

**Controlling the Uncontrollable:  
Navigating Subjectivity in the *perestroika* and post-Soviet  
Prose of L. S. Petrushevskaia and L. E. Ulitskaia**

by

Natalie Jean McCauley

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Doctoral Committee:  
Associate Professor Sofya Khagi, Chair  
Associate Professor Tatjana Aleksic  
Associate Professor Herbert J. Eagle  
Lecturer Jodi Greig

Natalie Jean McCauley

NataliMc@umich.edu

ORCID ID: 0000-0002-8598-1260

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*For my mother*

## Acknowledgements

Thank you to my committee

for keeping me on my toes,

to my mentors

for keeping me optimistic,

to my friends

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for keeping me kind.

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## Abstract

This dissertation deals with the daily, lived experience of women in the late- and post-Soviet Union as depicted in literature written around the time of its collapse. With respect to the specific challenges individuals in disempowered positions faced and the various ways they attempted to overcome them. The dissertation reexamines works by L. S. Petrushevskaia and L. E. Ulitskaia from the introduction of *perestroika* in 1987 through 2000. Drawing from studies of power in a range of contexts from Michel Foucault in 1970s France to Aleksei Yurchak in 2000s Russia, I focus my analysis on how any perception of control is portrayed as dubious, how individuals worked against traditional patriarchal power structures, and how the narrative structures replicate the environment of uncertainty and fear that came to mark the “Wild 90s” of Russian literature. I find that their protagonists’ constant navigation of subjectivity is particularly clear within the authors’ use of three topoi: corporeality, romantic relationships, and escapism. The first chapter argues that bodies do not only reflect subjective construction, but in fact become a primary vessel through which it takes place: while many texts depict how the regulation of bodies (and [self-]disciplining the body) indoctrinates subjects to codes of dominant (and patriarchal) social order, I find that these works also show the subjects’ reactions to such moments as situated in the physical. The second chapter examines how the binaries between private and public break down as individuals use the realm of interpersonal romantic

relationships as a venue to challenge, refute, or adapt societal norms propagated by communist morality. The heroines manipulate and reinterpret dominant regulations on social relationships in attempt to lessen their suffering, much of which comes from living under the Soviet totalitarian regime. Their efforts are often not successful and many inevitably continue the cycle of violence that causes their pain in the first place, but their attempts to manipulate or resist regulations on social relationships is an example of testing the limits of subjectivity. Lastly, the third chapter ponders those moments when individuals try to escape psychologically. No longer striving toward the ideal, they attempt to create new spaces in which they are the ideal. These spaces do not fully free them from dominant power, but their search for an alternate understanding of reality – through fantasy, hallucination, delusion, madness, or other – allows them a greater sense of influence than does the society around them. Even when these efforts fail, the attempt itself is a form of resistance to the dominant culture. Petrushevskaja and Ulitskaia's prose depicts those who feel control slipping rapidly from their hands; my work analyzes how they resist, evade, manipulate, and perpetuate the techniques of power to which they are simultaneously victim.



## Introduction

### Controlling the Uncontrollable

“In what ways did women, living within the constraints of a society that wished them to be powerless, affect the history of that society by responding creatively to its attempts to control them?”

-Barbara Evans Clements<sup>1</sup>

“What does ‘women’s literature’ mean?  
You can have a women’s sauna, but literature?”

- Lidia Chukovskaia<sup>2</sup>

This project is about power. It is about literature, of course, but it is also about the real, daily, and lived experiences of women in the late- and post- Soviet era and how these experiences are fictionalized in ways that lend insight into the workings of power. While these texts detail burdens of everyday survival (physical, psychological, moral, and other) for average Soviet women, they also paint portraits of various ways individuals perceive and experience subjectivity in the patriarchal post-Stalinist dominant social order and the even more multifarious ways they might respond. Through close textual readings of prose works by two popular *perestroika* women writers, Liudmila Petrushevskaia and Liudmila Ulitskaia, this project analyzes moments of tension in subjectivity and forwards three tropographical areas as particularly enlightening: first, subjectivity takes place in corporeality, constantly shaping individual’s understanding of selfhood via influence on the body; secondly, coercive regulations of social interactions, particularly romantic relationships, continue these messages of disciplinary

power and one's place within it; and lastly, escapism into alternative psychological spaces become venues for possible resistance and liberation, but also at times of continuance and appropriation. In each sphere, this project takes note not only of efforts to resist, knowingly or not, but also those instances when individuals inevitably end up perpetuating, reinforcing, and adopting dominant ideology's codes of behavior that oppress them.<sup>3</sup> Petrushevskaiia and Ulitskaia's *perestroika*-era prose works document the struggles of some of the most vulnerable parts of society – women, children, orphans, single mothers, and the impoverished – and depict chilling scenes of their extreme efforts to survive national and personal traumas. Written during the socially and politically unstable eras of *perestroika* and the immediate post-Soviet 1990s, these works reflect the atmosphere of uncertainty and fear that for many continued from the end of Stalinism through the end of the century. This project reads these works as recordings of a version of history long denied by official state rhetoric and as brief glimpses into individual experiences of navigating subjectivity by those on the margins of society.

### *What happened? Writing Women and Women Writers in Russia*

Women writers have had a troubled past in Russian literary history. While the Russian literary tradition has long been dominated by men, several insightful projects have shown the undeniable presence and influence of women writers long before those read in this project.<sup>4</sup> Among the first women's writings to receive any attention were memoirs, autobiographies, and other forms of life writing.<sup>5</sup> But as more recent scholars have argued, artistic portrayals of women's experiences continued to occupy only the margins of the cultural sphere in large part due to their writings' assumed lower priority in comparison to more political issues addressed in men's writing.<sup>6</sup> This hierarchization of literature's content has continued well into the 20<sup>th</sup> and

21<sup>st</sup> century, resulting in a contemporary conceptions of “*zhenskaia proza*” as not only a separate category of literature, which immediately signifies women’s concerns as ideologically “othered,” but also as one whose trivial content matter relegates it to just a few shelves in any Russian bookstore. Loosely defined, “*zhenskaia proza*” translates to “women’s literature,” but negative associations with the category reach far beyond the author’s gender identity; instead, “women’s literature” could also refer to the multifarious and widespread media that as early as the 1930s began to “urge women to cultivate their femininity,” which was unquestioningly considered women’s “innate capacities to nurture and serve.”<sup>7</sup> In other words, women’s media, in any form, was considered little more than daily guidelines by which women should conduct their lives at its dullest and overly sentimental romance stories at its best. The misconception that women’s prose concerns only “love and trivial themes” has also brought about labels such as *belletristika*, *bytopisatel’stvo*, “kitchen drama[]” and “trolleybus reading.”<sup>8</sup> To a generation of critics educated by Soviet ideology that art should uplift, scenes of childcare, domestic housework, and marital complications fell flat as meaningless and empty, a waste of art’s potential and primary charge to enlighten.

*Perestroika* women’s prose began receiving scholarly attention almost as soon as it was published, although the number of studies increased particularly quickly after the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991. The project at hand owes immeasurable debt to early scholars of *perestroika* women’s prose; those such as Helena Goscilo, Nancy Condee, Barbara Heldt, Catriona Kelly, Rosalind Marsh, Sigrid McCloughlan, and Sally Dalton-Brown were among the first outside of Russia to recognize the artistic value and substantive implications of these texts, while Russian scholars Nina Gabrielian, Mark Lipovetsky, Elena Gessen and Tat’iana Klimenkova, among others, drove the critical interest in Russian journals.<sup>9</sup> Although they

invariably approach the body of text from personal points of interest, nearly all early scholars of *perestroika* women's writing remark on the works' shocking exposé nature. For critics, scholars, and readers accustomed to socialist realism's strict limitations on what literature can depict and how, women's prose of the 1980s and 90s came as a shock in both content and style. Condee's 1985 interviews with Petrushevskaiia, as well as early literary studies by Goscilo (1989, 1990, 1994, 1995, 1996), McLaughlin (1989), Simmons (1990), Heldt (1992), and Smith (1997) explore the works' transgressive potential. These scholars' writings demonstrate that this field of literature about bleak living conditions, poor public assistance, and moral degeneration was not simply an effort to violate earlier conventions of Soviet literature, but also to illuminate daily crises that were continually swept under the rug by state and cultural authority alike. These texts incorporated multiple perspectives of those long ignored, the subversive and anarchic "voices of the crowd" in Smith's words or the "voices from the void" in Dalton-Brown's.<sup>10</sup> Finally rid of strict censorship with the onset of Gorbachev's policy of *glasnost*, writers delved into descriptions of the lives that overwhelmed reality, but were prohibited from appearing in print. To borrow Condee's apt wording, "while most of the worst of Soviet literature depicts a 'reality' that does not exist, Petrushevskaiia's writings depict a reality that 'does not exist.'"<sup>11</sup> Both authors at the focus of this project, address the dilemma of how, if at all, one might emerge from national and personal tragedies spiritually unsullied, albeit from starkly different perspectives.

Among crises depicted, those of women occupy center stage. In contrast to male authors of post-Stalinist eras who tended to write tragic scenes in war, prison, and politics, women writers illustrated the tragedy at home. Underemployed and often receiving little to no help from husbands, these heroines demonstrate the ongoing struggle to care for children while surviving abuse and the dangerous balance of living on the brink of destruction. As the content matter so

often dealt with the domestic sphere, women's writing since the 1960s took on the derogatorily-termed category of *byt* literature; *perestroika* women's prose continued to explore *byt* themes, but omitted from their works the redemptive qualities of earlier women's writing.<sup>12</sup> *Perestroika* women's prose now engaged with the daily crises of everyday life for women in the late Soviet era, but no longer did so with an ultimately reassuring note of hope, justice, and faith as previous authors had.<sup>13</sup> As such writing continued to gain popularity and join post-Soviet women's prose in the 1990s, additional critics and scholars recognized the inherent value of women's experiences and those of "regular people" (*liudi obychnye*) or those outside of "national concern" (*gosudarstvennogo masshtaba*).<sup>14</sup> As studies by Kazarina (1996), Smith (1997), Malygina (1997), and Sutcliffe's later book-length study of *byt* women's prose (2009) show, *byt* matters.<sup>15</sup> This perceived lack of direct engagement with *byt*ie – or larger existential questions of the meaning of life – led critics to excoriate women's *bytovaia* (everyday) literature for breaking with generic tradition and choosing the venerable medium of literature to depict presumably meaningless scenarios. Of course, these scenes were gynocentric, thus indicating the underlying misogyny below these critics' claims. The offense, in their eyes, was not just that women writers were not writing on *byt*ie (because, of course, many were), but that they were depicting the domestic, predominantly female sphere of existence, which they did not see as proper for reproduction in print. Western and Russian scholars alike have taken pains to show the value of such work from Natal'ia Baranskaia and Irina Grekova in the 1960s through Liudmila Petrushevskaiia in the 1980s and 1990s to Liudmila Ulitskaia's most recent publications in the Putin era. Elena Shcheglova unabashedly defends Ulitskaia and other Russian women *byt* writers, responding directly to critic Lev Kuklin's remarks on the dullness of domesticity:

... earthly *byt*, the fullness of human life, devoid of the pursuit of vanity, is itself *bytie*. [...] It may be that one of the takeaways of the awful twentieth century will be, finally, the cognitive admission of the unique inherent worth of specifically earthly, human *bytie*. And this is in no way some type of belittlement of higher ambitions, romanticisms, and so on. Quite the contrary. They are possible only when they emerge from the earth.<sup>16</sup>

Shcheglova here argues for the inherent worth of *byt*, a position I find convincing. These stories, Shcheglova and others explain, do not detail the everyday flippantly, but instead unearth the value of the everyday, embedded within the labor of domesticity, of childrearing, of caretaking, of mourning, and, perhaps harshest, of surviving.

But as many scholars have argued, *byt* does not necessarily signify banality. In literature as elsewhere, the domestic sphere becomes a lens through which one might read an era's quality of living and measure average citizen's most pressing concerns. In *perestroika* and the tumultuous years that followed, *byt* literature, now rid of overarching state censorship, provided insight to precisely how chaotic times were. For many, Gorbachev's policies of *perestroika* and *glasnost* mark the beginning of the end of the Soviet era; although the policies were intended to usher in a new era of liberation and relative freedom, they instead brought on governmental collapse and national humiliation on the global stage. Even before the collapse in 1991, the immediate years after *glasnost*'s beginning in 1985 brought instability to nearly all spheres of Russian life, including the political, economic, and social. Issues of high crime rates, widespread corruption, the rise of organized crime, rampant inflation, and weakened government authority were only exacerbated in the later-termed "Wild 90s" of Russian history; in the early 90s, poverty increased from under 2% to between 40% and 50%, the life expectancy fell by ten years for men and four for women, hyperinflation rose to 5000:1 (ruble:USD) and the 50% of the national GDP was lost between 1989 and 1993 alone.<sup>17</sup> Such political and economic instability intensified national disillusionment and concern about a crisis of morality, the very sentiments

that appear at the center of *perestroika* and post-Soviet women's prose. Furthermore, these writers capitalized on the removal of censorship and, for the first time since the 1930s, details of the Soviet system's deeply patriarchal and even misogynistic nature appeared in print.<sup>18</sup> In scenes of unfair labor practices, low quality maternal care, overcrowded educational facilities, abject poverty, and alcoholism run amok, women writers created biting critiques of a centralized government system that claimed to act as father to its subjects, but ultimately failed to provide even basic standards of living.

The repercussions of these daily struggles most often manifest themselves through corporeality. In these texts, bodies carry the burdens and wear the scars of the nation's history, visibly demonstrating what the state denied. In criticism, both positive and negative, the trope of the body is most commonly referenced as key to the texts' impact. *Perestroika* and post-Soviet women's prose depicts the body in detailed violent and sexual scenes. First, doing so further demarcated these texts from their sanitized socialist realist predecessor and the long cultural tradition of the feminine ideal as eternally trapped within the unforgiving Madonna/whore binary or limiting symbolic *Mokosh'* or "*mat' syra zemlia*" imagery; invariably tied to fertility of land and womb, symbolic femininity drew its cultural value in large part from woman's ability to sacrifice and suffer.<sup>19</sup> Even the Soviet era ideal female body, depicted as strong and commendable for its ability to produce both labor and children, remained inherently limited in assigning value. In Beth Holmgren's words, "the good body was the hard body."<sup>20</sup> Far from gaining freedoms, female bodies in the Soviet Union gained only additional obligations of labor both domestic and public. Now recognized for their ability to work, they were still far from liberated as individuals in their own right.

But apart from corporeality's importance within the Russian literary canon, *perestroika* and post-Soviet women's writings multifarious illustrations of female bodies also had tangible implications for their contemporary social, cultural, and political spheres. Many prose works from this era helped bring to the forefront of public discourse issues of alcoholism, adultery, domestic abuse, abortion, and subpar maternal care. Many of these issues most often occurred in the domestic setting or affected predominantly women, meaning they were too often absent from previous, male-dominated generations of Russian literature. At the intersection of women's space and corporeality lies the hospital, one of the most impactful tropes of *perestroika* women's prose. Studies of hospital wards, particularly maternity wards, demonstrate the literature's potential to employ a politically and socially charged space to depict techniques of power (surveillance, biopolitics, coercive behavioral codes, imprisonment) that affect ordinary Soviet women both within and outside hospitals.<sup>21</sup> These spaces, not unlike their claustrophobic apartment analogs in the domestic sphere, appear as both prisons that confine and fortresses that protect from external dangers.

But even without its depictions of wounded, suffering, or ill bodies, *perestroika* and post-Soviet women's prose employs corporeality in challenging ways unprecedented in Russian women's literature. Positive depictions of bodies carry the potential to be considered just as improper as violent ones; showing intercourse between same-sex couples, female sexuality as a positive and enjoyable experience, and female masturbation as normal occurrence works to free women's physicality from the confines of traditional femininity. Several scholars wrote of the larger implications behind writing the body as the works were published, but since the 2000s more nuanced and in-depth studies on the topic have appeared, including Parnell's 2001 "Hiding and Using Sexuality," Knurowska's 2010 "Telesnost' v Ulitskoi" and most recently, Elizabeth



Skomp and Benjamin Sutcliffe's 2015 *Ludmila Ulitskaya and the Art of Tolerance*, all of which analyze how these texts depict female bodies as valid in its own right, regardless of its production of children or communism.

Equally important remain the generic, stylistic, and narrative evolutions that 1980s and 1990s women's prose incorporate. Moving away from journalistic tones of socialist realism, these writers combine postmodernist tendencies, such as nonlinear time, intertextuality, irony, skepticism of any proclaimed authority, with earlier techniques of naturalism, the absurd, and Bakhtin's heteroglossia, reconstruction, and grotesque. More than any of their female predecessors in Russian literature, *perestroika* era writers played with time and space in provocative ways, including juxtaposing the shrinking space of the communal apartment with the expanding Russian empire of men's Russian literature, narrating in styles that resemble the oral *skaz* tradition, and following multiple generations of maternal lines within single families.<sup>22</sup> These narrative techniques enhance the themes of uncertainty/fear and exploration/discovery that permeate the works' subject matter; while skepticism, nonlinear timelines, and authorial distance reflect national anxieties that came to mark 1990s Russian popular culture, influences of the mystic, mythic, and supernatural amplify writers' contemplations of alternative consciousnesses and ways of being.<sup>23</sup> Similarly, these texts tend to privilege the personal over the political, which aids in constructing and maintaining these themes of interrogation. Mention of large historical markers, such as wars and political policies, is often completely absent in these texts and when present, details of these events are relegated to the sidelines of the plot, reserving the center of attention for the individual's struggles.

Prioritizing repercussions of authoritative power's violent policies on the individual reinforces messages of questioning power that underlie many texts within *perestroika* and post-

Soviet women's prose. More specifically, scholars have correctly observed that some idealized demographics are targeted more often than others. Among them certainly belong images of maternity, the intelligentsia, and irrationality within the Soviet system. Confronting maternity may be *perestroika* and post-Soviet Russian women literature's most contentious theme considering the topos' sacrosanct role in Russian literary history. Petrushevskaiia, for example, creates images of mothers not as inherently nurturing, as the dominant figure was often forwarded to be, but instead as capable of just as cruel violence as the most petty crook.<sup>24</sup> Ulitskaia, on the other hand, remains within the tradition of nurturing mothers, but does so in a way that directly juxtaposes the Soviet state's (the other parental figure for individuals) disregard for its citizens.<sup>25</sup>

Scholarly publications on *perestroika* and post-Soviet women's prose have slowed since the works' peak in both popularity and publication in the late 1990s, but those that continue share a common focus on the texts' subversive potential. Continuing the line of thought by scholars such as Alexandra Smith, who wrote on how Petrushevskaiia's narrative techniques immediately call into question authoritative voices, additional publications followed by Thompson (2000, 2003), Knight (2009), Doak (2011), Adams (2012), Clowes (2014), Sorvari (2017), and myself (2018).

### *What is to be done? The Insights and Potentials of Shock*

This dissertation continues the work of previous scholars and narrows its analytical lens to questions of feminine subjective construction as depicted in the prose works of two authors: Liudmila Petrushevskaiia and Liudmila Ulitskaia. Questions at the heart of this project stem from broad contemplations on subjective construction: how do individuals interpret, appropriate, and

receive messages of power? How do we react? How do we differentiate the possible from the impossible, the allowed from the prohibited, and how do we respond? What parts of subjectivity and discipline become productive and even beneficial to us? And finally, how does literature depict the individual's constant negotiation of self?

Of course, the analytical boundaries of this project limit any answers that may be offered. I consider only one country for the span of only about two decades, as illustrated by only two authors. But the goal of this project is not to answer life's biggest questions, but only to contemplate their quirks through small cases. When considering this aspect of my methodology, I find Lauren Berlant's perspective particularly helpful; in introducing *Cruel Optimism*, a theoretical approach to analysis that informs much of this dissertation, she writes

I am extremely interested in generalization: how the singular becomes delaminated from its location in someone's story or some locale's irreducibly local history and circulated as evidence of something shared. This is part of my method, to track the becoming general of singular things, and to give those things materiality by tracking their resonances across many scenes, including the ones made by nonverbal but still linguistic activities, like gestures.<sup>26</sup>

It is with this in mind that I approach my dissertation research. I am to view universal questions through specific contexts and discuss experiences that may be common to a generation, a population, or an entire gender through illustrations of distinct moments. Therefore, while reading the primary literature that follows, my analyses take into account many of the historically specific conditions that fill the world of the texts, but also the underlying implications of these conditions on matters of subjective construction for individuals in general. Put briefly, I am to catch a glimpse of the always through the now.

