vitali, who became far more than colleagues during my doctoral studies; and Steve Blackwell, whose friendship and guidance took me to Russia in the first place.

During the course of my graduate studies, I met my wife, Bobbie. She has been a constant source of love, inspiration, and support, and this dissertation belongs as much to her as it does to me.

Finally, I dedicate this dissertation to my grandfather, Bill Akins.
Introduction

In a 2018 *New York Times* article, literary critic Parul Sehgal writes of the unexpected afterlife of the ghost story in American fiction.¹ Chronicling the trope’s powerful resurgence in contemporary literature, Sehgal writes why it has proven so resilient: “The ghost story shape-shifts because ghosts themselves are so protean—they emanate from specific cultural fears and fantasies. They emerge from their time […] However, ghost stories are never just reflections. They are social critiques camouflaged with cobwebs; the past clamoring for redress.” Sehgal argues that the ghost story in American literature is something like a cultural myth that depicts a nation “not only as haunted but cursed, from Hawthorne on.” The genre, like the ghost itself, emerges from the past and pursues us because it still has something it needs to say.

The living, resurrected corpse has had a similar function in Russian literary and cultural history. Andrew Wachtel has called the living corpse a “cultural paradigm” that “influenced not just Russian literature but Russian history in general.”² Passing through many stages, the cultural myth of the living corpse has appeared and reappeared

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² Andrew Wachtel, “Resurrection à la Russe: Tolstoy’s *The Living Corpse* as Cultural Paradigm,” in *PMLA*, vol. 107, no. 2 (March 1992), 261-273.
throughout history, each time gathering nuance and new meanings. “Remains are concrete, yet protean; they do not have a single meaning but are open to many different readings,” says Katherine Verdery, whose study of the fate of political corpses in the postsocialist age elucidates the cultural meanings ascribed to corpses and their variability according to the era in which they surface. This is particularly true when it comes to corpses in Russian literature, which are anything but lifeless. From the incorruptible saints’ bodies to the “living sculpture” of Lenin that still lies at the heart of Moscow, to the forgotten authors whose written corpora are still being exhumed from the archives, the life of the corpse and the possibility of its resurrection pertains to several cultural discourses, most importantly art, history, and belief.

This is a study about a specific figure found in literature and film in the first decades of the Soviet century: the living corpse. By observing them in a selection of authors’ works—Andrei Platonov, Dziga Vertov, Vladimir Mayakovsky and Sigizmund Krzhizhanovsky—I intend to justify the title of this dissertation, “Matters of Life and Death: The Living Corpse in Early Soviet Society.” First, the title refers to the motif of the resurrected body, and its darker double, the living corpse, and the important role they played in artworks of the first two and a half decades (roughly 1917-1943) as artists attempted to shape, define, and describe the emerging Soviet subject. While the early avant-garde years are characterized by manifestos that variously call for “resurrection”


and a “new man,” the mid- to late works of Andrei Platonov, for example, see an inverse form of resurrection, as the subject gradually disappears from the world and becomes mere embodied hollowness. We see different models of animating the corpse, beginning with Nikolai Fedorov’s philosophy of resurrecting the dead and giving them a life after death. In contrast, Vertov’s bull from *Kinoglaz* does not have an afterlife, but instead is revived by reversing the process of death. This restoration of the past is different than Fedorov’s utopian future, where resurrection necessarily takes place after death. In a third example, Platonov’s corpses are not animated back to life, but instead pass through a stage of living death, where they take on characteristics of corpses. What unites these authors, beyond the spectrum of animated “lifeless” corpses, is the role the animated dead body plays in terms of representing art’s potency as a tool for instilling “humanity” into a thing. The dead body became the perfect literary vessel for representing the new life given to certain subjects and, conversely, the reduction to expendable “bare life” of others. While tracing the contours of the corpse motif, I will interrogate this devolutionary historical timeline, from utopian dreams to dystopian nightmare, as I examine the ambivalence of the grotesque in each author’s works.

Second, my title indicates that matter *matters* in the works under consideration. In a period characterized, on one hand, by medium-specific artistic experimentation (“the word as such,” film montage, collage), and on the other by the ideological shift toward exclusively materialist understandings of natural and historical phenomena, which, once understood, might be controlled, the subject of matter is the crux of post-revolutionary representations of living corpses. Again, neither of these characterizations is as distinct and straightforward as it seems, instead only providing a basic framework from where to
begin—as we will see, the “bodies” of words can have souls, and even the dead are also people. But the authors I examine consider matter as a vital force that informs and influences their artistic works. Platonov, for example, sees the body in terms of its proximity to earthen materials like dirt, clay, and stone, influenced by the radical materialism of his predecessor, Nikolai Fedorov. Vertov’s body of the bull in *Kinoglaz* is re-emboweled onscreen by physically manipulating the instruments of cinematography. Mayakovsky takes as his subject in *The Komsomol Song* [Комсомольская] the living body politic, which he vivifies through the transmogrification of the physical corpse of the *vozh’d*, Lenin. And Sigizmund Krzhizhanovsky’s phantasmagoric fiction materializes as words and word fragments gain independent bodies of their own. These experiments with material result in the grotesque appearance of the living, or resurrected, dead body in each author’s work.

The myth of resurrection was easily coopted into a utopian ideology in the post-Revolutionary era, and it penetrated into the worlds of politics, medicine, and art. Many willed the demise of death, and authors depicted versions of an earthly paradise in their prose and poetry. Irene Masing-Delic argues in her book *Abolishing Death: A Salvation Myth of Russian Twentieth-Century Literature* that an “immortalization myth” spans the entire 20th century in Russia. In her reading of five authors and their intellectual predecessors, she delineates six parameters that “provide the stable structural core of an influential immortality myth, that retains its basic outline from text to text:”

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World. These parameters manifest differently in each author’s work according to style and emphasis but form a broadly applicable structure with which to interpret the resurrection story in 20th century Russian letters. Masing-Delic reads the dream of “killing death” in each author not as a metaphorical motif, but as “anticipatory and thus expected to translate into real action and true events.” According to her scholarship, these works are not idle speculations of mystics and intellectuals, nor are they artistic experimentations, but rather “instructive texts” and “immortalization manuals” that constitute a program for earthly salvation. This intellectual current originates in the philosophy of Nikolai Fedorov and continues into fin-de-siècle and later post-Revolutionary avant-garde poetry and prose. Masing-Delic’s study contributes to both Russian intellectual history and 20th century literature, offering a framework for interpreting the recurring themes of resurrection and immortality.

While building on the scholarship of Masing-Delic and others, “Matters of Life and Death” contributes a new perspective on the trope of the living corpse in Soviet culture, distinguishing itself in three ways. First, while considering the sincere calls for resurrection, I argue that the trope of the living, resurrected corpse is involved with a reexamination of life and death as broader political, social, and existential categories in the wake of 1917. An important question that orients this study is how the “dead,” however they are defined in a particular work, qualify as subjects in the Soviet Union; that is, are the dead sentient and independent, what rights do they have, and where do these rights come from? Have they come back to life with power and agency, or are they merely ventriloquized by an external force? While the last question centers on the nature

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6 Ibid. 23.
of their necromancers, I mostly direct my focus on the corpses themselves, especially looking for the places where categories of “dead” or “alive,” “resurrected” or “living dead,” break down or are complicated. In these grotesques, we can discover the ambivalences of avant-garde utopianism and the vague hopes remaining in Stalin-era dystopianism.

Second, while probing the pre-Revolutionary period in search of origins, I take the early Soviet period, rather than the 20th century on the whole. One hypothesis I propose is that the particular nature of the Revolution—as a series of historical events and a sum of its ideologies—stamps its character upon these literary corpses. To this end, I consider in particular the afterlife of religion after 1917. While Soviet ideology easily replaced simplistic trappings of Christianity, the utopian promise of building heaven on earth had no immediate answer for the doctrine of salvation. “Heaven” was perpetually suspended in a glorious, communist future, and those who did not live to see it were condemned to be dead, forever. This presented a problem that, for example, Vertov attempts to address by emphasizing technology’s power to triumph over entropy, time, and death, while Platonov explores the abject lives of those permanently exiled from the Promised Land to come. Through my investigation, I argue that these alternative narratives of salvation are one of the primary forces animating the corpse after 1917.

Finally, instead of analyzing works in terms of certain mythological paradigms or parameters, I exhume the deformative and defamiliarizing aesthetic devices that bring these corpses to life within the texts themselves. Proposing that the living corpse is an aesthetic as well as historical phenomenon, I argue that there is a rhetoric of the living dead and that these living corpses are bound to certain narrative and aesthetic strategies.
as art underwent its own revolutions in response to the developments in society after 1917. My focus on devices like metonymy, metaphor, and anthropomorphization, as well as religious and mythological structures that undergird these narratives, allows us to closely examine the specific form and function of recycled literary tropes in avant-garde and post-avant-garde fiction. It also opens the space for considering the linguistic and formal experiments of Sigizmund Krzhizhanovsky and his respective place in the canon of Russian modernism, one of this study’s main contributions.

In short, “Matters of Life and Death” argues that the trope of the living corpse is a salient metaphor for exploring what it means to be “alive” after 1917. Bound to certain defamiliarizing aesthetic strategies, it reveals how artists engaged with the promises and problems of a new Soviet life in which death would be conquered by resurrecting its subjects on earth, rather than in Heaven. This resurrection is not literal; instead, it is involved with redefining life and death as political and social categories for “conscious” and “unconscious” individuals. The dead body becomes fertile ground for considering the rhetoric and ideologies of life and death in the aftermath of the Revolutions of 1917, and the vital role of art in elucidating these new forms of experience.

A brief excursion through the historical and philosophical landscape around 1917 will provide a backdrop for later considerations of the meaning of the living corpse in individual works, both as a product of resurrection and as its haunting inverse image.

“Christ is Risen! Russia is Risen!”

7 Cited in Boris Kolonitskii, Simvol vlasti i bor’by za vlast’: K izucheniiu politicheskoi kul’tury rossiiskoi revoliutsii 1917 goda (Saint Petersburg: Liki Rossii, 2012), 81.
These words are taken from the memoir of Metropolitan Evlogii, who after the February Revolution in 1917, wrote that he heard, in response to the traditional Easter greeting, “Christ is risen” [Христос воскресе], “Russia is risen!” [Россия воскресе!]. In the years after 1917, the idea of gaining control over the forces of life and death was not only a matter for science fiction. A millenarian sense of time and fate and an unbridled optimism in the future yielded eschatological visions of resurrecting the dead and achieving immortality. This idea was eccentric, to be sure, and often it was unclear what was said in earnest and what was merely speculative, apocalyptic reverie. Nevertheless, resurrecting the dead became a part of post-Revolutionary culture and rhetoric that inspired scientists, artists, philosophers, Party officials and citizens alike.

The reasons for such a bizarre fantasy to take hold specifically at this point in history are complex and many. For one, the idea of revolution was already tinged by apocalypse in the popular imagination, thanks in part to a rich tradition of utopian thinking that had influenced administrative officials, peasants, and the intelligentsia alike for decades. These imagined utopian scenarios, based more in the social realities of 19th century Russia than in the theoretical philosophy of Marx and Engels, generated much of the passion and euphoria that eventually found an outlet in the actions of 1917. While many events in Russia’s long history had been viewed through the lens of eschatology, the revolutions of 1917, both February and October, were something different.

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9 The Russian philosopher Nikolai Berdiaev captured the inclination toward eschatological readings of events in Russian history when he called Russians “a people of the end” [народ конца]. See Nikolai Berdiaev, *Russkaia ideia* (Paris: YMCA, 1946), 195. For a history and pre-history of the revolution as apocalyptic event in Russian
The February Revolution in particular seemed almost heaven sent, with many of its supporters regarding it as a spiritual, not simply a political, revolution. Alexander Kerensky’s pronouncement in March that, “we must create a kingdom of justice and truth” [Мы должны создать царство справедливости и правды] captures the moralistic tone accompanying the political events, which is further borne out by the written records of supporters and even opponents of the revolution, who regarded it as a “general victory of the Russian soul over passivity and carrion [мертвечиной], preventing life, breathing, and creation.”

Semyon Frank conceded that after the deposition of the tsar, “People became more attentive and more polite to one another. There awoke an acute, almost intoxicating, feeling of nationwide solidarity.”

There was a religious spirit in the atmosphere, and religious reforms were indeed included among the political. The mix of spiritual and political victory in the national consciousness, however, went deeper. Boris Kolonitskii writes that the theme of resurrection exists in virtually any revolution but that it cuts a specific path in the Russian Revolution. For instance, its interpretation as a religious event was aided by the felicitous coincidence of the February events and the paschal season of Lent, beginning in March that year, which led to obvious associations of insurrection and resurrection.

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10 Boris Kolonitskii, Simvoly vlasti i bor ’by za vlast’, 58.

11 Ibid. Kolonitskii here quotes an anonymous contemporary essayist, an apparent supporter of the February Revolution.

12 Ibid.

13 Ibid. 80.
Religious symbols, like the color red that was already draped around the city in honor of Orthodox Easter, quickly and easily merged with the symbolism and rhetoric of revolution, such that the term “red Easter” gained new political meaning after February and would eventually even be used by the Bolsheviks, who christened the October Revolution, “The Easter of the working class and indigent peasantry” [Пасхой рабочего класса и беднейшего крестьянства]. The resurrection of Christ became equivalent with the resurrection of the nation and a “holiday of freedom” in certain peasant villages. Promises of an egalitarian republic accompanied the earthshattering events that deposed the tsar, whose family was but one of the dynasties to have ruled over and oppressed the Russian people for centuries. With this, previously insurmountable boundaries suddenly lost their permanence, as what had seemed an ineluctable structure of life simply dissolved in a matter of weeks. The magnitude of this historic peripeteia was of Biblical proportions to thinkers like Dmitrii Merezhkovsky, the literal fulfillment of the last become first and the first become last: “Perhaps since the times of the first Christian martyrs, there has never been an event in world history more Christian, more directed by Christ, than the Russian Revolution” [Может быть, с первых времен христианских мучеников не было во всемирной истории явления более христианского, более Христа, чем русская революция]. This was more than a revolt over the kingdoms of the earth; it was a revolution whose repercussions reached the heavens.

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14 Ibid. 84.

15 Dmitrii Merezhkovsky, Angel revoliutsii, quoted in Kolonitskii, Simvoly vlasti i bor’ba za vlast, 82.
The apocalyptic sensibility around the events of the revolution was exacerbated by the development of technologies and experimental medicine that had begun before 1917, but which continued well after. According to Stites, the political spirit of the revolution, informed in part by Russia’s rich utopian tradition, was but one half of the equation; the other was the twentieth century’s technological revolution, which “added tremendous Promethean power to its visions and aspirations, releasing a much greater surge of futuristic fantasy than any previous revolution in history.”

Nikolai Krementsov writes that the Bolshevik Revolution coincided with three major scientific revolutions that had a great effect on Soviet scientific and popular culture: “an experimental revolution in the life sciences, which dramatically changed understandings of life and death, health and diseases, human nature and human future; a revolution of scale, which marked the transition from ‘small’ to ‘big’ science and made science a mass profession; and a revolution in science’s public visibility and cultural authority, aptly manifested in the explosion of ‘popular science’ in the media and the spectacular rise of a new literary genre, science fiction.”

Although many scientists were stripped of their positions and privileges during the Revolution and the Civil War, their status was restored at the end of 1921, when Bolsheviks’ support of science and scientists turned about-face. Now, scientific advancements aided Bolsheviks as they set out to expose the deceptions of religion’s “miracles” and install in its place an ideology based in a valorization of

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18 Ibid. 17-19.
science, rationalism, and materialism. According to A.V. Nemilov, editor of the popular journal *Man and Nature* [Человек и природа] in the 1920s, “Revolutionary work must be antireligious. It must underscore that the world is materialistic, that there is no spirit or secret mystical component to development. Furthermore, nature can be mastered by man.” Mastering nature through science became an atheistic dogma worthy of replacing religion.

As per Nemilov’s aspirations, science, in the meantime, was progressing toward making miracles into reality. An explosion of popular science media in the 1920s brought sensationalist headlines to newspapers and journals, frequently including articles about the transformation of agriculture through science. This includes articles written by the young journalist Andrei Platonov in the Voronezh-based journal *Krasnaia derevnia*, where he dreamed about the possibilities of weather control, increasing soil fertility, and mastering the processes behind food production. According to his essays, if the phenomena of weather and agriculture could be understood, then the inexhaustible labor of the newly formed collective working toward a unified goal could potentially bring such ideas to fruition.

Given the impulse to control these natural processes, it is not a huge leap to imagine influencing the natural limitations of biological life. Although some recognized

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19 A.V. Nemilov, *Chelovek i priroda*, no.1, 1925 (January), 1.


21 See, for example, “Remont zemli” first published in *Krasnaia derevnia*, 9 June 1920, 3.
the dreams of religion as reconciliable with a socialist society (for instance, the “God-Builders” Anatoly Lunacharksy, Alexander Bogdanov, and Maxim Gorky), such ideas were, in fact, in contradiction to official Marxist-Leninist dogma. The official party line discouraged any serious discussions of an individual’s transcendental immortality and instead spoke of the immortality of the people as a collective.22 But the revolution’s cosmic mission to conquer and reshape all the material conditions of existence made its encroachment into the realm of human mortality almost inevitable.23 By 1926, Bogdanov had become the first director of the Moscow Institute of Blood Transfusion [Московский Институт переливания крови], where he imagined and experimented with using blood transfusions as a means of rejuvenation.24 Speculative science led to impatient expectations: Masing-Delic notes that Ilya Erenburg was frequently asked on his lecture tours in the early 1920s if communism would overcome death.25 A product of both symbolic interpretation and scientific advances, dreams of resurrection and immortality soon became an important part of revolutionary imagination.

1917 and the Religious Philosophy of Nikolai Fedorov

Orthodox belief played a complicated role in the revolutionary events. While the beginning of the 20th century in general saw a decline in the cultural role of Orthodox Christianity in Russian society, the revolution ironically brought about a resurgence of religious sensibility and practices, especially among workers and in provincial regions of

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23 Ibid. 4-5.


Russia. According to historian Mark. D. Steinberg, the 1917 Revolution appealed to many ordinary Russians precisely because its “promise of a new spirit and order, its moral vision, and its utopian enthusiasm” resonated strongly with the Christian doctrine familiar to them.\(^{26}\)

It is not altogether surprising that artists, especially those creating overtly political art and propaganda, mined religious symbolism for its ability to interpret the cataclysmic events of the 1917 Revolution and the Russian Civil War and project them onto a cosmic canvas. Writers, filmmakers, and visual artists often relied heavily on religious imagery and symbolism during this period for many reasons, including the obvious links that bound pre-Revolutionary Russian culture to an Orthodox interpretation of historical events, and for the readymade religious idiom that, among other functions, emphasizes links between the visible with the eternal and the banal with the sublime.\(^{27}\) Of course, many also mined religious language to radically undermine it. Mayakovsky’s *Mystery-Bouffe* [Мистерия-Буфф], for example, exploits a judgment day scenario to satirize the Christian imagination of hell and paradise. Hell’s torments hardly compare to the tribulations of the proletariat (called the Unclean) on earth, and there is no food in paradise for the starving citizens of 1918 Petrograd. Leaving the angels of heaven, they continue on to the “promised land,” where they build an earthly paradise of their own. But even this satire, which mocks Christian notions of the afterlife, resorts to defining the goals of the revolution in terms of Revelations. As we will see, Platonov uses similar


\(^{27}\) Ibid. 11.
techniques of undermining Christianity’s authority by turning its own language against itself. Framing the Revolution as man’s fulfillment of God’s promise to transfigure the world and give life to the dead, many artists instilled their own art with religious symbolism in order to further emphasize the grandeur of the Soviet mission.

The particular fusion of Leninist-Marxist materialism with the apocalyptic Christian narrative that emerged after 1917 is unimaginable without the influence of the 19th century philosopher Nikolai Fedorov. Fedorov’s writings were well-known throughout the 19th century, and they were first collected and published as The Philosophy of the Common Task [Философия общего дела] in the decade before 1917. Fedorov imagined philosophy like Marx in his eleventh thesis on Feuerbach, in that he believed its point was not to merely study the world, but to change it. The main idea of Fedorov’s philosophy, the so-called “Common Task,” was an intriguing mix of eschatological utopianism and radical, naïve materialism, one that was well tailored to the grandeur and the salvific potential that the Bolshevik Revolution seemed to promise.

Fedorov started from the idea that death was the natural enemy of humanity. The ultimate goal of mankind’s evolution was to conquer death, first by turning technology (particularly war machines) from destruction to construction, using them instead to alter the weather and physical landscape and to cease wars, defeat hunger, and house the poor. The next step, and Fedorov’s most famous contribution to Russian philosophy, was for

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28 “[…] we are moving from the domain of theory—the most debatable—from the domain of knowledge in general, to the domain of the moral—the least debatable—the domain of action.” [...] мы переходим из области теоретической, наиболее спорной, из области знания вообще, в область нравственную, наименее спорную, в область действия.] Nikolai Fedorov, Filosofiia obshchego dela, vol.1, in Nikolai Fedorovich Fedorov: Sochineniia, ed. A.V. Gulyga (Moscow: Mysl’, 1982), 313. Translation mine.
mankind itself to fulfill the Christian promise of the general resurrection, reviving every person who ever lived on earth starting with the most recent and ending with the first man. This process would require amassing so much knowledge of the universe that it would be possible to collect the physical remainders of one’s ancestors in dust particles in order to reassemble them, and to engineer new bodies and prosthetic organs through advanced bioengineering.29 Fedorov believed that death was in fact an alien imposition on human life and completely surmountable, and that mankind’s greatest task would be to reshape human life so that the joint goals of immortality and resurrection were possible. By recognizing that all of humanity is related through a common brotherhood (related to the Orthodox concept of sobornost’, which was also an important idea for the Slavophiles in the 19th century), men would understand their ancestors as also part of that relationship and therefore be morally obligated to revive them.30

While Fedorov’s pseudo-Christian doctrine of general resurrection sounds preposterous given the atheism of the Soviet organs of power, its utopianism, along with its firm basis in materialism and science, made it palatable and even in line with many of the revolutionary ideals. The Orthodox/Slavophile idea of sobornost’, for example, places the collective over the individual and emphasized the general equality of all people in the

29 “In uniting the living for the purpose of resurrecting the dead, the object of action will be the dying, decaying dust of our fathers.” [В объединении живущих для воскрешения умерших предметом действия будет умирающее, разлагающееся, прах отцов.] Fedorov, Filosofiia obshchego dela, 201.

30 The male nouns “brotherhood” and “men” are used consistently with Fedorov’s writing, which is extremely patriarchal and often misogynistic. Female attributes are often linked to nature, which is exactly what is to be conquered and overcome in Fedorov’s utopian scenario. The potential biological conundrum of sexual reproduction is entirely circumvented in Fedorov’s philosophy, as immortality and resurrection are essentially life creation without childbirth and negate the need for sexual relationships.
eyes of God. The Common Task required all of society to unite toward a single purpose, the construction of a paradise that benefitted educated and uneducated, rich and poor, sick and healthy alike. It understood the task of humanity to be active labor in order to transform the world, not simply waiting for paradise to arrive as they had for the past millennia. Lastly, its teleological understanding of history as a gradual progression toward a certain moment when science and knowledge will become complete and death will be vanquished was easily understood in terms of the Marxian teleological dialectics of history, which ended with the elimination of class struggle and war. Fedorov himself was a vehement opponent of communism in the 19th century because of its atheistic foundations. Although reconcilable in many respects with communism, Fedorov’s Common Task could only be carried out in the name of the Christian God, and only Christianity (specifically Orthodox Christianity) was capable of uniting the people for such a task. But revolutionary thinkers, including Platonov and Bogdanov, imagined fulfilling Fedorov’s Common Task through technological progress alone, allowing Fedorov’s eschatological vision to be developed by materialists and atheists.

The Resurrection of the Word

In 1914, three years before the February and October Revolutions and before coining his influential concept of estrangement, Viktor Shklovsky read a short essay to a rapt audience at the Stray Dog cabaret in St. Petersburg. Provocatively titled “The Resurrection of the Word,” [Воскрешение слова], it mixes a particularly Russian theory of language (similar to the dyadic description of the sign proposed by Ferdinand de Saussure) with vaguely religious rhetoric, culminating with a call to return to the principles of religious poetry. “Words now are dead,” Shklovsky writes, “and language is
like a graveyard, but the newly born word was living, figurative” [Сейчас слова мертвы, и язык подобен кладбищу, но только что рожденное слова было живо, образно].

The word’s “figurative form” [образная форма] is equated with its “inner form” [внутренняя форма], which, according to Thomas Seifrid, was one of the theoretical developments made by Shklovsky’s predecessor, the Russian linguist Alexander Potebnia.32 Separating the word into its outer form—its sound—and the “inner form” of expression, Potebnia writes that every word in its original state is poetic, and that this inner poetic nature has been lost in the evolution of language.33 Its expressiveness [образность] can be recovered through etymology. In this early essay, Shklovsky views etymology, among other things, as a means of returning language to its originary poetic state.

The “resurrection” in the title is in fact a double resurrection: on one hand it involves the revival of language through poetic innovation—Shklovsky has in mind specifically the methods of the nascent Futurist collective—and on the other hand, as a consequence of such aesthetic experiments, a resurrection of feeling, sensation, “experience of the world” [переживание мира]. Shklovsky asserts that habitual and frequent use of language create shortcuts in our minds to the point that, instead of hearing or seeing words, we merely “recognize” them, a process he will in 1917 call


32 Thomas Seifrid, The Word Made Self: Russian Writings on Language, 1860-1930 (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005), 35-40. There is also a third component, its “content,” giving Potebnia’s theory of language a tripartite structure, which differentiates him from Saussure and his German predecessors.

33 Ibid. 40.
“automatization.” Poetry’s task is to learn from the lessons of religious poetry, which is “incomprehensible, difficult, impossible to read,” and to create a half-comprehensible [полупонятный] language in order to wake humanity out of its linguistic slumber: “This half-comprehensible language seems to the reader more figurative by virtue of its unusualness” [такой полупонятный язык кажется читателю, в силу своей непривычности, более образным]. Thus the main idea of estrangement, here as yet to be named, makes its first inchoate appearance as a grotesque hybrid of language. Artists are nothing less than necromancers, simultaneously reviving both dead words and dead souls through the creation of a new poetic idiom.

There are two nouns for resurrection in Russian: the passive воскресение (as in Christ’s resurrection from the dead) and the active воскрешение (as in Christ’s resurrection of Lazarus). Shklovsky’s use of the latter active noun makes this essay manifesto-like, a call to action for art and artists to participate in a broad project of resurrecting the dormant life of those who read or view works of art. Other Formalists, such as Yuri Tynianov, would emphasize the idea of literature’s evolution through a renewal of language and recycling dead literary forms and tropes. But none would emphasize so strongly art’s capabilities of returning dead souls to life as Shklovsky. In his famous citation of Tolstoy’s diaries in “Art as Device,” Shklovsky quotes Tolstoy’s existential dread: “If the whole life of many people is lived unconsciously, it is as if this life had never been.” Biological existence does not guarantee “life,” which in Shklovsky and Tolstoy’s definition requires attention, memory, sensation, and consciousness. Estrangement (which Shklovsky makes into the defining characteristic of all art and not just Futurism) causes us to slow down and linger over words, calls our attention to a
sensation or image, and breaks us from habitual perception. Literature’s highest calling according to this theory is to break the fossilizing tendencies of our habits of experience. True, good art is that which brings the dead sensations to life, “to make one feel things, to make the stone stony.”

Shklovsky uses Tolstoy’s account of mindlessly cleaning his couch to exemplify the moribund nature of the unexamined life. This begs the question: If Tolstoy had clearly “seen” his dusty couch without simply recognizing it, would he have become merely a more conscientious housekeeper? Shklovsky’s concept of estrangement, rehearsed in “The Resurrection of the Word” and more fully developed in “Art as Device,” is a doctrine with both aesthetic and ethical consequences. Making the stone stony enriches experience, increases pleasure and displeasure, and makes us more aware of our environment. If we actually feel, see, and hear our surroundings, rather than perceiving them automatically, then our experience may dictate our action. Shklovsky expresses the moral stakes of automatization and estrangement: “This is how life becomes nothing and disappears. Automatization eats things, clothes, furniture, your wife, and the fear of war.” In its ideal form art is actively engaged in battle with the mortifying effects of the everyday [быт] on life, shielding us from desensitization and simultaneously spurring us to reflection. In this case, aesthetics has a built-in ethical component: if art returns the fear of war, might there be less war? While not necessarily determining the rightness of our actions, an increased sensitivity to life heightens our consciousness of our own agency by bringing to the fore what we otherwise do, think, or feel unconsciously.
Shklovsky’s theory transforms resurrection into an existential process, which can be brought about through works of art. The “resurrection of the word” means returning to the concrete meaning of words. When we perceive a word, rather than automatically using it, we feel what lies behind it—the actual horror of millions of people dying, rather than the abstraction of the word, “war.” Bringing the word to life involves bringing the world to life and, as a consequence, life back into the world. The stakes of art are nothing short of the renewal of life on earth. The existential aesthetics of estrangement, based loosely on the principle of resurrection, would become an integral part avant-garde literature and art, which at the beginning of the 1920s, was never too distant from the transformative goals of the revolution.

**Literature of the Living Corpse**

My methodological framework spans several levels of analysis: the narrative (the events and characters of the plot), the hermeneutic (the artistic devices and strategies by which a text achieves its meanings), the philosophical (the philosophical meaning signified by characters, events, and their aesthetic representation) and the historical (the story’s relationship to events in the real world). Each author employs the figure of the living corpse for his own purpose, and I emphasize certain textual layers according to how I interpret the figure within a particular author’s personal history and individual network of meanings. But in order to understand how the living corpse constitutes a meaningful trope in a particular era, and not simply an individualized phenomenon in several works, this study draws on a number of theoretical approaches that have been developed within literary and cultural studies to describe the disturbing appearance and effects caused by the living corpse in the world. My argument that the Soviet
manifestation of the living corpse is an aesthetic strategy that explores the promises and problems of new Soviet ideas of “life” and “death” requires me to ask not only why the dead are resurrected, but also how they are resurrected and who they are meant to be.

Iurii Lotman contextualizes the living corpse as a device and as an essential element of plot in *The Structure of the Artistic Text* [Структура художественного текста]. In his structural analysis of plot, Lotman contends that any given world is defined by the boundary of what is normal, commonplace, not news, and, conversely, of what is extraordinary or what “takes place, though it need not have [was not supposed to have—A.T.] taken place” [факт, который имел место, хотя не должен был его иметь].\(^{34}\) A literary event is “a meaningful departure from the norm” [значимое уклонение от нормы] which involves “the shifting of a persona across the borders of a semantic field” [перемещение персонажа через границу семантического поля].\(^{35}\)

Differentiating the plotless text from the text with plot, Lotman proposes that,

The world is divided into two groups, the living and the dead, and there is an impenetrable border between them. The living, while they are alive, cannot cross over to the dead, and the dead cannot visit the living. The text that possesses plot, while maintaining this proscription for all personae, introduces a character or group of characters freed from this proscription: Aeneas, Telemachus and Dante descend into the realm of shadows; in the folklore of Zhukovsky or Blok, a dead man visits the living. Thus two groups of personae may be distinguished: the mobile and the immobile.

Мир делится на живых и мертвых и разделен непреодолимой чертой на две части: нельзя, оставшись живым, прийти к мертвым или, будучи мертвецом, посетить живых. Сюжетный текст, сохраняя этот


\(^{35}\) Ibid. 233-234/223.
запрет для всех персонажей, вводит одного (или группу), которые от него освобождаются: Эней, Телемак или Дант опускаются в царство теней, мертвец в фольклоре у Жуковского или Блока посещает живых. Таким образом, выделяются две группы персонажей: подвижные и неподвижные.\textsuperscript{36}

The character who visits the dead or the dead who visits the living is the mobile character \textit{par excellence}, the agent that moves plot. These subjects are ungovernable, disrupting the status quo to create plot, the “‘revolutionary element’ in relation to the world picture.”\textsuperscript{37}

The living corpse in this case is exemplary of a larger structure of the artistic text, and Lotman’s definition allows for narratological accounts of living death and resurrection that supplement historical and cultural readings.

The mobile character does not only cross boundaries but also explores the unique liminal space of the boundary itself. This is particularly true in the case of the resurrected corpse. A robust notion of the grotesque allows us to conceptualize the liminal figure of the living corpse more broadly in history and in art. Most generally, the grotesque is that which challenges our perceptual categories using figures that “stand at a margin of consciousness between the known and the unknown.”\textsuperscript{38} Bodies, according to Geoffrey Galt Harpham, are grotesque when they are in between categories—in our case, neither completely dead nor alive. Bakhtin’s seminal definition of the grotesque in \textit{Rabelais and His World} stresses the link between the body, its parts and its functions, and the social sphere, especially during periods of upheaval: “The grotesque conception of the body is

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{36} Ibid. 238/226-227.
\textsuperscript{37} Ibid.
\end{flushright}
interwoven not only with the cosmic but also with the social, utopian, and historic theme, and above all with the theme of the change of epochs and the renewal of culture.”

Meanwhile, Wolfgang Kayser points to its origin in the wall paintings of caves ("grotto"), which accounts for the darkness and dominance of the visual aspect in literary descriptions. He views the grotesque as a “structure” whose nature is summed up in the phrase, “The grotesque is the estranged world.” This kind of “estrangement” is characterized by suddenness and surprise, a feeling of ominousness, and instills “fear of life rather than death.” Against Bakhtin’s utopian theme, Kayser sees the grotesque in terms of Kafka’s nightmarish worlds, which throw into question not only our deeply held convictions about the nature of our perceptions but the foundation of truth itself, so that “categories which apply to our world view become inapplicable.”

Richard Murphy sees a similar tendency in European avant-garde visual art, claiming that Kayser’s mode of grotesque characterizes the impulses of “desublimation and de-aestheticization in expressionism.” The concept of the grotesque gathers together many of the theoretical challenges art made on representation during the early Soviet period.

While these approaches allow us to generalize more broadly about plot, composition, and depiction, others allow us to analyze the specific appearance of these living corpses in a particular era. One central question to ask is what the living dead body

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41 Ibid.

can tell us about the cultural moment in which it appears. Unsurprisingly, scholars of the Gothic have much to say about the generic conventions of dismembered, acephalous, and animated grotesque bodies, as well as how they reflect the scientific and social discourses of a particular moment of history. The Gothic is not only defined as the historical genre of fiction that appeared roughly between the 1750s and the 1820s; it is also a timeless “discursive site” where narratives of fragmented subjects and cultural “excess” find their representation through certain distinctive tropes and devices, among which is the living corpse. Kelly Hurley, for instance, looks at the “Gothic body” as it emerges in fin-de-siècle fiction, adapting Julia Kristeva’s psychoanalytic terminology of “abjection” to theorize what she calls the “abhuman,” who is a “not-quite-human subject” and is “bodily ambiguated or otherwise discontinuous in identity.” Hurley positions this reemergence of Gothic narratives and tropes among the nascent scientific and sociomedical discourses that were reimagining the human subject during the period, claiming that, far from nostalgic and reactive, the Gothic of this era was a deeply productive and speculative genre. While not exclusively focusing on the living corpse, Hurley investigates the distorted rematerialization of Gothic descriptions of the body at the end of the century and the “new set of generic strategies” that “enact the defamiliarization and violent...

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43 The dates of the Gothic period of fiction are flexible and debatable. I am relying on the years used by Robert Miles in his book *Gothic Writing 1750-1820: A Genealogy* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002).

44 Ibid. 3.


reconstitution of the human subject.” This includes uncanny resurrections and grotesque pastiches of the human body, which she uses to decipher complex cultural codes in the late-Victorian and Edwardian era.

