

Revolving Beast: Identifying the Animal in post-Revolutionary Russian Literature

by

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In memory of my brother

Jason Ford

(1970 - 2012)

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Abstract

The early years of the Soviet Union provide a rich context in which to examine the animal question, as one in which we see a complex search for meaning and identity in the climate of war and revolution. Three writers of the time—Boris Pilnyak, Andrei Platonov, and Evgeny Zamyatin—use animal imagery in ways that both illustrate and complicate ideological and ontological tensions. They emphasize the complexity of animal imagery, and the many problematic layers of the “animal.” Challenging traditional constructs of hierarchy and value, their works engage issues of identity, the problem of dehumanization, and the question of the intrinsic value of nonhuman beings.

In Chapter One, I explore the flexibility of animal imagery in constructs of human identity. In “Mother Earth” Pilnyak employs as his “hero” a misidentified fox cub to explore the estrangement and hostility between historically divided social groups. In “North” Zamyatin uses animals to explore the opposition between the primitive and the civilized, disrupting the binary construct through simultaneity and liminality.

In Chapter Two, I show how Zamyatin and Platonov use the literalization of dehumanizing tropes to question essentialist notions of animality and notions of morality and progress. In “The Dragon” Zamyatin challenges to notion of “humanness” by raising a third point of contrast to the animal/human binary: the inhuman. Similarly, in “Garbage Wind” Platonov disrupts human superiority through regressive metamorphosis, and challenges the “humanity” of humans who use science to justify oppression.

In Chapter Three, I examine the question of value, and the difficulty of representing a nonhuman subject whose interiority is not fully accessible to us. Pilnyak’s “A Complete Life” marginalizes the human by showing the “complete” lives of birds in the wild, free of human influence or meaning. By contrast, in “The Cow” Platonov presents the life of a cow whose value, as an agricultural resource, is limited to the products of her body. The tension created by

these conflicting views provides a critical view of anthropocentrism, in terms of both the exploitation of living beings, and the devaluation of individual subjective lives by which such exploitation is justified.

Introduction

I. Drawing Lines.

A Civil War propaganda poster from 1919 presents an image of a white medieval knight on horseback charging from the sky, about to slay a red dragon (Figure 1). The heading reads, “For United Russia,” and was designed to inspire the White Army to fight the “serpent ring” of Bolshevism that had “squeezed the heart of Russia.” It is a strong image, deliberately associating the plight of the White Army with the iconic image of St. George. While the poster’s symbolic meaning is unambiguous, the basic elements of the symbolism are not. A similar revision of the St. George image was also made earlier, in 1918, this time depicting Trotsky on horseback about to plunge a spear into a serpent’s head (Figure 2). The serpent wears a top hat and has the word “counter-revolution” written on his body. Juxtaposing these two images, we see that the knight and the serpent are the basic variables which can represent either term in a binary pair relating to values of good and evil, right and wrong, etc. While the political or ideological forces represented by the figures in the image may vary, the relationship between them is constant: the knight is always the good, while the dragon/serpent is always the evil.

Animal imagery is common in propaganda because of the ease with which such imagery can access reductive cultural associations in order to position one ideology or group against another, to either valorize a hero or vilify an enemy. This ease stems from the tradition of seeing the animal according to a mode (or modes) of binary opposition, and then using this opposition to

inform or illustrate others. Animal imagery provides a compressed and flexible vehicle for symbolizing notions of identity, meaning, and value.

While binary constructs are common across cultures and historical eras, during periods of intense social conflict, the tendency to define circumstances or people according to these constructs—old/new, right/wrong—is particularly strong. The period surrounding the Bolshevik Revolution was wrought with tension as Russia, still suffering the effects of World War I, was thrown into further conflict, and lines were continually being drawn according to class and ideology, in an effort to define and assert notions of identity and meaning during a time of great transition. Much of the literature of the period is both an exploration and a reflection of this tension, self-definition, and conflict. It was a period in which writers were still very much in the modernist current of exploration and innovation, with its preoccupation with fragmentation, discontinuity, and impermanence; and their art is both an extension and expression of the significant social and cultural changes occurring at that time.

This dissertation is about the literary use of animals and animal imagery in selected stories of three important and influential Russian writers: Evgeny Zamyatin, Boris Pilnyak, and Andrei Platonov. Their work, in general, is very much a product of, and directly engages, the experience of identity-construction as it occurred in the climate and aftermath of the Bolshevik Revolution. The specific works to be considered here were chosen because of the way in which their use of animal imagery engages the complexity of the animal image. They all address issues of identity, meaning, and value, but they do so in a way that questions these very concepts, and the beliefs associated with them, and they do so, in part, through a use of animal imagery that draws attention to itself. They highlight the ambiguity of the animal image, the tension between the symbolic and the real, and how nonhuman animals are simultaneously figurative

symbols and living beings in a way that challenges or distorts our perception and understanding of either. Reading these works with attention to the animal imagery we see that they engage difficult questions about the concept of the animal as a counterpoint to the human, about the animal as a mode of generating systems of meaning, the instability of such systems, and the way in which the ideas we hold about the animal directly influence both our concept of self, and our attitudes and treatment of those we view as “other.”

II. The animal read in mind and body.

“The question of the animal” is very complex because the term “animal” contains multiple meanings which exist simultaneously and inform each other, often with very serious implications. The term can refer to any animate being, *including* humans, or it can refer to all animate beings *excluding* them; it can refer to the biological, “natural” aspects of being, or it can refer to those lower, baser qualities positioned in opposition to those considered higher or refined. Thus, in general, the term refers to two principal ideas: animals and animality. Because of the multiplicity of meanings and because of the fact that “the animal” refers to both actual, living beings and the concepts we construct about such beings, when we speak of “the animal,” we are generally talking about what animals mean to us. Thus, in addition to all the things for which we use nonhuman animals, such as food, clothing, labor, etc., an important, and not entirely separable, use is in the development of our self-concept. We recognize that we are animals, but we have developed the idea that we have somehow transcended the animal, or that we have been afforded some special place in the terrestrial scheme of things. But the key problem here, and the one which Critical Animal Studies seeks to address, is the anthropocentrism inherent in this way of seeing, and the consequence this has for other beings.

Nonhuman animals are subjects of their own lives in ways that are entirely separate from the value we grant them, either physically or conceptually. Yet, our notions of animality and of animals, affects not only our relationship to our own animality, but also the very real lives of actual nonhuman beings, as species, groups, and, perhaps most importantly, individuals. This question has been raised by a number of theorists working on this problem: how the attitudes and treatment of living animals are affected by our concept of “the animal.” And it is a difficult question because of the extent to which all the aspects of this concept are connected and continually influence each other. As Steve Baker describes it, “Our attitudes, our prejudices and indeed our sympathies are all filtered through or clogged up in this thick but transparent mesh (or mess) of history, culture, public opinion, received ideas.”¹

In many ways, our concepts of human identity and value are the result of dualistic notions of animals and animality. We define the human by drawing a border of difference between “them” and “us,” between the animal and the human. But because humans are animals and other animals are both like us and not like us, this border of difference is flexible and vague. A productive way to engage this problem is to look at the larger dualism as comprised of two fairly distinct strains of thought, one which draws a line between humans and other animals, and one which draws a line between humanity and animality. The former is mainly a biological classification, while the latter is a moral position, yet the two are often mapped onto one another, continually affecting the understanding of both.

In his examination of theories of totemism, Claude Lévi-Strauss provides one approach to this system of mapping. He argues that animals figure prominently as totems in primitive

¹ Steve Baker, *Picturing the Beast: Animals, Identity, and Representation* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2001), 10.

societies not because a particular animal has any real relationship or resemblance to a given clan or tribe, but because they have great potential as metaphor, that animals are chosen “not because they are ‘good to eat’ but because they are ‘good to think.’”² Animals and nature provide a conceptual framework upon which analogic associations are imposed. But this framework often has little to do with actual animals or an objective understanding of the natural world. Rather, it is based on reductive concepts which we use to explain, justify, or criticize practices, qualities, or habits we see in ourselves.

Exploring the practice of associative projection, Lévi-Strauss explores some problems concerning notions of similarity and difference he sees in earlier studies of totemism. He maintains that animal imagery has been a significant part of cultural identity throughout history, but he asserts that associations with certain animals are not based on resemblances between an animal and a human group, but are actually rooted in notions of difference. He states that the important thing is “not the resemblances, but the differences, which resemble each other.”³ There are two realms of difference, he argues, one which distinguishes one animal species from another, and another realm which distinguishes different human social groups, either different tribes or different segments of one tribe, and that these two modes of difference are seen as analogous.

This associative projection is used to illustrate or validate hierarchical constructs of both nature and human society, informing the enduring constructs of a Scale of Nature or a Great Chain of Being.⁴ Sometimes the implications of these constructs are fairly neutral, while at other

² Lévi-Strauss, *Totemism*, Trans. Rodney Needham (Boston: Beacon Press, 1963), 89.

³ Lévi-Strauss, 77.

⁴ For a detailed discussion of these hierarchical constructs, see Arthur Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being: A Study of the History of an Idea* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1964).

times we see the more negative aspects of this in the justification of exclusionary social practices, including forced stratification and exploitation based on race or class. Such mapping can be seen in the language of taxonomic systems, especially pre-Darwinian systems, which arrange natural phenomena according to a hierarchically structure. To illustrate this type of analogical identification, Keith Thomas discusses the social terminology of taxonomic systems, pointing out, as an example, that Carl Linnaeus classified vegetables into “tribes” and “nations” with the latter having “plebeians” (grasses), “patricians” (lilies), “servants” (mosses), “slaves” (flags), and “vagabonds” (fungi).⁵ He also discusses how this sort of terminology was used to arrange different species as well as to understand the behavior of individual species, such as the monarchical structure of beehives. These projections are quite often developed and maintained despite natural complexity and conflicts between metaphor and reality.⁶

While the theories of Darwin and his successors have changed the way we understand the natural world, we continue to project one system of identification onto another, often with moral implications. A particularly clear discussion of these implications is offered by the anthropologist Tim Ingold. Where Lévi-Strauss sees two parallel lines of classification mapped onto one another, Ingold sees two lines basically intersecting, and he argues that the attempt to align the two is problematic because it relies upon a false identification. He outlines two senses of humanity, one which sees the human as a *species* of animal (*Homo sapiens*) and one which sees the human as a *condition* opposed to the animal. These two modes of thought are conflated to produce an anthropocentric view of human exclusivity, one which sees humans as unique not

⁵ Keith Thomas, *Man and the Natural World: Changing Attitudes in England 1500-1800* (London: Penguin Books, 1983), 66.

⁶ To underscore this, in his discussion of the popularity of the beehive as a metaphor for monarchical rule, Thomas explains that prior to the seventeenth century it was thought that the beehive was ruled by a male, a *king* bee. The female sex of the large bee was eventually proven in the mid seventeenth century by a Dutch entomologist, but his findings were so controversial that they were published only decades later in the 1740s. Thomas, 62.

in the sense that every species is unique, but one which sees humans possessing certain qualities in comparison to which all other animals are essentially the same.⁷ He argues that philosophers have sought the essence of humanity according to a mode of exclusion, asking not “what makes humans animals of a particular kind?” but rather, “what makes humans different in kind from animals?” In shifting the emphasis this way, humanity “ceases to mean the sum total of human beings, members of the species *Homo sapiens*, and becomes the state or condition of being human, one radically opposed to the condition of animality.”⁸ Thus, the question of whether human nature resides in our humanity or in our animality elicits conflicting answers, because we are, according to this conception, “constitutionally divided creatures, one part immersed in the physical condition of animality, the other in the moral condition of humanity.”⁹

This moral condition is overlain with a hierarchical concept of value, which constructs a vertical line of development perpendicular to the plane of species and of physical life. This concept asserts an ideal of human aspiration, one which is positioned in contradistinction to nature and animality as something to be transcended or overcome in the development of culture. The specific qualities of this ideal vary from one school of thought to another, from spiritual purity or moral temperance to the cultivation of intellect and refinement. But whichever quality or qualities are celebrated, they are typically antithetical to the lower, “baser” qualities of animality, an opposition which creates a dualistic view of the totality of the human self. As Barbara Noske explains it, “humanity’s ‘animalness’ is being restricted to its body, its real humanness lies in a vital addition to that body.”¹⁰ And since animals have been equated with our

⁷ Tim Ingold, “Humanity and Animality” in *Companion Encyclopedia of Anthropology*, ed. Tim Ingold (London: Routledge, 1994), 15.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 19.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 21.

¹⁰ Barbara Noske, *Beyond Boundaries, Humans and Animals* (Montreal: Black Rose Books, 1997), 82.

concept of animality, they are associated with the natural impulses which humans find fearsome or distasteful in themselves, a prop in the definition of human values; it was “a comment on *human* nature that the concept of ‘animality’ was devised.”¹¹ These concepts serve moralizing and socializing purposes in two different and contradictory ways. As Richard Tapper explains, “Sometimes certain animals are idealized and used as models of order and morality, in animal stories and myths. The animals are treated as agents and social beings, with motives, values and morals; and differences between them and people are implicitly denied. By contrast animals are sometimes represented as the Other, the Beast, the Brute, the model of disorder or the way things should not be done. Animals are ideal for both of these purposes.”¹²

In creating this divide within the human, and in identifying the negative aspects of the human with animality, and animality with animals, we project upon nature and the other species of the world a moral hierarchy with often terrible consequences, both for other animals, and for humans who, according to various criteria, somehow fall short of an established ideal, who fail to fully manifest qualities thought to define the *humanity* of the human. There have been several attempts to isolate specific features of this humanity in order to distinguish humans from all other species. Some have emphasized physical characteristics, such as intestinal length or facial structure; others have emphasized the mental traits of rationality and language; while still others have sought the difference in the religious ideas of a conscience or, most categorically, a soul.¹³

The problem with seeking a trait which defines the characteristic excellence of humankind is twofold. First, this type of thought is reductive and dismissive of the enormous diversity and complexity of animal life. Mary Midgley devotes significant space to this problem in *Beast and*

¹¹ Thomas, 41.

¹² Richard Tapper, “Animality, Humanity, Morality, Society,” in *What is an Animal?* ed. Tim Ingold, (London: Unwin Hyman, 1988), 51.

¹³ Keith Thomas offers a valuable summary of many of these defining qualities. See Thomas, 31-33.

Man, arguing that this method of differentiation sets all other species fundamentally apart from the human, and that it is really not possible to find a mark that distinguishes humans from “the animals” without saying *which* animals.¹⁴ Second, the difference asserted between humans and other animals, according to whichever criteria or mark of distinction, is overlain with a hierarchical notion of value, positioning other animals as “lower” or less important. In many ways, it is perfectly reasonable to assert the worth of one’s own species over others, as this is essentially a manifestation of kin preference, which occurs in many species, even extending that kin group to unknown members of the same species. What we seem continually unwilling to accept, however, is that this is a subjective mode of valuation. There is no cosmic principle to defend the position that humans are objectively, fundamentally more valuable than any other type of being.¹⁵

The imposition of moral value upon biological classification is at the heart of both Midgely’s and Ingold’s arguments. Midgley focuses mainly on the celebration of intellect as the primary trait used in this mode of projection in Western thought, because it is one of the most enduring and echoes through classical, religious, and Humanist traditions. She argues that we must be vigilant against conflating the moral and the biological, asserting that “The Platonic exaltation of the intellect above all our other faculties is a particular moral position and must be defended as such against others; it cannot ride into acceptance on the back of a crude method of taxonomy.”¹⁶ Ingold extends this line of thought to address the moral theories of personhood, arguing that the conflation of biology and morality is a great paradox in Western thought. It asserts equally that humans are animals and that animality is the very obverse of humanity; that a *human being* is an

¹⁴ Mary Midgley, *Beast and Man* (London: Routledge, 1995), 204.

¹⁵ It could be argued that one species could be objectively more valuable in the context of a particular ecosystem, but given our profoundly negative environmental impact, this line of thought would certainly not work to defend human supremacy.

¹⁶ Midgley, 204.

individual of a species, *being human* is to exist as a person. He states, “In the first sense humanity refers to a biological taxon (*Homo sapiens*), in the second it refers to a moral condition (personhood). The fact that we use the same word ‘human’ for both reflects a deep-seated conviction that all and only those individuals belonging to the human species can be persons, or in other words that personhood is conditional upon membership of the taxon.”¹⁷

The identification of *Homo sapiens* with the moral construct of “humanity,” along with the hierarchical understanding of both of these concepts, are at the core of our devaluation of nonhuman life. On the one hand, these notions inform our exploitative treatment of other animals; on the other they are used to justify it. Since nonhuman animals are considered deficient in intellect, language, the capacity for abstract thought, the ability to enter into contracts, an immortal soul, or any other exclusionary criteria, they do not, in themselves, warrant ethical consideration. Keith Thomas asserts that a powerful argument for the Cartesian position of animals as automata, was that it was the best possible rationalization for the way humans actually treated animals. The alternative view had left room for human guilt by conceding that animals could and did suffer, and it aroused worries about the motives of a God who could allow animals to undergo suffering on such a scale. The view of an absolute ontological (and moral) divide “absolved God of the charge of cruelty and humans of moral guilt [and] created an absolute break between man and the rest of nature, thus clearing the way very satisfactorily for the uninhibited exercise of human rule.”¹⁸

¹⁷ Ingold, 23.

¹⁸ Thomas, 34-35.

III. Reading the animal in Russian dualism.

Dualistic notions regarding the animal often find expression in culture through the association of parallel dichotomies. The opposition between animality and humanity is identified with those between instinct and reason, nature and culture, material and spiritual. Because dualistic concepts involving animals operate on many levels simultaneously, animals are very useful in representing oppositional concepts of human culture and society, and equally useful in questioning them. Moreover, given the flexibility of the animal image and its fundamental association with nature, it can at once represent the gross or base level of existence which is to be overcome in the name of cultural or spiritual progress, and it can alternately represent a sort of Edenic purity and harmony threatened in the process of modernity and the increasing estrangement from nature.¹⁹ This idea gained some currency in the Romantic period and found expression in the Russian nationalist movements of the time.

In Russian culture there is a strong tendency toward dualistic concepts, a tendency which is the subject of a famous essay by Yuri Lotman, in which he outlines many of the important manifestations of this idea from the Middle Ages to the end of the eighteenth century. In the essay, he advances two distinct but related ideas; the first has to do with ideological dualism, while the second concerns how this dualism informs a cyclical pattern of historical development. He argues that a specific feature of Russian culture “is its fundamental polarity which is expressed in the dual character of its structure [. . .] divided by a sharp line and without any neutral axiological zone.”²⁰ This fundamental polarity is centered on the opposition between old

¹⁹ See John Berger for a discussion of the development of nostalgia for the animal in the early Modern period. John Berger, *Why Look at Animals?* (New York: Penguin Books, 2009), 21-23.

²⁰ Yuri Lotman, “The Role of Dual Models in the Dynamics of Russian Culture,” in *The Semiotics of Russian Culture*, ed. Ann Shukman (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1984), 4.

and new, an opposition which informs and absorbs other oppositions, such as Russia/the West, true faith/false faith, social top/social bottom, etc.²¹ As a consequence of this polarity's being both extreme and hostile, and its having no neutral axiological zone, Russian culture can be divided into historical stages which replace each other dynamically, with each new period forming a decisive break with the preceding one. Because each new stage arises in opposition to the one immediately preceding it, there tends to be a regeneration of archaic ideas and structures, a cycle of "negations of negation" which, in the larger picture, contributes to an overall homeostatic character.²²

While the historical scope of his essay does not extend beyond the end of the eighteenth century, evidence of these binary models can be traced through the nineteenth and early twentieth century, if not beyond. In the nineteenth century, the fundamental old/new dichotomy, and its attendant opposition of Russia/the West, gained increased strength in the Slavophile/Westernizer debate in its various manifestations. According to Lotman, in the second half of the eighteenth century there was another turn towards the celebration of the "old" and the "natural" as the primordial sources of national culture, unsullied by Western influences.²³ This trend found expression in various circles and movements, such as the Wisdom Lovers and the early Slavophiles, who believed that Russia had developed along a trajectory separate from Western Europe and Roman influence, and consequently developed and maintained valuable traditions of spirituality and communalism (*sobornost'*) that distinguished it from the rationalization, materialism, and atomization of Western society.²⁴ While the upper classes were influenced—and largely corrupted—by the West and westernizing reforms of Peter I, the

²¹ Ibid., 5.

²² Ibid., 3,5.

²³ Ibid., 26-7.

²⁴ Andrzej Walicki, *History of Russian Thought: From the Enlightenment to Marxism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1979), 93-95.

common people (*narod*) had remained pure and were, in many respects, the repositories of these distinct and morally superior traditions and customs.²⁵ Despite their being romantic and utopian, as Andrzej Walicki characterizes them, the ideas of the Slavophiles were influential to later political movements, such as Panslavism, some strains of Populism, and later, Eurasianism and Scythianism. All of these feature nationalistic constructs of Russian (or Slavic) singularity and superiority characterizing one side of an East/West binary, and they are distinguished by cultural constructs that characterize the relative primitivism of the common people as a comparatively simple, authentic mode of life that is closer to God and a sort of “natural order,” in contrast to the Westernizers who tended to view them as emblematic of Russia’s backwardness and retarded development.

In the twentieth century, this cultural dualism found expression in Bolshevik ideology and its constructs of hostile antinomies. In her examination of Soviet political posters, Victoria Bonnell argues that while the Bolsheviks drew intellectual support from Marx and Engels, including the dualism of class struggle, their binary models were equally influenced by “the bipolar orientation in traditional Russian culture.”²⁶ They organized their social constructs around the diametric oppositions drawn between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat, the kulak and the poorer peasant, White versus Red, individual versus collective. Furthermore, these contrasts were so polarized that, as in Lotman’s theory, there was not a neutral axiological zone; the Bolsheviks were intolerant of ambiguities, of social categories or individuals who occupied, socially or intellectually, an intermediate position.²⁷ In light of both this tendency to draw definitive lines between opposing ideologies, groups, eras, etc., and in the inclination to think in parallel

²⁵ Ibid., 96-98.

²⁶ Victoria Bonnell, *Iconography of Power: Soviet Political Posters under Lenin and Stalin* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 187.

²⁷ Ibid., 188.

dichotomies, some writers of the period drew upon animal imagery to explore the implications of these oppositional constructs.

IV. Chapter outline.

This work is comprised of three chapters each of which explores a specific aspect of the animal question. I provide close readings of two principal texts in each chapter to examine not only the development of a particular theme, but the careful way these themes are treated through the language and structure of the texts. I seek to show that the specific details in these texts reveal the authors' awareness of the richness, complexity of animal imagery, as well as its implications. Looking at these works through this particular critical lens both enriches our aesthetic appreciation of these texts, and shows how they engage, both thematically and formally, the problems of animal representation and the politics of human and animal identity.

In Chapter One I analyze Pilnyak's "Mother Earth" and Zamyatin's "North" to show the way in which the authors explore the flexibility of the animal image in constructs of human identity. Pilnyak uses animal imagery to explore the constructs of cultural dualism, specifically the idea of the estrangement and hostility between historically divided social groups. He does this by establishing as the "hero" a fox cub who is mistaken for a wolf by those whose urban background has estranged them from nature and the authenticity of the common people. Similarly, Zamyatin also uses animal imagery to explore cultural dualism and dualist constructs of identity, specifically the opposition between the primitive and the civilized. He constructs a center-periphery model, and then complicates it through narrative point of view, and by adding aspects of simultaneity and liminality, which disrupt simplistic binary constructs. Moreover, the

animals in these texts are both symbolic and “real,” a detail which demonstrates the authors’ engagement with the complexity of the animal image, and which reminds the reader that animals are more than the concepts we create with and about them.

Chapter Two continues the theme of identity but in a much darker context as I explore the problem of dehumanization and the way in which the rhetoric and practice of dehumanization is connected to constructs of human supremacy. I analyze the stories of Zamyatin (“The Dragon”) and Platonov (“Garbage Wind”) to show how these texts use the literalization of dehumanizing tropes to draw a connection between essentialist notions of animality and notions of morality and progress. These texts are particularly compelling insofar as their use of animal imagery problematizes the conventional moral hierarchy. Zamyatin questions the notion of “humanness” by raising a third point of contrast to the animal-human binary: the inhuman. Similarly, Platonov disturbs the anthropocentric view of human superiority through the idea of regressive metamorphosis in a way that challenges the “humanity” of humans who use scientific rhetoric as a means of justifying oppression and violence. I argue that these texts illustrate a connection between the devaluation of nonhuman life and the oppression of humans regarded as essentially inferior “subhumans.” In doing so, they question the complex and problematic concept of “humanness.”

In Chapter Three I turn from more figurative treatments of animal imagery to texts which engage the problem of actual animals, the questions of nonhuman subjectivity and intrinsic value. I examine Pilnyak’s “A Complete Life” and Platonov’s “The Cow” to show how these texts both attempt an approach to the nonhuman subject, and underscore the inherent difficulty of representing a subject whose interiority is not fully accessible to us. These works approach the question of the animal subject in two very different contexts. Pilnyak’s story marginalizes the

human by showing the “complete” lives of birds in the wild, free of human influence or meaning. Platonov, by contrast, presents the life of a cow whose value, as an agricultural resource, is limited to the products of her body. The tension created by these conflicting views provides a critical view of anthropocentrism, in terms of both the exploitation of living beings, and the devaluation of individual subjective lives by which such exploitation is justified.

Figure 1: Poster, "Za edinuiu Rossiu," 1919.



Heading and caption, in English:

FOR UNITED RUSSIA!

"A thick serpent ring of Bolshevism has squeezed the heart of Russia.

It seemed that the victim could not break free.

But suddenly, in the light of the rising sun, came a horseman, freely taking the hard task of saving Russia.

His strong arm is lifted to strike, and the helpless serpent knows that the end is near, that he cannot escape and that justice shall be done."

Figure 2: Poster, “Lev Trotskii pobivaet kontrrevoliutsiiu,” 1918.



Chapter 1

Opposition

“The wolf stopped, momentarily puzzled, then tossed his head back and – moved away from me with the very same calm, majestic gallop: – *there the wolf was free, elemental...* To me the wolf is the beautiful romanticism of Russia, our Russian, blizzardly, dreadful romanticism.”

– Boris Pilnyak, *Machines and Wolves*

Pilnyak’s 1924 novel uses machines and wolves as metaphors for cultural conflict, as a way to explore the social and philosophical tension between civilization and nature, and between members of a historically divided populace. An important feature of the novel, one that is characteristic of Pilnyak’s complexity, is that these metaphors have no fixed meaning or defined value. Rather, like the “beautiful” (*prekrasnaia*) and “dreadful” (*strashnaia*) romanticism in Andrei’s characterization of the wolf, Pilnyak contrasts positive and negative connotations of each side of the opposition. On the one hand, the wolf symbolizes strength, courage, independence, instinct, and intuition; on the other the wolf symbolizes darkness, stagnation, superstition, and brutality.²⁸ As the wolf is used here as a symbol of the rural Russian people, its ambiguity of signification is characteristic not only of Pilnyak’s ambivalent feelings toward the

²⁸ Gary Browning presents a nice outline of these contrasting associations. Gary Browning, *Boris Pilniak: Scythian at a Typewriter* (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1985), 132-33.

question of “the people,” but similar feelings of many writers, particularly the so-called “fellow travelers,” who felt themselves between two worlds, historically, socially, and culturally.²⁹ A number of these writers explored a metaphorical connection between this tension of transition and liminality, and the ontological position in which humans place themselves in relation to the natural world, as humans conceive of themselves as both animals and above the animal, both a part of nature and apart from it. In the work of both Pilnyak and Zamyatin, for instance, animal imagery is used to explore these complicated issues of identity. In “Mother Earth,” Pilnyak uses the image of a wolf and fox to explore the problem of uniting socially and historically alienated groups. In “North,” Zamyatin uses animal imagery to explore the tension of the traditional East/West, rural/urban dichotomies in connection with the question of authenticity and progress.

While there is a strong tendency to draw associative connections between humans and other animals, the image of the animal does not have a fixed semantic meaning. Sometimes there are clear metaphoric or metonymic relationships, at other times the meaning or associative connection is vague or unknown. One example of this variability is the use of animals as national symbols. Some national animal symbols are based on metonymic associations, being either native to or prevalent in a given country, such as the Australian kangaroo or Indian Elephant, while others are more metaphorical and meant to convey ideas of courage, resilience, freedom, or any other qualities thought to characterize national or ethnic identity. In one sense these images are fairly straightforward, with one animal representing one country or group and a different animal representing another, with additional distinctions developed to maintain exclusivity for those animals that tend to be popular and cross-cultural, such as eagles and lions.

²⁹ The label “fellow travelers” was applied to writers who were not of revolutionary background, but were nonetheless generally willing to accept the ideals of the Revolution. Victor Terras, *Handbook of Russian Literature*, 135.

However, as Steve Baker argues, while the images themselves may be straightforward, the meaning the image is meant to convey is neither consistent nor reliable.³⁰ Baker presents a series of images of national animal symbols in cartoons, advertisements, and political posters, and analyzes them in connection with their context, intended meaning, and reception, to illustrate how these symbols are not only fluid but also easily misinterpreted. He argues that a reason for this misinterpretation has to do with the “difficulty in representing timeless, heraldic forms,” with the way in which “iconographic codes” can be altered or destabilized through “codes of connotation.”³¹ Another reason is that such iconographic codes are themselves unstable. The lion, for instance, in various cultures and periods has been used to symbolize courage, vigilance, endurance, magnanimity, but also pride, wrath, and ferocity.³² The question then arises as to why animal images would be used if their symbolic meanings are often vague or confusing.

One answer involves the area of inquiry in which Lévi-Strauss asserted that “animals are good to think” with. He argues that animal imagery is used as a symbolic system to establish meaning about human life and society by reading relative differences among animals and drawing a connection to differences among members of a human society. This practice of associative projection can be seen in many cultures and cultural expressions, from fables and religious myths, to theories of taxonomy and social politics. As Keith Thomas explains, “it is an enduring tendency of human thought to project upon the natural world (and particularly the animal kingdom) categories and values derived from human society and then to serve them back

³⁰ Steve Baker, *Picturing the Beast: Animals, Identity, and Representation* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2001), 34.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 55-6.