I have chosen prosaists Liudmila Petrushevskaja and Liudmila Ulitskaja for several reasons. They are both widely read, even today, and recipients of prestigious literary prizes in Russia and in the West; their content matter is concentrated on common concerns of Soviet

women from Stalinism to the “Wild 90s”; and, most importantly, I argue that their texts address many of the same pressing questions of sacrifice, struggle, and survival, but from starkly differing and at times contradictory illations. While both authors detail the ongoing obstacles faced by those in the post-Stalinist everyday, Petrushevskaja’s writings tend to highlight the possible dangers of accidentally letting one’s morality erode with the crises of the times, whereas Ulitskaia’s texts pose alternatives that allow for the preserving one’s internal moral compass.

As do their convictions, so do their styles differ. Petrushevskaja’s deliberately disorienting narrators and infamously dubious heroines do more to confuse and inflict psychological harm than her worst villains and often become the villains themselves. Ulitskaia’s forthright writing paints clear parallels between individual characters and larger icons throughout Russian history, resulting in a straightforward style that mirrors the author’s straightforward message of compassion as the route to moral salvation. Put briefly, both writers employ narrative techniques that amplify their individual perspectives.

Still, even to limit my pool of data to these two writers would result in a body of text larger than the current project can adequately address. Both Petrushevskaja and Ulitskaia are incredibly prolific: Petrushevskaja began writing in childhood and published her first works as a dramatist in the 1960s, before her work was blacklisted from publication for nearly a decade. After the removal of censorship during *glasnost*, her work once again found publishers, now eager to work with the author, and she began receiving extreme popularity that continues to this day. Today, she continues to create various forms of art, including performing as a solo vocalist in concerts, staging exhibitions of her watercolors (as dark chromatically as her texts contextually), and participating in poetry readings from time to time. Ulitskaia had a later start in literature and only began writing in her 50s in 1989, after leaving her first career as a

geneticist. But since then she has continued to undertake large literary projects and still regularly publishes new lengthy tomes, despite her recent diagnosis with breast cancer. It is in part for this reason that I have chosen to only examine their prose texts between the introduction of *glasnost* in 1985 and the beginning of the Putin era on December 31, 1999.<sup>27</sup>

But far more influential in my choice of scope are cultural and social milieu between these chronological boundaries. I have chosen these dates specifically in order to narrow my focus on the atmosphere of uncertainty and anxiety that surrounded the Soviet Union's collapse. As my project deals primarily with questions of power, individual perceptions of agency, and experiences of subjectivity, my main interest remains those moments of tension, worry, and fear when individuals navigate the ever-changing nature of subjecthood. I aim to look at the ebbs and flows of subjectivity, those moments when we notice the constant interpretation and renegotiation of selfhood. Such moments, I find, come into focus best at times of change and few eras document radical change better than late- and post-Soviet Russia.

*The Ideal v. the Real and what happens to the rest of us?*

Although I to turn several theorists from different fields throughout my project, they all invariably stem from Foucault. Foucault's writing on disciplinary power and subjective construction pull together the various topics and questions addressed in this project, while the later theorists I engage provide more narrowed discussions on a few of the innumerable elements and implications of disciplinarity.

In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault discusses how power is mapped across dimensions, not only vertically from state authorities down to the individual and vice versa (such as via law, police, and prisons) but also across fields horizontally, showing how power manifests itself in

different realms of life (education, workplaces, hospitals, churches, etc.) and constantly reasserts and reproduces itself in the everyday. Disciplinary power, he shows, develops in incalculable networks across the human experience, at every turn encouraging and discouraging various behaviors, ultimately resulting in a dominant power that disciplines through coercion instead of force. To illustrate his ideas on surveillance, Foucault utilizes the idea of panopticism, named after Jeremy Bentham's panopticon. A prison consisting of one central column located in the middle of a circular building of prison cells, the panopticon was designed so that prisoners could not discern the guards' presence in the watch tower and thus would always behave as if under surveillance. Such surveillance, Foucault demonstrates, constructs and maintains dominant power.

But additionally necessary for the reproduction of power is the subject's participation. The panopticon would not work if the prisoner did not believe in earnest that she was being watched. Foucault's most impactful observation might be how subjects, if entering the dominant social order, become part of the disciplinary machine to which they victim. As Jack Halberstam asserts, "Disciplinary [...] depends upon and deploys normalization, routines, convention, tradition, and regularity..."<sup>28</sup> To receive the benefits of subjecthood, individuals must participate in, and thereby perpetuate, the techniques of power that constrain, coerce, and exploit them. This project's primary area of interest lies in the moments of tension that arise as subjects experience disciplinary power and must decide, even if unknowingly, how to react. In navigating the dominant social order and their position within it, they face the tension between the ideal and the real, the promised and the actual, the presumed goal and the realistic probable. This project's focus is how the selected fictional works illustrate how topographical structures of society work

to regulate individual behavior, how individuals receive and react to these messages, and how some attempt to escape or resist them, even if only temporarily.

Lilya Kaganovsky's *How the Soviet Man was Unmade: Cultural Fantasy and Male Subjectivity under Stalin* provides the backdrop against which my project analyzes scenes of subjective construction. Kaganovsky explores the male experience of subjectivity during Stalinism and argues for a portrait of subjective construction that encapsulates two contrasting, yet codependent conceptions of exaggerated masculinity: Stalin's image plays the role of the ever-elusive phallus to which male subjects strive but never attain, while the wounded and mutilated bodies of its subjects illustrate the ongoing sacrifices they were coerced to make. These two competing images together form a "fantasy of extravagant virility" that keeps in tension the desired and the actual.<sup>29</sup> While Kaganovsky's research raises important questions of physical sacrifice during the Soviet era and its deeper implications in social structures of power, my interests lie in the female experience of physical sacrifice (or, when not voluntary, of loss) and subsequent productions of feminine subjectivity as contrasted between the promised and the possible. With attention to scenes in which individuals notice, experience, resist, continue, or evade disciplinary techniques of power, this project analyzes the authors' depictions of subjective construction and posits the real world implications for the individual in the dominant Soviet social order.

Similar to Kaganovsky, American theorist Lauren Berlant also focuses on the physical ramifications of tension between dominant power and the individual.<sup>30</sup> In *Cruel Optimism*, she investigates the complications of the individual's personal attachment to objects presumed "happy" according to dominant power, but ultimately harmful to the subject.<sup>31</sup> While optimism can be considered attachment to any symbolic object (a job, a promotion, a relationship, a

milestone, etc.), Berlant defines *cruel* optimism as that which comes to hinder, halt, handicap, or harm the individual, unable to let go of the attachment to the object. In *perestroika* women's prose, cruel optimism most clearly stems from a Soviet ideology that rested on oppressive gender hierarchies and is exacerbated by the era's nearly ubiquitous disciplinary surveillance.

Protagonists of the selected texts embrace their cruel attachments to the Soviet system's proclaimed ideals they cannot fulfill. Struggling to reconcile their perceived inadequacy, they twist, manipulate, and pervert these ideological models until they can meet them, thereby inadvertently and at times unknowingly resisting dominant paradigms.

Moreover, Berlant's writing also posits the ordinariness of suffering, a paramount matter in *perestroika* women's prose. As my research brings together discussions of the quotidian *byt*, violence (physical, discursive, and other), and coping strategies within this intersection, Berlant's point is crucial. Berlant looks at American history for her case studies (the "contemporary world" as she calls it), but her following ideas on how psychological and spiritual suffering has become normalized holds true in the Soviet context as well. She writes:

the irony that the labor of reproducing life in the contemporary world is also the activity of being worn out by it has specific implications for thinking about the ordinariness of suffering, the violence of normativity, and the "technologies of patience" that enable a concept of the *later* to suspend questions about the cruelty of the *now*.<sup>32</sup>

Certainly, the heroines of *perestroika* and post-Soviet women's prose experience precisely the same suffering. Their material and societal conditions demand constant labor, sacrifice, and worry, to the extent that simply "reproducing" this life, or surviving it, wear away at them, their bodies, and their spirits. The texts read in this project show the dangerous repercussions of normalized suffering and tell of a few individuals who attempt to break free of their violent societal milieu.



For those moments when individuals attempt to resist or escape, Teresa Polowy's study of muted group theory within the worlds of Tatiana Tolstaya's prose is particularly helpful.<sup>33</sup> With a viewpoint invoking the philosophy of Julia Kristeva, Polowy interrogates various power structures of Soviet society, who gets to build them, whom they benefit, whom is omitted, and how one might, conceivably, go about building an alternate understanding of society.<sup>34</sup> Women, one of the "muted groups" are at times able to break free from the patriarchal dominant group and explore an area all their own, "female space." Polowy defines female space as "a conscious zone 'on the boundary of patriarchal institutions and their legitimations.'"<sup>35</sup> More specifically, female space is that which lies just outside the dominant culture, meaning it is only fully accessible to the muted/non-dominant group (the dominant group, for its part, has no corresponding dominant-only space, as the makeup of social consciousness is already designed by the dominant group).<sup>36</sup> In female space, women are "physically present in the same old world but are free from patriarchal convention [...]"<sup>37</sup>

To say *perestroika* women's prose portrays those fully "free from patriarchal convention" would be too optimistic. Furthermore, one could argue that complete freedom from oppressive social conventions may be impossible; after all, can we ever completely unlearn the social mores so deeply ingrained in each of us since birth? However, my project reads as in and of themselves an effort of resistance the moments when protagonists simply consider a female space where dominant codes are minimalized, paused, or absent. Petrushevskaja and Ulitskaia's works depict women whose only ability to escape their bleak realities is through consciousness; they create worlds where they feel temporarily freed from the social hierarchies that cast them out and where they sense an autonomy absent in their realities.

Lastly, vital to these analyses remains those moments when individuals do not resist techniques of power around them, but instead adopt and perpetuate them. This project functions on the understanding that performing gestures of oppression and coercive authority are just as telling as modes of challenging it. To return to the theorist whose contemplations engender so many analyses of *perestroika* and post-Soviet women's writing, earlier Soviet writing, and writing in general, Foucault reminds us "We are neither in the amphitheater, nor on the stage, but in the panoptic machine, invested by its effects of power, which we bring to ourselves since we are part of its mechanism."<sup>38</sup>

### *The body, the social, and the psychological*

Although the following chapters of this dissertation are separated and labeled into thematic units, they are hardly distinct. The body, the social, and the psychological remain always already irrevocably interconnected and interdependent. Physicality plays a significant role in the construction of social identity; social interaction is a primary influence in one's psychological perspectives; and the psychological remains just as physical as any other part of the body. My goal is not to address the three as separate competing factors, but as different sides of a complex web of processes that constitute subjective identity. At times, my focus will lie closer to one corner of the body-social-psychological triangle than others, but it is never with an assumption of the ability to set them apart from each other.

In the first chapter, my attention lies near the body corner of the triangle. I read selected texts (Petrushevskaia's *Vremia: Noch'* and "Nezrelye iagody kryzhovnika" and Ulitskaia's "Vtorogo marta togo zhe goda" and *Veselye pokhorony*) to examine subjectivity via corporeality. I argue that bodies in these works do not only reflect subjective construction, but in fact become

a primary vessel through which it takes place. While many texts depict how the regulation of bodies (and [self-]disciplining the body) indoctrinates subjects to codes of the patriarchal dominant social order, I find that these works also show the subjects' reactions to such moments as situated in the physical. All with the end goal of gaining influence (financial, social, political, and other), they utilize their bodies: some capitalize on physical talents or feminine appearance, others threaten physical violence upon themselves and loved ones, many learn to perform dominant corporeality when need be, and a few adopt the ideology and begin surveilling others' bodies. Together, they demonstrate how individual subjectivity is constantly produced and negotiated via corporeality.

Chapter II moves into the social with specific attention given to interpersonal romantic relationships in order to remain within a narrow focus. Reading Petrushevskaia's "*Takaia devochka, sovest' mira*," *Svoi krug*, and "*Bessmertnaia liubov*" and Ulitskaia's *Medea i ee deti*, "*Bron'ka*," and *Sonechka*, I demonstrate how the heroines manipulate and reinterpret dominant regulations on social relationships in attempt to lessen their suffering, much of which comes from living under the Soviet totalitarian regime. Their efforts are often not successful and many inevitably continue the cycle of violence that causes their pain in the first place, but their attempts to manipulate or resist regulations on social interaction is an example of testing the limits of subjectivity. At times, they ignore the gendered behavior proscribed to them by ideological power structures; they create interpersonal bonds where popular conventions say bonds should not exist; they deliberately perform social roles condemned by dominant power; and they manipulate and exploit social relationships for personal gain. In this chapter, I look at those who go against Soviet power's messages of how women "should" behave with others and how this, too, is an attempt to test limits of the individual subject's influence.

Lastly, chapter III ponders those moments when subjects attempt to escape psychologically. The heroines of Petrushevskaiia's "*Most Vaterloo*" and "*V dome kto-to est*," and Ulitskaia's "*Lialin dom*," "*Doch' Bokhary*," and "*Narod izbrannyi*" seem exhausted from a lifetime of being measured against unrealizable ideological standards. No longer striving toward the ideal, they attempt to create new spaces in which they are the ideal. These spaces do not fully free them from patriarchal dominant power, but their search for an alternate understanding of reality – through fantasy, hallucination, delusion, madness, or other – allows them a greater sense of influence than does the society around them. Even when these efforts fail, the attempt itself is a form of resistance to the dominant culture. In these discussions around how social conventions encourage and discourage different affects, what lies beneath is the question of the possibility of escaping such assumptions altogether.

## Chapter I

### The Sovereignty in Survival

“Indeed, if all nineteenth-century male authors came out from under Gogol’s overcoat, then today’s young female prosaists have emerged from under Petrushevskaja’s skirt.”  
- Goscilo, *Dehexing Sex*<sup>39</sup>

“What does it mean to consider the ethics of longevity when, in an unequal health and labor system, the poor and less poor are less likely to live long enough to enjoy the good life whose promise is a fantasy bribe that justifies so much exploitation?”  
- Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*<sup>40</sup>

In stark contrast to Socialist Realist prescriptions on the body that guided literature from the 1920s, in which valorized bodies were strong, healthy, clean, and eternally working to build the promised communist utopia, Russian women writers of the 1980s and 1990s capitalized on decreased censorship to show images of female bodies that took a more realistic, and at times unsettling, approach.<sup>41</sup> Instead of women’s bodies as the previously prescribed “ideologically orthodox womb/factory, tirelessly producing future workers at the behest of the national economic plan” as Helena Goscilo aptly describes them, these writers produced portrayals of female corporeality in previously unexplored ways: as wounded, abused, or simply worn down from a life time of hardship; as sexual beings in their own right, without primary concern with reproduction or male desire; and as the universal human body with the same aches, pains, and ailments as everyone else. This chapter builds on Goscilo’s and others analyses of female

writer's utilization of corporeality and explores how two of them, Liudmila Petrushevskaja and Liudmila Ulitskaja, employ the trope to illustrate subjective construction – or the subject's establishing of the self – and the various ways selfhood is continually reproduced, negotiated, and interrogated. Engaging with previous scholarship on subjectivity, sovereignty, and Soviet sexuality, I look at how the body not only reflects or symbolizes, but also builds the self. Though the body, individuals interpret disciplinary power – its prescribed abilities and restrictions on the subject - and then react to it, whether via adoption, adaptation, manipulation, resistance, or other.

### *Bodies that Matter: Bodies as Scandalous and Productive*

Unsurprisingly, reception of *perestroika* women's prose and its tendency to illustrate the details of the human body has been mixed, particularly among Russian critics. Contemporary critics, unaccustomed to such prose, denounced these works as unnecessarily vulgar, deriding it as “*chernukha*” or “black stuff/verismo, *pornukha*, porno.”<sup>42</sup> Their criticism betrays the trope's capacity to speak to social issues, if only via offending with a stark naturalism.

Petrushevskaja came under criticism for many perceived offenses against “serious” literature, but her unapologetic depictions of dead, mutilated, diseased, pregnant, miscarrying, and ageing bodies top the list of offenses. In 1992, for example Russian literary critic E. Ovanesian describes Petrushevskaja's work as “an abundance of sickeningly naturalistic, sexual, and sadistic scenes.”<sup>43</sup> So, too, did critics seem upset that Petrushevskaja's illustrations of bodies did not explicitly reference grander philosophical discussions. Nancy Condee, one of the first Western scholars to interview and write on Petrushevskaja, relates some of the criticism of Petrushevskaja as a “kitchen dramatist” she came across in her project: “Unsympathetic critics

characterize her writing not as *bytopisanie* (a descriptive term meaning ‘the writing about daily life’) but as *bytopisatel’stvo* (a term of opprobrium meaning ‘the tendency to scribble about daily life’).”<sup>44</sup> Just a year after Ovanesian’s condescending remarks, Western scholars Jane Costlow, Stephanie Sandler, and Judith Vowles correctly identify the source of backlash to Petrushevskaja’s texts: “her distanced descriptions of horrifying actions or feelings still seem to unnerve Russian readers, who are not yet estranged from the didacticism of socialist realism.”<sup>45</sup>

Nor did Ulitskaia evade such criticism of her detailed literary depictions of bodies. In his “Literature about Nothing” (*Literatura ne o chem*), Russian critic Lev Kuklin seems repulsed and even angry with Ulitskaia’s subject matter when he likens her treatment of the body to that of a nurse who is determined to catalogue her patient’s symptoms in embarrassingly scrupulous detail before taking him to a qualified [presumably male] doctor. Ulitskaia, he states, does not refrain from describing “the unsightly, the nude, the aged body or the physiological specifics of the female body’s functions.”<sup>46</sup> To Kuklin, Ulitskaia is guilty of two crimes: ignoring literature’s presumed primary duty to enlighten and doing so unapologetically. “And [she] does this,” he writes, “with complete and scientific scrupulousness – or even, if you’ll allow me - without shame.”<sup>47</sup> Temporarily placing problematic assumptions of appropriate gender roles and shame, I sense that Kuklin’s remark nonetheless indicates the historically specific conventions of what should and should not be portrayed in prose. Vladimir Iuzbashev hits on the same idea when he complains that Ulitskaia’s *Veselye pokhorony* is not metaphysical enough, which he blames on the conversion to a free market economy:

But I am convinced, and all of great Russian literature stands behind me and serves this confirmation, that what separates great literature from naturalism, from the writing of *byt* (*bytopisatel’stvo*) is precisely its goal [...] [this novella] is absolutely devoid of philosophical digressions, aesthetic embellishments, and authorial commentary.<sup>48</sup>

Again, the assumed transgression here is not just detailing the unsightly parts of the female body, but doing so in a way that, to Kuklin and Iuzbashev, does not add anything to the deeper meaning of the text, an offense to the canon of “high” literature and its divine goal of leading audiences to the truth.

Realistic female bodies, it seemed, had no place in the Soviet literary canon specifically due to their realism. Much *perestroika* women’s writing included images of female bodies, especially within Petrushevskaja’s works, that are noticeably not sexy; a transgression in and of itself. They depict ageing, menstruation, disease, substance abuse, rape/sexual harassment, and average elements of corporeality that in no way pertain to childbearing. As the imagined ideal role for women was woman as producer (of labor or children), such portrayals of female bodies as earthly, imperfect human bodies might seem particularly offensive. To a culture accustomed to writers assuming the moral pedestal of philosophers, as guides to enlightenment, literature that seemed to be such a blatant refusal to do so was a violation to the literary code. Furthermore, such strong condemnation from critics inevitably undercuts its own aim and evidences the trope’s politically and ideologically transgressive potential.

Since the time of publication, however, the significance behind the writers’ use of physicality has received positive reception and, more importantly, insightful scholarly attention. Scholars of *byt*, *perestroika*, and post-Soviet women’s writing alike have explored how their use of the body works in several ways, including documenting hardship, opposing preexisting societal conventions of gender, contemplating freeing possibilities of positive physical sensations, and more. On this first point, Gosciolo writes that *perestroika* women writers “have elaborated a strategy of externalization, of maximal palpability, whereby not tearful lamentations but the female body – as the text’s physical and topological center – testifies to women’s



experience [...] the body of today's heroine inscribes the torments of a living hell."<sup>49</sup> T. Belova, on the other hand, directly argues for what many contemporary critics claim their work lacks:

Petrushevskaja uses such plots to focus on the dehumanization of the social mentality of twentieth century man, who as a product of Soviet society lacks a moral foundation, and to reveal the falsity and hypocrisy of social morality and ethics. Thus, her dwelling upon the things of everyday life proves only to be a mask, which covers something more profound, even as sometimes a plain worldly story turns out to be a parable ...<sup>50</sup>

*Perestroika* women writers do not write about bodies to be vulgar, offensive, or pornographic, despite what early critics argued; instead, they engage with existential questions of being, of suffering, of sacrificing, and of surviving through a trope that is at once universal and historically specific. While all readers, one may presume, can relate to portrayals of various body quirks, the ideologically charged era and its influence on abortion, childcare, marriage/divorce, health, poverty, hygiene and personal space create a venue through which to explore pressing issues in Soviet women's life experience.