The recent posthuman turn in literary and cultural studies has inspired a large output of work that inquires into the concept of the human—specifically who gets to be human—through its negative twin, the corpse. A significant movement in contemporary cultural studies, posthumanism takes as its subject what W. J. T. Mitchell calls “a whole set of nonhuman entities that seem to take on organic, lifelike, or ‘autopoietic’ characteristics—intelligent machines, of course, but also systems and swarms, viruses and coevolutionary organisms, corpses, corpora, and corporations, images and works of art.” Erin E. Edwards looks at the modernist period of American literature for corpses to tell us “who—and what—counts as human and as ‘alive’ in the early twentieth century.” Borrowing the terminology of “bare life” from Giorgio Agamben’s *Homo Sacer,* Edwards studies the corpses of American modernism in search of the techniques that dehumanize those who have been “condemned to social death, ‘buried’ from cultural view, and otherwise regarded as less than ‘fully human,’” as well as the corpses that are vivified, seem to live, or, conversely, living bodies depicted cadaverously. In general, the posthuman (which is sometimes equated with, sometimes differentiated from the “nonhuman”) turn in cultural studies reflects a more general tendency in contemporary

47 Ibid.


philosophy to return to matter and away from poststructuralism’s stress on linguistic and social constructivism. These “new materialisms,” like those put forth by Diana Coole and Samantha Frost in their introduction to *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics*, seek to level the traditional hierarchy of human agency and autonomy over “passive” and “inert” non-human bodies. In posthumanist studies, dead and decaying matter is reexamined as a dynamic alternative to the human subject.

These latter studies are instructive for reading the strange appearance of the living corpse in early Soviet literature and film. They provide not only a precedent for reading the trope as a historical emanation, but also a comparative framework: how does the return of the Gothic in post-Revolutionary Russia correspond with the concomitant ideological shifts—sociomedical, political, and otherwise—regarding the subject? And what does the specific focus on the corpse tell us about post-Revolutionary Russia’s own classes of the “human” and the “non-human”? Considering these fields of scholarship, I aim to reorient them toward the interplay of religious and ideological narratives of resurrection, which also has its precedents in Russian literary studies.

**The Living Corpse in Russia**

Death, resurrection, and immortality have interested scholars of Russian and Soviet culture nearly as much as they interested artists themselves. With a variety of methodologies, many have studied the living dead in terms of literary devices, its intellectual origins, and its social and political significance.

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The terminology of the Gothic has been used to describe the early Soviet period in terms of literature and broader culture. In her taxonomy of what she calls the “Soviet Gothic,” Muireann Maguire investigates the translation of Gothic elements into early Soviet fiction, including a detailed account of the paradoxes of writing death in Soviet life and literature.\textsuperscript{51} This literary apparition is, according to Eric Naiman, a part of a broader ideological narrative of the NEP Period that largely occurred outside of novels, generated by Gothic rhetoric in Party transcripts, newspaper reports, pedagogic articles, and criminal trials.\textsuperscript{52} Maguire expands Naiman’s notion to both before and after NEP, arguing that its origins expand even to Marx’s own ambivalent vocabulary about history’s ghosts and gravediggers and extend well into and after the Stalinist period.

Returning to characterizations of the Gothic throughout, I aim to expand the trope of the living corpse beyond the bounds of one particular genre or a set of generic conventions. Yet the examples I investigate cannot be confined within the notion of the Gothic. I argue that the trope of the living corpse goes beyond a revival or reinterpretation of 19th century Romantic generic conventions and challenge that classificatory paradigm.

The Soviet dream of immortality has been a subject of literary and cultural investigation for decades, with Irene Masing-Delic’s \textit{Abolishing Death: A Salvation Myth of Russian Twentieth-Century Literature} as the most complete study into its various instantiations in fiction. Recently, scholars have renewed their attention on Russian immortality, particularly as it relates to the posthumanist philosophy of the Russian

\textsuperscript{51} Muireann Maguire, \textit{Stalin’s Ghosts: Gothic Themes in Early Soviet Literature}. See Chapter 1, “What is Soviet Gothic?”

Cosmists and on their founder, Nikolai Fedorov. George M. Young’s 2012 book, *The Russian Cosmists: The Esoteric Futurism of Nikolai Fedorov and his Followers*, expands beyond Fedorov’s original teachings to their later evolution in the Soviet and post-Soviet periods.53 A 2018 collection of essays entititled *The Human Reimagined: Posthumanism in Russia* explores the potential for posthumanist approaches in Russia, with particular interest paid to Cosmism as a philosophical movement.54 In *Art without Death: Conversations on Russian Cosmism*, Fedorov’s philosophy propels dialogues between contemporary philosophers and artists ranging from digital immortality in Silicon Valley to applications of Fedorovian ethics in the 21st century.55 Following suit, my study explores the unique character of Russian posthumanism through Fedorov’s influence on writers and thinkers of the post-Revolutionary era, particularly as it comes to the resurrection of the dead.

The afterlife of dead bodies animates the discourse around revolution and change in Russia. Katherine Verdery observes in her book on dead body politics in the postsocialist era that bodies, especially those of political leaders, have always been used as political symbols throughout history and the world. This is particularly true in times of social and political transformation, where the physical manipulation of these bodies signifies a broader change that permeates the “body politic,” a phrase we have adopted to


acknowledge the connection between the body of the leader and the state he or she represents. The canonization of Lenin’s immortal body in the mausoleum on Red Square is especially poignant against the background of the fate of saints’ relics, whose decay was held up as proof of religion’s deception and illegitimacy. While one source of truth and transcendence was deposed, another was ushered into its place. Alexei Yurchak’s recent investigations into the political theology of Lenin’s corpse reveal the social and political dynamics of the dead body as it was shaped and reshaped to fit a fluid definition of “true” Leninist ideology. Yurchak’s conclusions challenge Nina Tumarkin’s theory that Lenin’s body could have been preserved as a “sacred relic,” which links the body with traditional Orthodox faith.

Dead bodies in the form of statues were noosed, unceremoniously toppled, and paraded through the streets while others were erected, signifying the end of one era and the beginning of another. Destruction of tsarist monuments and construction of monuments celebrating the October Revolution (as well as leaders of the French Revolution, including Maximilien de Robespierre and Georges Danton) were both officially sanctioned by Lenin’s decree on the monuments of the Republic [Декрет о памятниках Республики] on April 12, 1918, but the unofficial process of their destruction began as early as the February Revolution (represented dramatically in Sergei


Eisenstein’s film *October*). Mikhail Iampolsky points out that the new monuments in general were built on the place of the old on purpose, as “destruction affirms the power of the victor to the same extent as the erection of a monument to victory.” 59 Ironically, this also assures that what has been destroyed and is now absent is always, in some way, a phantom presence hidden behind the newly erected monument. These staged and public “deaths” of statues accompanied the real murder and clandestine burial of the tsar and his family, whose private execution and unmarked graves speak to the whitewashing of history. In these and other examples, the leader’s body is not simply a physical remainder of the life lived in it, but instead becomes a metonym for the system of values ascribed to it by its pallbearers, its historical successors.

The fates of the bodies of political leaders signify more than just political change. Verdery argues that these manipulations of dead bodies “help us see political transformation as something more than a technical process…The ‘something more’ includes meanings, feelings, the sacred, ideas of morality, the nonrational—all ingredients of ‘legitimacy’ or ‘regime consolidation (that dry phrase), yet far broader than what analyses employing those terms usually provide.” 60 The dead body reminds us that revolution, besides being a political process and historical event, is also a “reorganization on a cosmic scale, and it involves the redefinition of virtually everything, including


morality, social relations and basic meanings.”⁶¹ In terms of such a reorganization, the theme of the living corpse concerns more than just the fate of the body after death; it concerns the fate of death itself, as well as the very meaning of life and death in early Soviet society.

**Structure of the Dissertation**

This dissertation comprises an introduction, conclusion, and three chapters. While Chapter 1 captures the resonances of resurrection in the rhetoric of revolution in the works of multiple authors, Chapters 2 and 3 each focus on a single author and the way the living corpse functions within their individual poetics and semiotics and within the larger literary and historical context.

In chapter 1, “Paradise Now: The Resurrection of the Body (Politic) and Life Everlasting,” I argue that the dead body is injected with political meaning after the Revolutions of 1917, yielding to metaphorical (and potentially literal) resurrections of the body politic in several works of the early 1920s. The early *Proletkul’t* essays of Andrei Platonov offer a glimpse into how Fedorov’s idiosyncratic Orthodox philosophy might be appropriated for the nation’s new political goals. Next, through a famous scene of resurrection from Dziga Vertov’s film *Kinoglaz* we see not only the political ideology of resurrection in action, which seeks to revive its ideologically moribund viewers with the holy spirit of Leninist-Marxism, but also the aesthetics by which this resurrection would take place. And finally, using Mayakovsky’s post-funereal poem “The Komsomol Song” [Комсомольская], I demonstrate that the paradoxes surrounding Lenin’s death and the

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⁶¹ Ibid. 35.
preservation of his appearance allows his body to become the ultimate site of the resurrected body politic.

In chapter 2, “‘The Dead are Also People’: Bringing Death to Life in Platonov’s Fiction,” I return to Andrei Platonov, contextualizing the persistent themes of resurrection and the living corpse within the trajectory of his later career. I argue that, in contrast to his early position, in which resurrection represented victory over the limitations of humanity, Platonov’s prose from the 1930s instead posits death as the defining existential condition of life. I show how his characters do not merely wonder about death but wander through death, as they exit the world of existence and enter the spiritual underworlds of half-existence and non-existence. Eliding the firm boundaries that separate the living and the dead, Platonov explores the intermediate space occupied by his social outcast characters, the space of the living dead.

In chapter 3, “How to Disappear Partially: Sigizmund Krzhizhanovsky’s Autobiography of a Corpse and the Body of the Word,” I argue that the Gothic motif of the living corpse in the work of Sigizmund Krzhizhanovsky is the place to read him into the canon of Russian modernist writers. The “living corpse” becomes a palimpsest of Russian modernism. Using his novella Autobiography of a Corpse [Автобиография трупа] as an entry point, I demonstrate how the trope of the corpse develops in his non-fictional and fictional writings from 1913 through the 1920s, the most productive decade of his writing. I weave back and forth between theoretical and literary works, showing how Krzhizhanovsky’s aesthetic philosophies render legible the corpse’s strange appearance in his fiction, and how the trope elucidates his idiosyncratic philosophy of
poetic language. Through this survey, I argue that Krzhizhanovsky was participating in the aesthetic conversations of his day, albeit from the margins.

Finally, in the Conclusion, I look ahead to the end of the Soviet era, where the resurrection of the corpse becomes indicative of a larger historical reckoning with the past, and the leaps of imagination required in order to do so.
Chapter I

Paradise Now: The Resurrection of the Body (Politic) and Life Everlasting

During the first years after the transformative events of the Revolution, many writers and artists exploited the language of resurrection to interpret and symbolize the utopian dreams of 1917. The mythological symbolism of resurrection has both powerful existential and political significance, making it an ideal vehicle for post-Revolutionary narratives. Bringing the dead to life can symbolize the historical suffering of a poor people, particularly the working class and peasantry, whose tribulation now was given meaning through the salvific and sacrificial heroes and deeds of the Revolution. It connotes a new age, a rebirth of the world, the conquering of nature, and the victory of progress, by which all boundaries could now be torn down. It also symbolizes the New People who are part of this New Order, brought to life by its very existence. These bodies could be transformed by infusing them not with Christian Holy Spirit but with Leninist-Marxist ideology, and the goal was nothing short of a total transformation of “unconscious” individuals into a united body of the living.

This chapter surveys responses to the post-revolutionary years (approximately 1920-1924) that include dreams and reflections on an earthly resurrection of the dead. It begins from the premise that even the dead body—perhaps especially the dead body—is injected with political meaning after the revolution, whether it be the metaphorically dead body politic awaiting its revival, or the actual body of Lenin lying on Red Square, embalmed with a living, shifting definition of Leninist ideology.¹ But this focus on the

¹ Alexei Yurchak has written and spoken about the “living sculpture” of Lenin’s body and its relation to the mercurial doctrine of Leninism in multiple places. See for instance “Bodies of Lenin: The Hidden Science of Communist Sovereignty” and “Sacred
body immediately transforms political ideology into a broader existentialism, which equates the triumph of communism with the triumph of humanity over its own mortality. One essayist (the young Andrei Platonov), one filmmaker (Dziga Vertov) and one poet (Vladimir Mayakovsky) offer utopian interpretations of the revolution and the existential consequences of this political transformation for the dead body. All drew on persisting religious, especially Christian, frames of reference to describe their paradise, projecting overtly apocalyptic readings onto the political moment.

Andrei Platonov

Nikolai Fedorov’s philosophy had a profound and well-documented impact on Andrei Platonov, one that persisted, albeit in various forms, throughout the latter’s career.\(^2\) According to his widow, one of Platonov’s favorite books was Fedorov’s *The Necropolitics: A Dialogue on Alexei Yurchak’s*’s essay ‘The Canon and the Mushroom: Lenin, Sacredness, and Soviet Collapse,’ cited above. Yampolsky actually calls Red Square a “public square cum cemetery,” thanks to the mausoleum and the cemetery that has sprung up around it in the Kremlin walls. The visible presence of a corpse in the heart of the symbolic social sphere, he argues, hearkens back to the Middle Ages when the cemetery was at the center of diverse social spaces and actions. According to Yampolsky, Lenin’s body on Red Square enacts “a transformation of the world from profane to ‘other-worldly.’” See Mikhail Iampolsky, “In the Shadow of Monuments: Notes on Iconoclasm and Time,” trans. John Kachur, in *Soviet Hieroglyphics: Visual Culture in Late Twentieth-Century Russia*, ed. Nancy Condee (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 104.

Philosophy of the Common Cause. His early writings, including his poetry and his essays, suggest the philosopher’s strong influence, as well as that of a utopian collective inspired partly by Fedorov’s philosophy, Proletkul’t. Written in various journals that had sprung up in the wake of 1917, Platonov’s essays produce the image of a true believer in communism’s eventual victory, yet it is communism of an unorthodox brand. He is interested mostly in its implications for the future of humanity, which did not stop with the elimination of class and inequality but reached far beyond into human existence as a whole. Thomas Seifrid finds in this the direct influence of Fedorov and Bogdanov, who both grounded the social, economic, and political orders of experience in a more fundamental ontology. During this period, Platonov writes about the revolution as a kind of divine boundary that has been crossed, whose significance is much broader than the change of political regime and ideology. His particular understanding of the revolution transforms humanity, in particular the proletariat, from an oppressed political class awaiting its economic liberation into a class of the dead awaiting and eventually enacting its own resurrection. He does this through a particular recycling of Christian tropes, which in his essays are transfigured from a doctrine of Christian divinity to a materialist doctrine of earthly paradise.

Platonov’s early writing embraces a maximalist, apocalyptic interpretation of the events of 1917 and the years following, a popular theme of so-called “proletarian art” in

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4 Ibid. 34.
the early revolutionary period. In essay after essay, he imagines a glorious imminent future following the revolution when work will replace slavery and a new type of man [человек] will ascend and replace God as divine creator. His utopian visions of an earthly paradise are based in Marxist materialist principles, yet have as much in common with Biblical versions of paradise, including the Garden of Eden and the millennial kingdom of Christ. Although never naming the Bible (referring to it as “an ancient book” when citing it directly), he frequently borrows from the language of Christianity to scorn the Christian worldview he sees so prominent in bourgeois culture and erects in its place a new radical materialist “religion” that will reorganize the known world. For example, the brief essay “Hallowed be Thy Name” [Да святится имя твое] takes its name from “The Lord’s Prayer” but is dedicated not to Our Father, but to the name of the new “god” of communism, labor [труд]. According to the views expressed in his earliest essays, mostly written around 1920, the revolution is a quasi-divine threshold between the old and the new, the world before apocalypse and after. It has ushered in a new era, one Platonov occasionally refers to as the millennial kingdom of Christ, only this kingdom has no need for religion, as it is based in science and a Nietzschean brand of humanism. Central to Platonov’s apocalyptic communism is its faith in the wholesale transfiguration of the earth, from the soil that fertilizes crops to the values underpinning human beings

5 On the origins of “proletarian art” and Platonov’s place in the genre, see Elena Tolstaia-Segal, “Ideologicheskie kontektsy Platonova,” 52-3.

6 Given Fedorov’s influence on Platonov, I am using “man” instead of a more neutral word, such as “human being” or “person” to reflect this affinity.

7 References to the “Kingdom of God” and “Christ’s kingdom on earth,” are made in “О нашеi религии,” “Христос и мы,” and elsewhere. All essays quoted are taken from Andrei Platonov: Sochineniia. vol.1, Book 2, ed. E. V. Antonova (Moscow: IMLI RAN, 2004).
and their position in the world—in short, the entirety of human life. This transfiguration is not a product of divine intervention, but, importantly, a product of labor and human beings themselves, whom communism places at the head of its new church, supplanting God.⁸

In these essays, Platonov addresses the utopian possibilities of a world with communism, which he will later ambivalently satirize in his larger prose works, in particular immortality and resurrection. Clearly drawing on Fedorov’s eschatological philosophy, as well as his early reading of Nietzsche, Platonov frames 1917 and its future less in terms of its political or historical significance and more in terms of its transformative effect on human life and afterlife. This includes various possibilities, from the literal transfiguration of the human body, to the metaphorical resurrection of the emerging body politic, the newly invigorated proletariat citizens. Rather than promise resurrection and eternal life as a gift or result of the apocalypse, Platonov reframes them as an integral part of communism’s evolution.

Studying the theme of immortality in his early essays, Sh. Liubushkina notes that the revolutionary pathos of Platonov is less striking than the frequency and significance of “death” in his non-fiction articles.⁹ Another way of reading them shows that, in these writings, the most important transformation in the post-revolutionary society Platonov imagines is that of “life,” a loaded term invoked perhaps more than any other word in his early articles. Its meaning and context vary from essay to essay, even sometimes from

⁸ “O nashei religii,” 76.

page to page, but it ultimately rests on the thesis that the revolution and the coming communist society will call forth a force that has been lying dormant in the people. This includes the promise of an “eternal life,” or a “life without end.”

Platonov considered this life-granting power of the revolution both figuratively and literally. In one essay, entitled “On Our Religion” [О нашей религии], he characterizes the revolution as “the phenomenon of man’s thirst for life” [явление жажды жизни человека]. The revolution has awakened man to his essence, revealing in him a vital power that lay dormant thanks to centuries of oppression under tsarist and bourgeois rule. Reflecting his reading of Nietzsche during this period (whose Thus Spoke Zarathustra provides the first entry in Platonov’s diary in 1921), Platonov rebukes his “intellectual bourgeois” opponents by saying that, far from lacking a higher, spiritual meaning, a revolution based in atheism, materialism and a belief in humanity in fact returns man’s soul back to its proper place: “The center of man, his essence (his soul, as you call it), is transferred by the revolution into another place, into man” [Центр человека, его сущность (душа, как вы называете) перенесена революцией в другое место, в человека]. To the despised spirituality of “the unknown, the heavenly, the distant,” Platonov and his rhetorical followers prefer excrement: “We wouldn’t trade a clump of horse manure for all the blue skies, because even manure is useful, it improves the soil…” [На всю голубую высь мы не променяем комка лошадного навоза, потому что и навоз пойдет в дело, от него земля добрееет…]. Platonov’s understanding of the post-revolutionary world is based in his evaluation of human life from a materialist, humanist perspective.

The immediacy of life is something humanity has never experienced through
religious dogmas, but will come to be once communism, centered on the human being, is firmly established. In his materialist utopia, the immaterial concepts of “soul” and “life” are not simply reduced to biological processes but instead are reconceived as the result of labor in the revolutionary process. In its most idealized form, communism, with its focus on the material conditions of the present and their improvement in the future, raises human beings above themselves in a way that religion, with its distant focus on the afterlife, does not. The event of revolution awakens man to a new world and a new life; as Platonov sees it, this is the meaning of revolution: “We discovered a religion of the imminent; we found the meaning of life of humanity.”] Мы открыли религию грядущего, мы нашли смысл жизни человечества.] Christian eschatology ironically provides the rhetorical vessel for grounding the struggle for communism in the present: in building utopia, rather than waiting for it.

While he claims rhetorically in the essay that “we will first give life to the people, and then we will demand that there be truth and meaning in it” [мы сначала дадим жизнь людям, а потом потребуем, чтобы в ней были истина и смысл], Platonov also wrote about the revolution’s life-giving potential literally. The revolution inspired in some the utopian (and essentially Fedorovian) belief that a society based completely in science and focused entirely on the improvement of man’s lot in the world could eventually overcome the ultimate problem of death. This included the so-called “mechanist” philosophers of Marxism, a group of thinkers in the early 1920s who based their notions of materialism in the natural sciences. A group consisting of biologists, chemists and physicists, they held that the empirical study of nature and experimental science would be a more fruitful and more reliable basis for historical and social progress
than the a priori solutions provided by Hegelian dialectics.10 Experimental biology could possibly solve the problem of death. But for Platonov, immortality was not only the aspirational goal of this utopian society; it was also paradoxically necessary for the completion of its project.

In “Eternal Life” [Вечная жизнь], an article originally published in Krasnaia derevnia in 1920, Platonov reflects on immortality as a necessary condition for the completion of the project of communism and as its greatest eventual achievement.11 Beginning with the epigraph, “We die for the last time” [Мы умираем последний раз], Platonov imagines the possibility and desirability of immortality in the context of the revolution. The lifespan of humanity is virtually meaningless compared to the great tasks it must accomplish, he claims. To complete such a monumental task as building a communist future, Platonov proposes an unorthodox idea: that mankind needs an eternity and, for that, immortality. In this respect, Platonov diverges from Fedorov’s utopian idealism; according to Fedorov, “Regulation, meaning the ability to control material nature, does not require infinite time for its realization” [Регуляция, в смысле способности управления материальною природою, не требует бесконечного времени для своего осуществления].12 Platonov, instead, held that the normal human lifespan is what has always prevented humanity from achieving anything truly great, and

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therefore from enjoying life: “Man still does not love life so much; therefore he does not know that, for the completion of a great deed, immortality is necessary; for the unquenchable delight of living and loving a few centuries and millennia, eternity is necessary” [Человек не очень еще любит жизнь, потому не знает, что для совершения великого деяния нужно бессмертие, для неугасимого восторга жить и любить мало веков и тысячелетий—нужна вечность]. The revolution, with its wholesale destruction of all previous limits and boundaries, provides the chance to change this. When asking the question “What is the goal of our era of revolutions?” he answers, “to kill in ourselves the ancient, impotent, decrepit, suffering human being and here on earth give birth to a new being of strength unseen…Immortality will then become the final labor of man, and in his immortality he will manage to create all his great works” [убить в себе древнего, бессильного, ветхого, страдающего человека и родить здесь на земле новое существо невиданной силы…Бессмертие тогда станет оконченным трудом человека, и в свою вечность он успеет сотворить все великие дела]. Platonov’s interest in the works of Fedorov would suggests that this statement was no hyperbole. In some sense, he truly believed that communism would make immortality both a possibility and necessity for humanity to achieve its true potential. The struggle for immortality is united with the struggle for Communism, for only in a society transformed under Communism, united in purpose, and devoted to scientific advancement could immortality become a reality; and only once immortality has been achieved could a project as large as the transformation of the world become possible. Politics and existence, in understanding the goals of utopia, are merely two sides of the same coin.

While he views the 1917 Revolution and its aftermath as the beginning of this
new world with its new promise of life, Platonov still sees the future in a hazy mist of the kingdom to come. He characterizes the post-revolutionary period as one of constant labor [труд], one that Fedorov would recognize and approve of, were it not for the atheism at its heart. Both Fedorov and Platonov shared the view that the paradise to come must be made by human hands, not inherited from the skies. Yet Platonov, like many others committed to the cause of the revolution, saw in religion the same oppressive hierarchies as on earth. God and tsar were, in fact, two faces of the same power, and the Russian Orthodox Church was another oppressive tsarist institution that perpetuated the rule of the rich over the poor. The immortality and resurrection of the righteous taught by the church was false, but the example of Christ and his resurrection signified a revolt against such authorities. Despite his antipathy toward religion, Platonov absorbed its lessons and mythologies and reinterpreted them through a revolutionary lens.

His essay “Christ and Us” [Христос и мы] transforms Christ’s resurrection into an earthly universal resurrection of the proletariat. Again speaking with a vaguely Nietzschean vocabulary, Platonov declares the church an echo chamber full of “dead prayers” to a “dead God” that has neutered Christ’s revolutionary message of “outrage and hope” and embraced one of servitude and submission. “The souls of the people have become moribund,” he laments, “from waiting for centuries for the kingdom of God. And forgotten is Christ’s main covenant: the kingdom of God is taken by force” [Души людей помертвели…от ожидания веками царства Бога. И забыт главный завет Христа: царство Божье усилием берется]. The force of Christ’s sacrifice can be regained through the overthrow of the church and its representatives, including the tsar. It

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is Christ’s humanity—“the force, struggle, suffering, and blood”—that represents the true radical element of his sacrifice and resurrection, for it proves that the kingdom of God can be, and must be, attained on earth through perilous, mortal struggle. Platonov believes that the church has missed this message, but that the proletariat are, in fact, its true inheritors:

The proletariat, the son of despair, is full of rage and the fire of revenge. And this rage is loftier than all heavenly love, for only it will bear forth Christ’s kingdom on earth…For that which they have only thought about, we do. People saw God in Christ; we know Him as our fellow man. He is not yours, you temples and priests, but ours. He has long been dead, but we do His work—and He is alive in us.

Пролетариат, сын отчаяния, полон гнева и огня мщения. И этот гнев выше всякой небесной любви, ибо только он родит царство Христа на земле…Ибо то, о чем они только думали, мы делаем. Люди видели в Христе бога, мы знаем его как своего друга. Не ваш он, храмы и жрецы, а наш. Он давно мертв, но мы делаем его дело—и он жив в нас».

Resurrection gains a new meaning that lends itself to Platonov’s overall eschatology. The essay reads more like a religious, rather than political, tract, intensified by the use of archaic and Biblical language (the conjunction ибо, for instance, frequently appears in the Bible), which gives it the force of prophecy and revelation. By emphasizing the rage, suffering, humiliation, and struggle against earthly powers that makes Christ a “friend” of the proletariat, Christ’s resurrection becomes a matter of “vengeance” for all the inequities on earth. Eschewing Christ’s divinity and the Biblical event of the resurrection, Platonov reclaims resurrection for the people it was meant to save.

14 Ibid. 28. Italics added.

15 Liubushkina notes that, in general, Platonov did not reject the idea of God, but like other Proletkul’t-ists, recreated God in his own way. This extends to his idea of Christ, who, in “On our Religion,” Platonov invokes not as a God-man, but as the person from
The resurrection here is not a story of past divine intervention, but an action accomplished in the present; not a thought or tenet of belief, but a deed. His vision is not the act of being resurrected [воскресение] but the act of resurrecting [воскрешение]. Platonov’s interpretation of the message of Christianity means that the proletariat are the true followers of Christ, in that they participate in his resurrection rather than waiting for their own. “Doing his work” is actively bringing the kingdom of Christ to bear on earth, and thus resurrecting his radical message into the world. Christ’s resurrection therefore becomes transfigured by the utopian worldview of communism into the general resurrection of his followers: becoming a “true follower” means actively working toward the kingdom he promised. In a sense, the revived bodies of the proletariat during the early Soviet period become the true manifestations of the resurrected body of Jesus Christ.

Platonov offered his first proletarian readers more than socialism; he offered them salvation. Elevating the events following 1917 above the political realm into the existential, Platonov saw the proletariat as more than an economically oppressed class. They had been dead, he claimed, and the revolution offered them life for the first time, even eternal life. In this cross-section of essays from the early 1920s, Platonov construes the revolution in terms of Christian apocalypticism, in which followers of Christ are given a new, eternal life to reward them for their past suffering. His true “followers” are the proletariat, in that their historical suffering mimics the shame and despair of Christ before the cross. In this way, Platonov’s essays offer a theology of the famous image in Alexander Blok’s 1918 poem, “The Twelve” [Двенадцать], where Christ, resurrected, whom began the deification of all humanity. See Liubushkina, “Idei bessmertiia u rannego Platonova,” 167.
marches at the front of twelve Red Guard soldiers. The revolution, like the resurrection, represents a break in history, separating death from life and old from new. The resurrection and eternal life promised to the followers, however, is not simply a reward for their suffering or a gift from a divine power; it is a real, attainable, even necessary component of the Communist utopian society to be built. Platonov redefines the miracle of resurrection as a product of work and collective purpose, one which is both the purpose of the labor and inherently present in the labor itself. This utopian interpretation of the historical moment was not unique to Platonov. David Bethea notes that Platonov’s coming of age coincided perfectly with the high water mark of utopian fervor in Russia, where social and economic harmony were only a piece of the general puzzle. The entire Proletkul’t movement, of which Platonov was a part, saw in the revolution a deeper level of humanity, one that easily translated into the ready-made mythologies of religious stories and even, perhaps, could make them a reality.

**Dziga Vertov and the Resurrection of the Bull in Kinoglaz**

In 1924, several years after Platonov was writing his essays on the resurrection of the proletariat, the filmmaker Dziga Vertov performed perhaps the first resurrection in front of a Soviet audience: in *Kinoglaz*, the Kino-eye brings a bull back from the dead in a slaughterhouse. Performed by means of reverse motion, it shows step by step how the bull, from a carcass hanging from meat hooks, is re-embowed, re-skinned, and finally revived. What may appear to be a simple, if innovative, camera trick in a didactic

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sequence in fact points to the revolutionary function of film in the early years of the Soviet Union.

At the heart of the resurrection sequence is an aesthetic ideology, which Vertov developed both in his writings and in his films, of how Soviet society, Soviet art, and the Soviet subject might be transformed by cinema. In the early 1920s, Vertov wrote of the mechanical Kino-Eye, the cameraman behind it, and the editor-director as a demiurgic force. Film would be able to reorganize the world onscreen for its audience. Through the technology particular to film, Vertov imagined creating coherent plots without resorting to the typical understanding of narrative found in fiction; in other words, he imagined revolutionizing the concept of narrative itself, creating what he called “Kino-truth” [Киноправда] that would reveal hidden truths invisible to the human eye. Importantly, Vertov was developing his idiosyncratic views on “Kino-truth” at the same time as Sergei Eisenstein was formulating his own competing methodologies, seeking to create “not a ‘Kino-Eye […] but a ‘Kino-Fist’” [не Киноглаз, а Кинокулак!] in service to the Revolution.¹⁷ These rival views met in 1924 in a slaughterhouse, toward the beginning of Vertov’s Kinoglaz and in the final sequence of Eisenstein’s Strike [Стачка]. By comparing their slaughterhouse scenes and parsing the polemics that divided the directors’ approaches, which played out in a series of speeches, editorials, letters, and reviews, we can better understand not only the political ideology of resurrection, which

seeks to revive its ideologically moribund viewers with the holy spirit of Leninist-Marxism, but also the aesthetics by which this resurrection would take place.

From the beginning, Lenin and the Party elites keenly grasped the potential of film to spread Bolshevik ideology to the illiterate and uninitiated Russian population. A revolution based on Marxist principles in the capital created the need to distill and disseminate a complex new system of values throughout the enormous Russian territory. During the Russian Civil War, when popular support was crucial for the Red Army’s victory, Vertov and other directors created films for the agit-trains [агитпоезда] that toured the countryside and distributed propaganda in hopes of stoking the coals of revolutionary fervor. Vertov traveled on these trains himself, which brought a “proper” ideological education to a geographically dispersed peasantry. The Orthodox Church was one of Vertov’s earliest targets, with the agit-train film *The Exposure of the Relics of Sergius of Radonezh* doing just what it purported: exposing the decayed remains of the famous Saint Sergius on camera for audiences throughout Russia to see. In this case, the body of the saint metonymically stands in for the entirety of Christianity; the veil removed from the body reveals the lie that undergirds the mystery not just of the

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18 This was, according to Peter Kenez, the primary function of cinema according to Soviet leaders, although Soviet directors themselves had broader aspirations. See Peter Kenez, *The Birth of the Propaganda State: Soviet Methods of Mass Mobilization, 1917-1929* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 196.

19 Ibid. 109.

particular body, but also of faith and the institution of the Church. Films such as these played an important role in laying the foundations for the ideological conversion of those living outside Russia’s cultural centers, in that they dramatically exposed the rotten core of the Church while substituting for it the secular, “objective” truth of Leninist Marxism.

Unsurprisingly, different aesthetic philosophies for film were developed for spreading the new official doctrine and inspiring the future believers. Sergei Eisenstein, for his part, imported theatrical acting and fictional devices and plots and combined them with his innovative theories of montage in order to create a maximal psychological effect on his viewers. He envisioned his cinema as “a tractor ploughing over the audience’s psyche with a class purpose in mind” [tractor, перепахивающий психику зрителя в заданной классовой установке].

To Vertov, Eisenstein’s approach was merely “a literary skeleton covered with Kino-skin” [литературный скелет, обтянутый кинокожей]. Eisenstein, on the other hand, saw Vertov’s Kinopravda approach—characterized by his unacted, documentary-style “narratives” of “propaganda through facts” [пропаганда фактами]—as a symbol of “vision” and “contemplation,” when what was needed was “action.” Their contemporary, Boris Arvatov, wrote of the differing approaches of the directors as “Agit-kino and “Kino-Eye,” where the former


sought to “create the greatest impression, to create the greatest attraction (which should not be confused with the stunt), and to create dynamic action.”\textsuperscript{25} While both filmmakers engaged in agit-style filmmaking, Eisenstein’s approach used drama and pathos in ways that were foreign to Vertov’s philosophy.

In his first full-length film, \textit{Strike} (1924), Eisenstein depicts Lenin’s entreaty for revolutionary solidarity. David Bordwell points out that audiences likely had no knowledge of the historical sources of the events, and that the film “insists on the generality of the lesson by presenting a composite of several historical strikes.”\textsuperscript{26} Eisenstein treats the events as a model for striking and revolution more generally, liberally applying pathos in scenes depicting suffering, beatings, and violence against the film’s heroes, the proletariat. Eisenstein creates an emotional, rather than merely contemplative, reaction in his audience, foregrounded in his use of montage in the film’s final sequence, where the scene of a bull being slaughtered in a slaughterhouse is intercut with striking workers being killed by soldiers in a field. An intertitle, reading “The Slaughterhouse” [Бойня], provides the metaphorical vehicle for reading the two scenes simultaneously: the massacre of the victims and the slaughtering of the bull. The bull’s brutal death is shown in gruesome detail, as the camera shows its still-kicking legs and copious amounts of blood spilling from its neck. Meanwhile, the workers’ deaths are relatively sanitized: a match cut links the bull’s spilling blood with the soldiers spilling down the hill. The viewer connects the emotions of disgust, pity, and horror from the slaughterhouse with the images of the dead workers. The slaughterhouse imagery shows


\textsuperscript{26} David Bordwell, \textit{The Cinema of Eisenstein} (New York: Routledge, 2005), 51.
the brutality of the workers’ death realistically by using actual blood, rather than a substitute. This is the closing scene of the film, followed only by the command, “Remember, Proletarians!” [Помни, Пролетарий!] This passage sums up the film’s hortatory intent and Eisenstein’s early approach to revolutionary film: to rouse its audience to revolutionary consciousness through sympathy and rage by showing them evocative images and inspiring stories. The lack of end title card suspends any closure, leaving the events open-ended.

Eisenstein prided himself on the effectiveness of the slaughterhouse metaphor, calling it “gorily effective,” as opposed to Vertov’s own scene in a slaughterhouse in Kinoglaz that “merely recorded.” This was a particularly barbed insult; for Vertov, film was a transformational, not representational, form of art, as he wrote in his essay “Kinoks: A Revolution” [Киноки, переворот]: “Until now, we have violated the movie camera and forced it to copy the work of our eye. And the better the copy, the better the shooting was thought to be. Starting today we are liberating the camera and making it work in the opposite direction—away from copying” [До сегодняшнего дня мы насиловали киноаппарат и заставляли его копировать работу нашего глаза. И чем лучше было скопировано, тем лучше считалась съемка. Мы сегодня раскрепощаем аппарат и заставляем его работать в противоположном направлении, дальше от копированного]. His film Kinoglaz in particular, shot and in production at the same

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time as *Strike*, was meant as a revolutionary insurrection against art’s relation to reality; it is more about changing, reordering and restructuring the world than representing it. It radically separates itself from Eisenstein’s approach, which used fictional plots and devices and theatrical acting. Vertov was interested in the ways film could take the raw material of “truth” and construct something more—film-truth:

Kino-eye as the possibility of making the invisible visible, the unclear clear, the hidden manifest, the disguised overt, the acted nonacted; making falsehood into truth. Kino-eye as the union of science with newsreel to further the battle for the communist decoding of the world, as an attempt to show the truth on the screen—Film-truth.”