³² For a survey of lion symbolism in heraldry and iconography, see Beryl Rowland, *Animals with Human Faces: A Guide to Animal Symbolism* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1973), 118-123.

as a critique or reinforcement of the human order, justifying some particular social or political arrangement on the grounds that it is somehow more ‘natural’ than any alternative.”³³

The rich potential of animal metaphors exists in this concept of the similarity of differences, as Levi-Strauss asserts, but it simultaneously exists in concepts which maintain a strict difference between humans and other animals. If the first concept is more commonly used to define or justify certain, often hierarchical, social structures, the second is more commonly used in the realm of morality. Rather than describing the ways in which humans and our inter- and intragroup relations and structures are similar to other animals and their inter- and intraspecies relations, the emphasis here becomes one of human distinctiveness, supremacy, and the elevation of “humanity.” On a moral level, the proposed distinction between humans and animals has less to do with actual animals than it does with the animality of the human. This is a mode of projection that sees animals as representative of the uncomfortable, frightening, or repellent aspects of being, all that is “carnal,” “lower,” “base.” As the antithesis of what is valued as noble, civilized, or refined, our humanness is in many ways defined through the negation of animal features, through the repression or excision of our own animality.³⁴ This line drawn to separate humans from other animals, and humanity from animality, has powerful and far-reaching implications, informing a host of binary oppositions such as wild/tame, lower/higher, nature/culture, primitive/civilized, body/mind, flesh/spirit, most of which stem from traditional theological and metaphysical dualism. Animals are very useful as symbols because they can be made, more or less easily, to represent one side of a moral or ontological opposition. These oppositions influence not only our treatment of other animals, but also our treatment of each

³³ Keith Thomas, *Man and the Natural World: Changing Attitudes in England 1500-1800* (London: Penguin Books, 1983), 61.

³⁴ For a more detailed discussion of this in philosophy and religion, see Keith Thomas, *Man and the Natural World*, Barabra Noske, *Beyond Boundaries*, and Mary Midgley, *Beast and Man*.

other, since in our constructions of nature, as Mary Douglas phrases it, “the contrast between man and not-man provides an analogy for the contrast between the member of the human community and the outsider.”³⁵

Animal imagery is used, then, not in spite of its inherent variability, but because of it. Animals are useful as symbols because they can simultaneously carry a number of different meanings and modes of contrast, and can themselves be seen as symbols of conflict. The works to be discussed here explore this variability and complexity of the animal image as it relates to a binary model.

I. A Fox in Wolf’s Clothing: Conflict and Estrangement in Pilnyak’s “Mother Earth” (1924).

Boris Pilnyak rose to great prominence in the years immediately following the Bolshevik Revolution, and is noted for being one of the first prose writers to deal directly with the subject of the Revolution and the Civil War, most famously in his novel *The Naked Year*. Pilnyak makes frequent use of animal imagery in his work, to different but related ends. Some works include animals in a more auxiliary role as merely beings of the natural world, as many of his stories are set in the provinces, where animals are a more integral part of daily life. In others, animals are given a more prominent role as central figures in a range of representational modes. Some animal subjects are clearly allegorical, such as the characters of “A Dog’s Life” (“Sobach’ia zhizn’” 1919), where various animals are anthropomorphized and speak in human language. Others are represented as animals as such, where the narrator attempts to provide a

³⁵ Mary Douglas, *Implicit Meanings: Essays in Anthropology* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1975), 289.

vision of life from an animal's point of view, in the spirit of the animal stories of Jack London. "A Complete Life" ("Tselaia zhizn'" 1915) and "Snow Wind" ("Pozemka" 1917), for instance, present life, death, and the struggle for survival in nature without overt anthropomorphism or allegorical didacticism.

While there is a range of uses of animals in Pilnyak's work, they are all, with the possible exception of the allegorical "A Dog's Life," associated with the theme of nature, and more specifically, the contrast seen on several levels between nature and civilization. This is a major current running through his work, and it informed his opinions and artistic treatment of the political, social, and cultural issues of his time. From an early age, Pilnyak felt a close affinity with nature and rural life. His parents were both from the lower Volga region, his mother from Saratov and his father from Ekaterinenshtadt, now Marks.³⁶ They were active in the Populist movement, and believed that the *zemstvo* could improve the lives of the peasantry through education and material improvement. To that end, they were employed by provincial *zemstvo* boards, his father as a veterinarian, and his mother as a schoolteacher. The family relocated several times, and the young Pilnyak learned much about rural life and the social and economic disparity of the country, while his strongly apolitical father impressed upon him the need to combat the barbarism which was, in many respects, the consequence of the people's hardship and destitution.³⁷ From his somewhat nomadic childhood and from his apolitical father, Pilnyak developed a worldview in which he would not attach himself completely to any one idea, movement, milieu, or area. Well-educated and well-read, he was comfortable among urban intellectuals, but did not feel, at the same time, detached from the common people. As Peter

³⁶ Peter Alberg Jensen, *Nature as Code: The Achievement of Boris Pilnyak 1915-1924* (Copenhagen: Rosenkilde and Bagger, 1979), 16-17.

³⁷ Browning, 10-11.

Jensen characterizes him, Pilnyak was “very much interested in the borderline between nature and civilization; but he did not feel that he belonged specifically to one side or the other, considering himself to be just as competent in the big city as in the wilderness. His place was the border area between the two.”³⁸ And while he tended, especially in his earlier work, to idealize somewhat the simplicity of rural life and its connectedness to nature and natural cycles, he was quite even handed about examining the positive and negative aspects of both nature and civilization. As Gary Browning states, “Throughout his life, ideologies were peripheral to the all-encompassing issue that juxtaposed the positive *and* negative features of nature (spontaneity and freedom versus ignorance, poverty, and violence) to the equally positive and negative features of civilization (wealth and security versus regimentation and monotony).”³⁹

While Pilnyak resisted organized affiliations, he was certainly not beyond political or ideological concerns. He gravitated toward a Slavophile view of Russian exceptionalism in that he sought to understand Russia’s place in relation to the East/West dichotomy, and he believed that the Russian people had preserved a simplicity and spiritual integrity (though not necessarily in terms of religion) that was lacking in the intellectual and mechanized West. These views led him toward a general support for the Bolshevik Revolution, which he viewed, at least initially, as a spontaneous popular uprising in the spirit of Pugachev and Stenka Razin.⁴⁰ In *The Naked Year*, Pilnyak expresses these ideas through Gleb Ordynin. In a conversation with a young ecclesiastic, Gleb states that in the West

Everything is dead, purely mechanical, machinery, comfort! [. . .] Machine culture forgot about spiritual culture [. . .] The Russian State for the last two centuries, since

³⁸ Jensen, 15.

³⁹ Browning, 26.

⁴⁰ Ibid, 80-81.

Peter, has wanted to adopt that culture. Russia, Gogol's through and through, was being stifled in that atmosphere. And the Revolution has opposed Russia to Europe. What is more—now, after the first days of Revolution, Russia, in her life and her ways and her towns has gone back to the seventeenth century. Peter stood at the end of the eighteenth century.⁴¹

And he asks, which of the two will win, “machine Europe” or “sectarian, orthodox, spiritual Russia.”

While the conflation of the dichotomies old/new, East/West, nature/civilization are not exclusive to Pilnyak, it is a prevalent theme in his writing, and it underwent many changes as he continually revised and reworked his texts, incorporating early stories into later novels and novellas. A characteristic feature of Pilnyak's work is his use of repetition and refrain, both intra- and inter-textual, and these repeated characters, passages, and images become altered, complicated, and enriched in new and broader contexts.⁴² In terms of animal imagery, Pilnyak makes repeated and increasingly complex use of the wolf to symbolize both nature and the Russian people, and perhaps more specifically the primitive life of the rural peasantry.

In Pilnyak's earlier stories, wolves are used less metaphorically; they do not come to be clearly representative of the Russian people until the works of the early 1920s. Instead, the earlier depictions of wolves are of beings in the natural world without any overt contrast to civilization, at least within the text. For instance, in “Snow Wind” (“Pozemka”), written in the

⁴¹ Boris Pilnyak, *Sobranie sochinenii v 6 tomakh* (Moskva: Izdatel'stvo Terra-knizhnyi klub, 2003), I: 74. Translation by Alec Brown with some modifications for accuracy.

⁴² Mary Nicholas analyzes this tendency across several of Pilnyak's works, arguing that his pattern of revision and repetition is one of the features that define him as a particularly Modernist writer. Mary A Nicholas, “Boris Pil'niak and Modernism: Redefining the Self,” *Slavic Review*, Vol. 50, No. 2 (Summer 1991), 410-421.

spring/summer of 1917, Pilnyak presents the life of a wolf pack at a critical point in a larger life cycle, when the leader has temporarily abandoned the pack to avenge the death of his mate. When he finally returns, he is killed by a younger, stronger wolf who will himself, the narrator suggests, eventually be replaced. The human in the story, the farmer in whose trap the older wolf's mate is caught and later killed, is chased and mauled to death by the vengeful older wolf. Yet, while there is a conflict between the human and the wolf in the story, this conflict is only part of the larger struggle for life and survival. In this they are equal.

With this image, Pilnyak establishes the wolf as a symbol of nature and natural life, as a being governed by instinct and the will to survive, and he uses the wolf to symbolize similar qualities he feels exist in the Russian people. These associations become more clear and overt in later texts, principally in "Wolves" ("Volki" – 1923), which features an important scene in which a young anarchist, Anna, visits a menagerie and has a conversation with a Communist commissar in front of a caged wolf. She feels sorry for the wolf and draws a connection between him and the suppression of anarchists following the Revolution. To Anna, the wolf is the master of the forest, he is Russia, romantic and beautiful, fierce and terrifying, "like the revolt of Stenka Razin." Conversely, in the cage he is a "conquered element." His brothers wander the forest, they howl, live, kill, give birth, die; his brothers are free; "they are Russian and rule the Russian fields, forests, and nights," while he "suffers like a pendulum" in the cage. In her and the narrator's description, Pilnyak establishes a contrast between wolf and machine which becomes the largely irreconcilable conflict between nature and civilization:

волок бегал по клетке; волк изучил клетку,—он кружился в ней, след в след, шаг в шаг, движение в движение, не как живое существо, *но как машина*, — исчезая в тень клетки и возвращаясь в свет; потом он остановился, опустил голову, взглянул

на людей понуро, устало, исподлобья и тихо завыл, зевнул;—волк был беспомощен, страшный русский зверь.⁴³

The wolf ran about the cage. The wolf had studied the cage—he whirled around it, track by track, step by step, movement by movement, not like a living being, *but like a machine*—disappearing into the shadows of the cage and returning into the light, he stopped, lowered his head, looked at the people despondently, wearily, from under his brows and quietly began to howl, yawned. The wolf was helpless, a frightening Russian beast.

The image of the crippled, mechanized wolf in a cage is the symbol of the alliance between the Revolution and the machine, at the expense of naturalness and spontaneity.⁴⁴ It symbolizes the conflict outlined by Gleb Ordynin between old and new Russia.

This conflict is more fully developed in *Machines and Wolves* (1924), of which the material from the story “Wolves” forms an important part. While much of the material is the same, however, in the novel the connotations of the wolf take on greater complexity and ambiguity, and are more revealing of a shift in Pilnyak’s thought regarding progress. Following the publication of “Wolves,” Pilnyak spent the greater part of four months in England during the spring/summer of 1923. This trip made a strong impression on him and significantly influenced the novel he worked on at the time. He saw the possible material and cultural advantages of industrialization and the consolidation of labor which, while not completely destroying his romantic ideals of authenticity, compelled him to look upon rural Russia as a place of stagnation and backwardness.⁴⁵ He saw a need for the machine as perhaps the only way to elevate Russia and the Russian people from barbarous conditions and work towards the greater development of Russian culture. At the same time he was aware that the advance of the machine does not

⁴³ Pilnyak, II: 108.

⁴⁴ Jensen, 223-4.

⁴⁵ Ibid, 57-8.

necessarily alleviate suffering and ensure happiness. The exploitation of labor will not necessarily release the muzhik from the vice of poverty and ignorance.⁴⁶ Thus, in *Machines and Wolves*, we see a very complex and ambivalent picture of the tension between nature and civilization, wolf and machine. At various points in the novel and through its various characters, Pilnyak illustrates the contrast between the wolf and the machine which includes the positive and negative values of each. On one hand the wolf is nature, simplicity, instinct, spontaneity, freedom, and independence. On the other it is poverty, ignorance, brutality, predatoriness. Likewise, the machine is both the artificial, rationalized regulation that crushes life and freedom; and it is also material wealth, scientific and technological progress, security, and equality.⁴⁷ Both have their potential value, but if human life is violated, both civilization and nature are equally repulsive.

Pilnyak completed *Machines and Wolves* in June of 1924. Later that year he finished another piece involving the wolf, the novella “Mother Earth” (“Mat’ syra-zemlia”), which has come to be considered one of his finest works. By this point in the evolution of Pilnyak’s symbolism, the wolf had become a strong and recurring emblem of wild nature and the Russian peasantry. While the wolf continues to hold these associations in this story, there are a couple of crucial differences, the most important of which has to do with the specific features of the peasantry the wolf is made to represent. As in *Machines and Wolves*, Pilnyak continues to explore some of the darker aspects of rural life, its primitive barbarity and lawlessness, and thus it is a further step away from his earlier romanticization of the rural peasantry and the idealization of raw nature.⁴⁸ Pilnyak continues to explore the underlying tension between East/West, rural/urban,

⁴⁶ Browning, 137.

⁴⁷ Browning, 132-3

⁴⁸ Peter Jensen argues that 1924 marks a major turning point in Pilnyak’s work, and considers “Mother Earth” his “final renunciation for his revolutionary nature Utopia.” Jensen, 64.

nature/civilization, but the focus of this tension is on a smaller scale, with an emphasis on a more particular, nuanced point. Here he explores the irreconcilability of these opposites, the mutual alienation and hostility of opposing forces. It is a portrait of estrangement, of the suspicion, hostility, and ignorance that came to characterize the chasm in Russian culture between the gentry and the peasantry, between educated society and the common people. In the story, Pilnyak uses a wolf pup to symbolize this estrangement, to suggest that it stems from a deeply ingrained perception of difference impossible to overcome through structural or ideological changes in the larger society.

The story is set during the Civil War, in a remote area in the lower Volga region, to which a communist party forester, Anton Nekulev, has been sent to organize and oversee a campaign to stop the local peasants from ravaging the recently nationalized forest. Nekulev is an educated and worldly man who grew up in a town in the Urals, but who later studied at a forestry institute in Germany, lived in Moscow, and became passionately involved in the communist cause. He is proudly rational, and considers his life lived with “the precision of a game of chess.” He is also naively optimistic about the possibility of uniting the city and the countryside. As he ventures into the rural world of the peasants, however, his optimism and rationality are increasingly threatened. He faces repeated and aggressive opposition from the peasants who consider him an interference in the taking of the forests which they consider now rightly theirs.⁴⁹ To them he is little more than a replacement of the landowning prince whom the peasants gruesomely

⁴⁹ The Soviet government nationalized the woodlands in May 1918, placing them under the control of the local *volost*’ soviets, which were expected to provide the peasants with forest resources according the government’s norms and regulations. However, this shift of control of forest land from landowner to state did not sit well with the local peasants, for whom free access to the woodlands was an aspiration of the revolution. The village communes declared the woodlands to be the property of the people (belonging to the commune) and not the state. This is indicative of both the peasants’ mistaken conception of what was meant by nationalization, and of the persistent rift between the village commune and the state administered local soviet. See Orlando Figes, *Peasant Russia, Civil War: The Volga Countryside in Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 120-121, 188.

murdered, a parallel reinforced by Nekulev's assigned residence in the manor house which had been stormed and looted immediately after the Revolution. In his isolation, Nekulev meets a young woman, Irina, who grew up in the area as the daughter of a local tanner, but who lived and studied in Petersburg, who joined the communist party before the Revolution, and who has now been sent to the area to revive the tannery. Despite her rural background, her education and life in the city have alienated her from the common people. In some ways she is a liminal character, between Nekulev and the peasants; she knows the area and the people, their problems and their customs, but she no longer shares their worldview. But unlike Nekulev, she is not as repelled by the darker side of rural life, a difference which ultimately leads to their separation. While he knows that she works as a tanner, when he witnesses her slaughtering a group of old horses, he is overcome with revulsion and runs away, never to see her again. That night, he begins to write her a letter, apologizing and thanking her, but he never finishes the letter. He has received news that the White army is approaching and the peasants are rioting. His unease and fear has reached a point that teeters on madness, and he flees the manor house through a window. That same night, Irina is brutally raped and impaled by Cossacks. In the morning, Nekulev's peasant assistant, Kuzya, finds her room overturned with traces of blood on the floor. Assuming that Irina had been either killed or forcibly expelled, he takes what possessions he can carry, along with the pup, whom he later kills to make a hat out of his pelt.

Despite his stated importance to the story, the wolf pup occupies very little of the actual text, being featured in only five of the novella's fifty pages. However, the narrator states at the beginning that the wolf pup is the hero of the story:

...Главный герой этого рассказа о лесе и мужиках (кроме лесничего Антона Ивановича Некулева, кроме кожевенницы Арины – Ирины Сергеевны

Арсеньевой, кроме лета, оврагов, свистов и посвистов)—главный герой—волчонок, маленький волчонок Никита, как назвала его Ирина Сергеевна Арсеньева, эта женщина, так нелепо погибшая и мерившая—этим волчонком—погибшим за шкуру—столь многое.⁵⁰

The hero of this story of forest and peasants (apart from the forester Anton Ivanovich Nekulev, apart from the tanner Arina—Irina Sergeevna Arseneva—apart from summer, ravines, and whistles), the hero is a wolf pup, the little wolf pup Nikita, as he was named by Irina Sergeevna Arseneva—that woman who was to die so senselessly and to whom the wolf pup—who was to die for his pelt—stood for so much.

After a short section in the prologue, the wolf pup is not mentioned again until the final pages, where it is then revealed, at the very end, that the wolf pup is actually a fox. The reader is then left to question the relationship of the wolf/fox to the rest of the text. Given his previous use of the wolf, Pilnyak's readers would have some understanding of its emblematic significance, and given the fact that the bulk of the story is devoted to Nekulev's conflicts with the local peasants, the reader will correctly assume a symbolic relationship between the wolf pup and the peasantry. Yet, the question remains as to what purpose the wolf/fox serves, what specific points or shades of meaning are gained by not only his inclusion, but the narrator's insistence on his importance. Clues to understanding this lie in the details in the scenes involving the wolf pup, and in the story's overall structure.

The novella is composed of five parts, with two main storylines: Nekulev's problems with the peasants, and his relationship with Irina. Symbolically connected to these are two subplots: Irina's relationship with the wolf pup; and Kuzya's tale of a man who conceives a devious plan to punish three priests who have made advances on his wife. This man plans to embarrass the priests, but inadvertently kills them and covers it up by deceiving a drunken peasant into helping

⁵⁰ Pilnyak, II: 377-78.

him dispose of the bodies. This tale is told in four installments throughout the course of the main narrative. The question is how these storylines and subplots fit together to produce a coherent whole.

There are a few possible ways of answering this question. Judith Mills, for instance, argues that of the two main storylines in the text, one is plotted (Nekulev – Irina) while the other is non-plotted (Nekulev – peasants).⁵¹ While she makes some very insightful points, and her conclusions generally seem valid, particularly in her analysis of the thematic conflict between the rationality of Nekulev and the instinct-driven world of the peasants, contrasting these two storylines this way is a bit problematic, insofar as the Nekulev – Irina storyline only seems more “plotted” because there is less space devoted to it and it is therefore easier to piece together. The fragmentation that seems to complicate the plot of the other storyline occurs here as well. Furthermore, both of these storylines do in fact follow a generally clear temporal and thematic arc, which, while it is complicated by fragmentation, interruption, and detailed subplots, is made more coherent through a closer examination of the text’s structure, and its use of repetition, parallelism, and framing.

Studying the arrangement of the story’s five sections, one notices a clear symmetrical structure. The work begins with a somewhat lengthy prologue, about twelve pages long, which is neither titled nor identified as a prologue, in which the main characters and central problems are all introduced. Following the prologue are three core chapters, each with a title and a unifying theme. These are followed by a short epilogue, entitled “About the Wolf Pup.” In his article on Pilnyak’s use of myth, Eduard Meksh points out that the wolf and the theme of

⁵¹Judith Mills, “Narrative technique in Pil’nyak’s ‘Mother Earth.’” *Journal of Russian Studies*. No. 28 (1974), 13-14.

blindness provide a frame for the rest of the story, and states that these themes emerge as the contrast between the life and fate of the intelligentsia (Nekulev) and the natural society of the forest people.⁵² However, as this is somewhat tangential to the focus of his article, he does not develop this connection nor explain how it functions in the narrative.

The connection between the wolf pup and blindness (and the faculty of sight more generally) is not overt, but rather is introduced with a textual association at the beginning of the prologue. The story opens with a flash forward to a scene in which a peasant forest thief, Stepan Klimkov, is brought before Nekulev after he was discovered hanging inverted in a tree from which he was stripping bark during the night. Apparently, Klimkov lost his footing, became entangled in the branches and, consequently, his eyes burst from the sustained rush of blood to his head. He asks Nekulev for a guide since his eyes have “run out” (*glaza-te vytekli*). Immediately following this flash forward, the narrator begins the introductory part of the prologue which begins with the introduction of the “hero” wolf pup in the passage quoted above. The narrator explains that Irina bought the pup from a peasant boy who found him the only survivor of an abandoned litter, and that at the time he was still blind and unable to open his eyes. The narrator places repeated emphasis on eyes throughout the text up to the final scenes where we see two striking parallels. First, when Irina’s death is described with imagery somewhat reminiscent of the opening scene with Klimkov, the narrator notes that her eyes had fallen out of their sockets (*glaza vylezli iz orbit*).⁵³ The second occurs at the end of the text, when Kuzya is walking home through the dark forest after visiting Irina’s room and taking the fox cub. The narrator states that Nekulev would have wondered how Kuzya could move through the darkness without having his eyes poked out

⁵² E.B. Meksh, “Mif i real’nost’ v povesti Borisa Pil’niaka ‘Mat’ syra-zemlia,’” in *Boris Pil’niak” Issledovaniia i materialy* (Kolomna: Kolomenskii gosudarstvennyi pedagogicheskii institut, 2001), 43.

⁵³ Jerome Rinkus notes a connection between these two scenes, arguing that they are both parodic crucifixions. Rinkus, “Mythological and Folkloric Motifs in Pil’njak’s *Mat’ syra-zemlja*.” *Russian Language Journal*, Vol. 29, No. 103 (Spring, 1975), 32-33.

(*ne vytknet sebe glaz*), which repeats a sentiment (and verbal construction) stated near the beginning of the story, in the middle of the prologue, when Kuzya is first escorting Nekulev from the village to the manor house.

These sections concerning the wolf/fox and the theme of blindness, which occur in tandem at either end of the text, do provide a frame for the rest of the novella, and is likely what Meksh refers to in his article. The question remains, however, as to what exactly these episodes are framing and what significance this has to the understanding of the work. The answer is that both of these themes have to do with perception, which is obvious with respect to the faculty of sight, but less so with respect to the wolf/fox. And this association with perception operates simultaneously on thematic and structural levels.

In terms of structure, these opening and closing sections involving blindness and the wolf/fox form a frame of the three internal chapters. Chapter Two is the physical and thematic center of the work. In some respects, it is one long digression, as very little action concerning the main storylines takes place within it, and so, in terms of plot, it is largely an interruption and thus likely the main cause of the work's apparent fragmentary form. However, despite its digressive form, Pilnyak emphasizes the chapter's centrality in a few deliberate ways. First, it is literally in the middle of the text. Second, it is the only one of the three chapters that does not open with a piece of folk mythology. Chapter One begins with a description of the myth of the wood devil (*leshii-liad*), and chapter three begins with the myth of Mother Earth (*Mat' syra-zemlia*). Third, chapter two is divided into two equal sections, which are distinguished from each other by a shift in point of view. The use of contrasting point of view is the key significance of both the chapter and the story as a whole.

The primary focus of chapter two concerns the lives and worldview of the peasants among whom Nekulev has been sent to live and work. In the first section, the narrator gives an account of the lives of Kuzya and Yegor. Yegor has built a new hut, but before he and his family can move in, they must undertake an elaborate, superstitious “crawling-in” ceremony strictly following the directions of another local peasant, “father” Ignat. Ignat is a local soothsayer who rents an apiary, and whom the other peasants turn to as a wise man and folk healer. Before Yegor’s move, Kuzya buys black-market grain and *samogon* from a local peasant who operates a distillery in a cave. We see Yegor’s wife, Katyasha, decorate an icon case with beer labels because she cannot read. And we see Yegor find Nekulev’s toiletries, and it is made clear that he has never seen a razor, toothbrush, or tooth powder.⁵⁴ All of the details in this section serve to expand the reader’s understanding of the daily lives of the peasants with whom Nekyulev has come to live, and while the narrator conveys the information in a calm, straightforward tone, the details emphasize the peasants’ poverty and ignorance, their isolation, illiteracy, superstition, and fatalism, as well as a mode of life that is beyond whatever laws and conventions the larger society happens to promote at any given time. The general sense is that their lives are characterized by a primitive constancy. To them, leaders and laws come and go, but their lives are so remote, basic, and marginal that these changes occur in a different realm, and if they do affect them at all, it is generally as an inconvenience to which they adapt but which has very little impact on their lives in the broader picture.

Of particular importance in this section is the fact that the reader is given these details through omniscient narration, but mainly from Kuzya’s point of view. The choice of omniscient

⁵⁴ Meksh makes an interesting point regarding the detail of the razor. He states that all peasant foresters would have beards, which explains Egor’s bewildered reaction to the razor. More importantly, it is another way Pilnyak emphasizes the difference between Nekulev and the peasants, and it forms a symbolic connection between the western Nekulev and Peter I. See Meksh, 48.

narration with multiple points of view allows for not only a fuller picture of the characters' lives, but a better understanding of the degree of difference in worldview between Nekulev and the peasants, and the enormous difficulty in bridging the gap that separates them. This gap is the main focus of this chapter. In addition to shifting point of view, the narrator provides long passages through which the reader gains access to the views they hold of each other, the peasants' impressions of Nekulev in the first section, and Nekulev's impressions of the peasants in the second. For instance, in one scene, the peasants have gathered around an evening bonfire. Kuzya is in the middle of his tale of the priests when they see Nekulev leave the manor house to climb the hill where he occasionally goes to be alone, as by this point he is becoming increasingly frustrated and disillusioned. They exchange stories about him. Kuzya's wife, Maryasha, tells the others of "the barin's" indulgent lifestyle, that he "lives like the masters" (*gospodskaia zhizn'*), eating foods both rich (cream, butter, eggs) and exotic (buckwheat), and that he insists on having his undergarments washed even though he has worn them only a week and they are "clean as can be," and insists that she wash the clothes and dishes with soap, even though she informed him that they hold soap to be "unclean" (*poganyi*). Yegor tells them how many of the women are convinced that he is a sorcerer, and that one night, out of curiosity, he followed Nekulev up the hill and was terrified by what he saw. He describes how Nekulev would break up dry branches to start a fire, lie beside it and stare into the fire, and "his eyes are terrible to see, and those glasses on his nose glow like coals—and all the time he's chewing a blade of grass . . . It's real frightening!"⁵⁵ And after lying and looking into the fire, or standing and staring out over the Volga, he walks home "just like nothing's happened."

⁵⁵ Pilnyak, II: 402. The detail of the firelight's reflection making his glasses "glow like coals" (*stekla, na nosu-to, goriat, kak ugli*) echoes a phrase used in the piece of mythology about the wood demon (*leshii-liad*) which opens chapter one. There the wood demon is described as having "eyes which glow like coals" (*glaza goriat kak ugli*) (p.

These details and depictions are given immediate contrast in the chapter's following section, where we see the peasants from Nekulev's point of view, in a letter describing his time among them. He describes their lives, with many details coming from the preceding section, which sharpens the contrast in their respective points of view. For instance, we learn that Yegor's hut has been built with illegally cut forest wood which he is supposed to be protecting, and that this hut is furnished with furniture taken from the manor house after the prince's murder. We learn that Kuzya's wife, Maryasha, who is twenty-three, has had five children, two of whom have died, and that she bore all of them herself, without help from anyone, including the local midwife, and that the three children she has are all filthy, naked, and malnourished. He explains how Yegor's bull calf became ill and they called in not the veterinarian from the nearby village, but the soothsayer, Ignat, who "removed (!) some kind of film (!) from its eyes" and the calf went blind. He then sprinkled salt in them and instructed Katyasha to rub ground snakeskin in them for treatment. Their lives, he states, are all "savagery and horror" and that his relationship with them is one of mutual bewilderment:

Я для них:—барин и больше ничего,—я не пашу, мою белье с мылом, делаю непонятные им вещи, читаю, живу в барском доме, стало быть,—барин; заставлю я ходить их на четвереньках—пойдут, заставлю вылизать пол—вылизут, и сделают это на 50% из-за рабственного страха, а на 50—из-за того, что:—может, барину это и всерьез надо, ибо многое из того, что делаю я, что делаем мы, им кажется столь же нелепым, как и лизание полов.⁵⁶

For them I'm just the Barin and nothing else: I don't plow, I wash my clothes with soap, do things incomprehensible to them; I read, live in the manor house, and so—I'm the Barin; if I were to order them to crawl on all fours—they'd do it; if I ordered them to lick

389). These parallels reinforce the way in which the peasants see Nekulev as an evil presence. Similarly, Meksh offers an interesting point in connection with this fire scene, stating that Egor views Nekulev as a possible sorcerer because he stares into the fire, something a sorcerer would do to foretell the future. Meksh, 49.

⁵⁶ Pilnyak, II: 414.

the floor clean—they'd do it; and they'd do it 50 percent out of servile fear and 50 percent because—who knows?—maybe the Barin really needs it done, because much of what I'm doing—what we're doing—seems as absurd to them as licking floors.

Just as the peasants' views of Nekulev reveal their incomprehension of him, his letter reveals a similar degree of incomprehension, and underscores the idea that their way of life is so deeply entrenched that bridging the gap that separates them would likely be impossible. In juxtaposing these contrasting points of view, and in emphasizing this contrast through the structural arrangement of the text, Pilnyak underscores the story's key theme of alienation.

Pilnyak further emphasizes this alienation through the wolf pup. As mentioned above, the passages involving the wolf pup are placed at the beginning and end of the text, forming the outermost frame of the novella's center—the contrasting views presented in chapter two. In addition to this structural framing, the wolf scenes reinforce this opposition in other ways, one of which is the suspicion and hostility with which the pup meets Irina's maternal affections. The narrator explains that when left alone the pup leads “a very contented life, absorbed in his own concerns,” running about the room, lying around, chasing flies. But when she enters the room, he immediately retreats to his corner and stares at her carefully and suspiciously. There is a clear parallel drawn between the wolf pup's suspicious hostility and the attitudes and behavior exhibited by many of the peasants toward Nekulev. He tries to treat them with benevolence and understanding, assuring them that he is on their side, but his attempts to find a common ground with them are consistently frustrated.