Lastly, recent scholarship has recognized that even without subtextual discussions of the social, political, or spiritual, the physical holds meaning on its own. As Elizabeth Skomp and Ben Sutcliffe write, "for Ulitskaya, the body needs no 'higher' justification [...] *telesnost'* is not merely the corporeal shell of the soul – it has significance in its own right."<sup>51</sup> Indeed, both Ulitskaia and Petrushevskaja treat the body as innately worthy of attention, but I would add that instead of continuing the corporeal/spiritual divide, texts from both authors work to break down this boundary and, in fact, emphasize the inseparability of the two. This chapter functions on the assumption, furthered by Skomp and Sutcliffe, that the corporeal "has significance in its own right," but also works to show that this significance in large part stems from the body's fundamental role in construction of the self. In other words, corporeality shapes the spiritual, psychological, and social.

*How the Body Builds, Continues, and Reproduces Selfhood*

In this chapter I work closely with Lidia Kaganovsky's *How the Soviet Man was Unmade*, in which the author insightfully outlines the construction of masculine subjectivity during Stalinism as depicted in film and prose. Kaganovsky forwards two opposite, yet codependent figures of masculinity that together constitute the dominant masculine ideal: the ultimate alpha male, personified by Stalin's image, and the numberless wounded bodies that eagerly sacrifice themselves for a chance at recognition from dominant power. My project deals little with masculinity, but Kaganovsky's research nonetheless informs my reading of physical sacrifice and feminine subjective construction in the texts below. Put briefly, I turn to her study to guide my analyses of interactions of the individual with the ideal, the visible manifestations of disciplining the body, and the disciplined subject's inevitable fate participating in and perpetuating the techniques of power that oppress her. Feminine subjective construction takes place in and on the body; while Soviet women's physical abilities (going into labor or laboring in the workplace) are precisely what is demanded and exploited by the Soviet ideal, their inability and unwillingness to reach this ideal are also expressed via corporeality. If Kaganovsky's masculine subjects are asked to sacrifice physically for the Stalinist phallus, heroines in the texts I explore are forced to sacrifice physically simply in order to survive.

Considering the ideal/real binary, I also find Lauren Berlant's concepts of cruel optimism and slow death particularly helpful. Cruel optimism, as mentioned in the introduction, describes those occurrences when subjects hold on to hopeful attachment to objects past the point of productivity and even at the expense of their own psychological, social, or physical well-being. Certainly, Kaganovsky's observations of male protagonists' willingness to sacrifice for the

Soviet system can be considered one such materialization of extreme cruel optimism. Slow death, too, has no shortage of parallels in the Soviet context. Berlant describes slow death as “a condition of being worn out by the activity of reproducing life” which draws attention to the oft overlooked personal sovereignty required for everyday physical and psychological survival.<sup>52</sup> Berlant’s writing reminds us of the work in the usual, the tedious and heavy burden of simply sustaining life. In this chapter, Kaganovsky and Berlant’s perspectives guide my analyses of subjectivity as actualized in corporeality by emphasizing the implications of discipline and the continued labor of survival.

*Liudmila Petrushevskaja: Physical, Moral, and Spiritual [De]generation*

Publishing as early as the 1970s, Petrushevskaja was one of the first Russian women writers to utilize the trope of the body in ways that simultaneously broke with traditional assumptions of women’s writing and explored through it larger existentialist questions of suffering, sacrifice, and survival. As other scholars have noted, Petrushevskaja’s prose pushes the boundaries of corporeality in Soviet literature to a shocking, yet impressive extent; in Goscilo’s words “No contemporary prosaist has explored the textual possibilities of the narrated body more profoundly and productively than Petrushevskaja.”<sup>53</sup> In many ways, Petrushevskaja’s bold and shocking texts anticipate the “overkill,” to borrow Eliot Borenstein’s term, of explicitly detailed sex and violence that later took over Russia’s literary market in the 1990s. Because of her early visibility and later success (after ten years of being blacklisted from publishing houses), scholars both in Russia and abroad have already examined Petrushevskaja’s use of the body and made important observations about how her writing challenges earlier Soviet literature’s hyperrealism and depicts the body as a palimpsest that documents long histories of trauma,

personal and national. In addition, scholars such as the aforementioned Helena Goscilo, Mark Lipovetsky, Adele Barker, Amy Adams, and others have observed one of the author's most impactful strengths: far from exposing the most disturbing parts of humanity, the Petrushevskaian body and its scandalously detailed presentation masks something even worse: spiritual and moral decay. That is to say, the minutiae of corporeality may be initially repulsive to her contemporaries, but it is only a physical externalization of the internal existential crises felt across generations. This chapter will continue previous scholars' line of thought and contemplate how the Petrushevskaian female body paints a portrait of feminine subjective construction from Stalinism to *perestroika*, when her works were created and set. In Petrushevskaiia's prose, bodies are portrayed as perverted versions of the Stalinist ideal. They are observed, regulated, and coerced; her subjects, in turn, adopt and perform the precepts of the dominant social order in hopes of benefitting, but ultimately only further harm themselves and those around them by perpetuating the oppressive techniques of power to which they are also subject.

*The Time: Night (Vremia: Noch', 1992)*

*The Time: Night* is one of Petrushevskaiia's most famous works. The novel is comprised of sporadic diary entries by Anna Andrianova, a specious narrator whose contradictory claims to love her children and deliberate efforts to hurt them has drawn scholarly attention since its time of publication. With space in short supply in the crowded *kommunalka*, Anna and her kin are as close physically as they are distant emotionally. Anna, writing at night when her family sleeps, details the vicious arguments that ensue as her daughter Alena carries out three pregnancies, her son Andrei is sent to prison, her mother Sima is sent to a psychiatric hospital for schizophrenia,

and her grandson Tima develops nervous tics from PTSD. Anna's narratorial gaze evokes the Foucaultian gaze as details of each character's life, especially those concerning the body, are surveilled, recorded, described, and analyzed by Anna and reader alike. Indeed, no bodily action is off limits: we learn of when they bleed, breastfeed, urinate, defecate, vomit, starve, binge, freeze, have sex, have orgies, bathe, break limbs, cough up mucus, get pregnant, catch STIs, are raped, beat spouses, attempt suicide, undergo abortions, and, finally, commit infanticide. In this section, I read the novel first as a radical reworking of Soviet gender norms as illustrated through the corporeal and, secondly, as a bleak (and extreme) portrait of feminine subjectivity in the late Soviet era.

Petrushevskaja's text, published in 1992, but written during Gorbachev's period of *glasnost* and set during Khrushchev's Thaw, works against preexisting conventions of socialist realist literature and draws from precisely the dominant ideological images it continually challenges. Although set and published later, the text engages with the earlier cultural doctrine of the New Soviet Woman, if only through implicit comparison. If Petrushevskaja's women are other-ed, it is via their comparison to the big Other, the ideological fantasy of the quintessential, physically strong Soviet worker, whose image, at times embodied in the *kolkhoznitsa* or *rabotnitsa*, pervaded cultural discourse until the removal of censorship under Gorbachev. This discursive construction of the New Soviet Woman relies heavily on corporeal capabilities of reproduction, physical and mental grit, and a priori assigned gender roles. While the New Soviet Man produces a hyper-exaggerated masculine virility, as described by Kaganovsky, propagandized female subjectivity centered around woman as mother (personified in the mythic *rodina-mat'*) whose most valued contribution to the producing of communism stems from her reproduction of future communists. At the same time, the New Soviet Woman was noticeably

defeminized in comparison to her 19<sup>th</sup> century counterpart; no longer psychologically and physically weak and frail, the *kolkhoznitsa/rabotnitsa* embodied strength of body, mind, and womb. In Beth Holmgren's words, "the good body was the hard body."<sup>54</sup> Now "liberated" to participate in hard work, the New Soviet Woman was expected to perform side-by-side with her male counterparts during the day, then take over the burden of housework and childcare in the evenings.<sup>55</sup>

Still, she never escaped the patriarchal family unit, despite the early Soviet era's brief experimentation with attempting gender equality. Instead, the New Soviet Woman was expected to dedicate herself (and her body) fully to production of communism, loyalty to Stalin, and care for her husband and her children. Family, either the great family of the Soviet people or the patriarchal individual familial unit, remained her primary concern. As Vera Dunham has shown, the New Soviet Woman continued some prerevolutionary intelligentsia values, the most important for this project being domesticity: the home, children, and caretaking were still very much women's obligation.<sup>56</sup> In the quotidian, the doctrinal ideology of proper communist behavior was manifested via instructional pamphlets, educational materials, magazines, literature, and film that outlined guidelines for appropriate hygiene, childrearing, beauty, and health. As women's contribution to communism via reproduction originated in corporeal abilities, their regulations, surveillance, and disciplinary power techniques followed suit.

It would be an oversimplification to claim that Petrushevskaja's *The Time: Night* only reverses or disavows patriarchal dominant Soviet cultural traditions for women. Instead, she perverts them. Her heroines continue to embody many of the aforementioned traits of the New Soviet Woman, but Petrushevskaja shows the New Soviet Woman as forced to now acclimate to and survive the cruel conditions of New Russia, not its utopian equivalent. Petrushevskaja's

heroine eventually adapts to Russia's dark 1980s and 1990s, but only at the cost of her morality. The production and continuation of late Soviet feminine subjectivity – both as the promised ideal that originates under Stalinism and the experienced reality that can appear in print only since *perestroika* – takes place on the body. The body becomes the physical site at which tension between the promised and the possible is mediated, at no small cost to its bodily owner.

In *The Time: Night*, as in many of Petrushevskaja's texts, her most condemning perversion of sacrosanct tradition is that of the mother. Again, her heroines do not simply deny the dominant ideal. Petrushevskaja's women do not stop reproducing; in fact, one of their largest troubles is that they cannot stop reproducing. Unwanted pregnancies, complications from childbirth, miscarriages, and abortions drive the text. All of the main characters - Anna, Andrei, Alena, Tima, Katia, and Nikolai - are all the result of unplanned (and to a large extent unwanted) pregnancies; their presence after being born only brings additional burdens, both financial and emotional, to their mothers. Anna and her daughter both have multiple unplanned pregnancies with married men (Anna two by one man, Alena three by three men); Alena is hospitalized for complications from her second child just a few weeks before the due date of her third; two acquaintances have abortions, and a neighbor, left without better options, "gave birth to a six-month old son, who meowed all night in front of an open window while [the mother] washed the floors, ai-ya-ai, and by morning he quieted down."<sup>57</sup> Petrushevskaja's text does not refuse or omit paradigmatic maternity; instead, she manipulates such sacrosanct conventions and targets her pen on their darkest possible manifestations. Furthermore, characters' status as mothers remains one of the largest components of their identity, as recognized both by popular society and themselves. The novel depicts them first and foremost as mothers and only later as people with unique characteristics (although, to be fair, many of these characteristics still pertain to their

motherhood). When it comes to subjecthood, their primary roles in both dominant society and in their own understanding is that of mother.

Mothers' troubles do not end with the pregnancy, with the exception of the aforementioned neighbor. The mothers in the text (and nearly all characters are mothers) adopt the role of mother and perform it to the point of excess. What Gosciolo terms "the totalitarian Petrushevskian mother [who] mirrors the totalitarian Soviet state" over-parents her children, monitoring and surveying their every move, attempting to control appetites, health, hygiene, and sexual behavior well into adulthood.<sup>58</sup> Anna is the worst offender. She berates grandson Tima for his excessive appetite, despite knowing its origin in starvation; insults Alena and Andrei for what she sees as poor hygiene; eavesdrops on her children's conversations and reads their diaries; and attempts to coerce everyone, family and stranger alike, via the use of shaming (accusing a father on a bus with his daughter of pedophilia and incest, for example, just in case he should consider it in the future). With what she describes as "the most important thing in life – love" ("And what do I get for this, I loved [Alena] madly! Madly loved Andriusha. Endlessly") Anna's tyrannizing maternal care suffocates her children and grandchildren until their dependence on her is unavoidable.<sup>59</sup> Far from denying the Soviet ideal of motherhood, Petrushevskiaia's totalitarian mothers extend it to its absurd extremes.

Just like the propagandized Soviet feminine ideal, Petrushevskian mothers are far from weak; after all, they must be physically and psychologically strong enough to survive the traumatic 20<sup>th</sup> century and care for others at the same time. Returning to Berlant's writings on the "work of getting through it," women in mid- and late- 20<sup>th</sup> century Russia carried a particularly heavy burden. The labor of survival bespeaks much about the family's current environment and common struggles in late Soviet Russia. Petrushevskiaia's prose shows the



author's familiarity with and clear understanding of the era's most pressing crises; as Costlow, Sandler, and Vowles observe, "Petrushevskaja seems to have her finger on the pulse of the times," especially when it comes to "unmasking the violence in everyday life."<sup>60</sup> The root cause of many woes remains financial instability brought on by chronic underemployment, male family members' alcoholism/unreliability, and female family members' unplanned pregnancies. Such is the case for Anna. But while her self-delusion thinly veils the severity of her situation, the details of her diary betray reality; in Petrushevskaja's works "Flesh is truth," to borrow Goscilo's wording. The corporeal, not the linguistic, emotional, or spiritual, reveal the crux of the novel: moral bankruptcy, the oppressive Soviet system that caused it, and how individuals unwittingly perpetuate it. The body documents the harsh reality both state and Anna deny. For example, Anna opens the narration with a description of her Tima's inability to control his hunger at a friend's home and her own near starvation, evidenced by her underweight, but disguised as adherence to proper etiquette and feminine vanity. She also mentions Tima's nervous tic several times, but denies to both reader and herself the ongoing psychological trauma, of which she is in part the cause, that triggers it.<sup>61</sup> Anna's selective description of her mother's illness is similar: Anna describes the details of Sima's sordid hospital conditions for the past seven years, including moments of urinary and fecal incontinence, but avoids mentioning the KGB's covert surveillance that caused Sima's schizophrenic paranoia or her own role in her mother's fate (that is, that Sima could have stayed at home if Anna was willing to take care of her). Andrei, absent throughout much in the novel, appears mostly after spending two years in prison, where he was sodomized, after which time he strives to reassert his masculinity by loudly fornicating with two prostitutes in Anna's bedroom. In these scenes and others, Petrushevskaja's devious narrator unwittingly describes the harshness of late Soviet reality, including underemployment, inefficient

housing, poor healthcare, high crime rates, and the nation's unresolved traumatic past. Through describing the body, the text becomes a body covered in scars from the traumatic 20<sup>th</sup> century. If in masculine subjectivity male subjects "wage a war against corporeality," then in late Soviet feminine subjectivity the Soviet system wages a war against woman, with corporeality as its strongest weapon.<sup>62</sup>

Unable to reconcile the tension between promised and possible, desired and real, Petrushevskaja's heroines participate in misremembering and fantasy to alleviate perceived shortcomings. Fantasy structures the diegetic events and the very format of the diary-novel. The multi-framed narrative structure of the novel exemplifies these competing historical narratives. The multi-layered rewriting of events reaches absurdity when Anna copies parts of Alena's diary into her own and, when reaching parts where Alena copied dialogue between Anna and Sima, writes her own commentary into the diaries; that is, she copies a copy, comments on comments, and fictionalizes a fiction. As such, Anna's diary evidences her own unwillingness to face reality through her immediately specious renditions of events. For example, Anna's depictions of hygiene and personal care regularly contradict each other and show her willful self-delusion. She accuses son-in-law "Ternopol'" of pedophilic and incestuous attraction to his son, but then describes her own "carnal" and "sinful" love for the same boy and shows rather disturbing attraction when she reminisces about changing his diaper, "his pee smells of a chamomile meadow. And his head, when it hadn't been washed in a long time, and his curls smell of phlox."<sup>63</sup> At one point, she shames her son for attempting suicide by self-defenestration while conveniently forgetting her own initial reaction to do the same when her first lover leaves her. While she repeatedly reasserts her beauty, youth, and thinness, claiming "No one ever gives me my age," and "I never let myself go, not in any situation," attentive readers understand she is

actually underweight and malnourished.<sup>64</sup> Although she claims to still appear young, the timeline of the diary suggests she is at least in her seventies; later, she is unable to hide her disgust for the ageing body:

It's so terrible the extent to which we can't manage our own ugliness and often appear in front of people in a frightful sight, fat, sagging, dirty, remember yourselves, people! You look like bugs, yet demand love, and I bet this husband plays around on the side in horror of Kseniia and her mother and asks what good is there in the ageing body? Everything hangs, wiggles, is curled up, clumps, joints, aches, as if [pulled tense] on ropes.<sup>65</sup>

Here we see the workings of misrecognition on Anna's part. Criticizing that which she already embodies (literally and physically), she is unwilling to recognize herself as part of this othered (by both Soviet and her own standards) demographic. Anna's efforts are less a refusal to engage in subjective self-recognition completely and more an attempt to adjust the tension between the Soviet ideal feminine subjectivity and her own reality/lack in the face of it. As Kaganovsky describes Althusser's *meconnaissance* and Lacan's mirror stage, "If recognition of yourself as a subject of a hail is always, in some way, a *misrecognition* [...] then the failure of *meconnaissance* is a moment of desubjectification."<sup>66</sup> Anna's misrecognition is rooted in a desire for partial desubjectification, but not because she is wary of patriarchal dominant power; instead, she simply does not like this part of her assigned identity. That is, Anna is unwilling to recognize herself as old not because of the physical symptoms of ageing, but because of the signified value assumptions that accompany identity politics of the elderly. Her defensiveness is explained by the Soviet context, which valued one's ability to work above all else and discarded any body incapable of contributing. Additionally, it is important to remember that in many ways disciplinary power relies specifically on subjects' self-recognition and, thereby, participation in the system. Anna may not follow authoritative disciplinary guidelines as the ideal submissive

subject would, but her perversion of them nonetheless shows her participation in continuing and reproducing dominant power.

Alena's diary reveals her own participation in misremembering: either striving toward the ideological goal of the patriarchal family unit or simply looking for financial aid as a single mother, Alena misinterprets a string of failed romantic encounters and ignores all evidence of her lovers' disinterest, whether with her first lover, who marries her only to avoid the draft, or her second and third lovers, who refuse to leave their wives or pay child support. Condee elaborates the significance of Petrushevskia's portrayal of such hopeful, but ultimately misguided women: "Her search for a 'good man,' by means of whom she could acquire the other tokens of happiness, is both naïve and mercenary. It is, oddly, just these qualities that allow for her exploitation by lovers who are equally mercenary."<sup>67</sup> Alena fails again and again to replicate the romantic ideal of the happy nuclear family, deeply ingrained by ideological messages from an early age. Eternally hoping for something better, Alena romanticizes her experiences until she convinces herself the ideal is possible. Through the process, she suffers many physical sacrifices, including complications with each pregnancy, abuse from various men, and the ongoing trauma of being an unemployed, occasionally homeless single mother. For Alena, attempts at building feminine subjectivity results in a cycle of romantic mythmaking, physical and emotional pain from rejection, and humiliation from her mother for the failure.

Both women, furthermore, construct false conceptualizations, or myths, of their relationships with their mothers and children. Anna's literal rewriting of personal history mirrors the state's efforts at national mythmaking. Participating in the [re]construction of both personal and national myths, Anna continues the Soviet tradition of purposeful misremembering/misrecognizing history to make violent tragedies more palatable and absolve

the self from guilt. The most incriminating moment comes when Anna blames her mother for exactly what she does to Alena and Tima, conveniently without realizing the parallels:

My mother wanted to be the object of [my] love and trust, she wanted to be a whole family for me, take the place of everything, and I've seen such all-women families, mother, daughter, and a small child, a nuclear family! A horror and a nightmare. [...] And at the same time the mother is jealous of all [the daughter's] friends, not to mention the men, in whom she sees competition.

As if genetically predisposed to fantasy, Anna and Alena both romanticize their relationships with their absent fathers and overestimate their proclaimed endless maternal love, while simultaneously subjecting their children to the same totalitarian parenting for which they demonize their mothers. Misremembering enables Anna to reinterpret conventional norms, such as that of maternity and femininity, until she satisfies them. Her understanding of the self, then, does not align with how authoritative power views her, but it does enable her further participation in the dominant social order. By constructing and furthering misconstrued narratives, Petrushevskaja's heroines attempt to negotiate the tension between the ideal promised by communist ideology and the reality delivered by the Soviet system. Their attempts, however, are futile and ultimately cause more harm than good on themselves and loved ones.