Vertov might say that, while Eisenstein *thinks up* a narrative, he *reveals* it where it might otherwise be invisible. The “plot” of *Kinoglaz* accordingly is made not from various dramatic events that, taken together, constitute a “story” in the traditional sense, but rather from its organization of material by means of montage, showing how village and city may be vitally connected by following the actions of its heroes, the Young Pioneers.  

Vertov’s slaughterhouse sequence participates overtly and covertly in the general project of instilling class-consciousness in its viewers, advertising for workers’

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30 On the Pioneers as “hero” and *smychka* of the city and village as a method of organizing the film’s action, see Daria Khitrova, “Siuzhet ‘Kino-Glaza’” in *Kinovedcheskie zapiski*, 104/105 (2013), 95-118.
Cooperatives and agitating for Lenin’s call for a union between city and country, proletariat, peasant and avant-garde, what during the NEP-period was called “the union of the city and village” [Смычка города и деревни].

It accomplishes this while simultaneously challenging the idea that film is “a literary skeleton covered in Kino-skin,” in effect reinventing the conventions of narrative while literally putting skin on the bull. Vertov uses reverse projection to showcase the “true” living body of film, and the resulting resurrection of the bull is at once a statement of the revolution’s cosmic and economic aspirations and a manifesto for film as a revolutionary medium in and of itself.

Vertov was offended by Eisenstein’s slaughterhouse scene for two reasons: first, he felt his work had been plagiarized; and second, he saw Eisenstein’s sequence as a debased form of what film was capable of. The former is difficult to prove, but seems unlikely, although the coincidence of the slaughterhouse scenes is striking. There is no doubt that Eisenstein was decisively influenced by Vertov’s cinema and cinematic techniques, but, as Aleksandr Belenson noted in a review of *Kinoglaz*, the two films were in production at the same time, which “undoubtedly excludes the possibility of ‘borrowing’ from there by Eisenstein.” Eisenstein himself made this point in an essay in 1925, adding that *Strike* was already completed by the time *Kinoglaz* was released.

Whether or not Eisenstein “stole” the scene from Vertov, it manifests so differently in the

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two films, both in appearance and in function, that any resemblance is superficial. And yet the differences are telling.

While the possibility of plagiarism was an annoyance, it was Eisenstein’s approach to the slaughterhouse that bothered Vertov more. In an essay critiquing Strike, Vertov writes that, alongside the “actorly material from which the film is constructed” and the “theatrical and circus elements [and] all the tragic poses of ‘silent howling,’” that are alien to his approach, he also finds “certain allegories in the picture unacceptable, for example the visual comparison of the proletariat with a bull which is being slaughtered in an abattoir, and a whole series of other qualities and particulars which are taken not from ‘life as it is,’ but from the so-called ‘theatre for fools.’” Vertov’s main critique is that the bull’s slaughter is not filmed as a fact, but is instead used simply as an allegory. Rather than presenting the work of the butchers, the body of the bull, and the role of the slaughterhouse in the life of the city and countryside, Eisenstein, according to the director, employs the site only insofar as it metaphorically serves the message of violence and bloodshed. This (reductive) reading of the bull in Eisenstein’s film is, according to Vertov, a form of deception, which he refers to as “magic” that characterizes all fictional films. Film, he argued, is for instilling the audience with consciousness, not breeding the unconsciousness that characterizes religion as an “opiate of the masses”:

34 Dziga Vertov, “Kino-Eye on Strike,” in Lines of Resistance, 125.

35 Eisenstein develops a more sophisticated motif using animals in the film than Vertov gives him credit for. For instance, the capitalist forces are likened to animals through visual and intellectual metaphorical comparisons. As Bordwell points out, at some points of the film the proletariat is depicted as in charge of the animals, until the final scene where they themselves have become a bull at slaughter. A scene directly before this shows the police committing atrocities—including throwing a baby from a balcony—which is accompanied by an intertitle, claiming “Озверели”, punning on the word for
We oppose the collusion of the “director-as-magician” and a bewitched public. Only consciousness can fight the sway of magic in all its forms. Only consciousness can form a man of firm opinion, firm conviction. We need conscious men, not an unconscious mass submissive to any passing suggestion. Long live the class consciousness of the healthy with eyes and ears to see and hear with! Away with the fragrant veil of kisses, murders, doves, and sleight-of-hand! Long live the class vision! Long live kino-eye!

Мы против сделки «волшебника-режиссера» с подверженной волшебству публикой. Только сознание может бороться с магическими внушениями всякого порядка. Только сознание может создать человека с твердыми взглядами, с твердыми убеждениями. Нам нужны сознательные люди, а не поддающиеся любому очередному внушению бессознательная масса. Да здравствует классовое сознание здоровых, видящих и слышащих людей! Долой благоуханную завесу из поцелуев, убийств, голубей и фокусов! Да здравствует классовое зрение! Да здравствует киноглаз!

According to Vertov, fiction and its devices were anathema to the project of the Kino-Eye, which sought to create “a fresh perception of the world” [к созданию свежего восприятия мира] and “decipher in a new way a world unknown to you” [расшифровываю по-новому неизвестный вам мир]. His “film-truth,” which sought to reveal otherwise invisible connections and phenomena for his audiences, proceeds by resisting the conventions of fiction and presenting “facts” that are reorganized into the structure of an innovative form of plot. To that end, Vertov challenged the very idea of “beast.” The slaughterhouse is not a superficial addition to the scene, but the culmination of a motif’s development. For more on the animal motif, see Bordwell, The Cinema of Eisenstein, 50-57.


Vertov’s critique of Strike’s slaughterhouse scene as an allegory poses the question: how should we read Vertov’s resurrection sequence? First, let us look at the sequence: a troop of Pioneers marches through the marketplace, inspecting the merchants’ prices at their booths and posting agitational posters on the walls. Meanwhile, a woman (the mother of one of the Pioneers) shops for meat from the same merchants until she approaches one of the Pioneers’ posters. She is shown reading the sign, which is followed by a close-up of the advertisement: “Don’t give merchants any profit, buy from the Cooperative” [Не давай купцам наживы, покупай в Кооперативе]. As if in reaction to the sign, her behavior and the world around her suddenly change: everything begins moving backwards, including her own movement. She backs away from the sign and down the street, proceeding in reverse into the First Red Grocery Market, which we are told, “receives meat directly from the butcher shop.” Now, the reason behind the sudden erratic behavior is revealed: “The Kino-Eye moves time backwards” [Кино-Глаз отодвигает время назад]. Leaving the peasant woman and cooperative behind, the camera now moves to the butcher shop, on top of which stands the statue of a large bull, foreshadowing the coming resurrection. Inside is where it takes place: we are shown the carcass of “what 20 minutes ago was a bull” hanging from meat hooks, followed by its re-embowelment (“We return the bull his entrails” [Возвращаем быку его внутренности]), then his re-incarnation (“We put his skin on him” [Надеваем на него шкуру]), and then suddenly, after kicking and flailing, “The bull comes to life” [Бык

38 Khitrova, 100.
оживается]. He stands, is released, and, with the film still moving backwards, is led out of
the butcher shop, is put on a train, and is sent back to the herd in the pasture. At this
point, the scene ends and the film resumes its forward motion.
Figure 1 - Statue on top of the butcher shop

Figure 2 - "What 20 minutes ago was a bull"

Figure 3 - "We return the bull his entrails"

Figure 4 - "We put his skin on him"

Figure 5 - "The bull comes to life"
Let us first look at the sequence’s ideological content, since the directors’ quarrel originates in whether film should be a revolutionary “eye” or a “fist.” On one hand, the scene instructs its audience, not only by inserting agitational slogans into the film’s narrative, but also by emphasizing and revealing the mechanisms behind the meat’s production, namely the invisible human labor that the Revolution makes visible. Instead of filming actors playing heroes, Vertov purports to show the actions and lives of everyday workers and the hidden but vital connections between citizens of the countryside and the city. Background becomes foreground as the butchers are shown on screen, deemphasizing the final product of the meat (thanks to the reversal of the onscreen action) and instead emphasizing the process behind it. Yuri Tsivian calls the sequence a “Marxist object lesson,” a pedagogical non-fictional short that teaches the ideologically “unconscious” viewer how certain objects or goods are made.\(^{39}\) Tsivian analyzes how the Kino-Eye “corrects” the mistake of the woman who has bought meat from the merchants and reverses time in order to bring her to the Cooperative supermarket instead. Once she has entered, the film explains why she should shop there; it has nothing to do with quality, sanitation practices, or prices, but with the character of the labor by which it is made. The end product of the meat is not what is important—the meat may taste exactly the same, after all. What is important is that the labor behind the meat’s creation is of socialist, rather than capitalist, origin. This is an exemplary scene of Vertov’s documentary “film-truth” style, which, even without its reverse projection, has deep ideological implications for his projected audience.

Another ideological underpinning to the scene is what in NEP parlance was known as “the alliance of the city and village” [смычка города и деревни]. This NEP-era policy was a social initiative meant to unite the peasantry with the working class in order to stabilize the country’s shaky economic base after the War.\(^{40}\) While initially favoring the new Soviet regime, by 1921 the peasantry was rebelling in Tambov and Ukraine, and famine ripped through the Volga region, both largely due to Bolsheviks’ ruthless grain requisitioning. The near collapse of the economy forced the government into restructuring the economy with regard to the peasantry, which continued until collectivization at the end of the 1920s. Rather than requisitioning all of the peasants’ grain, they instead substituted a fixed tax (and later a money tax), as well as reopened certain markets that had been closed during the era of War Communism.\(^{41}\) Throughout *Kinoglaz*, Vertov moves back and forth between city and village, showing the vital connections between the two spheres by following the movement and actions of the Pioneers. In the slaughterhouse scene, Vertov reverses the bull’s market trajectory from countryside to city, effectively giving back to the rural peasantry what is rightfully theirs. His representation of *smychka* does not merely show the two worlds as economically connected, but, in fact, visualizes the reversal of violence inflicted on the peasantry, essentially giving life back to them.

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\(^{40}\) See Akhiezer: Кроме того, хозяйственный подъем деревни рассматривался как необходимая предпосылка преодоления явно выявившегося раскола между рабочим классом и крестьянством, между городом и деревней, который сам по себе мог сокрушить слабую государственность. Akhiezer, *Rossiiia: kritika istoricheskogo opyta (Sotsiokul’turnaia dinamika Rossiia)*, 459.

The bull’s resurrection in this case can be read allegorically against the director’s wishes. The camera reverses time and restores the bull’s life, which had been taken through an act of violence. Destroyed in order to feed others, the bull is both a metaphor for the exploited peasantry, and it metonymically represents the requisitioned food and labor sent to the city by the peasants until 1921. Vertov’s Kino-Eye, however, makes whole that which has been broken through violence. After the bull has been reassembled and revived, the film proceeds in reverse motion until the bull is back in the countryside, literally giving back to the peasants their property, which they have sent to the city. This is a visual metaphor of the social and economic reparations that were in the air in 1924.

Of course, Vertov did not merely create ideological propaganda in the service of the revolution; he also showed the potential of cinema as a revolutionary, even utopian, medium that could remake the world. The technology specific to film—the ability to speed up, slow down, freeze and reverse projection, and the techniques of montage— is presented in its cosmic dimensions, as if the Kino-Eye has replaced God’s will. The Kino-Eye declares itself the omnipotent agent of change, able to literally “turn back time” and reverse the actions of the woman shopping at the market. As if underlining the truly “revolutionary” changes that the Kino-Eye participates in implementing, she walks backwards rather than forwards down the street and into the Cooperative. We can tell, however, that this is not a reversal of the actual film, as moments before we see that same woman approaching the poster from the marketplace, not the Cooperative. This means that Vertov is not simply reversing her real path from the Cooperative to the poster, but instead is using it as a visual metaphor of the woman truly “changing directions” in a more profound way, emphasized by the dissonant intertitle’s forward-marching
interjection, “To the Cooperative!” [В кооператив!]. This change in direction, literal and metaphorical, originates from the Kino-Eye’s intervention in the world: it directs its audience to what it wants them to see—the message on the propaganda poster—and then, as if to demonstrate its own power, reverses the flow of time.

Vertov may not have explicitly participated in the Fedorovian doctrine of physical resurrection, but his techno-utopian approach to film brings resurrection nonetheless. In an essay on Vertov’s film *The Eleventh Year* [Одиннадцатый], John Mackay argues that Vertov’s immersion in the doctrine of “productivism” or “transcendental materialism” during his student years shaped the director’s conception of cinema as it pertains to energy: “The job of montage [...] is to narrate the trajectory of energy, the conversions it undergoes, including the forms that still-latent energy might adopt.”42 The dead body of the bull is the perfect measure of cinema’s energy, in that the camera reorganizes the images onscreen to show how it reverses entropy. The intertitle explaining that “the Kino-Eye moves time backwards” informs us that the bull’s resurrection is not simply a by-product of the film’s reverse projection; rather, it shows that the demiurgic medium of film is as vital to the scene’s intent as its economic message. The parallel between the workers inserting the bull’s intestines in reverse and the cameraman’s reverse recording unite the labor of the butchers with that of the didactic cinematographer in one common task of reanimating the inert body by literally stuffing it full of vitality. What the workers do onscreen, the filmmaker attempts to accomplish with his audience, albeit metaphorically: to instill them with “propaganda through facts,” turning them into ideologically “conscious” Soviet citizens.

42 John Mackay, “Film Energy: Process and Metanarrative in Dziga Vertov’s ‘The Eleventh Year,’” *October* 121 (Summer 2007): 50.
It would appear that, even against his own wishes, Vertov’s own slaughterhouse scene may be read on the level of allegory. But Vertov’s approach to film and ideology differs significantly from Eisenstein’s dramatic reenactments in films like *Strike* and *Battleship Potemkin*. While Eisenstein creates heroic plots full of pathos in order to inspire revolutionary feeling, Vertov resists the draws of fiction and narrative more generally, preferring revolutionary perception instead. The fact that he performs a resurrection in a slaughterhouse is perhaps the most pronounced indication of his renunciation of typical fictional emplotment. As we have seen in *Strike*, the slaughterhouse has the character of a literary *topos* that is open to allegorical readings. Eisenstein taps into the motif’s melodramatic potential when he portrays his virtuous workers slaughtered like cattle by the police, who are the agents of the calculating, office-bound capitalist antagonists. Their visual association with the slaughtered bull, and their final resting place in the fields outside the city, allude to the slaughterhouse’s symbolism: the brutal destruction of innocence. Vertov, against his rival’s allegorical representation of the proletariat with the slaughtered bull, flips the narrative on its head, reversing the violent symbolism of the slaughterhouse and creating out of it, instead, a resurrection. With this, Vertov offers a way of reading his aesthetic approach to film vis-à-vis the “literary skeletons” behind Eisenstein’s scenarios. Film, to Vertov, is not simply a mode of projecting theater or fiction. As Daria Khitrova writes, *Kinoglaz* is “a film made in 1924, as well as a method, and an ideology, and an entire movement of *kinoks.*” As an all-encompassing ideology, it must approach its form, content, and audience in a new way, including rejecting the simple transference of fiction onto cinema and, accordingly,

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treating cinema as a new and unique artistic medium. By projecting the bull’s slaughter in reverse, Vertov conveys his stance in his war against fiction, as he effectively creates narrative by explicitly working against the grain of the slaughterhouse’s inherent narrative and symbolism. By transforming the bull’s slaughter into a narrative of resurrection, he signals the rejuvenating potential of film as an artistic medium.

In a speech in 1926, Vertov claimed that directors like Eisenstein (and Eisenstein in particular) attempted to “make a little blood transfusion from the healthy body of Kino-Pravda into their “high art” but nevertheless utterly rotten organism.” Vertov held firmly that Eisenstein copied and debased the techniques developed in Vertov’s editing room. This corporeal metaphor sums up both Vertov’s vitriol in the argument over aesthetics, and the way that resurrection became part of the vocabulary this argument. The directors’ differing approaches to film, shown here through their individual treatment of the slaughterhouse motif, shows how much was at stake for avant-garde corpses in the early post-Revolutionary years. Art, especially aided by the evolving technology and techniques of cinema, was a vehicle for indoctrinating a large, largely uneducated, geographically dispersed public in a new pseudo-religion of Leninist-Marxism. It was also a new frontier in aesthetics; as Boris Groys notes, the basic definition of the avant-garde project in Russia and elsewhere is the move from representing to transforming the world. Both directors sought to use cinema and the techniques unique to it to influence


and create the new Soviet subject, one who, in one way or another, is brought to life by revolutionary aesthetics.

Mayakovsky and the Body of Lenin

1924, the same year the Kino-Eye performed its miraculous resurrection, was also the year of a spiritual crisis in the early Soviet Union. On January 21, 1924, Vladimir Ilych Lenin, died. His body lay on display under a glass case in a temporary mausoleum on Red Square for the nation to come and pay its respects. The Soviet narrative of Lenin’s death created the impression that the grief was real, as was the confusion: what would happen now that the leader of the revolution was gone?

In response to this implicit and explicit question, poets, Party officials, friends, rivals, and citizens penned myriad responses that were published in the days and weeks following in popular newspapers. According to Viktor Pertsov, whose scholarship reflects the Soviet narrative of Lenin’s death, the main difficulty for artists of the time was to “lift the listener from the depths of sorrow, from the shock of anguish, to the realization that Lenin ‘is now more alive than all the living’, to instill into every grief-stricken person the thirst for working towards communism according to the precepts of Lenin…to come to the realization that this communal pain spoke of the strength of Lenin’s ideas, about their immortality, and hence not about death, but about life.”

Vasilii Kamenskii’s poem, “Lenin is Our Immortality” [Ленин—наше бессмертие], printed in the January 24 edition of Izvestiia, provides a representative example of the artistic response following Lenin’s death. A slight variation of the poem’s first line, “No, we do not and cannot believe” [Нет, не верим и верить не можем], also opens each of

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its four stanzas, and the poem proceeds by negation and denial to arrive at the conclusion embedded in the last line and the poem’s title, “Lenin is our immortality.” Other representative titles of this nature include “This is not Death” [Это не смерть], “We do not Believe” [Не верим], and “No, He is not Dead” [Нет, он не умер]. These initial attempts to proclaim Lenin’s “immortality,” however, were based primarily in the first stage of grief—denial. The shift away from talking about death to talking about life was a delicate and enormously significant political moment for the fate of the revolution and the future of Communism, one that required navigating between commemorating Lenin’s past life (and thus accepting his death) and optimistically projecting forward to the continuation of the Leninist project under a new leader.

In a speech delivered shortly after Lenin’s death, Anatoly Lunacharsky addressed the relationship of the leader to the collective, and implicitly the relationship of Lenin’s death to the future of the revolutionary project, stating that “leaders [вожди] are formed out of the mass, leaders are moved by events, they receive all their content from events…For us a leader is the organ of the mass [орган массы].” Lunacharsky’s description signals the tension surrounding Lenin’s death as it relates to the living collective organism of the body politic. On one hand, it evokes Abraham Bosse’s famous image drawn for Thomas Hobbes’ Leviathan, a giant body of the head of state with sword and scepter in hand, whose torso is composed of smaller images of the citizens of the state. This understanding of the phrase “organ of the mass” is that the head of the Soviet

47 A relatively contemporaneous collection of poems on the subject of Lenin’s death can be found in On zhiv: stikhi na smert’ Lenina, 2nd ed. (Leningrad: Kubuch, 1925).

48 A.V. Lunacharsky, as quoted in Pertsov, Maiakovskii, 333. Italics original.
government is impersonal, merely gathering together and enacting the popular will from
the nexus of one physical body. The individual personality is therefore de-emphasized,
and the next leader equally embodies and continues the will of the people.49 On the other
hand, the phrase “organ of the mass” implies the vital function of the leader to the
collective body of the state, like an essential biological structure (“organ”) animating it
(the “mass”) to life. This had been the appraisal of Lenin, at least in the official rhetoric
of the day—the soul and inspiration of the people. Kalinin’s obituary of Lenin published
on January 24 in Izvestiia provides an example of such rhetoric: “Each individual […]
physically felt that along with Vladimir Ilyich departed into history the best, most ideal
part of his or her life, the soul…”50 In Kalinin’s description of the soul leaving the body,
the soul of the people and the leader are inextricably intertwined in the same corporate
body—the political body, or the body politic.51 This decision to rhetorically unite the

49 This interpretation follows the recent work of anthropologist Alexei Yurchak on the
preservation of Lenin’s body on Red Square. According to Yurchak, Lenin’s preservation
resembles the medieval European practices of creating body-effigies of deceased kings at
their funerals. In contrast to the king’s mortal body, the effigy represents that which
supersedes the body of each individual king and signifies the legitimacy of succession
from one individual ruler to the next. Yurchak believes that the dynamic preservation
of Lenin’s body amounts to a “living sculpture,” whose constant restructuring resembles the
protean doctrine of Leninism, which future Soviet leaders continually changed and
invoked as the source of their legitimation. See Alexei Yurchak, “Bodies of Lenin,”
especially p. 128-148.


51 In Europe, the body of the political leader began to be associated with their ruled
collectives in the late Middle Ages, when the State began to appear as “a quasi-Church or
a mystical corporation on a rational basis.” The State’s borrowing from the Church the
corporational concept of the corpus mysticum occurred earlier in the Middle Ages, and
the Church itself had adapted the concept of corpus mysticum over its history from the
distinction of Christ’s two bodies during the Eucharist to Aquinas’s “mystical body of the
Church,” a mystical body in its own right. See Ernst H. Kantorowicz, The King’s Two
body of Lenin with the bodies of Lenin’s followers proved fateful, as Lenin’s lack of decay inside his tomb became an idealized symbol of the health of the State.

These two opposing meanings imagine the state and its people as a unified body and comprise the central tension of the moment: how the political body can continue to live on past and without Lenin while also acknowledging that Lenin remains the beating heart of the people’s belief and the Party’s legitimacy. This problem took on a more literal, visible shape when it coalesced in the actual body of Lenin. The debate on how to proceed occupied at least two separate commissions from January to March in 1924, when the fate of the body was discussed. After much argument and disagreement, a third commission in July 1924, the “Commission for the Immortalization of Lenin’s Memory,” finally issued a statement explaining, post-hoc, why his body had been preserved: “We did not want to turn the body of Vladimir Ilyich into a ‘relic,’” they assured the public, because “he had already immortalized himself enough with his brilliant teaching and revolutionary activities.” Their focus, they claimed, was to “preserve the physical appearance [физический облик] of this remarkable leader for the next generation and all the future generations.” With that, Lenin’s body transcended itself as biological remains—a corpse—into the realm of a “living sculpture,” a modernist monument made possible through the scientific and technological progress of the

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52 Yurchak, “Bodies of Lenin,” 126. The commissions were the “Commission for the Organization of Lenin’s Funeral” and the “Commission for the Preservation of Lenin’s Body.”

twentieth century. Ironically, however, this urge to perfectly preserve the leader’s physical appearance simultaneously dehumanizes its subject, revoking his mortal privilege to decompose and devolving him from flesh and bone to waxy filler. Lenin’s body becomes akin to a real-life Ship of Theseus, replaced in its entirety over time until it either is or is not the same object, the corpse of Lenin. The contents of the mausoleum at once become more than and less than a body, a living relic and a museum piece.\textsuperscript{54} Strangely, Lenin’s dehumanization is crucial to keeping him alive.

These issues of the integrated political body, the dehumanized corpse, and its dislocated resurrection in the body of the people are addressed in Vladimir Mayakovsky’s “The Komsomol Song” [Комсомольская], first printed in the pages of \textit{Molodaia gvardia}. Mayakovsky’s poem inherits the political tension of the moment and attempts to resolve it by reworking the ubiquitous cliché of Lenin’s immortality into the resurrection of the body politic. Addressed to the youth organization \textit{Komsomol}, the poem has the spirit of a battle hymn meant to reinvigorate the bodies of its real and rhetorical audience. The famous slogan, “Lenin lived, Lenin lives, Lenin will live on” [Ленин жил, Ленин жив, Ленин будет жить], echoes like a refrain, lending the poem its song-like structure as well as formally embodying the idea of resurrection proclaimed throughout, both of which aim at reviving the nation’s collective heartbeat. Rather than centering on his death, the poem instead shifts toward redefining the nature of Lenin’s “life” as one that still courses through the veins of the body politic. As Nina Tumarkin has observed, the physical health of Lenin’s own body had been of central importance to the political health

\textsuperscript{54} Boris Groys calls the Lenin mausoleum “a synthesis between a pyramid and a museum.” See Groys, \textit{The Total-Art of Stalinism}, 67.
of the Soviet Union even before Lenin’s death.\textsuperscript{55} Here, the metaphor of the body counter-intuitively links Lenin’s lifeless body with the reanimation of the body politic. The double meaning of the phrase “Lenin will live on” [Ленин/будет жить]—that Lenin is both animated by and the animator of the body politic—establishes the needed continuity between Lenin and the future of the revolution.

The poem’s title indicates the poem’s insistence to speak “not about death, but about life;” that is, rather than wax elegiacally over the body, Mayakovsky sings an ode to Lenin’s afterlife in the form of the future generations embodied in the youth organization. While other works directly referenced Lenin’s death, memory, or the emotions of grief and anguish in the title, Mayakovsky’s tells us instead its rhetorical audience and function. The youth metaphorically represent a new beginning, unlimited potential, and revitalization, all of which were required in the uncertain period following Lenin’s death. Addressed to Komsomol, or more precisely, the “youth army of Leninists” [юная армия: ленинцы], this rhetorically allows Mayakovsky to eschew the posture of grieving comrade for the pedagogical role of commander.\textsuperscript{56} Speaking to the young

\textsuperscript{55} Tumarkin shows how the Soviet government manipulated the truth about Lenin’s health to the public from mid-1922 until the end of 1923 in order to maintain their symbol of strength. See Nina Tumarkin, \textit{Lenin Lives! The Lenin Cult in Soviet Russia}, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 115.

\textsuperscript{56} That the poem is directed toward Lenin’s “children” as a rhetorical gesture and not toward real children seems supported by Roman Jakobson’s anecdote: “Majakovskij was indeed capable of giving full due to the creative mission of those ‘kids of the collective’ in their unending quarrel with the old world, but at the same time he bristled whenever an actual ‘kid’ ran into the room. Majakovskij never recognized his own myth of the future in any concrete child; these he regarded simply as new offshoots of the hydraheaded enemy.” Roman Jakobson, “On a Generation that Squandered its Poets,” in \textit{Roman Jakobson: Language in Literature}, Eds. Krystyna Pomorska and Stephen Rudy (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987), 288.
“troops,” Mayakovsky highlights Lenin’s role as leader [вождь] of the world’s proletariat while also casting himself in the role of leading the youth army from within their ranks: the characteristic personal Mayakovskian “I” is here replaced by a collective “we,” although he more often commands like a general himself using the imperative form. The tone is defiant, captured in his orders to the Komsomol cadets to cease their wailing (Нам—не ныть) and to “hold [their grief] tighter” against their chest.

Given the audience of the “youth army of Leninist,” the poem reads like a battle hymn made for invigorating a melancholic public. It is highly energetic, captured in both the diction and the rhythm of the poem’s short, staccato lines. The first words of the poem, each appearing separately in Mayakovsky’s stairstep line, capture the effervescent energy that the poem seeks to build up in its listeners, which literally boils and foams until the poem’s ending, which closes with the same lines:

It builds,  
collapses,  
cuts  
and tears,  
grows quiet,  
boils  
and foams,  
buzzes,  
speaks,  
goes silent  
and roars  
the young army  
of Leninsts.

Строит,  
руши́т,  
кроит  
и рвет,  
tихнет,  
кипит  
и пенит́ся,  
gудит,
говорит,
молчит
и ревет—
юная армия:
леницы.

Relying exclusively on present tense verbs, the poem’s beginning and ending foreground activity and action over memorializing and grief. The verbs are full of destructive and creative energy, building dialectical tension between themselves as they visually march forward across and down the page. The importance of the present tense in this introduction, and the rhetorical “resurrection” of these verbs at the end of the poem, contradict R. D. B. Thomson’s characterization of the evolution of time in Mayakovskv’s poetry. Thomson claims that the resurrection of the dead becomes an important motif in Maykovsky’s poetry at a time when his revolutionary optimism had evaporated, and the present tense no longer appears as a vehicle for expressing his utopianism. Mayakovskv feared he would not live to see the future promised, and therefore resurrection became a poetic device for making improbable leaps into the future to glimpse the promised land. However, in “The Komsomol Song,” the present tense is used as a bridge between the past and the future, between Lenin’s death and the future of communism. This is represented in the repeated refrain, where “Lenin lives” stands between “Lenin lived” and “Lenin will live on.” Furthermore, the repetition of these present tense verbs at the end of the poem imply that present action is the means by which Lenin’s metaphorical resurrection will take place.

The tension reflected in the verbs is carried over to the syntax, which delays identity of the agent of the actions until the very end, thus building anticipation and

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driving the lines forward. The combination of these features creates the effect of an overwhelming energy meant to sweep the reader away along with them, like an elemental power which “roils,” “foams,” and “roars.” These actions transform the actual bodies of the cadets into a dehumanized, depersonalized force, preparing the way for the transmogrification of Lenin’s corporeality into transcendental “strength,” “knowledge,” and “a banner.” The cadence of Mayakovsky’s signature lesenka arrangement, especially the opening stanza and refrain, beats to the sound of a drum, as if to rouse its addressee to a march. Both are repeated, rhetorical resurrections on their own that embed the idea of death and return into the structure of the poem. While the refrain captures the idea of Lenin’s immortality, its repetition invokes a revived heartbeat, which the poem projects onto its audience.

The mechanism of Lenin’s resurrection on earth is laid out explicitly: “Lenin is near./There/he is./He goes/and will die with us./And again/is born in every newborn/as strength,/as knowledge/as a banner.” [Ленин рядом. Вот/он./Идет/и умрет с нами./И снова в каждом рожденном рожден--/как сила,/как знанье,/как знамя.] Lenin is converted from a unique personality into the spirit of the revolution that pervades the collective body. Mayakovsky contrasts Lenin’s mortal body [тело], whose death is grieved and already lies in the mausoleum, with that which is shared by the population and participated in, and therefore will never decay, the deed [дело] (lines 26-34). Lenin’s life is passed on to his “children,” the rhetorical addressees of the poem, which in fact represents all citizens that follow their leader’s example. The individual bodies of these children, however, form an even larger body, that of the body politic, which Mayakovsky imagines at the beginning of the poem: “We are/the new blood/of the cities’ veins/the
body of the fields/the thread of a woven idea [Мы/новая кровь/городских жил/тело нив/ткацкой идеи/нить]. This unified body is teeming with life, animated by the blood and tissue (ткацкой, from the word ткань, which can mean both “fabric” and biological “tissue”) of the “youth army of Leninists,” who, like blood, course through the streets of the cities. The “thread” [нить] which weaves together the city streets and the fields of the countryside evokes a body rent by a collectively suffered trauma, connecting the lifeless body of the leader with the wounded yet relentless body of his followers. The “new blood” that now flows in the cities’ veins takes the metaphor farther than the original draft’s “young blood” [юная кровь], in that it suggests an almost spiritual redemption for the body, as well as rejuvenation from a blood transfusion, a possible reference to Alexander Bogdanov’s utopian experiments with immortality. Lenin’s resurrection and immortality is even linguistically woven together with the collective body of his followers, which resounds within the corporeal metaphor: the veins [жил], fields [нив], and thread [нить] rhyme with the tripartite structure of the guarantee of Lenin’s continuance, Lenin lived [жил], Lenin lives [жив], and Lenin will live on [жить].

Mayakovsky pictures Lenin’s resurrection in the body politic as internal to the body,  

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59 Although Mayakovsky’s poem predates Bogdanov’s scientific research institute of blood transfusion by two years, his utopian idea, which ended his life tragically in 1928, was already part of popular culture thanks to his 1908 novel, Red Star. See Nikolai Krementsov, A Martian Stranded on Earth: Alexander Bogdanov, Blood Transfusions, and Proletarian Science (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2011), for Bogdanov’s experiments and their presence in early Soviet culture.
based in its organs, veins, and tissue, reflecting the unseen but vital processes of carrying on the labor of the leader.

The popular spirit of this bodily metaphor is tempered somewhat by the anthropomorphized image of the Kremlin, depicted as the legs of the body: “Lenin/is alive/in the step of the Kremlin” [Ленин—/жив/шага́ньем Кремля]. Imprlying that Lenin’s spirit motivates, and thus legitimizes, the political direction taken by Party leaders, Mayakovsky pictures the march of the Kremlin as the outward symbol of Lenin’s continued existence. Indeed, as Boris Groys has observed, Lenin’s body and resting place remained a visible symbol for the legitimacy of the current Soviet Party leader. Standing on top of the mausoleum, as though rising from the dead and emerging from the tomb, the leader received the twice-yearly parades and demonstrations, symbolically solidifying his own power through his physical connection with the body within. This vertical transference of power from the dead body through the legs of the next leader is reflected by Mayakovsky’s image, which asserts Lenin’s continued “living” authority while metaphorically raising him from the grave onto his feet. The spirit of Lenin, felt in the stride of the Kremlin, inspires not just the march of the “youth army of Leninist,” but also the bodily symbol of state power.

Before the poem closes with the repetition of the first twenty-five lines, its final image again invokes Bosse’s image of the Leviathan, as well as Lunacharsky’s definition of the leader as he relates to the body of the public. “Lenin/is bigger/than the biggest,/but even/this/wonder/was created by the children/of all ages--/we, the children of the collective.” [Ленин/больше/самых больших,/но даже, и это/диово/создали всех

60 Boris Groys, The Total Art of Stalinism. 66
Lenin is depicted in hyperbolic, almost childlike language as a phenomenon of epic proportions. He is physically larger than life, a colossus composed out of the work of the smallest members of society. He is also exaggerated temporally, as his creation stretches throughout the work of “all ages.” Lenin is nearly god-like, but he owes his existence to the actions of others. The Lenin of Mayakovsky’s poem is not the exceptional individual genius who single-handedly conducted the events of the Bolshevik Revolution and presided over the first years of the new state’s existence. Here, he is the metonymic name for the collective body, comprised of the labor of the people with the outward physical symbol of the state. Mayakovsky’s poem is effectively a resurrection of the body politic disguised as a resurrection of Lenin. While the body might be lying on Red Square impervious to decay, this is not the immortal body addressed in “The Komsomol Song.” Mayakovsky instead translates the Fedorovian utopian dream of bringing the dead to life into the reinvigoration of the metaphorical political body.

Resurrection in “The Komsomal Song” (and in the longer epic dedicated to Lenin’s death, *Vladimir Ilych Lenin*, in which the poet declares, “Lenin is now more alive than all the living”) must be understood in terms of its appearance elsewhere in Mayakovsky’s works and his interest in resurrection in general. According to Roman Jakobson, in 1920, Mayakovsky expressed a sincere conviction in the idea of immortality’s inevitability, once saying, “I’m absolutely convinced that one day there will be no more death. And the dead will be resurrected.”

the epilogue to “About That” [Про это] (1923), entitled “A Request Addressed to…(Please, comrade chemist, fill in the name yourself)” [Прошение на имя……Прошу Вас, товарищ химик, заполните сами!] may have been sincere. He names a future institution, “The Institute for Human Resurrections” [мастерская человечьих воскрешений], and begs the chemist of the future age for a literal resurrection:

“Resurrect me!/Give me a heart!/And blood to my last veins./Drum a mind into my skull!/My earthly life I haven’t lived out,/and on earth/ haven’t loved till the end”

[Воскреси!/Сердце мне вложи!/Кровищу--до последних жил./В череп мысль вдолби!/Я свое, земное, не дожил,/на земле/свое не долюбил]. In contrast to his poem on Lenin, the veins here are real, as is the resurrection of the poet. He adds, “Resurrect me/even if only because/ I was/ a poet/ and waited for you,/and rejected that prosaic nonsense.” [Воскреси/хотя б за то,/что я/поэтом/ждал тебя,/откинул будничную чушь!] Mayakovsky’s plea at the end of “About That” emphasizes his role as a poet, a subject with an individual voice rather than a manifestation of a larger, impersonal force.