In addition to these behavioral and situation similarities, Pilnyak also draws this parallel linguistically, through the use of recurring terms:

Волчонок забился в угол, сидел на задних лапах, поджал под себя пушистый свой хвост, и черные его глаза стерегли каждое движение рук и глаз Ирины. И когда глаза их встретились, глаза волчонка, немигающие, стали особенно чужими, враждебными навсегда. Ирина нашла волчонка еще слепым, она кормила его из соски, она нянчилась с ним, как с ребенком, она часами сидела над ним, перешептывая ему все нежные слова, какие знала от матери, волчонок рос у нее на руках, стал лакать с блюдца, стал самостоятельно есть,—но навсегда волчонок чувствовал себя врагом Ирины. Приручить его возможности не было; и чем больше волчонок рос, тем враждебнее и чужее был он с Ириной.⁵⁷

The wolf pup hid and crouched in the corner, his fluffy tail curled under him, and his black eyes followed every movement of Irina's hands and eyes. And when their eyes met, the pup's unblinking eyes became especially alien and eternally hostile. Irina found the pup when he was still blind; she fed him with a rubber nipple; she nursed him like a baby; she sat over him for hours, whispering to him all the tender words she learned from her mother; the wolf pup grew in her care, learning to lap from a saucer, to eat on his own—but he felt that he would always be Irina's enemy. There was no possibility of taming him; and the bigger the wolf pup grew, the more hostile and alien to Irina he became.

In this passage the narrator repeats the words “*vrazhdebnyi*” (hostile) and “*chuzhoi*” (other, alien), words which are also used in other scenes involving the wolf pup, as well as in the beginning of chapter two when the narrator describes Nekulev's feelings about the manor house being alien and hostile to the surrounding area, to the forests and the steppe, and the parallel he draws between the murdered prince and his own insecure position among the peasantry. Of the four scenes involving the wolf pup, the word “*chuzhoi*” is used in all but the last, the final scene of the story in which Kuzya finds the pup alone in Irina's room.

⁵⁷ Pilnyak, II: 423-24.

The *svoi / chuzhoi* (one's own/other) dichotomy is important in Russian culture based on ancient identifications of kinship or clan, as a means of signifying who is and who is not part of one's group. As Yuri Lotman describes it, the *svoi / chuzhoi* distinction is vital to the construction of the boundary, the primary mechanism of semiotic individuation, which forms the "outer limit of a first person form."⁵⁸ Pilnyak's repeated use of the word "*chuzhoi*," a term that is loaded with connotations of otherness, is a subtle but powerful way to impart to the reader the degree of alienation experienced by Irina and Nekulev, both from the wolf, and by symbolic extension, the peasants whose world resists them.

The absence of the word "*chuzhoi*" in the final scene further emphasizes this opposition. With Irina and Nekulev the wolf pup is invariably hostile, whereas in the scene with Kuzya we don't see this hostility. He notices the wolf pup, looks at him closely, sees that he is not a wolf but a fox, and calmly picks him up by the scruff, wraps him up, and takes him home. The contrast here to previous scenes suggests to the reader a more natural association between the animal and Kuzya. It is not to suggest a bond or affection – the narrator states that during Winter, Kuzya kills him for his pelt – but that the wolf/fox and Kuzya, in the realm of the text, are on one side of a divide which runs through the story. The narrator underscores this division through Kuzya's story to the others about the misidentification of the fox. He tells them that a wolf's tail is like a cudgel, but the fox has a black tuft on the end and his ears are black, but "how would the masters (*gospoda*) know about that?"

⁵⁸ Yuri Lotman, "The Notion of Boundary," in *Universe of the Mind: A Semiotic Theory of Culture*. Trans. Ann Shukman (London: I.B.Tauris and Co., 2001), 131.

The misidentification of the fox is significant in a couple of ways. On one level, that the animal is a fox is symbolic, given its cultural associations of craftiness, trickery, and deceit.⁵⁹ In the novella these associations are manifested in the numerous details of theft and deceit pervading the text. In addition to the illegal seizure of forest resources which forms the basis of the plot, and the rampant bootlegging of grain and *samagon*, Nekulev becomes aware of the fact that his peasant aides are deceiving him by overcharging for the foodstuffs they procure from the German settlements across the Volga. When he finds out about this, Nekulev is upset over their apparent lack of honor, and he reproaches Maryasha and Katyasha, who tell him that they did it “for fun, on purpose like” (*My ponaroshku zato, narochno my, to est*). Their nonchalance underscores the idea that such behavior is simply a matter of course, as does Kuzya’s tale about the deception of the three priests, their accidental deaths, and the peasant’s stratagem to cover up the deaths by tricking another peasant into helping him. As it is, his tale features layers of deceit, but with Kuzya’s jovial tone, his rendition is one which celebrates such deception. Jerome Rinkus argues that Kuzya’s tale emphasizes an ironic contrast between the values of the peasants and those of the intelligentsia, and that the fox is an allegorical comment on the ease with which man may be deceived or deceive himself.⁶⁰

This idea of self-deception is another way the misidentification of the fox is important. Irina views the wolf pup as a sort of surrogate child. We know that before her relationship with Nekulev, she was a virgin, and devoted her time to her education and political activity. Her attempt to care for and raise the pup is a way for her to at once reconnect with her rural youth for

⁵⁹ Pilnyak invokes these cultural association in a later piece, “A Story about how Stories Come to be Written” (“Rasskaz o tom, kak sozdaiutsia rasskazy,” 1926). There the narrator is taken to a temple to the fox in Japan. In his reflections, he states that “The fox is the god of cunning and treachery.”

⁶⁰ Rinkus, 33-34.

which she is somewhat nostalgic, as well as to provide an outlet for the instinct of motherhood.⁶¹ But the intervening distance has estranged her from the place of her youth, and the wild animal rejects her attempts at domestication. Similarly, Nekulev initially feels that the problem with the peasants can be resolved through reason and order. Just as he imagines it will be easy to restore the manor house by replacing windows and doorknobs, installing a new floor, etc., it will be just as easy to bring the peasants around to his (and the party's) way of viewing the local natural resources, and creating a rational sense of order. Additionally, his vision of Irina is also tinged with self-deception, insofar as he willfully ignores the reality of her work, and dismisses the smell of blood and tanbark that surrounds her. When he finally comes to face the violent reality of what she does, his self-deception is exposed and his idealistic constructs dismantled.

In the novella, through repetition and framing, Pilnyak compresses several ideas into the image of the wolf/fox. As established in his earlier work, the wolf is emblematic of positive and negative qualities he associated with the peasantry. Likewise, in "Mother Earth," we see the qualities of instinct, resilience, independence, as well as ignorance, brutality, and anarchic predatoriness. Here, though, he further complicates the image by superimposing upon the image of the wolf that of the fox and its cultural associations of treachery and deceit. This compression gives the reader a more complicated image with which Pilnyak symbolizes the mutual alienation of the two general groups, and the tension of conflicting identities and worldviews between the urban intelligentsia and the uneducated rural peasantry. Additionally, for our understanding of Pilnyak's evolving thought, this complicated imagery underscores not only his shift from his earlier "primitivism" and idealization of "the people," but also his increasing pessimism toward

⁶¹ Pilnyak tended to place great importance on reproduction and specifically motherhood as a manifestation of natural instinct. Browning, 79.

the idea and possibility of meaningful progress, and his growing ambivalence toward the Soviet project.⁶²

II. A Space Between: The Bear and Deer in Zamyatin's "North" (1918).

Whereas Pilnyak uses animal imagery to explore the idea of an irreconcilable duality, Evgeny Zamyatin problematizes the dual model by introducing the concept of a relative continuum. Zamyatin makes frequent use of animal imagery in his fiction and critical essays. In some instances, he uses animals to symbolize the realm of nature in general; in others, he uses animals more in the sense of animality, as symbolic of the "lower" aspects of the human, characterized by the barbarous and appetitive, which threaten the realization of "higher," nobler modes of being toward which humans allegedly strive. The two symbolic uses of animal imagery are not exclusive to Zamyatin, informed as they are by traditional dualistic conceptions of life and humanity, and the rigid line drawn between humans and other animals. More specific to Zamyatin is the way in which these are connected to differing notions of the primitive, how they relate to each other, and how they are characteristic of the sense of tension which echoes throughout his work and thought.

Present in history, art, philosophy, religion, and science, Zamyatin explores this tension as it is expressed in the conflict between the individual and the collective, the natural and the

⁶² Kenneth Brostrom offers an insightful analysis of Pilnyak's shift toward nihilism in the mid-twenties. He writes: "The Gods of Heaven and History became for him analogous illusions. There is no genuine human progress ('spiritual progress'), only technological, 'material' progress. Pil'njak came to believe that men always respond to universal, unchanging human impulses and needs, including the need for faith, in ways shaped by their culture. In one way or another the present will thus reiterate the past. Pil'njak's antidote for his own nihilism was virtue and love, through which men can generate meaning and value in their lives." Pilnyak's 1924 "Mother Earth" can thus be viewed as indicative of his transitional period. Brostrom, "The Enigma of Pil'njak's *The Volga Falls to the Caspian Sea*," *The Slavic and East European Journal*. Vol. 18, No. 3 (Autumn, 1974), 272.

artificial, the primitive and the civilized, and in the philosophical (social, scientific, cosmic) dichotomy of energy and entropy. In his essays, this tension guides his ideas of social revolution, artistic forms and movements, and dialectical models. In his fiction, it manifests itself in themes of opposition, formal experiment and innovation, and in his use of satire and irony as a means of resisting philistinism and challenging the status quo. While we can trace this tension throughout his work, including the stories, tales, and fables of his early period, it isn't until the "middle period" that we see these ideas taking a more definite shape, being explicitly articulated in his essays and in his longest and most famous work, the dystopian novel *We*.⁶³

A significant point of tension in Zamyatin's work is the contrast between the artificial and the natural or authentic, a contrast which he often explores through the use of setting. Many scholars have noted a shift in setting during the middle period, with more works being set in the city, such as the three stories set in Revolutionary Petersburg ("The Dragon," "The Cave," and "Mamai") and the urban future depicted in *We*. It is important to remember, however, that while there is a greater use of urban setting during this period, the majority of his works, even those from this period, feature provincial settings. Like Gogol, whose Petersburg stories are among his most famous, Zamyatin's provincial stories far outnumber the urban, and come to provide, during the middle period, an important thematic contrast. While rural settings remain a strong constant in his fiction, there is an important shift in emphasis and meaning. In much of his early work, especially in the two famous tales, *Uezdnoe*, and *Na kulichkakh*, the emphasis is on the banality and backwardness of provincial life as degrading or corrupting influences. In the middle period, there is a shift toward viewing the rural, if only symbolically, as antithetical to the

⁶³ The middle period is typically defined as beginning in 1917 after his return from England, and continuing up to the early 1920's, with the completion of *We*. For a breakdown of these periods with a list of their respective works, see Alex Shane, *The Life and Works of Evgenij Zamjatin* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968), 230-231.

mechanization and automatization of urban life as a hyper-rational force that threatens individuality and authenticity, and results in a state of entropy and philistinism. Such a threat is central to *We*, for example, in the opposition of the One State to the Mephi rebellion, and the ambivalence and inner conflict this opposition produces in the protagonist, D-503.

This shift in emphasis and significance has less to do with setting as it does with evolving ideas of the primitive and progress, which take shape in the middle period, at least in part as a reaction to the Revolution and its aftermath. Zamyatin was attracted to revolutionary ideas early on, becoming involved with the Bolshevik party during his first years in Petersburg, studying engineering at the Polytechnic Institute. His involvement stemmed more from the pull of contrast and rebellion than from a strong interest in politics, as he writes that being a Bolshevik at that time “meant following the line of greatest resistance.”⁶⁴ By the time he finished at the Institute, following periods of arrest, imprisonment, and exile, much of the allure of Bolshevism had waned and he left the party.⁶⁵ Though he moved away from political forms of rebellion, from meetings and demonstrations, his revolutionary passion remained, but he channeled it into his academic and artistic pursuits. A more meaningful break with Bolshevism would come later, in 1917, after his return from England. Like many writers and artists of the time, he was excited by the social changes promised by the Revolution, but became disillusioned and highly critical of the forms of barbarism and oppression Bolshevik policies were taking. He was dissatisfied with the way revolution had become not a force of dialectical change and social development, but a slogan of a state whose policies threatened individual thought and freedom. Revolution is a means of progress, but progress, in Zamyatin’s view, is not a state or condition; rather, like

⁶⁴ Zamyatin, “Autobiography” (1929), *Sobranie sochinenii v 5 tomakh* (Moskva: Izdatel’stvo Russkaia kniga, 2003), I: 24.

⁶⁵ Shane, 12.

evolution, it is a force of perpetual motion and change, an idea made quite explicit in a 1923 article in which he wrote that “Revolution is everywhere, in everything. It is infinite. There is no final revolution, no final number. The social revolution is only one of an infinite number of numbers; the law of revolution is not a social law, but an immeasurably greater one. It is a cosmic, universal law.”⁶⁶ Very similar ideas are expressed by I-330 in *We*. In that novel, D-503 describes the One State as a place of perfect order, built on reason and mathematical precision. The citizens are depersonalized cogs in a carefully-built and smoothly-running machine. Nature, the irrational, and emotion have been forcibly excised. In the spirit of Ivan Karamazov’s Grand Inquisitor, freedom has been sacrificed for the sake of happiness. It is a state of civilized order which is drawn in contrast to the wild, natural world beyond the Green Wall.

To explore the problematic notions of progress, Zamyatin uses concepts of nature and the primitive as antithetical counterweights to stasis and entropy which he increasingly associated with the civilized world. Thus, in the middle period, as he clarifies his views of revolution as a cosmic force, we see a development and a change in the representations of the primitive. There is a quite a shift, for instance, from the animalized characters of his early tales, such as *Uezdnoe* (1911-12), to the similarly primitive fur-bearing people beyond the Green Wall. While both are primitive and “uncivilized,” they exemplify different modes of these ideas. These distinctions can be more clearly seen when comparing some of the provincial tales. For instance, the protagonists of *Uezdnoe* and “North,” Baryba and Marei respectively, are both portrayed as provincial, hulking giants. There is, though, a crucial difference between them. While both are portrayed using animal imagery—a wolf in Baryba’s case, and a bear in Marei’s—there is a difference in characterization and emphasis. Baryba is lumbering, barbaric, and selfishly

⁶⁶ Zamyatin, “On Literature, Revolution, Entropy, and Other Matters” (1923), III: 173.

appetitive, while Marei is more a gentle giant with comparatively noble, altruistic tendencies. Baryba is a brute, whereas Marei is referred to several times as “bogatyř,” recalling folkloric associations to heroic figures like Ilya Muromets and mythical notions of authentic “Russianness,” in a way similar to Leskov’s Ivan Severyanich Flyagin from *The Enchanted Wanderer*. In several instances, especially those works which serve as antitheses to philistine civilization, the primitive comes to represent a connection to nature, however tenuous and nostalgic, and a form of a lost or threatened authenticity.

Associating the primitive and rural with the authentic is a strong thematic feature in Zamyatin’s “northern cycle,” three stories set in the far north of European Russia, in the area surrounding the White Sea. These three works—“Africa,” “North,” and “The Yawl”—were written individually over a span of twelve years, from 1916 to 1928, but have often been considered together due to similarities in setting and theme. Each story features a male protagonist whose idealistic dream of a better life is obsessively focused on a material object or, in the case of “Africa,” a distant place, rejecting the present for the sake of an imagined future happiness. Each protagonist suffers a tragic fate as a consequence of his pursuit. These stories are not a criticism of aspiration and idealism per se; rather they are, as Shane argues, a rejection of the notion that the attainment of a material goal will automatically lead to a perfect life; that while Zamyatin espoused true progress as endless movement forward, humans are still mortals who should live fully, and that an important part of life exists in manifestations of love rooted in strong physical desire.⁶⁷ He advocates an authenticity which often exists apart from, and in spite of, social or political conventions and constructions. This is part of the significance of the setting

⁶⁷ Shane, 190-1.

of these works, as Zamyatin subscribed to the opinion that the distant north was a repository of authentic “Russianness.”⁶⁸

While these three works taken together share a number of common elements, this discussion will focus on “North” for a few reasons. First, it was written in 1918 during the middle period, and thus is in many respects an immediate reaction to the Revolution and conflicting ideas of social and technological progress. Second, the novella includes a greater use of animal imagery. Third, this animal imagery is thematically and formally connected to questions of identity, progress, and authenticity. In “North” Zamyatin uses animal imagery to challenge conventional dualistic notions of identity, such as center and periphery, civilization and the primitive, West and East, culture and nature.

The story is set in a remote fishing village and its surrounding forest in the far north near the White Sea.⁶⁹ The story focuses on three characters: Kortoma, a wealthier merchant and entrepreneur; Marei, a local fisherman who, while physically imposing, is dreamy and withdrawn; and Pelka, a young Sami woman who comes to the village one spring as part of her community’s migration route and ends up staying and marrying Marei. After hearing about the technological progress occurring in the city, Marei becomes obsessed with constructing a giant lantern which he envisions will illuminate, both literally and figuratively, the entire village. In the course of his work on this, Pelka is seduced by Kortoma, a conquest which, along with the crushing failure of Marei’s project, results in a sort of spiritual death of the couple, and the story ends with a fatal confrontation with a bear. They are hunting, but bring only one rifle loaded

⁶⁸ Philip Cavendish, *Mining for Jewels: Evgenii Zamyatin and the Literary Stylization of Rus’* (Leeds: Mancy Publishing, 2000), 85.

⁶⁹ While written in 1918, the story was first published in 1922. The three “northern” stories “Afrika” (1916), “Sever,” and “Ela” (1928) were eventually published together in the fourth volume of Zamyatin’s 1929 collected works.

with shot. Consequently, they are unable to kill the bear, so in an attempt to survive, they play dead. The bear then covers them with moss and crushes them to death.

Zamyatin uses animal imagery to signify or illustrate qualities of the story's characters. In some instances this is done in a general way, such as the use of animal imagery, specifically fish and migratory birds, to characterize the Sami people. In others, it is used more specifically to define traits of individual characters, such as Marei's nephew, Stepka, who is referred to as *zuëk* (plover) and compared to a puppy, and the shop assistant, Ivan Skitksy, who is compared to a mouse. Marei is likened to a bear, and Pelka is associated with a deer.

An important aspect of these comparisons is that they become sustained associations in a way that illustrates Viktor Shklovsky's statement that Zamyatin's characters are accompanied by "a fixed characteristic which is something like a detailed epithet."⁷⁰ In the initial presentation of a given character, Zamyatin will often draw a similarity between the character and an object or a specific animal, and that associated image will be repeated throughout the text often to the point where, like Gogol's extended similes, they border on the grotesque. This repeated imagery becomes interchangeable with the character in the reader's mind, so that if a character is associated with a certain color, for instance, further mention of that color will subtly recall the character, even if that character is not mentioned in a given passage. In "North," this is particularly apparent and important in connection with the story's three principal characters, especially with Kortoma and Pelka, who form the two sides of a civilization/nature binary. The

⁷⁰ Viktor Shklovsky *Gamburgskii chet: Stat'i – vospaminaniia – esse (1914 – 1933)*. Moscow: 1990. 246. See also Alex Shane, who provides a good summary of this narrative feature with examples from other works. He argues that this tendency toward impressionism is conveyed in one of three ways: comparison to an animal, focused attention on a single physical or psychological trait, and repetition. Shane, 118-121. See also Tatiana Davydova who analyzes this device with animal imagery in *Uezdnoe*, Tatiana Davydova, *Russkii neorealizm: Ideologiya, poetika, tvorcheskaiia evolutsiia* (Moskva: Izdatel'stvo Flinta-Nauka, 2005), 87.

reader is first struck by this repetition in the initial presentation of Kortoma, whose associated image is a samovar. While this association is not based on a similarity to an animal, as are the associations of Marei and Pelka, this early passage serves to establish a formal pattern which, because it is so overt and sustained, affects the way in which the reader views the other central characters. Chapter Two opens:

На столе в конторе – самовар: скуластый, руки в боки—кирпичом натерт—сияет. В сияющем самоварном брюхе—по-своему, самоварному, приплюснуто, перевернуто—отражен весь мир. И на своем самоварном языке—самовар, несомненно, мыслит:

"Мир—мой. Мир—во мне. И что бы без меня стал делать мир?"

Самовар милостиво ухмыляется миру...

Перед самоваром—Кортома. Кортома в самоваре—как в зеркале: приплюснутый, широкоскулый, медно-добродушный. Самовар в Кортоме—как в зеркале: рыластый, веселый, бьет день и ночь белым ключом, попыхивает белым дымком.⁷¹

On the table in the office there is a samovar: high-cheeked, arms akimbo, rubbed to high polish with a brick. The shiny belly of the samovar reflects the whole world—in its own way: stretched, flattened, upside down. In its own samovar language, the samovar undoubtedly thinks: “The world is mine. The world is in me. And what would the world do without me?”

The samovar grins graciously at the world...

Kortoma sits before the samovar. Kortoma is in the samovar, as in a mirror: flattened, with side cheekbones, good-natured. The samovar is in Kortoma, as in a

⁷¹ Zamyatin, I: 507. English translation of “North” by Mirra Ginsburg, with some alterations for accuracy.

mirror: broad-jowled, merry, bubbling away day and night, sending out puffs of white smoke.

In this extended association, the narrator introduces several key details and phrases that recur throughout in reference to Kortoma. Some of these are physical details, such as the copper of the personified samovar being used to refer to his shiny cheekbones and to his “coppery good nature” (*medno-dobrodushno*), and the puffs of white smoke we see emitted from both the samovar and Kortoma’s pipe. Other details are psychological or behavioral, such as the adverb “graciously” (*milostivo*) which, in addition to later repetition, here already echoes a statement in the first chapter, in the way Kortoma “graciously reigns” over the shop and “graciously banter with the women” (*milostivo koroliuet Kortoma, milostivo shutit s zhënkami*). These earlier lines, and the psychological insight provided in this passage, provide a portrait of Kortoma’s self-importance, his pride in having a central and supreme position in the village: “The world is mine. The world is in me. And what would the world do without me.” By strongly affixing these characteristics to the image of the samovar early in the story, and thus establishing a formula in which the physical qualities of the samovar are interchangeable with the psychological qualities of Kortoma, the narrator can trust the reader’s memory to recall these characteristics by referencing the samovar without explicitly mentioning them. For instance, during Kortoma’s pursuit of Pelka, she rejects him the second time he visits the hut, when Marei is out. Following the rejection, the narrator states: “The samovar world was shattered” (*samovarnyi mir rasskochilsia*). Later, Kortoma is in his office and the samovar is “boiling, spurring steam” (*kipit, obdaet parom samovar*) suggesting his anger. And when Pelka arrives at Kortoma’s party wearing the dress he acquired for her in Norway, his prideful conquest is illustrated through these same associative connections: “The wide-cheeked copper began to gleam; it chomped and flattened the world: mine!” (*Zasiiala shirokoskulaia med’, chavknula, spliusnula mir: moi!*). By

this point, very late in the story, the connection is so entrenched that the narrator can convey meaning with a sentence in which only “copper”—not Kortoma nor the samovar—is the active grammatical subject.

In addition to establishing a formal pattern of association, the Kortoma-samovar parallel creates a metaphoric opposition which illustrates the urban/rural, civilization/nature dichotomy forming the thematic center of the text. Kortoma and his wife, Kortomikha, are the only characters not associated with animal imagery, but exclusively with man-made objects – the samovar for Kortoma, and an empty glove for his wife – whereas the villagers all have some sort of animal imagery associated with them. And the nomadic Sami people are referred to not only through animal imagery, but collective animal imagery specifically. For instance, when they come to Kortoma’s shop that first spring they are described as dark and quick, like young fish (*rybnaia molod’*) in shallow water. Later, that autumn, as they are preparing to leave town, their departure is described in connection with bird migration:

Запели синички, хрусталем зазвенели синички. Лебеди, гуси носятся косяками, разминают крылья: скоро в дальний путь. Помаленьку укладываются лопари: не нынче—завтра двинутся на свой погост, к югу.⁷²

The titmice started singing, tinkling like crystal. Swans and geese were flying in flock formation, stretching their wings, preparing for the distant journey. The Lapps were gradually packing up. Very soon they would start moving south, to their ancestral burial grounds.

While the Sami are not overtly compared to migratory animals here, in Zamyatin’s careful prose, the succession of active grammatical subjects here (titmice, swans, geese, Lapps) forms a structural connection to the associative images, one which emphasizes their nomadic nature.

⁷² Ibid., 518.

Furthermore, their association with collective animal imagery underscores a lack of individuation which suggests a greater degree of otherness. What Zamyatin seems to be doing here is establishing a conventional center/periphery model and placing his characters on some point along a graded continuum. As the city is typically associated with the idea of a cultural center, Kortoma occupies this position given that he is the only character with any experience in the city. The Sami, by contrast, are figuratively the furthest away from the center, further even than the villagers, because the Sami's lack of permanent settlement endows them with a greater degree of primitiveness. Zamyatin makes a similar distinction regarding this in *We*, when D-503 states that "the whole of human history, as far as we know, is the story of transition from a nomadic mode of life toward an increasingly settled one."⁷³

In her reading of the story as a critique of technocratic consciousness, Susan Layton identifies a key contrast in the story of the abstract world of the city and the more natural world of the provincial village and its surrounding area. In her view, the city world is represented by Kortoma, who speaks of St. Petersburg as a realm of civilization and progress, whereas the world of nature is represented by Marei.⁷⁴ While this reading is essentially valid, I would modify it somewhat with the assertion that it is Pelka, rather than Marei, who more explicitly represents nature. As a Sami woman, she is more primitive and natural according to a center/periphery model, and she is the character most heavily associated with natural and animal imagery. With Pelka, Zamyatin introduces a third point of contrast, one which complicates the more straightforward binary opposition that Layton proposes. Rather than representing nature, Marei occupies an intermediary position between two perceived extremes, and thus represents the site

⁷³ Zamyatin, II: 218.

⁷⁴ Susan Layton, "The Critique of Technocracy in Early Soviet Literature: The Responses of Zamyatin and Mayakovsky." *Dialectical Anthropology*, Vol. 3, No. 1 (February, 1978), 5.

of tension between opposing forces. Over the course of the story, he is drawn in both directions, but charmed by the notion of progress as a light in the darkness, he chooses culture over nature, a choice which ultimately proves fatal.

This fatality is connected to the theme of self-destruction, which Zamyatin develops through the use of associative imagery with both Marei and Pelka. As in the recurrence of Kortoma's samovar, Pelka is repeatedly associated with both the color red and deer, which in the course of the narrative themselves become linked. The first of these associations is the color red, specifically the word "*ryzhii*" used to distinguish the red-haired Pelka from the other brunette Sami women, as we see when the Sami first come to Kortoma's shop: "only one red head flashes like a hare among the black" (*tol'ko zaichikom mel'kaet ryzhaia golova sredi chernykh*).⁷⁵ This word is repeated dozens of times, and while many of these instances refer specifically to her hair, many feature the word when context might prefer "*krasnyi*" or "*rumianyi*." One of these occurs in a phrase introduced in the episode in which "*ryzhii*" is first used, when Marei briefly notices her watching him from the opposite bank of the river: "And far off among the pines on the other bank flashes a red spot, like the sun on pine trunks" (*I daleko mezhdyy sosen na tom beregu mel'kaet ryzhee— kak na sosnovykh stvolakh ot solntsa—piatno*).⁷⁶ This phrase is repeated multiple times with slight variation—always drawing a connection between red, the sun, and the pines—up to the final scene in which Marei, fearing the bear's approach, thinks: "the sun—the red spot—to live..."⁷⁷ Colors have symbolic significance in many of Zamyatin's works, and red is most often associated with blood, life, and energy. In *We*, for instance, this connection is maintained in D-503's thought of a "crimson (*bagrovoe*) sea of fire" hidden beneath the surface

⁷⁵ Zamyatin, I: 511.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 540.

of the earth, in the dark red (*temno-krasnye*) wall of the ancient house, the blood of the Mephi, and in the repeated mention of I-330's red (*krasnye*) lips.⁷⁸ Similarly, in “North,” the color red and the pine trees become repeated signifiers of Pelka's association with nature: “She calls out to all the forest creatures. Her green-red sister pines run after her in an obedient herd” (*Pereklikaetsia so vsiakoi lesnoi tvar'iu, pokornym stadom begut za nei zeleno-ryzhie sestry-sosny*).⁷⁹

While Pelka is associated with life and nature, she is also associated with death and destruction. One way this association is achieved is through the use of sound reiteration, specifically the consonant sounds /r/ and /zh/ as Zamyatin carefully juxtaposes the words “*ryzhii*” (red) and “*ruzh'e*” (gun/rifle). There are three key scenes in which this is done, all of which have to do with violence or death. The first instance is in the personal encounter with Marei, mentioned above, when he is watching for the thief who has been cutting the fishing lines. Marei hears the person in the woods at night and chases after him, finally catching him and throwing him to the ground, only to discover the girl:

та самая, **рыжая**... Вот так Ванька...

—Ты... ты зачем же это... крючки-то?—стоит Марей, ноги расставил, **ружье** на земле.

А **рыжая**—лицом в мох . . .⁸⁰ [Bold type added for emphasis]

the girl, the redhead . . . Some Vanka! . . .

“You . . . but why . . . why the hooks?” Marei stood, his legs wide apart, his gun on the ground.

And the redhead, with her face in the moss . . .

⁷⁸ While he does not analyze the significance of the color red, Shane presents a discussion of Zamyatin's symbolic use of color in various works. Shane, 156-9.

⁷⁹ Zamyatin, I: 525.

⁸⁰ Zamyatin, I: 517.

The next instance occurs during their next confrontation in the beginning of autumn when the Sami are all preparing to leave. She confronts him in the woods and shoots at him:

Голова—**рыжее** пятно, губы—кровь, **ружейный** ствол на руке. И ни слова, ничего: увидала—и на Марея бегом. Волну мчит на камень: ударится и—одни дребезги. Но ни зацепиться, ни удержаться, ни крикнуть: мчит волну.

"Эй, **ружье**-то свое..."—хотел крикнуть Марей... Но уж **рыжая** подняла, приложила—бух!⁸¹

Her head—a red spot, her lips—blood, a rifle in her hand. And not a word, nothing. She caught sight of Marei and ran straight at him. A wave rushes toward the rock: it strikes and shatters to bits. Yet there is no catching it, no holding it back, no crying out: the wave rushes.

"Hey, your gun . . ." Marei wanted to shout . . . But the redhead had already raised it, aimed – boom!

She misses, and he tackles her to the ground and the scene ends, suggestively, with their first sexual union, after which she professes her love and devotion and decides to leave her people and stay with him. The above two instances feature a violent confrontation with Marei. In the third instance, the situation is more directly self-destructive:

Пелька ходила по избе веселая, напевая изменчатую, переливчатую лопскую песенку. Сняла со стены **ружье**, на минутку замолкла: или не надо—или повесить **ружье** на место?