Petrushevskaja's overarching authorial gaze transcends describing everyday experiences of discipline. What sets her work apart from other popular exposé or pulp fiction works of *perestroika* is the author's investigation into parts of the human psyche that transform individuals from objects of surveillance to part of the network of power that confines them. If Foucault theorizes that discipline "is the specific technique of a power that regards individuals both as objects and as instruments of its exercise," Petrushevskaja's most unnerving insights articulate how individuals gradually transform from the observed to the observers.<sup>68</sup> Anna's diary and overreaching parenting techniques mimic disciplinary surveillance as the diary

becomes a written record of her efforts at self-discipline and disciplining others. As Connor Doak notes, “The most disturbing aspect of the text is not the adverse socio-economic climate in which Anna Andrianovna exists, but rather her own self-delusional psychology, the strategies of erasure which appear in her writing, and the absurdist black humour scattered throughout the text.”<sup>69</sup> Although her coercive efforts embrace many similar conventions to those of the dominant Soviet subjectivity, her efforts at “training” others relies more on shame than recognition. Again, corporeality structures her coercion: she repeatedly insults and derides her children for a range of actions, including sexual history, physical appearance, eating habits, disability, and what she deems poor hygiene. She admonishes Alena for not continuing to properly style her hair while in her ninth month of pregnancy, gives Andrei a pamphlet on hygiene as a Christmas present, and encourages him to wash his hands and wash up before eating his first meal after prison, knowing very well that

The words “go take a bath” didn’t go away, but sat in his throat, like an offense. Since [his] childhood, this phrase of mine triggered vomit and repulsion in him (since, it was understood, this phrase belittled him, reminded him what he’s worth, so sweaty and dirty, in comparison with me, always clean, two long showers a day, a different warmth! The warmth of a thermal electric station, for lack of something better.<sup>70</sup>

Shame can manifest itself as the inability to reconcile unattainable normative ideals and perceived personal shortcomings. Shame eases the subject’s pain of not living up to the ideal by placing guilt, albeit mistakenly, on the individual. Indeed, shame functions as a powerful coercive technique in this text and elsewhere. In *The Time: Night*, Anna’s shaming of her children function to generate self-doubt within them for not conforming to the ideological model instead of doubting the irrationality of the ideal. In what will have negative repercussions for years to come, Anna utilizes shame to coerce her children to conform to normative conventions of hygiene and adoption of dominant behavioral regulations overall.

As such, shame and hygiene are irrevocably associated for Alena well into her adult years; after “shameful” sexual intercourse (when losing her virginity, when sleeping with a married man for the first time), Alena rushes to clean herself immediately afterwards and thinks about her body, “which had become different, as if I was seeing it in a pornographic film, my other body.”<sup>71</sup> Anna’s shaming techniques are meant to encourage “proper” adherence to traditional Soviet protocol of personal care, but instead her callousness pushes her children away from both her and convention. In Anna, Petrushevskaja illuminates the danger of unquestioning adherence to disciplinary regulations and the greater danger of doing so without a moral compass.<sup>72</sup>

Increasing such danger is the ease of continuation, a theme reflected in the cyclical nature of time in the novel. While some scholars expect Alena, who already resembles her mother in so many ways, to continue the violence with her own children after the novel ends, later consideration by Petrushevskaja hints that Alena has finally broken the cycle.<sup>73</sup> The novel ends when Anna wakes late at night from unusual quiet; fearing Alena has killed the three children and herself, Anna investigates Alena’s room only to find they have all abandoned her, this time for good. In a 1999 interview Petrushevskaja says, “That’s the note of hope the novel gives – we are allowed to hope that with [Alena’s] act of forgiveness the vicious circle, that endless circle of revenge and recrimination, will at last be broken.”<sup>74</sup> Alena, who has been able to step out of *The Time: Night* into daylight, has broken the cycle. We know Alena is finally able to live independently from her toxic mother and later made steps toward forgiveness, as evidenced through her desire to publish her mother’s diary, but the novel cannot tell us how. Just as Petrushevskaja’s text omits the darkest parts of humanity, so does it omit the brightest: self-preservation, progress, and forgiveness.

Petrushevskaja's novel paints a bleak portrait of late Soviet life. Underscoring the impossibility of the ideal, the text depicts heroines taken over by harsh living conditions and the era's harsher moral bankruptcy. She undermines the early Soviet Union's patriarchal portraits of femininity as maternity, sacrifice, and strength by perverting them to the n<sup>th</sup> degree. Her text details the disciplinary techniques of power that attempt to guide behavior, especially those concerning the body, and the byproducts subjects must carry. At the same time, she simultaneously explores how individual subjects receive, understand, and eventually continue these messages. Not unlike social power itself, Petrushevskaja's terrifying and terrorizing mothers claim to adopt dominant ideals, but end up interpreting techniques of power in ways that cause more harm than good. While her text may allow room for answers, Petrushevskaja's signature distant authorial voice leaves no clues or hints of how to find them, fulfilling what she sees as the writer's duty: "not to resolve things, but to ask questions – as truly, honestly, and correctly as mathematicians do."<sup>75</sup>

*Young Berries (Nezrelye iagody kryzhovnika, 1999)*

Petrushevskaja's autobiographical short-story "Young Berries" recalls the author's experience at a summer camp (*lager*) in the early 1950s. The twelve-year-old narrator (hereafter L) struggles to find meaning in her experiences of being socially rejected by peers, physically attacked by boys, and eventually praised by instructors. The text illustrates L's transition from childhood to adulthood, from naiveté to awareness, and from ignorance of to participation in the social order. In this text, corporeality both reflects and reifies L's experience; again, subjectivity is produced and generated in the corporeal.



The setting emblemizes the larger dominant Stalinist social order. The children's *lager* is housed in a former manor turned tuberculosis sanatorium after the revolution. Located outside of Ufa, the *lager* is run by patients no longer considered safe for societal participation and exposure. Although these "educators" (*vospitatel'nitsy*) are nearly always present, L feels defenseless without her mother, noting that the children must learn to "defend themselves" against both personal and systemic violence within the *lager*. Metaphorically and geographically removed from society, the *lager* becomes a microcosm of Soviet society at the time. As Foucault reminds us, hospitals and schools are prime sites to view physical manifestations of disciplinary power; in this case, the *lager* is both. As such, disciplinary techniques structure the children's everyday routines and train them for later participation in the larger social order as adults. For the children, much of this training involves learning how to conduct one's body in "appropriate" ways. For example, the importance of lines (the popular *ochered'* trope) and order within them is emphasized to L from the beginning:

[we] ate in cafeterias where there weren't enough spaces, so we had to create lines for every chair, on which sat someone eating (*edok*). Lines formed in crosses from any chair, four beams from four chairs, and became intertwined, the hungry lines, watching over every spoonful, directed at the piehole of those sitting and eating as if they were at a bar, in no rush to go anywhere, now that they've finally fallen upon a seat.<sup>76</sup>

With space, food, and clothing in short supply, lines foster order via self-discipline. L quickly learns that in order to receive the benefits of subjectivity, such as living provisions and acceptance into social groups, proper self-discipline is necessary. As she learns how to position her body correctly, she comes to appreciate and respect the line for its disciplinarity: "the line is fairness personified," she tells us.<sup>77</sup> It is not coincidental that L's training occurs at the *lager*, where parents are absent. The *lager* may position itself as a parental figure, but just like the Soviet system it signifies, it parents through communal order, not the personal attention her

mother provide. Without her mother's protective wing, L is becoming aware of the routines and performances required to become a subject.

In the eternally-observing *lager*, personal care of the body is regulated just as strictly and one's failure to meet the ideal is visible to all. L is one such failure. Struggling to adapt to the *lager's* rules of propriety, L is soon socially outcast from the other girls. In her defense, she feels the expectations placed upon the children are unrealistic, not allowing for a child's natural energy that keeps them from sitting still as long as desired: "A twelve-year-old child doesn't have the strength to cope with her chaotic nature, to watch after herself and be a model of behavior, neatness, and reserved character."<sup>78</sup> L, she continues, cannot help but to take part in childish behaviors of running, screaming, fighting, playing games, tearing her clothes, messing up her hair, and failing to notice the snot coming out of her nose. As a result of her still nonconformist behavior, she loses her hairbrush, boots, scarves, mittens, and other rarities that visibly set her apart from the crowd. L's inability to behave according to code results in her visibly different clothing, ultimately embodied by mismatched rubber boots. Ol'ga Vainshtein explains the importance of appropriate clothing in the Soviet context and how clothing becomes a public concern:

vestimentary specificity had great significance for official surveillance over the individual: clothes had to correspond to place, time, and function; each person had to be clearly classified, and ideally she had to represent her place in some group, whether it was based on age, gender, or social standing [...] The normative discourse of social discussions of clothes created a situation of total surveillance. Not only colleagues at work, but also neighbors and teachers at school could be the mouthpiece of 'public opinion,' as could old ladies sitting on a courtyard bench or even chance fellow travelers on the subway or tram.<sup>79</sup>

Although Vainstain writes of Soviet adult society, the ideas remain in the children's context.

They may not care about fashion as explicitly as adult women, but they certainly care about fitting in; L's developing romantic feelings for bully Tolik prompt her to consider physical appearance

in a new way (“It was very important to me to look decent, a girl of twelve years, no joke! In the older course, the sixth, was the short Tolik”).<sup>80</sup> Clothing and bodily care in general feature as venues through which larger authoritative power – either a popular social clique, the *lager* and its teachers, or the Soviet system overall – train subjects in self-discipline. Furthermore, L’s difference in attire prompts her first experience with recognition from the localized social order established within the narrative. While her educators struggle to keep the young girl under control, the other girls exclude her from their social group. Certainly, the dynamics of social exclusion and reprimand are disciplinary mechanisms critical to the continuation of dominant power.

Humiliated and unwelcome, L begins walking alone, behind the other children, everywhere she goes, “like a recusant (*otshchepenets*), a sinful soul [...]”<sup>81</sup> Reflecting on her early inability to conform, the older narrator has the self-awareness and cognitive ability to articulate what went wrong:

The collective doesn’t like when someone behaves separately, not the right way, [when someone] runs late, doesn’t dress correctly. The collective – and the girl had been raised in collectives since preschool – chastises, severely. It mocks you, thrashes you on the head, nips at you, trips you, robs the weak of what it can, badgers you. It beats you right on the nose with its fist, causing blood. It wildly laughs [...] They’ve beat the sense of ownership out of you forever. Give it all up!<sup>82</sup>

In these episodes, L learns the consequences of not fitting in with conventional discipline, a lesson that will follow her as an adult in Soviet collectivism. To join the social order, she must learn to control her physical impulses and present her body in the proscribed appropriate ways.

As L’s awareness increases, she also receives strong messages about her place within the social order as female. Not coincidentally, her developing consciousness is reflected within her female body; throughout the short story, L complains of growing pains located in small “swellings” on her chest, thus alluding to half the double entendre of the text’s title (the other

half refers to the pubescent boys' genitalia). At the same time, specifically timed heart palpitations, visible nervousness, and clouded cognition evidence L's first experiences of sexual attraction. The object of her affection, Tolik, delivers the strongest message of what it means to be female: while L is walking to her dormitory one evening alone, she is unexpectedly encircled by Tolik and his group of friends, who are described as wolves on a hunt. Although L is presumably too young to know the full possibilities of physical attack (that is, rape), she immediately intuits the extreme danger of her situation; as they close in on her, she recognizes the impact the moment has on her: "After – for my whole life – I recognized that mask of a senseless, conspiring, foul smile, the involuntary smirk, surreptitiously, for yourself, when no one is looking [...] I prepared to sell my life dearly [...] What could they do to me?"<sup>83</sup> L understands the nature of the attack: they chose her because she is female, alone, and vulnerable. The experience foreshadows much of what L will experience as a young woman by introducing her to the constant vigilance and self-defense abilities needed to survive in popular/patriarchal/dominant/Soviet society as a single woman. L, whose "swelling" on her chest is paralleled by the boys' "swelling" in their groin from excitement of the attack, is becoming aware of gendered power dynamics in popular society and her own ideological subordination and, in Lacanian terms, "lack" as female.

Apart from giving insight into L's process of maturing, the scene also warns of the danger of mob mentality, a phenomenon Soviet ideology claimed would be eradicated under communism. Observation structures much of the short story, this scene being no exception. The attack happens during one of the rare moments educators are not present. Sensing the guard's temporary absence from the Foucaultian panopticon, the boys allow themselves to be overtaken by an animalistic drive to hunt, conscious only of "the feeling of the collective pursuit, to catch

her!”<sup>84</sup> Petrushevskaja’s language underscores the boys’ sense of presumably primitive instincts throughout the encounter: “Like wolves, they instinctively cut off the road from the living creature,” “they come together around the sacrifice,” and, most telling, “As if they were all seized by one feeling, the collective reasoning of hunters, which makes them all one organism, falling into a heap upon the corpse.”<sup>85</sup> Much of Petrushevskaja’s prose seems to warn of the dangers of forgetting one’s inner sense of morality. Here, I do not mean to conflate her recounting of the incident with implicit approval of observatory disciplinary techniques; instead, I feel the scene stresses the importance of individual morality above all else. That is, one’s sense of morality must remain strong independent of observation or disciplinary structure. Petrushevskaja’s text, as many of her others, illustrates the potential evil and widespread immorality that can easily overcome anyone if only given the opportunity. Considering her oeuvre, it is not a stretch to see the mob of boys as parallel to late Soviet adult society.

Thankfully, L is able to escape the impending attack, in no small part thanks to her body. Seeing that the boys have positioned themselves as to block all routes of escape, L is left with few choices and resorts to screaming for help. L screams until the boys are visibly distracted by fear of her being heard, then capitalizes on the moment by darting past them toward the dormitory. From this moment on, they stop harassing her, now aware that “This girl, it turned out, had the talent to scream, horrifyingly. She had a strong, unusual voice, from a low whine to a high shriek. And this talent appeared at the necessary moment.”<sup>86</sup> With the scream, L discovers an individual power she previously was unaware she had: the ability to scream and, therefore, the power to escape harm. But she knows this power is limited; it will not always save her, only when she is able to distract her attackers with her voice. Her body, in both voice and the physiological changes of puberty, further demarcates the extensions and limits of L’s

abilities. Just as she is learning of the various power dynamics that shape adult society, she is experiencing through corporeality her own place within it. She is becoming indoctrinated into the social order and realizing both her potential to participate within it and the cost of doing so: she must fall in line, behave appropriately, carry her body appropriately, and be recognized as female.

When L returns to the dormitory, she realizes the other girls were aware L was being attacked; maybe they had also been targeted, she wonders, or maybe “they’re descended from the dark times of the cave, each [woman] was a descendent of this hunt and catch.”<sup>87</sup> L views the harassment as a ritual of initiation into the social order, another price to pay for participation in the *lager’s* society. Through these attacks, and the daily physical harassment that follows, the girls are being trained to recognize themselves as female, as vulnerable, as sacrifices, and as objects of a hunt. Furthermore, her inclination that similar attacks have occurred since “ancient times” correctly indicates that gender hierarchization is not limited to the Soviet historical context; instead, L’s reflections have implications that reach far beyond socialist patriarchy.

The children, Petrushevskaja notes, accept the rules of behavior unquestioningly, ready even to “return to the ancient way of life, with communal food in rations, the leaders get more and the last and weak get less or nothing at all, and with women as communal” and even more accepting of established social hierarchies, with the “downcast” (*opushchennyi*) as fair game to the entire collective: “you can use him however you want, beat him if you wish, eat him with a spoon, mock him, and everyone around can make him do whatever they want.” Perhaps this is why L so easily accepts Tolik’s daily harassment afterwards; instead of turning her off from his presence, L’s romantic feelings for Tolik only increases as he continues to tease, tackle, and push her. Tolik’s harassment signifies recognition. Even negative attention demonstrates L’s status in

the social order as a subject, answering the call and being recognized by the “tsar” Tolik. Furthermore, the *lager*, separate from popular society, functions by the rules of this “ancient time,” when not under educator observation. Tolik is the leader (*vozhak*), the girls are the “last” ones who get less food and L, due to her inability to correctly perform the routines of the collective, is the “weak” and “downcast” who can be tormented and abused at others’ will. Accepting the status of weak/last/downcast is the sacrifice L and some of her female peers must make if they wish to be perform dominant subjectivity; in order to participate, they must recognize themselves as already less than. In what becomes a metonymical illustration of regression from civility to savagery, the *lager* signifies the author’s larger concern with late Soviet society’s moral bankruptcy, when people (and even children) turn on each other, hunting and taking advantage of the weak for personal gain.

Recognition continues to build L’s awareness of subjectivity in the classroom. First admonished for her subpar appearance, her ability to write poetry catches her educators’ attention. When L writes a poem for Constitution Day (“We are the Soviet people / Today we are strong / And we stand for the world around the whole world”), her teacher asks “Did you write this yourself?” and L becomes the *lager*’s largest source of pride.<sup>88</sup> L’s ability to write ‘correct’ Soviet poetry and ‘correctly’ praise Stalinist ideology demonstrates her developing preparedness for entering Soviet subjectivity. Both educators and children recognize L’s progress, positively reinforcing her behavior with an invitation to perform a dance at the New Year’s party and increased popularity among the children. Not coincidentally, L receives a replacement for her lost boot, the object that made her most visibly different from the other students, around the same time. Now part of the collective, L, it seems, has learned how to

perform Soviet subjectivity correctly and, as a reward, has been recognized by the dominant power.

L's experiences that summer coalesce into an echo representative of larger Soviet society and Soviet collectivist ideology in general. Still, L understands that the *lager* is its own world with separate, if similar, social structures. When Tolik calls her in Moscow to ask her on a date (albeit as a prank), L understands that the two worlds cannot combine: "That world could not exist in the conditions of Moscow, in a communal apartment, among neighbors, in our apartment, filled with bookshelves in which there hid foul bedbugs, and you could only sleep on the floor under the table."<sup>89</sup> She deliberately misrecognizes Tolik, her harasser/crush/ideal, and refers to him as "Lena" to throw off caller and eavesdropper alike. The *lager* may have provided L with some of the training needed to navigate adult Soviet subjectivity, but it remains just that – training. When she leaves with her mother, L, still officially homeless, must reenter popular society, this time as an aware, somewhat indoctrinated young woman, and attempt to negotiate her place in the early post-Stalinist era.

By approaching the text as an autobiographical narrative, Petrushevskaja is able to capitalize on the child narrator's ability to interrogate deeply embedded accepted truths and the increased understanding of them that accompanies hindsight. L's interactions with her peers introduce her to the types of ethical hierarchies and expectations of performing conventions that will structure her future as an adult and, specifically, as a Soviet citizen. Furthermore, it begins her training in performing sanctioned Soviet corporeality; she learns what to wear, where to stand, what to say, how to defend herself, and how to entertain in ways that will aid her entrance into the dominant order. Bodily developments mirror psychological and emotional maturation via pubescent developments (the name of the story, for example), but the body also becomes a site of



establishing selfhood. Bodily behavior, from brushing hair to screaming for help, produces L's feminine- and Soviet- subjectivity.

*Liudmila Ulitskaia: They May Take Away Our Freedom, but They'll Never Take Our Bodies*

For Ulitskaia, the body can seem a natural choice of literary topoi given her first career as a biologist and geneticist. When asked in a 2001 interview about what prompted the career shift, she responded, "There was no transition, as a matter of fact. More than anything else in the world, what has always seemed most interesting to me is the individual. In a way, I really didn't change my profession, but just changed the method and instruments of my research."<sup>90</sup>

Ulitskaia's primary concern has always been comprised of putting life under the microscope, the only change is her medium. Monika Knurowska puts it aptly when she writes "[Ulitskaia] uses corporeality as an artistic tool not only for the sake of describing the fate of women, but of people overall [...] What interests Ulitskaia is the person as a single unit, the union of the psychological and biological in him."<sup>91</sup> If Petrushevskaja's depictions of the body disguised internal darkness, Ulitskaia's illuminates it and attempts to restore it to humanity. In these texts, the union of the physical with the spiritual, of the biological with the psychological, is brought to the forefront to demonstrate the author's vision of surviving trauma without sacrificing morality, if the right values are remembered.