By contrast, in “The Komsomol Song,” Mayakovsky balances between the idea of Lenin as a “Great Man” and Lenin as the embodiment of the people—the two definitions of “organ of the mass.” By invoking Lenin’s literal resurrection, Mayakovsky would be committing the sin of marking Lenin as an exceptional human being, rather than the vessel of the popular will. Different forces animate the poet and the leader.

possibility of resurrection to Fedorov, as well as Albert Einstein’s recent scientific discoveries.

62 Russian quotations are from Vladimir Maiakovskii, Pro eto, Fundamental’naia elektronnaia biblioteka, accessed on May 10, 2019, http://feb-web.ru/feb/mayakovskiy/texts/ms0/ms4/ms4-135-.htm
The same Institute for Human Resurrections reemerges in Mayakovsky’s satirical play from 1928-1929, *The Bedbug* [Клоп]. A NEP-man, Ivan “Pierre” Prisypkin (eventually “Skripkin”), is resurrected in 1979 to find that alcohol, dancing, and romance—those things that made him an object of contempt in the past (for spectators, the present)—now make him the only recognizably “human” member of a futuristic society. “Comrades! I protest! I didn’t unfreeze for you to dry me up!” [Товарищи, я протестую! Я ж не для того размерз, чтобы вы меня теперь засушили!], Prisypkin cries when he hears that the only dancing in this future society is a mass rehearsal of a new work system on farms.63 Ironically, his pathetic humanity (symbolized by his guitar and banal ditties) lands him in a cage in a zoo, along with a bedbug that was frozen along with him accidentally fifty years ago. “They are different in size, but essentially identical. Both of them have their habitat in the musty mattresses of time” [Их двое—разных размеров, но одинаковых по существу…Оба водятся в затхлых матрацах времени].64 The satire ends as both comedy and tragedy: its final celebratory words (“Let’s have a march!”) distract from Prisypkin’s desperate question, “Why am I alone in the cage?” Resurrection, here, is not a vehicle of salvation or transcendence; it instead satirically questions the utopian impulse of perfecting society at the expense of expunging the “human.” Prisypkin’s bourgeois taste renders him absurd, but in the end, he is more sympathetic than his more “advanced” countrymen. It is the utterly ordinary individual who is resurrected, this time with tragic consequences. This is at once an


64 Ibid. 299.
indication that Mayakovsky’s earlier metaphorical rendering of Lenin’s collective resurrection is a product of an ideological discourse around the figure of the leader, and an indication of Mayakovsky’s ultimate disillusionment with the Soviet project.

In these two works, Mayakovsky’s treatment of the future of resurrection is dramatically different than that which he projects onto Lenin. Resurrecting the real, historical Lenin is antithetical to his position as the vozhd’. But while the idea that “Lenin will live on” might have been clever sloganeering for Mayakovsky, for others it remained a sincere spark of hope. Even into the late 1920s, as the optimistic utopian fervor of the post-Revolutionary age was fading into the beginnings of the Stalinist twilight, there were some who took the revolution’s promise of resurrection literally. One of these hopefuls was Nikolai Setnitsky, a writer, economist, philosopher, and a devoted follower of Nikolai Fedorov. It was Setnitsky, along with Alexander Gorsky, who in the twentieth century was most responsible for expanding Fedorov’s original ideas into the more developed movement of Cosmism, in which form the “common task” continued to survive.65

In an essay published in 1928 entitled “On Death and Burial” [О смерти и погребении], Setnitsky argued against contemporary funereal practices such as cremation and burial outside of towns, practices he believed would hinder the eventuality of resurrection. Setnitsky believed that the preservation of Lenin’s body was proof that scientific development would eventually be capable of restoring Lenin and others to life: “Only the thought that resurrection is a necessity and inevitability can explain the

embalming and preservation of V.I. Lenin’s body (in spite of his well-known words about ‘necrophilia’)” [Только мыслью о необходимости и неизбежности воскрешения можно объяснить такой факт, как бальзамирование и сохранение тела В. И. Ленина (вопреки его собственным общеизвестным словам о "труположстве")].

Even “in an entirely unexpected environment there appeared the profound, obviously hidden and subconscious tradition of burial in preparation for resurrection, however strenuously they tried to avoid explaining or interpreting it politically” [проявилась в совершенно неожиданной среде глубочайшая, очевидно скрытая и подсознательная традиция воскресительного погребения, как бы политически не пытались ее объяснить и истолковать]. Setnitsky was one intellectual who saw Lenin’s body not as a political symbol, but as an actual empty vessel waiting to be revitalized by scientific miracles. In The Foundation Pit [Котлован], written around the same period, the once zealous Andrei Platonov ironically voices such an idea in his character Zhachev, who insists that Lenin “wants to be resurrected” and that “Marxism will be able to do anything.” Zhachev is crippled himself and hardly understands Marxism, its tenets, and its goals. As we will see in the next chapter, through Zhachev and others, Platonov captures the dissonance that echoes between Setnitsky’s utopian dreams and the reality facing those awaiting a miracle in Stalin’s Soviet Union.

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Mayakovsky’s and Setnitsky’s varying approaches to Lenin’s body and his afterlife offer an outlook onto the ideological landscape of post-Revolutionary Soviet society, one which borrowed from the grand cosmological narratives of religion and mythology while supplementing them with an ardent faith in rationalism and progress. Mayakovsky sees the death of Lenin as the birth of Leninism, the Holy Spirit of communism that lives, moves, and grows while always remaining “true.” Lenin’s resurrection is not literal but is nonetheless utopian, in that Mayakovsky imagines the body’s death as fertilization for the seeds of Leninism. Setnitsky, on the other hand, sees Lenin’s preservation as proof that the body, not just the spirit, will see a literal resurrection. Scientists and artists continued (and still continue) to artificially maintain Lenin’s appearance as it was on the last day of his life—perhaps so that his body will be prepared to carry on when that day comes. These two interpretations of Lenin’s body, the resurrection of the spirit and the reanimation of his body, reflect millennia-old debates on the nature and meaning of Christ’s resurrection for humanity and the general resurrection that is part of the ever-approaching Apocalypse. They provide an interpretive framework for understanding the diverse responses to the post-Revolutionary era, a period of utopian fervor and cataclysmic shifts. The different ways of understanding the resurrection of the revolution signal diverse attitudes toward history, technology, and ideology, included in which is the salvific potential of the revolution for all of mankind. The afterlife of Lenin’s body was not the only one at stake, Mayakovsky and Setnitsky agree.
Chapter II

“The Dead are Also People”: Bringing Death to Life in Platonov’s Fiction

In his early essays, Platonov interpreted the events of 1917 as a manifestation of humanity’s struggle with its own mortality. As the Soviet period progressed, however, Platonov’s philosophy of the revolution, death, and resurrection dramatically changed in several ways. Most importantly, his optimistic assessment of humanity’s ability and necessity to overcome death shifts to an exploration of death as an integral and necessary part of human experience. As a result, Platonov’s characters of the late 1920s through the 1930s experience death in a fundamentally different way. Their lives are permeated by death, and it is the most pronounced feature of their meager existence. Death is not the terminus of their lives but instead part of the experience of life itself. As Chiklin says in *The Foundation Pit*, “Anybody can be dead if he’s made to suffer enough,” reminding the engineer Prushevsky that deadness in Platonov’s world is not only a biological state but an existential one.¹ Several sentences later, Chiklin produces the quintessential Platonovian phrase that could conceivably define his body of work from *Chevengur* to the end of his years as a writer. In response to Prushevsky’s question as to why he exerts himself in caring for the dead body of a woman he hardly knew, Chiklin responds with surprise: “What do you mean, why? The dead are also people” [Как зачем? (…)] Мертвые тоже люди].² Chiklin’s remark captures something of Platonov’s


² Ibid. 61/459.
compassionate, complicated attitude toward death and the dead as the theme of resurrection evolved in the later years of his writing into the theme of living death.

In contrast to his early position, in which resurrection represents victory over the limitations of humanity, Platonov from 1930 on posits death as the defining existential condition of life. Death becomes a spiritual, rather than merely physical, phenomenon in the lives of his characters, and it penetrates into the world of the living. Comprised of grotesque bodies and language, his fiction explores the metaphysical landscape of death, which then becomes a kind of spiritual topography. His characters do not merely wonder about death but wander through death, as they exit the world of existence and enter spiritual underworlds of partial- and non-existence. Eliding the firm boundaries that separate the living and the dead, Platonov explores the intermediate space occupied by his characters, the space of the living dead. And as death becomes a part of exploration in life, resurrection, too, takes on new meanings.

The specter of a religious mythology exists as a hollow, yet hulking presence in Platonov. Resurrection is one of these tropes, where the hollowed out bodies left behind are literal. In this chapter, I look at the middle to late period of Platonov’s career (1929-1943), noting how the dominant utopian themes of resurrection and immortality that were present in his Proletkul’t essays are superseded by the phenomenon of living death as a state of being. As a result, we see the emergence of the “living corpse” as both a character and theme in his prose. While still dominant in Platonov’s prose, resurrection is

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3 “The ideological genesis of ‘proletarian art’ in Russia lay in the materialistic hypostasis of Russian utopian-religious thought at the turn of the century, with all its ethical maximalism and definite syncretism.” Elena Tolstaya-Segal, “Ideologicheskie konteksty Platonova,” Russian Literature 9 (1981), 237.
now displaced to the symbolic realm of his thought and poetics. It is no longer presented as a quasi-Christian utopian prospect for overcoming our mortality; resurrection instead becomes a more prosaic, and yet more profound, response to death, which has become an everyday part of life in his characters’ lives. These stories depict a world where dead matter and living bodies can hardly be distinguished from one another. In exploring this dead matter, Platonov negates the grand utopian vision of resurrection in Fedorov’s philosophy, promoting instead Fedorov’s ethics of memory and kinship.

As we have already seen, in his early essays, Platonov wrote apocalyptically about the possibility and necessity of conquering death for earthly and cosmic justice to truly flourish. Platonov’s communism was, paradoxically, both the means to this Fedorovian end and the end in itself of immortality. He held that the establishment of communism on a worldwide scale was a way to the unity required to fulfill the Common Task; but to create such a society, which addressed all forms of injustices, including death, one would need more than a lifetime, i.e. immortality. In these essays, the desire for resurrection bespeaks Platonov’s hope for humanity in general, that it will overcome itself: the proletariat stands for the pitiable state of mortal mankind, and the oppressive hierarchies of the tsarist Orthodox state represent the obstacles to its evolution. The enormous societal and political changes imagined during the revolutionary era were indicative of a possible larger change for humanity in general. Until the Revolution, people had lived in oppression, a virtual living death, but now may take control of previously uncontrollable chaotic forces. Platonov’s quotation of Nietzsche in his first journal entry is telling: “‘God has died; now do we desire the overman [Übermenschen] to live.’ That is: God draw near to me, become me, but the very best, very highest version of
me—the overme, the overman.” [«Бог умер, теперь хотим мы—чтобы жил сверхчеловек». Т.е.: Бог приблизься ко мне, стань мною, но самым лучшим, самым высшим мною—сверхмною, сверхчеловеком].

Platonov was not waiting on the future birth of this new man; he saw the Revolution as the tipping point in mankind’s evolution.

Less than ten years later, in his larger works of Chevengur, The Foundation Pit, and Dzhan, this superman—a humanity that has conquered its own mortality on the wave of revolution—is replaced by the ubiquitous emaciated waif, a body that continues to live through the inertia of his or her own heartbeat. The waif is a spiritually, and nearly physically, living dead character. More than the disinterred bodies of the resurrected, these characters resemble walking corpses. Platonov’s attitude toward mortality has changed, at least insofar as death and resurrection are represented in his fiction. Olga Meerson is one of many Platonov scholars who sees a general disillusionment with utopian materialist answers to death; as she shows, they gradually are replaced by metaphysical responses instead. She illustrates this evolution by adapting a quote from Chevengur: “People really are born, live, and die from their social conditions. But they are not resurrected from them” [Люди действительно рождаются, проживают и умирают от социальных условий. Но воскресают они не от них].

The possibility of a

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4 Andrei Platonov, Zapisnye knizhki: Materialy k biografii, ed. N. V. Kornienko (Moscow: IMLI RAN, 2000), 17.

5 See Olga Meerson, Svobodnaia veshch’: Poetika neostaraneniia u Andreia Platonova (Novosibirsk: Nauka, 2001), 89. Meerson goes on to suggest that Platonov’s views shifted from a Fedorovian materialist in his early days (with its obvious marriage with utopian Marxist-Leninist materialism) to a “convinced metaphysician” in his later writing as regards the idea of overcoming death. This point of view is also in line with Ayleen Teskey’s overview of Platonov’s evolving understanding of Fedorov’s philosophy in his literature. According to Teskey, Platonov eventually became convinced that if resurrection were to take place, it would require some spiritual or metaphysical factor and
materialist resurrection appears only occasionally, usually in satirical form, while other possible answers to death and mortality begin to appear. If death is a modality of life, then a return to “life” can be a spiritual transformation rather than a physical process.

There is a profound shift from his essays, which express confidence that humanity will eventually but certainly overcome its mortality through scientific advancement and the utopian political aims of communism, to an apparent acceptance that physical death is not only humanity’s inevitable future, but also, in a sense, its inescapable present. This in part constitutes the struggle that Thomas Seifrid calls the “ontological myth” at the heart of all of Platonov’s work: “In essence his vision ironically conflates the Christian-idealist notion of perishable flesh, which is usually held up as evidence for the soul’s transcendence (the flesh passes away, but the soul does not), with the materialist conviction that spirit is subordinate to matter. And the corollary of that belief for

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6 Thomas Seifrid offers an important corrective to the narrative that Platonov’s oeuvre simply marks “a progression from early, utopian enthusiasm for the Revolution to a bitter disenchantment expressed in satire,” saying instead that “what we have is the record of Platonov’s repeated, though never fully successful, attempts at reconciling his vision of existence with the Soviet experiment to which he was witness—and which seemed, provisionally, to promise redemption from the trials of physical existence.” According to Seifrid, seeing Platonov at any point in his career as subscribing to an undiluted utopianism is a simplification, and dividing his career between “utopian” and “disillusioned” loses much of the nuance and dialogism of Platonov’s prose and thought. See Thomas Seifrid, *Andrei Platonov: Uncertainties of Spirit* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 133. I see in Platonov’s essays a conflation of his hope for the potential for a Fedorovian resurrection and immortality and his hope for communism, while in his later fiction, any potential for any kind of resurrection takes place either in the personal, psychological, or metaphysical, not in the realm of actualized utopias. This progression, I believe, does indicate Platonov’s faith in a salvific version of materialism represented for him by the revolution and its ideals, which later moves in the direction of other metaphorical types of resurrection in his fiction.
Platonov is that the soul finds itself condemned to inhabit a vessel which is itself subject to decay.”

Seifrid interprets all of the social, political, and personal struggles of Platonov’s heroes as variations of one essential problem: that when the body decays, the soul disappears along with it. In the face of such a realization, his characters attempt to find meaning and permanence without recourse to the domain of the body, looking instead toward memory and creation.

While Platonov remained a supporter of communism’s ideals even in his pessimism, it is also true that the more “utopian” Stalin’s cultural revolution became, the less hopeful and utopian Platonov’s stories became. The picture he paints in his works from the late 1920s through the 1930s is much bleaker than the famous pronouncement by Stalin in 1935 that “Life has become better, life has become more cheerful!” Life, in Platonov’s prose from this stage of his career, hardly looks like life at all, but more like a state of living death, in which the poor, the emaciated, the orphaned, the homeless, and the abject are constant characters and allegorical representations of moribund life. Seifrid has argued that, following Bogdanov and Fedorov, Platonov sought to ground the social, economic and political orders of experience in ontology, meaning that the dystopian

7 Ibid. 108.

8 Sheila Fitzpatrick writes that the term “Stalin’s revolution” describes the violent, destructive, and utopian character of the end of the 1920s and beginning of the 1930s, following the abandonment of the relatively moderate and gradualist economics of NEP and the adoption of collectivization and the First Five-Year Plan. See Sheila Fitzpatrick, Everyday Stalinism: Ordinary Life in Extraordinary Times: Soviet Russia in the 1930s (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 3. On the other hand, Andrzej Walicki claims that Lenin’s version of communism was far more “utopian” in character, and that Stalin’s rise to power broadened the scope of totalitarian control, but weakened the revolutionary striving to create a completely “new” human being. See A. Walicki, “The Communist Utopia and the Fate of the Socialist Experiment in Russia,” Russian Studies in Philosophy 39, no. 4 (Spring 2001): 25-26.
world he depicts in *Chevengur*, for instance, is emblematic of a more profound ontological suffering of man, rather than only his political status. However, one must not overlook the historic levels of suffering of the actual population during and after Stalin’s First Five-Year Plan (1929-32), in which, as Sheila Fitzpatrick has written, the average Muscovite consumed virtually no fats, little milk and fruit, and a fifth of the meat and fish compared to the turn of the century. Bad harvests and famine virtually decimated the countryside and goods shortages affected the lives and bodies of real people. Platonov is a deeply symbolic writer, and reading his texts on a solely historical level would lose the richness of his world. But the actual suffering of the living can never be too far from mind when reading his prose from the beginning of the Five-Year Plan throughout the 1940s.

Platonov’s characters do not live toward death but tend to live in death, evocatively (and almost literally) illustrated by the kulak peasant in *The Foundation Pit* who sleeps at home in his coffin. This practice originates with certain sects of Christian monks, who sometimes slept in their own coffin to prepare for death. The symbol takes on a more macabre meaning in Platonov’s texts, however; it is a recurring, potent symbol for death grotesquely penetrating into life. Besides this peasant, there are many characters for whom the coffin is a vessel that carries them not through death, but through life. Another peasant begs for the return of the uncovered coffins at the excavation site because “every man of us today lives just because he has his own coffin—that’s all the

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property we’ve got now! We practiced lying in them before we hid them in the cave.”

The peasants have not only measured themselves, including their children, for their own coffins, but have buried them before dying, making their exhumation by the diggers even more grotesque. The excavation of the empty coffins appears as a travesty of the empty tomb of resurrection; rather than symbolizing the negation of death, these empty tombs instead testify to death’s potency. The empty tomb of Christ is reversed when Nastya, whose name means “resurrection,” sleeps in the coffin, portending her death and the “death” of resurrection.

Coffins appear in other plots in which characters move through the world as if dead. In a scene removed from the final version of Happy Moscow, Moscow Chestnova is discharged from the air force because “the air force does not need organizers of their own coffins.” Later in the novel, Komyagin, a man who has been previously misidentified as a corpse, actually “organizes” a coffin for himself:

I’m predicting a coffin for myself […] I want to learn a deceased person’s entire itinerary: where you get authorization for the digging of a grave, what factual data and documents are required, how you order the coffin, and then the means of transport, the burial, and how the balance sheet of life is finally drawn up […] I want to follow the entire itinerary in advance—from life to complete oblivion, to the liquidation beyond trace of every being.

Гроб я гадаю для себя […] Я хочу узнать весь маршрут покойника: где брать разрешение для отрытия (sic) могилы, какие нужны факты и документы, как заказывается гроб, потом транспорт, погребение и чем завершается в итоге баланс жизни […] Мне хочется заранее

11 Platonov, The Foundation Pit, 66.

The itinerary of the dead has nothing to do with the spiritual path of the afterlife. It is, instead, the dead man’s earthly path, which includes navigating the bureaucracy of death and acquiring its physical accoutrements. At Nikita’s workshop in “The River Potudan,” coffins are the one piece of furniture that is always free of charge to build. Nikita’s unskilled craftsmanship when constructing a coffin for Lyuba’s friend Zhenya is thematically linked to his later sculpting of his “dead fantasies,” the clay figurines which serve as a grotesque surrogate for the children he is unable to produce. Nikita is a hollow Prometheus, whose creations are linked with the emptiness of death. In a different example, the coffin in “The Third Son” creates the frame around which the sons gather and the story is built. The frame of the coffin renders uncanny the body and face of their once beloved, now estranged mother who has suddenly transformed from person to object. It is later the vital site of contact between the third son and her body that finally affirms her death and, as a result, brings his brothers “to life.” The coffin, a visible object that most clearly demarcates the transition from life to death, becomes instead a grotesque symbol of the presence of death in life.

Many of Platonov’s characters are, in some way, dead as a result of their pitiful physical and/or spiritual states, and he privileges these characters and these states of being above others. One of Platonov’s contemporary critics, A. Gurvich, remarked on his “living dead” characters in a scathing but insightful essay in 1937 entitled “Andrei Platonov.” Observing that Platonov in his prose “speaks about and for those who are

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weak and mute…destitute and forsaken” [говорит о тех и за тех, кто слаб и нем (…) обездоленных, брошенных], Gurvich notes that these characters are most often represented as somehow “living in death,” and that this characteristic dominates Platonov’s oeuvre from the 1920s up until the year of his essay in 1937: “‘Life is survival.’ ‘As if he were dead.’ ‘He lived as if he were sleeping.’ ‘I’m living and dying.’ All of Platonov’s people are dead. That is why complete physical death does not frighten them. The transition from indifference to non-being. Where is the boundary here? Where is the transition?”

Gurvich, criticizing the writer from a socialist realist perspective, attributes this aesthetic feature of Platonov’s works to the un-Bolshevik emotion of pity and Platonov’s love of suffering, which, he “hungrily pounces on like a religious fanatic” and “offers those who suffer not help, but comfort”.

While his criticism was politically motivated, Gurvich is not altogether wrong in many of his assessments of certain aesthetic features of Platonov’s texts. There is something interesting to Platonov about the dead, particularly those who themselves claim to be dead, are described as dead, and feel, in some way, dead, but are somehow still alive. Even as early as 1920, in the essay “Life Until the End” [Жизнь до конца], Platonov writes about suffering as a

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15 Ibid. 369.
key ingredient to art: “And all the best songs on earth were always sung by the hungry and the dying; they used them to distract themselves from bread” [И все лучшие песни на земле пели всегда голодные и умирающие, этим они отвлекали себя от хлеба].

In his characterization, art is produced as a salve for suffering.

The corpse as character emerges in Platonov’s fiction in at least two ways. The first type of “living dead” character is the one that appears in some form in almost every one of Platonov’s main works after Chevengur: the waifs, who, as Seifrid puts, “live less at the margins of society than at the very margins of existence itself.” These corpse-like characters often experience death by living “in absentia” [заочно], as does Voshchev in The Foundation Pit, or a member of the dzhan tribe who feels that, “there’s nothing inside us—only weakness…I’m always empty inside, as if I were dead.” Sometimes entire populations of people, they are almost indistinguishable from the dead, and their actual deaths often pass unnoticed or are rendered in participial clauses, as in a later scene from the end of The Foundation Pit: “But the activist, dead or pretending, made no response” [Но активист, притаясь или умерев, ничем не отговорил Вощеву].

Death, one of fiction’s (not to mention life’s) most extraordinary and dramatically charged events, is neither an obvious nor important shift of states, represented here by its

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17 Thomas Seifrid, A Companion to Andrei Platonov’s The Foundation Pit (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2009), 113.


19 Platonov, The Foundation Pit, 134. Sobranie, 527.
grammatical subordination. Although Seifrid correctly points out that these figures exist in a state of ontological limbo, it should also be noted that these forms of “bare life” are often found in the peripheral territories of the provinces, the countryside, the wilderness, and the desert. These landscapes are settings for allegories and myths of being, but they also are physical representations of exclusion from the cultural center. These bodies cause the reader to reflect: to whom is “life” conferred, particularly in the Soviet context of “former people”?

The second type of corpse as character is the literal dead body that interacts with the living. The figure of the corpse often invites living characters to ponder the ontological status of the dead body: when does the transformation from subject to object, or from human to corpse, take place, if it takes place at all? Chiklin’s observation in *The Foundation Pit* that “the dead are also people” is startling because it is a simultaneously obvious and mystifying statement about the personhood of the dead. The dead form a population, which in Fedorov’s quasi-Christian philosophy awaited and virtually cried out to their descendants for resurrection. Platonov, however, at once invokes and inverts the language of Christianity, referring to Christ’s admonition to his disciple to abandon his father and “let the dead bury their own dead.”

"Instead of a burial ceremony, Chiklin surrounds Julia’s body with “dead objects,” saying that “the dead are many, after all, like the living; they aren’t lonely with their own.” Again, Chiklin’s speech belies Platonov’s complicated relationship to death, as Julia’s body occupies an ambiguous space between object and person: it is both one among other dead objects, and yet these objects form a

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20 The episode occurs both in Matthew 8:22 and Luke 9:60.

21 Platonov, *The Foundation Pit*, 60.
population and keep each other company. This makeshift ceremony is rooted in preserving her memory, creating an intermediate space for the dead between an inanimate category of objects and an animating force on the living: “She doesn’t [need anything], but I need her. Let something be saved of the person.”\textsuperscript{22} This “something” relates to memory and is what Fedorov implored his readers to remember: that the dead were once living, and that the living, too, will soon become the dead, whence comes our moral responsibility to and our kinship with the dead. Likewise, in another burial scene in the story “Takyr,” Stefan Katigrob (whose name foretells his eventual death, making him another metaphorical case of “living death”) digs a grave for Zarrin-Tadzh in the desert because “he didn’t want a person, even a dead one, to be forgotten.” [Он не хотел, чтобы человек, даже мертвый, был забыт].\textsuperscript{23} This “even” [даже] expresses the ambiguity of the corpse’s ontological position; it is included in the definition of the human, but by means of an exceptional inclusion. The corpse in Platonov is often the locus of conversations concerning the nature of the division between human subject and object-like corpse, which also has important consequences for Platonov’s living characters. Death in general, and the idea of the corpse more specifically, upsets the subject/object distinction because it biologically resides in us like a timer, even while it is opposed to us.\textsuperscript{24}

\textsuperscript{22} Ibid. 61.

\textsuperscript{23} Platonov, “Takyr,” in \textit{Sobranie}, vol. 4, 305.

\textsuperscript{24} Julia Kristeva, in her definition of the “abject,” includes corpses amongst the other refuse (excrement, bodily fluids) against which the subject is eventually defined: “The corpse, seen without God and outside of science, is the utmost of abjection. It is death infecting life. Abject. It is something rejected from which one does not part, from which one does not protect oneself as from an object. Imaginary uncanniness and real threat, it
Living death appears not only as character or theme of Platonov’s plots; it is also a part of his poetics. In many of his works, including his later, shorter prose in the 1930s, death is often what activates his characters, animates them, and even brings them into his narrative worlds.\(^{25}\) Death, paradoxically, is a *vital force*, a narrative necessity that allows Platonov to explore those hidden facets of humanity that so characterize his fiction.

Similar to Artemy Magun’s position that, beginning in the late 1920s, melancholy \[тоска\] becomes a “subjectifying and intellectualizing ‘operator’” [субъективирующего и интеллектуализирующего “оператора”] in Platonov’s work, one could say that death is a subjectivizing experience for many of his characters, as it is death, whether witnessed or experienced, that brings them to life.\(^{26}\) It is as if the physical substance discovered by the surgeon Sambikin in *Happy Moscow* is in fact a metaphysical substance or even an aesthetic principle that stands behind and runs through all of Platonov’s work: “At the moment of death there opens in the human body a last sluice, one we have not yet brought to light. Behind that sluice, in some dark ravine of the organism, a last charge of beckons to us and ends up engulfing us.” Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 4.

\(^{25}\) For example, the hero of *Chevengur*, Sasha Dvanov, emerges in the story as an orphan thanks to his father’s suicide. The first sentence of *The Foundation Pit* introduces its hero, Voshchev, through a kind of symbolic death. The first sentences of *Happy Moscow* are of Moscow Chestnova’s first memory—a man running through the street and being killed—which determines her life and consciousness to a degree such that, each time upon remembering it, “the young woman would immediately change her life.” The events of “The Third Son” are all predicated on the first sentence about an old woman dying in a village. I will discuss these and other instances of narrative birth through death in more detail later in this chapter.

life is faithfully and miserly preserved. Nothing but death can open up that spring, that reservoir [...]” [В момент смерти в теле человека открывается последний шлюз, не выясненный нами. За этим шлюзом, в каком-то темном ущелье организма скупо и верно хранится последний заряд жизни. Ничто, кроме смерти, не открывает этого источника, этого резервуара…]. Paradoxically, many of Platonov’s characters are brought to life through their experience of death. The dead, in a peculiar way, become an aesthetic category, or more simply a type of character, that animates many of Platonov’s narratives, both large and small.

Platonov’s fiction, as he phrased it in relation to Sambikin’s desire in Happy Moscow, uses “the dead to revive the dead” [мертвыми оживлять мертвых]; that is, through his peculiar stories of living death, he enacts upon, or at least suggests to, his reader a kind of metaphorical, metaphysical, aesthetic revision of resurrection. Meerson’s analysis of the technique of “disestrangement” suggests that the disarming poetics of Platonov’s texts—those that render ordinary and unnoticeable what should be outrageous, fantastic, or tragic—in fact desensitizes the reader to death as an event and makes him or her morally complicit in accepting death: “Platonov develops a very complex and powerful strategy of disestranging death, aiming to make his reader, just as his characters, accept it as necessary [должное] and trivial in exactly those situations in which outside of the Platonovian world it would be an egregious fact, not simply tragic or inevitable.” She concludes, “this technique [...] is aimed at expressing the absurdity, that is, the ridiculous and illusory nature of nonmetaphysical, purely “this-sided” [посюсторонних]
attempts to conquer, overcome, or even simply understand death.”28 Although in her view Platonov’s literary output expresses a departure from the Fedorovian philosophy of the Common Task he once embraced, Meerson insists that metaphysical themes, including that of resurrection, remain closely connected to realm of the moral, and not, for example, to the magical element that occasionally emerges (for instance, in the episode of the magically anthropomorphized bear in *The Foundation Pit*). But the juxtaposition of “dead or pretending” from the earlier example belies the enormous metaphysical gap between these states. It is not that Platonov asks us to see or not see death with different perceptual parameters (which estrangement and “disestrangement” would imply), but rather to consider the indifference of narrative to death as an event. Death instead becomes a drawn out state of existence, rather than a sudden irruption into the life of a character.

Platonov’s combination of art, moral intuition, and resurrection originates from Fedorov’s writings as well, particularly about the important role of art in the Common Task, which acts in concert with all the other forces of humanity against death, including science, morality [нравственность], and religion.29 Inseparable from these realms, art is given its *telos* by the general resurrection [всеобщее воскрешение].30 This link exists because, according to Fedorov, both art and the religious impulse derive from the same evolutionary moment in mankind: the pain of loss, in which the one who experiences the


30 Fedorov, “Как началось искусство, чем оно стало и чем должно быть?” in *Sobranie,* 563.
loss lifts his head toward the sky. Art in Fedorov is a means for overcoming loss, for bridging the gap between the living and the dead, and for turning the attention of the living towards the dead, a reminder of the task before us; in other words, art is a form of memory, not of a particular moment, person, or event, but an abstract form of memory that allows the dead to coexist with the living. According to Stephen Hutchings, Platonov, like Fedorov, was “inclined to translate memory allegorically into a form of action,” specifically in the form of his prose. This kind of memory appears frequently in Platonov’s narratives, in which a character’s personal loss is often subordinated to a wider mourning for the world’s “dead objects.” Dead objects, ironically, vivify characters like Voshchev and Nazar Chagataev with meaning, both of whom are literally searching for their source of life in the dust of their ancestors. The recovery of the objects is their retrieval from the jaws of oblivion and, thus, their continued existence in life. When they are metonymically connected to the body, as in the case of Voshchev’s

31 Fedorov, “Iskusstvo podobii,” 564.

32 For a broad, contemporary discussion of Fedorov’s philosophy and its implications for art, see the recent volume of published dialogues on Fedorov and Cosmism entitled Art without Death: Conversations on Russian Cosmism (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2017), particularly the dialogue “Art without Death” between Elena Shaposhnikova and Arseny Zhilyaev.


34 For example, Voshchev’s collection of a dead leaf, dead bird, and “all sorts of lost, unfortunate objects,” along with his retrieval of objects left behind by the kulak peasants who are removed from the village. In Džan, Nazar Chagataev returns to his birthplace not to recover his family and personal identity but in order to recover the tribe, to organize them with socialism, and, thus, to bring them back into the world. His memory of his birthplace and people is subservient to the aims of socialism and to recovering them from aimlessness and death.
collection of the kulaks’ possessions, it results in a displaced resurrection, or at least preservation, through the materials linked to memory.

Platonov’s interpretations of overcoming death in his art undergo a series of transformations throughout his writing, even while he channels the influence of his philosophical mentor. The realm of death and its population are more complicated existential categories for the author than the Orthodox Christian Fedorov. Disabused of the apocalyptic idea that revolution would usher in the conditions to make possible a materialist resurrection, Platonov remained steadfast in exploring its possibilities in his fiction as an antidote, not an end, to what he saw as the human condition of suffering.

From the beginning, and even throughout his engagement with Fedorov’s philosophy, Platonov was suspicious of the idea that religion could play any role in relieving humanity’s mortal suffering. Still, in his own narratives, Platonov borrows liberally from the stockpile of religious and even mythological tropes, motifs, and symbols. They often stand at the center of his narratives, like the Tower of Babel in *The Foundation Pit*, the tribe of wandering through the desert in *Dzhan*, or the Promethean traits of Nikita in “The River Potudan.” As each of these examples shows, however, these motifs are evoked only to be inverted and ultimately denied their spiritual force. Looking at two narratives from the beginning and the end of the 1920s, we can see how resurrection evolves into living in death. We will then look at its starkest manifestation, in Voshchev’s narrative in *The Foundation Pit*.

**Living in the Province of Death**

The first narrative is an untitled parable written in his journal in 1921 in which two men appear before God, “one barely alive, dying, the other flourishing and joyful”
[один еле живой, умирающий, другой цветущий и радостный]. When God asks them what they did in their life, the first answers, “All my life I died in your name […] so that I might never die” [Всю жизнь умирал во имя Твое (...) Чтобы не умереть]. The second answers, “All my life I feared death and took care only of my body, the source of life […] so that the life in it never perished” [Всю жизнь боялся смерти и заботился только о теле своем, источнике жизни (...) Чтобы не погасла в нем жизнь]. God responds with his judgment: “Both of you wanted the same thing: life. And both of you forsook it, one for a lifeless soul, for you destroyed your body; the other for a dead body, for you forgot everything but your body. And you are both dead” [Оба вы хотели одного—жизни и ушли от нея, один—в неживой дух, ибо умертвил тело, другой—в мертве тело, ибо забыл все, кроме тела. И оба вы мертвы]. The truth, “that soul and flesh are one,” has evaded both, sentencing both to death by different paths.36

In this short writing, Platonov adopts the language and forms of Christianity to produce a Proletkul’t parable of moral life. Platonov consciously establishes a parallel between the Christian salvation myth of eternal life and the moral equivalent of living death. Visible are the similarities with his early essays, both in his stylized word choice

35 Compare to Matthew 16:25: “For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake will find it.”

36 This conclusion signals Platonov’s debt to the philosopher and guiding light of the Proletkul’t movement, Alexander Bogdanov. Bogdanov was Platonov’s biggest philosophical influence besides Fedorov and influenced his thought tremendously, especially in his early period. Bogdanov’s “empiriomonism” proposed that the dualism of spirit and matter could be overcome by discovering within human experience the ground for a unitary theory of being. This philosophical position made it possible in theory to combine idealism with Marxist materialism, which influenced Platonov for many years. Bogdanov himself was accused of idealism, but claimed to be a materialist. For more on Bogdanov’s philosophy and its influence on Platonov, see Thomas Seifrid, Uncertainties of Spirit, especially 24-27.
(using the Church Slavonic ибо, for example, as well as the spellings of перваго and втораго), and in the use of Christian motifs, including reference to scripture, to undermine Christian belief. Along with his philosophical inheritance from Bogdanov’s ontology, Platonov is again indebted to Fedorov in his emphasis on the moral, rather than solely metaphysical, dimension of death and resurrection. Both men are physically dead, but God’s sentence condemns even their lives to death, as they have sinned against living (the end of the parable calls the two men “sinners” [согрешившие]). Living in death in this parable belongs to the realm of immoral action, whether adhering to a life-negating religious philosophy, or to a spiritually deficient philosophy of pure materialism that takes the body as the sole source of life. God’s injunction to both men to “Resurrect” or, alternatively, “Understand yourself and live again” at the end of the parable, therefore, is an ironic appropriation of religious doctrine. It is not given in reward for a life rightly lived, but instead presented as a moral imperative to resist either path that leads to death.\textsuperscript{37} Particularly notable is that, unlike Fedorov, Platonov uses the Christian idea of resurrection as a metaphor for the necessary spiritual transfiguration of life, rather than the literal resurrection of the dead. Resurrection becomes a moral choice to understand and integrate the physical and spiritual poles of existence during life and not, as Fedorov’s adapted version of Christianity taught, a matter of future justice for the dead.