Нет. Пошла с **ружьём**:

—Там я следы видала, может—и промыслю что...

⁸¹ Ibid., 521.

Развивается, свивается, колышется синий сполох. В синей пещере на дне—чуть виден тонконогий **рыжий** олень. Шею ему обхватили горячие руки, горячие губы целуют, целуют—кругом всю заиндевавшую морду.

И Бог весть, как это случилось—должно быть, курок зацепился за рукав—**ружье** нечаянно выстрелило прямо в оленя, олень упал.⁸²

Pelka went about the hut gaily, humming a warbling, fluid Lapp song. She took the rifle from the wall, fell silent for a moment: maybe she ought not . . . maybe she ought to put the gun back in its place?

No. She went out with the rifle.

“I’ve seen some tracks, maybe I’ll shoot something. . .”

The blue northern lights sway, folding and unfolding. In the blue cave at the bottom of the ice the slender-legged red deer is barely visible. Hot arms embrace his neck, hot lips are kissing, kissing his hoary muzzle.

And God knows how it happened, the trigger must have caught in her sleeve, but the rifle inadvertently fired straight at the deer. The deer fell.

By this point in the story, the signifiers “*ryzhii*” and “*olen*” (deer) have become so firmly associated with Pelka that her killing the deer is highly suggestive of her own destruction. Her association with deer is first introduced from Marei’s point of view, the second time he sees her, the morning following Midsummer Night (Ivan Kupala). He sees her across the river driving a young bay deer.⁸³ The next instance illustrates his subconscious association of the deer and Pelka, which occurs during his watch of the thief, discussed above, when he falls asleep and

⁸² Ibid., 534.

⁸³ Philip Cavendish suggests that this is a subtle variation on the *rusalka* theme, something Zamyatin explored earlier in “Afrika.” Cavendish, 99. The narrator’s description of Marei’s near death by drowning as a boy, how he fell in because he “listened too closely” to the river’s tales, and the position of this description in the same chapter as his first vision of Pelka across the river would support this connection.

dreams of a bay deer who comes to him and pleads: “Don’t ruin me, Marei, I am from Petersburg.” The association with the red deer specifically is introduced following their first sexual encounter. Marei calls her “my forest deer” and “my golden deer,” and when she agrees to stay with him, she asks that her pet deer remain with her: “But let my deer come with us. He was little, red . . . And I was little . . .” (*I tol’ko pust’ s name—moi olen’. On byl malen’kii—ryzhii . . . Ia byla malen’kaia*). Her decision to leave the Sami is difficult and has important implications, and we see her ambivalence in the representations of the deer. For instance, the following spring we see that part of her is drawn to leave, to move on as her people always have, while another part is drawn to her life with Marei:

У избы смирно стоял, привязан рыжий олень. Пелька обняла, прислонилась к теплой оленьей морде.

—Хорошо, миленький, а? Стоять надоело?

Отвязала—пустился олень стрелой. Очертил круг, вскочил на взлобок, стал, тонконогий, задумался: бежать ли туда, где синее низкий северный лес, или вернуться к избе за мхом?⁸⁴

Near the hut, the red deer stood quietly on his tether. Pelka embraced him, pressing her face to the warm muzzle.

“Happy, darling? Tired of standing still?”

She untied him, and the deer darted off like an arrow, made a wide circle, leaped on a knoll, and stood, thin-legged, thinking: should he run out there, to the low northern woods blue in the distance, or come back to the hut for moss?

⁸⁴ Zamyatin, I: 524.

In light of these connections, the final scene with the deer, quoted above, when she inadvertently shoots him and she and Marei subsequently eat his flesh, is thematically significant. It occurs right before she succumbs to Kortoma's coercion, suggesting her spiritual death both in her betrayal of Marei and in her moving still further from her origins, from the natural, rural periphery symbolized by the Sami, to the artificial, urban center symbolized by Kortoma.

As mentioned above, Zamyatin complicates a conventional dual model by situating Marei between two extremes, and with the inclusion of additional places. Rather than just the city (Petersburg) and the country (the northern village) we have also the temporary settlements of the Sami people, and the vague "West" which Kortoma characterizes as the height and goal of civilization. With this inclusion, these spatial contrasts become associated with a center-periphery model, with distinct points along a continuum—from Western Europe to Petersburg to the village to the most peripheral, Lapland. And Zamyatin uses animal imagery proportionately to signify this gradation, as more of this imagery is used for those furthest from the conventional center.

Zamyatin also uses point of view to complicate the notion of a stable center. Marei is the main figure of the story, and the narration follows his experience and perception. The reader's view of the world is localized to the village, while presenting other places—the West, Petersburg, Lapland—as vague and foreign. This is particularly true of Petersburg, which is referred to throughout as a place of culture, a site of western enlightenment, yet remains a sort of mythical place to which the people in the village have no access. Only Kortoma has been there, and even he presents it in a way that underscores his lack of any real connection to it. For instance, on Midsummer night, he tells Marei of Petersburg: "We must live according to the Western European nations, we must see educated cities. Take, let's say, Petersburg . . ." Marei

is astonished by what Kortoma tells him, and he asks how many streets there are in Petersburg, to which Kortoma replies that there are “around forty, or maybe even fifty . . .” Marei is astonished:

Бог знает, есть ли в самом деле такой город, чтобы пятьдесят улиц и всё дома, дома, люди. И как же там не заблудятся в улицах? Ведь это не лес, в лесу всякое дерево, и мох на коре, и мочажины, и камни—все разное, только глаза разуй, а там—как же, в городе-то?⁸⁵

God knows whether there is really such a city—with fifty streets, and houses all over, and people. How come they don’t get lost in those streets? After all, it isn’t like a forest, with all kinds of trees, and moss on the bark, and junipers, and rocks—and everything different; all you have to do is keep your eyes open. But there in the city?

Marei’s reaction exaggerates the difference in his perception which, because of the narrative point of view, is fixed in the space of the village and forest. The effect is a sort of decentralizing of an assumed center by confusing the perception of where and what the center actually is. For Marei, Petersburg is just as peripheral as the far north of the Sami people.

Marei’s intermediary position is further suggested by the metaphorical association with the bear. Bears have long been thought of as sort of liminal beings: in their perceived anatomical and behavioral similarities to humans, they are thought to occupy a unique position between animal and human; and because of their annual hibernation, in folk mythology they are thought to traverse the threshold between life and death.⁸⁶ Similar to the bear’s apparent resurrection, in childhood Marei had been resuscitated after drowning; and like the bear’s unique position between human and animal, Marei occupies a liminal space between civilization and nature.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 513.

⁸⁶ Jane Costlow, “For a Bear to Come to your Threshold.” In *Other Animals: Beyond the Human in Russian Culture and History*. eds. Jane Costlow and Amy Nelson (Pittsburg: University of Pittsburg Press, 2010), 78. See also, Paul Shepard, *The Sacred Paw*.

Marei is between extremes—between an urban, technological future and a primitive, nomadic past.

There are two points in the text in which the narrator draws a parallel between Marei and the bear. The first instance follows his first real encounter with Pelka, when he discovers that it was she, rather than “some Vanka,” who had cut the fishing lines. The second occurs during Marei’s defeat, when the giant lantern he builds explodes. The two episodes are structurally significant insofar as they form two temporal points which frame the relationship between Marei and Pelka, the first immediately preceding their first sexual union, and the second following Kortoma’s conquest of Pelka and the couple’s subsequent death. Furthermore, each of these explicit associations occurs right before an episode depicting a bear hunt during the animals’ mating season, one of the story’s associative connections between sex and death. Pelka’s sexual encounter with Marei initiates her separation from the Sami people, while her tryst with Kortoma leads to her alienation from Marei and her spiritual death. As Pelka’s shooting the deer is symbolic of her self-destruction, so too is the bear’s killing the couple at the end of the story symbolic of Marei’s fatal decision to abandon what was valuable and authentic in his life for an illusory idea of progress. While there is embedded criticism here, Marei is portrayed as a positive character throughout, and in his fatal promethean quest is to illuminate his society, but he fails in his approach by succumbing to a perceived cultural ideal. As Alex Shane argues, Marei realizes his mistake and understands what is truly important—life and love—only moments before his death.⁸⁷

Some scholars argue that this story illustrates Zamyatin’s pessimism concerning the actual course of the Revolution and its faith in technological progress, and that it presents a romantic

⁸⁷ Shane, 132.

view of natural, instinctive life which is corrupted by civilization.⁸⁸ There is certainly a prominent shift from the works of Zamyatin's early period, such as *Uezdnoe* (1912) and *Nakulichkakh* (1914), which demonstrate a more anti-provincial attitude. In the middle period, of which "North" forms an important part, it is not so much that he is celebrating the rural as much as criticizing the urban by contrast. Like the earlier tales, the provincials in "North," with the exception of Marei, are also depicted as somewhat backwards—simple, barbarous, and superstitious—but the story does feature a strong reverence for the natural. In "North" nature both is and is not romanticized. On the one hand we see nature as idyllic—mostly from Marei's point of view—though he rejects the past (primitive) for the sake of an imagined future. On the other, we see the violence of nature in the impulsive destructiveness of Pelka and the bear who, in the final scene, underscores nature's violence and indifference. In Zamyatin's work we find competing views of the oppositional relationships civilized/primitive and human/animal. Looking at some of his early work, particularly *Uezdnoe*, we see the primitive and animal connoting negative ideas—the primitive as dark and backwards, and the animal as base, carnal, appetitive, violent. In his later work, such as *We*, concepts of the primitive and the animal are endowed with positive connotations, as natural, authentic, organic, etc. What is particularly interesting about "North" is that both of these conceptions exist simultaneously. The primitive is both backwards and authentic, nature is both idyllic and violent. This simultaneity creates a compelling disruption of binary systems of thought, a disruption which prompts the reader to seek a way to either synthesize or transcend these oppositions

⁸⁸ See, for instance, Susan Layton, who centers her analysis of the story on this view, as well as D.J. Richards, *Zamyatin: A Soviet Heretic* (London: Bowes and Bowes, 1962), 33-34.

While advances in modern thought, at least since Darwin, have destabilized the traditional ontological divide, the persistent notion of a human/animal boundary is still evident in our contemporary worldview, practices, and language. The image of the animal is deeply encoded with dualistic ideas, informing and informed by our concepts of both nature and civilization, both reality and the ideal. Animals are powerful in figurative constructs not only because they can be employed in a variety of different meanings, but also because each image can host a number of such meanings simultaneously. While they are, in a sense, automatically suited for dualistic and hierarchical concepts, given the range and competing modes of similarity and difference, they are just as valuable in questioning these concepts. In the works discussed above, Pilnyak and Zamyatin use the inherent dualism of the animal image in ways that both illustrate and complicate binary strategies of identity which, while not exclusive to Russian culture, are particularly strong and loaded with specific historical and social significance. The way in which animals are used in these two texts suggests the authors' awareness of the singular complexity of the animal image as a site of several related, intersecting, and conflicting ideas. Animals occupy an important space in these texts because they are related to and effective in capturing their central themes of division and conflict.

Chapter 2

Dehumanization

“In order to kill them, it was necessary to declare that kulaks are not human beings. Just as the Germans said that Yids are not human beings. That’s what Lenin and Stalin said too: The kulaks are not human beings.”

-Vasily Grossman, *Everything Flows*.

In Grossman’s final novel, *Everything Flows*, the protagonist’s landlady and lover, Anna Sergeevna, gives an account of her memory of and involvement in the Terror Famine of the early 1930s. She explains that at the time anti-kulak rhetoric was everywhere—in meetings, radio broadcasts, films, books, Stalin’s speeches—and she refers specifically to the way in which kulaks were characterized as subhuman in order to ignite “the fury of the masses” against them. Though a particularly strong example, it is not unique; in many texts dealing with national, ethnic, or political conflict, one can find instances in which the “others” are referred to as vilified animal beings, such as vermin, parasites, insects, rats, dogs, pigs, etc. Such dehumanizing rhetoric is common because it can be effective in rationalizing or excusing atrocities, and to assuage or prevent any guilt associated with harming other humans, who would normally be included in a wider moral community, the border of which has long been drawn around the

species *homo sapiens*. By associating a human or group of humans with non-human beings, they are effectively removed from the sphere of moral concern and can thus justifiably be treated as “animals.” The other side of this practice, however, and one that is not adequately questioned, is that it both derives from and strengthens the ontological and moral boundary that humans have erected between themselves and every other species. It is a practice of violence that is based on practices of greater violence.

As discussed in the previous chapter, the post-Revolutionary period was marked by oppositional strategies of identity-making along a number of lines, not only national and ethnic, as were quite strong in previous eras, but increasingly along lines of culture, class, and ideology. The Civil War occurring in the wake of the Revolution, the aggressive campaigns of collectivization and dekulakization a decade later, and the waves of purges culminating in the Great Terror, were periods of incredible devastation, fear, and uncertainty. In the literature of or about these two decades, several texts highlight the use of dehumanizing animal rhetoric in their illustrations of extreme social and political tension. Some of these texts go a step further by not only drawing attention to such rhetoric, but by exploring and questioning the beliefs which underlie it. Since this kind of dehumanization is based on notions of human supremacy, questioning these underlying beliefs and their reductive cultural associations is a way not only to see the practice of dehumanization from a different, perhaps broader perspective, but also to explore an effective means of resisting it.

The texts discussed in the previous chapter use animal imagery to explore dualistic constructs of identity. The texts to be discussed here use animal imagery in a way that furthers this exploration by focusing on a significantly darker aspect of identity and identity-making. They illustrate the social and psychological processes of dehumanization, and they do so in a way that

problematizes received conceptions of an animal-human binary, particularly its axiological and moral implications. Zamyatin's "The Dragon" ("Drakon") and Platonov's "Garbage Wind" ("Musornyi veter") diverge in their temporal and geographical settings—the former set in post-Revolutionary Petersburg, and latter in Nazi Germany—but they are similar insofar as they both not only criticize the moral assumptions of what it means to be human, but do so through the literalization of dehumanizing tropes. In doing so, both stories play with ideas of form and essence as a way to question notions of morality and progress. Zamyatin's story juxtaposes two different modes of animalistic dehumanization, the subhuman animal and the superhuman monster, which serves to problematize the conventional moral hierarchy associated with an animal-human binary by introducing a third point of contrast, the inhuman, in a way that questions the concept of "humanness." Platonov is similarly provocative in his approach to this concept. He uses the imagery of regressive metamorphosis in a way that challenges the notion of an ontological hierarchy for the specific purpose of criticizing materialism and scientism, and the use of scientific rhetoric as a means of justifying violence and oppression.

Animalistic dehumanization is based upon the deeply entrenched boundary separating humans from other animals, upon the reductive contrast between humanity and animality. These ideas are based upon two fundamental ideas: the notion of a taxonomical hierarchy such as the Great Chain of Being, and the notion of essence. While these are two distinct ideas, they are closely interrelated, owing to human tendencies to essentialize, categorize, and rank. Both of these ideas, in the West, have roots in ancient Judaic and Greek philosophy, and together inform dualist views regarding animals and animality which developed through Medieval Scholasticism to the Enlightenment, most strongly in Descartes, and inform the anthropocentric underpinnings of Humanism. And while advances in science may have seriously challenged these ideas, they

continue to inform our conception of humanity in relation to the rest of the natural world. Language in both scientific and popular discourse reveals the continuing influence of traditional modes of thought. When we speak of “higher” and “lower” animals, when we refer to organisms, groups, or behavior as “primitive,” “brutal,” or “bestial,” we are comparing other species or human outgroups to our own and placing them in a conceptual position relative, and generally inferior, to the one we envision for ourselves.⁸⁹

In recent years there has been a growth of interest in the subject of dehumanization, particularly in the field of social psychology. The research being conducted in this area is interesting insofar as it sheds light on some of the lesser known aspects of a fairly well-known phenomenon. We have seen instances of dehumanization throughout history; in periods or instances of intergroup conflict there is a tendency to objectify and denigrate the opposition through the use of animal rhetoric. And we understand that this practice may be a strategy, conscious or unconscious, to cope with hatred or violence that would be morally problematic.⁹⁰ What we do not fully understand is how these practices occur, why they seem to be so universal across cultures, and how they are connected to our more overarching worldview. These studies have begun to answer some of these finer questions, revealing that dehumanization is more widespread than is commonly believed, and that it is closely connected to essentialist ways of thinking.⁹¹

⁸⁹ Mary Midgely offers an insightful discussion of language and notions of animality in *Beast and Man*. She points out an interesting fact about this related to Darwin, who pinned up a warning to himself to avoid using the terms “higher” and “lower” in his writing in an effort to avoid imposing human notions of progress and hierarchy. Richard Dawkins has similarly discussed the danger of imposing “value-laden” notions of progress on principles of evolution. See Midgely, *Beast and Man*, 33-35, 148. Richard Dawkins, *The Ancestor’s Tale: A Pilgrimage to the Dawn of Evolution* (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 2004), 597-603.

⁹⁰ See Nick Haslam, *Dehumanization: An Interpretive Review*. *Personality and Social Psychology Review* (Vol. 10, No. 3, 2006).

⁹¹ Leyens, et. al., “Psychological Essentialism and the Attribution of Uniquely Human Emotions to Ingroups and Outgroups” (*European Journal of Social Psychology*, 31, 2001), 395-96.

In its most basic definition, metaphysical essentialism holds essence to be that which constitutes and distinguishes a thing, the most fundamental feature that is shared by only and all members of a specific type of entity.⁹² Essence is thought to be an unobservable property which causes a thing to be the type of thing it is, and which remains constant despite observable changes in appearance, such as the growth of a biological organism or the change in the form of a chemical substance.⁹³ In classical thought, human essence was defined by rationality (Aristotle); in the Judeo-Christian tradition it is defined by the possession of an immortal soul. These two fundamental notions became merged in Medieval Scholasticism up through the Enlightenment in Descartes's firm position that animals lack both reason and a soul.⁹⁴ These ideas of a distinct human essence had a profound and lasting effect on theories concerning the natural world. As Marc Ereshefsky points out, "Prior to the acceptance of evolutionary theory, essentialism was the standard mode of classification in biological taxonomy. Such biologists as John Ray, Maupertius, Bonnet, Linnaeus, Buffon, and Lamarck believed that the proper way to sort species taxa is by their species-specific essences."⁹⁵ While evolutionary theory has undermined biological essentialism, as well as the notion of a Great Chain of Being, essentialism continues to inform our concepts of species and taxonomical divisions.⁹⁶

Furthermore, while problematic, biological essentialism informs popular concepts of race, gender, and ethnicity. Essentialism seems to motivate and underlie various modes of stereotyping, as it is commonly felt, though often unconsciously, that social and racial

⁹² Marc Ereshefsky, *Poverty of the Linnaean Hierarchy: A Philosophical Study of Biological Taxonomy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 17.

⁹³ Susan Gelman, *Essential Child: The Origins of Essentialism in Everyday Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 8.

⁹⁴ Gary Steiner, *Anthropocentrism and its Discontents: The Moral Status of Animals in the History of Western Philosophy* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2005), 57, 138-39.

⁹⁵ Ereshefsky, 95.

⁹⁶ See D.L. Hull, "The Effect of Essentialism on Taxonomy: Two Thousand Years of Stasis," *British Journal for the Philosophy of Science*, 15 (1965), 315-18.

differences are inherently determined and fixed.⁹⁷ This tendency to essentialize, especially to conceive of a fundamentally different essence based on outward, observable differences, gives strategies of dehumanization such power. Perceiving another person as inherently different allows for a process of mapping one mode of difference (race, gender, class, etc.) onto another (species), and consequently allows human outgroups to be regarded as somehow less than human. For instance, the development of physical anthropology in the late 18th and early 19th centuries was largely defined by racial and ethnic classification based on physical measurements, such as arm length, skull shape, etc. Scientists such as Arthur Gobineau, Samuel Morton, Paul Broca, and Georges Cuvier were part of a trend in anthropology which held that objective racial differences could be determined on the grounds of either physical or behavioral similarities in other animals.⁹⁸ The use of anthropometry to provide physical evidence of a number of value-laden differences continued throughout the 19th and early 20th centuries, informing racial and ethnic discourse, criminology, and the practice of eugenics.

An underlying impetus in of all this is to find a distinguishing mark of humankind, the essence of humanness, to define ourselves relative to other beings. The use of science to locate and specify this distinction is the more modern means of approaching this goal, but it is just another way of asking the same question. Mary Midgley argues that the use of science to support a notion of ontological dualism is problematic insofar as it confuses two distinct modes of thought. The question “what is the characteristic excellence of Man” is a question of morality, not one of biological classification.

⁹⁷ Gelman, 14-15, 299.

⁹⁸ Mark Roberts, *Mark of the Beast* (West Lafayette, In.: Purdue University Press, 2008), 20-22.

The problem remains, however, that we seem to be generally inclined to seek these differentia. In the research on dehumanization, psychological studies have attempted to locate these differentia, not in an area of physical reality, but in the cultural perception of groups and individuals. Nick Haslam has compiled the data from several studies to arrive at a schematic model which separates two distinct groups of traits, Human Nature (HN) and Uniquely Human (UH). HN traits are shared in varying degrees among both human and non-human animals, and include warmth, emotional responsiveness, agency, individuality, and depth. UH traits, by contrast, are thought to be uniquely possessed by humans, and include civility, refinement, rationality, and moral sensibility. In connection with these two groups, he posits two different modes of dehumanization: mechanistic and animalistic. When someone is considered to lack HN traits, they are thought of as machines or robots. When someone is seen to lack UH traits, they are thought of as animals or savages.⁹⁹ While these two groups of traits, particularly those positing traits that are “uniquely human,” may be just another attempt to fortify the animal-human boundary, these studies are important because they reveal that these differentia, while arguably objectively suspect, are quite real in human perceptions of self/other, and the views of animals and animality. When we talk about animals we are almost always talking about human concepts of “animal.”

The human-animal problem has always existed in two different but inextricably related forms: the problem of humanity’s relationship with other animals, and that of humanity’s relationship with itself as a type of animal. Just as humans position themselves above other animals, the concept of humanity is positioned above the concept of animality. There are many theories as to why humans are so anxious to differentiate humans from other animals, and

⁹⁹ Nick Haslam, “Dehumanization: an Integrative Review,” 256-8.

humanity from animality. For the purpose of the present discussion, it is enough to understand how these concepts inform one another, and the consequences these distinctions have on human relations. Of course anthropocentrism leads to violence against other species, but it is also connected with dehumanization and human intergroup violence. In instances of extreme violence—war, genocide—this pattern is fairly clear, as evident in historical accounts, propaganda, literature, etc. However, studies suggest that the process of essentializing and denying humanness to perceived outgroups is not isolated to these instances of extreme conflict, but is more common than generally perceived, and most often unconscious.¹⁰⁰ Furthermore, there is evidence to suggest that people who hold humans to be inherently more valuable than members of other species tend to be less tolerant of human racial, cultural, and ethnic outgroups.¹⁰¹ For instance, another study included “dehumanization interventions” in which strategies that reduced the human-animal divide exerted a positive effect in studies of human outgroup tolerance. The researchers conclude that since there is a direct correlation between notions of inherent human supremacy and practices of dehumanization and intolerance, a concentrated challenge to these notions may positively impact not only human-animal relations, but intergroup human relations as well.¹⁰² Thus being aware of these patterns of dehumanization in culture, and examining the way in which they are connected to animal-human relations, may be an important way of challenging them. The literary works being considered here do just this.

¹⁰⁰ See Leyens, et. al. “Emotional Prejudice, Essentialism, and Nationalism” (*European Journal of Social Psychology*, 33, 2003).

¹⁰¹ Hodson, MacInnis, and Costello, “(Over)Valuing ‘Humanness’ as an Aggravator of Intergroup Prejudices and Discrimination.”

¹⁰² Ibid.

I. Monsters in Men: The Inhuman in Zamyatin's "The Dragon" (1918).

With his philosophy grounded in the humanist tradition, Evgeny Zamyatin's employment of animal imagery is predominately figurative and generally connected with his notions of human development and progress, and with his views on revolution and social or cultural heresy. Generally speaking, he uses animal imagery in a way that is consistent with classic dualist conceptions of an animal/human binary, and more specifically, an animal nature/human nature binary, with both "natures" comprising a human being with a perceived continual struggle for supremacy between the "lower" and "higher." While the animal imagery in his work is generally conventional, he often uses this imagery in such a complex way that it invites a critical engagement with these conventions. He will often juxtapose or combine imagery in a way that complicates binary models of lower/higher, animal/human.

Zamyatin's philosophical and critical writings repeatedly articulate his notion of perpetual revolution, which he defines as a force that urges humanity toward ever higher and nobler aspirations of liberty and progress, in a pattern based on a dialectical model.¹⁰³ His revolutionary idealism is restless insofar as it must not have too proximate a goal; it must never be allowed to fully manifest as this would degrade the ideal and result in stasis and entropy: "victory is defeat, because victory is inevitably followed by dogma and philistinism."¹⁰⁴ As a counterpoise to his enlightened revolutionary process, in his fiction Zamyatin presents satirical portraits of people who personify entropy and/or who are characterized by backwardness and slavishness, either to their own baser drives, or to social tradition or political dogma. One way he does this is through the use of what Christopher Collins refers to as "downward-directed metaphors," such as those

¹⁰³ Alex Shane, *The Life and Works of Evgenij Zamjatin* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968), 49.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 48.

Zamyatin uses to compare people to non-human animals and inanimate objects.¹⁰⁵ Zamyatin used this technique multiple times, for instance, in his early provincial tales, such as *Uezdnoe* and *Na kulichkakh*.

In these tales, an animal metaphor serves as a compact device consistent with his mode of impressionism to convey both physical features and character traits which resonate throughout a given work as a sort of leitmotif.¹⁰⁶ In *Uezdnoe*, for instance, Timosha is repeatedly likened to a sparrow, both in manner and appearance, and the narrator uses animal imagery throughout, most commonly that of wolves and dogs, to underscore Baryba's animality and "primitive" nature. As Davydova argues, this reveals his animalized nature and suggests a lack of soul or conscience.¹⁰⁷ More generally, these metaphors help to highlight Zamyatin's satirical treatment of the theme of the primitive backwardness of provincial life.¹⁰⁸

Zamyatin's animal metaphors are derived from traditional hierarchical conceptions of human superiority, conceptions which follow a largely unbroken current from classical models from Aristotle and the Bible up through the Modern period, including conservative interpretations of Darwin. For Zamyatin, however, the importance of such distinctions exists entirely within the realm of the human, as he focuses on the struggle between humanity and animality, not as different species, but as ascending levels of one species. The focus of his satire in his pre-

¹⁰⁵ Collins, *Evgenij Zamjatin: An Interpretive Study* (The Hague: Mouton, 1973), 18.

¹⁰⁶ Shklovsky argued that all of Zamyatin's characters are accompanied by "a fixed characteristic which is something like a detailed epithet." See Shklovsky, Viktor. *Gamburgskii chet: Stat'i – vospaminaniia – esse (1914 – 1933)* (Moscow: 1990), 246. Davydova (87), and Erlich (95) make similar statements in their discussions of Zamyatin's early work. See also Collins (18), and Shane (118-119) particularly for the use of animal metaphors to this effect.

¹⁰⁷ Tatiana Davydova, *Russkii neorealizm: Ideologija, poetika, tvorcheskaia evolutsiia* (Moskva: Izdatel'stvo Flinta-Nauka, 2005), 87.

¹⁰⁸ See Shane, 119. Scholars have compared Zamyatin's early work to some of Gogol. See Davydova and Collins. In highlighting some important similarities, Collins draws an important distinction between the two authors. While both are critical of human corruption, he argues that Zamyatin is considerably more critical of authority than the conservative Gogol. See Collins, 19.

Revolutionary work was mainly provincial primitivism and backwardness. Following the Revolution, there emerged a new threat to individualism and humanist ideals, one which forced him to redefine his revolutionary ethos to distinguish what he viewed as a cosmic force of continual evolution from the violence, moral chaos, and devaluation of life which he saw in the wake of the Bolshevik Revolution.¹⁰⁹

Zamyatin's earlier idealistic hopes for the Revolution were by this time (1918-1919) being challenged by the destruction and hardship pervading the country. Now the Revolution was seen not as a liberating force but a force of depersonalization, dehumanization, and destruction. Zamyatin warns of the corrosion of values (specifically the value of human life) in his essays, most pointedly in the essay "Zavtra" (1919). There he argues that Russia had shifted from the era of the suppression of the masses to one of "the suppression of the individual in the name of the masses," and that "man is dying. The proud *homo erectus* is getting down on all fours, is sprouting tusks and fur; the beast in man is triumphant . . . the value of human life is falling steeply . . . It is time to cry out: man is man's brother."¹¹⁰ This degradation and dehumanization is explored in the three Petrograd stories, "The Dragon," "Mamai," and "The Cave" ("Peshchera"). With respect to the use of animal imagery, "The Dragon" is the most compelling, but as there is some thematic continuity among all three, it is helpful to briefly discuss the other two.

¹⁰⁹ See D.J. Richards, *Zamyatin: A Soviet Heretic* (London: Bowes and Bowes, 1962), 37. Shane, 148.

¹¹⁰ Zamyatin, III: 115.

“The Cave” and “Mamai” are often discussed together owing largely to similarity in theme.¹¹¹ Both take place in Petrograd and both feature intellectuals who are driven to desperate and morally compromising acts due to extreme conditions. Furthermore, both use highly metaphoric imagery to establish the severity of the setting. In “Mamai,” post-Revolutionary Petersburg is metaphorically presented as a dark sea with apartment houses as isolated ships weathering the storms of nightly searches. The protagonist, Petr Petrovich Mamai, a gentle man with a strong aversion to violence, is forced to guard the house from those conducting illegal searches. He has saved a sum of money with which he plans to buy a rare edition of a certain book, and hides this money under a loose floorboard by the front door. He later finds that this money has been eaten by a mouse, and the gentle man who is earlier described as one who refuses to kill a fly is overcome by vengeance and finds and viciously impales the mouse. In “The Cave,” the city has become an ice age of glaciers and mammoths in which the people live in caves in the “black nocturnal cliffs” which “somehow resemble houses.” The story follows a couple, Martin Martynych and his wife Masha, as they struggle to keep warm with no wood for the stove which has become a “greedy cave god.” It is Masha’s name day and in an effort to keep her warm, Martin loses a moral struggle and steals a few logs from a neighbor. As their room warms a bit, they reminisce and manage to secure a moment of happiness before the cold returns and Martin confesses to her what he has done. Masha takes the one serving of poison they have between them, and the story ends with Martin walking outside, having lost everything.