While the body is one of the most prominent tropes in Ulitskaia's oeuvre, depictions of adolescent and sexually active bodies are especially numerous, (for this reason and others, both of the texts in this section feature adolescent characters who begin exploring sexual activity). First, it is important to remember that portrayals of female sexuality as pleasurable are already noteworthy as they disrupt traditional conventions of femininity as resting upon the

mother/prostitute binary, without room for any variant in between. Costlow, Sandler, and Vowles explain that *perestroika* women writers, such as Ulitskaia, “see women’s sexual pleasure as not in conflict with the biological reality of women’s capacity to bear children, and in their affirmation of lesbian existence they do not limit women’s sexual pleasure to heterosexual (or monogamous) settings.”<sup>92</sup> While homosexual relations are only briefly mentioned in the texts below, these selections utilize sexuality to explore not only intimacy and pleasure, but also subjects’ construction of self and entrance into (or exit from) dominant society.

More specifically, what sets Ulitskaia’s prose apart is that she shows sex – between any genders - as a physical manifestation of intimate connections the author forwards as a saving grace in violent times. The connective ability of sex, as Christina Parnell notes, comes in part from the participant’s opportunity to focus on the personal instead of the social:

Ulitskaia's protagonists retreat into the private sphere in order to resist ideological influence. This gives them the chance to focus on subjective relationships, and most importantly, on the individual Self [...] Exploring the sexual side of human nature will turn one's eyes first towards individual differences and not toward social or ideological fields which, during Soviet times, represented fundamental differences in human relationships.<sup>93</sup>

Sex under the right circumstances allows for temporary reprieve from ideological psychological constraints that otherwise separate and offers the universal language of physicality that bridges such divides. Again, Ulitskaia's writing shows physical intimacy as a way to create connections that will carry individuals through national and personal tragedies.

Along these lines, the author’s depiction of childhood, too, leads to revelations that challenge divisive mainstream assumptions. Ulitskaia’s many child characters contribute a perspective that allows them to notice moments of power imbalance that adults may miss due to their ordinariness. Child narrators mark precisely when they notice episodic inequalities because it is their first time seeing it. As will be shown below, both pre-teen characters in this section are

positioned within a space of tension between the equality they were taught to believe existed and the world they are coming to learn. They struggle to reconcile the promised and the possible as they transition from naiveté to awareness. Corporeal imagery signifies their changing perception of personal agency, tracing both its expansion and limitations, as the protagonists, especially children, navigate subjective construction and strive to find their place in the dominant social order.

“March 1953” (*Vtorogo marta togo zhe goda*, 1994)

Ulitskaia’s “March 1953” is semiautobiographical. The short story follows Lilia, a socially outcast twelve-year old Jewish girl based on Ulitskaia at the same age. Her struggle to cope with several dramatic changes in her life, including the death of her great-grandfather, physiological developments of puberty, and an anti-Semitic bully who verbally harasses her and slaps her behind with the school gates in front of classmates, are all based on true events in Ulitskaia’s childhood, as is the story’s culmination, when Bodrik, the bully, physically attacks Lilia and attempts to sexually assault her.<sup>94</sup> Lilia, much to her surprise, easily fends him off, giving him multiple bruises and a possible concussion.<sup>95</sup> That evening, Lilia lies on the couch crippled by the pains of her first menstrual cycle, not understanding the source or meaning of her pain. In the next room, her great-grandfather quietly dies and, on the same night, Joseph Stalin suffers the cerebral hemorrhage that would kill him three days later, thus giving the story its name.

The changes that occupy Lilia’s attention are both physical, as she goes through puberty, and psychological, as she suffers the loss of her great-grandfather, and becomes aware of various societal power structures in her environment. Each of these developments is related through

scenes of intense corporeal experiences, from sexual assault and domestic violence to cuddling and body language. In this short story as in others, Ulitskaia employs physicality to not only represent psychological subjectivity, but also to shape, produce, and maintain it. Lilia's early subjective construction and increasing familiarity with the assumptions that structure the patriarchal social order are experienced through the body.

Lilia's most striking and alerting sign of things to come introduces her to what it means to be Jewish in Stalin's Soviet Union. Her "difference" first appears when her teacher lists examples of nationalities that make up the Soviet Union, naming Jews as one and causing Lilia, the only Jewish student, great embarrassment. After school that day, Bodrik waits for Lilia in her apartment building and, before violently attacking her, pointedly asks "Why did your Jews crucify our Christ?"<sup>96</sup> The narrator explicates the underlying power dynamics: "He asked as if the Jews crucified this Christ solely to give him, Bodrik, *the full and sacrosanct right* to spank Lil'ka on [her] behind with the rusty iron gates."<sup>97</sup> In this scene, Bodrik experiments with exercising the societal privilege assigned to him for his Orthodoxy, while Lilia receives a strong message of her own social disempowerment as Jewish. Foucault reminds us that power "separates, analyses, differentiates"; it does not work to create one homogenous aggregation. Lilia in this scene marks one of her first experiences of feeling separated, analyzed, and differentiated. Reflecting on this time years later, Ulitskaia explains that "[Being Jewish] meant being not worse and not better, but being *different*...I wanted to be like everyone else ... From time to time, [other children] in the courtyard made me remember that I was not like them."<sup>98</sup> Through this violent episode, Lilia becomes more aware of dominant ideology and the various inequalities that constitute it. As part of her entrance into Soviet adult society, Lilia must learn to recognize not only different power dynamics that make up the social order, but also her

expected place within them and the innumerable consequences of performing or failing to perform that subjective identity.

After Bodrik throws himself onto Lilia, he holds her against the wall and puts his hands down her pants, changing the nature of the attack from racially-based violence to racially- and sexually-based violence. Again, Lilia's identity is marked in difference; at this point, she is targeted for her gender. While Lilia's learns of the limitations of her assigned subjective identity as female and Jewish, Bodrik's attack stems from the amalgamation of his fluctuating understanding of uneven power dynamics, fears of inadequacy, and confused pubescent sexual frustration.

Lilia is unexpectedly overcome with a strength not known or experienced before.<sup>99</sup> She is overtaken by "such a red, powerful, rage that she begins to tremble, barely able to contain in herself the hugeness of this feeling, which was without name and without limits."<sup>100</sup> No longer victim to and powerless against Bodrik's daily harassment in the school yard, Lilia can now sense a level of security in knowing she has some say over who can and cannot harm her. That is, at the same time she learns of behaviors expected to accompany her identity (submission, in all likelihood), she experiments with the repercussions of acting outside of those limitations. In this case, it pays off and she easily defends herself. Ulitskaia's text pays special attention to the well-being of children, whom she seems to consider as particularly defenseless against various violences of daily life. In Lilia, Ulitskaia demonstrates that in the beginning of adolescence, when much seems confusing and frightening, a sense of personal strength, and in this case physical strength, provides comfort. If the death of Lilia's great-grandfather, the death of the national patriarch, and her entrance into adulthood leave her searching for signs of hope, then her body provides her with some reassurance.

That afternoon brings Lilia further understanding of sociopolitical networks of power and her position within them. When her grandmother, Bela, learns of Bodrik's attack, she erupts into anger and confronts Bodrik's mother, Tonia. Tonia and Bodrik live in abject poverty. Entering their dirt-floor home, Lilia notices economic inequality for the first time. As part of the growing middle-class intelligentsia, Lilia is shocked at the contrast between their families' living conditions. The influence of societal hierarchies, especially those based on wealth, is enforced by her grandmother's taking personal offense at the boy's uncleanness: "The point was that, according to [Bela's] balanced understanding of fairness, Tonia's son could not raise his hand to her clean, pure little girl, to her pinkish-olive little face, or insult her with his dirty touch and those awful scratches."<sup>101</sup> The image of Bodrik as a parasite who contaminates Lilia's virtue is enhanced minutes later when Bodrik's mother turns to him and yells "Ah, you pest!" before violently beating him until blood appears.<sup>102</sup> Bela, a dermatologist, interprets everything in terms of skin; to her, the worst offense is not that Bodrik emotionally traumatized Lilia, but that his inferiority came in contact with her virtue. Again, Ulitskaia's text portrays subjectivity as constructed and continued through corporeality; Lilia physically experiences her introduction into the social order through the attack, just as Bodrik physically experiences it through his mother's beating. The body itself and the children's experiences of their bodies shape, mold, and develop their subjective construction.

But for as much as the short story illustrates the body's potential to harm, it also attests to its ability to connect. Lilia's family organizes their life around maintaining a center of communal support, continually generated and evidenced through physical intimacy. Witnessing the "evil intent that had taken over millions of people" during World War II and Stalinism, Lilia's grandparents build in their home a sanctuary from the violence of the outside world and

create a space where affection, trust, and respect are conveyed via physical touch. At the center of their home is Lilia's great-grandfather, Aaron, her only respite from harassment at school. Lilia spends hours on his lap every night, noticing details of his smell, his clothing, and his touch as he retells Biblical tales to provide her with the religious education she will not receive in school and a foundation of faith in her ancestral heritage. Lilia's grandparents also participate; knowing their chances of exile or arrest (as two Jewish doctors and members of the intelligentsia with a hostile son who works for the KGB) and the severity of Aaron's cancer (a diagnosis particularly hurtful to his oncologist son), they forego evening work in their office to listen to Aaron's stories. They, too, maintain their relationship via corporeality: after many years together, they are able to communicate without words, using instead physical "movements, signals, and secret wordless messages," a skill especially useful when conveying worry about their current situation without upsetting Lilia.<sup>103</sup> The narrator relays their relationship in notably physical terms and describes the influence of physiology on emotion and vice-versa:

[They] fall asleep at the same time, holding [one another], resting in this way more than forty years, so that it was no longer clear whether the ins and outs of their bodies were placed in a way to guarantee their continued comfort or whether, over the years spent in evening embrace, their bodies themselves had changed shapes, coming together in order to show this unification.<sup>104</sup>

The text juxtaposes the personal sphere as safe with the public as violent; for Ulitskaia, the family is the ultimate safeguard against outside danger. Skomp and Sutcliffe assert that Ulitskaia's writing "illuminates the centrality of the physical entity by showing how it illustrates an individual's struggle to live a moral life despite the tragedies of the Soviet past," but I would argue that the topos also demonstrates how the interpersonal connections that secure one's moral fate are also produced and maintained via physical connection.<sup>105</sup> For her family, the body remains a source of strength even in the worst of times; in stark contrast to the Soviet system that

regards individual bodies as a dispensable commodity, Ulitskaia shows the body as an externalization of one's fundamental capacity to survive. Here, corporeality not only illustrates the "labor of survival" that Berlant addresses, but in fact generates, strengthens, and reproduces it.

Both professors of medicine, grandparents Bela and Alexander find a level of moral reassurance in their ability to help others in times of crisis. Having "lost brothers, nephews, and numerous relatives," they are able to save countless more in their profession, not the least of whom may be considered Lilia.<sup>106</sup> When their son, Lilia's father, proves unable to care for her and bring her to the hospital weighing just three kilograms at five months old, Bela and Alexander use their medical expertise to nurse Lilia back to health. Again, Lilia's father works as a Gulag warden; his inability (or unwillingness) to care for his daughter's health is synecdochical of Stalinism's disregard for individual well-being (physical or otherwise) and the Soviet system's commodification of bodies. Lilia is of no use to her father and must be disposed of, just as the numerous prisoners he oversees at work. The inclusion of wounded bodies, especially those wounded as a result of Stalin's political policies and that of wounded children, stands in direct contrast with the narrative of healthful virility and happy childhoods that came to mark the Stalinist era. Instead of the propagandistic image of strong, victorious soldiers and happy, healthy children, Ulitskaia depicts the all-too-real constant stream of bodies that passes through hospitals and the bodies of poverty-stricken, abused, and malnourished children. Doctors and caretakers, her writing shows, have the potential to counteract some of these national tragedies through their knowledge of the body.

Not by coincidence, the final scene describes physical change in four major figures: Lilia is paralyzed by cramps from her first period; Bodrik suffers a concussion of medium severity;



Aaron dies in his sleep; and Stalin suffers a cerebral hemorrhage. Each enhances Lilia's understanding of the dominant social order and the inner workings that construct, shape, and perpetuate it. Skomp and Sutcliffe write that Ulitskaia "personalizes history by stressing its corporeal effects on individuals who respond to events beyond their control."<sup>107</sup> Here, we see not only the corporeal effects of Soviet history that Skomp and Sutcliffe reference, but also, I would add, how this corporeality works to shape Lilia's understanding of Stalinist-era techniques of power, her expected role within the social order, and possible ways to manipulate them.

Lilia's ailment that evening is the puberty that she considers "unpleasant, unclean changes in her body." Tellingly, her first menstruation brings her immediate shame about her body and her sex. Just as she learned of her subjective positionality as Jewish and as part of the intelligentsia, Lilia learns the shame women are taught to feel toward their bodies and, specifically, toward menstruation. Furthermore, the inclusion of such a scene, in which Lilia remarks on the amount of blood and searches for the best way to hide her stained underwear, and previous scenes describing in detail the various aches and pains of puberty, challenges previously conventions of appropriate literary subject matter. So, too, does Bodrik's concussion. Whether caused or worsened by his mother's beating, Bodrik's concussion comes as a result of Lilia's decision to tell her grandmother of the assault. Lilia, then, learns of her own abilities: to defend herself against violence and to cause physical harm to others. An adolescent, she is coming to know the extents and limits of individual power.

Aaron, the family patriarch, works as a foil to national patriarch Stalin, so it is not surprising that their deaths are linked. Costlow, Sandler, and Vowles observe the perceived increase of depictions of dead bodies in 1990s literature and remind us that "One way to read the recurrence of corpses is as a sign of something in a culture's memories that cannot be repressed;

one would not have to look far to conjecture the historical and political reasons why the body that emerges in many Russian texts might be damaged, wounded, aching, dead, decayed.”<sup>108</sup> In this text, Aaron and Stalin’s dying bodies represent two contrasting worldviews, both of which with futures that remained uncertain at the time. While Lilia’s father and Stalin embody violence, Aaron’s image stresses the importance of compassion and the right to spirituality. Of course, future continuation of Judaism was in question at the time due to the recent Holocaust and Stalin’s hostile policies. While Stalin’s death signals the upcoming Thaw and the Gulag’s termination, Aaron’s death demarcates his successful passing of Jewish faith to future generations. Furthermore, Goscilo notes that Stalin’s death, which “will prevent others’ blood from flowing needlessly in loss of life” is further juxtaposed to Lilia’s new ability to create life, symbolized by the flow of menstrual blood.<sup>109</sup> In a 2001 interview, Ulitskaia remarked on the importance of her grandfather’s (represented by Aaron in the text) efforts to instill faith in her from a young age: “In the story “March 1953,” a lot is autobiographical. In any case, I was that girl, whose grandfather, dying of cancer, told her all the biblical stories. And this image only becomes more significant with time.”<sup>110</sup> These memories, one might presume, are what give young Lilia the strength to continue the labor of survival, the extremely demanding “work of getting through it” and, eventually, become the adult Ulitskaia/author whose texts now work against nostalgia for Stalinism and ultranationalist rewritings of history. Furthermore, Aaron’s death will presumably be more traumatic for Lilia than Stalin’s, if we judge by the semiautobiographical nature of the text and Ulitskaia’s later comments on the strong influence of her grandfather’s death, thus reversing the Soviet era prioritization of the political/national over the personal/family. In Ulitskaia’s writings, only through the personal can one survive the

political. Only through recognizing one's dominant subjectivity can one survive it. In this text, the personal is created, strengthened, and maintained through the body.

*The Funeral Party (Veselye pokhorony, 1991 (pub. 1997))*

Put briefly, *The Funeral Party* is about transcending boundaries and building community. The plot follows Russian Jewish émigré Alik and the harem of women who care for him in New York during his final days. In between detailing the days leading up to his death, the text's sporadic flashbacks explain the personal tale of each woman in Alik's life and how he gradually brings them together to form an émigré community that provides much needed companionship during the August 1991 Moscow coup, when the émigrés hear no news of their family members' safety. The emotional support found in the small community surrounding Alik helps them navigate this uncertain time and, later, the time grieving Alik's death. The text culminates with the boisterous celebration after Alik's funeral that gives the work its title and signals hopes of healing through community.

Of the various tropes through which the text conveys community building, physicality is by far the most prominent. Characters relate to each other and the world around them through touch, intimacy, harm, illness, appearance, grooming, rituals, and even microbiological composition. Nearly every scene in the novella is soaked with symbolic imagery of bodies described in attentive detail. As such, I limit my scope to just a few main characters in the text, although nearly each one plays with the theme in some way. I analyze how Ulitskaia employs the physical to convey messages of the individual's ability to survive times of crisis without sacrificing personal morality. As others have shown, Ulitskaia underscores the importance of community; in my research, I extend this idea to demonstrate how she also emphasizes selfhood

and subjective construction through bodily experiences in scenes of sexuality and intimacy, of illness and healing, and of individual bodies as parallels representative of the larger Soviet body. In this novella, corporeality simultaneously reflects “the ordinary work of living” that Berlant discusses and through this labor, individual’s continued navigation of self-building.

In this work and others, Ulitskaia treats sexuality as one of humans’ most impactful behaviors. Going outside the confines of both Socialist Realism and the 90s later pulp fiction, Ulitskaia depicts sexuality as having the potential to liberate the individual from oppressive societal conventions, especially for women. The theme permeates nearly every scene in the novella, from the opening lines that detail the group of naked women in their hot New York apartment to the closing scene that describes one woman’s sexual adventures with a stranger during the funeral party.<sup>111</sup> Sexuality here becomes a positive force that can bring together individuals from various walks of life. Protagonist Alik has done just that. Throughout his adventurous life as an artist, a dissident, an émigré, and an extroverted womanizer in general, Alik inadvertently brings together women (lovers, girlfriends, neighbors, friends, caretakers, and a daughter) with disparate worldviews. Although the audience is introduced to Alik when his external dying body is juxtaposed to his internal strength of character that unites them, the novella is littered with symbolic images that hark back to Alik’s potential to unite subjects in a dominant social order that relies on separation and hostility.

Take, for example, the imagery created in the opening of the novella when recent arrival Faina wishes to take a group photograph with her new camera. Gathering the group together, she organizes the women to stand around Alik, now bedridden, which produces a visual image that recalls Biblical scenes of women surrounding Jesus. When looking through the lens to steady her camera, Faina notices that Alik’s genitals (*mude*) and catheter have fallen out from under his

robe and now lie in the center of the shot. At this moment, Alik's reproductive abilities and, I would argue, productive abilities are literally and figuratively in the center of the scene, emphasizing the importance of Alik's role as creator and builder (of communities, of connections, of children, of comfort). This image, although brief, sets the tone for the rest of the novella and indicates the significance of Alik's fecund generative abilities; his *mude*, as Faina calls them, make up the center of the photo, just as Alik features as the centripetal force in the otherwise gynocentric group. Alik's body, through both his sexuality and his illness, has brought together wives, mistresses, and exes who may have fought over him previously, but now work alongside one another to care for the dying man. Later, his disease brings men together as well, including two Russian émigré doctors and a rabbi and a priest who both come to his house at the same time to discuss end-of-life care, but end up having a meaningful and respectful discussion about their contrasting religions. Alik's ability to create connections that bridge personal, religious, and ideological divides drives the novella; at many points, these connections are depicted, created, and strengthened via physical touch, either as intimacy between lovers, parents and children, or caretakers and patients. Blurred boundaries between the physical and the spiritual, as well as the deliberate blurring of lines between religion, gender and nationality, all materialize within Alik, the literal and figurative center of the plot.

Again, emphasizing the benefits of connections among power techniques that mandate division indicates the author's belief of the individual's ability to endure in oppressive social orders. In both the Soviet Union and in America, Alik and his acquaintances are separated, categorized, and labeled in several ways: they are Others due to their dissident beliefs that prompt them to leave the USSR, their Jewishness in the Soviet Union, their immigrant status in America, and their poverty in both contexts. Moreover, the women face societal limitations

based on gender and Alik's debilitating and paralyzing disease further distances him from ideal masculine subjectivity, constantly enhanced by his inability to make a living on his art.

Kaganovsky reminds us that such contrasting images of powerful ideals and wounded realities further "the notion of limitation, of certain disciplinary and structural parameters that the Stalinist subject (of either gender) is not allowed to cross."<sup>112</sup> By juxtaposing Alik's continually produced and reproduced fragmentariness with his ongoing ability to build communities, Ulitskaia flips conventional prioritization of dominant society over personal sphere and interrogates assumptions of meaningful and worthwhile labor.