\textsuperscript{37} Interesting, the parable has two endings, telling of Platonov’s religious and philosophical influences: to the question “Now what shall we do?” Platonov wrote two answers: “Resurrect” [Воскреснуть] (which is struck out); and “Understand yourself and live again” [Понять себя и жить сначала]. While the former turns Christianity’s highest ideal into a moral imperative aimed against itself, the latter includes an allusion to the ancient Greek imperative to “know thyself,” and a potential allusion to Eastern religious beliefs in reincarnation and rebirth. While the former is more clear in its repurposing of the myth of Christian resurrection, the latter, which was in the end chosen by Platonov, is more clear, perhaps, as a moral imperative to his (living) readers.
from one’s descendants. Platonov’s parable of living death and resurrection already includes the possibility that one’s own physical death is far less profound than the death one lives every day, an idea that is played out in different ways in his mature works.

We can compare this to another narrative from the end of the same decade from the prologue to *Chevengur*, in which Sasha Dvanov’s father, Dmitrii Ivanovich, is driven to suicide by his fascination with death and the possibility to “live awhile in death and return” [пожить в смерти и вернуться]. As always in Platonov, there is a degree of ambivalence in the fisherman’s actions, allowing for multiple readings. The naïve metaphysical yearning toward the other side that results in the fisherman’s death is reminiscent of Platonov’s own early criticisms of Christianity’s otherworldliness, which relegates paradise to an afterlife and is mistakenly drawn toward death in search of life. The fisherman’s boredom with his own existence, alongside his personal disbelief in death, draws him to the other side as if he were simply moving from one region to another, more interesting place: “In secret he didn’t even believe in death. The important thing was that he wanted to look at what was there—perhaps it was much more interesting than living in a village or on the shores of a lake. He saw death as another province, located under the heavens as if at the bottom of cool water, and it attracted him” [Втайне он вообще не верил в смерть, главное же, он хотел посмотреть—что там есть: может быть, гораздо интересней, чем жить в селе или на берегу озера; он видел смерть как другую губернию, которая расположена под небом, будто на дне

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The underwater utopia he seeks has its origins in the mythical city of Kitezh, and has nothing to do with the desperation of suicide. Death for the fisherman does not represent a profound shift in his state of (non)existence, but rather a physical place to be explored, a place that could be settled and yield a “much more interesting” and happier life.

Again, the specter of Christianity defines the motifs with which Platonov illustrates the story while he simultaneously denies their fulfillment. Dmitrii Ivanovich’s vocation as a fisherman identifies him as a Christ-like figure, and his willingness to explore death in search of a new life is Platonov’s parody of Christian otherworldliness.

In this way he resembles the first man from the parable who “died all his life” in order to never die. The fisherman’s death is a result of awe and wonderment in what death has to teach, and a search for knowledge identified with the look in the eye of a dead fish when it “stands between life and death.” “Look—there’s wisdom! A fish stands between life and death, so that he’s dumb and expressionless. I mean even a calf thinks, but a fish, no. It already knows everything.” [Гляди—премудрость. Рыба между жизнью и смертью стоит, оттого она и немая и глядит без выражения; телок ведь и тот думает, а рыба нет—она все уже знает]. The empty expression of death in the eye of the fish looks to the fisherman like an ecstatic wisdom that appears as paralysis. Its manifestation in the

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40 See, for example, John 21: 1-14, when Jesus appears to his disciples after his resurrection while they are fishing, as well as Jesus’s references to fishing in calling his disciples.

41 *Chevengur*, 6; *Sobranie* 15.
fish’s expression is mystical, in that it is beyond reason and thus cannot be communicated, and the fisherman’s suicide appears equally inexplicable and mystical, like that of a holy fool, who transgresses the bounds of sense and logic in a pursuit of a mystical truth, even into death. But whereas the holy fool often sees what cannot be seen with normal vision, Dmitrii Ivanovich mistakes the emptiness of the fish’s eye with profundity. His desire to live in death is rooted in his disbelief in death’s permanence and his belief in his ability to return. Instead, he sets the precedent for his son who at the end of the novel follows his fate, descending into the lake and into death like his father.

And yet, there is something profound about Dmitrii Ivanovich’s longing to explore death like another province. As Mikhail Geller notes, Dmitrii Ivanovich is just one of Platonov’s characters who finds the space of life “too restrictive” but “believe that their exit from life is temporary, that they will return from the wandering in non-being, having solved the mysteries that tormented them.” David Bethea suggests that the path of the fisherman “is the ever-present alternative to a realization of the utopian urge in history; it forks away from the other overland roads as an option to be taken when all else fails.” Rather than the salvation offered by resurrection, Platonov’s work after *Chevengur* is focused on precisely what the fisherman sees in the eye of the fish, that in-

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between state that stands “between life and death.” This character, and his profound philosophical, yet tragic, obsession with the mystery of death, becomes the central motif in many of his later works. It is in this space “between life and death” that Platonov’s characters exist, a space in which they, like Dmitrii Ivanovich, “live awhile in death.”

The character of the pilgrim and the topos of death as “another province” are at the heart of Platonov’s the novel that followed, *The Foundation Pit* [Котлован]. While Seifrid has noted that the English translation’s “pit” is perhaps too suggestive of negativity than the original Russian title (which also carries an emphasis on the idea of potential or prospect), the novel’s overwhelming imagery of hollowness and emptiness justifies the title’s implication that its characters are somehow engulfed by death from the very beginning. Furthermore, the title signals one of the dominant thematic aspects of the novel, namely the hollowing out of language, which is here used to suggest the optimism of building that the novel subverts. Platonov’s descriptions of both the provincial landscape and characters, particularly the nameless diggers at the pit, suggest that everything that takes place in the novel occurs in a virtual underworld, an inversion of the utopian world of socialism, where life resembles death. This is summarized

45 More has been written about the tripartite ontology of Platonov’s worldview, which was influenced by fellow Fedorovian contemporary Cosmist philosophers and scientists, most prominently by the scientist Vladimir Vernadsky, whose research into the methods of the earth’s creation led to the postulation of a third state between “living” and “dead”—the “non-alive” [неживое], which is a state of potential for life that only needs to be awakened, rather than resurrected. See Sergei Brel’, “Kul’turnye konteksty ‘zhivogo-nezhivogo’ A. Platonova,” in “Strana filosofov” *Andreia Platonova: problemy tvorchestva*, vol. 4, ed. N. V. Kornienko (Moscow: Nasledie, 2000), 239-245.

46 For example, Seifrid writes that “something like ‘The Building Site’ would capture more of its at least provisional air of optimism.” See Seifrid, *A Companion to Andrei Platonov’s The Foundation Pit*, 104-5.
succinctly by the phantom existence of the tower, the prospective new residence of the
town’s population (and, eventually, in its most utopian imagining, of “the working people
of the whole earth”), which turns out to be no more than a grave for the embodied hope
of socialism, Nastya. With Nastya, Platonov again combines socialist utopian thought
with universal salvation: her full name, Anastasia, identifies her with the Greek anastasis,
meaning resurrection. In the novel, however, life is absorbed by death and death
penetrates into the world of life, resulting in grotesque figures of corpse-like workers and
peasants who sleep in coffins.

Platonov combines the thematics and poetics of the living corpse in this novel,
which begins with the main protagonist, Voshchev, appearing as a narrative subject of
interest as he disappears from the social and symbolic world of which he is a part.47 The
first two sentences of the novel help illustrate how the idea of living death works on both
narrative planes. Voshchev emerges on the day of his thirtieth birthday, which is
coincidentally the day his life, in a certain sense, ends. He is fired from his job at a
machine factory because of an “increasing loss of powers” (literally, “the growth of
weakness” [рост слабосильности]), which is a result of the development of his inner
world. Alongside his apparent physical disappearance, his emergence as a narrative
subject depends on several other symbolic layers of narrative “death.” Expulsion from the

47 As Elena Tolstaya-Segal points out, Voshchev’s name is etymologically connected
both the wax [воск] and the colloquial pronunciation of вообще (ваше), meaning
approximately “in general.” Both words also contribute in different ways to Voshchev’s
emptiness, whether as a wax figure (recall Vasilii Rozanov’s comment that Gogol’s
characters were “wax figures” rather than real people) or as a general “everyman” with
no specific content of his own. See Elena Tolstaya-Segal, “О свяzi низших уровней
текста s vysshimi; proza Andreia Platonova” in Slavica Hierosolymitana, vol. 2, 1978,
197.
workplace means a double death sentence for Voshchev. First, it deprives him of the way in which “he had earned the means of his existence,” the urgency of which is clarified further when Voshchev stands in front of the trade union committee to beg for another job because “he had to live and eat again.” His physical existence is put in peril by his spiritual search for meaningfulness. As the latter constitutes the basis for the rest of the novel, the narrative is predicated on Voshchev’s exchange of his material “existence” for spiritual “life.” Second, and related to the first point, by losing his position as a worker, Voshchev becomes a social and political nonentity: “We cannot defend you, you are a politically ignorant [unconscious—A.T.] man, and we don’t wish to find ourselves at the tail end of the masses” [Мы тебя отстоять не можем, ты человек несознательный, а мы не желаем очутиться в хвосте масс], Voshchev is told by the trade union committee.\(^48\) Being politically unconscious, Voshchev loses his humanity in front of the committee, whose decisions affect not only his political life but also his access to food and shelter: “Voshchev wanted to ask for some other work, even the feeblest, just so that he would earn enough to eat; and he would do his thinking on his own time. But how can one ask for anything if there’s no respect for a man, and Voshchev saw that those people had no feeling for him” [Вощев хотел попросить какой-нибудь самой слабой работы, чтобы хватило на пропитание,--думать же он будет во внеурочное время; но для просьбы нужно иметь уважение к людям, а Вощев не видел от них чувства к себе].\(^49\) No longer worthy of the respect given to human beings, he is effectively banished to the realm of the subhuman and is treated as such.

\(^{48}\) The Foundation Pit, 5-6. Sobranie, 415.

\(^{49}\) Ibid.
This in part reflects the historical situation of workers and non-workers. Working was a requisite for political life and was encoded into each iteration of the Constitution after 1917. It can be seen, for example, in Section IV, Chapter 13 of the 1918 Constitution of the RSFSR, where “the right to vote and be elected to the Soviet” is granted explicitly to “all who earn their livelihood through productive and socially useful work” [все добывающие средства к жизни производительным и общественно полезным трудом]. Those who were forbidden from voting or being elected, and thus comprised a class of virtual “dead souls” to the state, include non-workers, specifically “individuals living on non-laborer wages” [лица, живущие на нетрудовой доход]. In general, these provisions (which, according to Shelia Fitzpatrick, also subjected this underclass to a wide variety of civil disabilities such as exclusion from higher education and extra taxation) were primarily aimed at “former people;” that is, former members of the old privileged classes and former capitalists, as well as certain classes of criminals and current and former suspected members of the Tsarist police. Later, however, they would also be used to target kulaks, former Nepmen, and others whose social class made them “natural opponents of the Soviet state.” Especially during the First Five-Year Plan period, “these instincts were given free rein,” and the designation of “class enemy” was used more liberally to include other undesirable members of society. By losing his means of survival, Voshchev also loses his political personhood, emerging into the narrative as a member of the living dead and wandering through the novel as a hollow waif, “living in absence from himself” as he searches for “truth.”

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As this introduction-through-disappearance takes place on a thematic level, it seeps into the semantic level as well. Platonov not only populates his stories with “dead souls,” he also employs aspects of what Renate Lachmann in her essay on Gogol calls the “poetics of negativity.”51 These rhetorical figures of abstention include hyperbole, phantasm, allegory, and nonsense, as well as hypo- and hypertrophic language to establish an all-encompassing semantics of negativity, through which absence is made palpable.52 Voshchev’s own disappearance from life is made all the more visible thanks to the pleonastic language of the first sentences (including the phrase “growth of weakness”), whose complicated formulation of a simple idea mimics that of Soviet bureaucratese. The similarity in the language of the first sentence bears a striking resemblance to the excerpt of the 1918 Constitution above, again aligning Voshchev with “former people.” Compare *The Foundation Pit* (где он добывал средства для своего существованья) and the Constitution (все добывающие средства к жизни производительным и общественно полезным трудом). Furthermore, Voshchev’s name is introduced obliquely in the dative case, as if the grammar reflects his own provisional existence as a subject. The second sentence includes three pronouns referring to Voshchev, one in the dative [ему написали], one in the locative [вследствие роста]


52 Negative semantics is an aspect of the theological tradition of apophaticism, which proceeds toward truth through negative statements about the nature of God. This “negative way” alleviates the disquieting ineffability of God and transforms this absence in to a mysteriously experienced presence. Apophaticism was a powerful tradition in Eastern Orthodoxy and influenced many Russian philosophers and writers, not least of which was Nikolai Gogol, with whom Platonov shares some characteristics, and Vladimir Solovyev, one of Fedorov’s many followers.
слабильности в нем] and once in conjunction with a reflexive verb (whose subject is also its object) [он устраняется с производства]. His “personal life” [личная жизнь] (contrasted with his “existence,” which is connected to his work and his physical, biological and social being) appears in the genitive case, the case also used to denote negation and absence, as if to suggest the hollowness of his body he discovers later: “[…] and in the darkness of his body he felt a quiet spot where there was nothing.”

This negative relationship between emergence and death applies to the broader context of language as well: the contrast between the simple meaning of the first two sentences and the complex, formulaic language used to express it sets up the struggle not only between Voshchev as another “little man” of Russian literature against the Soviet dictates of law and language, but also portends the struggle between matter (form) and spirit (content) that plagues Voshchev, Prushevsky, Chiklin, and others. Here, form outweighs content and yields the ponderous formulation, as if language itself is dead matter, much like the world according to Prushevsky, which is made up of “dead matter,” which “always submitted to precision and patience; hence it was inanimate and empty.”

The material with which The Foundation Pit is constructed resembles the dead material out of which the foundation pit in the story is built, with both resulting in paradoxical negative creations.

Voshchev’s story, which begins on his thirtieth birthday, ends with an inversion of the resurrection story in the form of Nastya’s life being claimed by death. His journey into the countryside in his search for truth [истина] has its model in Christ, who began

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53 Platonov, The Foundation Pit, 10.

54 Ibid. 18.
his sojourn into the wilderness after his baptism at thirty years old. The world in which *The Foundation Pit* takes place is located across the physical barrier of the fence at the edge of town and the metaphysical boundary of life and death, which is why it resembles a netherworld of living corpses. Voshchev immediately encounters Zhachev, the “cripple of imperialism” [урод империализма], whose dismembered body physically mirrors Voshchev’s spiritual disappear from existence. “Nobody’s a cripple like you,” Zhachev tells Voshchev, apparently recognizing their kinship. Voshchev then encounters the workers at the pit, whose corpse-like bodies are illuminated by a chthonic lamp as they sleep in a barn:

Inside the barn, some seventeen or twenty people slept on their backs, and the dimmed lamp lit the unconscious human faces. All the sleepers were as thin as corpses; in each one, the narrow space between the skin and bones was occupied by veins, and the thickness of the veins showed how much blood they had to pass during the hours of strenuous labor. The cotton of the shirts conveyed exactly the slow, refreshing work of the heart, which beat close to the surface, in the darkness of the wasted body of each sleeper. Voshchev peered into the face of the sleeper nearest to him—did it express the simple happiness of a satisfied man? But the man was dead asleep, his eyes hidden deeply and sorrowfully, and his chilled legs stretched out helplessly in shabby working pants. There was no sound except of breathing in the barrack. Nobody had any dreams and nobody conversed with memories. Each man existed without any superfluity of life, and in sleep only his heart remained alive, preserving him.

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55 According to Luke 3:23, Christ is baptized when he is thirty years old and immediately wanders into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. The wilderness in the Gospel story is a prelude to his temptation and death on the cross, and therefore to his resurrection.

56 In some respects, Platonov is simply borrowing a trope from 19th century Russian literature, which often sets stories of “living dead,” hollow people in the countryside. See Gogol’s *Dead Souls*, Dostoevsky’s *Notes from the House of the Dead*, or Saltykov-Schedrin’s *The Golovlyov Family*, each of which was in a way *The Foundation Pit’s* spiritual and stylistic predecessor.

57 Platonov, *The Foundation Pit*, 11.
Внутри сарая спали на спине семнадцать или двадцать человек и припопутешественная лампа освещала бессознательные человеческие лица. Все спящие были худы, как умершие, тесное место меж кожей и костями у каждого было занято жилами, и по толщине жил было видно, как много крови они должны пропускать во время напряжения труда. Ситце рубах с точностью передавал медленную освежающую работу сердца—оно билось вблизи, во тьме опустошенного тела каждого уснувшего. Воццев всмотрелся в лицо ближнего спящего—не выражает ли оно безответного счастья удовлетворенного человека. Но спящий лежал замертво, глубоко и печально скрылись его глаза, и охладевшие ноги беспомощно вытянулись в старых рабочих штанах. Кроме дыханья, в бараке не было звука, никто не видел снов и не разговаривал с воспоминаниями—каждый существовал без всякого излишка жизни, и во время сна оставалось живым только сердце, берегущее человека.

Voshchev’s hope of finding the “truth” in the bodies of the workers is parodied in their utter emptiness, reduced only to physical remains. Sleeping in the barn like livestock, they appear as grotesque caricatures, in which the boundaries separating inside and outside, human and animal, and living and dead, are indistinguishable. Platonov emphasizes their “human faces,” which only further belies their subhuman existence, as their bodies consist of mere bones and a translucent layer of skin. But even more important than their exposed organs and vascular system is that their physical destitution is projected inward, revealing a void of inner life. The darkness of the surrounding night becomes the “darkness of the wasted body” and a corporeal emptiness unable to be “occupied by veins.” The breath [дыхание] that they expel is implicitly contrasted with the workers’ lack of an inner soul [душа], without which “nobody had any dreams and nobody conversed with memories. Each man existed without any superfluity of life […]”. Devoid of this invisible, immaterial “superfluity of life,” the workers’ bodies are

58 Ibid. 12-13; Sochineniia 420-421.
indistinguishable from their abject negative image, the corpse, as if the lack of an interior life itself is the cause of their grotesque physical forms. But most strikingly of all, Voshchev sees something of himself reflected in these grotesque figures; in another Biblical allusion, as he looks at the “nearest” [ближний] sleeper, he sees also his neighbor (Matthew 22:39: Love thy neighbor as thyself [Возлюби ближнего твоего, как самого себя]).

The emptiness of their bodies registers in the world around them: the land set to be dug “smelled of dead grass and the dampness of denuded earth” before work commences, and the earth itself, regarded as “dead matter” by the project’s engineer, Prushevsky, is full of “dead places” into which the workers dig. It is eventually transferred into the foundation pit itself; the utopian project of a house for humanity, a Soviet Tower of Babel, ironically becomes Nastya’s grave. Prushevsky imagines the future residents of a tower to be built “in the middle of the world” for “the working people of the whole earth [to] enter for permanent happy settlement,” but cannot imagine what kind of bodies these tenants will have, nor whether or not they will “be full of that excess of warm life that used to be called soul. He was afraid of erecting empty buildings, in which people would live only to keep out of bad weather.” Prushevsky himself is afraid that this symbol of man-made utopia is as empty as the bodies that will populate it, bodies that ironically resemble those of the hollow workers. Emptiness characterizes the landscape and population of The Foundation Pit, just as the symbol of salvation becomes little more than an empty signifier of the utopian dreams of immortality and resurrection.

59 Ibid. 18-19.
Platonov does not depict resurrection in the novel—he in fact parodies it through Zhachev, who claims that Marxism will resurrect Lenin and he “would find work for Lenin too,” and laments its passing with Nastya’s death. Instead, resurrection yields to acts of memory in which the dead are preserved, just as Chiklin begs for “something [to] be saved of the person.” Physical death is rarely or only passingly observed, but metaphors of death—Voschev’s expulsion from work, the kulaks liquidation and expulsion down the river—instead become significant narrative events in the lives of its characters, defining their purpose and their struggles. Even Nastya’s death is filled with symbolism, rather than pathos, as she has been made an explicit emblem of the socialist future. The “dead,” then, are not only the literal dead, but also the “lost people” who, like Voschev, “had lived like him without truth and who had died before the victorious conclusion.” This group includes the diggers and the kulak peasants, who exist between the memory of the past and the paradise of the future, represented by the tower, but belong to neither. The kulaks are class enemies, aptly called “former people” in the Stalinist language of the Five-Year Plan, while the diggers, on the other hand, are “not-quite” people, belonging neither to the liquidated bourgeois past, nor to the transfigured bodies of the future imagined by Prushevsy. They are the grotesque “living dead” of the neither/nor, both contaminated by the past but not yet part of the future.

60 Ibid. 120.
61 Ibid. 118.
62 In her study on the Soviet Gothic, Muireann Maguire acknowledges that the Gothic-fantastic tropes used by Marx and Lenin—the undead corpse, the lurking specter, the inadvertent gravediggers of history—in fact were culturally and historically relative, leading to pernicious historical paradoxes. Lenin himself admitted that the corruption of the old society would contaminate the first generations of the new society: “who, then,
The ultimate form of death, the form of vitality also lacking in the bodies of the workers, is the absence of memory. Fedorov’s thoroughly materialist philosophy still privileged memory of one’s ancestors above all, because it is only through memory that one feels an ethical responsibility towards the dead. Platonov, although having abandoned the literal dream of resurrection, still retains this ethical substructure in his novel, implying that memory is not the antidote but the salve for death. Voshchev feels the pangs of oblivion as watches the young pioneer girls march by and feels himself “being shunted out [устраняется] by hurrying, active youth into the silence of obscurity [безнвятность].” This passage not only relates his expulsion from memory to the expulsion from the factory [устраняется с производства], but also connects his own existence to the dead objects he collects in a sack “for remembering and avenging every obscure, neglected thing [куда собирал для памяти и отмщения всякую безвестность]. These objects—a dry, dead leaf, and a bird that dies midflight—also include those collected from the village after the liquidation of the kulak peasants, objects that, “instead of people” are entered in as “evidences of [their] existence.” The “poor, rejected objects, all the small unknown and forgotten things” that Voshchev collects “to be avenged by socialism” form a literal “propertyless” body through metonymic replacement: “a bast shoe from the last century, a leaden earring from a shepherd’s ear, a trouserleg of homespun cloth, and a variety of other equipment of a laboring but...”

were the vampires and living corpses, those metaphors beloved of propagandists, within Soviet Russian society?” The paranoia of not having truly buried the past, one of the Gothic tropes par excellence, thus also reemerges in what she calls the Soviet Gothic. See Maguire, Stalin’s Ghosts, 27.

63 Platonov, The Foundation Pit, 10.
If Fedorov imagined resurrection through the literal reassembly of molecules of the deceased, preceded by the collection of ancestral artifacts in “museum-shrines,” Voshchev’s collection of these artifacts is an ironic allusion to his philosophy, which parodies the salvific promise of resurrection. The end of the novel casts doubt on the utopianism of Stalin’s Five-Year Plan, but Voshchev’s collection of these dead objects offers an alternative in sympathy and care, which emerge in the promise of memory: “Lie here; I’ll find out why you lived and died. Since nobody needs you and you are lying uselessly in the middle of things, I will keep and remember you” [Лежи здесь, я узнаю, за что ты жил и погиб. Раз ты никому не нужен и валяешься среди всего мира, то я тебя буду хранить и помнить].

This brings us back to the “dead objects” with which Chiklin surrounds Julia’s body. This makeshift memorial service held by Chiklin suspends her body between life and death. At one point, Chiklin bends and kisses her, causing Prushevsky to recoil. “What of it,” Chiklin says, “Anybody can be dead if he’s made to suffer enough. After all, you need her not for life, but only for remembering.” Chiklin’s kiss marks Julia’s body like an icon, preserving it in a space that both accepts and defies death. Her body is not buried underground but instead left in the tomb of the deserted factory, while her daughter, whose name symbolizes resurrection, emerges. Nastya’s death portends the death of Platonov’s utopian dreams, but it is Julia’s body, one of the dead objects cast

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64 Ibid. 118.

65 Seifrid makes similar remarks on a passage from Chevengur, in which Iakov Titych also collects pieces of detritus. See Seifrid, Andrei Platonov: Uncertainties of Spirit, 112.

66 Platonov, The Foundation Pit, 8; Sobranie, 416.

67 Ibid. 60.
throughout the novel, that represents a modest recalibration of the Fedorovian ethics of memory.

Platonov himself wrote in an afterword to the novel that he intended it as a kind of negative example, an allegorical realization of hypothetical reality:

Will the USSR perish like Nastya, or will it grow up to be a complete human being, into a historically new society? This was the concern which formed the theme of the work as the author was writing it. The author may have erred in having portrayed in the girl’s death the demise of the socialist generation, but this error resulted from excessive concern for something beloved, whose loss would be equivalent to the destruction not only of the past but of the future as well.

Погибнет ли эсесерша подобно Насте или вырастет в целого человека, в новое историческое общество? Это тревожное чувство и составляло тему сочинения, когда его писал автор. Автор мог ошибиться, изобразив в виде смерти девочки гибель социалистического поколения, но эта ошибка произошла лишь от излишней тревоги за нечто любимое, потеря чего равносильна разрушению не только всего прошлого, но и будущего.68

Platonov’s question places the novel in the space “between life and death” (погибнет ли или вырастет?), that mysterious space in which Dmitrii Ivanovich saw wisdom. This is the philosophical space for investigation in Platonov’s fiction. Accordingly, his world and his characters are also suspended in such a limbo, as the events of the novel appear to take place in some form of allegorical underworld, in which the landscape and the characters have absorbed death into their very being. This becomes an extended metaphor in his next large work, Dzhan, in which the hero, Nazar Chagataev, returns to his birthplace in a literal desert to resurrect (that is, organize) the nomadic tribe into which he was born. Dzhan is much more conciliatory towards Stalinist literary practices and

68 Translation mine. Sobranie, 534.
exhibits little to none of the stylistic idiosyncrasies of his earlier works. Yet even there, the familiar motifs of living death and resurrection are present. As his career and writing evolved, Platonov managed to keep writing about death and resurrection in a way that, despite his literary compromises, continued to mark his work.

**The Domestication of Death**

Platonov’s literary career from the mid-1930s on is marked stylistically and thematically by his turn to the genre of the short story and to examining themes of domesticity and personal intimacy. Even his later war stories, which have their roots in reportage, often portray the destruction of war in terms of familial relations. Many scholars have speculated on the reasons for such a transformation in Platonov’s literary concerns, including external pressure to conform to socialist realism, the desire to be published and reach an audience and, perhaps most compellingly, to escape into the private world of human experience as an answer to increasing dissatisfaction with his own utopian aspirations.69 Along with these stylistic and thematic shifts, Platonov’s conception of resurrection, life and living death also shifted, both in his interpretation of what it meant to be spiritually alive and dead, and in his symbolic representation of these states. In the intimate sphere of these short stories, the theme of resurrection is set against

69 Seifrid lays out his argument for having “two Platonovs,” pre- and post-1934, based on Platonov’s conversion to a socialist realist aesthetic, while still retaining his own idiosyncratic world view and, at least partially, the poetics of its earlier expression. See Seifrid, Andrei Platonov: Uncertainties of Spirit, Chapter 5. Meanwhile, in his analysis of Platonov’s treatment of the feminine principle in his prose, Phillip Ross Bullock argues that utopianism increasingly becomes unable to provide realistic comforts, and Platonov’s migration to themes of domesticity was his way of exploring human relations as an alternative to the intoxicating verbiage of Marxism-Leninism in his search for contentment. See Phillip Ross Bullock, The Feminine in the Prose of Andrey Platonov (London: Modern Humanities Research Association and Maney Publishing, 2005), Chapter 3.
the establishment of any sort of political utopia, and instead is located in human relations, particularly the type of love that exists within families. By looking at three short stories, “The River Potudan” [Река Потудань], “The Third Son,” [Третий сын], and “The Seeker of the Perished” [Взыскание погибших], we can see how the theme of resurrection undergoes adjustment in both the quietest period of his domestic tales, and finally in his war stories. Disillusioned with the grand, utopian project of a materialist resurrection, Platonov instead reinterprets Fedorov’s ethics of kinship, love, and memory as a way to domesticate, rather than eradicate, death as a human experience.

In the opening sentences of “The River Potudan,” we learn that Nikita Firsov is returning from fighting for the Red Army in the Civil War. He had left his home years before like other men who were now “on their way to live as if for the first time, dimly remembering themselves as they had been three or four years ago, for they had turned into quite different people” [они шли теперь жить точно впервые, смутно помня себя, какими они были три-четыре года назад, потому что они превратились совсем в других людей].

Nikita’s own transformation through death and a return to life at the end of the story is foreshadowed from the very beginning with this description of war, represented as a journey through death. While other soldiers are returning “home to their own lives and to life in general” [домой к своей и общей жизни] full of the “great universal hope” of the revolution, Nikita’s own return is accompanied by a sense of uncanniness, “as if the man on foot were not from here” [точно пешеход был нездешний]. The word for “not from here” [нездешний] resonates with the titular river Potudan, which linguistically points to an other place or movement across a border from

“here” to “there” (both туда and по ту [сторону] echo in its name).71 The river’s physical geography plays a pivotal role in the story, creating the symbolic boundary of the River Styx between “here” and “there,” this world and the next. Both Nikita and Lyuba imagine their own passage from life to death in terms of this river. Nikita’s procreative life force, or lack thereof, is described in terms of the frozen river, and its thaw allows Lyuba to attempt suicide, the event that brings Nikita back home and finally to life. Nikita’s “otherworldliness” at the beginning and the spiritual topography of the Potudan open the question of Nikita’s “return to life in general,” specifically regarding the physical and spiritual boundaries of life and death.

Nikita’s estrangement grows even after his initial arrival home. He returns to his father, a joiner in a peasant furniture workshop who has lost two of his sons in the First World War. His third son and final hope arrives at night, and the narrator links this homecoming with Nikita’s birth and, potentially, a new life: “The father got down from the old wooden bed he had slept on with the mother of all his sons; once Nikita himself had been born on that very bed.”72 But there is no return to childhood for Nikita, who now sees his hometown from an estranged perspective: the apple trees that once blossomed are dead, the large, impressive manors turn out to be dilapidated one-storey huts occupied by ants, and, apparently, “the town had shrunk.” The light, color, and life have literally faded out of the world, as weather and time have taken their toll on the facades of homes and buildings. It is not clear to what extent his impression comes from

71 Tolstaya-Segal analyzes the river’s etymology, tying the river’s name to the story’s theme of “a pull beyond, into otherworldliness [в потустороннее].” See Tolstaya-Segal, “O sviazi nizshikh urovnei teksta s vysshimi; proza Andreia Platonova,” 197-198.

the town’s degradation during the years of Civil War, or whether, as he thinks, “it must mean he had lived through a lot of his life, if large mysterious objects had now become small and dull.”

Either the town has lost its vitality, or Nikita himself has lost the warmth and feeling of life following his experiences in the war. Having crossed a psychological boundary during his time away, Nikita finds himself estranged from his childhood home.

Platonov pits mere biological existence against the spiritual notion of “life” which is full of memory and meaning. Just as Nikita wonders “how he was to live from now on,” he meets Lyuba, who is walking on the street where “the people had started coming back to life now that the war was over.”

The daughter of a schoolteacher whom Nikita’s father had courted but never married, Lyuba recognizes Nikita from their childhood and they begin a quiet courtship. She is a student at the medical academy, although her interest in medicine goes beyond the dogma of proper Soviet materialism: “the human heart had been tormented too much, not only by hunger and poverty but by the meaninglessness of life, and it was necessary to understand what human existence really was: Was it something serious or was it a joke [by design—A.T.]?”

A lack of food or material means may well result in the body’s death, but a loss of meaning desiccates life from inside, leaving one an empty body with no spirit.

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73 Ibid. 218.

74 Ibid. 219.

75 Ibid. 221/432.
These two levels of existence, that of the physical body and of the meaningful subject, are separate and independent. Lyuba for instance declares her hunger divided between her self and her body: “It isn’t my fault! I’m really not all that fond of eating. It’s not me—it’s my head. It starts aching and thinking about bread, it stops me from living and thinking about anything else” [А я не виновата! Я и так не очень люблю кушать: это не я—голова сама начинает болеть, она думает про хлеб и мешает мне жить и думать другое]. While the physical body requires sustenance to continue existing, this does not define the “life” that belongs to the subject. For Lyuba and Platonov, these are two separate strata that each requires nourishment. Nikita barely survives a case of typhoid, thanks to Lyuba, who explains to him, “People die because they are ill and have no one to love them.” This echoes a similar thought by Nikita’s father, whose loneliness compels him to take into his home a beggarwoman or even an animal: “never mind if it unsettles your life and spreads dirt everywhere—without it you cease to be human.” Whether it is being “alive” or being a “human,” Platonov draws an important distinction between the material and spiritual types of being. One can be physically alive thanks to a lack of hunger, poverty and sickness, but still a kind of corpse without contact with another.

The separateness of the physical and spiritual produces a problem in the couple’s life together, as Nikita cannot reconcile his love for Lyuba with physical desire. His impotence is described in parallel terms to the Potudan, which at this point is still frozen: “all his strength pounded away in his heart, flowing into his throat and staying nowhere

76 Ibid. 222/433.
77 Ibid. 230.
else.” Lyuba, for her part, believes that he will learn to “love [her] less and then that will make him strong,” but for Nikita the shame convinces him to end his own life.

Meanwhile, incongruously, he talks of offspring and utopian happiness: “The Revolution’s here to stay, now’s a good time to bear children. Children will never be unhappy again!” Unable to bear the thought of Lyuba’s childbearing pain, however, Nikita remains impotent and cannot sleep with her to produce children. Instead, he begins to model grotesque clay figurines, which the narrator calls “dead fantasies,” that express his inner turmoil:

And when he had done everything there was to do, he would scrape up some clay from the old cellar into the flap of his shirt and carry it into their room. He would then sit on the floor and fashion the clay into small human figures and a variety of objects that had no function or likeness to anything—just dead fantasies in the shape of a mountain with an animal head growing out of it, or a huge tree root, apparently an ordinary root, yet so intricate, impenetrable, with each branch of it biting into the next, gnawing itself and torturing itself, that looking at this root for any length of time made you want to go to sleep.

А когда он отделывался начисто, то нагребал к себе в подол рубашки глину из старого погреба и шел с ней в квартиру. Там он садился на пол и лепил из глины фигурки людей и разные предметы, не имеющие подобия и назначения,—просто мертвые вымыслы в виде горы с выросшей из нее головой животного или корневища дерева, причем корень был как бы обыкновенный, но столь запутанный, непроходимый, впившийся одним своим отростком в другой, грызущий и мучающий сам себя, что от долгого наблюдения этого корня хотелось спать.

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78 Ibid. 234.