Like Mamai, the protagonist of “The Cave” is a modest intellectual “little man” struggling to maintain his dignity amid difficult times. These men—the book collector Mamai and the music

¹¹¹ The two stories were written in 1920. Though initially published separately—“Mamai” in *Dom iskusstv* in 1921, and “Peshchera” in *Zapiski mechtatelei* in 1922—in many subsequent published collections, including the 1929 four-volume Soviet edition of Zamyatin’s collected works, these stories were printed together and consecutively.

lover Martin Martinych—are victims of the severity and brutality of the period. Richards defines them as “Hegelian tragic heroes, crushed by the dialectic of history. Products of the pre-revolutionary era, they are educated, refined, gentle and highly moral—qualities which are pathetically out of place in the new world.”¹¹² However, as Davydova points out, they are not victimized in the same way as the *intelligent* from “The Dragon.” They are not physically killed outright. Their victimization is more internal, as they are forced to cross a moral line within themselves.¹¹³ In “The Cave” this is seen in the moral struggle as Martin contemplates stealing the wood, and when he confesses to Masha: “We do not have a single piece of wood in the study. And I went to Obertyshev, and there, between the doors . . . I stole, you understand. And Selikhov [the house manager] said . . . I must take it back at once – but I burnt everything, everything! I don’t mean the wood – what’s wood! – you understand me?”¹¹⁴

While both of these stories center on moral degradation, in “The Cave” Zamyatin more overtly employs animal imagery to elucidate his point. As the story’s characters are likened to primitive cave dwellers, the desperate conditions in which they must attempt to secure basic needs (here, warm shelter) have relegated to superfluity any “higher” aspects of human culture. For instance, as Martin and Masha huddle around the stove, able to briefly warm themselves sufficiently, the narrator highlights what is lost in the severity of their struggle: “For a single hour it was spring in the cave; for one hour the animal hides, claws, fangs were discarded, and green shoots—thoughts—struggled up through the ice-crusting cortex of the brain.”¹¹⁵ While the loss described in the story is a consequence of the hardship of the Civil War period and loosely

¹¹² Richards, 39.

¹¹³ Davydova, 174-76.

¹¹⁴ Zamyatin, I: 548

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 541.

based on an actual event,¹¹⁶ given Zamyatin's unwavering defense of artistic and intellectual culture, this loss underscores his criticism of philistinism and Bolshevik brutality, but it also suggests a tension the extremity of which impels both sides to devolve into such brutality. This tension is the central focus of the very short but artistically dense "The Dragon."

Written in 1918, the story, like "The Cave," is set in a Petersburg winter. It depicts the brief interaction on a tram between a couple of Red Army soldiers, one of whom relates a story of how he, with his bayonette, dispatched to "the Heavenly Kingdom" an unspecified man with an "intellectual mug." Immediately thereafter, he sees a small frozen sparrow lying on the floor. He crouches down, his pistol drops, and he proceeds to cup the sparrow in his hands and warm it with his breath, until the bird revives and flies off into the "unknown." The soldier picks up his pistol and resumes his post as the tram rushes along.

The story is generally read as criticism of the chaos and violence of the Revolution.¹¹⁷ Here, however, the devaluation and dehumanization described in the essay "Zavtra" takes a more aggressive form than in the other two stories discussed above. In "The Dragon" this spiritual degradation from man to beast is symbolized by the transformation of a common soldier into a dragon, by the transformation of men into monsters, and the erosion of values is characterized by the nonchalance of the soldier's killing the man. His saving the bird has been viewed in two ways: on the one hand, it can be regarded as a sort of reversal of a conventional value hierarchy (a human is killed in cold blood while a tiny bird is saved); on the other hand, the soldier's saving the bird can be viewed as a different mode of contrast, one emphasizing the contrast of

¹¹⁶ In "Zakulisy" Zamyatin reveals the origin of "Peshchera." He writes: "One winter night in 1919 I was on watch duty in our yard. My partner—a frozen, half-starved professor—complained about the lack of firewood: 'Sometimes I am even tempted to steal some wood! But the trouble is that I cannot do it, I'd rather die than steal.' On the following day I sat down to write 'The Cave.'" Zamyatin, III: 190. See also Richards (40) who originally pointed this out.

¹¹⁷ See Richards, 37. Shane, 148.

different actions rather than a contrast of objects of those actions, that is, saving a life versus taking a life. The moral conclusion would then be, as Alex Shane suggests, a plea for brotherly love.¹¹⁸ While this is a valid reading of the story, it is nevertheless worthwhile to take a closer look at the complex elements of the piece, particularly its use of animal imagery, in order to better understand the nuances of Zamyatin's plea.

The theme of chaos and disorientation pervades the story, first introduced in the story's setting as described in the first few lines. The setting is at once stark and vague, depicted with a set of carefully chosen images and words that repeat with minor variations and mutations throughout the text, with combinations that convey a strong impression yet are themselves strange and disorienting:

Люто замороженный, Петербург горел и бредил. Было ясно: невидимые за туманной занавесью, поскрипывая, пошаркивая, на цыпочках бредут вон желтые и красные колонны, шпили и седые решетки. Горячее, небывалое, ледяное солнце в тумане—слева, справа, вверху, внизу—голубь над загоревшимся домом.¹¹⁹

Gripped with bitter cold, Petersburg burned and raved. It was clear: invisible behind a curtain of fog, red and yellow columns, spires, and hoary gates, trudge along on tiptoe, creaking and shuffling. A fevered, impossible, frozen sun in the fog—to the left, to the right, above, below—a dove over a house on fire.

These opening lines introduce some of the story's important themes and devices. The use of contradictory language and certain specific terms captures the sense of chaos, and more specifically, the theme of delirium that is central to the story. For instance, the city is both frozen and burning; the scenery is both clear and invisible; the sun is icy and fevered, and shining in all directions. Furthermore, since the reader does not know until the following

¹¹⁸ Shane, 148.

¹¹⁹ Zamyatin, I: 473 Translation of "Drakon" by Mirra Ginsburg with some modifications for accuracy.

paragraph that the scenery is described from the point of view of a moving tram, the inanimate objects listed are seen as motile, described with the verb *bresti* (to trudge along), which in the third person form used in the text (*bredut*) has a stem which echoes the root of the verb *bredit'* (to be delirious) a root which is repeated several times in the story as the “delirium world” (*bredovyi mir*) from which the dragon men originate.¹²⁰

This sense of delirium is furthered by the use of space in the text. There are seven “worlds” mentioned in the story: the delirium / foggy delirium world (*bredovyi / bredovyi, tumannyi mir*); the earthly world (*zemnoi mir*); the leaping, rushing world (*soskochivshii nesushchiisia mir*); the human world (*chelovechii mir*); the human/humane world (*chelovecheskii mir*); the heavenly kingdom (*Tsarstvie Nebesnoe*); and the vague “unknown” (*neizvestnoe*). There is constant movement between these worlds: the dragon-men rise up (*vynyrivali*) from the delirium fog world into the earthly world; the intellectual is dispatched to the heavenly kingdom; the tram and the bird both go off into the unknown. And while there is some movement up and down, most of the movement is horizontal, following the tracks, as the tram itself traverses these worlds.¹²¹ This last detail adds a surreal quality to the movement through these worlds, since while the tram’s movement along the tracks is physical, the worlds themselves are more spiritual or metaphysical, such as the Heavenly Kingdom, the strange underworld from which the dragon-men emerge, and the dragon’s eyes which are described as “two chinks from the delirium world to the human.” All of these worlds seem to be parallel and simultaneous, traversable but not harmonious. This is suggested by the inability of communication between worlds: the dragon

¹²⁰ The use of the third person verb form to echo this repeated root is most likely deliberate since, aside from Zamyatin’s typical care with such elements, particularly in such compact a piece, it is the only verb in the story, outside of dialogue, that is used in the present tense.

¹²¹ Edna Andrews has analyzed these worlds in connection with Yuri Lotman’s ideas about artistic space. See Edna Andrews, *Conversations with Lotman: Cultural Semiotics in Language, Literature, and Cognition* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003), 106.

men belch fog, which in the delirium world are heard as words, but in the earthly world are only little white puffs of smoke; when the dragon speaks to the sparrow, they are words only in the earthly world, but are unheard in the delirium world. The dragon-soldier is a sort of liminal figure, existing at the intersection of these multiple worlds—he comes up from a world of fog and delirium, exists “here” in the earthly world (which is described as also pervaded by fog and delirium); he is a dragon whose eyes give access to a ‘human world’; he is from a sort of underworld, yet at the same time is a “guide to the Heavenly Kingdom” capable of both killing and reviving.

The dragon-soldier’s liminality is important in connection with the story’s theme of dehumanization. The multiple layers with which Zamyatin crafts this character not only engage this subject, but complicate a traditional understanding of it by blurring the line between dehumanizer and dehumanized as well as the line between human and animal.

In strategies of dehumanization, the attempt is made to dissociate the person under scrutiny or attack from the attacker, and to degrade or demean them as much as possible, and thus dissociate them from the sphere of moral concern. Since nonhuman animals have long been situated on the other side of a moral boundary, animal imagery or rhetoric is often used as a tool for dehumanization, to stigmatize the object of oppression or violence. This type of behavior is illustrated in “The Dragon” by the dragon’s language when recounting the murder. He states: “So I’m taking him along: an intellectual mug – disgusting just to look at. And it talks, the scum. Would you believe, it talks!” (*Vedy ego: morda inteligentnaia—prosto gliadet’ protivno. I eshche razgovarivaet, sterv’ a? Razgovarivaet!*).¹²² The terms the dragon uses to demean his victim are very typical of dehumanizing practices. First, in describing the intellectual’s face he

¹²² Zamyatin, I: 473.

uses the word “*morda*,” which means “snout” or “muzzle,” thus attributing a nonhuman feature to his victim. Second, he calls him “*sterv*,” a form of the word “*sterva*” which has a common pejorative meaning, when used for a man, “scum” or “bastard,” and when used for a woman, “slut.” The traditional definition according to Dal’, however, is that of a dead animal or “carrion.” The victim is characterized as subhuman and thus any moral compunction for taking the man’s life is avoided.

An interesting feature of the dragon-soldier is that while he engages in dehumanizing strategies, he is himself dehumanized and depersonalized.¹²³ He is dehumanized insofar as he is referred to as a dragon, a mythical monster. Cultural representations of monsters, often depicted as variations of animal-human hybrids, have been employed throughout human history as a way to vilify and personify any dangerous and terrifying threats. David Livingstone Smith discusses this tendency at some length, arguing that it is a distancing mechanism to cope with atrocities committed by humans.¹²⁴ To refer to individuals like Stalin or Hitler as “monsters” is a practice of essentially dehumanizing the dehumanizers to arrive at a more comfortable conclusion that “they” are different from “us”; that what they do or have done so undermines a shared human moral code that they must be fundamentally inhuman. It is a common practice, he argues, that is “a symptom of the disease for which it purports to be the diagnosis.”¹²⁵ This is not to minimize or excuse the atrocities committed by these men, nor those committed on a much smaller scale.

¹²³ In discussions of dehumanization terms are not always consistent. Often “dehumanization” is used when what is meant is depersonalization or objectification. Depersonalization occurs when a person’s individuality is in some degree not recognized, such as depicting someone as merely a unit in the collective, a cog in the machine. By contrast, dehumanization occurs when a person is divested of features or traits that are commonly considered to define the human. This can have two forms: mechanistic and animalistic. My discussion here focuses on animalistic dehumanization, in which a person is seen to lack what Nick Haslam calls “Uniquely Human” (UH) traits (civility, refinement, moral sensibility, rationality). See Haslam, “Dehumanization: an Integrative Review,” 256-8.

¹²⁴ David Livingstone Smith, *Less Than Human: Why We Demean, Enslave, and Exterminate Others* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2011), 133-6.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*

Rather, it is to make an important point that dehumanization is a common cultural practice, and one that is not restricted to particularly “evil” individuals. Furthermore, it reveals the psychological complexity behind strategies of coping with the darker aspects of human culture, and to relegate these darker aspects or tendencies to other realms, most often to those of the nonhuman. The terrible irony, of course, is that the extent and variety of human cruelty has no parallel in the rest of the animal kingdom.¹²⁶

In addition to the soldier’s being dehumanized, he is also depersonalized. This is underscored by the narrator’s emphasis on his uniform; on his cap, boots, and army greatcoat (*shinel*). Military uniforms are often used as symbols of conformity or depersonalization. As a self-styled cultural heretic, Zamyatin was very critical of what he considered a herd-like philistinism, as well as habits or strategies of social depersonalization. While he uncompromisingly espoused revolutionary fervor in art and culture, after the Revolution and the Bolshevik seizure of power, we see a shift in tone as he attempts to qualify notions of revolution. Rather than a dialectical force of change, he believed that revolution was being used as a means to power and subjugation.¹²⁷ Like many artists of the time, he was shocked and disheartened by the increasing, and often violent, loss of personal and artistic freedom. In “Zavtra” he writes: “Wars, imperialist and civil, have turned man into material for warfare, into a number, a cipher.”¹²⁸ Similarly in “Skify li?” criticizing what he saw as the philistinism of the Revolution, he writes: “Shave all heads down to the skin; dress everybody in the regulation uniform; convert all heretical lands to your own faith by artillery fire.”¹²⁹ These sentiments reverberate in his artistic prose. In “The Dragon” this suppression of the individual is exemplified by the

¹²⁶ For a discussion of this idea see Mary Midgely, *Animals and Why They Matter*, and Peter Singer, *Animal Liberation*.

¹²⁷ See Richards 36, 37.

¹²⁸ Zamyatin, III: 114.

¹²⁹ Zamyatin, IV: 287.

uniformed soldier who kills the man with the “intellectual mug” (*morda inteligentnaia*), presumably a counter-revolutionary.

Zamyatin uses this symbolism, but he goes a step further, taking the depersonalizing effect of the uniform to an extreme. It is not simply his individual personhood that is minimized, his physical body is as well. At first this seems to be perhaps an issue of the size of the uniform: “The cap slid down on his nose and of course would have swallowed the dragon’s head were it not for his ears; the cap came to rest on his protruding ears. The greatcoat dangled to the floor, the sleeves hung down, the tips of the boots were turned up—empty.” Further on, however, after the brief conversation in which the soldier recounts the murder, the emptiness of the uniform is exaggerated: “The hole in the fog [the soldier’s mouth] closed up: there was only the empty cap, empty boots, empty greatcoat.” The man in the uniform is literally reduced to nothing. Aside from this imagery, the narrator underscores the soldier’s reduction grammatically. It is not *his* cap or *his* coat, but rather *the* cap or *the* coat.¹³⁰ And when he squats down to pick up the bird, it is not the soldier that does this, rather the empty greatcoat is the grammatical subject of the sentence: “*Pustaia shinel’ prisela k polu.*”

The principal reason for the symbolism of the empty uniform seems to be a means of criticizing the Bolshevik rejection of the individual’s value as well as, more generally, the depersonalizing effects of power and authority. Additionally, one could argue that it provides an explanation for violence against others, insofar as it suggests a causal chain: when one is depersonalized or dehumanized, it is easier to impose those states on others. In this way, Zamyatin’s dragon-soldier is a particularly pregnant image. Depersonalized and dehumanized,

¹³⁰ Zamyatin, I: 473. This is more subtle in Russian than it is in an English translation because Russian does not have articles. However, the distinct lack of personal or possessive pronouns or any other indicator of subjecthood conveys this sense of depersonalization and reduction.

he is himself an agent of violent dehumanization. His individuality is lost in his “empty” uniform, symbolizing his being lost in his social role and the ideology that fosters it. At the same time he is depicted as a dragon, a mythical non-human being, rising up from an underworld. To understand how these two notions, of depersonalization and dehumanization, are encapsulated in the image of the dragon-soldier, we must revisit the ideas of form and essence.

Following a strain of thought from Aristotle to Locke to contemporary philosophers, Smith argues that “humans are natural-born essentializers, that we spontaneously divide the world into natural kinds to which we attribute hidden essences.”¹³¹ In doing so we suppose that there is a natural kind to which *we* belong—a *human kind*—and it is an aspect of our basic psychological makeup to think that the term *human* (or its equivalent) is properly applied only to bearers of a human essence . . . when we dehumanize people we think of them as *counterfeit human beings*—creatures that look like humans, but who are not endowed with a human essence.”¹³² In strategies of dehumanization, verbal or visual imagery of non-human animals is often used to make more apparent a believed subhuman essence hiding in human form.

In *Zamyatin* we see a play with form and essence. What is important to note, however, is that as a humanist, Zamyatin emphasizes in many of his characters a positive human essence that is threatened from outside, that degrades itself or is degraded by external hardship, oppression, and violence. In “The Dragon” there are three nested layers to the dragon-soldier’s being. He is at once an empty uniform, and a dragon (his paws (*lapy*) emerge from the coat’s empty sleeves). And when the dragon slides his cap back exposing his eyes, these are described as chinks into the human world; the uniform contains a dragon which seems to contain a human essence.

¹³¹ Smith, 100-1.

¹³² *Ibid.*

This last detail is of particular importance. Prior to being engaged with the frozen sparrow, the dragon's cap covers his eyes. Symbolically, he is blinded by the uniform and the ideology informing his role. When he slides back his cap, his eyes reveal the hidden humanity that is distinct from the worlds previously described. This distinction is suggested by the fact that the words spoken to the sparrow are unheard in the delirium world. Another distinction from the preceding moments occurs when, as he blows on the bird "with all his strength," his pistol drops to the floor. His weapon and his role as soldier are temporarily abandoned and his positive humanity is revealed. The dragon, which before is seen as an agent of death, is here breathing life into the bird, as breath is a symbol of spiritual essence and life. While a dragon's breath is mythically associated with fire and destruction, here we see a reversal. It is in this instance that the dragon is in a sense momentarily transformed from dragon to man, in a moment that is described as a critical point in space and time: "at the moment ordained by destiny, at a point ordained in space, the sparrow jerked, jerked again – and fluttered off the dragon's red paw into the unknown." In this way, the instance is given a sort of cosmic significance, at an intersection which echoes both the dragon-soldier's liminality as well as the permeability of worlds discussed above. After the bird flies away, we see the dragon smile (his maw (*past*) opens to his ears) and the cap then slides back over "the chinks into the human world" and he picks up his pistol and resumes his role as "guide to the Heavenly Kingdom," as the tram screeches and rushes "into the unknown, out the human world."

The sparrow scene is crucial to our understanding of the story. It occurs at a moment in which the dragon-soldier steps out of his role and is overtaken by a spontaneous moment of compassion that disrupts the mode of movement characterizing the story. That is, as a "moment ordained by destiny, in a point ordained in space," it is a static point in space and time

contrasting the tram's movement through the worlds. In his monograph, Richards discusses Zamyatin's polemic against entropy as he saw it, and its manifestation as religious, scientific, social and political dogmatism. Characterizing Zamyatin's earlier philosophy of revolution he writes, "A man is most truly filled with the spirit of Revolution, and hence most truly alive and free, when he acts or thinks *spontaneously*, inspired by his total unique personality, unrestrained by the demands of reason, uncoerced by imposed values or beliefs."¹³³ After seeing the destruction and violence of the Revolution and the Civil War that followed, realizing the physical and psychological consequences of armed revolution, Zamyatin qualified this view but did not change it. Rather, he now felt that "the real revolution is psychological, in men's hearts, and that ideals imposed by force are corrupted in the process."¹³⁴ The dragon's moment of compassion reveals a hidden urge that counterpoises the casual violence of the recounted murder, which is textually established through the repetition of the word "*sterv*" which the dragon uses for both the murdered man and the sparrow. The repetition of this term also helps to emphasize the point that the same person is committing both acts and, while one does not excuse the other, the dragon-soldier is a figure that resists simple vilification; he cannot be easily and neatly dismissed as a "monster." The monster is human.

The story's underlying notion of human goodness underscores Zamyatin's humanism and his very critical view of the degradation and violence of that time. In "The Dragon" he initially presents an image of man at his worst, as image of one degraded by violence who in turn extends that violence by degrading others. What is interesting, though, is that Zamyatin complicates this presentation, and seems to be drawing a distinction between agent and instrument. The agency of the dragon is ambiguous. The details about the uniform underscore this. When assuming his

¹³³ Richards, 17.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, 39.

role as Red Army soldier, blinded by the ideology of his mission, he is an instrument of death. When spontaneously and momentarily free of that ideology and his social role, symbolized by the exposed eyes and the dropped pistol, he is an agent of resurrection. The conflict here is one between human and inhuman, with the inhuman symbolized by the depersonalizing uniform and the ideology it represents, rather than the nonhuman form the human has taken as a result of that ideology in action. This is evidenced by the fact that as he is trying to save the bird, he is still referred to as “the dragon” blowing into his “red paws.” The dragon is essentially human, but is only humane when free of his social role. The ambiguity of these distinctions is further emphasized in the last line of the story: “The tram gnashed and screeched and rushed into the unknown, out of the human world.” In this final instance, the narrator uses the phrase “*chelovecheskii mir*” rather than “*chelovechii*” as he had previously. “*Chelovecheskii*” can mean either “human” or “humane,” depending on context. In such a carefully constructed text, the ambiguity is most likely deliberate. If the tram is symbolic of the Revolution, Zamyatin warns that its motion and direction are dubious, and threaten to undermine the better qualities of humankind.

II. Cleansing the Organism: The Subhuman in Platonov’s “Garbage Wind” (1934).

The question of humanness is also addressed in the context of dehumanization in Andrei Platonov’s short story, “Garbage Wind” (“*Musornyi veter*”). A central philosophical problem in Platonov’s work is ontological dualism, and the tension or conflict which characterizes strict and apparently irreconcilable binary oppositions such as universal and particular, abstract and

concrete, essence and existence, mind and matter, spirit and body.¹³⁵ In many of his works we can trace an ongoing struggle with divergent existential paths each attempting to resolve this conflict and tension and ultimately overcome dualism: either a final reconciliation of consciousness and matter, or a complete emancipation of the former from the latter. These philosophical ideas informed his social outlook insofar as he placed great hope in the potential for science and technology to transform society. This is evident in some of his earlier work, particularly his essays, in which he posits that materialization, the path from abstract to concrete, will be the final outcome of the historical process, a sort of reconciliation with matter.¹³⁶ This was one of the reasons he had also placed great hope in the Revolution, and what he believed would bring progress and liberation. Yet as the Soviet project unfolded, through the Civil War, collectivization, and the increasingly severe suppression of any debate and dissent, Platonov grew more and more disillusioned and cynical.

In “Garbage Wind,” we see a disillusioned Platonov presenting a gruesome and mordant critique of the 20th century totalitarian state in which all life is reduced to matter and function, to be consumed as material resources in the realization of a utopian project. It is a state moving toward complete homogeneity into which everything is to be integrated toward a single direction, and all superfluous and contrary elements are to be forcibly excised. The more balanced ontological tension we see in his other works here gives way to the pull of materialism at its most oppressive and decadent. While there is some ambiguity and nuance to the text, the underlying message is quite clear, and hopeless. The diagnosis and prognosis are equally grim.

¹³⁵ Thomas Seifrid offers a thorough discussion of Platonov’s philosophical problems in his monograph. See Thomas Seifrid, *Andrei Platonov: Uncertainties of the Spirit* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

¹³⁶ See Seifrid for a discussion of such works, as well as for a discussion of Platonov’s ambivalence and contradictions relating to this central dilemma. Seifrid, 37-39.

The central point of the story is sacrifice of the individual to the homogeneous collective state. This sacrifice is achieved through assimilation, suppression of independent thought, and the practice of social and racial hygiene by which deviant or dangerous elements are expunged from the collective “organism” of society. Platonov examines these ideas and practices in the story through the related themes of metamorphosis and dehumanization. Throughout the narrative we see multiple images of, and references to, “regressive” zoomorphic transformations, of humans developing into nonhuman animals, as well as the metamorphosis, though more subtle and less literal, of humans into machines or mechanized parts of a larger machine. In connection with these metamorphoses, Platonov offers a criticism of the practices and consequences of the two main types of dehumanization: mechanistic and animalistic. While the former of these two is certainly important, it is the latter that is more prevalent in the story, and the one which is connected to the theme of physical and moral degradation, as well as to the use of biology and taxonomical hierarchy to support practices of eugenics and genocide. In “Garbage Wind,” Platonov uses the theme of regressive metamorphosis to symbolize the degrading effect of social crises and political oppression, and to challenge the notions of ontological hierarchy and progressive evolution which underlie practices of pseudospeciation and dehumanization.

The story is set in Germany in the summer of 1933, the year Hitler came to power as chancellor of the Nazi party, and the first Nazi concentration camp was founded at Dachau. The protagonist, Albert Lichtenberg, is an astrophysicist who is repulsed by corporeality and who rejects the materialist reduction of life to matter and function in service to, or as resource for, the state. On the afternoon of July 16, he follows a group of National Socialists to a site in the city center where a metal statue of Hitler’s upper body is being erected. He gives an impromptu speech about power, society, and despotism, at the end of which he denounces Hitler and strikes

the statue with his cane. Consequently, he is attacked by some party supporters and severely maimed, and later taken to a rubbish pit and discarded, but manages to survive for some time eating scraps of kitchen refuse. Later, he is arrested and taken to a concentration camp where he is sentenced to execution but manages to escape and ends up in a deserted village, where he finds the last inhabited house in which a starving old woman tends to her two dead children, whom she imagines are still alive. In an attempt to save her, Lichtenberg prepares a soup into which he puts several pieces of flesh from his own leg. He goes outside and dies, and his body is found by his wife who comes searching for him with a police officer, but his body is not recognized by his wife. Rather it is seen as the corpse of an “unknown animal” which had been mutilated and dressed in scraps of human clothing. The old woman dies, and the meat left on the stove is eaten by the investigating officer.

Several readings point out that while the story is set in Nazi Germany, there are a number of clues which suggest that it is also a veiled denunciation of Stalinist Russia. Mikhail Geller, for instance, focuses on a number of parallels in the story between Platonov’s depiction of Nazi Germany and Soviet Russia under Stalin.¹³⁷ One such parallel, he argues, is the emphasis on science and technology, which while important for Germany, was even more important for the continued industrialization of the Soviet Union, especially given the temporal setting of 1933, the beginning of the second Five-Year Plan. He points out that Lichtenberg is one of the last in a long line of scientists in Platonov’s work, and represents the author’s detachment from his earlier

¹³⁷ Geller lists a number of such parallels. For instance, the use of the term “concentration camp,” while instated in Germany in 1933, had already been a term used in Soviet speech in reference to the corrective labor camps comprising the Gulag system. A second detail occurs in Lichtenberg’s speech near the statue, where he refers to Hitler as the savior/leader of “humanity” (*chelovechestvo*). Geller argues that such an epithet was not used for Hitler, who was referred to as the savior/leader of the “nation” or “race”; rather the savior/leader of “humanity” was an idea commonly used in celebrating Stalin. A third detail is in the description of the desolate village at the end of the story, which Geller argues would not be realistic for Germany at that time, but was in fact common in the Russian countryside during and following famine and collectivization. See Mikhail Geller, *Andrei Platonov v poiskakh schast’ia* (Moskva: Izdatel’stvo ‘MIK,’ 1999), 356-9.

hopeful beliefs regarding the liberating effect of science and technology. Lichtenberg's rejection of the utopian state is a rejection of what he characterizes as the materialist dream of the nineteenth century, the century that gave birth to Hitler who was "the first to understand that what must be built on the back of the machine, on the poor, sullen hump of precise Science, is not freedom but unyielding despotism!"¹³⁸ In rejecting the despotism of science, Lichtenberg is rendered unnecessary and is rejected by the state. His attempt to retain a sense of freedom and thoughtfulness is represented in the final scene in which he attempts to save the starving woman by feeding her his own body. Yet, as Geller points out, this attempt is undermined by the woman's death and the officer's consumption of Lichtenberg's flesh.¹³⁹

The rejection of materialism and positivism is established in the opening pages with the narrator's intensely physical descriptions of people and events, and with Lichtenberg's revulsion toward such physicality. At the beginning of the story, after Lichtenberg strikes his wife with his cane, he goes outside and the reader is presented with a series of physical descriptions of typically spiritual or intangible phenomena. For instance, the first image we see when Lichtenberg goes outside is a Catholic church which stands "like suffering organized into stone," and the narrator describes the people leaving the church in despiritualizing terms. We see old women in whom "once-seething passions now oozed like pus"; a group of girls are seen with tears in their eyes, yet these tears are filled not with "adoration of Christ, but with moisture from love glands"; and a priest who is "excited, damp, and red—an ambassador of God in the guise of a man's urinary appendage."¹⁴⁰ A crowd sings songs "from the depths of their guts" in a "tenor of quivering intestines." Similarly, in the first scene the narrator states that Lichtenberg's despair

¹³⁸ Platonov, Andrei. *Sobranie sochinenii v trekh tomakh*. Vol.I, 118. Geller, 356-7.

¹³⁹ Geller, 363.

¹⁴⁰ Platonov, 68.

“lay with bony hardness,” while in this scene his thoughts grow furious and stand up in his head “like stubble, forcing their way through the bone.”¹⁴¹ These opening scenes with their extremely corporeal imagery, present a world in which dualist mind-body conflict is overcome not through some idealistic synthesis, but through a degrading reduction of all life to the physical. It is a world that is perhaps Platonov’s grim vision of materialism carried to its fullest extreme.

The narrator’s emphasis on the physical establishes the theme of mind/body dualism which pervades to the text. Analyzing Platonov’s treatment of this dualism in the story, Konstantin Barsht focuses on the scene of Lichtenberg in the rubbish heap in which he engages in a philosophical argument with Descartes. While Lichtenberg’s initial denunciation is against nineteenth century positivism, here he traces the problem back to the Cartesian formula, “I think therefore I am,” which he views as the basis for the senselessness and irresponsibility of the modern age. Barsht argues that Platonov proposes to correct Descartes by reversing the formula, stating that existence precedes thought. One can act and exist without being conscious of one’s life.¹⁴² Yet, what is most important for Platonov is the interdependence and mutual influence of the energy of the universe and the energy of human thought. According to Platonov, the ontological necessity of man to the Universe and his real existence is determined by the level of intensity of his thought and the level of his responsibility to the universe, and his thought becomes the last hope of man to extricate himself from the “rubbish of history.”¹⁴³

Similar to Barsht, Thomas Seifrid sees the independence of thought at the center of Lichtenberg’s rebellion. Seifrid argues that what is important is not whether the story is a

¹⁴¹ Ibid., 66,69.

¹⁴² Barsht, “‘Musornyi veter’ A. Platonova: spor s R. Dekartom,” *Vestnik Tomskogo gosudarstvennogo pedagogicheskogo universiteta* (Tomsk, 2005. Vypusk 6 (50)), 62. We see this idea developed in the central Asian stories written at the same time (1934), particularly *Dzhan*, in which the tribe, due to their hunger and deprivation, moves about in a sort of half-dead sleepwalk.