In stark contrast to Alik lies Nina, his thin and frail wife. Nina's perceived weakness is both physical and psychological (in fact, the first spoken dialogue is Alik commenting on Nina's dangerous weight loss).<sup>113</sup> In contrast to her husband, Nina is marked by "Hamletism" (*Gamletovshchina*), or an extreme inability to act. Apart from physical weakness, she is also afraid of touching fire, which keeps her from cooking, and of touching money, which keeps her from buying anything or running day-to-day errands. Most harmful is her paralyzing fear of making any decisions, even small ones: "the more insignificant the choice, the more she suffered."<sup>114</sup> The only action Nina seems to be comfortable performing on a regular basis is drinking, which she does almost continually and while the details are not conveyed in the text, the narrator informs us that Nina attempted suicide thrice in the past.<sup>115</sup> For Nina, it seems, even Berlant's "labor of getting on" is a tall order; just "getting through it" is enough for the timid and fearful woman. Additionally, Nina's role in the novella indicates disciplinary power's strength in ingraining messages of restriction in subjects. In many ways, Nina replicates perceived limitations in exaggerated form; instead of recognizing the productive value of dominant discipline (Foucault's important point that discipline enables as much as it restricts), she

perceives only messages of what she cannot do, even to the point of keeping her from functioning in popular society.

However, Nina displays uncharacteristic initiative at one moment that merits special attention. When it comes to saving Alik, it seems she will do anything. Although she has been giving him various folk medicinal remedies (oils and herb balms, provided by a Belorussian neighbor, that Nina rubs on his legs), she remains worried he cannot recover and begs him to be baptized before it is too late. Alik, a Jew, refuses, but agrees to meet with a priest, thus leading to the aforementioned interreligious discussion. But before he gives permission for the baptism, Alik temporarily loses consciousness; Nina, fearing the worst, attempts to baptize him herself, although she does not know proper instructions for the ritual. After reading some random prayers from a church calendar and baptizing him under the wrong name (Alik instead of Alexander), she sits next to Alik and rubs holy water over his face, neck, and chest.<sup>116</sup> By baptizing him, Nina attempts to compensate for her failure to save his life on earth via her efforts to save his soul in the afterlife. Nina's actions stem from corporeality: not knowing how to complete the baptism, she rubs holy water on him because that is how she has been attempting to heal him with oils. Apart from creating moments of intimacy between Nina and her dying husband, the act of rubbing healing ointments (herbal or spiritual) gives Nina the psychological vigor to continue "the work of living." Privileging individual faith over societal label, Ulitskaia proposes that formal education in religious doctrine neither guarantees nor prohibits one's spiritual strength, as evidenced through Nina's unsuccessful, but ultimately sympathetic attempt at baptism. And while doing so perpetuates traditional binaries of masculine/feminine and rational/spiritual, Nina's attempt to reconfigure sacred church rituals to her own needs inadvertently challenges traditional understandings of women's roles and powers in organized

religion, as women were not allowed to become priests or, therefore, perform baptisms. Marja Sorvari, writing on Ulitskaia's later novel *Daniel Stein*, extends this thought to suggest that breaking boundaries of gender roles in corporeality and in religion also works to "carve out space for female subjectivity and spirituality."<sup>117</sup> In this scene, one would be mistaken to suggest that Nina is deliberately, or even knowingly, attempting to participate in feminine subjective construction, as she only performs the baptism as a last resort and had hoped for a traditional baptism with a [male] priest. Moreover, the text ultimately perpetuates traditional ideological images of women as natural nurturers and caretakers through Nina's consistent tending to Alik (in fact, in one scene Valentina cradles Alik "like a baby who still can't hold his head up").<sup>118</sup> However, her trust that good intentions trump conventions of social structures evidences expansion in her perception of the subject's ability to work outside of said conventions.

If any character were to intentionally challenge the status quo, it would be Irina, Alik's former lover and mother of his only [known] child, Maika. Irina has worn many hats, but her current stage in life foregrounds her status as a wealthy attorney (indeed, one of the few financially stable characters in the text), whose tumultuous past has ingrained her with steadfast confidence and an aura of power and strength. At the same time, she is depicted as overtly sexual; more than any of the other women in the group, she labors to conform to American beauty standards and expends time, effort, and considerable amounts of money into maintaining her feminine appearance, including regular pubic waxes and a recent breast enhancement surgery (indeed, these two features are the first images we get of Irina in the opening pages, which describes the group spending their days in the nude due to the overwhelming heat). More explicitly, her sexual exploits are emphasized throughout the text, from priding herself in



“mounting every horse, even including a Jewish one” to counting the minutes of lovemaking with her most recent partner, Harris.<sup>119</sup> Irina, then, is both upholding and breaking conventions surrounding feminine physicality; although she strives for the American feminine ideal, in doing so she actively breaks with Soviet-era messages that underscored modesty and a more utilitarian view of physical appearance (although, interestingly, she does conform to these standards while married to her first husband, Leva, a Hasidic Jew who requires her to follow Hasidic traditions of female dress and behavior).<sup>120</sup> As I will show, Irina’s efforts to break with convention and utilize physicality to her benefit are precisely where she draws her strength.

When first immigrating to the United States from the Soviet Union, Irina finds work as a circus and street performer thanks to her background as an acrobat in Saint Petersburg. Later, when she decides to leave Leva, she knows she can rely on this skill for financial security. Unbeknownst to her friends, she spends a few years working nights as an exotic dancer at a “special place for rich idiots”<sup>121</sup> in order to pay for law school during the day. When she graduates, she uses these “rich idiot” connections to obtain her first clients as an attorney. Apart from providing her with much-needed income, this physical skill also gives Irina emotional strength, as she describes when reminiscing years later:

The ability to walk on a tightrope is very useful for émigrés. Maybe it was specifically thanks to this that she ended up the most successful of all of them ... the soles of your feet burn, your heart almost stops, sweat pours over your eyes, but your cheeks remain stretched in a smile, your chin facing up in victory, and the tip of your nose tipped towards the stars – everything light and simple, simple and light... Losing two hours of sleep every night for eight years, you fight tooth and nail for this high-paying American profession ... and you have to make ten decisions a day and you learned long ago not to get upset if today’s decision turned out to be wrong.<sup>122</sup>

Her body’s strength allows her financial independence that gives her the freedom to decide where and with whom she lives (a luxury not all, especially émigré, women have). This financial success enables her to help Alik pay bills years later when he fails to sell his artwork,

thus reversing additional traditional power dynamics between male breadwinners and female homemakers. Moreover, Irina's employment as an exotic dancer demonstrates her familiarity with female lesserness within the dominant social order and her ability to perform such gender roles in order to later distance herself from them. Put simply, she plays the part to manipulate the system. As Nadya Peterson observes, resistance to and perpetuance of traditional power imbalances are not mutually exclusive: "Yet women manage to achieve a certain measure of control over their daily lives, practicing hidden resistance to authority as they simultaneously reinforce preexisting power relations within the family."<sup>123</sup> Irina's actions ultimately further gendered power dynamics on the level of the social, but they concurrently allow a hidden resistance that increases her individual abilities within the dominant social order. While there may be moments when Irina's physicality works against her (after getting in an argument with Alik, for example, she walks on her hands across a rooftop holding on only to empty beer bottles to impress a dissident writer, a performance for which Alik punishes her with a sharp slap across the face), overall Irina's body not only symbolizes her strength, but quite literally gives her a level of influence that many of the other characters lack.<sup>124</sup>

Furthermore, Irina's years as a single mother balancing exotic dancing and law school illustrate the burden of everyday maintenance demanded for survival. Ulitskaia explains a few parts of the tiresome "work of getting through it" that Irina experiences: "[She learned] in these years to get up at 6:30, take a three minute shower instead of a forty minute bath, and not pick up the phone before letting the answering machine notify her who is calling."<sup>125</sup> Irina's salvation – her perseverance and grit - comes from both the ability to discipline her body to outstanding physical feats, such as tightrope walking, and the "agency of maintenance" from her demanding life. Tamara Kazarina examines Ulitskaia's heroines' strengths and attributes their special,

sometimes superhuman, powers to their status as women and mothers, who are more “keyed in” (*podkliucheny*) she writes, to the parts of life that control birth, growth, ageing and death.<sup>126</sup>

While I cannot completely agree with Kazarina’s thought, which seems to rest on orthodox assumptions of gender differences as inherent in biological sex, I would say that Irina’s years of experience as a single mother certainly fortified this seemingly “superhuman strength” Kazarina mentions. Overall, Ulitskaia’s depictions of Irina’s physicality pull together a portrait of work and sacrifice, but also of endurance and survival.

Irina’s daughter with Alik seems to inherit her mother’s strong will, but little else. Going by the name Maika (meaning “T-shirt” in Russian), the adolescent refuses to speak to any adults except her mother, begrudgingly, and later her father, albeit unknowingly.<sup>127</sup> Instead, she chooses to express her general outlook through her T-shirt, which reads “ПИЗДЕЦ” across the front, thus reflecting both her status as a first-generation Russian-American immigrant and her angst in navigating this identity.<sup>128</sup> As her voluntary near mute-ness indicates, much of Maika’s exploration of self-identification/identity-building manifests itself through restraint from physical activity, as opposed to participation in it. By acting through inaction, Maika demonstrates one’s ability to scrutinize a priori conventions and calls into questions assumptions of mandatory participation in the dominant social order.

First, Maika strongly resists her body’s physiological changes as she goes through puberty and even begs her mother for a breast-reduction surgery, a transparent contrast to her mother’s recent breast-enhancement surgery. She makes the request after reading *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying*; impressed with the monks’ lifestyle, she laments that she was born a woman, thus unable to enter a monastery, and asks for the surgery “as if this could bring her closer to perfect life of a Tibetan monk.”<sup>129</sup> Her request juxtaposes her vision of femininity with

her mother's; she does not want the waxed bikini line, false nails, dyed hair, perfectly maintained facial features, or cosmetic surgery that her mother has, but instead a humble, almost masculine body. In many ways, she finds in her body the ability to do exactly that which words have failed her: express herself. Mimicking her refusal to speak, she is refusing (or at least attempting to refuse) to grow into a woman. Similarly, after two disappointing sexual encounters with classmates, Maika decides to give up on the activity entirely and live the rest of her life in celibacy. Returning to Kaganovsky's writings on masculine subjectivity, one could ponder to what extent Maika's refusal to partake in societal conventions of gender performance represent a desire to avoid reaching feminine subjectivity in the American social order. That is, if she sees her mother playing the game (and performing the role) of appropriate femininity in her appearance, Maika seems to want to sit this one out. Maika simultaneously employs the corporeal to resist mandates of orthodox gendered performance and, in doing so, interrogates the very directive to join the dominant social order.

Still, in many ways Maika is also just a kid in a particularly tough spot. She is still too young to know the type of labor of daily survival that her mother and the other women in the group have experienced in both Soviet and American immigrant contexts. However, her burdens should not be fully discredited, either. Maika's current frustrations come from her identity as a Russian-American immigrant (she regularly has trouble fitting in with either social group), hers and her mother's frequent relocations, and what is eventually diagnosed as autism, after being "dragged between psychologists" since early childhood.<sup>130</sup> This is not to say that her struggles are equally as demanding as that of other heroines in this chapter, just that Maika, too, must perform her own labor within ordinariness, however different it may be. Indeed, it may be specifically these transitional intersections that occasion Maika's sophisticated resistance.

Again, Ulitskaia's oeuvre conveys the message that only with the strength of the familial unit do individuals have any chance of survival, especially in the chaotic 20<sup>th</sup> century. The August Coup exemplifies this best. The three-day attempt on the White House for many represented the instability of the Soviet Union and foreshadowed its upcoming collapse. Although Alik and his friends have primarily negative memories of the Soviet system, their loved ones are still in Moscow. Gathering in Alik's apartment, the group huddles together watching the news unfold on television, physically and emotionally in need of closeness with one another. The scene is emotionally tense; apart from worrying for loved one's, they also come together to work through their feelings regarding their decision to leave their homeland; as one Russian critic points out, "they are different in abilities, education, and simply personal traits, but they come together on one point – they all one way or another deserted Russia ... they all needed the same thing - proof of the correctness of this act."<sup>131</sup> The timing is not coincidental: the bodies of both Alik and the Soviet Union, once strong and powerful, are now seen in an undeniable state of decline; linking the highly personal event of Alik's death with the larger historical event of the coup bridges boundaries both geographic (the Soviet Union and New York) and temporal (between an older generation in Moscow, a younger generation that moved to New York, and the youngest generation growing up Russian-American). Sutcliffe and Skomp note that the protagonists' attitude of tolerance allows them this "potential to heal the historical wounds of ethnic and secular strife"; in other words, their compassion for others eventually allows personal moral salvation and encourages healing from past tragedies.<sup>132</sup> The text narrates the group's experience through corporeality; bodies, in the broadest sense of the term, become entwined, interdependent, and even attached.<sup>133</sup>

Continuing to transcend boundaries, the text eventually dissolves the divide between physical and psychological altogether. The narrator describes the effects of immigration not only as a change in environment, but indeed as a change in one's microbiology:

As the years went by, even their bodies changed their composition: the molecules of the New World entered their blood and replaced everything old from home. Their reactions, their behavior and their way of thinking gradually altered, [...] None could have imagined that what was happening in the far off place which they had all but erased from their lives would be so painful for them now. It turned out that this country sat in their souls, their guts, that whatever they thought about it – and they all thought different things – their links with it were unbreakable. It was like some chemical reaction in the blood, something nauseating, bitter and terrible.<sup>134</sup>

The ability to survive times of struggle, in this scene, is not only reflected physically, but also quite literally manifested via corporeality.<sup>135</sup> Characters must adapt physically in order to adapt mentally. Russian critic Nina Malygina also picks up on this trend in Ulitskaia's writing and points out how it "[shows that] it is impossible to enter a new reality without changing oneself."<sup>136</sup> This is possibly the clearest example of how her texts show subjective construction as materializing in the body – in the very molecules - and its constantly changing, expanding, fluid nature. For Ulitskaia, bodies are not symbolic physical manifestations of internal character, but the very builders of identity.

Because of intertwined depictions of intimacy/reproduction and death/decay that constitute Alik's image, not to mention repeated focus on the lower bodily stratum, a few scholars have posited the influence of Bakhtin's grotesque body.<sup>137</sup> Indeed, several moments evoke the grotesque: a detailed depiction of Nina nestling her face in Alik's bright red pubic hair, Nina seeing an apparition of a healthy, young Alik a few days after his death, and the final scene of the funeral party, where the group of friends hold a loud, Bacchanalian party to mourn Alik's passing, to name just a few.<sup>138</sup> At the funeral party the group heeds Alik's farewell advice (tape

recorded and given to Maika to play) to observe the occasion through joy instead of grief. The image of a group of people drunk, nearly nude, dancing, singing, and celebrating around the metaphorical center of a dead body links Ulitskaia's text to Bakhtin's concept of the banquet and the grotesque. However, the noticeably non-repulsive quality of Ulitskaia's descriptions of bodies (they are at times flattering and at times neutral, but never repugnant) keeps the text from being a direct interpretation of the Bakhtinian grotesque. The predominant grotesque quality shared by Ulitskaia is the body's ability to connect that which was previously divided ("The limits between the body and the world are erased, leading to the fusion of the one with the other and with surrounding objects"), but Ulitskaia situates this ability in the universal body, not only in the grotesque.<sup>139</sup>

Valentina, Alik's girlfriend, seems to take the idea of celebratory corporeal carnival quite literally. While others dance and drink, Valentina sneaks away to the bathroom to have sex with an Indian (*indeets*) stranger, who brings her "mind-blowing" (*potriasaiushche*) physical and psychological sensations "unlike anything she had ever experienced before."<sup>140</sup> First, this scene intersects a few binaries, including death (Alik) with life (sexual reproduction), grief with euphoria, physical with emotional, and unfamiliarity (*chuzhoe*) with intimacy. At the same time, illustrating female sexuality as positive and pleasurable undermines patriarchal interpretations of female sexuality as dangerous and shameful, especially when depicted outside of any reproductive mandate. In this scene, Valentina's subjective construction – that is, her understanding of self and abilities – is experienced, generated, and develop through the body. In other words, the body influences the subject's perpetual and ever-changing negotiation of self. Lastly, the scene speaks to the productive potential of sex to stand in for language; as Knurowska writes, "The act of sex in Ulitskaia often becomes the only way to search for dialogue, for an

escape from this nightmarish reality and its vulgarity (*poshlost*).”<sup>141</sup> Valentina’s bathroom adventure inverts the paradigm between physical squalor and spiritual positivity; what other critics, such as Kuklin and Iuzbashev, have labeled unnecessarily crass and obscene becomes enlightening; only through this “vulgar” act that Valentina can escape the more far more oppressive vulgarity of reality.

More often than not, the protagonists of *The Funeral Party* find that their best chance of survival comes via their ties with each other. If Lilia’s story in “March 1953” prompted her to wonder, “Will I be okay?” then the protagonists of *The Funeral Party* would ask, “Will we be okay?” What we see in *The Funeral Party* is how one body and its deterioration bring together a small community of divergent identities who will continue to support each other after the center has passed. Each experiencing and negotiating selfhood differently, they represent different approaches to adopting, reinterpreting, resisting, and avoiding dominant power, at the same time stressing the importance of individual will. When so much remains uncertain, these communities may be all they have to continue the labor of survival.

### *Conclusion: Tending to the Body’s and the Nation’s Wounds*

Petrushevskaiia and Ulitskaia’s works, along with the works of many other Russian women writers of *perestroika*, rework the trope of the body in powerful ways. They break with narrow Soviet-era conventions of appropriate depictions of the physical in ways that extend the trope’s influence into metaphysical, existential, and extrasensory realms.<sup>142</sup> While Ulitskaia’s bodies illuminate corporeality’s ability to create communities and introduce pleasure into dark worlds, Petrushevskaiia’s examine its vulnerability to becoming part of that dark world that surrounds it. In Petrushevskaiia and Ulitskaia’s above texts, physicality becomes a primary



vehicle through which these techniques of power are experienced and through which heroines navigate their ever-changing subjectivity. They receive training in standing in line, maintaining proper hygiene, and performing femininity, then react by either falling in line (literally and figuratively), acting out, lashing out, or refraining from doing much at all.

While Petrushevskaja and Ulitskaja's writings differ in tone, style, and message, their works share one similarity I believe merits special attention. Both wrote semiautobiographical stories about physical and sexual harassment during childhood: Petrushevskaja's "Young Berries" and Ulitskaja's "March 1953." First, this speaks to the commonality of violence, or the "crisis ordinariness" that Berlant ponders. Although the boys' actions may have previously been disregarded as typical childhood play, readers today recognize their behavior as harassment with very real and long-lasting consequences. Certainly, that the two writers both felt the need to retell their stories as adults and write so insightfully about their experiences shows the enduring repercussions of childhood bullying and physical abuse. Both authors have expressed particular interest in representing the tribulations of those unable to fend or speak for themselves, including children. In an early interview, Petrushevskaja elaborates:

A woman who doesn't have a child, but could at any moment conceive one 'from nowhere;' a woman carrying a child in her belly; a woman who has given birth to a child – along with the sick, the elderly, and children: these are the weakest and most vulnerable moments in human life. A child alone on the street could perish; a woman with a child alone in a city apartment could perish; an old woman left alone could perish. I examine the lives of people who can perish.<sup>143</sup>

Both authors work to tell the stories of those who cannot speak for themselves, those whose subjective identity puts them at constant risk of exploitation or exclusive from the social order. But their ability to readdress the traumas later as adults via life writing furthers the works' underlying themes of survival in times of crisis.<sup>144</sup>

But more importantly for this chapter's focus, both stories describe the heroines' early process of establishing and recognizing selfhood; the young Liudmilas learn what it means to be threatened, to be in danger, to fear, and then what it means to defend oneself and stand up to bullies. They discover within themselves individual powers previously unknown. This power, I believe, reaches far beyond individualized, distinct occurrences of bullying; instead, it testifies to the authors' larger approach to spiritual survival in totalitarian and oppressive systems. It is not coincidental that both young girls at first seemed helpless against their attackers: Petrushevskaja was outnumbered and alone in the woods, Ulitskaia alone and physically overpowered by Bodrik. Nor is it accidental that they both discover *unexpected* strengths within themselves, either screaming and running or punching and kicking. In both cases, the young women seem to be learning how to navigate oppressive power techniques, how and when to interrogate coercive messages of submissiveness versus dominance, and the fluidity of presumed limitations and potentials of the individual. Of course, this is not to say the author's convictions are the same: Petrushevskaja is clearly more skeptical of the individual's ability to rebel than Ulitskaia. Instead, I hope to have shown here that the two are exploring the same issues from different perspectives: the messages we, as humans, are given from our environment about what is and is not allowed/proper/punishable; how these messages are embedded with the social structures and cultural assumptions that surround us; and how each individual's continued navigation of these messages, conscious or not, produce and reproduce subjectivity.