79 Ibid. 235.

80 Ibid. 236/446.
Nikita’s soulless “children” allude to both Biblical and pagan mythical creation stories. Eric Naiman points out Nikita’s similarities to Saint Nikita Muchenik, whose moniker explains the frequent appearance of the word muchit’sia in the story, including in the strange image of the tree root “gnawing itself and tormenting itself” [грызущий и мучающий сам себя]. But the word “likeness” [подобие] refers to the foundational creation of man in Genesis, who is made in the image and likeness of God. The clay material also points to Prometheus, who according to legend sculpted men out of clay before Athena breathed life into their bodies. Nikita’s association with stoking the fire for Lyuba (whose last name, Kuznetsova, alludes to the blacksmith Hephaestus, the source of Prometheus’s fire) throughout the story also links him to the Titan who gave form and fire to humanity. The fire that Nikita stokes, however, only ever gives off light, not heat: “Nikita got the stove going so the fire would give them light for their notebooks”; “He […] opened the stove door and put some chips of wood and short thin logs on the fire, trying to make it give more light and less heat”; “Nikita made to kindle a fire for some light.” This inability to provide warmth is hinted at toward the beginning of the story when he lies down by the Potudan and feels “life’s warmth […] go dark in him” and he dreams of a small, furry animal who crawls inside his soul “in order to burn up his breath” [чтобы сжечь его дыхание]. Nikita’s creations are a travesty of the creation myths, as his fire provides no heat, his love offers no passion, and his children remain

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83 Ibid. 214. Sobranie, 426.
inanimate clay grotesques. These empty humanoid statuettes are poor substitution for bringing life into the world.

Nikita’s inability to have sex and produce children with Lyuba also links him with the Fedorovian doctrine of ethical celibacy, which was a vital tenet of the plan of resurrection. Fedorov wrote essentially that the idea of sexual procreation was, in fact, a misnomer. There are two logical conflicts between sex and the Common Task: first, birth only renews the body’s inevitable trajectory towards death; and second, sex itself is an act of ego, individuation, and personality. The Common Task, on the other hand, meant to eliminate death from the human experience once and for all, which requires the unified effort of all mankind in a collective struggle, leaving no room for personal sexual relationships. It valorized kinship [родство] as the primary and only ethical relationship, making sex an act of incest. Sex was akin to death in Fedorov’s vision, and the earth (indeed, the universe) would be populated instead by our resurrected ancestors. Fedorov imagined that given the time and technology in the future, mankind would figure out a way to reassemble their bodies from these particles and in doing so, restore consciousness to these bodies as well. As well as being thematically suggestive, Nikita’s gathering of clay in the cellar is linguistically connected with this Fedorovian fantasy of bringing the dead back from the grave; in Russian, the verb used here for gather [нагребал] and the word for cellar [погреб] are both etymologically connected to words for digging, burial and grave, from which the words coffin [гроб] and tomb [гробница] also derive.

In 1934, only three years before writing *The River Potudan*, Platonov wrote about resurrection in his journal in precisely Fedorovian terms: “The first time a plant is produced from the seed of the mother and father, the second time it is produced from the
soil, consisting of the dust of the mother and father. The dust of the mother and father is the permanent basis for the life of the son. We arise on the dust of our fathers!” [Первый раз растение производится из семени отца-матери, второй раз оно производится из почвы, состоящей из праха отца-матери. Прах отца-матери—непрерывное основание жизни сына. Мы поднимаемся на прахе своих отцов!] But Nikita’s celibacy and his molding of clay figurines does not manifest as adherence to a moral imperative or devotion to philosophical doctrine. It is instead presented as a tragedy of the spirit’s estrangement from its physical manifestation. The sculptures resemble the hollow body of their creator, whose blood and life force is as frozen as the Potudan. These inanimate objects are “dead” in the same way as Nikita himself resembles a corpse, containing no animating force within their bodies. Platonov’s beliefs in a salvific materialism, either a literal or metaphorical resurrection brought on through progress and revolution, gives way in this story to a disenchanted materialism devoid of such dreams. Nikita’s clay figurines are not the utopian bodies of resurrected ancestors, but instead the anti-utopian bodies of a materialist doctrine with no salvation.

The bizarre deformations of the statuettes are an expression of the spiritual weakness inherent in strictly material interpretations of life, including resurrection. These “children” of an impotent God are grotesque in the truest sense according to Geoffrey Galt Harpham, who claims that, “Grotesque figures […] seem to be singular events, appearing in the world by virtue of an illegitimate act of creation, manifesting no

84 Andrei Platonov, Zapisnye knizhki, 147.
coherent, and certainly no divine, intention.”\(^{85}\) Nikita’s “illegitimate” creations reflect only the weak, malleable material of which they are made, and nothing of the spirit that governs their purpose and meaning. They are literally and figuratively soulless, with Harpham qualifying soul in grotesque art as “an organizing spiritual principle, the source of structure and order.”\(^{86}\) The pathology of separation of form from meaning that plagues Nikita and manifests in his figurines is precisely what Lyuba studies in medicine and means to cure. Without this reconciliation, the body is damned to solitude and exile, lacking kinship: “The damned, on the other hand, announce and suffer their singularity; their clotted and degraded shapes, seen throughout Western art, are entirely their own, or those of their sins […] Considered as a class, the damned resist family grouping.”\(^{87}\) Nikita resists the organizing structure of family, leaving his wife and his father, as well as his soulless “children,” to live like one of the damned at Kantemirovka.

His symbolic resurrection—Nikita’s definitive “return to life in general”—comes after Nikita passes through a symbolic descent into another underworld of the bazaar at Kantemirovka and lives like a corpse with no soul.\(^{88}\) This is the closest Platonov gets to realizing Dmitrii Ivanovich’s desire to “live in death awhile and return,” as if death was

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\(^{86}\) Ibid. 6.

\(^{87}\) Ibid. 7.

\(^{88}\) According to Keith A. Livers, Nikita’s life in the bazaar is loosely modeled on the Russian Orthodox figure of the holy fool and a figurative descent into the underworld, where he must embrace the unclean before emerging back into life. See Keith A. Livers, *Constructing the Stalinist Body: Fictional Representations of Corporeality in the Stalinist 1930s* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2004), 57-58.
“another province.” Nikita forgets how to speak, think, and remember, becoming subhuman to the point where even the prison guard thinks, “Not worth dirying a prison with a man like him!”89 Nikita exists both outside the realm of life and the realm of death, not belonging to the former but not worthy of the latter. He ironically finds the domestic warmth lacking with Lyuba in his soul’s homelessness: “He might then seem to everyone else to be living his life in the world, but in fact he would just happen to be there, existing in unconsciousness, in poverty of mind, in absence of feeling, as if in some homely warmth, hiding from mortal grief” [пусть всем людям кажется, что этот человек живет себе на свете, а на самом деле он будет только находиться здесь и существовать в беспамятстве, в бедности ума, в бесчувствии, как в домашнем тепле, как в укрытии от смертного горя].90 Refusing to face the Fedorovian problem of mortality inherent in sexuality, Nikita searches for refuge in a virtual living death of muteness and soullessness. Rather than bringing the dead to life, Platonov instead brings death into the life of Nikita.

His resurrection from the world of the dead is a return to the order of kinship, realized in the recognition of his father and his return to Lyuba. As Robert Chandler observes, the importance of kinship to Platonov is emphasized in Nikita’s surname, Firsov, derived from “Firs,” the name of his paternal grandfather.91 Eric Naiman, in his psychoanalytic reading of the story, sees the father’s appearance exiting the latrine “with an empty sack under his arm” as the deflation and final “weakness of this paternal vision”

that has left Nikita castrated throughout the story. Through this reading, Naiman suggests how far Platonov has drifted from the explicit dictates of Fedorov, particularly in relation to the cult of fathers. This reading pits Nikita against his father in Oedipal conflict, with the son ultimately defeating the father. But this interpretation obscures the fact it is through, not against, his father that Nikita comes to himself and returns home. Living empty and alone in Kantemirovka, Nikita loses his identity, but when he recognizes his father, he also remembers himself.

Platonov suggests that love, literalized in Lyuba’s name, is the only respite from the emptiness of life without the promise of a utopian ideology. Returning to find her sick and in bed, Nikita embraces her and “a cruel, pitiful strength came to him. But Nikita’s joy from this close love of Lyuba was nothing higher than what he had known ordinarily; he felt only that his heart was now in command of all his body, sharing its blood with a poor but necessary pleasure.” Bullock inserts a caveat into such a hopeful reading, reminding us that, although Nikita’s acceptance of love offers “contact with Lyuba and with another life” [прикосновение к Любе и к другой жизни], he still thinks immediately of death, despite the erotic surprise of seeing her in their first encounter: “her pale muslin dress reached only to her knees […] he had seen dresses like it on women in their coffins, yet here the muslin was covering a body that was alive and full-

92 Naiman’s point about castration is supported by his father’s words upon seeing him: Does this mean you’re whole? [Значит, ты цел?]. See Eric Naiman, “Andrei Platonov and the Inadmissibility of Desire,” 351.

grown, only very poor.”

This image of her corpse-like body reemerges in the final line of the story after they have consummated their love, in which Lyuba is dressed in a “threadbare nightdress, and her thin body was chilled to the bone in the cool half dark of late time.” Nevertheless, Nikita’s spiritual estrangement from his body is finally resolved as the two are reunited and Platonov’s split with Fedorov’s vision of a celibate and resurrected population is pronounced, even though the specter of death still casts its shadow. It is a tentative resurrection that Platonov allows his hero, signaling that the reconciliation between the soul and the flesh is both a symbol of promise and resignation.

In his filmic interpretation of the story, director Alexander Sokurov underscores Nikita’s metaphorical resurrection and amplifies its Fedorovian undertones by inserting a scene from another of Platonov’s works. The Lonely Voice of Man [Одинокий голос человека] attempts to achieve the lyricism of the original story by supplementing the sparse narrative and dialogue with allegory and symbolism. One example of this is a recurrent image in which workers turn an enormous wheel in a circle, potentially alluding to several themes in The River Potudan: the cyclical force of seasons, nature, and time, the Sisyphean absurdity of life, and Nikita’s many “returns.” During Nikita’s migration to Kantemirovka, Sokurov splices in this image followed by a reinterpretation of the scene from Chevengur, in which Dmitrii Ivanovich’s conversation about death is staged with another man in a fishing boat. The conversation is virtually identical with that described in Chevengur, while its insertion into the story of Nikita and Lyuba changes its context.

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95 Ibid. 246.
The description of the fish relates to Nikita’s unconscious state when he is found in the bazaar, mute, expressionless, and seemingly suspended between life and death, and the bazaar is Nikita’s exploration of death as “another province.” After their conversation, Dmitrii Ivanovich ties up his feet and dives in the water, committing suicide, and Nikita’s story resumes. Only in the final seconds of the film, after Nikita has returned and reunited with Lyuba, do we see Dmitrii Ivanovich resurface and climb back into the boat. The lake combines the metaphor of crossing over into the province of death and the role of the Potudan in the lives of Nikita and Lyuba, literalizing what Mikhail Iampolsky sees as Sokurov’s version of Platonov’s story: “a story of a dive into love and death, given as a story of a dive into subjectivity, into otherness, into the darkness of other vision” [история в любовь и смерть, данная как история погружения в субъективность, в инобытие, в темноту иного зре ...]

Sokurov’s lyrical interpretation of “The River Potudan” integrates a scene from earlier in Platonov’s career, which reveals the evolution of the motifs of “living death” and resurrection in his work.

The same motifs of kinship and spiritual resurrection emerge obliquely in the compact story “The Third Son” [Третий сын], which takes place between a death and burial. In the story’s first sentence, an old woman dies in a provincial town. Her widowed husband sends out telegrams to their six sons, who have all moved away from home and become members of the Soviet elite. Their mother’s death brings them back home briefly, along with the daughter of the third son, who has never met her grandparents.

With their mother’s body lying in the main room of the house, each son grieves her

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silently and secretly as they observe a perfunctory Orthodox funeral service. That evening, while the father and his granddaughter both weep for the woman in the room where she lies, the sons in the other room rambunctiously tell stories, sing songs, wrestle and laugh until the third son, who has been quiet until now, speaks up. They grow quiet as he walks out of the room, approaches his mother’s coffin and suddenly loses consciousness and collapses on the floor. The other five brothers rush to revive him, and this event finally frees them from their inhibitions to mourn their dead mother. In the morning, all six brothers carry her coffin to bury her and the story ends on a relatively affirmative note, with the father feeling satisfied that “he too would be buried by these six powerful men—and buried no less properly.”97 The specter of resurrection haunts the narrative, but its realization is displaced from the physical corpse to the titular third son, and eventually his brothers.

The corpse is the site of abolishing the Fedorovian dreams of resurrection based in Orthodoxy and replacing them with Platonov’s ethics of resurrection, rooted in memory and kinship. The mother’s body is described in hagiographic language as it resists decay, still not smelling of death on the fourth day and actively “waiting on the table” [Мать ждала на столе] when her sons arrive. She has an even more lifelike appearance to her granddaughter, who sees the old woman staring back at her from under her half-closed eyelids [чуть глядящей на нее из-под прикрытых век белыми неморгающими глазами]. But unlike the saints’ bodies, these are not signs of holiness and the triumph of spirit over the body; they are instead signs of the body’s frailty and

sparseness even during life. Because she only “kept a small, miserly body for herself” in the most “pitiful state” while alive, her death hardly changes her physical appearance.

The Orthodox rite performed for her body is a parody of the Christian myth of salvation. The sons observe it without belief, and even the priest does not take solace in its spiritual comforts, but would rather “draw lasting comfort from a meeting with representatives of the new world he secretly admired but was unable to enter.”\textsuperscript{98} The mother organizes the ritual for her burial, not out of belief in God or for the physical fate of her dead body but because “she did not want to part from life without solemnity and memory.”\textsuperscript{99} The brothers cannot access this memory when they encounter her body for the first time. They do not see their mother, “whose love had always found them—even across thousands of miles—and they had sensed it constantly and instinctively and this had made them stronger and they had been successful in life more boldly.” Instead, they encounter a foreign object, which has metaphysically transformed from familiar to other: “Now their mother had turned into a corpse; she could no longer love anyone and was lying there like an indifferent stranger of an old woman” [Теперь мать превратилась в труп, она больше никого не могла любить и лежала, как равнодушная чужая старуха]. The corpse and the rituals around it are hollow, empty signifiers that cannot be refilled by the promise of resurrection.

Memory, instead, becomes the key to the mother’s resurrection in her sons’ lives. In contrast to his brothers’ behavior in the other room, the third son’s psychosomatic response to the corpse comes through coping with his mother’s death. While they recount

\textsuperscript{98} Ibid. 150.

\textsuperscript{99} Ibid. 149.
stories and sing songs, looking to repress their mother’s death by forgetting, the third son approaches it directly. He faints at the moment when he “reached out his hand in the dark and clutched at the edge of the coffin,” aligning his physical and mental comportment; as he struggles to grasp her death in his mind, he does so literally as well. 100 This physical site of contact triggers a mental response akin to death, and his brothers rush to his side, carry him into the other room, and calm him. By uniting in care for their brother, they perform a metaphorical resurrection, literally raising him up like Lazarus. This symbolic act translates to the resurrection of their mother in their memories. Whereas before they viewed her as a distant foreign object devoid of feeling, suddenly “they wept, whispering words and laments, as if the mother were standing over each one of them, listening to him and grieving that she had died and made her children yearn for her [заплакали, шепча слова и жалуясь, точно мать стояла над каждым, слышала его и горевала, что она умерла и заставила своих детей тосковать по ней]. 101 She no longer lies on the table in a coffin, but now “stands” over them, and the simile resurrects her with semantic agency.

The third son is Platonov’s moral hero because he is the one to recognize that “the tragedy is not that the mother has died, but that life continues on.”102 His reaction is an acceptance that tragedy and despair are a part of being human, and it is his response to his mother’s body, simulating death and resurrection, that makes him an “actual person” and “makes [his brothers] people.”103 Both Gurvich and Geller mention that Platonov only

100 Ibid. 153.
103 Geller, Andrei Platonov v poiskakh schast’ia, 364-5.
labels this son as a “communist” in the story (although, judging by their high positions, all the sons are “good communists” by the standards of Soviet society). In some sense, he represents Platonov’s moral ideal of communism, which crucially includes memory and respect for one’s parents and ancestors. While the literal Fedorovian dream of resurrection has long receded in Platonov’s fiction, the crucial tenets that informed Fedorov’s philosophy of resurrection remain.

Вперед, ребята, смерти нет—Resurrection at War

With the beginning of World War II, Platonov saw something similar in the existential threat posed by the Nazi German troops that he once saw in the early years of the revolution: the possibility of uniting the living against the forces of death. Platonov reacted enthusiastically to the call to war and committed himself to defeating fascist Germany, working as a war correspondent even through his late bout with tuberculosis. This wartime writing lacks the craft and subtlety of all his earlier works, perhaps as a result of the contingencies of living and writing from the frontlines of war, where encouraging stories of bravery were needed quickly and on a daily basis, or perhaps as a result of self-imposed censorship so that his stories would be published. In any case, Platonov’s participation in the genre of wartime reportage and interpretive reporting allowed him to insert into this otherwise formulaic writing the same motifs of living death and resurrection that he had been working with throughout his life. The threat of death was all too real in the Soviet Union during the war, and Platonov no longer needed the metaphors of the historical living and the dead to include the motif of resurrection. It instead emerges as a moral imperative directed at Soviet society, particularly toward the
soldiers fighting on the frontlines. This code of morality now applies more specifically to the narod, the Soviet people in their battle against the Germans.

In his war stories, the Germans are often depersonalized to the point of representing the force of death itself. They less resemble individual human beings and more an existential threat of pure chaos and death that tears apart the nation. Defeating the German army is not only a matter of national survival, but part of the war against death itself. In the story “The Seeker of the Perished” [Взыскание погибших], the Fedorovian belief in sobornost’ and humanity’s shared struggle against death receives additional nationalistic overtones consistent with the broader cultural rhetoric during World War II. The utopian hope of resurrection once again surfaces in the form of defeating the real, physical harbinger of death represented by the German army. The opening line from another story from this period, “The Defense of Semidvor’e” [Оборона Семидворья], signals how Fedorovian dreams of resurrection reemerge in the context of war—Forward, men, there is no death! [Вперед, ребята, смерти нет!] 104

No longer animating hollow corpses with hollow language, in his war stories, Platonov intends to speak for the dead. In “The Seeker of the Perished” [Взыскание погибших] from 1943, a mother has lost all her children to the war. Having suffered such a loss, she no longer fears the German army and wanders the streets back home. She meets her neighbor, who has also lost all her family, who tells her, “What can you do: live like you’re dead, I live like that, too” [А что ж тебе делать-то: живи как мертвая, я

She informs her that the dead have all been buried in a mass grave, and Maria Vasil’evna visits and speaks to the bodies of her children, who lie underground. Were it not for the fictional scenario, this monologue spoken by the mother to her children in the grave could be lifted from one of Platonov’s early essays. Completely erased are the linguistic idiosyncrasies of Platonov’s most experimental works, instead replaced by the colloquial speech patterns of the mother, who nonetheless expresses Platonov’s enigmatic relationship to death: “‘They’re sleeping,’ whispered the mother, ‘no one is even stirring. Dying was difficult, and they’re exhausted. Let them sleep, I can wait. I can’t live without children. I don’t want to live without the dead.’”

[Спят,--прошептала мать,--никто и не пошевельнется,--умирать было трудно, и они уморились. Пусть спят, я обожду—я не могу жить без детей, я не хочу жить без мертвых].

The characteristics of the living and dead are mixed, as always, and while it is only Maria Vasil’evna who speaks to her children, the story begins with an epigraph that positions her as the medium for the dead—“I cry out from the abyss—Words of the dead” [Из бездны взываю—Слова мертвых].

The name of the story itself comes from an icon of the same name depicting the Virgin Mary, to whom the dying, or those whose souls are in danger of spiritual death, pray for salvation. Platonov’s fantasy of resurrection again merges Christian motifs with Fedorov’s moral imperative when Maria, sitting at the grave of her children, tells her

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106 Ibid.

107 Ibid. 213.
dead daughter, “I alone cannot raise you, daughter; if only the people loved you, and would correct the lie on earth, then it would raise both you and all those who died righteously back to life: death, after all, is the first iniquity!” [Я одна не подыму тебя, дочка; если б весь народ полюбил тебя, да всю неправду на земле исправил, тогда бы и тебя, и всех праведно умерших он к жизни поднял: ведь смерть-то есть первая неправда!]. Platonov takes the wartime horror of mass grave burials and turns it into a Fedorovian metaphor of the kinship of the dead, with Maria Vasil’evna playing the role of Mary.

While the mother’s speech to her daughter’s resembles Platonov’s early utopian Proletkul’t beliefs, the final paragraph of the story reveals the transformation of his Fedorovian belief in resurrection to a wartime moral imperative while still retaining the influence of the philosopher. Once again, the religious motif is invoked only to be corrected. Maria, the mother and protector of the dead, perishes, leaving the responsibility of vengeance to the Red Army, and by extension, the Soviet population. A Red Army soldier passing by sees Maria Vasil’evna, now dead, lying on the grave, and recognizes her as the symbolic mother of all humanity: “Whoever’s mother you were, I’m also left an orphan without you” [Чьей бы ты матерью ни была, а я без тебя тоже остался сиротой]. In this stranger’s death, the soldier feels the shared loss of a member of his extended family, that of the Soviet narod. Bullock writes that Platonov’s war prose imports the domestic themes from his fiction of the late 1930s, but it is the army that plays the role of family, “the ultimate, parental locus, a vital site of material survival […] It is not that they are united simply by a common enemy: their fraternity is a deeper one,

108 Ibid. 218. Translation mine.
related not only by a common ideology, but also through the symbolic blood of the new Stalinist family.” While the fraternal relations of soldiers may be the focus of his wartime stories, the encounter between the soldier and Maria Vasil’ievna’s body extends the familial ties outside of institutions to the level of population. The soldier suddenly feels that “living now became even more necessary” because now his task was “not only to utterly commit to death the enemy of the life of people” [истребить намертво врага жизни людей], but also to “be able, after victory, to live that higher life, which the dead silently bequeathed us.” These thoughts grammatically shift in the final lines to a collective imperative addressed to his audience: “The dead have no one to rely on except for the living. Now we must live so that the death of our people is vindicated by the happy and free fate of our nation; through that, their death will be recovered [Мертвым некому довериться, кроме живых,--и нам надо так жить теперь, чтобы смерть наших людей была оправдана счастливой и свободной судьбой нашего народа и тем была взыскана их гибель]. Resurrection yields now to the goal of victory in war, ensuring both the survival of the nation and the justification of those who died for the cause.

Conclusion

Platonov’s representation of resurrection has come nearly full circle. Beginning with his early essays, Platonov imagined how humanity might reinterpret the eschatological event of resurrection in a way that produced life rather than reduced it to life after death. Predicating life on death’s necessity nullified it to the point of absurdity,


110 Ibid. 220.
resulting in the life-negating philosophy of Christianity. Platonov’s zeal for revolutionary utopianism enflamed his belief in a Fedorovian model of earthly resurrection. But as his faith in a utopian reality was tested, Platonov began to imagine other forms of spiritual resurrection, which produced the corollary state of living death. Living death became such a dominant characteristic of his prose that, in his more experimental years, it even characterizes his stylistics, when “dead matter” becomes the stuff out of which the work is made. The exigencies of Platonov’s difficult career as a writer—including being censored by none other than Stalin himself—and the dystopian fate of Stalin’s utopian projects ultimately led him to turn inward and toward small stories of domestic life. This, however, did not prevent him from importing the cosmic themes of resurrection into the lives of these characters, turning the prosaic into the mythical. The spiritual condition of living death again emerged into the physical world as death became an existential threat to the nation during World War II and resurrection became a call to avenge the death of the fallen. Platonov’s flexibility throughout his career as a writer belies his consistency in terms of philosophical inquiry in his fiction. Writing about the “dead souls” of his time, he is equally satirical and compassionate with those living dead—never just corpses but also people—who wander the bleak internal and external landscapes of his prose.
Chapter III

How to Disappear Partially: Sigizmund Krzhizhanovsky’s Autobiography of a Corpse and the Body of the Word

“I made a choice: better consciously not to be, than to be, but not conscious.”

Я выбрал: лучше сознательно не быть, чем быть, но не сознавать.¹

Only recently beginning to find his way into the canon of Russian modernist writers, Sigizmund Krzhizhanovsky is the author of a significant body of literature that revels in the playfulness of language through existentialist parables of life, death, and living death. Although writing during the same period as Platonov, Krzhizhanovsky shares little in common with his Russian contemporary’s interest in Fedorovian dreams of physical resurrection infused with Christological metaphor. Instead, Krzhizhanovsky animates what he calls the dead bodies of words, positing a metaphysical view of fiction that “lives” apart from its capacity to reflect reality. While an obscure figure during his lifetime, Krzhizhanovsky has gradually emerged as one of Russia’s most intriguing twentieth-century writers thanks to his rescue from the archives by Vadim Perel’muter and others.² Finding an audience for the first time decades after his death, Krzhizhanovsky’s fiction of living corpses has finally received its resurrection.

¹ Sigizmund Krzhizhanovskii, “Zapisnye tetradi. Vtoraia tetradь,” in Sobranie sochinenii v shesti tomakh, vol. 5, ed. Vadim Perel’muter (Saint Petersburg: Symposium, 2001-2013), 366. All Russian quotes hereafter are taken from Sobranie sochinenii unless otherwise noted, and will be abbreviated SS.

² Most of Krzhizhanovsky’s writings were published only after being rediscovered by literary historian and poet Vadim Perel’muter, who found Krzhizhanovsky’s name mentioned in a document from Georgii Shengeli’s archive and pursued the lead to RGALI. From 1988 until the mid-1990s, Perel’muter began publishing individual non-fiction and fictional works in various literary journals. Eventually, between 2001-2013,
In this chapter, I argue that what makes Krzhizhanovsky’s work unique and, simultaneously, of his time, is the transference of the existential condition of “living death” onto his philosophical approach to artistic language. The motif of the living corpse is a carefully cultivated theme that reveals his relationship to letters, literature, and the literary world of the first half of the Soviet century. I read Autobiography of a Corpse [Автобиография трупа], one of Krzhizhanovsky’s first posthumously published works in both Russian and English, as exemplifying the complex metaphysical relationship between idea, word, and world. In order to do so, I first contextualize the story in Krzhizhanovsky’s biography and contemporary reception, followed by a survey of relevant fiction and non-fictional essays, where death, dismemberment, and degeneration play a paradoxically animating role. Along the way, I point out places where Krzhizhanovsky might fit into the canon of avant-garde fiction and aesthetic manifestos, as well as how his inclusion in this canon could elucidate new philosophical networks connecting him and his contemporaries.

Krzhizhanovsky wrote enigmatically and prophetically, at times appearing to foretell the events of history to come. The science-fiction dystopian tale told by Dazh in The Letter Killers Club, written between 1925-7, in which a World Central Committee saps the free will from all human beings and remotely animates their bodies like marionettes, reads like a prescient allegory of twentieth-century totalitarian regimes. Reading his posthumously published fiction, we feel we have found an author who had a sense of the future, especially as it comes to the fate of Russian writers.

again with the help of Perel’muter, Krzhizhanovsky’s entire collected works were published in Sobranie sochinenii v 6-x tomakh by Symposium.
Krzhizhanovsky’s fiction is densely populated with authors, artists, and inventors who are outsiders in their own lives or are corpses while still living, occupying a space that is “neither ‘here’ nor ‘there’ but in a between—in a seam.” These creators are often overpowered by their creations, while authorial status is subordinated to the work of art itself, suggesting a powerful metaphor during a period where a piece of writing judged ideologically unsound could destroy one’s life.

At times, Krzhizhanovsky’s meditations on authorial absence are personal, as his own career is characterized by his inability to publish. “I’m known for being unknown” [Я известен своей неизвестностью], he quipped in his journal. It becomes a constitutive aspect of his fiction, whereby, as Jacob Emery has argued, passivity, irrelevance, and virtual non-existence becomes an alternative to aesthetic “strength.” Emery reads Krzhizhanovsky’s “poetics of passivity” as part of the author’s reflection on both the commodification of literature and inspiration from literary canon, that is, “artistic production as the result of economic alienation (the worker moved by an alien will)” and “writing as the manifestation of literary influence (the author moved by the spirit of past culture).” He locates this reflection specifically in The Letter Killers’ Club, in which “even silenced stories enter literary history” and “worthless writers produce

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6 Ibid. 100.
works of aesthetic and economic value.”

As a writer virtually unable to publish during his lifetime, Krzhizhanovsky’s reflections on alienation reveal an attempt to justify the writer’s “worth” apart from the literary marketplace.

The passivity of the author is only a subset of my interests here, and I approach Krzhizhanovsky’s desire to “possess” a reader from a more morbid angle. While Emery reads the theme of passivity through the author’s preoccupation with his own obscurity (and obscurity in general) as an ironic form of literary “strength,” the animated corpses and bodies in his fiction ask us to reflect on the frequently encountered metaphor of the word as dead body “as such.” Krzhizhanovsky keeps real-world events at a distance in his metafictions, made evident with the frequently encountered framing devices of his stories. Removing himself by several layers from the narrative, Krzhizhanovsky often wraps a story within a story within another story, like a nesting doll of narratives, embedding the theme of authorial absence, distance, and alienation into the philosophical core of his writing. In his juvenile essays on language and his more mature reflections on fiction and theater, the author and the reader are pronouncedly passive, while the word is variously and frequently referred to as a dead body whose “soul” of an idea must be given life.

Krizhizhanovsky develops a metaphysical understanding of writing that is reflected in the expression of the living corpse, a motif whose origin and meanings are partially obscured by the author’s own personal fate. Moving back and forth between theoretical and literary works, we can see how the motif develops in Krzhizhanovsky’s non-fictional and fictional writings from 1913 through the 1920s, the most productive

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7 Ibid. 98.
decade of his writing. His aesthetic philosophy renders legible the corpse’s strange appearance in his fiction, and the Gothic trope elucidates his idiosyncratic philosophy of poetic language. As a result, his fiction is not only about the “living corpses” of the world but question the romantic notion of literature’s relation to life.

**Background**

Krzhizhanovsky seems like a writer from another era, and he gave that impression to his contemporaries as well. Born in 1887 to a Polish-speaking family in Kiev, Krzhizhanovsky moved to Moscow in 1922 and wrote the majority of his fiction in the 1920s and 1930s, while lecturing on literature and theater into the 1940s until his death in 1950. But despite his biographical timeline, the Gothic themes of his stories align more closely with the previous century. In 1932, Gorky relegated Krzhizhanovsky’s works to the late 19th century, saying his fiction was out of step with the post-Revolutionary times. His prose was too fanciful, abstract, and purely philosophical for the critic, and his flights of fancy, along with excessive bad luck, that kept Krzhizhanovsky serially unpublished:

I cannot analyze the ironic works of citizen Krzhizhanovsky as regards their philosophical value, but they seem to me interesting enough and probably would have had success in the 80s of the 19th century. In those years, idle thought among intellectuals was in fashion, and friendly arguments around the samovar on the theme of the reliability or unreliability of our knowledge of the world served as quite the form of entertainment. […] I think that in our tragic era, when the whole world is living with the foreboding of an unavoidable and great catastrophe, ironic, idle talk is inappropriate, even if its is sincere. The majority humanity is not up for philosophy […] That’s why I think that the works of citizen Krzhizhanovsky will likely not find a publisher.

Я не могу рассматривать иронические сочинения гр. Кржижановского со стороны их философской ценности, но мне кажется, что они достаточно интересны и, вероятно, имели бы хороший успех в 80-х годах XIX столетия. В те годы праздномыслие среди интеллектуалов было в моде, и дружеские споры вокруг самовара на темы достоверности или недостоверности наших знаний
о мире служили весьма любимым развлечением. […] Мне кажется, что в наши трагические дни, когда весь мир живет в предчувствии неизбежной и великой катастрофы, лукавое празднословие—неуместно, даже и в том случае, если оно искренне. Большинству человечества—не до философии […] Поэтому я думаю, что сочинения гр. Кржизановского едва ли найдут издателя. 8

Meanwhile, more recent critics have noted the opposite; that in fact his fiction anticipates the themes of postmodern philosophy. N. L. Liederman finds that concepts like “the world as text,” the theory of simulacra, and a critique of a “metaphysics of presence” are manifested in his stories decades before their theoretical formulation by philosophers. 9 Depending on one’s perspective, Krzhizhanovsky perhaps was either well before or after his time.

Krzhizhanovsky himself admired and emulated the Gothic prose of E.T.A. Hoffman and Edgar Allen Poe, as well as the satire of Jonathan Swift, whose Lilliputians inspired the titular “Itty-Bitties” [Чут-чуты] in one of his stories. And yet, his work feels completely attuned to the existential crises of the early twentieth century. Like his contemporary namesake, Sigmund Freud, Krzhizhanovsky looked back at Gothic Romanticism for models of explaining the strange conditions of modern life. 10 He examines the psychological mores of his day from all angles in his surreal tales in which

8 M. A. Gor’kii in a letter to E. Lann, dated August 17, 1932, cited by Vadim Perelman in “Posle katastrofy,” SS, vol. 1, 25.


10 Sigmund Freud, “The Uncanny,” in Sigmund Freud: Complete Works, compiled by Ivan Smith (Epub, 2011), 3675-3700. Muireann Maguire, for example, reads Krzhizhanovsky’s Autobiography of a Corpse as “a clear indictment of Soviet society as a system where only living corpses, that is, passive and insincere individuals, willing to sublimate their individual passions and peculiarities, survive. […] ‘Avtobiografia trupa’ suggests that moral death—unambitious, soulless, mercenary existence—has become the Communist way of life.” See Maguire, Stalin’s Ghosts, 167.
death, literally, knocks at the door. The title of one of his unpublished collections of works, *What Men Die By* [Чем люди мертвы], (from Tolstoy’s *What Men Live By* [Чем люди живы]), alludes both to the genre of the parable, to which his stories belong, and to the existential horror at their core. In these stories, Krzhizhanovsky’s heroes, much like Kafka’s Gregor Samsa, find their greatest existential struggles waiting at home. They become inexplicably separated from themselves, get lost in their own homes, and are visited by the dead at night. The homeless, the stranger, the traveler, and the waif are his recurrent cast of characters, and their struggle with their homes—whether finding one or locating themselves in one—alludes to a greater struggle with the strangeness in oneself, or even estrangement from oneself. Freud’s notion of the uncanny (“unheimlich,” or “un-homelike”) is almost literalized in Krzhizhanovsky’s account of a pianist’s runaway fingers, not to mention the corpse who “moves in” to his old apartment, haunting the new tenant (and his literary double) through his autobiography.

As a descriptive term for a narrative mode with a range of characteristic tropes and topoi, the Gothic usefully applies to Krzhizhanovsky’s fiction. Besides the typical images and plots that appear in his fiction, Krzhizhanovsky’s writing also fits within the Gothic’s discourse on excess and the fragmented self.\(^{11}\) Identity is a frequent philosophical theme and motivation for his uncanny plots, where the fracturing of the ego is often rendered as a form of death. The psychological themes of fragmentation, excess, and transgression are not simply transmitted *through* language but are rather projected

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\(^{11}\) In his study of the genre, Fred Botting identifies the Gothic with the “writing of excess” and a “fascination with transgression and the anxiety over cultural limits and boundaries.” Fred Botting, *Gothic* (London: Routledge, 1996), 1-2. Robert Miles writes that the Gothic is “a series of contemporaneously understood forms, devices, codes, figurations, for the expression of the “fragmented subject.” Robert Miles, *Gothic Writing 1750-1820: A Genealogy* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002), 3-4.
onto language, recalling his spiritual predecessor, Nikolai Gogol, and several of his contemporaries, notably Andrei Bely and the Futurists. Krzhizhanovsky often personifies the word as such, allowing interjections, particles, and other auxiliary particles to become “autotelic images” that move around and fragment the textual world.\(^\text{12}\) The psychological motivations of Romantic Gothic fiction often yield to linguistic motivations—thus the German idealist philosopher Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi can be engaged in dialogue by the embodied Russian word particle «якобы» in “Jacobi and Jakoby [Якоби и «якобы»]. This shift from abnormal psychology to abnormal paranomasia gives Krzhizhanovskyi’s plots an additional level of philosophical abstraction.