¹⁴³ Ibid., 63-64.

denunciation of fascism or Stalinism, as is the story's grim "anticipation of the punishment awaiting anyone who raises a hand against absolute power."¹⁴⁴ While the story is particularly gruesome, Lichtenberg's rebellion is typical of a Platonovian hero insofar as his rebellion is as much against the ontological regime in which individuals are reduced to resource and mechanism as it is against "the political one that mirrors and intensifies it."¹⁴⁵ However, the intensity of the materialism and Lichtenberg's rejection of it is particularly strong, and may have much to do with Platonov's own growing concerns over both the situation in the Soviet Union, and the silencing of his voice. This is suggested by Lichtenberg's surprise that they did not remove his tongue, as thought is "the most dangerous thing," more dangerous than the "submissive reactionary" (*smirnyi reaktioner*) of the sexual organ.¹⁴⁶

As Lichtenberg is silenced, he loses not only his individuality but also his human status. He is beaten, detained, slated for execution, while being dehumanized to the point where he is officially placed in a different taxonomic category, as a subhuman animal. This is a point raised by those critics who have looked at this story in connection with the animal-human question. For instance, Oksana Timofeeva argues that animals in Platonov are often used to represent his tragic dialectic of nature and his disappointed hopes in the socio-political project of the October Revolution. Platonov's animals become a localization of life energy which is often tragically subject to exploitation and entropy. Regarding the short story "Garbage Wind," she argues that Platonov is describing a situation in which the messianic force of a political movement has

¹⁴⁴ Seifrid, 181.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 182.

¹⁴⁶ Platonov, 120. Seifrid, 183.

undermined social progress, and thus humanity is degraded, and the astrophysicist is no longer able to remain human in the Fascist society.¹⁴⁷

The idea of devolution is extended in Hans Günther's article concerning animals in Platonov more generally. He argues that a common thread running through much of Platonov's work is the idea of progressive metamorphosis. Often propelled by social and scientific effort, the theme of progressive metamorphosis in Platonov is an idealistic view of evolution by means of which, concurrent with a more general course of progress, the utopian vision of harmonious relations between humans and other animals will eventually be realized.¹⁴⁸ Platonov's later works tend to be less optimistic. Günther briefly focuses on "Garbage Wind" to discuss an inversion of this current of regressive metamorphosis, in which a defective society, and Lichtenberg's rejection of and by it, leads to degraded mutation, and zoomorphic transformation.¹⁴⁹

These readings situate the story in the body of Platonov's work more generally, particularly in connection with his pervasive, and often ambiguous, preoccupation with ontology. The problem of dualism has been adequately discussed by scholars, as has, though to a lesser extent, the animalization of humans as a consequence of deprivation and oppression. What has not been discussed, however, is the connection between animality and practices of dehumanization. It is thus worthwhile to take a closer look at a number of the story's details to see how Platonov engages these ideas, as well as his treatment of scientism as a means of dehumanizing exploitation and violence and the way in which he explores these issues through complex images of animality.

¹⁴⁷ Timofeeva, Oksana. "Bednaia zhizn': zootekhnika Visokovskii protiv filosa Khaideggera" in *Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie*, vol. 106, 2010.

¹⁴⁸ Hans Günther, "A Mixture of Living Creatures': Man and Animal in the Works of A. Platonov," Trans. Sergey Levchin. *Ulbandus Review* (Vol.14, 2011/2012), 267.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 268, 270.

While Platonov is generally apprehensive about placing nonhuman animals along a hierarchical scheme or continuum in a static position subordinate to humans, the presentation of animality in this story is, as Günther states, one of regression or devolution. From the opening scene onwards, Lichtenberg is presented as a man repulsed by corporeality, who sees everything around him reduced to gross matter, and people devolving into animals as a result of oppression and deprivation. The first instance of this is the portrayal of Lichtenberg's wife, Zelda, an Afghan "who had faded from hunger, though once she had been a dear and magnificent being." Now she had "become an animal: the down on her cheeks had turned to a coat of hair." Her leg is covered by rampant sores of "an unclean animal; she did not even lick them, she was worse than a monkey."¹⁵⁰ Later, Lichtenberg is in a similar state after several days in the garbage pit, where as a result of his mutilation "a dark infection, similar to lupus, had spread over all of his body, while a thick coat of hair had sprouted on top of it . . . Bushes of hair had also grown on the places where his ears had been torn off."¹⁵¹ Similar descriptions of Lichtenberg occur in the office of the concentration camp and in the village after his death.

Platonov had previously used hair to symbolize animality and regressive metamorphosis in *Kotlovan*, where we see both Nastya's mother and the peasant Yelisei growing pelts as an atavistic consequence of their lives of hardship and deprivation, conditions so desperate that they must be so consumed by physical need that they have no time for "higher mental functions." In both of these works, Platonov is using animality to symbolize the dehumanizing effect of oppression, and exposing the philosophical and psychological notions on which such an effect is based. In these instances, Platonov is highlighting a long-established dualist convention which positions humanity qualitatively above animality in associating humanity with notions of reason

¹⁵⁰ Platonov, 113. Translation: Robert Chandler.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 119.

and spirituality and animality with notions of instinct and physicality. In “Garbage Wind” such a dualist contrast is maintained by Lichtenberg’s opposition to corporeality and materialism while asserting that despite the surrounding conditions he will remain human. This pledge is first mentioned in the opening scene in Lichtenberg’s revulsion toward his wife:

Теперь она зверь, сволочь безумного сознания, а он до гроба, навсегда останется человеком, физиком космических пространств, и пусть голод томит его желудок до самого сердца — он не пойдет выше горла, и жизнь его спрячется в пещеру головы.¹⁵²

Now she was a beast, scum of crazed consciousness, whereas he would always, until the grave, remain a human being, a physicist of the cosmic spaces, and even if hunger were to torment his stomach right up to his heart, it would not reach higher than his throat, and his life would hide away in the cave of his head.

Here we see an opposition drawn between animal and human as well as the classic opposition between body and mind, but expressed in particularly gross, physical terms. These oppositions are developed and problematized as the story proceeds, with arguably more severe implications than those in *Kotlovan*.

While physicality and animality are two different things, they are often conflated, and Platonov himself closely intertwines these concepts for various reasons and effects. One is of course the problem of dualism; another is the problem of dehumanization. When Lichtenberg is arrested and taken to the concentration camp, he is not questioned but only examined as he “could hardly be a human being,” and is determined to be “a possible new species of social animal, developing a layer of hair.”¹⁵³ Similarly, at the end of the story as Lichtenberg lay dead, he is unrecognizable to his wife; she sees only “unknown animal [. . .] it might even have been

¹⁵² Ibid., 113.

¹⁵³ Ibid., 122.

a primitive man who had grown a coat of hair, but most likely it was a large monkey someone had mutilated and then, as a joke, dressed up in scraps of human clothing.” The policeman confirms her speculation that it was either a monkey or some other “unscientific animal for which Germany had no use” (*kakoe-nibud’ nenuzhnoe dlia Germanii, nenauchnoe zhivotnoe*).¹⁵⁴

In these scenes, Platonov is literalizing the metaphors used in practices of animalistic dehumanization. Platonov featured this practice as it happened in the language and imagery used to demean and justify violence against the kulaks in *Kotlovan*; in “Garbage Wind,” however, this practice and its consequences are more deeply explored. Depicting humans as being animalized in the context of oppression or deprivation is one thing, to describe them as a physically animalized “other,” a specimen of a bestial outgroup, is another. Perceiving members of an outgroup as less human than one’s own group forms the basis of animalistic dehumanization and its possible consequences of war and genocide. This type of thinking is common among human groups, particularly in situations of intergroup conflict.¹⁵⁵ Yet modes and patterns of dehumanization are difficult to understand and assess due to the relationship between the figurative and the literal, and the relationship this in turn has to notions of form and essence. As David Livingstone Smith argues, the language of dehumanization may be metaphorical, but it is not *just* metaphorical; the language is only an indication of something occurring in deeper levels of perception.¹⁵⁶ In “Garbage Wind,” when Lichtenberg literally begins to take on a nonhuman (or subhuman) form, he is manifesting a perceived subhuman essence, making physical and overt what is normally considered hidden, and thus destroying any ambiguity and uncertainty that

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., 128.

¹⁵⁵ There have been several studies in recent years concerning the relationship between animalistic dehumanization and intergroup prejudice and violence. See, for instance, Leyens, et.al. “Emotional Prejudice, Essentialism, and Nationalism.” *European Journal of Social Psychology* 33(2003), 703–717; and Boccato et. al., “The Missing Link: Ingroup, Outgroup, and the Human Species.” *Social Cognition*, 26.2 (April 2008), 224-234.

¹⁵⁶ Smith, 24.

might normally be involved in recognizing the subhuman. This type of insidious subhumanity would be made quite explicit in a later warning to members of the German SS that the subhuman is a dreadful creature that imitates man, that “not every being with a human face is human.”¹⁵⁷

This literalization of metaphor has further significance in relation to the other aspects of physicality and materialism expressed in these passages. This has to do with the use of science or pseudoscience to support theories of racial or cultural supremacy, and to justify practices of extreme discrimination. In the scenes mentioned above, Platonov points to the important and interrelated ideas and practices of cultural pseudospeciation, and racial and cultural hygiene. Pseudospeciation is a practice of conflating the concept of species with other categorized groups, most often race. As Erik Erikson originally defined it, “the term denotes that while man is obviously one species, he appears and continues on the scene split up into groups (from tribes to nations, from castes to classes, from religions to ideologies . . .) which provide their members with a firm sense of unique and superior human identity.”¹⁵⁸ While the term was first used in 1966 it bears a strong relation both to modern theories of dehumanization and to 19th and early 20th century appropriations of biology and physical anthropology for the purpose of supporting modes of discrimination, from criminal anthropology and social Darwinism, to the extreme applications of such theories in eugenics, racial hygiene, and genocide.

When the party officers define Lichtenberg as a “new species of social animal,” and as an “unscientific animal for which Germany had no use,” they are literally dehumanizing him by placing him in a different taxonomic category. And since according to the pervasive notions of human supremacy nonhuman animals are always lower life forms, Lichtenberg is placed in a

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., 89.

¹⁵⁸ Erikson, “Pseudospeciation in the Nuclear Age.” *Political Psychology* 6, no.2 (1984), 214.

position that is categorically inferior to humans, and can thus be treated accordingly with little moral compunction. This is what is done when outgroups are labeled as subhuman, as rats, pigs, apes, etc. Here, though, Platonov is drawing attention to this practice both through Lichtenberg's literal, physical metamorphosis, as well as the attempt to distinguish his subhumanity through physical, "scientific" means.

One such scientific (or, more accurately, pseudoscientific) method is anthropometry, particularly craniometry and phrenology, to which Platonov alludes in the scene in the camp office. During the examination, the officer reports that "judging by superficial characteristics of the head," Lichtenberg is "a moron" (*debil*). Platonov is actually alluding to two different practices here, both of which refer to the specific temporal context of the story, and two groups singled out for persecution in 1933: communists and the disabled. The story features a number of connections to communists, such as the dedication to Comrade Zachow, a German communist who had been a witness at the Leipzig trial, and the imprisoned communists Lichtenberg meets in the camp, most importantly Hedwiga Wotmann, who receives her death sentence along with Lichtenberg. Mikhail Geller discusses Platonov's inclusion of communists in the story, but does so mostly in an analysis of the significance of Hedwiga Wotmann's character, and the possibility that Platonov had included a vision of communists as positive heroes suffering under German oppression in the hope that it would increase the likelihood of the story's publication.¹⁵⁹

While these are certainly valid points, there are other important factors to consider. First, communists became a key target of the Nazi party early in 1933, after the burning of the Reichstag building in February, for which communists were blamed and punished. Second, in

¹⁵⁹ See Geller, 361-2. Regarding the hope of publication, the inclusion of communists did not help; the story was first published in 1966.

March, the Dachau concentration camp was established, and in its first months of operation was used to inter mostly communists and other political opponents.¹⁶⁰ Finally, Platonov's inclusion of craniometry refers to specific practices that were used to examine communists in the camp. While communists were a problem because of their political convictions, Nazi ideologues developed the practice of viewing such convictions in semi-biological terms. According to Nazi propaganda, communists could be recognized by their "deformed head shapes and the twisted features of their faces."¹⁶¹

The second specific point of temporal context is the persecution of the mentally disabled. On July 14, 1933 (Platonov's story begins on July 16), Germany passed the Law for the Prevention of Genetically Diseased Offspring, a law instituting the compulsory sterilization of anyone suffering from certain genetic disorders, the first official step in a larger program of Nazi eugenics.¹⁶² Platonov's criticism of eugenics is suggested by Lichtenberg's being labeled a "debil," the earlier detail of his genitals being crushed, and the language used during his sentencing. Lichtenberg is sentenced to be shot:

вследствие несоответствия развития своего тела и ума теории германского расизма и уровню государственного умозрения: в целях жесткого оздоровления народного

¹⁶⁰ Nikolaus Wachsmann, *KL: A History of the Nazi Concentration Camps* (New York: Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, 2015), 56.

¹⁶¹ Gellately and Stoltzfus, "Social Outsiders and the Construction of the Community of People," in *Social Outsiders in Nazi Germany*, eds. Robert Gellately and Nathan Stoltzfus (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 5. Anthropometry would also be used in attempts to differentiate Jews and other targeted groups, and provide some physical "evidence" for Aryan superiority. While anthropometry of this type had fallen out of favor outside of Nazi Germany, it was common in the late 19th century up through the peak of the eugenics movement. The practice of anthropometry relative to animality was central to the theory of innate criminality advanced by Italian criminologist Cesare Lombroso. To support the theory that savages and certain criminals were atavistically inclined to crime, he devoted the first half of his 1870 work, *Criminal Man*, to an analysis of the criminal behavior of nonhuman animals. See Stephen J. Gould, *The Mismeasure of Man* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1996), 153-4.

¹⁶² These disorders, not all of them actually hereditary, included congenital mental deficiency, schizophrenia, manic-depressive disorder, hereditary epilepsy, blindness, deafness, any severe hereditary deformity, and severe alcoholism.

организма от субъектов, впавших в состояние животности, в целях профилактики от заражения расы беспородными существами.¹⁶³

on account of the failure of his body and mind to develop in accordance with the theories of German racism and the level of State speculation, and with the aim of rigorously cleansing the organism of the people of individuals who had fallen into the condition of an animal, so protecting the race from infection by mongrels.

Not typically used for humans, the term “*besporodnyi*” here underscores the discriminatory mentality commonly associated with eugenics, as well as its origins in the selective breeding of plants and nonhuman animals combined with the social application of evolutionary theory, a way to further dehumanize the individuals subjected to these practices.¹⁶⁴

While Platonov’s criticism here may in part be his echoing contemporary Soviet opposition to eugenics,¹⁶⁵ he seems to include this as part of a more overarching criticism of practices that use science to legitimate discrimination, as well as practices involved in a larger pattern of biological reductionism. One form of such reductionism occurs in this same scene in the use of the metaphor equating society to an organism. When Lichtenberg is sentenced to be executed for the purpose of “cleansing the organism of the people,” Platonov is engaging another trope of 19th century positivism and social Darwinism which later came to be used in the theoretical justification of eugenics and “race hygiene.” Biological terms such as “germ,” “infection,” “disease” are common in racist rhetoric and were used repeatedly in Nazi propaganda. Platonov refers to this type of language in the sentencing scene quoted above, and again earlier when the

¹⁶³ Platonov, 128.

¹⁶⁴ For a discussion of the relationship between eugenics and agriculture in the U.S. and Germany, see Patterson, *Eternal Treblinka*, 81-102.

¹⁶⁵ By the mid-1920’s eugenics was drawing negative criticism in the Soviet Union as a “bourgeois science” that relied too much on genetic theories and ignored the environmental factors of social and economic conditions. See Nikolai Kremetsov, “Eugenics in Russia and the Soviet Union” *The Oxford Handbook of the History of Eugenics*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 420-1.

narrator states that unlike Jewish women, German women “did not consciously suffer from syphilis,” (*sifolisom soznatel’no ne boleli*), and that “they did not give off any bad smells thanks to the perfect racial composition of their bodies” (*blagodaria sovershennomu rasovomu ustroistvu tela*).¹⁶⁶

The organism metaphor became popular in the 19th century initially through the writing of Auguste Comte, who sought a way to advance a positivist theory of holism. The trope then became more literal with Herbert Spencer, who provided detailed extensions of the metaphor saturated with biological language: society was not like an organism, it was an organism.¹⁶⁷ However, while Spencer did warn that while individuals comprise the units of a larger organism which is greater than the sum of its parts, the collective does not have a corporate consciousness as do individual organisms, and therefore individual welfare should not be subordinated to the collective good.¹⁶⁸ A similar warning would be voiced by the populist Nikolai Mikhailovsky in his own critical use of the biological metaphor to articulate his ideas of social development. For Mikhailovsky, the individual and society develop inversely and the heterogeneous individual is at constant risk of being homogenized in the larger collective, turning individuals into specialized organs in a larger organic whole, and what should be defended and developed is the whole, “integral” individual (*tselostnaia lichnost’*) in a cooperative society with little division of labor.¹⁶⁹ A more monistic view of the social organism was developed by Alexander Bogdanov, one of Platonov’s principle influences.¹⁷⁰ At a philosophical distance from other Marxists, particularly Plekhanov and Lenin, both of whom were averse to the organism metaphor and the application of evolutionary theory to social progress, Bogdanov developed an idealized vision of

¹⁶⁶ Platonov, 115.

¹⁶⁷ Donald Levine, “The Organism Metaphor in Sociology,” *Social Research*, Vol.62, No.2 (Summer 1995), 247.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 253.

¹⁶⁹ Walicki, *A History of Russian Thought*, 252-3. See also Vucinich, *Darwin in Russian Thought*, 334-8.

¹⁷⁰ For a summary of Bogdanov’s influence on Platonov see Seifrid and Tolstaia-Segel.

the fusion of the individual and the whole in which individuals would become like “cells in the system of the tissues of an organism.”¹⁷¹ But this fusion would not be a subordination of the individual to the collective, but rather a much more utopian merger involving a unity beyond concepts of part and whole, mind and matter.¹⁷²

This vision of unity is very much in the spirit of Platonov’s own monistic ideal, and is likely one of the reasons for the bitterness throughout this story. Of course, it is difficult to reconcile the individual’s integration into a harmonious whole with Platonov’s repeated concerns for the value of the individual, a value that would be more in keeping with Mikhailovsky’s vision of individual wholeness. Whether a reconciliation of these ideas is possible, what is important for our understanding of the story is Platonov’s position against homogeneity in a totalitarian society. After Lichtenberg is assaulted following his denunciation of Hitler, the narrator states that he is resigned to his severe physical injuries since “he had long ago recognized that the time of the warm, loved, whole (*tseĭ’noe*) human body had passed: it was necessary for each person to become a mutilated cripple.”¹⁷³ In the story we see both a criticism of the collective society as an enemy of the individual, and a criticism of the use of holistic tropes, particularly scientific tropes, to legitimate oppression and violence. What concerns him is not so much the idea of seeing society as an integrated and evolving organism, but the promotion of an ideology as the goal of that evolution, and reducing individuals to mere units in a larger structure, units which can be expunged if they compromise the integrity or health of that structure. In this way, biological metaphors for society provide a particularly severe form of dehumanizing the objects

¹⁷¹ Bogdanov, *Empiriomonism*, qtd. in Erik van Ree, “Stalin’s Organic Theory of the Party,” *Russian Review*. Vol. 52, No. 1 (Jan., 1993), 49.

¹⁷² *Ibid.*

¹⁷³ Platonov, 119.

of persecution, objects which can be seen not only as subhuman, but as dangerous pathogens or parasites which should be destroyed.

In addition to using dehumanization as a means of criticizing the use of biological metaphors and science to legitimate oppression, Platonov subverts the axiological construct of a human-animal hierarchy. As a victim of violence and oppression, Lichtenberg is “degraded” to the level of the subhuman, as he becomes, at the end of the story, an “unknown animal” for which the state had no use. It is in this condition, however, that he literally sacrifices himself to feed a starving woman with the muscle tissue from his own leg. With this act, Lichtenberg not only asserts his individual will, but also a particularly strong degree of compassion, a quality of moral sensibility often considered lacking in “lower” life forms. It is not the subhuman Lichtenberg that behaves with savagery, but the uniformed vessels of the rational state. In a way somewhat similar to Zamyatin’s dragon-soldier, Lichtenberg is at his most humane when he is least recognizable as human.

The stories of Zamyatin and Platonov considered here offer complex insight into the human-animal dynamic, particularly as it concerns inter-human conflict and practices of dehumanization and a few ways these practices are informed by or otherwise connected to an ideology which positions the human above the animal. They present a vision, at least partially, of the conventional human-animal hierarchy, and how this hierarchical construct can influence violent practices. Yet, while they may be grim in their representation of darker sides of these ontological constructs, they both complicate these constructs insofar as both problematize the conventional notion of the human. Zamyatin’s dragon-soldier is most “human” when he

spontaneously and momentarily rejects the social order which he is charged to uphold. Likewise, Platonov's scientist is most "human" as an animalized "degenerate" who sacrifices his flesh to a victim of the mechanized, homogeneous state. By using the themes of zoomorphism and dehumanization in a way that confuses notions of humanity and animality, these texts not only expose the anthropocentric underpinnings of dehumanization, but question the deeply complicated idea of humanness.

Chapter 3

Subjectivity and Value

The woman is smiling, gentle, whitefaced. An old monkey stares at her from the cage with cold attention....

The woman takes a piece of bread out of her pocket and holds it out to the monkey.

Getting up with difficulty, the animal approaches her without moving his eyes from the moldy piece of bread.

“People are sitting around starving,” mutters a nearby soldier.

“What can a beast do? A beast can’t talk!”

Isaac Babel, “A Beast Can’t Talk,” 1918.

Isaac Babel wrote a series of short stories and vignettes to report on events and circumstances in Petersburg during the months surrounding the October Revolution. One of these is a piece about starving animals in the city zoo. Due to resource shortages, three members of a commission visit the zoo to evaluate the animals in order to decide which specimens would be kept and fed and which would be shot; and from a visitor’s vantage point, the narrator gives a brief glimpse of the conditions of a series of animals as one would encounter them, moving from cage to cage. Like most of Babel’s Petersburg reports, the story presents a bad situation amid a bad situation, and like most of his work it engages deep and difficult questions. This story, in particular, raises a couple of important problems connected to our relationship with nonhuman

animals: the question of value, specifically the value we place upon the lives of other beings; and another which often informs the first—the question of the nonhuman subject. The story begins with a paragraph consisting of two short sentences, each with a different grammatical subject, a woman and a monkey, placed at either end of the paragraph. The only verb is in the second sentence. The woman is before a display cage from which a monkey looks out, watching her attentively. This gaze contains both a mystery and a challenge: the mystery of a consciousness beyond the human, and a challenge to the value we reserve for our own.

In the previous chapters I examined literary texts which explore the use of animal imagery as a means of defining human identity, through a system of associative symbols used to assert varying notions of value and meaning. In the context of dehumanization, for instance, humans are often denigrated through the symbolic association with an animal being that is regarded as having little or no value from a human point of view. In studying these associations, though, we encounter a separate but related question: how do this symbolism and this point of view relate to and affect our understanding of and attitudes toward actual animals? Our notions about animals directly influence our relations with them: we eat, wear, and experiment on them, we breed, collect, and display them, as in Babel's example, largely because we feel morally justified in doing so based on a shared belief in our greater intrinsic value. In this chapter we turn from animals as symbols to animals as living subjects, to examine various problems and effects of representing nonhuman life in a literary text.

Pilnyak's "A Complete Life" is a story which effectively marginalizes the human by offering a glimpse of wildlife in an environment with an underscored lack of a human presence, told through a narrator who struggles with the challenges of representing the nonhuman subject. Platonov's "The Cow" engages similar problems, but in a different context and with a

domesticated rather than a wild animal. While also addressing questions of accessibility and value, the implications in Platonov's story are arguably more grave and immediate insofar as the events take place in an environment in which humans are all too present. In "A Complete Life," Pilnyak disrupts anthropocentrism by questioning the value of humanity's place in the world, the value of human reason, and the limitations of human understanding and experience. Platonov extends this challenge by providing a portrait of some of the unfortunate consequences of an anthropocentric worldview, and by using narrative perspective to give the reader a view from the other side. In these works, Pilnyak and Platonov have constructed complex narratives that approach a nonhuman animal as a unique subject while simultaneously drawing attention to the problems of representing that subject. They explore the questions of similarity and difference, the difficulty of understanding nonhuman interiority, the comparative value of nonhuman life, and they problematize the anthropocentric view of nature and animals, as well as the narrative in which these are represented.

In attempting to represent an animal subject in a way that captures the animal's experience, a writer is confronted with the question of whether access into that experience is even possible. Exploring the subjective nature of experience, Thomas Nagel argues that each species has both a distinct and unknowable mode of experience. To illustrate this, he uses the example of a bat because its unique faculty of echolocation is radically different from the way humans perceive the world.¹⁷⁴ He states that if we try to imagine what it is like to be a bat, we are restricted by the resources of our own mind. We can understand how echolocation works, but even if we could simulate this, we would only be humans experiencing a simulation, because we cannot know

¹⁷⁴ Thomas Nagel, "What Is It Like to Be a Bat?" *The Philosophical Review* 83.4 (1974): 435–450.

what it is like for a bat to be a bat.¹⁷⁵ Though we cannot experience or describe an animal's unique subjectivity, he concludes, we should not dismiss their experience as meaningless or less rich than our own.¹⁷⁶

Representations of animals, of animal interiority, will thus always be approximations, at varying distances from the actual subject. Drawing on the distinction that “non-human experience cannot be reproduced but only represented,” John Simons explores the sort of gradations of animal subjectivity in literature in connection with the topic of anthropomorphism, from the highly anthropomorphic fable to works which attempt to reproduce an animal's life.¹⁷⁷ He argues that while actual reproduction is impossible, the closer a work comes to reproduction, the greater its tendency toward challenging the boundary between human and nonhuman.¹⁷⁸ This challenge is complex insofar as it concerns both the established ontological boundary between humans and other animals, and the concept of anthropomorphism as a means of maintaining that boundary.

Tom Tyler outlines three general uses of “anthropomorphism”: the literal use which attributes human *form* to a nonhuman being; the ascription of distinctively human activities or behaviors to an animal, such as seen in children's stories; and a third which attributes intentionality, purpose, or volition to a being thought to lack them, a charge often leveled at animal behaviorists who grant mental phenomena to animals without scientifically establishing the existence of such phenomena.¹⁷⁹ In her study of the representation of animals in behavioral works, Eileen Crist examines the use of language which, in an effort to maintain a standard of

¹⁷⁵ Ibid., 439.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid., 440.

¹⁷⁷ John Simons, *Animal Rights and the Politics of Literary Representation* (Houndmills, UK: Palgrave, 2002), 120.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid., 140.

¹⁷⁹ Tom Tyler, “If Horses Had Hands,” in *Animal Encounters*, ed. Tom Tyler and Manuela Rossini (Boston: Brill, 2009), 14-15.

objectivity, tends toward the technical and mechanistic in a way that denies animal subjectivity.¹⁸⁰ To avoid having one's research labeled anthropomorphic, a writer will avoid terms which grant the animal meaningful experience or agency. One can, for instance, use "bond," "pleasure," and "pain," but not "friendship," "happiness," and "misery" as these allude to states of being beyond mere sensual experience.¹⁸¹ Emphasis is consistently placed on the reflexive, functional or adaptive value of behaviors, rather than inviting interpretations of thought or agency.¹⁸²

Tyler argues that the resistance to anthropomorphism is defensible in the sense that it can help to avoid the hazard of demeaning either the human or nonhuman by failing to appreciate the unique traits of either. However, as a rule, the charge of anthropomorphism is almost invariably anthropocentric insofar as, firstly, it fails to question certain assumptions about the human, and secondly, it precludes the possibility of discovering or appreciating animal-human continuity.¹⁸³ The charge of anthropomorphism, more than anything, reveals the presuppositions and biases of the critics, the "*a priori* conviction that the difference between animals and humans is so fundamental as to prohibit a shared language of representation in the depiction of action."¹⁸⁴

When encountering anthropomorphism in fables or children's stories, we tend not to see it as a challenge to human exclusivity. Real rabbits, for instance, don't wear vests and attend tea parties. But when an animal is represented as an animal in appearance and behavior, yet through narration that interprets his or her feelings, thoughts, or motivations, a conclusion often reached

¹⁸⁰ Eileen Crist, *Images of Animals: Anthropomorphism and Animal Mind* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1999), 6.

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 32.

¹⁸² *Ibid.*, 35.

¹⁸³ Tyler, 21, 24. Mary Midgley makes a similar point about anthropomorphism and evolutionary continuity in *Animals and Why They Matter*, 128-133.

¹⁸⁴ Crist, 157.

is that the narrator is projecting uniquely human faculties onto the animal. Such projection is to a degree perhaps unavoidable because of the limited access to an animal's experience. But more importantly, these conclusions reveal a discomfort in or resistance to accepting animals as agents, as meaningful subjects. The texts to be discussed here explore some of the aspects and implications of this discomfort.

I. No Man's Land: The Limits of the Human in Pilnyak's "A Complete Life" (1915).

As discussed in the first chapter, Boris Pilnyak's employment of animal imagery tends toward the symbolic, as a way of representing one side of a number of binary conflicts circulating through his work: nature vs. civilization, rural vs. urban, primitive vs. modern, instinct vs. intellect. While some works assert a greater value of one side over the other, he is, in general, quite fair in examining the positive and negative aspects of both, interested as he was in the borderline between the two, in the tension and interplay of different modes or realms.¹⁸⁵ His exploration of this tension became more complicated in the years following the Revolution, a feature which appears frequently in the novel *Machines and Wolves*, in which the central binary operates on multiple levels simultaneously, and their positive and negative qualities are more difficult to distinguish or disentangle. In his earlier work, the contrast is relatively simpler, purer, more straightforward, with a greater value placed on nature and the natural as something to be preserved.