## Chapter II

### Private Parts and Public Knowledge

“In the archaic and large industrial Moscow life, that cellular corner, with the centers of attraction next to the ice-covered columns and neighborhood storage containers, there were no family secrets. There was not even a regular private life, and any patch of underwear, hung on the communal clothing lines, was known to everyone and anyone.”  
Ulitskaia, “Doch’ Bukhary”<sup>145</sup>

As famously known among Russophones, there is no word for “privacy” in the Russian language. Historically, there was also no need for the term until recently. Imperialist Russia saw the foundational home unit as an estate where landowners, family members, servants, employees, and serfs lived alongside each other. Later, the Bolshevik revolution and a string of wars prompted rapid industrialization and waves of migration to centralized locales. The Soviet population was sent by the thousands to newly constructed communal housing, either to large cities or collectivized farms. *Kommunalki*, or large city buildings filled with apartments shared by multiple families, were one result and soon became infamous for being overcrowded, under-resourced, and always in short supply. But their history also helps explain why the notion of “privacy” or any space free from others’ prying eyes, never developed in Soviet Russia as it did in other industrialized nations. Privacy in the modern sense was not only not a priority, but to a large extent nonexistent.

Private lives on the other hand, and events within them, were very real concerns in the Soviet Union. While the boundary between the private (romantic relationships, family, home-life) and the public (work, education, party involvement) had been blurred since the revolution, separating the two became even more difficult during the Thaw. While the Thaw was professed as an era of new freedoms for individual citizens and loosening of the legal regulations, violence, and political repression of Stalinism, individual and human rights were far from guaranteed. This new freedom came with its own limitations and restrictions, many of which are best understood through the interplay of private and public and the state's intrusion into individuals' private lives, making private concerns public – and state - business. Almost a decade after Stalin's death in 1953, Khrushchev's administration launched a campaign that put citizens' private lives under a new spotlight of investigation, both among authorities and citizens. The new focus on conduct at home, Khrushchev and his colleagues explained, was the necessary next step toward the ultimate goal of creating a communist utopia. If citizens were to be good communists, they need not act as such only in public and at the workplace, but at home and, eventually, in all places. The private suddenly became a public concern.<sup>146</sup>

In the short prose works of Petrushevskaja and Ulitskaja, binaries between private and public break down as individuals use the realm of personal relationships (romantic, platonic, or familial), as a venue to challenge, refute, or adapt societal norms propagated by communist morality. By breaking with the norm, these characters, mostly women, show an attempt to reclaim some agency over their lives. Responding to unforgiving social structures and a myriad of nationwide difficulties in Russia's long 20<sup>th</sup> century, these women search frantically for any perceived level of agency, at times without plan or direction, but simply for the sake of feeling in control and whatever false hope that it may give. In this chapter, I will look at how each author

portrays protagonists living outside dictated social structures, pushing against conventions in order to preserve feelings of personal agency. Both women show individuals working against the system, but in starkly different ways. Petrushevskaja's heroines use any and all faculties at hand in attempts to get what they want, regardless of how others may view them or how much harm they cause to those around them. Among these tools are manipulation of loved ones, physical violence, infidelity, and prostitution. In Ulitskaia's writings, the end goal is also personal agency, but the methods used for attaining it could not differ more; her protagonists are known for their aptitude for tolerance, respect, and empathy above all else. They learn to see the value in community-building where societal regulations dissuade them from doing so: her works highlight the power of love in places society says love should not exist, either due to sexual orientation, age difference, non-monogamy, or disability status. Where Petrushevskaja's break taboos for selfish aims, Ulitskaia's do so for the sake of intimacy. More importantly, with both writers we see the individual reshaping, questioning, and at times outright refusing societal expectations of behavior in the private sphere for his or her own benefit, which is a daring, yet sometimes necessary act in times of struggle.

### *Morality and Discipline*

As explained in the introduction to this dissertation, Foucault's writings on disciplinary power have shaped this project from its first iterations. The workings of coercion that, as Foucault explains, function to regulate individual behavior structure nearly every society and the Soviet Union was no exception. Perhaps the clearest example remains the 1961 Moral Code of the Builder of Communism (*moral'nyi kodeks stroitelia kommunizma*). The 1961 Code, in many ways, can be seen as a literal manifestation of Foucault's disciplinary power; it is a detailed

document that outlines the twelve guidelines that professionals of the time – educators, physicians, government officials, a journalist, and the like – believed each communist should follow in order to live “moral” lives. First and foremost was understandably one’s “allegiance to communism, love for the socialist Motherland, and countries of socialism” (*predannost’ delu kommunizma, liubov’ k sotsialisticheskoi Rodine, k stranam sotsializma*), while secondary were personal qualities that one might more readily expect to see on a code of conduct: honesty, integrity, loyalty, cooperation, and intolerance for injustice. According to the code, being a good person is important, but not as important as being a good communist. Deborah Field writes extensively on the nuances and inconsistencies within the 1961 Moral Code and explains the rationale behind the regime’s interest in citizens’ conduct at home: “Moralists saw personal relationships and domestic responsibilities as both vitally important and necessarily subordinate to social and political concerns; private life was thus a basic component of communist morality but, if not controlled, also a potential threat to it.”<sup>147</sup> “Private” life was far from private. The private sphere may have referenced personal matters, such as romantic relationships or activities in the home, but it was hardly secret. On the contrary, citizens’ behavior at home mattered on a communal level; if one’s conduct was not furthering collective progress towards a communist utopia, it was hindering it, and the community had a moral obligation to intercede.

And intercede they did. First, and most directly, some holdovers from Stalinism remained long after his death, such as state surveillance in the form of audio recordings, undercover police, spontaneous property searches, and other intrusive measures, all of which were commonly practiced by the Soviet government to detect and punish suspected transgressors. But in addition to such top-down observation, a complex web of surveillance techniques, created through and maintained by the compliance and active participation of

individuals, developed in everyday society. Largely encouraged by Khrushchev's political push toward a more ubiquitous and thorough understanding of communism, citizen-run organizations separate from official state authority also took upon themselves the perceived duty to monitor each others' everyday conduct. *Druzhini*, for example, were similar to Soviet neighborhood watch groups that monitored not only the presence of strangers in a community, but also all suspicious activities, primarily those of its own residents, and even had the power to punish if the committee believed it to be necessary. Comrades' courts (*cud' tovarishei*), or "panels of lay members delegated by housing and work collectives to exert measures of 'social pressure' on individuals who had breached social norms," increased in number from the low hundreds to 197,000 during Khrushchev's decade in office.<sup>148</sup> Going beyond state and legal systems of power (such as police, courts, and the like), these committees focused their gaze not on criminal behavior, but on what was *ne priniato* – or not accepted - "inappropriate" behavior, such as being too loud, quarrelling in public, paying bills late, having illegitimate children, and petty hooliganism.

*Kommunalki*, as the most common living arrangement, only aided this drive toward an all-encompassing communist morality. With several families sharing one apartment, one bathroom, one kitchen, and, if lucky, one phone, individuals could hardly hope to keep anything secret. All behavior was immediately on display, if for no other reason than lack of place (and space) to hide. Public shame became the new preferred form of punishment. Such committees are clear physical manifestations of the Foucaultian gaze. The Soviet Union, embedded within communist ideology that stressed collectivism and cooperation, created the perfect confluence of conditions under which the gaze could thrive.

*“V SSSR seksa net”*: Gender in Communist Morality

Of the various areas of private behavior that seem to concern authorities, sexuality, and specifically female sexuality, is a suspiciously frequent contender for the top spot. What women do with their bodies, it seems, is regularly a source of apprehension for institutions and, as such, is often treated as something governments feel obligated to supervise, restrict, and contain. In the Soviet Union, such attention focused on “proper” and “improper” behavior for Communist women. After Stalin’s revision of laws regarding divorce, the Soviet Union returned to the restrictions on women’s sexuality that had long been in place under the previous patriarchal systems. Public apprehension manifested itself as widespread pamphlets, lectures, books, magazine articles, and other didactic materials that attempted to teach female audiences how to date, marry, love, and raise children in proper (that is, communist) fashion.<sup>149</sup> In a sense, such coercive and surveillance techniques can be considered a communist adaptation of longstanding patriarchal norms. Thus, while my overall focus of this project extends to individuals’ behavior and how it works against, around, or through these dictated expectations of conduct, my analyses will, for now, focus on the dynamics of relationships from specifically women’s perspectives. Without venturing into the debate on whether or not these works or their creators’ viewpoints can be termed “feminist” in the modern sense of the word, it is my belief that some analytical methods within contemporary feminist theory, especially those which examine the workings of power dynamics, can lead to worthwhile questions and interpretations.<sup>150</sup> Therefore, while I do not wish to debate the notion that these works can be considered feminist, I feel they nonetheless address very serious feminist issues, including, on the most basic level, the well-being of women in the Soviet era.



Furthermore, the texts are indisputably gynocentric. While writing about the inherently gendered nature of *byt*, or everyday life, Ben Sutcliffe notes that the private sphere, inhabited by women, was seen as both subordinate and necessary to the public sphere.<sup>151</sup> To expand, private and public conduct were not seen as binary opposites of each other or even fully separate realms; instead, the private buffered the public and gradually became considered just as crucial to the final goal of socialism. To this end, women's roles were indisputable. Needed as workers in factories, at home women were charged with all responsibilities of housekeeping, childrearing, managing financial matters, and keeping up the family's appearances. One's failure to abide by socially accepted norms, then, could mean not only the downfall of the woman's reputation, but that of her entire family. In the lived experience for Soviet women, these conditions resulted in the unforgiving double burden of work and childcare. Now presumably "freed" from the home thanks to the proclaimed establishment of gender equality by the Soviet Union, women were expected to contribute to the building of communism by joining the workforce, but were not relieved from their domestic duties, presumed to be naturally assigned to their gender, of childrearing and housework. In effect, women's entrance into the Soviet workforce resulted less in emancipation and more in further restrictions on individual's time, responsibilities, and social function.

Although the post-Stalinist government's intrusion into the home was undoubtedly authoritarian in nature, the contradictions and ambiguities within the code and its enforcement created occasional gaps. Within these gaps, varied possibilities of agency – from intentional resistance to accidental influence – become possible. Field notes that within this space the individual could "evade, resist, and make use of that interference."<sup>152</sup> As Foucault's writings on the penal system remind us, the use of power (via official discourse, institutions, social

structures, taboos, and more) works to subdue subjects, but it also enables them to rework, reclaim, and resist this power, even if only done unconsciously.<sup>153</sup>

Such moments between regulation and purposeful resistance will lie at the center of my focus in the current chapter. In each work, I examine not how individuals conform to social norms, but how they break from them. In Petrushevskaja's writings, my analysis focuses on challenges to two fundamental tenets of communist and patriarchal morality (although others are certainly questioned in her writing as well). First, Petrushevskaja's characters often place their own individual needs and desires above that of the communist collective and the overarching patriarch order, at times even deserting or ignoring their roles as mothers, thus breaking with another sacredly held convention. Secondly, they regularly challenge the expectation of honesty. Petrushevskaja creates characters who are nearly always willing to sacrifice any appearance of truth for their own benefit, either through directly lying, exaggeration, omission, or misleading others.

In the second half of this chapter, I bring into the discussion works by Ulitskaia, whose protagonists represent a myriad of underrepresented backgrounds. Ulitskaia is now known by many for her promotion of tolerance towards nontraditional lifestyles, but these notions were present in her earliest works as well, which make her stand out sharply from many of her contemporaries. She writes romantic relationships as places for understanding where it is least expected. Depicting a range of taboo relationships, including homosexuality, polygamy, multiraciality, and difference in age. She presents a female physicality/sexuality that provides as much love as traditional marriage; thus she directly challenges the dominating heteronormative narrative within communist morality. In her worldview, the best way to fight is to love one another.

Of import here are not the specific prescribed tenets of communist morality, the norms of traditional patriarchy, or the 1961 Code in its entirety; rather, I hope to explore the rifts between dogma and reality and how they are experienced by the individual. Examining the ways in which citizens worked around, modified, ignored, or defied regulations allow for a better understanding of lived reality in the late Soviet Union. It is not the structure of patriarchal society itself, but attempts to break or stretch the limits of its social constraints that make these works notable. As scholars such as Alexei Yurchak have shown, everyday life in the Soviet system should not be categorized into binaries of pro- and anti- state rhetoric, if for no other reason than because for many, socialist values were distinct from existing power structures. Such generalizations obscure the nuances, contradictions, and intricacies of daily behavior and corner Soviet citizenry into limited roles of either conformist or dissident. Yurchak's groundbreaking research posits levels of performativity of discourse in various arenas of civic duty, from everyday chats to party meetings and elections. He proposes that participation in such events did not necessarily indicate sincere faith in the system and vice versa. Instead, performing the role of a good communist could simultaneously be done with a level of skepticism and a sincere belief in the values of socialism (particularly equality, community, and diligence). Furthermore, this intermediary space became for many an opportunity for the creation of personal meaning, which Yurchak explores through discourse, both private and public:

The unanimous participation of Soviet citizens in the performative reproduction of speech acts and rituals of authoritative discourse contributed to the general perception of that system's monolithic immutability, while at the same time enabling diverse and unpredictable meanings and styles of living to spring up everywhere within it.<sup>154</sup>

With this in mind, my research explores a similar idea through the lived experiences of women in the Soviet Union as depicted in fictional prose. As the women in Petrushevskaia and

Ulitskaia's works largely represent disempowered positions, their ability or inability to work within these confines of various power structures reveals insight into the particular challenges faced by those on the margins of society. Petrushevskaja and Ulitskaia portray women who face destitution, homelessness, disease, addiction, abortion, isolation, or simply extreme difficulty in social situations. Their ability to navigate through the difficulties of Soviet life depends on the ability to retain some sense of agency in their private lives. Again, choices, from individual actions to the construction of lifestyles, do not work only for or against authority. I argue that these various interpretations of and responses to communist morality nonetheless represent an sincere attempt at Yurchak's "diverse and unpredictable meanings and styles of living."

Lastly, I would like to acknowledge the time difference between the publication dates of the aforementioned Moral Code and of the primary works studied below. Although the code was published roughly twenty years before the fictional literature, I feel it is still relevant in understanding how these stories demonstrate the search for personal agency. Both Petrushevskaja and Ulitskaia were in their formative years when the Code was published, Petrushevskaja twenty-three and Ulitskaia eighteen, meaning they were old enough to understand the expectations of behavior in accordance with communist morality. As the code remained in the program of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union until its redaction in 1986 under Gorbachev and his introduction of *glasnost*, the majority of their adult lives was spent with documents on the ethics of behavior in popular print. But in a more general sense my analysis not only focuses on the explicitly recorded regulations concerning everyday conduct, but rather on the norms, taboos, etiquette, and presumptions that were built into patriarchal society, whether or not they appeared in official documents. And while the Moral Code may have been

in place only from 1961 to 1986, the ideas behind it certainly applied in everyday situations long before and after.

Although written after *glasnost*'s removal of the strict censorship on published literature, many of Petrushevskaja and Ulitskaja's texts are set during the Thaw and the Stagnation periods or, as especially common in Petrushevskaja's works, some unspecified time easily ascribed to either period. There are several possible reasons for this. Of course, many of the concerns facing Soviet citizens, and especially young women, remained through the post-Stalin era: financial instability, poor reproductive healthcare, the ongoing housing crisis, shortage of suitable employment, fear of war, threats of censorship or party intervention if anti-socialist sentiments are suspected (although this came in ebbs and flows), and so on. But accompanying these concerns in their works seemed to be a strong desire to readdress the past. As other scholars have already explained, even contemporary post-Soviet Russia has largely avoided mourning the tragedies of the nation's long 20<sup>th</sup> century; there has been no government acknowledgement of or apology for the Stalinist Terror and no state-sanctioned memorials to the victims exist.<sup>155</sup> The more indirect forms of violence exerted by the government upon its citizens, such as extreme shortages of basic goods and routine state surveillance, has received even less recognition by officials. By setting so many works in the near distant past, as opposed to their contemporary era of *perestroika*, Petrushevskaja and Ulitskaja gesture toward a feeling of deficiency and fragmentariness in national cultural history. The act of writing resembles witnessing in that it allows the author to reveal deliberately repressed counter-narratives. Alexandra Smith seems to take this into account when she sees Petrushevskaja's act of writing through a rare optimistic light, suggesting her novella *Our Crowd* "offers some corrective mechanisms which help to restore balance between the collective memory and the official one,

and to reconstruct a real memory which otherwise could easily slide into oblivion.”<sup>156</sup> In this way, preserving darker moments of humanity can disallow the romanticized version furthered by official state ideology. They write to save a version of history that is jeopardized by the victors. The stories analyzed below, focused on the daily challenges to feelings of agency, may be an attempt to write through the past and reexamine some of the difficulties that spanned the century.

### *Love and Marriage in the Soviet Union*

Despite early socialism’s brief consideration of non-monogamy and free love as the best dynamic for romantic relationships in the future communist utopia, such ideas did not last long. The writings of thinkers such as Aleksandra Kollontai originally proposed that letting go of society’s insistence on the patriarchal family was in the best interest of young communists; without the need to be restricted to one romantic interest, Soviet citizens could put their work first and prioritize their contributions to the party over the personal needs of their partners. Kollontai’s philosophy was put down by higher state authorities, who seemed to have no interest in reassessing the patriarchal structure of society. Stalin’s ascendancy to power in the 1920s and the reinforcing of patriarchal norms that accompanied his image (later to become known as the cult of personality), was heavily dependent on the trope of a strong masculine figure needed to steer the nation through tumultuous times. This cultural figure became a metaphor for the communist party’s unwillingness to prioritize individual freedoms, such as the elimination of wealth inequality between genders called for by Kollontai. While the party preached equality and rights for all, their actions and policies reveal ulterior motives. Still, some traces of her philosophy remain visible; for example, while camaraderie was clearly emphasized within the tenets of communist morality, romantic partnership was only praised as long as each member

kept the future of socialism as their primary interest. The state, symbolized by a line of strong male leaders, such as Lenin and Stalin, was to remain everyone's first love.

As Kollontai's ideas on free love were reversed from above, the indispensability of the family unit once again became the norm and soon a woman's roles as wife and mother became her most important contributions to the greater good in the view of the patriarchal regime. Enthusiastically embracing the double burden of work and childcare - being a loving and supporting wife, raising ambitious communist children, and continuing her own hard work in industry and agriculture - was the propagandized ideals to which each Soviet woman should strive. Importantly, obligations as wife and mother were still placed within the framework of forwarding communism. The concept of *vospitanie* (loosely translated as upbringing or education) was particularly emphasized for the first time in the Brezhnev era (1964-82). As mothers, women were expected to provide proper communist *vospitanie* to their children, but in order to do so, they needed an adequate communist *vospitanie* for themselves, which was to be acquired and nurtured via regular consumption of increasingly disseminated popular educational materials (the aforementioned pamphlets, lectures, manuals, etc.). Elizabeth Skomp's insightful study comparing these materials with prose works that portray everyday life (*bytovaia literatura*), both of which were appearing in increasing numbers at the time, shines light on how together the two groups of works "exposed the tension between officially constructed and individually experienced motherhood."<sup>157</sup> I would argue that such tensions were exposed in several arenas of everyday life, not only in motherhood. Consistently exposed to a stream of propagandist portraits of the idealized life in communism, women situated within the difficulties of daily life in the Soviet Union became more aware of the inconsistencies between the model

and lived experience, either at home (many such manuals were about how to best decorate one's apartment in the most "communist" way), at work, in society, with one's family, or in romance.

Also apparent was the message that women were expected to be dutiful wives and loving mothers, not only out of the individual's love for her family, but because this behavior was necessary to help build communism. Love in and of itself was considered a dangerous force that must remain under close surveillance for men and women, lest it begin to control behavior in irrational ways. One journalist warns of such hazards: "We must not regard love as a force of nature that cannot be subordinated to any discipline and forces reason to be silent. Yielding to any attraction, a person starts down a very slippery path, the path of the anarchy of emotions, which often leads to dissipation."<sup>158</sup> Thus, everything about a person, including his/her deepest drives, was to be controlled and shaped to ensure they reflected communist ideals.