The problems of Krzhizhanovsky’s macabre plots are often based in philosophical abstractions, yet the specter of real-life violence and psychological rupture haunt the pages. It is no accident that grotesque figures, like the “figment” of a 0.6 man in Autobiography of a Corpse, appear during this period of physical and socio-psychological instability.\(^\text{13}\) His phantasmagoric narratives of living corpses and otherwise animated bodies and body parts find their literary predecessors both in the Russian canon, as well as European and American literature, but they are situated in the Soviet world of cramped, coffin-like housing space, mortifying Soviet bureaucracy, and the real-life horrors of war. When the Stygian toad from “Bridge over the Styx” [Мост через Стикс]


\(^{13}\) In dialogue with Jacob Emery, Sasha Spektor remarks that, “in Autobiography of a Corpse the philosophic predicament of the narrator is written against the backdrop of World War I, where the experience of treating human life as a statistic, as pure matter, is accompanied by a complete loss of meaning, the transformation of “I” into nothing.” See Jacob Emery and Alexander (Sasha) Spektor, “A Dialogue on Sigizmund Krzhizhanovsky,” Poroi 13:1 (2017): Article 7, 4.
appears at a man’s bedside, she relates how he can no longer tell the shores of life and death apart after “the war of the living against the living:” “both [shores] were burnt to ashes and deserted, pocked with deep funnel-like grave pits: fog mixed with a litter of poisonous gases blanketed the left and right distance. Which way? I had to make up my mind. So I leapt at random” [оба берега были испепелены и обезлюдены, глубокие воронки могильными въямьями изоспили их, и туман, смешанный с стланью ядовых газов, застилал левую и правую даль. Как быть? Надо было решаться. И я выпрыгнула наугад].

In another example of modern psychological horror, the protagonist of “Quadraturin” buys a mysterious liquid to enlarge his “matchbox” of a room only from the inside, giving him the luxury of more living space while still allowing him to evade the Soviet housing authorities. But his “greed” has terrible consequences: he accidentally spills the substance, the room grows exponentially, and is swallowed by the room’s vastness. Given his predilection for the Gothic literature of Hoffman and Poe, and combined with the physical and psychological cataclysmic changes of the early 20th century, it is perhaps no surprise that Krzhizhanovsky’s stories contain their fair share of living corpses.

A quick glance at Autobiography of a Corpse shows that, even only a few years into his career as an author, Krzhizhanovsky was already experimenting with the identity of the author-as-corpse. But the theme runs much deeper that art and life resembling one another, as we will see in his non-fictional essays on language and fiction. I then return to Autobiography of a Corpse at the end of the chapter.

Origins of the Corpse

The 1924 novella *Autobiography of a Corpse* [Автобиография трупа] reads like a precognition of the author’s imminent fate. Despite its minimal plot, the story manages to integrate the historical events of the pre- and post-Revolutionary period with the dense philosophical musings of a socially invisible, corpse-like intellectual and author. A journalist named Shtamm moves from the provinces to Moscow to pursue his career and immediately faces the task of finding a place to live. After spending a night homeless, he finds and rents a room, and on the third day receives an envelope that contains a text entitled “Autobiography of a Corpse.” The manuscript belongs to a formerly proleptic and now actual corpse, the previous tenant of the room, who has recently committed suicide, and details his devolution from an intellectual writer to a living corpse who has lost possession of his own “I” by failing to integrate with “we.” While his condition, which he labels “psychorrhea” or “soul seepage,” initially affects only him, he soon sees it spreading throughout the population, especially as certain living individuals go off to die in World War I and the Russian Civil War and the other “dead” members stay behind as the war is fought on their behalf. When the revolution breaks out, the narrator briefly sees an opportunity to integrate himself back into the “we” of society, but this attempt also fails. In a last attempt, the autobiographer kills himself in order to free up his apartment, and he has arranged for the new tenant to receive his manuscript upon moving in. In turn for providing Shtamm a place to live, the corpse makes a demand upon him—that he “shoulder the burden of [his] three insomnias and listen patiently, till the corpse has finished its autobiography” [звалить груз [его] трех бессонниц на плечи и терпеливо слушать, пока труп не доскажет своей autobiografía].\(^{(15)}\) This *quid pro

relationship makes this a Russian Gothic “host” story—the corpse hosts Shtamm in his new apartment, claiming that now the two will share a room (not ready to “cede [his] square feet,” he agrees to “move over just a little” [чуть-чуть потесниться], and refers to it as “your, forgive me, our room” [Вашей, виноват, нашей, комнате]16); and Shtamm quite literally becomes the host body for the author by reading his text, a trick the author reveals at the end:

Don’t be afraid: I won’t menace you with hallucinations. Those are cheap psychological tricks. I’m counting instead on that exceedingly prosaic law: the association of ideas and images. Even now, everything, from the dark blue blots on the wallpaper to the last letters on these pages, has entered your brain. I’m already fairly well entangled in your ‘associative threads’; I’ve already seeped into your ‘I.’ Now you too have your own figment.

[Не бойтесь: я не стану Вам угрожать галлюцинациями. Это психологическая дешевка. Гораздо больше я рассчитываю на архипрозаичнейший закон ассоциации идей и образов. Уже даже сейчас все, от синих плоских пятен на обоях до последней буквы на этих вот листах, вошло к Вам в мозг. Я уже достаточно цепко впутан в Ваши т. н. “ассоциативные нити”; уже успел всочиться к Вам в “я”. Теперь и у Вас есть свой примысл].17

Thus, through his suicide and actual death, the author manages to reach outside of his own “I” and become part of a “we,” both with Shtamm and, metafictionally, with the reader of Krzhizhanovsky’s novella.

Reading this story of authorial existential angst in light of the author’s real-life struggles is tempting but misleading for two reasons. First, Krzhizhanovsky may have been unpublished in his day, but he was certainly not unknown in the literary milieu of

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16 Ibid. 4, 7/512, 515. Italics original.

17 Ibid. 28/540-541. Italics original.
Moscow. He was a popular lecturer on theater in both his native Kiev and Moscow, where he moved in 1922. In the 1930s, he was able to publish many articles of literary criticism, primarily on Shakespeare and Shaw, in a range of journals, and he worked as an editor for the Bol’shaia sovetskaia entsiklopediia from 1925-1931. Alongside his articles on theater, he also wrote several entries for the Literaturnaia entsiklopedia: Slovar’ literaturnykh terminov. In other words, Krzhizhanovsky’s lack of publishing success did not mean that he was a lonely and ostracized figure, a kind of literary living corpse that is so frequently encountered in his works. Secondly, the year Autobiography of a Corpse was written, 1924, was practically the beginning of his career. His first story, the philosophical dialogue “Jacobi and Jakoby” [Якоби и «якобы»], was published in the journal Zori in 1919, and Krzhizhanovsky himself considered this date as the beginning of his professional career as a writer. ¹⁸

There is instead a deeper relationship between obscurity, absence, death, and literature in Krzhizhanovsky’s fiction, one that developed early in his career. Before he became a prolific but obscure writer of short stories and criticism, Krzhizhanovsky was experimenting with aesthetic philosophies that positioned him on the threshold between the Symbolists’ metaphysical reflections on language and the emergent ideas of several literary circles—Formalists, Futurists, Acmeists, OBERIU—that conceived of language as a unique form of material. In one of his first essays from 1913, entitled “Idea and Word” [Идея и слово], he adopts and elaborates a metaphysical view of language that both challenges and at times resembles the Formalists’ soon-to-be formulated concept of estrangement (and Shklovsky’s “Resurrection of the Word,” published the next year). In

¹⁸ Perel’muter, “Posle katastrofy,” 10.
Krzhizhanovsky’s essay, thought and language are divided analogously to soul and body, with the thought being trapped “alive” inside the corpse-like husk of the word. From this corporeal metaphor, Krzhizhanovsky formulates a grotesque aesthetics of corpse mutilation, where the translation of ideas into language commits pure concepts to death, but it is this death that brings literature to life.

Like his literary coevals, Krzhizhanovsky was reacting either explicitly or implicitly to the enormously influential linguistic theories put forth by Alexander Potebnia, which permeated the philosophical discourse of language in Russia for decades. The 19th century philosopher and linguist was a crucial figure for Russian Modernist linguistic experimentation. His transmission of the German linguistic philosophy, as well as his significant departures from it, provided the vocabulary for Futurists, Formalists, and others, even as they rejected his views on aesthetics. Potebnia was rejected as the avant-garde wrote their manifestos, but they were in fact heavily indebted to him. In particular, both Khlebnikov and Shklovsky derive the organic metaphor of language as “living” or “dead” directly from Potebnia, and both develop their theories of renewing quotidian language through defamiliarizing techniques in reaction to (and in debt to) his writing. Krzhizhanovsky’s organic metaphors belong to the same conversations around Potebnia’s writing, as does his notion of the word having an “inner” and “outer” form that corresponds to soul and body. His essay’s title, “Idea and Word,” echoes Potebnia’s most famous work, Thought and Language [Мысль и

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19 For a complete summary of Potebnia’s linguistic philosophy and influence, see Thomas Seifrid, The Word Made Self: Russian Writings on Language, 1860-1930, particularly chapters 1 and 2.

20 Ibid. 67-73.
язык] (1862). While Krzhizhanovsky’s grotesque and violent formulation in “Idea and Word” is his own, he in fact finds himself well within the aesthetic context of the 1910s.

Krzhizhanovsky begins from the philosophical tradition, including Hobbes, whom he cites, in which the pure idea is primary to the word. Language is an alien [чуждое] body that is given [данное] to the organic [свой] thought, which originates in the Platonic eternal realm of the Idea [Идея]. This Gnostic attitude toward language means that words are forever tragically separated from the pure thought they seek to express, while the thought still struggles to find its way from its eternal, ethereal realm to the physical, temporal realm.21 In order for thought to be given a body in language, and thus enter into the world, it must first transfer through the body of its author by instrumentalizing and possessing him or her: “It is not he who thinks it, but it who thinks through him” [Не он ее мыслит, она им мыслит].22 Here is the philosophical origin of Krzhizhanovsky’s passivity as an author, which crops up repeatedly in his later fiction. In this essay, however, it is his analogy of the word as a “dead body of letters” [мертвенное буквенное тело] that takes precedence. Passing through the body of the writer, the idea enters into language, where already it “has gone dead in the word” [омертвившуюся в слово].23

21 Caryl Emerson has written that, “Krzhitzanovsky’s hero everywhere is the idea or concept (mysl’, zamysl) trapped in the brain. His recurring plot: how to release an inner thought into the outer space of the world at the right time with enough nourishment so it will survive.” Caryl Emerson, introduction to Krzhizhanovsky, The Letter Killers Club (New York: New York Review of Books, 2012), vii.


23 Ibid. 498.
It is now the job of the metaphysician and poet, those who are most capable of matching word and concept as closely as possible, to resurrect the “life” of the thought from the dead body of the word. They do this by tearing language away from its “associative threads” and literally removing pieces of its body, its letters and syllables. The writer “amputates” [ампутировать], “digs into himself with the sharp point of the pen” [копающемуся острием пера в себе самом], and “rips out” [оторвать] the latent thought from the word-corpse. As language is his or her only medium, the writer must use it but somehow physically deform it, taking it “off the street” [берет с улицы], that is, away from its everyday use and meaning, to get closer to the essence of its thought:

“For this it is necessary to tear off two or three letters from the everyday [уличное] word or attach a new syllable to it. In other words, to mutilate the word so that it cannot crawl back down to life” [Правда, для этого необходимо у уличного слова оторвать две-три буквы или прикрепить к нему новый слог, одним словом, искалечь слово так, чтобы оно не могло уползти назад в жизнь]. The author must deform language in order to restore its expressive value. Krzhizhanovsky does not explicitly acknowledge the connection but certainly resembles Khlebnikov when he says that the poet longs for the language of the “savage” [дикарь], who has two separate words for “a flock of birds ascending from the earth” and “a flock of birds descending to the earth,” and that the metaphysician longs for the language of the ancient Russian clergy, whose vocabulary

24 Ibid. 498/501. Italics original.

25 Krzhizhanovsky was not merely a formulator of the idea but an active practitioner as well, who ascribed an ontological importance on paronomasia and neologism, as they build new connections to the world. See the chapter “Slova. Words,” in Karen Link Rosenflanz, Hunter of Themes: The Interplay of Word and Thing in the Works of Sigizmund Križižanovskij (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc, 2005).
included a word for truth that could only be seen through half-closed eyelids.\textsuperscript{26} Like his Formalist and Futurist counterparts, Krzhizhanovsky sees linguistic simplification in the era of newspapers that leads to language being practical and communicative rather than rich and evocative.

Crucially for his later career, it is the lack inherent in the word/idea relationship that produces fiction. This essay contains one of the earliest expressions of Krzhizhanovsky’s poetics of absence, what Emery calls his “aesthetics of generative effacement,” whereby what is missing in fact becomes reified in language.\textsuperscript{27} First, the word appears as an inferior but necessary expression of an idea; the author then mutilates the word to remove it from its normal context in order to closer approximate the thought at its core, thus transforming it into poetic language. While the transformation of idea into word is defined by metaphysical loss, the adaptation of the word is also defined by loss in its removal from life: “The metaphysician, isolated by the Idea, in turn plucks the word from the street and, having released it […] from its web of associated threads, severs it from life [Метафизик же, изолированный Идею, в свою очередь, берет с улицы слово и, высвободив его […] из путаницы ассоциационных нитей, отделяет его от жизни].\textsuperscript{28} This inverse relationship, by which what is absent conditions the presence of poetic language, typifies Krzhizhanovsky’s style and even serves as the basis for his plots. It also offers a philosophical basis for what becomes Krzhizhanovsky’s penchant for metonymy, a literary device predicated upon lack and removal. As we will see later in

\textsuperscript{26} Krzhizhanovskii, “Ideia i slovo,” \textit{SS}, 497.

\textsuperscript{27} Emery, “Sigizmund Krzhizhanovsky’s Poetics of Passivity,” 104.

\textsuperscript{28} Krzhizhanovskii, “Ideia i slovo,” \textit{SS}, vol. 5, 501.
the story “The Runaway Fingers,” the formal device of metonymy gives language a body, leading to the strange psycho-linguistic state of separation, elision, and erasure.

**The Strange Life of Letters in The Letter Killers Club**

Krzhizhanovsky’s early philosophical position signals his ambivalent relationship to the written word, which echoes even in his later career. A version of this production by removal from life is the core principle of the coterie of writers in *The Letter Killers Club* [Клуб убийц букв], whose extremist views on the written word lead to its abolition altogether. Written between 1925 and 1927, the novella unites the philosophical ideas from “Idea and Word” with themes explored in *Autobiography of a Corpse*, including death, textual “mutilation,” and the grotesque principle of fiction’s production. The Club’s president, Zez, regards books and words as figurative coffins for life: “If there is one more book on the library shelf, that is because there is one less person in life. [Если на библиотечной полке одной книгой стала больше, это оттого, что в жизни одним человеком стало меньше].” He takes Krzhizhanovsky’s violent analogies one step further, likening the writer to a fur producer, who, in order to procure the most pure wool pattern, kills the lamb while it is still unborn:

Or a better analogy: do you know about the production of astrakhan fur? Suppliers have their own terminology: they track the patterns of the unborn lamb’s wool, wait for the necessary combination of curls, then kill the lamb—before birth: they call that “clinching the pattern.” That is exactly what we—trappers [manufacturers] and killers—do with our conceptions.

Или еще точнее: слыхали вы об изготовлении так называемых каракульча? У поставщиков этого типа своя терминология: выследив, путем хитроумных приемов, узор и завитки на шкурке нерожденного ягненка, дождавшись нужного сочетания завитков, нерожденного

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The brutal image recalls Krzhizhanovsky’s own complex metaphor for the writer, who is paradoxically both the idea’s midwife and its murderer. According to Zez, in order to capture the conception in its purest form, the writer must be committed to not allowing it to be born; that is, to killing its body of letters, in contrast to writers who are “professional killers of conceptions.” Thus, in order to “return to the kingdom of free, pure, and unsubstantiated conceptions” [вернуться назад в царство чистых, неовеществленных, свободных замыслов], the Club’s members forswear writing altogether, instead meeting every Saturday to orally relate their highly abstract fictions.

Writing more than a decade after “Idea and Word,” Krzhizhanovsky by this point recognizes the precariousness of his earlier sceptical position, challenging the purist ideology of the Club through a dissenting member, Rar. While Zez invokes the flowers of St. Francis’s garden, where they bloom of their own right, and ultimately Kant’s aesthetic ideal of free beauty in his description of the Club’s aims, Rar challenges the analogy, saying, “a sunless garden produces only etiolated shoots” [бессолнечный сад может взрастить лишь этиолированную поросль]. Rar indicts the idealistic philosophy of the club, in which unencumbered ideas, though “pure,” can never properly flourish without contact with the outside world. Suspecting the group’s obsession with aesthetic purity as a form of “matterphobia,” [материебоязнь], he invites an outsider, the frame narrator of the novel, to be a spectator to the group’s proceedings for several Saturdays in

30 Ibid. 9/12.

31 Ibid. 81/98.
a row. What transpires is the ephemeral telling of potential plots for fantastical stories—ephemeral except that the narrator, after Rar’s suicide at the end of the novel, writes down both what he sees inside the Club’s meeting place and the stories that are told there.

Through the narratological frame, Krzhizhanovsky in effect elaborates a more complicated reconciliation between word and idea that retains death at its core. The novella written by the narrator comes into being not despite death but because of it. Immediately upon hearing about Rar’s suicide, he returns to his apartment, and suddenly “they came of their own accord—one after another—the five Saturdays.”32 The stories of the Club’s members possess him, instrumentalize him, even though he himself is no writer:

My writing life—having begun so unexpectedly—shall die newborn. Never to be reborn [Without resurrection]. As a writer I’m all thumbs, it’s true—I don’t have a way with words; it is they that have had their way with me, conscripting me as a weapon of revenge […] words are spiteful and tenacious—anyone who tries to kill them will be sooner killed by them.

Мое писательство, начавшееся—так нежданно для меня,—елегодившись и умрет. Без воскресения. Ведь я писательски безрук, это правда—словами я не владею; это они овладели мной, взяли меня напрокат как орудие мщения […] слова злы и живучи—и всякий, кто покусится на них, скорее будет убит ими, чем убьет их.33

Alluding to his other fictions, particularly “The Runaway Fingers” with the phrase, “I’m all thumbs,” (“I’ve got no hand for writing” [писательски безрук]), Krzhizhanovsky acknowledges the uncanny afterlife that emerges from the suppressed and “murdered” word. His narrator’s pronouncement stands alongside The Master’s quote from

32 Ibid. 111.

33 Ibid. SS 132.
Bulgakov’s *Master and Margarita*, “Manuscripts don’t burn” [Рукописи не горят]. In *The Letter Killers Club*, manuscripts *do*, in fact, burn; Rar’s written text that he brings to one of the meetings is committed to the flames in agreement with Article 5 of the group’s charter. But importantly, words express a vitality that overpowers any force that oppresses them, including that of aesthetic idealism and stringent self-censorship. In effect, the Club’s attempt at purifying ideas from language’s corruption only provides the plot for a further written work; that is the paradoxical logic underlying Krzhizhanovsky’s fictional worlds.

**The Role of the Reader**

Krzhizhanovsky ends “Idea and Word” on a pessimistic note for the reader: in the end, the idea retreats back to the infinite, and the word left on the page is just a faint outline or memory of the true thought, to which only the poet has access: “For the poet, the stiffened stanza is not a dead body of letters, for he knew the stanza during its life [Для поэта застывшая строфа—не мертвенное буквенное тело. Ведь он знал строфу еще при жизни]. The reader, on the other hand, “does not see, of course, what is visible to the poet,” and only encounters the stiff, cold body of a mutilated corpse, akin to meeting a murder victim by attending his funeral. The author, by mutilating the body of the word, strangely brings its “soul” to life, but only for him or herself.

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34 See Emery: “the conceit of *The Letter Killers Club*, however, is that stories enter the world despite their creators’ intent to keep them secret, and despite the unsuitability of those who write them down.” Emery, “Sigizmund Krzhizhanovsky’s Poetics of Passivity,” 96.

35 Krzhizhanovskii, “Ideia i slovo,” 503. Italics original.
This privileging the author over the addressee reveals a general tendency in Krzhizhanovsky’s fiction and non-fiction to view the reader less as an active participant and more as a passive function of literature. For instance, inasmuch as the narrator from *The Letter Killers Club* is an author, it is because he was first a passive “reader” and merely reproduces what he has already heard. Similarly, Shtamm’s role in *Autobiography of a Corpse* is not so much one of a necromancer as it is a vacant host, a willing “listener” to the corpse’s tale. It is through Shtamm’s passive reading that the corpse’s story is transmitted to the non-diegetic reader of the novella—his reading the corpse’s autobiography is the frame narrative that gives us the text that comprises Krzhizhanovsky’s story of the same name. Many of Krzhizhanovsky’s stories involve such frame narrative devices, in which a character is introduced at the beginning and gradually becomes the frame narratee, whose audience to a garrulous interlocutor constitutes the moment of the text’s production.36

The reader’s role in Krzhizhanovsky is reduced to a reproductive, rather than productive, function. In one of his entries in the *Dictionary of Literary Terminology* [Словарь литературных терминов] on “The Reader” [Читатель], Krzhizhanovsky describes the reader not in terms of interpretive acts, but rather as the phenomenological lens that holds together all the individual words and letters to recreate the text exactly in one’s mind. His most basic definition, placed at the beginning of the four-page entry, is

36 There are far too many instances to name, but see, for instance, “In the Pupil” [В зрачке] where the story is told to a man by his own homunculus about his lover’s ex-lovers (and not by the lover herself), or “The Bridge Across the Styx,” where a stygian toad appears to an architect in a dream-like state and narrates to him the unfortunate situation in the underworld.
appropriately passive: “The addressee of the book” [Адресат книги]. The reader is recipient of the word, the exact position of Shtamm in *Autobiography of a Corpse*. But the reader is not entirely inactive: he or she is compared to a “bookbinder, collecting the various pages of a book into a whole” [переплетчику, собирающему розные листки книги в одно] and a “typesetter, slowly, letter by letter, *retyping* a given text in one’s consciousness” [наборщика книги, медленно, буква за буквой, *перенабиряя* в своем сознании данный текст]. Krzhizhanovsky clearly regarded the reader’s task as strenuous, if mechanical, given our immersion in language. He details the historical emergence of the reader, in which, as we passed from the “epoch of the lay to the epoch of the eye” [из эпохи сказа к эпохе глаза], “the sounds of words go mute and are fixed as conventional signs made of letters” [звуки слов немеют и закрепляются условными буквенными знаками]. This process not only turns sounds into signs, but the very *things* they signify into signs—“Heroes in books become more real than real heroes” [Книжные герои делаются реальнее реальных героев], he laments. In other words, language becomes a substitute reality that produces a stultifying effect on what it ostensibly reproduces.

This transformation of the world into word leads to several “illnesses” of reading, including “automatic reading,” or reading without thinking. In order to make the reader “perceive the individual word not as one logical sign but as a fluid current of sound” [отдельное слово воспринять не как один логический знак, а как изменчивое

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течение звука], the poet must “exceed simple speech” [преодолев просторечье] and “eliminate inner-phraseological paralysis” [устранив внутри-фразовую неподвижность] by “breaking down common phraseologies with new word combinations” [путем разбивки привычной фразеологии новыми словосочетаниями]. Again echoing the theoretical practices of Formalist aesthetics, Krzhizhanovsky sees language’s tendency toward deadness as art’s potential for entry into the world, as it must make itself distinct for the reader to process it.

БЫТИЕ—быт—бы—“A Philosopheme about Theater”

One thing that earns Krzhizhanovsky the reputation as a mad scientist in the laboratory of his fiction is the way he transforms his theoretical stances on fiction into entire stories, where the questions themselves become plots, and even characters.38 In many ways, Autobiography of a Corpse is an exemplary text for considering the intersection between the literary questions Krzhizhanovsky writes about in his non-fiction—questions of author, reader, and the medium of language—and the poetics by which he transfers these questions into fictional scenarios. One of the techniques that results in his phantasmagorical fiction is to make a philosophical abstraction into an existential crisis, which he then renders into an aesthetic conundrum. These translations of the abstract into the layers of life and fiction are a central part of his thinking and his

story crafting, one that he details in a discursive and broad-ranging essay from 1923, “A Philosopheme about Theater” («Философема о театре»).³⁹

While “all the world is a stage,” Krzhizhanovsky argues that the stage is also a world unto itself worthy of philosophizing. Krzhizhanovsky, a student of both Shakespeare and the Kantian metaphysical tradition, writes that what is shown in theater is akin to the phenomenalization of everyday life, much as the perceivable world is a phenomenalization of an unperceivable noumenal reality.⁴⁰ In explicating the relationship between these levels of perception, Krzhizhanovsky introduces three distinct worlds of consciousness, importantly created out of his characteristic wordplay:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Being</th>
<th>Everyday Life</th>
<th>As-if</th>
<th>0</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

I take the word “Being” and tear off its final two signs: Everyday life. Severing off its dull “t,” I have: as-if. I do the same thing with meaning as I do with letters: as from word to word there are less and less sounds and signs, thus from meaning to meaning there is less substance, killing and diminishing being.

³⁹ For an excellent summary and analysis of this essay, see Alisa Ballard’s “Быт Encounters Бы: Krzhizhanovsky’s Theater of Fiction,” The Slavic and East European Journal, 56:4 (2012), 553-576.

⁴⁰ On the relation between theater and philosophy, Krzhizhanovsky notes in his essay “Fragments on Shakespeare” [Фрагменты о Шекспире] that his encounter with Shakespeare as a teenager saved him from the existential despair he experienced upon reading Kant’s Critique of Pure Reason: «И в это время—совершенно случайно—пришел […] первый том переводного Шекспира. […] и вдруг почувствовал, что у меня есть друг, который может защитить от метафизического наваждения. […] Это был объект, реальный мир, люди, которые захочали бы, слушая формулы объекто-ненавистника [Kant—А.Т.].» See “Fragmenty o Shekspire” SS, vol. 4, 384.
In his idiosyncratic formulation, Krzhizhanovsky renders visible the connection between the levels of abstraction (Бытие), life (быт), and fiction (бы) and the vital role played by language in his thought. “Being” is the static, hermetic world of Platonic Forms and Kantian noumena, whereas everyday life is the world we inhabit and the world through which we experience the phenomenalization of this higher, more abstract realm. The third term, the counterfactual particle бы, is a space of pure potential, play, and freedom, the space of Krzhizhanovsky’s ideal theater and fiction. Each descent down the ladder from Being to nothingness entails a deformation of the word and, simultaneously, a deformation of the world, recalling his earlier metaphysical views on language from “Idea and Word.” This descent approximately coincides with the ontological layers of being; thus, бы is the phenomenalization of Бытие, and бы is the same to быт. The latter is most crucial to Krzhizhanovsky’s poetics because, just as we perceive a form of

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42 Krzhizhanovsky has nothing to say about the 0 that follows, except that, “I will not go further: however black my ink may be, the night of non-existence is blacker.” Ibid.
43 Krzhizhanovsky again uses wordplay to cement the connection between metaphysics and theater, using the theatrical word «представление» to describe the process of the lower level’s “representation” of the higher. «Представление» is the Russian translation of Schopenhauer’s “representation,“ so the term is used consistently with the German philosophical tradition, but Krzhizhanovsky uses it with another context in mind, the Russian translation of the phrase emblazoned over the entry of Shakespeare’s Globe Theater: «Весь мир играет представление». See Ballard, “Быт Encounters Быт,” 555.
Being through interaction with everyday life, thus we perceive everyday life through the modality of fictional presentation of the world.

It is fiction as potential and possibility, “what if,” that calibrates and corrects our understanding of “what is.” Fiction, as Krzhizhanovsky imagines it, reflects and refracts both the real world comprised of people, historical events, politics, etc., and the world of Being, one that exists on a level of abstraction and relates to the true nature of things. And yet, as бы, the purely hypothetical, counterfactual “what if,” the modality of fiction retains a certain level of autonomy from factual forms of being as well. “For Krzhizhanovsky,” writes Alisa Ballard, “things which do not exist in быт or no longer exist in it can, however, exist in literature. True literature is possible only when its subject has some degree of absence from быт.”44 There is a productive disengagement from realistic representation that stands at the heart of literature.

But Krzhizhanovsky’s stories prove that fiction can also climb up the ladder of nothingness into being, a reversal of his diagram. Just as, in his earlier essay, immaterial thought materializes in language, from 0 we can derive бы and further move up the chain to Being. Fiction is the realm of pure invention, where the non-existent is instantiated in language. It does not merely take, crop, and copy the world, but it brings worlds into existence through words, with fantastic literature as the purest distillation of such an idea. This embodied negativity is a unique threshold state that challenges both what exists and what does not, making fiction a form of philosophical investigation.

Krzhizhanovsky dramatizes his conviction in the story “The Thirteenth Category of Reason” [Тринадцатая категория рассудка], in which a corpse mysteriously comes

44 Ibid. 568.
back to life, escapes his coffin, and misses his own funeral. While the story lightly satirizes the mores of Soviet life, including bureaucratic agencies, the claustrophobic apartments of the Moscow housing shortage, and the deadness of the average Soviet citizen, its main focus is on the corpse’s fictional animator, the gravedigger who doubles as the embedded *skaz* storyteller. His unbelievable tales provide the narrator, a writer of fantastical fiction, potential plots for his upcoming cycle of stories. Considering his stories the product of madness, the narrator relegates the gravedigger to this so-called thirteenth category of reason, “a sort of logical lean-to slouched against objective obligatory thinking […] where we entertain, in essence, all our figments and alogisms”

[этакой логической боковушке, лишь кой-как прислоненной к объективно обязательному мышлению …[где] мы даём явки, в сущности, всем нашим вымыслам и алогизмам]. Like the corpse from his story, the gravedigger, too, is homeless, or rather has been “evicted […] from all twelve Kantian categories of reason” and “must seek refuge in a thirteenth category.” It is from the margins [боковуша] of life and logic, the space embodied by the graveyard, that an authentic fiction emerges. Upon hearing the gravedigger’s tale of the runaway corpse, the narrator wonders as he walks away: “one can sometimes learn more from water stains [spots of mold] than from the creations of a master” [у пятен плесени можно иной раз научиться большему, чем у созданий мастера]. Like Tolstoy’s artist Mikhailov, who sees his sketch spring to life when a wax spot [пятно стеарина] changes the pose of his figure, Krzhizhanovsky’s artist sees more genius in the narrator’s “spots of mold” than in the creations of a master.


46 Ibid. 132/288.
For a story that valorizes the power of an independent and fanciful literature, “The Thirteenth Category of Reason” is fairly conventional. It originates from the same tradition of Pushkin’s “The Undertaker” [Гробовщик] from The Belkin Tales and Dostoevsky’s Bobok, and the social satire within the gravedigger’s tale is mild at best. But there is more at stake with regard to his philosophical stance on literature’s origins and value. The narrator’s departing thought may reflect back onto Tolstoy (in fact, he credits Leonardo da Vinci with the quote) but it also prefigures the penultimate paragraph of Andrei Sinyavskii’s 1957 essay, What is Socialist Realism? [Что такое социалистический реализм?], in which he invokes the masters of the Gothic-fantastic—Hoffman, Dostoevsky, Goya and Chagall—to “teach us to be truthful with the help of the absurd fantasy” [научат нас, как быть правдивыми с помощью нелепой фантазии]. Notably, Krzhizhanovsky’s story was written in 1927, precisely the year that, as Katerina Clark writes, the literary world shifted under Stalin, when “experimental, avant-garde writing became palpably weaker with each day” and “literature was now more closely controlled, and a narrower range of literary approaches was allowed.” As a “fellow-traveler” writer of the period, Krzhizhanovsky perhaps saw the window closing for his peculiar stories to ever see the light of day. But rather than writing a personal exoneration of his unpublishable writing, Krzhizhanovsky writes a metaphysical defense of idle, fantastic literature in general, invoking the “Thirteenth Category of Reason,” in which its distance from the world is its strength.


The Body of the Word—“The Runaway Fingers”

The interconnection of the levels of abstract being, everyday life, and fictional possibility in “A Philosopheme about Theater” is rendered through playful paronomasia rather than rigorous analytical argumentation, adding one last dimension to Krzhizhanovsky’s theoretical stance on theater and fiction. This formulation is not only convenient and verbally efficient, but also constitutes an essential element of Krzhizhanovsky’s poetics. Language is not simply a representational device in his fiction but, at times, a world unto itself, the ontology of which is reflected back into the realm of Being and the world of his characters, at times with horrifying results. In *Autobiography of a Corpse*, for instance, the narrator is haunted by a fractional representation of population density appears partially embodied as exactly 0.6 of a person. Elsewhere, the smallest parts of speech attain autonomous bodies and lives and rule kingdoms (“The Land of Nots” [Страна нетов]) and the role of Hamlet, presented as a character, abandons the actor playing Hamlet (*The Letter Killers Club*). Not only does Krzhizhanovsky believe that paronomasia parallels the thought process, as Rosenflanz finds, but his worlds are uniquely defined by the properties of language. The materialization of metaphor and metonymy, his “means for putting palpably visual flesh on the virtual reality that constitutes his artistic worlds,” is one of the ways his fiction transcends its playful Gothic tropes and becomes modernist Gothic, where the linguistic and psychological layers of the text are indistinguishably intertwined.

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In his diagram of the three worlds of consciousness, the terms are related by the deletion, or rather the “tearing” [отрывать] or “severing” [оборвать] of letters and sense, recalling the “amputation” [ампутировать] and “ripping away” [оторвать] of the dead body of words from the living idea. This violent metaphor of dismemberment that prevails in his non-fiction writings sets out a principle of production in his prose that is governed by absence, lack, and removal. In his fiction, Krzhizhanovsky thematizes his philosophical stances on language and fiction, clothing them in themes of social disintegration and alienation and grotesque imagery of corporeal fragmentation and suicide. The linguistic, social and psychological levels of his texts are combined in the personae of the оторвыши (translated by Turnbull as “waifs”), a label he uses to describe both the anthropomorphized and literally “torn off” or “broken away” fingers of “The Runaway Fingers,” and the “social waifs” [социальные оторвыши] identified by the narrator of Autobiography of a Corpse. In these texts, the misadventures of these eccentric individuals are rendered in a way that mirrors Krzhizhanovskky’s views on language, as if the linguistic is profoundly related to the existential. Absence is a central part of his poetics and is reflected in his fiction where his characters lose parts of themselves. Krzhizhanovsky’s fiction is a complex game of becoming through loss, like бы is born from Бытие, and it also materializes the abstract world of thought, as бы is derived from 0.

Krzhižanovskky incorporates death and dismemberment into his fiction by fully realizing his own metaphor of the word as body. Starting with the first story in his earliest collection, Fairytales for Wunderkinder [Сказки для вундеркиндов], Krzhizhanovsky almost literally lops of the appendage of the т in быт in a story of fantastical amputation.
In “The Runaway Fingers” [Сбежавшие пальцы] (1922), a virtuoso pianist known for his elegant trills comes apart. In the midst of a concert, his fingers are suddenly imbued with a life of their own and tear away from the keyboard and the pianist’s hand, fleeing the concert hall and audience out into the grimy streets of the city (momentarily meeting the “huge bulbous nose of someone’s boot” [тупой огромный нос чьего-то ботинка] in their escape, a possible allusion to its spiritual predecessor, Gogol’s “The Nose”). Spending several nights on their own, they are finally found and returned to their overjoyed owner. But in this story of bodily disintegration and reintegration, that which has split apart can never be successfully reunited: the fingers are physically and “mentally” altered during their trip, and when the pianist performs again, he no longer plays his trills as once before, leaving his audience disappointed.

In the background of any story of corporeal fragmentation is the specter of a parallel psychic splintering of the subject, a theme often encountered in literature at the end of the nineteenth century and carried over into post-war twentieth century fiction. In 1892, Max Nordau pathologized early European modernism in Degeneration, translating his work as a medical doctor from of the psychiatric hospital to the literary world. Treating decadent art of the fin-de-siècle as a patient, Nordau lambastes it as “unbridled lewdness,” in which the psychological and physiological degeneration of the body manifests in cultural production.\(^{51}\) Olga Matich writes of Tolstoy, one of Nordau’s targets, as a writer of the “degeneration” of society and the body. According to Matich, Tolstoy employs metonym and synecdoche to disintegrate the bodily unity of his

spiritually deficient characters and “to dissolve higher meaning” on a textual level.\textsuperscript{52} These characterizations connect the dismemberment of the body to the moral layer of the text. World War I gave bodily dismemberment a new gruesome context, and new stories of deformation brought out the psychological effects of the horrors experienced at war, among which was “the transformation of men into uncanny and castrated bodies.”\textsuperscript{53} Three years before Krzhizhanovsky’s story, Freud in “The Uncanny” includes “dismembered limbs, a severed head, a hand cut off at the wrist” as markers of the uncanny that spring from the castration complex.\textsuperscript{54} Figuratively dismembering the body is a way to represent the various forms of cultural or psychological violence inflicted on a subject.