Because of his overall tendency toward the symbolic, exploring the role of animal imagery in these earlier works can be difficult. Some of this imagery functions more apparently as symbols

¹⁸⁵ Peter Jensen, *Nature as Code*, 15.

or allegory, while other uses are more ambiguous, seemingly more an attempt to represent animals as beings as such. The story “A Dog’s Life” (1919), for instance, is unmistakably allegorical; the animals are highly anthropomorphized, speaking in human language and behaving according to distinctions of social class. “Snow Wind” (“Pozemka,” 1917), by contrast, presents a pack of wolves struggling for survival in their natural setting, with a narrative interpretation of their experience or motivation, but comparatively little of what would be considered anthropomorphic. However, this story and the one to be discussed here, “A Complete Life,” often draw allegorical readings from scholars. One reason for this, perhaps, is that because of Pilnyak’s frequent metaphorical or symbolic use of animals, one is inclined to see all of his animals in this mode. Another possible reason, though, is that these stories, especially “A Complete Life,” approach the representation of an animal subject, which presents a challenge to the reader’s ability to see beyond the mode of projection. In this story, the narrative carefully hovers at the interface of similarity and difference, in such a way that it simultaneously offers a narrative of a nonhuman subject, and confronts the tendency to read such a narrative either anthropomorphically or allegorically, and in doing so, it offers a critique of the anthropocentrism that promotes such a reading.

“A Complete Life” is a short story about the lives of a pair of large, predatory birds, apparently eagle owls. The dominant theme of the story is nature, specifically a wild animal’s natural life cycle which is itself composed of smaller periodic cycles. The narrative follows the pair as they unite one spring, begin their annual propagation the following spring, tend their offspring until they depart in the autumn, and the cycle begins again. They live together for thirteen years, sharing a nest suspended over a ravine, until the female leaves the male for a younger, stronger mate, and the old male dies, his body devoured by wolves who dwell at the

bottom of the ravine. Within the presentation of their larger life cycle, the narrator underscores the theme of instinct, and the fulfillment of natural instinctual drives through which nature is perpetuated. At the end, the male dies contented, feeling that the purpose of his life—reproduction—had been realized.

The story is one of Pilnyak's earliest, written in 1915, and while it was included in many of his collections, it is not considered as important as his post-Revolutionary work, and has therefore not received a lot of critical attention.¹⁸⁶ In a general sense, it is seen as an objective, dispassionate portrait of nature and natural life processes. Where readings differ is in the degree to which a distinctly human meaning can be gleaned from or projected onto this portrait. Voronsky, for instance, views the depiction of the birds and concludes that human life is the same—its essence is wild, primitive, ruled by instinct.¹⁸⁷ Similarly, Peter Jensen, sees human features in the birds which reveal the story to be a “universal parable.”¹⁸⁸ Gary Browning, sees it as an “allegory of man's condition” in the precarious nature of life.¹⁸⁹ Galina Lobanova gives a detailed reading of the story, but she, too, views the story allegorically. In her view the birds live a complete life, but their lives do not have sufficient meaning from a human point of view, so to understand the significance of the story one must look beyond the birds to the symbolic meaning they contain as psychological types.¹⁹⁰ She argues that the narrator describes the birds so vividly, while shifting the emphasis of his descriptions and interpretations, that the birds alternately elicit sympathy and revulsion from the reader. The more “human” they become,

¹⁸⁶ Pilnyak himself regarded it as among the best of his early stories. Shaitanov notes that it was one of only two (along with “Smerti”) of his pre-Revolutionary stories to be included in the 1935 collection. I.O. Shaitanov, “Metafora Borisa Pil'niaka ili istoriia v lunnom svete,” in Boris Pil'niak, *Povesty i rasskazy 1915-1929* (Moscow: Sovremennik, 1991), 6.

¹⁸⁷ Aleksandr Voronsky, *Literaturnye tipy. Boris Pilniak* (Moscow: Krug, 1927), 41.

¹⁸⁸ Jensen, 108-9.

¹⁸⁹ Browning, 97.

¹⁹⁰ Lobanova G.A. “Funktsii opisaniia i problema universal'nykh zakonov bytiia v rasskaze B. Piln'niaka ‘Tselaiia zhizn’,” *Novyi philologicheskii vestnik*, (1 (12), 2012), 61.

when their emotions approach the human, the reader is repelled by their carnality.¹⁹¹ She concludes that the story demands the reader seek those qualities which distinguish humans from other animals.¹⁹²

Other readings are less inclined to attribute specifically human meaning to the story. Vladimir Kriuchkov, for instance, argues against allegorical readings, stating that the connection between the birds and humanity is much “thinner and deeper.”¹⁹³ He reads the story as one of the first manifestations of the theme of the natural cycle, the endless repetition of birth and death, which defined Pilnyak’s philosophical views of life and history. Kriuchkov sees the story as an exploration of “wholeness” (*tselostnost*) with “fully-fledged” (*polnotsennye*) animal characters which should not necessarily be read allegorically. The birds experience the drama and achievements of a life distinct from the human. He notes that despite Pilnyak’s sympathy towards the birds, one senses the author’s detachment or dismissal (*otstranenie*).¹⁹⁴ The “complete life” is in the fullness of its manifestation of life processes and cycles which would be applicable to humans insofar as they too are subject to the cycle of birth and death.

Both of these readings are helpful in revealing important facets or implications of the story, Kriuchkov’s in his emphasis on the fact that human meaning is irrelevant to the birds’ lives, and Lobanova’s in her discussion of narrative shifts which complicate the reader’s experience of the story. Of additional interest, though, is the variation in the degree to which the story can, or should, be read allegorically. Taking a closer look at some of the story’s details will reveal some of the causes of this variability.

¹⁹¹ Ibid., 62.

¹⁹² Ibid., 63.

¹⁹³ Vladimir Kriuchkov, *Proza B.A. Pil’niaka 1920-x godov: motivy v funktsional’nom i intertekstual’nom aspektakh* (Saratov: Saratov gosudarstvennyi universitet, 2006), 44.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid., 46.

The story is composed of ten sections, most of these presenting a vision of the birds' lives in a particular season. While the theme of cyclicity is central to the text, the narrative focuses on the male bird as the main figure, and the composition presents his life in an arc, the thematic and structural climax of which occurs in section five, which concerns the birth of his offspring. Understanding section five as the center, the rest of the narrative forms a frame for two key elements, one which concerns the matter of the text—the lives of the birds and the fulfillment of their natural, instinctual purpose (propagation)—and one which concerns the narrator's (and the reader's) experience of these lives and processes. This second element has not yet received sufficient critical attention regarding the way Pilnyak's narrative raises questions concerning the problem of subjectivity, and the value we place on the subject's experience of his or her own life.

There are a few likely reasons for this lack of critical attention. First, representation of a non-human subject, at least one which is not highly anthropomorphized, is inherently difficult insofar as there are limits to our ability to truly access a non-human life and to describe its sensations and consciousness. Second, since such representations are created by humans for humans, even when such subjectivity is approached, readings tend toward anthropomorphic or allegorical conclusions. Third, and of particular importance for this analysis, is the fact that Pilnyak's text is complex in its use of language and structure, so that some of the important points regarding the potential to read the text as a critical challenge to both anthropomorphism and anthropocentrism can be easily overlooked. The two elements mentioned above, the story and the narrative complexity through which it is presented, are essentially superimposed on one another, so that the first element, being dominant, eclipses the second, more subtle element, embedded in the text throughout, but becoming more palpable at the climax in sections four through six.

The first section functions as a sort of prelude, in which the narrator introduces the setting and the two birds. The first word of the story is “*ovrag*” (ravine), which establishes the preeminence of nature and underscores the fact that, while the birds are the story’s principal figures, they are both a part of and subject to the natural world they inhabit. This is further emphasized by the narrator’s introduction of them as simply “*samets*” and “*samka*” (male and female), rather than as individuated beings or even members of a particular species. They serve as a sort of “everyanimal,” a point of reference for the narrator and reader to focus on as the author attempts to explore the experience of life and nature from a nonhuman perspective.¹⁹⁵

This close connection with nature is also established through linguistic association. When the birds are first introduced, we are given a description of their appearance and their nest. In this section, the narrator repeats a variation of the word “*tiazhelyi*” (burdensome/heavy) six times in just over a page of printed text. He uses the word to describe the “heavy, gray, low-hanging sky” above the ravine; the “big, heavy” bodies of the birds; the “rough, heavy gracefulness” of the female’s neck; and the male’s “heavy eyes” and “heavily hanging wings.” Looking closely, one notices that this modifier is used for both the surrounding environment (the sky, the smell of pines) and the birds, which helps to reinforce an identification of the birds with nature, and also establishes a system of association which the narrator uses in his exploration of instinct and subjectivity, which he begins in the subsequent section.

The second section introduces the cyclical theme as it takes place in the spring, specifically the first spring in which the birds meet and the male competes in courtship of the female; this begins the narrator’s exploration into subjectivity. The male’s desire for a mate is characterized

¹⁹⁵ Jensen argues that the text contains several “key words” (“male,” “female,” “birth,” “life,” “death”) which designate pure forms of life, and that Pilnyak uses these in an attempt to avoid the normal human way of seeing things in order to arrive at a vision of life close to the agents of the story. Jensen, 108-9.

as both a burden and a power which commands his actions, first introduced with the noun *tiagota* (burden/weight), which stands out to the reader as it comes immediately after the repetition of the adjectival and adverbial forms (*tiazhelyi, tiazhelo*). The introduction of this burden marks a turning point in the male bird's life:

Эта весна, солнце, бестолковый ветер и лесные шумы вложили в тело самца весеннюю, земную тяготу. Раньше он летал или сидел, ухал или молчал, летел быстро или медленно, потому что кругом и внутри него были причины. [. .]

Теперь было не так.

Уже не ощущения голода и самосохранения заставляли его летать, сидеть, кричать или молчать. Им владело лежащее вне его и его ощущений.¹⁹⁶

This spring, the sun, the gentle wind and forest sounds filled the body of the male with a vernal, earthly burden. Before, he would fly or perch, call or be silent, fly quickly or slowly, because there were causes both around and within him. [. . .]

Now it was no longer so.

It was not a sense of hunger or self preservation that induced him to fly or perch, call or be silent. He was under the power of something outside of him and his sensations.

Impelled by this “burden,” he leaves his roost “as if in a fog, not knowing why” (*kak v tumane, ne vedaia zachem*), scanning the ground and finally landing near a group of birds with the female among them, again “not knowing why” (*ne znaia pochemu*). In these passages the narrator presents the drive to reproduce as an unavoidable force, and he does so in a way that attempts to capture the male's bird's experience of this force. Here it is a “burden,” while elsewhere it is described as a “beautiful” or “sweet torment” (*prekrasnaia, sladkaia muka*) or, a bit later on, as a

¹⁹⁶ Boris Pilniak, *Sobranie sochinenii v 6 tomakh* (Moskva: Izdatel'stvo Terra-knizhnyi klub, 2003), I: 296.

“tormenting, enchanting alarm” (*tomiashchaia, zacharovyvaiushchaia trevoga*) which the forest animals feel just before spring.

This burden, torment, and alarm refer to instinct, which the narrator continually underscores as the impetus, purpose, and guiding force of all of their actions. But what is interesting in these passages is how the idea of instinct is treated. Near the end of the story, the narrator overtly states, in a somewhat diminishing way, that the animals’ lives are governed by instinct, that they are incapable of thought and understanding, at least as we tend to define them. In these earlier passages, though, he attempts to capture the experience of instinct from a nonhuman perspective, how they perceive and react to the mysterious inner force that drives them on. Moreover, this attempt is underscored as just that, an attempt. Throughout the text there is a tension between internal and external points of view, culminating in the climax in sections four and five. The narrator exhibits varying degrees of omniscience, at times describing the scene of the animals’ behavior from a completely external point of view, while at other times he seems to have full access to their feelings, sensations, and motivations. At still other times, he presents these inner phenomena interpretively, as conclusions drawn from observable appearance and behavior.

The narrator begins the shift in point of view in section two in the passages mentioned above, and continues this in section three where he attempts to illustrate the difference in worldview more explicitly. This section takes place in winter, when the climate is harsh and food is scarce.

The narrator states:

Ночи были мучительны. [. . .] А блужающий свет луны тревожил, страшил, точно вся земля состоит из одного огромного волчьего глаза и поэтому светится так страшно. [. . .] Если бы птицы умели думать, они больше всего хотели бы утра.¹⁹⁷

The nights were agonizing. [. . .] And the wandering light of the moon tormented and terrified them, as if the whole world consisted of one huge wolf's eye and that is why it shone so terribly. [. . .] If the birds had the ability to think, they would have most of all longed for morning.

Similar to the description of the burden of instinct, the threatening environment is depicted from the birds' point of view through an associative connection with their natural predators. On the one hand, this passage reads as an attempt to portray the interiority of the birds by using the type of figurative association often seen in religious and mythological constructs, and thus it is again an attempt to imagine the subjective experience of the nonhuman. On the other hand, this passage reinforces the narrative tension and highlights the question of access to what the bird sees and understands. Using the conjunction "*tochno*" ("as if"), the narrator creates a simile which interprets rather than reproduces the birds' experience of their environment. This might seem too subtle a detail to command the reader's attention, were it not for a couple of important points. First, Pilnyak's careful use of language is evident elsewhere; even here, for instance, he uses roots repeated throughout the text, specifically in many of the attempts at interiority, such as "*muka*" and "*trevoga*." Second, in the sentence a few lines down ("If they had the ability to think"), he uses a hypothetical construction to assert a border of difference between the birds' subjectivity and human cognition, despite the fact that the assertion contradicts other parts of the story in which the narrator illustrates, or in some way refers to, the birds' thoughts. So, while helping to describe what life might be like from a nonhuman perspective, this tension serves to raise the question of representation and challenge the observer's and the reader's ability to

¹⁹⁷ Ibid., 298.

actually know how the animals see the world. There is a limit to what we can know and represent. What we have, then, is a sort of imagining of nonhuman experience presented in a human medium or mode of thought. And while this is done in virtually any text dealing with nonhuman experience, Pilnyak's story is important because it momentarily foregrounds the act of representation and its shortcomings with respect to human understanding and expression.

The most overt instance of this occurs in the climax, where the narrator includes a series of vocal communications. In texts typically viewed as anthropomorphic, one will often see nonhuman animals communicating through human speech. A classic example of this is Tolstoy's "Kholstomer," in which, over the course of several evenings, the old horse tells his stable-mates the story of his past. In such a narrative, the reader must participate in the convention of representation, and see such moments as if they were translations of nonhuman communication in order to achieve a particular result. The difference between Tolstoy's story and this one is that Pilnyak seems to be deliberately addressing the idea of translation to highlight the question of access to the animal's perspective.

There are two key points of "human speech" in the narrative, placed immediately one after another, in sections four and five, the point of both the organizational center of the text and the climax of the narrative arc mentioned above. This is their second spring together, the time of the birds' first reproduction. At the end of section four, the male bird is drawn to his mate by a "great and beautiful passion" (*bol'shaia, prekrasnaia strast'*). She, in turn, accepts his advances, and it is here that the narrator uses human speech, but the way he does so is quite careful. Here is the exchange as it appears in the text:

На своем языке, языке инстинкта, самка говорила самцу:

—Да. Можно.

И самец бросался к ней, изнемогая блаженством страсти. И она отдавалась ему.

V

Так было с неделю, с полторы.

Потом же, когда ночью приходил к ней самец, она говорила:

—Нет. Довольно.

Говорила, инстинктом своим чувствуя, что довольно ибо пришла другая пора—
пора рождения детей.¹⁹⁸

In her language, the language of instinct, the female said to the male:

—Yes. You may.

And the male threw himself at her, exhausted with the bliss of passion. And she yielded to him.

V

So it was for a week or a week and a half.

Then at last, when the male came to her at night, she said:

—No. Enough.

She spoke, feeling instinctively that it was enough, for another time had come—the time of the birth of children.

This portion of the text calls attention to itself with the simple, parallel structure of the two utterances and how they are placed in such a way that they straddle the break between sections. While this structure can be read as emphasizing the thematic importance of reproduction, which of course it does, it can also be seen as engaging the anthropomorphic text. Rather than simply presenting the speech and leaving implicit the interpretive nature of the speech, the narrator announces the fact that he is translating through the phrases he uses to qualify the utterances: “in

¹⁹⁸ Ibid., 300.

her language, the language of instinct,” and “feeling with her instinct.” These function as a sort of explanatory note that the narrator is conveying the essence of the exchanges in a manner accessible to the reader.

The narrator’s translation of these exchanges is further emphasized through contrast with the male bird’s untranslated calls (hoots) that frame the “dialogue” quoted above. There are three of these calls in the text, in sections two, three, and six. In addition to providing contrast, if one compares the narrator’s presentation of these calls in turn, one notices that they too highlight the issue of interpretation. In the first of these, the narrator simply presents the call as it would sound:

Перед вечером самец, неизвестно почему ухал:

—У-гу-у!—кричал он так, будто звук в горле его проходит через воду.¹⁹⁹

Toward evening, the male, for some unknown reason, called out:

—Oo-hoo-oo! he cried, as if the sound in his throat were passing through water.

An interesting detail here is that the narrator qualifies the call with an expression of ignorance. He writes that the male calls “for some unknown reason,” but he uses an impersonal type of adverb rather than a verbal adverb as he had in the expressions of ignorance seen in section two (“not knowing why”). Using the impersonal adverb (*neizvestno*) creates a level of ambiguity regarding precisely to whom the reason for the call is unknown, whether to the bird or to the narrator. With the second call, the narrator removes this ambiguity, but still resists trying to fully access the bird’s consciousness:

Потом, снова сжимаясь в комок, втягивая голову, жмурясь, ухал.

¹⁹⁹ Ibid., 299.

—У-гу-гу-гу-у!—кричал он, пугая лесных жителей.²⁰⁰

Then, he huddled up again, drew in his head and, squinting, called out.

—Oo-hoo-hoo-hoo-oo!, he cried, frightening the forest creatures.

While he goes a step further in his description, indicating how the call is perceived by other animals, and while he still does not interpret the call or its motivations, he does indicate that an invigorating alarm (*trevoga*) had entered him. Additionally, this occurs just before the “translated” mating exchange quoted above. However, while these details suggest a motivation, there are a few sentences between them and the call, a gap which gives the impression that a causal chain is likely but still uncertain. In the third and final call, this uncertainty is removed, as the narrator goes still further along a continuum of interpretation:

И он в полноте жизни, в ее красоте, грозно и жутко ухал, встряхивая эхо.

—У-гу-гу-гу-у!—кричал он, пугая ночь.²⁰¹

And in the fullness of life, in its beauty, he called out fiercely and threateningly, stirring the echoes.

—Oo-hoo-hoo-hoo-oo! he cried, frightening the night.

In the second call, the focus is on the external depiction of the bird’s body and movements, but both these and the description of the call remain rather neutral. In this third instance, he interprets both the motivation and the manner of the call in a way that distinctly contrasts with his earlier distance and objectivity.

In including these calls and imposing upon them varying degrees of what would be labeled “anthropomorphism,” and by juxtaposing them with expressly “translated” interactions, Pilnyak

²⁰⁰ Ibid., 300.

²⁰¹ Ibid., 302.

is foregrounding the question of our experience of nonhuman communication. We can see that animals communicate with one another. We can even often see, with time and attention, what they are communicating about. But we cannot penetrate this communication or their consciousness enough to quite grasp how these exchanges, in whatever form, are understood and processed, how they are felt. It is not that animals do not understand and engage with the world in a meaningful way, but that this understanding is opaque to us and therefore creates an obstacle to our desire to know and talk about it. We are limited to translation and interpretation.

Pilnyak's narrator demonstrates the inherent difficulty in attempting to represent nonhuman life from within. The narrator is shown to grapple with this problem in that we see, near the beginning, his attempt to access the animals' perception or feeling of instinct and other natural forces, but then, as the narrative progresses, he employs increasingly more interpretation as his insight into the nonhuman cannot be sustained. And while this grappling and inconsistency is evident throughout, the climax ("dialogue") marks a point of transition from which we see his greater reliance on interpretation and his arrival at conclusions which reveal his difficulty.

As a possible consequence of this difficulty, we also see an increasing turn toward an anthropocentric view on the part of the narrator. The uncertainty and speculation prevalent in the first half of the text gives way to more authoritative statements and conclusions, beginning in section six. As mentioned earlier, following the wolf-eye/moon simile in section three, the narrator states, "If they were able to think" (*Esli by ptitsy umeli dumat*). In section six, we see the first of two pronouncements in which he uses similar language but in a more definitive way, drawing sharp distinction between thought and instinct. He writes:

Самец не умел думать и едва ли чувствовал, но чувствовалось в нем, что он горд, у своего прямого дела, которое вершит с великой радостью.

И вся жизнь его была заполнена инстинктом, переносящим всю волю его и жизнеощущение на птенцов.²⁰²

The male was not able to think and was barely able to feel, but within him was a sense of pride in his work, which he manages with great joy.

His whole life was suffused with instinct, which directed his will and sense of life toward his fledglings.

Similarly, in the next section he writes:

Он не умел думать. Он делал это потому, что так велел тот инстинкт, который правил им.²⁰³

He was not able to think. He did as he did because it was so ordered by the instinct which guided him.

In these passages, the narrator is invoking the traditional instinct/intellect binary which has been used to mark a distinction between human and animal minds from Aristotle through Descartes up to modern ethology, an anthropocentric strain of thought which posits that only humans have rational agency while animals may appear to be active agents, but really act only in accordance with reflex or instinct. However, leaving aside the problem of accessibility, though it applies to this as well, the narrative confronts this anthropocentrism in a couple of important ways.

One such confrontation is achieved through form. As discussed above, the narrator states that the birds are incapable of thought, while elsewhere he describes their thoughts and feelings either as an omniscient statement or in a mode of speculative interpretation. In these passages and their surrounding text, Pilnyak engages the question of agency through the use of narrative inconsistency, specifically through the use of verbs within the narrative. In the line above, we

²⁰² Ibid., 301.

²⁰³ Ibid., 302.

see that he immediately juxtaposes the active and passive forms of the same verb (*chuvstvovat' / chuvstvovat'sia* – “to feel,” “to be felt”) in the context of the bird’s capacity to feel or to understand his sensations. In discourse on instinct and agency, an animal is typically seen as a passive instrument through which the processes of instinct operate, a contrast illustrated in this juxtaposition. Yet, in the long paragraph that follows this line, the narrator presents a series of actions each of which feature active verbs performed by the bird as the active nominative subject. Moreover, several of these actions are qualified in ways that highlight his agency: he watches attentively (*vnimatel'no*) as the fledglings feed; he flies hurriedly and solicitously (*pospeshno, zabolivo*) after a fledgling who has fallen from the nest, and he carries him back carefully (*ostorozhno*).

These inconsistencies continue to the end of the story, where we are given a vision of the male bird coming to terms with death. The narrator writes that he has settled the account of his life, that he has lived to eat and reproduce, that what remains for him is only to die and that, “he probably sensed this instinctively, since for two days he sat quietly and still on the precipice, his head drawn into his neck” (*verno, on chuvstvoval eto instinktom, ibo dva dnia sidel tikho i nedvizhno na obryve, vtianuv golovu v sheiu*).²⁰⁴ Again, we see the narrator using the concept of instinct as a qualifier, as a means of explaining the bird’s behavior while maintaining a border of difference between human and animal subjectivity. But that it is again somewhat inconsistent, and presented with the speculative “probably,” reminds the reader, at the end, that an important point of the text is the human perception and representation of the nonhuman world, in contrast to the nonhuman experience of the world.

²⁰⁴ Ibid., 303.

The other way the text challenges anthropocentrism is less concrete, and concerns the overall tone of the narrative and the conclusions reached at the end of the story. While the narrator is seen to grapple with the problem of accessibility and in his struggle with representation he reveals certain anthropocentric tendencies, he does not devalue the birds' lives. Rather, his tone is consistently one of interest and respect, while at the same time continually reminding the reader of the difference between instinctual intuition and human reason. Thus, in light of his emphasis on reason, an important distinction emerges, between living without understanding why, and living without the *need* to understand why. The birds engage in behaviors necessary for their existence, yet the reader is consistently made aware that these behaviors spring from natural, unalterable sources, either environmental or instinctual, rather than from choices stemming from reason or an analytical awareness of life, of life cycles, of causality, etc. But the juxtaposition of these distinctions invites the view that a nonhuman life is no less complete or meaningful in the absence of understanding as we tend to define it.

The text maintains a complex relationship both with the animals it seeks to portray as well as the humans for whom the portrayal exists. This is one of the things that makes this particular story quite valuable—it is effective in decentering the human. It suggests humanity's estrangement from nature perhaps as a consequence of our forced exclusivity. At the beginning of the story, the narrator states, in a short simple paragraph, "Man seldom came here" (*Tut redko byval chelovek*). This is the only mention of humankind in the text. We are thus given a glimpse of the world without human presence or influence. And this world is presented through an omniscient narrator who struggles with his omniscience, with his ability to access this world and explain it to us.

In her analysis, Galina Lobanova argues that the human-animal difference exhibited in the text is important insofar as it shows that humans are distinguished by their ability to have a greater sense of the whole, an awareness of cycles, instinct, etc.²⁰⁵ This may be a valid conclusion insofar as humans do seem to have a more holistic sense of existence, and seem demonstrably superior in terms of analytical ability. However, it does not necessarily follow that because of such heightened analytical ability humans are *qualitatively* better, that for other animals, whose awareness of life in manner and degree is not equal to that of humans, life is *for them* any less whole. The title of the story is compelling in this regard, and seems to be something to which Pilnyak gave considerable thought, having changed it to “Tselaiia zhizn” (A Complete Life) from the original “Nad ovragom” (Above the Ravine). It is a story of a complete life as we may or may not understand it. And it is in this that the variation in the story’s allegorical potential is most revealing. The story can be read as relating to human experience, but in rather a different sense. The similarity or difference between humans and the birds matter less than our attitudes toward these comparisons. The story operates on two levels simultaneously. On the one hand it is a sort of naturalist portrait of animals in nature. On the other it is a query not so much into animals’ lives, but into the human reception of them, into our own abilities, ideas, and beliefs of self-importance. The animals represented in the story live complete lives without us. They understand life to the extent that they need to, and they do not need us to understand them.

²⁰⁵ Lobanova, 64.

II. Because She is Beef: Valuing the Subject in Platonov's "The Cow" (1938).

Where Pilnyak's story gives us a glimpse of animal life without a human presence, Andrei Platonov's "The Cow" presents the reader with a subject whose life, as a domesticated animal, is marked by human intervention. As in "A Complete Life," we have an omniscient narrator who employs interpretation to give the reader access into the animal's interior life, and consequently raises questions concerning the cultural assumptions regarding the intrinsic value of that life. Where the story diverges is in its implications, arising mainly from the difference in context. The birds in Pilnyak's story lead complete lives in accordance with their natural instincts; in Platonov's story, the cow's nature and instincts are frustrated because of her role and status in human society. Because of the context, the story features a prominent and sustained tension between the cow's subjectivity and her objectification as an agricultural resource, whose value is determined by what her body can provide or produce. The narrator's attempt to access her inner life and generate empathy with her suffering is framed in the text by reductive objectification. The cow begins and ends as a resource. The tension created by these conflicting views provides a critical view of anthropocentrism, in terms of both the exploitation of living beings, and the devaluation of individual subjective lives by which such exploitation is justified.

The association or equation of animal and human life is prominent in Platonov's work; the animality of humans and the "humanity" of animals serve as devices Platonov uses for various ends—satire, cultural criticism, philosophical speculation. However, animals in Platonov's fiction are typically more than just symbols or metaphors for humans or human circumstances. Often animals are represented as beings in their own right, or if they are stand-ins for something else, it is often the concept of "animal." As beings, in his works we see animals assuming the traditional roles imposed upon them—they are ridden, used as agricultural laborers, eaten, and

hunted. However, there is typically not the same sense of the assumed value hierarchy we see in other authors. Rather, we often encounter a degree of implicit, and sometimes explicit, criticism of such a hierarchy, either from the narrator, or through the sentiments of the characters with whom the narrator is in closest sympathy. What becomes apparent, and what some scholars have noted, is that Platonov was rather consumed with the idea of a continuum of life, that all beings have, from a subjective standpoint, an equal stake in terrestrial existence. What is remarkable is that he so often underscores the idea that this continuum exists beyond any type of value system. Konstantin Barsht notes that “In Platonov’s works there are no distinctions of value between living beings, nor between beings and things.”²⁰⁶ Similarly, Elena Tolstaya argues that in his work of the 1930’s, Platonov demonstrates an interest in finding a way out of this metaphysical hierarchy of being, in which “lower” forms of life serve as food for “higher.”²⁰⁷ This is a concept he explores in “The Cow,” using subjectivity and empathy as a possible way out.

The story is about a cow and the young boy, Vasya Rubtsov, who has grown attached to her, and who, through a series of events concerning the cow, must confront suffering, loss, death, and the prevailing notions of the adult world concerning the value of the cow’s life. At the beginning of the story, we learn that the cow’s young calf has fallen ill. Vasya’s father, a railway crossing keeper, takes him to the local veterinarian, and after having the calf treated, decides to sell him for slaughter, since he receives a good offer, and since his family has no practical use for a bull. The mother cow, however, is shown to suffer deeply due to the loss of her son. In her grief, she wanders onto the nearby railway tracks and is consequently hit and killed by a train. Her body is then sold for meat. The story ends with an excerpt from Vasya’s

²⁰⁶ Barsht, K.A. *Poetika prozy Andreia Platonova* (Sankt-Peterburg: Sankt-Peterburgskogo Gosudarstvennogo Universiteta, 2000), 224.

²⁰⁷ Elena Tolstaia-Segel, “Naturfilosofskie temy v tvorchestve Platonova 20-x—30-x gg.” *Slavica Hierosolymitana* 4 (1979): 236.

classroom essay, responding to the question of how he “will live and work in order to be of service to our Motherland.” In his response, he narrates the events concerning the cow and his gratitude for her sacrifice to him and his family and his promise to remember her.

Vasya is endowed with an independence of mind which the narrator repeatedly underscores as part of his resistance to loss, death, and the assimilation of the dominant worldview. He is not afraid to reproach the adult characters for what he deems their irresponsibility and thoughtlessness, such as the train conductor for his not having brought enough sand for the wheels to grip the rails when going uphill, as well as his father when he returns from selling the calf, whom Vasya feels was too young to be separated from his mother. While one could argue that this is demonstrative of a youthful idealism or ignorance of practical, economic concerns, it also suggests that he is unwilling to compromise what is just or responsible for the sake of external concerns, and his emotional and intellectual independence position him in the narrative as a representation of an ideal. The tragedy of the story rests in the fact that this ideal is at odds with the outside world, and Vasya risks losing this perspective in his passage into adulthood. It thus echoes a prevalent existential theme in *Platonov*, discussed by Thomas Seifrid as the “progression from *resistance* to some larger order or force, to reluctant *submission* to it all the same.”²⁰⁸ For though at the end Vasya promises to remember the cow, some points made elsewhere in the narrative suggest that his memory of her will likely fade with time.

This idea is central to some of the critical work devoted to the text. For instance, Galina Romanova reads the story as a coming-of-age tale in which Vasya encounters, and is forced to cope with, the challenge to his holistic and existentially unified worldview.²⁰⁹ The story is not so

²⁰⁸ Seifrid, 81.

²⁰⁹ G.I. Romanova, *Praktika analiza literaturnogo proizvedeniia* (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo Flinta, 2012), 65-66.

much about the cow, as it is about Vasya. A key element of the story, as she points out, is the narrative distinction between the adult characters and the child, and the differing ways they view the cow and her perceived value. The adults adopt a more practical view, whereas Vasya perceives an inherent value in the cow, which she argues is due to the naiveté of youth which tends to anthropomorphize nonhuman life, a naiveté which he will lose in his passage to adulthood.²¹⁰

Tatiana Fominykh also offers a reading which is centered on Vasya.²¹¹ However, in contrast to Romanova, she devotes much more space to detailing the philosophical underpinnings of Vasya's resistance, focusing on the young hero's story not so much as a coming-of-age tale than as a representation of certain philosophical strains in Platonov's work. She discusses, as many scholars have done with Platonov's work in general, the palpable influence of Nikolai Fedorov, particularly the aim of universal brotherhood and the resistance to death.²¹² She argues that the central focus of the story is Vasya's opposition to death, and that through his empathy and active agency, he represents a vital force in the manifestation of Platonov's "idea of life" stemming from Fedorovian philosophy, which uses grief over death as a starting point in the striving toward an immortal ideal.²¹³ She explains that the thematic material of the story stems from two things: Platonov's loss of his son, who was arrested in 1938; and the childhood memory of Vasilii Rozanov's witnessing a cow being slaughtered, a memory which, for him, echoed the

²¹⁰ Ibid., 63-65.

²¹¹ Fominykh, Tat'iana, "Eshche raz o rasskaze A. Platonova 'Korova,'" *Filolog* 3 (2003)

http://philolog.pspu.ru/module/magazine/do/mpub_3_56.

²¹² For a detailed discussion of Fedorov's influence on Platonov, see Elena Tolstaia-Segel, "Ideologicheskoe konteksty Platonova" in *Andrei Platonov: Mir tvorchestvo*; and Ayleen Teskey, *Platonov and Fyodorov: The Influence of Christian Philosophy on a Soviet Writer*.

²¹³ See also Svetlana Semenova, "'Ideia Zhizni' Andreia Platonova," in *Andrei Platonov, Vzyskanie pogibshikh: Povesty, rasskazy, p'esa, stat'i* (Moscow: Shkola-Press, 1995), 5-38. Semenova argues that Platonov's child characters all represent an aversion to death and a representation of an ideal worldview, pointing out Vasya as a particularly strong example. Semenova, 31-32.

pitiful lot of all living beings.²¹⁴ In light of these influences, the cow in Platonov's story becomes symbolic of both parental loss and a sort of destined fatality. In terms of the latter, Fominykh argues, the important distinction in Platonov's story is the fact that this fatality does not generate merely a passive despair, but an active resistance to injustice.

These readings certainly contribute to our understanding of the text, particularly Romanova's analysis of setting, theme, and point of view, as well as Fominykh's discussion of the larger philosophical and biographical context, and the symbolic value of Vasya's resistance. However, there has not yet been a detailed analysis of the cow's interiority in terms of its relevance to the problem of humans' attitudes to other animals. Thus, I would like to extend the above points by taking a closer look at the way in which the cow is depicted, the specific language used, and the position of key points in the narrative—elements which raise questions about subjectivity and value as a critical counterpoint to anthropocentrism.

While Vasya is the main protagonist, the narrator keeps the cow in a central position. This is done through the title²¹⁵, and through the narrator's devoting significant space to describing her behavior and her subjective mental and emotional states. The desire for access and understanding is first made overt in the initial train episode as the narrator describes Vasya's personality. On the day the calf is taken to town, the father has not returned in time to signal the

²¹⁴ Rozanov recounted this memory in a letter to Erikh Gollerbakh. See Elena Tolstaia who points out this connection and the allusion to it in the hero's name: "Literaturnye alliuzii v proze Andreia Platonova," in Tolstaia, E.D., *Mirposlekontsa: Rabota o russkoi literature XX veka* (Moscow: RGGU, 2002), 359.

²¹⁵ Fominykh calls attention to the title and the way in which Platonov possibly used it as an intertextual reference to Tolstoy's story of the same title. She argues that the similarities and differences between the two texts are important in distinguishing the authors' polemical differences; Tolstoy wrote his story for children as a matter of moral instruction, whereas Platonov wrote about children but not expressly for them. Both feature the economic difficulties arising from the death of the family cow, and both feature children in central positions. The contrast lies in the responsibility for the cow's death. In Tolstoy, the boy is directly responsible (he puts broken glass into her food), whereas in Platonov, it is essentially the father, though he does not act out of malice, but, in selling the calf for meat, simply acts in accordance with common convention and practical economic concerns. Additionally, unlike in Tolstoy, the boy in Platonov's story is morally superior and represents the author's ideal hero.

evening train and see it past, and so Vasya must do it. In this scene, referring to the boy's interest in physics and machinery, the narrator states that Vasya "could not bear to see any object or substance and not understand its workings and how it lived inside itself" (*Ego muchilo, esli on videl kakoi-libo predmet ili veshchestvo i ne ponimal, otchego oni zhivut vnutri sebia i deistvuiut*).²¹⁶ The language used here is strange, particularly as the verb "to live" is used for inanimate nouns. This is not uncommon in Platonov's fiction, where we often see a blurring of the line between animate and inanimate as well as abstract and concrete.²¹⁷ Here, though, this use of language is given additional significance by suggesting a curiosity for not only how a being functions or lives, but for an understanding of how it experiences that life, its unique subjective point of view. The idea of subjectivity here is further emphasized by its place in the text. It follows a description of this same curiosity applied to the people on passing trains. The narrator explains:

он всматривался в лица людей, глядящих из окон пассажирских поездов,—кто они такие и что они думают,—но поезда шли быстро, и люди проезжали в них не признанными мальчиком на переезде.²¹⁸

he looked at the faces of the people who looked through the windows of the passenger trains,—who were they and what were they thinking,—but the trains went by quickly and the people in them passed by, still unknown to the boy at the crossing.

The key clause here (who were they and what were they thinking) is set off by dashes, which formally distinguishes it and helps to connect it to the common theme of interiority. The narrator then goes on to describe a particular incident involving one of these unknown passengers, a young, pensive (*zadumchivyi*) man whose train passed by slowly enough for him to notice the

²¹⁶ Platonov, *Sobranie sochineniia*, III: 286.

²¹⁷ Seifrid offers a discussion of Platonov's blurring of abstract and concrete levels of reference. See *Uncertainties of the Spirit*, 92-3.

²¹⁸ Platonov, *Sobranie sochineniia*, III: 285.

boy at the crossing and briefly engage him in a silent exchange. Vasya wonders who he is—a parachutist, an artist, a medal-winner—and “tells” him not to die, but to wait for him to grow up so they can meet again.

This passage deals with the subjectivity of other humans, but there are a couple of ways in which this is related to the subjectivity of the cow. The first is thematic, as mentioned above; the second is linguistic. Platonov uses repetition to establish a formal connection between this episode and the introductory episode in which we see Vasya interact with the cow. In the opening section, the narrator states:

Она всегда узнавала мальчика, он любил ее. Ему нравилось все, что в ней было,—
добрые теплые глаза, обведенные темные кругами, словно корова была постоянно
утомлена или задумчива...²¹⁹

She always recognized the boy, and he loved her. He liked everything about the cow: her warm kind eyes, framed by dark circles—as if she were continually exhausted or lost in thought...

In the descriptions of the cow and, a bit later, the young man on the train, the narrator repeats the word “*zadumchivyi*,” which both creates a formal link between these two passages, and endows both figures with a personal subjectivity, particularly one signifying a private depth of mental experience, albeit with the cautiously interpretive “as if” (*slovno*) when applied to the cow. The second repetition here is found in the similarity between the phrase “*uznavala mal’chika*” (she recognized the boy) and the phrase “*ne uznannymi mal’chikom*” (unknown to the boy). While the grammar between the two phrases is different, the word order is the same. In the first we have an active, transitive verb with the cow as the subject and Vasya as the direct object; in the second we have a participle of the verb while Vasya is the logical subject in a passive

²¹⁹ Ibid., 284

construction. Thus, the grammatical differences between the two phrases lend additional significance insofar as they call attention to the interplay or reversal of subject and object, and active and passive agent, which enrich the text's treatment of the theme of subjectivity.

In addition to highlighting the interplay of grammatical subjects, the sentence near the beginning (“she always recognized him, he loved her”) points to another question raised in the text: the significance and implications of the difference between species. While the two clauses are very similar grammatically, the juxtaposition of two different verbs with the absence of a conjunction creates a noticeable distinction. It is not that the cow is incapable of deep feeling—the narrator elsewhere demonstrates that she is—but that the two characters see each other in different ways. Later in the story this distinction becomes central to the specific way in which Platonov explores the issue of empathy. The narrator makes it clear that due to the loss of her calf, the cow is very distraught, waiting for him, searching, and lowing mournfully. Seeing this suffering, Vasya tries to console her but is unsuccessful. In one instance, Vasya goes out to the yard and puts his arms around her neck “so she would understand that he understood and loved her,” but she jerks her neck, throwing him off, and, with a “strange guttural sound” (*chuzhoi gorlovoi golos*), runs away into the field. In another instance, the narrator states that Vasya feeds and cleans her, “but the cow did not respond to his care, nothing anyone did made any difference to her.”²²⁰ The reason for this is made clear in the key section of the text where the narrator gives the reader further insight into the nature and intensity of her suffering. Similar to these other instances, here we see Vasya trying to console the cow, while she remains motionless and indifferent because:

²²⁰ Ibid., 290.

ей нужен был сейчас только один ее сын—теленок, и ничего не могло заменить его—ни человек, ни трава и ни солнце. [. . .] корова уныло мычала, потому что она была полностью покорна жизни, природе и своей нужде в сыне, который еще не вырос, чтобы она могла оставить его, и ей сейчас было жарко и больно внутри.²²¹

she needed only one thing—her son, the calf—and nothing could replace him; neither a human being, nor grass, nor the sun. [. . .] the cow lowed despondently, because she was entirely obedient to life, to nature, to the need for her son, who was not yet big enough for her to be able to leave him, and she felt hot and aching inside.

Like Pilnyak's owls, the cow is identified with nature and instinct. Here, though, we see the effects of having those instincts frustrated, and a partial glimpse into what this might feel like. The narrator is interpreting a mode of life that is comprehensible to humans but not fully accessible. Her life means something different for her; we can understand her instincts, her impulses, drives, etc., but we cannot completely understand how she perceives or experiences them. We do not know what it is like to be a cow.

This is not to suggest that humans are incapable of experiencing a deep sense of loss, sorrow, or frustration; rather, the narrative seeks to establish an appreciation of how the experience of life differs between species. Nor does the articulation of these differences diminish the text's emphasis on sympathy or empathy. In fact, it strengthens it by raising a compelling point which challenges widely-held beliefs regarding how humans and nonhuman animals differ in their experience of suffering, beliefs which are centered on human rationality. This point is raised in the same passage describing the cow's obedience to life and nature. The narrator states:

тяжкое, трудное горе томилось в ней, которое было безысходным и могло только увеличиваться, потому что свое горе она не умела в себе утешить ни словом, ни

²²¹ Ibid., 289.

сознанием, ни другом, ни развлечением, как это может делать человек. [. . .] Корова не понимала, что можно одно счастье забыть, найти другое и жить опять, не мучаясь более. Ее смутный ум не в силах был помочь ей обмануться: что однажды вошло в сердце или в чувство ее, то не могло быть там подавлено или забыто. [. . .] она глядела во тьму большими налитыми глазами и не могла ими заплакать, чтобы обессилить себя и свое горе.²²²

a heavy, difficult grief languished inside her, one that could have no end and could only grow because, unlike a human being, she was unable to allay this grief inside her with words, consciousness, a friend or any other distraction. [. . .] The cow did not understand that it is possible to forget one happiness, to find another and then live again, not suffering any longer. Her dim mind did not have the strength to help her deceive herself; if something had once entered her heart or her feelings, then it could not be suppressed there or forgotten. [. . .] she was looking into the darkness with large, bloodshot eyes, and she was unable to cry with them, to weaken herself and her grief.

Platonov is raising the point often made that since humans have ostensibly greater or more developed cognitive abilities that they necessarily have a greater capacity for suffering, that because of this increased cognition, they can more intensely anticipate pain, imagine possibilities, and speculate on possible or likely consequences. And in many respects this is true; suffering fear or anxiety associated with a source of pain, real or imagined, can often be worse than the experience of the pain itself. But the question raised in this passage is whether greater cognitive capacity or increased rationality necessarily correlates to the degree of suffering. Several researchers and theorists suggest that in many ways, and in many circumstances, the reverse might in fact be true.²²³ In contrast to humans, if other animals are less able to

²²² Ibid., 289.

²²³ For a general discussion see Bernard Rollin, *The Unheeded Cry: Animal Consciousness, Animal Pain, and Science* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989); and Andrew Linzey, *Why Animal Suffering Matters: Philosophy, Theology, and Practical Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013). For a specific discussion of this idea in connection with the behavior of dairy cows and their separated calves, see Lily N. Edwards-Callaway, “Animal

rationalize or understand the source of fear or pain, or are unable to imagine an end to it, their experience of that pain or fear may actually be more distressing.²²⁴ Bernard Rollin offers a challenge to the belief that animals are less capable of suffering because of their limited intellect, and specifically, their lack of a concept or awareness of time, that they cannot remember or anticipate pain and so their experience of pain is both transitory and insignificant. He argues that if one accepts the position that animals are thoroughly immersed in the present, then their experience of pain would be worse, specifically because they cannot remember its absence or look forward to its cessation. According to this logic, he writes, “If animals are in pain, their whole universe is pain; there is no horizon; they *are* their pain. So if this argument is indeed correct, then animal pain is terrible to contemplate, for the dark universe of animals logically cannot tolerate any glimmer of hope within its borders.”²²⁵

In this passage, then, Platonov is asserting a difference between species, not as a way of excusing or justifying animal suffering, but as attempt to illustrate what that suffering might be like from an animal’s point of view, to try to access the subjective experience of that suffering. Of course, there is a limit to accessibility into the consciousness of another being, and so Platonov’s narrator offers a vision of her experience couched in imaginable, understandable concepts. We cannot truly feel or understand her pain, but we can approach an appreciation of it, however limited our own faculties. In doing so, he is attempting to give the reader an experience

Well-Being and Behavioral Needs on the Farm,” in Temple Grandin, ed. *Improving Animal Welfare: A Practical Approach* (Oxfordshire, UK: Cabi, 2015), 139-163.

²²⁴ Several writers on animal ethics, when discussing this idea, have pointed to R.L. Kitchell’s 1985 study on animals’ experience of pain. Kitchell argues that the response to pain is divided into two dimensions: sensory-discriminatory and motivational-affective. The former refers to the process of locating and understanding the source of pain, while the latter refers to the response to it, generally the impulse to escape it. He speculates that since animals are limited in the first dimension, their experience of the second dimension is correlatively stronger, since they cannot understand and intellectually cope with the danger or painful stimulus to the degree that humans can. See R.L. Kitchell and R.D. Johnson, “Assessment of Pain in Animals,” in G.P Moberg, ed. *Animal Stress* (Bethesda, MD.: American Physiological Society, 1985), 113-140.

²²⁵ Rollin, 144.

of empathy as a way to challenge the valuation of an animal's life and experience, a valuation based on criteria which invariably privilege the human.

To emphasize the message of empathy, and to heighten the contrast between opposing attitudes regarding nonhuman life, the passages concerning the cow's subjectivity are framed in the narrative by passages referring to her objectification and the reduction of her life to a resource. This reduction is first illustrated in the opening paragraph:

Серая степная корова черкасской породы жила одна в сарае. Этот сарай, сделанный из выкрашенных снаружи досок, стоял на маленьком дворе путевого железнодорожного сторожа. В сарае, рядом с дворами, сеном, просяной соломой и отжившими свой век домашними вещами—сундуком без крышки, прогоревшей самоварной трубой, одежной ветошью, стулом без ножек,—было место для ночлега коровы и для ее жизни в долгие зимы.²²⁶

The gray Cherkassian cow from the steppe lived alone in a shed; the shed made of boards and painted on the outside, stood in the small yard by the house of the level-crossing keeper. In the shed, beside the firewood, the hay, the millet straw and the household things that had outlived their time—a trunk without a lid, a burnt-out samovar flue, some old rags, a chair without legs—there was space for the cow to lie down in at night, and for her to live in during the long winters.

This paragraph sets the tone of the story with a few of important elements. Firstly, we see the perceived “thingness” of the cow, as she is introduced among a catalogue of resources or used up, worthless objects. Secondly, the nature of these objects is important as they are either of human production or natural materials gathered for human use (or secondary use, perhaps, in the case of the hay and straw as it is used as feed). Even the mention of her Circassian breed (*poroda*) suggests human intervention and domination. Thus, our first vision of the cow is one

²²⁶ Platonov, III: 284

of a being who finds herself firmly lodged in the human world, placed among inanimate objects in varying states of use and disuse. In this way, her position in the world order is made clear: she is not a being, an end to herself, she is a resource.

Similar illustrations of reduction occur later in the text. One such instance, relating to this aspect of “thingness” in particular, takes place in the train episode in which Vasya helps the conductor by spreading sand on the tracks to enable the train’s wheels to better grip the rails. The narrator reflects upon the contents of the train’s load:

Мимо Васи пошли тяжелые четырехосные вагоны; их рессорные пружины были сжаты, и мальчик понимал, что в вагонах лежит тяжелый дорогой груз. Затем поехали открытые платформы: на них стояли автомобили, неизвестные машины, покрытые брезентом, был насыпан уголь, горой лежали кочаны капусты, после капусты были новые рельсы и опять начались закрытые вагоны, в которых везли живность. [. . .] Из одного вагона с живностью закричала чужая безвестная телушка, и тогда из сарая ей ответила протяжным, плачущим голосом корова, тоскующая о своем сыне.²²⁷

Some heavy four-axle wagons went past; their springs were compressed, and the boy could tell they were carrying a heavy and precious load. Then came open wagons; on them were motorcars, machines of some kind covered with tarpaulins, mounds of coal, mountains of cabbages, and then new rails; after that came more closed wagons, carrying livestock. [. . .] From one of the livestock wagons came the low of an unknown calf, and his own cow, yearning for her son, answered from the shed with a long, plaintive cry.

Similar to the opening paragraph, there is an inventory of resources, but here the reduction of living beings to commodity or resource is more overt, as we do not have a single, individual cow with whom the narrator or hero is in sympathy, but rather a group of unseen animals referred to by the collective “*zhivnost*’,” who are presumably being transported to a farm or to slaughter.

²²⁷ Ibid., 286

Exploitation often relies on abstraction and distance, both philosophical and spatial, and this is particularly true of animals. In this story, the narrator continually resists or exposes this abstraction. In this passage, this resistance is asserted through the juxtaposition of inanimate things and animate beings, the sentience of whom is underscored by the cry of the unknown female calf and the responding bellow of the Rubtsovs' cow.

The abstraction indicated in this passage is further illustrated in the text through the signifiers with which the cow is identified; she does not have a name, and is simply referred to as "the cow." While arguably of little importance to the cow herself, this both preserves her dramatic otherness and allows for the minimization and trivialization of her life; she is not an individual, but rather merely a member of a given species. Even Vasya, whose feelings for the cow are very strong, does not give her a name, but rather calls her "cow" as that is "what was written in his reading book" (*kak bylo napisano v knige dlia chteniia*). His reference to her as "cow" as a matter of accepted cultural taxonomy calls attention to the system of defining and organizing the natural world and the value structures imposed upon it, as well as the way in which this system is reinforced through the education of the young: "You are a cow!" he tells her (*ty ved' korova*).

This statement of her identity becomes important in comparison to the way in which she is referred to after she is killed. After she is hit by the train, Rubtsov and the other men pull her body from under it: "they dragged the mutilated carcass of the cow out from underneath the tender and heaved all the beef into a dry ditch beside the track" (*oni vyvolokli izurodovannoe tulovishche korovy iz-pod tendera i svalili vsiu goviadinu naruzhu, v sukhuuu kanavu okolo puti*).²²⁸ First reduced to a taxonomic classification (cow), she is then further reduced by a different signifier (beef). This same identification is repeated in Vasya's short essay written for a

²²⁸ Ibid., 291.

classroom exercise at the end of the story. In his essay he writes that she “died from a train” and was eaten too, as her son had been, “because she is beef” (*ee tozhe c’eli, potomu chto ona goviadina*).²²⁹ In his sympathy for the cow, Vasya is forced to come to terms with the reduction of her life to the use-value for the humans to whom she is subjugated, and he is forced to engage the cultural signifiers by which the life and totality of the animal is reduced to her physical parts, to the word used for the flesh they consume, in a sort of semantic distancing. She is not a sentient being—she is meat.

The repeated emphasis that the cow is a sentient being with a mental and emotional life distinct and important for her is indicative of a larger trend in Platonov’s work, in which animals are repeatedly seen as more than objects, more than simply means to human ends, however they might be used in a given situation. More generally, though, Platonov was very interested in the idea of natural unity, an awareness of the fact that all beings (and Platonov does not even restrict this to sentient beings) are engaged in their own existential or evolutionary path, that nature exists independently of any anthropocentric or hierarchical worldview we might wish to impose upon it. He wrote in his journal that life is “not a ladder of evolution, but a mixture of living beings, a general conglomeration.”²³⁰ Placing all beings on an equal existential plane, Platonov presents a challenge to ontological hierarchies by asserting a view that other animals are not lower forms of life, but only different forms, complete in and for themselves. This idea is quite overtly stated in the novella *Dzhan (Soul)*, written a few years earlier (1935) in which the narrator concludes that other beings have distinct qualities which signify the “great inner worth of their existence” (*velikoe vnutrennee dostoinstvo ikh syshchestvovaniia*).²³¹

²²⁹ Ibid., 292.

²³⁰ Platonov, *Zapisky knizhki: Materialy k biografii* (Moscow: IMLI RAN, 2000), 213.

²³¹ Platonov, *Sobranie sochineniia*, II: 95.

In these stories, Platonov and Pilnyak raise the issue of intrinsic value of other animals, a value which has nothing really to do with how we see them, nor how we see ourselves in relation to them. We often judge the value of animals based on faculties which more closely approach those we prize in ourselves—reason, abstract thought, ingenuity, etc. Of course, we are immersed in our own particular way of seeing; just as we do not have access into another animal’s mode of consciousness, we do not have a way out of our own. However, while the faculties which distinguish the human, in kind or degree, are important and valuable to us, there is not necessarily a reason to believe that they are universally so. Barbara Noske examines this practice of valuation in connection with theories of communication. She argues that in judging animal communication by human standards, in trying to determine whether animals have some degree of human-like language, the animals will always come out as “reduced humans.” We claim to know, she states, “*from within* that [humans] themselves possess certain faculties and to know *from without* that animals do not.”²³²

It is difficult to put aside the human yardstick when considering the value of other animals, not only insofar as it is all we know or can know, but also because it raises uncomfortable questions. These questions can threaten to destabilize our sense of self, the assumptions or beliefs we hold about the value of human existence; and they can force us to examine the ethics of our behavior. If we accept nonhuman animals as subjects, intrinsically valuable and complete in themselves, the strategies we use to justify our exploitation of them are challenged.

²³² Barbara Noske, 144, 78.

Conclusion
(Re)seeing the animal

I see now what a horse means to a Cossack and a cavalryman.

Unhorsed cavalymen on the hot dusty roads, their saddles in their arms, they sleep like corpses on other men's carts, horses are rotting all around, all that's talked about is horses, the customs of barter, the excitement, horses are martyrs, horses are sufferers—their saga, I myself have been gripped by this feeling, every march is an agony for the horse.

Isaac Babel, Diary, 18 August 1920.

In 1920, Babel was serving as a war correspondent in the Sixth Cavalry Division of the Red Army. Being in a cavalry division, Babel was surrounded by horses, and their presence is felt throughout his diary and the *Red Cavalry (Konarmia)* cycle based on his experiences and observations. While such a presence would be true of most depictions of a cavalry, a distinguishing feature of Babel's work is that, at times, he foregrounds the horse, not as a vehicle, resource, or property, but as a being made to serve human ends. This is perhaps most apparent in the above passage in which he juxtaposes the value of the horse from the perspective of the Cossack and cavalryman, with the sensitive assertion of what this experience is like from the perspective of a horse. He tries to really see the horse. And while the diary entry above may

be a more overt example of this attempt than we see in the *Red Cavalry* cycle which developed from it, when we look at these later stories in light these entries, we see the animals in those stories in a different way; we become more sensitive to their presence, and, I would argue, to the ethical implications of their presence.

I began this dissertation with a comparison of two images, two modifications of the iconic image of St. George to show how the human/animal binary is overlain with a hierarchical concept which holds the human as fundamentally superior. When we look at these images we immediately see the two principal figures, the knight and the serpent, and we perceive their ascribed value in a moral or ideological sense. Indeed, this immediacy of perception is necessary for their effectiveness as propaganda. However, there is a third figure in these images, one which, despite its centrality, we tend to overlook: the horse. Unlike the serpent, the horse on which the knight is mounted is less noticeable because he is, in many ways, an extension of the knight; he is his vehicle, his property. In relation to both animals in either image, the human is supreme, but the horse is not the focus because he has already been conquered.

Any representation of an animal carries with it, intentionally or otherwise, the baggage of our ideas, beliefs, and attitudes. In his work on animal imagery, Steve Baker explores the possibility that attitudes to living animals are the result of the symbolic use of our concept of the animal in cultural representations. He argues that “the representational, symbolic and rhetorical uses of the animal must be understood to carry as much conceptual weight as any idea we may have of the ‘real’ animal, and must be taken just as seriously.”²³³ Animals have meaning for us; we use them for what they can physically provide, and we use them as symbols in various strategies of self-definition. But an important feature of the texts explored here is that they point to an

²³³ Baker, 10, 25.

understanding of animals as more than a set of symbols for us to explain ourselves to ourselves, more than objects for our use, conceptual or physical. Returning to the idea of two intersecting lines of differentiation which Tim Ingold outlines, a horizontal line which differentiates between species of animal, and a vertical one which seeks to raise humans out of the animal world, if we remove the vertical mode of difference, if we suspend our notions of hierarchy, then we are left with a perhaps more objective view of life in which no one species is necessarily more valuable than any other. And if we suspend the notion that only humans can be subjects, if we open up the notion of subject to a more general sense of “subject of a life” as opposed to defining it as a rational agent, we are forced to confront serious moral questions concerning our attitudes to “the animal,” to our view of our intrinsic animality, and most importantly, to other animals.

Although animals pervade human culture, as beings, resources, and ideas, too little critical attention is paid to their significance, to us and to themselves, to how we think about them and how we think through them, and to the way in which the moral concept of animality is related to our attitudes and treatment of actual animals, as victims of our curiosity and domination. The question of the animal cuts through practically every aspect of human culture, but it is a question that has only relatively recently been posed. There are, of course, many possible and likely interrelated reasons for this lack of critical attention, from the complexity and multiplicity of the problem, to the uncomfortable ethical questions which result from seriously addressing it, as so many aspects of human culture are related to our exploitation of other animals. However, it is an important line of inquiry because of what it reveals about ourselves and our self concepts, as well as our vision of the world beyond ourselves. When we begin to seriously consider these questions about the moral significance of nonhuman animals and the politics and poetics of the representation of animals, we see problems hitherto unrecognized or underexplored, and this

affects our perception of the cultural artifacts of the past. Looking back at older literary works, for instance, with our attention focused on a given author's use of animals and animal imagery, new levels of meaning and complexity are revealed, and we see details, or a deeper significance of details, previously unnoticed.

In the preceding analyses, I have directed attention to the authors' use of animals in an attempt to show how these writers explore the difficult questions of identity, meaning, and value through the use of imagery that is, because of its inherent complexity, well-suited to revealing some of the intricacies and deeper implications of these questions. They were produced in a period of profound transition, when questions were raised regarding the reduction and exploitation of life, the diminishing of intrinsic value, and the social and existential opposition between the individual and the collective, a particularly dominant theme in the literature of this period. These texts were chosen, as I mentioned earlier, because of the way in which they use animal imagery to engage these questions, but also because they highlight some of the problems of the imagery itself, the ontological and ethical issues inseparable from any discussion of "the animal." It is because of this complexity that I have chosen the method of the close reading to better glean the significance of the animals in these works. This type of reading is particularly relevant for the literature of this period due to the writers' inclination toward formal experimentation and frequent use of poetic devices to create meaning and significance. Additionally, though, this methodology has been employed to offer a productive way to engage the animal question within literary works more generally. Because of verbal art's capacity for subtlety and multiplicity, it is a perfect vehicle for the complexity of the animal image and the animal question. I have sought to show how these texts operate in terms of their use of animals

in a way that, I hope, will reveal similar uses in other texts by these and other writers, and thus see these works, or aspects of these works, in a new and appropriately sensitive way.

While I have attempted to provide a thorough analysis of the animals in these particular stories, there remain some issues which could be developed, as some sacrifices had to be made for the sake of organization, coherence, and depth. In order to keep my discussion of the texts relevant to the chapter topics, there are a number of details I do not fully explore because they are more relevant to other chapters. For instance, I do not analyze the question of the fox cub's interiority in "Mother Earth," the significance of the sparrow as an actual animal juxtaposed with the symbolic in "The Dragon," or the way in which the meat of Platonov's cow may be symbolically related to dehumanization in an oppressive or exploitative social structure. That the animals or animal imagery in these stories are amenable to different organizational approaches demonstrates, once more, the richness and complexity of these works, as well as the fact that problems concerning animals and animality operate in multiple areas and on multiple levels simultaneously.

Furthermore, I have restricted my discussion to various works by Zamyatin, Pilnyak, and Platonov, but other writers, and indeed other works by these same writers, feature animals in ways that are equally compelling. There have been a couple valuable studies of animals in Tolstoy and Turgenev, but few studies of the animals in Garshin or Chekhov, some of whose stories question the devaluation of nonhuman life. Likewise for twentieth century literature, some scholars have discussed animals in the works of Bulgakov, yet few have addressed the subject in Remizov or Prishvin. There has also been surprisingly little attention paid to animals in Khlebnikov, Babel, and Grossman, as these writers, like Platonov, engage rather directly with the ethics of animal exploitation. As the field of (Critical) Animal Studies gains attention and

credibility, there is no doubt that progress will be made in these neglected areas, and these authors be recognized for not only addressing ethical problems which are just now gaining traction, but also for providing intriguing ways for seeing and discussing them.

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