And yet, despite the story’s appearance during the years of the Russian Civil War and soon after the First World War, there is no actual violence in the story’s otherwise traumatic event, nor is the pianist’s corporeal fragmentation echoed by a psychological episode that provides the motivation for his uncanny castration. Krzhizhanovsky indeed borrows the trope of the dismembered body and its device, synecdoche; but rather than creating chaos in the social or sexual world, Krzhizhanovsky’s synecdoche creates chaos in the textual world. The fully realized synecdotal substitution of the fingers for the

\textsuperscript{52} Olga Matich, “Lev Tolstoy as Early Modernist: Fragmenting and Dissecting the Body” in Erotic Utopia: The Decadent Imagination in Russia’s Fin de Siècle (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2005), 35.

\textsuperscript{53} In their comprehensive study on Gothic body parts, Ian Conrich and Laura Sedgwick remark that hands, alongside heads, are the body part most often detached. Focusing on twentieth century narratives of severed hands, they locate the phenomenon in the context of the First World War. See Ian Conrich and Laura Sedgwick, Gothic Dissections in Film and Literature: The Body in Parts (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 135-6.

\textsuperscript{54} Sigmund Freud, “The Uncanny,” in Sigmund Freud: Complete Works, 3694.
pianist is an expression of the gap that separates fiction from reality, or in his terms, бы as it relates to быт. An arena of pure possibility, бы is where language exists by its own rules. The kinship between word and body in his essay “Idea and Word” is exploited as Krzhizhanovsky’s amputated limb expresses the life given to fiction.

The surreal events of the story are a direct product of “baring the device” of synecdoche, specifically by highlighting its peculiar deformation of the world by representing the whole through the part. The story’s opening paragraph sets the stage for the fingers’ flight away from their owner as Krzhizhanovsky tests the tether that binds literary language to a real-world referent:

Two thousand ears turned toward the pianist Heinrich Dorn as he calmly adjusted the wicker seat of his swivel chair with long white fingers…The tails of his dress coat hung down from the chair, while his fingers leapt onto the piano’s black case—and cantered down the straight road paved with ivory keys. Polished nails flashing, they first set off from a high octave C to the treble’s last, glassily tinkling keys. There waited a black block—the edge of the keyboard frame. The fingers wanted to go farther; they stamped distinctly and fractionally on the last two keys […] then spun round on their tapered ends shod in fine epidermis and, leaping over one another, began galloping back. Halfway along the fingers slackened their pace, musingly choosing now black, now white keys for a footfall that was soft but deeply impressed upon the strings.

Две тысячи ушных раковин повернулись к пианисту Генриху Дорну, спокойно подвинчивавшему длинными белыми пальцами плетенку стула вертушки…Фалды фрака свисли с вертушки, а пальцы прыгнули к черному ящику рояля—и мерным бегом по прямой, мощенной костяным клавишем дороге. Сначала они направились, блестя полированными ногтями, от «c» большой октавы к крайним стеклисто-звенящим костяшкам дисканта. Там ждала черная доска—

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55 N. L. Liederman notes that Krzhizhanovsky resembles the impressionists in his general preference for metonymy and synecdoche over metaphor, and that he similarly employs it as a means of “demonstrating graphically the disintegration, the dissonance of all ties and clamps that hold meanings together.” See N. L. Liederman, “The Intellectual Worlds of Sigizmund Krzhizhanovsky,” 527.
What is otherwise a description of a piano concert is transformed through metonymic substitution of body parts for whole subjects. One hardly notices the “two thousand ears” that begin the story, but by their reappearance at the end of the paragraph, they have already assumed a level of independence, as if it is actually two thousand ears, rather than their owners, attending the recital. This transformation occurs gradually, as Krzhizhanovsky applies conventional literary devices—metaphor and metonymy—to a description of an event. The fingers “leap” onto the keyboard “road” and are “shod in fine epidermis,” subtly acquiring their independence as a byproduct of their literariness. Quickly, the fingers meet the boundary of the “black block—the edge of the keyboard frame,” reminding us of the frame of art and performance, the context where such descriptions find their home. But chaos erupts when the properties of synecdoche are fully realized—no longer expressing its conventional relationship of part to whole, the figure of speech gains an independent life of its own: “The pianist’s right hand made to pull back, to the middle register, but its galloping fingers refused—on they flew at breakneck speed” [Правая рука пианиста тянула назад, к медиуму, но рассекавшиеся пальцы не хотели: в бешеном разбеге они мчались вперед и

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As an independent life force, the poetic word does not empower its author but instead overpowers him. Suddenly, the laws of figuration are allowed to govern the physical world, a device that connects him to the poetic worlds of Mayakovsky.

V. N. Toporov and N. L. Leiderman both read Krzhizhanovsky’s stories as expressing a hunger for wholeness and a return to community, but it is in fact absence and lack from which Krzhizhanovsky’s fictions draw their life. This is one of the themes Krzhizhanovsky returns to in Autobiography of a Corpse and elsewhere—how absence from the unified whole is a unique and terrifying form of existence. In fact, returning to the center is mortifying; the hand is corpse-like when it reunites with its owner: “two hands lay side by side: one with white, tapered, manicured fingers smelling of expensive cologne; the other brownish gray, calloused, and covered with abrasions”

[Ibid.]


58 A possible subtext for the story is Blaise Pascal’s Pensées, which Krzhizhanovsky draws from in The Return of Munchausen. In Pensées 473-5, Pascal asks the reader to “imagine a body full of thinking members […] If the feet and the hands had a will of their own [volonté particulière], they could only be in their order in submitting this particular will [volonté particulière] to the primary will [volonté première] which governs the whole body. Apart from that, they are in disorder and mischief; but in willing only the good of the body, they accomplish their own good.” Drawing on St. Paul’s example of the body from his first letter to the Corinthians, Pascal posits the sentience of its separate members to illustrate the chaos of prioritizing individual will over collective unity. Pascal’s individuated members meet a similar end to Krzhizhanovsky’s: in number 483, Pascal states that “to be a member is to have neither life, being, nor movement, except through the spirit of the body, and for the body. The separate member, seeing no longer the body to which it belongs, has only a perishing and dying existence.” See Blaise Pascal, Pascal’s Pensées (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., 1958), 112-114.
точеными пальцами, другая—коричнево-серая, заскорузлая, обтянутая грубой и стертой кожей].  

60 In “Idea and Word,” the author works by “mutilating,” “amputating,” and “tearing off” [оторвать] parts of the “dead body of letters” to restore life to the idea. In “The Runaway Fingers” the fugitive fingers are called оторвыши (translated by Turnbull as “waifs”), symbolizing their “tearing away” from the unified physical body, and nominalizing their existence-by-absence. The properties of synecdoche map onto the existentialist themes of alienation that persist throughout Krzhizhanovsky’s work, in that the individual draws its meaning from its relation to the whole. Once this tethering cord is cut, however, it gains an eccentric independence, often felt by his characters as radical solipsism.

“The Runaway Fingers” is an example of how language, bodies, and selves are caught up in the same existential games in Krzhizhanovsky’s fiction. The metaphors of “Idea and Word” of “amputating” parts of words and “separating [the word] from life” are literalized in this early story that treats language in terms of the body and the body in terms of language. When the same logic that governs the literary device of synecdoche seeps into the world it is meant to represent, chaos ensues, challenging the mimetic function of literature. This absurdist impulse belongs to the same world as the writings of Daniil Kharms, whom Mikhail Iampolsky credits for reorienting the Russian avant-garde “from the social reality to a semiotic reality.” “Everything that the earlier avant-garde employed for the magical transformation for reality is used by Kharms for the ‘deconstruction’ of the very concept of ‘reality’ or for the criticism of the mimetic

functions of literature.” Similarly, Krzhizhanovsky uses literary language to challenge literature’s very relation to the world it represents, what he sets out in his own writings as the relation between бы and быт. This idea reaches its climax in *Autobiography of a Corpse*, where the narrator deletes himself from life to enter the world as textual potential.

**And the Flesh became Word—*Autobiography of a Corpse***

The death of the author leads to a strange life of the text in the modern ghost story, *Autobiography of a Corpse*. Like the bizarre event of “The Runaway Fingers,” language completely overpowers its author. Suffering a condition he calls “psychorrhea,” whereby his soul mysteriously seeps out of his body, the narrator discovers that life, in general, is dissipating around him. War wages on, and men are translated into death statistics printed in the newspapers. But even before war, he observes the deformations of language encroaching upon the real world. He is haunted by a “figment” of a 0.6 person, and sees his solipsism reflected in the very structures of language. At last, he sees an opportunity to reunite with a “we” by himself becoming a disembodied “figment” [примысл] of language and writing himself into an autobiography. This comes at a significant cost, however; dying to possess a reader, he literally dies in order to “possess” his reader and become part of his “associative threads.”

Translating his “aesthetics of generative effacement” into an existential scenario, Krzhizhanovsky creates a story in which writing itself becomes the physical threshold

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between the real and the fantastic. The peculiar nature of fiction as a “seam” between
being and nothingness [Бытие-быт-бы-0] is embodied in the figure of the figment, and in
the idea of an autobiography (with “life” in its name) of a corpse. The narrator’s
existential conundrum reflects the metaphysical exchange between language and life
elaborated in Krzhizhanovsky’s writing from his earliest essays through his most prolific
period, wherein separation from life conditions fiction’s existence.

The threshold between the real and fantastic takes literal shape in the form of a
pair of eyeglasses, which separates the narrator from direct experience of the world. This “glassy appendage” [стеклистый придаток] is both a Kantian metaphor for the
faculty of perception, and an index of the narrator’s intellectualism, both of which lead to
his solipsism.

The specter of Kant haunts the narrator, who questions the reality of subjective
perception to the point of solipsism. Rather than enhancing his perception, the glasses
instead redirect his vision inward, calling into question the existence of space outside of
his own experience: “Sometimes, when I wipe my slightly dusty lenses with a piece of
chamois, I have an odd feeling: what if, along with the specks of dust that have settled on
their glassy concavities, I were to wipe away all of space? Here and gone: like a sheen”

[Иногда, когда протираю замшей мои чуть пропылившиеся стекла, курьезное


63 Vision is a recurring theme that recurs in Krzhizhanovsky’s work and links him with
the genre of the Fantastic, which typically employ glasses and mirrors to see beyond the
world given to perception. In his taxonomy of the genre, Tzvetan Todorov notes that
distorted and subverted vision, mainly through eyeglasses and mirrors, is an essential
element of the subdivision of Fantastic literature he labels “Themes of the Self.” See
Instead of providing a point of contact between him and the outside world, the glasses materialize the lack that results in his “psychorrhea.” He entirely identifies his subjective experience of the world with what is, shown in how he describes his lack of vision in terms of existence: “My vision is now 8.5. That means that 55 percent of the sunlight does not exist for me” [Сейчас у меня 8,5. Это значит 55% солнца для меня нет]. Kant’s epistemology—defined primarily by the gulf of perception that exists between the subject and the world—becomes the foundation for the narrator’s existence.

The “loss” of the world is a direct result of his intellectual identity. As a scholar of obscure philosophy, mathematics, philology, and geography, he literally begins to lose himself in books: “Though the lines in books deprived me of half of my eyesight (55 percent), I never resented them” [Пусть книжные строки и отняли у меня половину зрения (55%), я не сержусь на строки].65 This preference of the world of text for the real world leads to his identification with the “meek and dead […] silent black signs” [покорными и мертвыми (…) молчаливые черные значки] of words. Writing his dissertation on the letter “T” in Turkic languages, he makes the observation that the personal pronoun “I” is no more than another letter (“T,” in fact, is a “two-armed” body), and as such, life can be distilled down to a two-dimensional plane of being:

I have long preferred the narrow margins of books to the monotonous miles of earthly fields; the spine of a book has always seemed more


65 Ibid. 8/517.
intelligent to me than confused lectures about “the roots of things”; the sheer accumulation of those things, everywhere on looks, strikes me as crude and meaningless compared to the wise and subtle concatenations of letters and symbols hidden in books.

Я давно предпочитал узкие книжные поля однообразным верстам земных полей; книжный корешок всегда казался мне умнее путаных рацей о каких-то «корнях вещей»; самое нагромождение этих вещей, окружающих глаз, казалось мне куда грубее и неосмысленнее тонких и мудрых сцеплений из букв и знаков, запрятанных в книге.  

Morphology provides the narrator with the logic of his eventual translation into textual figment. For him, text does not stand in for a realer, richer world, but constitutes a flattened world unto itself with its own ontology; the narrator punningly juxtaposes the narrow margins of a book with wide-open fields using the same word («поле», meaning both “margin” and “field”) and the “root of things” («корнях вещей») with its grammatical diminutive, «корешок», a book spine. This translation from life to language reflects his existential solipsism, as his “I” grammatically disappears the more he searches for it: “if one searches life, is there much ‘I’ in it? [А если обыскать жизнь: много ли в ней его?], he asks rhetorically. As he loses his connection with the outside world, he finds a sympathetic home for himself in language, preparing his ultimate reification of his missing “I” in an autobiography.

It is through his own text that he intends to become “entangled in [the reader’s] ‘associative threads’” and “seep in [his] ‘I.’” This desire to become intertwined in another originates from the moment that precipitates his “corpse-like condition” [трупье

66 Ibid.

67 Ibid. 9. SS 518.

68 Ibid. 28.
положение], in which his glasses fall from his face and he loses direct contact with an other. Alone with his love interest, his glasses become entangled with hers as they kiss and fall to the floor, disrupting his vision and his sense of self.

One day we were left alone together; I touched her hands; they responded with a light pressure. Our lips moved closer together—and at that very moment the absurdity occurred: In my clumsiness I jostled her lenses with mine; caught in a wiry embrace, they slipped off and landed on the carpet with a high, thin tinkle. I bent down to pick them up. In my hands I held two strange glass creatures, their crooked metal legs so entangled as to form one hideous four-eyed creature. Quivering glints, jumping from lens to lens, vibrated voluptuously inside the ovals. I pulled them apart: With a thin tinkle, the coupling lenses came unhooked.

The figure of the “hideous four-eyed creature” is diegetically produced by the narrator’s myopic vision; but in an indication of his later identification with language’s two-dimensionality and distorting properties, the aborted sexual encounter is metonymically projected onto the glasses. The lover’s embrace becomes the metallic “legs” of the spectacles entwined around the others’ and the “quivering glints” and “voluptuous vibrations” of their separation have been transferred from their anticipated romance onto the adjacent “bodies” of their eyeglasses. In this episode, the glasses shift from a Kantian perceptual boundary that prevents direct contact with the things-in-themselves, to an

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69 Ibid. 6. SS 514.
embodied metonym of absence with which the narrator identifies. Tearing the “bodies” apart, he also tears himself away from any further attempts to reach outside his own “I,” a move that fractures his already fragile sense of self. This separation from the social world traps him in solipsistic abstractions, the very process by which he later identifies dead soldiers with death statistics.

The threshold of perception embodied by the “appendage” [придаток] of the glasses yields to the threshold of language that separates non-being from being, and fiction from reality. Prefiguring his own transformation at the end of the story into a figment [примысл], the narrator recalls an episode from his youth when he once read a statistic in a geography book:

“In the country’s northern latitudes the population per square mile is 0.6 person.” It stuck in my mind’s eye like a splinter. I squinted and saw a flat white field stretching away past the horizon…And in every square, where the diagonals intersect, it, a stooped, thread-paper body bent low to the bare, ice-covered ground: 0.6 person. Exactly 0.6. Not just half, not half a person. No. A small, dissymmetrizing fillip had attached itself to “just”. The incompleteness, contradictory as this may seem, had been infiltrated by a remainder, by an “over and above.”

As a statistic, 0.6 represents the sparseness and ultimately the distance separating the isolated residents in the northern latitudes of Russia. The literal space between people of

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[^70]: Ibid. 9-10/518-519. Italics original.
the far north physically represents the existential condition of the narrator and of his fellow Russian citizens, one virtually written into their DNA—he later cites a passage from a book claiming Russia’s name is taken from an ancient Aramaic word *Ressaia* or *Resissaia*, “meaning dispersion by drops.” What creates the figment’s uncanny body, though, is the narrator’s failure to translate it from its semiotic field into the concept it represents, as if the physical and mental dispersion from one another literally creates gaps in our being. Lifted directly out of the geography book, the statistic becomes isolation embodied. Language becomes a vehicle that represents a philosophical truth concerning the ultimate alienation of individuals: “‘I’ and ‘we’ are separated by gulfs…Now I understand: Any ‘I’ not nourished by ‘we,’ not umbilically attached to the maternal organism enveloping its small life, cannot begin to be itself” [Меж я и мы: ямы…Теперь мне ясно: никакое «я», не получая питания из «мы», не срастаясь пуповиной с материнским, обволакивающим его малую жизнь организмом, не может быть хотя бы только собой]. Paranomasia elucidates the problem not through explanation but through imitation: the removal of space between the words я and мы results in gulfs, [ямы], that metaphorically represent the psychical space between the minds of individuals, who exist in a state of living death if unable to integrate into a

71 Ibid. 12/521

72 Throughout Krzhizhanovský’s work the frequent dialogic pairing of “I” and “not-I” bears a striking resemblance to both Martin Buber’s “dialogical personalism” (most fully expounded in *I and Thou*) and Mikhail Bakhtin’s philosophy of answerability, written in the early 1920s. In 1924, it is highly unlikely that Krzhizhanovský was acquainted with either’s work, but was developing his own philosophy of self and Other. See Liederman, “The Intellectual Worlds of Krzhizhanovský,” for Krzhizhanovský’s ethical orientation regarding “I” and “not-I.”

larger collective. This is not only a reflection of the narrator’s idiosyncratic existential condition, but of a general Soviet symptom of the non-existence of the individual outside of the collective, expressed by Mayakovsky in Vladimir Ilych Lenin: “An individual is nothing./An individual is zero” [Единица—вздор./единица—ноль]. The apparition of the disfigured 0.6 person provides the physical embodiment of alienated life, literalized in the statistical symbol.

The abstract fears about human lives subsumed under deforming statistical denotations are soon actualized as war breaks out. Society is quickly divided into two groups: “men with rifles” and “men with newspapers,” or, “those who would die and those for whom they would die” [на мёх, которые умирают, и на мёх, за которых умирают]. Relegated to the latter group as one of the “men with newspapers,” the narrator watches as the blood spilled from war transforms into printer’s ink, and war statistics turn live bodies into a “journal of death.” Yet the names in the journals prove more alive than those who are “dead” from their inaction, who spend their time idly calculating which surnames were more likely to be killed or captured. The narrator for his part recognizes the irony that being a man of the newspaper relegates him to the ranks of the dead, whereas being sent off to die, and thus being integral for the survival of those who do not go to fight, is to be alive. One night, as he sneaks toward a stretcher carrying a body home from the frontlines, he confronts the existential question of a life without action: “For us? For me? But I may not exist. That’s just it, I don’t” [За нас? За меня? А меня-то, может, и нет. Так вот—нет]. Punning on the inflected pronoun меня, he

74 Ibid. 16/525.

75 Ibid. 17/528.
questions the absurd discourse of the war. Reduced to its grammatical underpinnings, the statement contains a kernel of existential truth for the narrator: if others must fight for his existence (за меня), then it is as if he does not truly exist (меня нет). His passivity during the war and failure to integrate into the collective render him socially and spiritually dead. Sensing the battles getting closer, he chooses “to live in the dative case,” whereby he identifies his own real-life lack of agency with the indirect object’s passivity. As a man of the word—a “man of newspapers,” an intellectual and philologist, and a writer—the narrator uses language as an alibi for survival.

This leads to the ultimate question of the autobiography: is it the preservation of life, or is it the final coffin, as the third-person frame narrator puts it, a “paper noose,” into which the narrator finally commits himself? In his closing statement when he announces his intention to become a figment for his reader (akin to the 0.6 person), he invokes the language of possession. His spirit does not linger in the apartment with Shtamm but seeps into his “I,” entangles himself in Shtamm’s “associative threads.” The spirit of the narrator does not want to inhabit the body of text but rather the body of his reader. The deadness he commits himself to, his literal suicide and the transfer of life to page, ensures him of an audience and ultimately of the ability to “cross the ‘threshold of consciousness,’ the line between ‘I’ and ‘we.’”76 This is the role of Shtamm, whose very name means viral strain, which links him to the spread of the narrator’s disease, psychorrhea, and to the spread of his word. The narrator lives parasitically, even vampirically, off his unsuspecting host, making the autobiography itself a form of infection. As the reader approaches Krzhizhanovsky’s text, the narrator’s technique

76 Ibid. 13.
seems to have worked: the autobiography, embedded into a third-person narrative, takes
over the story, even supplying it with the title.

Shtamm is the perfect host, in all senses; he takes in the autobiography as it
arrives at his threshold, reads it through to the end, and gives the narrator a psychic home.

We are informed at the beginning that, as a writer, he contains multitudes already: his pen
name is Etal. (Ндр.), “among other pseudonyms.”77 The narrator simply seeks to be one
more voice speaking through the writer’s pen. The relationship between reader and text is
one of life and death; as a document, a paper body, the autobiography only contains the
record of life, reminding us that reading the autobiography, or any text, is an encounter
with a dead author, or with “life alienated in objects that continue to exert control over
people in the present day.”78 As the narrator (and ironically, Krzhizhanovsky) would
never find a public audience in his lifetime, the only mode of distributing such a text
takes his death, leaving a vacancy for his future reader. The text’s paradoxical
existence—which fully comes into being when it finds a reader, a direct result of the
author’s suicide—is predicated on death, rather than life.

Conclusion

Krzhizhanovsky’s worlds exist along the chain of Бытие-быт-бы-0, precariously
balanced between being and nothingness. His fiction is more a product of non-being than
of being, and his characters seem to sense as much. In these parallel worlds,

Krzhizhanovsky links the living dead bodies in his fiction with the “dead body of letters”
[мертвенное буквенное тело] that comprises them. His characters grapple with their

77 Ibid. 1/508.

own partial existence as literary figments, a feature that creates tragic existentialist plots out of the peculiarities of linguistic material. Like the absurd fiction of his contemporary, Daniil Kharms, the surreal element of Krzhizhanovsky’s stories emerges from the surreal qualities inherent in language, and it is the phenomenological properties of language that overpower all other forms of representational realism. Krzhizhanovsky’s literature involves a “resurrection of the word,” but the word is not the Johannine *logos*—the word is not flesh, but body, and a dead one at that. Life does not prevail in his fiction, where suicide is a recurrent theme and writing commits concepts to death. But crucially, it is death that begets literature, the paradox that results in the grotesque figures that populate his worlds.

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79 According to Todorov, this is also a general quality of the Fantastic: “If the fantastic constantly makes use of rhetorical figures, it is because it originates in them.” Tzvetan Todorov, *The Fantastic*, 82.
Conclusion: Looking Ahead

The study of the living corpse is animated by the observation that, by examining the rituals, symbols, and appearances of death, we discover the shifting values against which “life” is determined and defined. In this dissertation, I have argued that the living corpse is an apt metaphor for considering the various forms of political, social, and existential resurrections in the aftermath of 1917, and for considering how art plays a vital role in elucidating these new forms of experience. I have explored the rhetoric of the living corpse and the aesthetic and narrative strategies used to bring corpses to life, especially emphasizing where the motif diverges from imagining a literal resurrection of the dead. The influence of Fedorov on Platonov, for example, does not prevent the latter from exploring both the resurrected corpse and the living dead as metaphors of different kinds of existence following the revolution. Throughout, I have used 1917 as a reference point, arguing that the history of and after the revolution stamped its character on the bodies of the living dead. This is especially evident when we consider the substitution of Leninist-Marxist ideology for religious belief, and the materialist ontology underlying both the bodies of the dead and the artworks that bring them to life. Finally, in Chapter 3, I have read Krzhizhanovsky’s “living corpse” into the canon of Russian modernism, considering its appearance in both his aesthetic philosophy and his philosophical fiction.

I will now briefly look ahead to the end of the Soviet period, regarding the afterlife of dead bodies at another revolutionary moment and suggesting possible paths forward for future research. The reappearance of dead bodies in culture is particularly salient during the period of glasnost and the dissolution of the Soviet Union.
Reexamining the past invokes metaphors of resurrecting what was lost, both personally and culturally, as well as holding the dead accountable for their crimes.

There is a strong impulse during closing decade of the Soviet Union and the first decade of post-Soviet Russia to reexamine the dead body. Historical, cultural, and personal narratives that had been partially buried under years of suppression suddenly rose to the surface. One of these narratives involves the resurgent role of Orthodoxy in cultural life, which is perhaps best exemplified by the metaphorical resurrection of the Church of Christ the Savior [Храм Христа Спасителя]. Demolished under Stalin, it was meant to house the utopian Palace of the Soviets but instead inadvertently became an empty grave, followed by the world’s largest swimming pool. Its reconstruction, which spanned the 1990s, was capped in 2000 when the Romanovs, the very rulers whose removal shook the heavens in 1917, were glorified as saints in the church. Physically excavated and culturally elevated, they now ironically await their own resurrection in St. Petersburg. Whereas resurrection was a metaphor for revolutionary saturnalia in 1917, its reversal has now restored the old order.

The hopeful literary narrative of resurrection influences the ways we talk about lost history, literary and otherwise. Andrew Wachtel’s article “Resurrection à la Russe: Tolstoy’s The Living Corpse as Cultural Paradigm” ends with the observation that the “thematic knot” of suicide, death, and resurrection exceeded its literary bounds in the Soviet period and became a symbolic cultural paradigm for the fates of authors and their texts. He locates this cultural narrative in the literary lives of Bulgakov’s The Master and Margarita, Pasternak’s Doctor Zhivago, Grossman’s Life and Fate, and Platonov’s

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1 Wachtel, “Resurrection à la Russe,” 270.
novels, calling their posthumous publishing “literary ‘resurrections.’” Finally reaching the light of day after decades of suppression, these works gave their authors a revival that ironically mimics the themes that Bulgakov, Krzhizhanovsky, and others explored in their fictions. We could also include in this list the first official publications of works like Anna Akhmatova’s *Requiem* and Varlam Shalamov’s *Kolyma Tales* in the Soviet Union during the *glasnost* era, both of which add the voices of the dead to the chorus of the living, in their own way.

Written in 1992, Wachtel’s article expresses optimism for the canon of Russian literature—that it would be “permanently altered by the reappearance of these literary ‘living corpses’”—that is still being borne out, as we have seen in the case of Krzhizhanovsky. But this optimism is tempered by the thought of how many stories have yet to be unearthed and never will be. There are bodies that have never been found and memories that have forever been buried by the traumatic events of history. Alexander Etkind points out in his comprehensive study of the particular character of mourning in Soviet and post-Soviet Russian literature that the gulag was worse than a death sentence because death, at least, was certain:

> In an indefinitely large part of the Soviet experience, death could not be recognized as death, and survival could not be relied upon as life. The state, the source of the repressions, was also the only source of information. This is a condition of uncertain loss, in which the beloved person disappears for reasons that nobody understands; in which she may be alive and might possibly return; in which no information about the loss is available or trustworthy.²

Reviving a sense of “what happened,” then, is often limited to “making the past present, if only in symbolic, detoxicated form,” producing different types of literary living dead. Literature, film, and art in general play the role of mourning historical corpses that are unknown, or only partially known. This exploration often leads to the blending of the fantastic with the historical, a genre for which the living corpse is perfectly suited.

In some cases, artists animate corpses to arbitrate this history. In the Soviet Georgian film Repentance (produced in 1984, released in 1987) by Tenghiz Abuladze, Stalin’s crimes are allegorically dug up and posthumously put on trial. Years before the main plot takes place, the film’s protagonist, Keti Barateli, lost both of her parents in the Terror carried out in her hometown by the Stalin-like mayor, Varlam Aravidze. Decades later, upon his death, she refuses to let the leader’s body rest in peace. She repeatedly digs up his corpse and props him up against a tree in his son’s courtyard until she is caught, arrested, and brought to trial. The exhumation of his corpse leads to an exposition of his crimes and a reexamination of history, as she narrates her life story to the courtroom and to the audience in a series of flashbacks. Keti’s testimony does not acquit her of her crimes in court; she is declared insane and sentenced to an asylum. But her truth is spoken to a higher deity, and justice comes tragically in the form of Aravidze’s grandson, who knew nothing of his grandfather’s horrors. Outraged by his parents’ refusal to admit the truth about Varlam, he commits suicide, causing his father, Abel, to dig up Varlam’s body one more time and throw it over a cliff.

Repentance invokes both the metaphors of the living corpse (or the “undead”) and resurrection in its presentation of historical reckoning. Varlam’s body metaphorically

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3 Ibid. 1.
stands in for history and crimes that have been buried by secrecy, guilt, and ignorance.

His unexpected appearance above ground forces his family and the city to confront him anew, which they do with the help of Keti’s trial. While the dead have enormous psychological power over the living, Varlam’s dead body now has no political power, and he is unable to defend himself or prevent Keti from telling the truth from beyond the grave. Her trial unearths his crimes to the world, but it is finally his son, Abel, who truly commits Varlam to the undead by refusing him the honor of his burial. Crime is the force that animated Varlam’s actions while alive, and now they animate his dead body as well: Keti must commit a municipal crime by digging him up, but the exposure of his crimes against humanity is what leaves him unburied.

Meanwhile, resurrection metaphorically is given to the victims of his injustice, Keti’s parents, Sandro and Nino, through memory and imagination, as the film consists mainly of a flashback that tells their story and a deceptive framing device. Presented as her record of “what happened” in the courtroom, Keti’s flashbacks bring the dead into the present through memory. We learn that her parents are both affiliated with the Church, and the resurrection of their memory is connected to the cultural memory of the Church in Georgia. One of Sandro’s “crimes” for which he is arrested is opposing the government’s use of churches as science laboratories. He is an artist and attests to the importance of their historical preservation. Nino, who shares her name with the saint who Christianized Georgia, keeps a crucifix in her house, which is stolen by Varlam’s son and returned by Varlam in a scene preceding their arrest. The film’s final scene brings together the personal narrative of Keti and the cultural narrative of Georgian (and Soviet) history, as an elderly woman walking by Keti’s house asks her whether the road she is on
leads to a church. Keti responds by telling her it is Varlam Street, named after the mayor, and does not lead to a church. The Stalin-like dictator has not only permanently scarred her memory, but the town’s memory as well—his dictatorship has redefined society from top to bottom. But the woman’s reply is the sentence on which the film ends: “What good is a road if it doesn’t lead you to a church?” The road ascends and the woman continues on anyway, leaving the ambiguous question unanswered. One interpretation is that the path of history must lead to atonement for the sins of the past, not only on a personal level, but on a societal level. Any road that does not lead to the church—any path forward that does not reckon with its past—is worthless.

The framing device of the film complicates any simplistic reading, however, implying that imagination is as important a device as memory. The film, Repentance, is fiction, after all, and a highly allegorical one at that. Varlam’s last name, Aravidze, means “everyman” in Georgian, even while he stands in for Georgia’s most infamous son. The film’s complicated position between history and fiction is produced by the surreal and magical elements of the plot, and the opening and closing sequences imply that wishful thinking is, in fact, key to its message. It opens with Keti decorating a cake topped with a church, when a man reads Varlam’s obituary in the newspaper. We only return to this scene at the end of the movie after Abel has thrown Varlam’s body into the ravine. It is left up to the audience to decide where these events fit within the film’s chronology: whether the entire film has been Keti’s reverie of justice, or whether justice has truly been served. Abuladze leaves this question ambiguous as the film ends, but

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4 For a complete breakdown of the plot and structure of the film, see Josephine Woll and Denise J. Youngblood, Repentance (KINOfile Film Companion 4) (New York: I. B. Tauris, 2001), 6-11.
given its highly allegorical plot, *Repentance* is a sober reminder that art’s commitment to resurrecting the dead has become an elaborate wish fulfillment, nothing like the utopian project of Fedorov and others.

The imaginary history of Keti’s reverie becomes a parable for retrieving and reckoning with the lost past. The post-Soviet novels of Vladimir Sharov offer another perspective on imaginary histories, where Fedorovian resurrection is a recurring and central theme. A trained historian and author of seven novels, Sharov writes phantasmagoric fiction that combines elements of history and fantastic invention. According to the author, they are neither “historical prose” nor “alternative history,” but “novel-parables” [романы-притчи], in which Biblical stories merge with Russian history, and historical truth is blended with imagination.

Sharov is especially interested in the works of Fedorov. Sharing common philosophical ground with Platonov, he explores the ramifications of Fedorov’s philosophy of literal resurrection in terms of the Soviet project in the novel *The Resurrection of Lazarus* [Воскрешение Лазаря]. He even casts Fedorov as a character in his 1993 novel *Before and During* [До и во время], which takes place in a psychiatric ward. The narrator, Alyosha, begins writing a “Memorial Book” (modeled on one kept by Ivan the Terrible at the end of his life) because of his recurring blackouts, which he is told will eventually lead to total amnesia. He writes the stories of those he remembers, as well as those he meets in the hospital, because, like we saw in Platonov, oblivion is a form of death: “Death was waiting behind me, not in front of me, and almost instinctively

I too set off in that direction—back, to the past.” Soon, the line between fiction and reality is blurred entirely, and a fellow patient tells Alyosha the story of Madame de Staël (about whom Alyosha wrote his dissertation), who is reincarnated in her daughter, moves to Russia, and begins a romance with the philosopher Nikolai Fedorov. It turns out that Fedorov and de Staël are also residents of the psychiatric ward in the present day, and that de Staël had a son in Georgia, who grew up to be Stalin. The novel’s convoluted and dreamlike structure weaves back and forth between fact and fiction, as well as history and the present day, calling into question the cause and effect relationship of historical events.

The romance of de Staël and Fedorov is the centerpiece of the novel and its consummation is gravid with Gothic perversity. She seduces the young Fedorov—who is presented as naïve, a “half-wit” and “madman” who mistakes her “either for a statue of the Virgin Mary or for the Virgin Mary herself”—by lying in a coffin with a clear glass lid. Pretending to be under a magic spell, she lies like a corpse while Fedorov visits her daily and lies on the glass lid, which gradually becomes less and less of a boundary:

“This was the lightest of caresses, as if he were barely touching her, as if he were warming her with his breath, the breath of his body, and she would forget that they were separated by glass, as if he’d lain down directly on top of her, and she could feel him on her and began to want him, madly.” Fedorov himself responds sexually to her “corpse,” and they continue in a necrophilic relationship for months. She eventually emerges from

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7 Ibid. 151.

8 Ibid. 160.
the coffin and takes Fedorov as her lover, but his passion for de Staël dissipates quickly; death had made her appear innocent, and therefore perversely desirable, but life corrupts her appearance: “Whatever had surrounded her, whatever had mattered to her before, whatever she’d known, valued, loved—all this was the world of sin and had no right to exist.” Eventually, Sharov imagines Fedorov’s vision of a sexless utopia as being born out of his relationship with de Staël, and the two are still alive, alongside the narrator and his company of old Bolsheviks in the novel’s apocalyptic finale. This historical necromancy may be read as allegory, tying together the French and Russian revolutions through the “resurrection” of Madame de Staël by the utopian impulses represented by Fedorov. Sharov himself has indicated that de Staël’s figure in the novel is “a synonym for the influence of French culture on Russian,” and “a parable […] allowing us to understand much of what was in this country and still is, what isn’t on the surface, the underlying bases of interrelationships.” These subterranean excursions through history magically and grotesquely animate corpses to their aid.

The revolutionary events of 1917 cast history, belief, and art into a new light, elucidating the outlines of some corpses and partially erasing others. By ending at the beginning of the post-Soviet period, we have arrived back at our question of how historical events stamp their imprint upon the dead body. The resurrected corpses of this era remind us that, until science realizes the utopian (or dystopian) Fedorovian scenario, it is through cultural history and memory that we preserve the dead, and it is we, as readers, who continue to revive them.

9 Ibid. 176.

10 Vladimir Sharov, “Ia ne chuvstvuiu sebia ni uchitelem, ni prorokom.”
References


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