Again, reality rarely resembled propaganda and marriage often did not lead to the blissful home life that it promised. Indeed, there was a sharp rise in divorce after Stalin's death and continued well into the 1960s.<sup>159</sup> To a certain extent, affairs became part of the norm in Soviet society. The situation was exacerbated after the World War II era, when millions of men had perished and the Soviet Union entered a demographic crisis of few men (and even fewer healthy men) in their reproductive years. It is also possible that parts of the Soviet work environment, such as employer-organized regular vacations out of town (*otpuski*) were created with the knowledge that they might encourage, or at least enable, extramarital affairs, but that these affairs were ultimately advantageous as they helped bolster the birth rate. Furthermore, that men were not held financially responsible for illegitimate children may have functioned to encourage extramarital affairs. While such strategies resulted in more children, they also created more



divorce, more single-parent households, and more economic demands on those households. Importantly, the additional burdens of single-parenting fell predominantly on women.

Indeed, Petrushevskaja and Ulitskaja include many examples; their works are populated with single mothers, divorcees, widows, and unfaithful spouses. And while their works illustrate in detail the emotional discord that unhealthy relationships cause, they can also act as a possible route towards personal agency. In the works of Petrushevskaja and Ulitskaja, social relationships are sites ripe for living outside the dogmatic mores of communist society. While the two writers differ drastically in how they portray these topics, they nonetheless have in common an ability to illustrate how individuals worked around and challenged societal values, particularly those of fidelity and trust, in attempt to obtain something for themselves, be it financial and material stability, emotional fulfillment, physical intimacy, or personal safety. Some are successful, many are not. While some protagonists are frighteningly cunning in their calculations of exerting influence, others fumble clumsily and do themselves more harm than good, while still others seem to stumble upon agency as their last chance at emotional survival. By reworking and, at times, disobeying societal rules regarding love and sex, the women in Petrushevskaja and Ulitskaja's prose search for routes to agency in a society that largely disallows and discourages any exercise of power for personal interest.

*Liudmila Petrushevskaja: All's Fair in Love and in general*

In Petrushevskaja's dark worlds, romantic relationships are not a place of trust and affection, but rather a tool that can be used for one's own benefit. Optimistic hopes for traditional romantic happy endings may blind Petrushevskaja's younger heroines, but their first relationships' invariable failure quickly hardens and disillusion them. Much of the author's

concern with Soviet society's moral degeneracy is linked in her prose to women's loneliness. Despite cramped living conditions that place families nearly on top of each other, Petrushevskaja's heroines are desperately lonely, which gradually transforms them from victim to villain. Adultery, prostitution, fictitious marriages, one-night stands, abortion, and rape fill her prose. Her protagonists run the gamut of manipulation: they exploit romantic partners for gains in finance or social standing, they have recurring affairs that rarely bring joy, they become prostitutes and encourage their daughters to follow in their footsteps, and they delude themselves into believing that unrequited love brings fulfillment. But by far the most prominent trope in Petrushevskaja's fictional romances is infidelity. Readers would be hard pressed to find a couple within her oeuvre who share long-lasting mutual trust and respect. Instead, Petrushevskaja's protagonists, most often women, usually fall into one of two categories: either they are selfish, manipulative partners who scheme ways to benefit from their relationship status or they foolishly delude themselves into believing their love interest feels just as strongly and sincerely as they do. The second category of heroines will be analyzed in more detail in the third chapter, which focuses on denial, delusion, and deleterious daydreams. But unfaithful and unloving partners fall squarely into the focus of this chapter, as their untrustworthy behavior directly and deliberately challenges Soviet society's prescriptive ideals of marriage.

By exploring alternatives to monogamy, Petrushevskaja's protagonists show an attempt to step into, however briefly, a world outside of socially dictated rules of behavior. One scholar observes that Petrushevskaja "questioned the logic of following a decades-old Soviet socio-economic script for the family and for literature that denied the importance of individual identity outside of one's loyalty and connectedness to the party."<sup>160</sup> In a way, their willingness (and sometimes eagerness) to explore a world outside the limits of a happy family works to debunk

the myth of socialist utopia, found so often in propaganda materials, furthered by the Soviet regime. While it cannot be said, as it can of Ulitskaia's heroines, that Petrushevskaja's characters do so for sentimental reasons of intimacy, communication, or bonding, Petrushevskaja's characters nonetheless demonstrate a clear attempt to either maintain or reclaim a level of individual agency, however small, over their personal lives. In other words, cheaters may be cheating for selfish and manipulative reasons, but they are nevertheless acting out of self-interest in a society that demonizes acting out of self-interest and places love for the community above all else. Those with cheating husbands, on the other hand, are eager to use whatever means they can find in order to reclaim some level of power in their relationships. All struggling to survive in times of both national and personal crises, Petrushevskaja's characters are faced with the decision of which transgressions are morally acceptable and when.

“Such a Girl, Conscience of the World” (*Takaia devochka, sovest' mira*, 1988)

Of the manipulative wives who populate Petrushevskaja's writing, one of the most memorable must be the unnamed narrator in “Such a Girl, Conscience of the World,” who capitalizes on the tragic past of her neighbor, Raisa Ravilia, a former prostitute from Tatarstan. The narrator and her husband have a tumultuous marriage. The husband, Petrov, has three to four affairs per year, which the narrator refers to as “zigzags,” and brings home these women for dinner in hopes of witnessing moments of jealousy between the two women. Although these zigzags eventually become the norm for the Petrovs, and the wife even attentively listens to her husband describe the sexual idiosyncrasies of each woman (most likely thanks to the enthusiastic, if dubious, apologies that follow each affair), the first incident of infidelity in the story is especially difficult for the narrator to stomach. Hearing that he may abscond with their

child to elope with his mistress, the narrator plans to throw herself out of the window when the husband and mistress return. Her conscientious planning of the event shows that her true motives lie beyond her own emotional turmoil. Her ultimate goal is to punish her husband; if her suicide attempt is successful, he will be traumatized and guilt-ridden, if she is unsuccessful, overwhelming feelings of guilt might convince him to leave his mistress and remain with his family.

Self-defenestration seems to be Petrushevskaja's preferred method of suicide. It appears in several other works, most famously when Andrei from *The Time: Night*, (*Vremia: noch'*) jumps out of his apartment window while his mother and sister fight over which sibling should receive the bedroom, and the protagonist-husband in "The Flu" ("Gripp"), who stands on top of the windowsill as his wife collects her things to leave and jumps out only after she turns her back to him, symbolically calling her bluff. In all three cases the threat of self-defenestration, executed or not, is originally a bargaining chip during fights with loved ones.<sup>161</sup> Such a depiction of suicide differs significantly from previous instances in the Russian literary canon: if Shatov's famous suicide in Dostoevsky's *Demons* is based on the philosophical fusion of existentialism and nihilism and Vronsky's act of shooting himself is a desperate attempt to quell the pain of heartbreak, Petrushevskaja's suicides remove any glimmer of a romanticized greater meaning in taking one's life. Instead, her characters attempt suicide in an effort to scare and manipulate others into doing what they want. They step far outside the conventions of appropriate behavior in a stubborn, if distressed, effort to influence others to give them attention, affection, or sometimes, a room. In Petrushevskaja's works, people consider suicide not in defiance of life's futility, as Shatov does, or as a result of unbearable grief, like Vronsky, but as a means to exploit the sympathy of partners and family.

In this story, the narrator's plan fails; her suicide attempt is interrupted not by Petrov, but by, ironically, their neighbor, Raisa Ravilia, a Tatar prostitute now married to the Russian Seva. Raisa's role drives the plot. Seva finds Raisa in a small village (or, in the narrator's words, he "raked her out of some pit") probably during Stalin's deportation of Crimean Tatars in 1944.<sup>162</sup> Raisa's past is tragic, even for Petrushevskaja. After her mother dies at a young age, she grows up in a single-parent, single-room apartment and is witness to her father's habitual and flagrant mistreatment of the women he brings home. After running away as a teen, Raisa is held hostage in a room by a group of young men for months before authorities stumble upon the location. During her time held captive, it is implied that she is raped regularly ("But this is just a story, it doesn't pertain to anyone now, what's important is that Raisa even now engages in such activity").<sup>163</sup>

Predictably, Raisa's life with Seva is hardly better and her only respite from long days spent in deep depression is her growing friendship with the narrator. Traumatized by her past and unaware of her new freedom to reject men's advances, she gives in to all men who come to her apartment while her husband is at work. Petrov finds humor in Raisa's condition. He sends all of his male friends, family members, or anyone who comes to visit him to Raisa's apartment, then eagerly awaits their return for details of her visible submission and aversion to the act. In what becomes a parallel to the long history of Russian imperialism into neighboring lands, several markedly Russian men – Seva, Petrov, and the friends – briefly enter Raisa's apartment, rape her, and leave, regarding her body as territory within their domain of dominance, readily available for their disposal, at their convenience.

The narrator is not an innocent witness, nor does her first-hand knowledge of Raisa's tragic background prompt her to ask her husband to stop. On the contrary, she enthusiastically

joins in the fun as their friends regale them with the intimate specifics of raping Raisa. The narrator briefly attempts to justify herself, saying that they were laughing at Raisa “in a good way” (“*ochen’ po-dobromy*”), but the fact that these instances of taking advantage of Raisa’s past occur most often after one of Petrov’s zigzags shows that ultimately the narrator is prioritizing her husband’s good mood over her friend’s safety and wellbeing. In what becomes a recurring theme, in this story in and many of Petrushevskaja’s works overall, women react to their own exploitation by exploiting the trust and vulnerabilities of others.

The narrator’s largest transgression is yet to come. When her husband grows bored and anxious after a series of unexciting mistresses, the narrator considers an appeal to Raisa’s former “profession,” but before any steps are taken, Petrov falls for one mistress and gradually stops coming home after work. Realizing she has underestimated this particular mistress, she confides in Raisa, breaks down in tears, and reveals that her deepest fear is not losing Petrov, but losing the prospect of a two-bedroom apartment. How much increased housing means to her becomes clear immediately:

Raisa really understood [...] that here the conversation was not about some zigzag, but about the loss of residence for myself and for Sasha, about the loss of hope for a two-bedroom apartment, about which I have been so passionately dreaming and which even appeared to me in my sleep. How many times, during our late night conversations, Petrov and I laid out all the furniture.<sup>164</sup>

The on-going housing crisis in the Soviet Union meant that each family kept possible residences in the forefront of attention and the frequency of this topic’s occurrences within Petrushevskaja’s texts guarantees that audiences will, too. The closest analog might be Olia in “The Way of Eros” (“*Po doroge bog Erosa*” 1993) whose primary concern upon realizing her husband is having an affair with her coworker is the lost potential of better housing.<sup>165</sup> Her protagonists are willing to go to great lengths – from trading husbands in *Our Crowd* to faking suicide attempts in “Ali

Baba” – to procure reliable housing. As families were wait-listed at least partially on the basis of demand, a married couple with a small child would stand much better chances than a newly single divorcée, as the narrator is sure to keep in mind.

Only after mourning the loss of her apartment does the narrator think about what else Petrov’s absence would mean, specifically a fatherless Sasha and the new status of single mother. As a result, she begs Raisa to call Petrov, say that she has not seen him in a while, and ask him to visit her. Raisa understands this as an invitation to sleep with Petrov, which she does, and for which the narrator immediately disowns her completely, stating “Now she may as well be dead to me, and maybe she really did die.”<sup>166</sup> She ignores Raisa’s defenselessness, uses it to her own advantage, then ostracizes Raisa for it after the fact. The irony of her decision is not lost on scholars: Mary Theis explains “the abused and friendless narrator will also become more depressed, disbelieving in the possibility of connection with anyone.”<sup>167</sup> Although Raisa’s efforts prove ultimately successful (Petrov returns the next day, now with his own regaling tale), the narrator’s methods remain deplorable. She breaks her friend’s trust and profits from her history of abuse only to keep an unloving, unfaithful husband.

Considering the story’s content, it is unsurprising that in 1968 then editor-in-chief of the literary journal *Novyi mir* Aleksandr Tvardovsky declined to publish it, noting “She’s talented, but this is painfully grave, couldn’t it be a bit lighter?”<sup>168</sup> Indeed, the story’s dark plot offers a ruthlessly pessimistic view of the world and directly engages with concerns about late-Soviet society’s moral bankruptcy, discussions of which would become increasingly popular in the coming decades. However bleak, the narrator’s actions merit analysis if for no other reason than because they so clearly demonstrate how crucially she values the ability to drive her fate. Sensing that she may soon lose husband and housing, she sacrifices both trust and safety of a

friend (and threatens to jeopardize her own) to ensure her future remains as she envisions it. She becomes a mastermind manipulator, willing to endanger herself and others to get what she wants. Petrushevskaiia's protagonists may be morally weak, but they are far from powerless.

#### "Klarissa's Story" ("Istoriia Klarissy" 1972)

The eponymous heroine's defining characteristic is her proclivity for perseverance in the face of adversity, a skill acquired after having to stand up to bullies in grade school. Tenacity aids Klarissa through three marriages, each of which with their own failures. The first marriage occurs when she is still in high school and seems to come to an end due to the geographical distance between Klarissa and her husband, whom she met during summer travels.

The ending of the second marriage is not as simple; Klarissa marries a paramedic who begins drinking, fighting, and cheating on her shortly after the birth of their first child. The change in her husband has a devastating effect on Klarissa: at first she attempts to argue her way back to happiness, eventually unable or unwilling to keep herself from continuing to yell outside of her husband's company: "She, one could say, relentlessly continued the fight with her husband, continued to provide evidence of her correctness and her point of view, even when she was far from her husband, for example at work, at a friend's house, in the most inopportune moments."<sup>169</sup> Petrushevskaiia's choice of words in this excerpt emphasizes a few key points. First, she does not include any notion that Klarissa complained to friends and coworkers out of a desire for emotional support or understanding. Instead, Klarissa's goal when berating her husband's behavior seems to be, justifiably, proving his guilt and her innocence. The act of lambasting a loved one is, in a way, its own version of working outside of societal norms. Gossip was considered inappropriate behavior for Soviet citizens and propaganda programs



routinely targeted ads at women to discourage talking poorly of others (the famous 1941 poster of a woman with her finger over her mouth above the caption “Ne boltai” comes to mind). The biggest transgression, we are told, is not the husband’s hooliganism, but that he was “uncontrolled, unashamed of anything, living his barbaric, graceless life in the same room as Klarissa and their child.”<sup>170</sup> What concerns Klarissa seems to be not the behavior itself, but the change in status and reputation that accompanies it. She is ashamed of a husband who regularly drinks and fights and must continuously reassert her innocence with respect to the events that occur.

A similar dynamic occurs between two minor characters in the short story “Father and Mother” (“*Otets i mat*” 1988), in which the young protagonists’ mother spends every evening waiting for her presumed unfaithful husband to return from work in order to relentlessly chastise him, even going so far as to insinuate that he raped his teenage daughter, the protagonist. When he fails to come home before eleven, the mother decides to go to his work, with all five children in tow, to embarrass him in front of colleagues. When he leaves in the morning, she chases him down the street, yelling at the top of her lungs for all to hear. While the father attempts to keep up appearances of a happy family, the mother uses public berating to shame her husband into submission. This reads this story in her research on scripted communication and its failures to produce mutual understanding: “A Russian woman who does not support her husband’s efforts to keep up appearance risks destroying what is left of the script and more.” In other words, the mother’s readiness to go off “script,” or no longer comply with expected codes of behavior, not only fails to bring about improved communication between the couple, but also threatens the foundations of the Soviet community’s implicit social contract of sweeping personal crises under the rug. For her, a public reputation of a happy family means nothing if she cannot change her

husband's behavior behind-the-scenes. Exposing family impropriety, even more taboo than now, becomes a tool she uses, albeit unsuccessfully, for her own benefit. Unlike Klarissa however, the mother in this story, does not find resilience from hardship and her fate after the protagonist's departure remains unknown.

Klarissa's strength seems to wear from her husband's affairs; as time goes on, she loses control over herself and becomes, "like an amoeba that moves from place to place with the primitive goal of getting away from a point of contact."<sup>171</sup> This is the point in the story at which Klarissa's resilience seems to fade. Importantly, Petrushevskaja breaks the narratorial pattern and uses several idioms and metaphors to describe Klarissa's life: "She turned out to not have what it takes (*ne v silakh*) to really bear her husband's contempt for her and his apathy [...]" "One could say that during these years she lived without ability to steer nor sail (*bez rulia i bez vetril*) from jolt to jolt (*ot tolchka do tolchka*) [...]" and "Klarissa in this period of her life could not in any way define her role, come to terms with this role, and accept a more deserving decision."<sup>172</sup> These turns of phrase, if nothing else, emphasize the rarity and import of Klarissa's passivity.

This time in her life is short lived. When her husband moves to a different town with their son, her feelings of self-determination return and she takes action. She sets out to his apartment and beats on the door, demanding an answer. When neighbors tell her he has left for his family's dacha (at an unknown location), she begins earnest, if frantic, detective work by interrogating friends and traveling to different nearby towns on weekends to look for her son. The concept of rest, and especially lack of rest for women, is recurrent throughout Petrushevskaja's works and Klarissa is no exception. After multiple frenzied searches, a doctor and nurse visit Klarissa's apartment, asking if she might like to take a break in a sanatorium for a

while, which she refuses. Without delving too far into the history of mental illness in Russian cultural history, one might note that the conflation of women's stress and suspected madness in this scene is heavily gendered. Klarissa's erratic behavior is easily understandable to anyone familiar with her situation; she does not need medical treatment, the social stigma of hospitalization, for being worried about her kidnapped son.

Not unlike elsewhere in the Russian literary canon, Petrushevskaja's heroines, often single mothers, are extremely overworked and rarely have a minute to spare. As mentioned in the introduction, women faced pressure to play several roles and meet a tall order of the double burden of full-time employment and overseeing the domestic sphere. In addition, women were often the first victims of layoffs and those employed held mostly lower-paid positions, such as unmechanized industrial and agricultural labor, where they performed strenuous tasks in unhygienic conditions for minimal pay, eventually causing women to make up the majority of the population living below the poverty line.<sup>173</sup> The chaotic daily routine that these onerous demands created for many women does not pass by Klarissa. The narrator explains that Klarissa six months later finds herself a divorced single mother with primary custody and monthly alimony, her days filled rushing between home, her son's school, stores, and other errands. Interestingly, Klarissa's ability to juggle burdens of work, childcare, and basic survival becomes her hamartia; while performing these duties are necessary to maintaining care of her son, they also drive him to become more attached to his father, whose parents assist in childcare, and can therefore provide more "nursing, tenderness, and upbringing" than the busy Klarissa.<sup>174</sup>

Klarissa shows that old habits die hard. Even when she finally allows herself to go south for a break from work, she spends most of her days standing in line to call the kindergarten and inquire about her son. However, the warm weather and relaxation do her well and after a few

days, she meets a pilot whom she marries upon returning to the city and they start a new, “full” life together.<sup>175</sup> The only thing that blurs their happiness, the narrator explains, is Klarissa’s insistence on calling the airport multiple times a day to inquire about her husband’s flight schedule and expected return. The new routine is an obvious improvement for Klarissa in many ways, but her inability to not monitor her husband’s every move betrays her remaining deeper insecurities.

“Klarissa’s Story” can be read two ways. First, and more obviously, it is about the partial maturity of a young woman. With every marriage, Klarissa’s behavior changes, as does her physical appearance (descriptions of her go from “she did not evoke among anyone admiration nor even the smallest interest” when young, to “foolish, spineless” and yet “a full beauty” after her first marriage, to “a mature woman of twenty-five” after her second).<sup>176</sup> However, this reading would miss an important factor in Klarissa’s development; namely, while her outward metamorphosis may lead to beauty and confidence, her character seems to stop short of full maturity. Even though one of her most attractive qualities is how she “looks through her glasses with a brief aloofness,” her inability to stop incessantly badgering her husband and his coworkers shows that her struggles with self-discovery remain (as well as once again breaking with the taboo of airing dirty laundry). Sally Dalton-Brown, author of the only current monograph on Petrushevskaja, coins the phrase the “Klarissa syndrome” to describe those of Petrushevskaja’s characters who suffer similar insecurities: they are in a state of “victim and victor, lack of self and over-awareness of self, Klarissa’s life illustrates the unhappy state of women faced with the concept of an absent other, her possessive drive stemming from the fear occasioned by dispossession.”<sup>177</sup> In other words, Klarissa’s vacillation between vulnerable and assertive becomes something of a tragic flaw. Unable to feel fully confident, she overcompensates by

attempting to control everything and everyone around her, ultimately driving away the very relationships she strives to preserve. And as her predecessors before her, Klarissa goes against the foundational command of communist morality, if only via omission: she places personal love over love for the collective.

“Immortal Love” (*Bessmertnaia liubov*, 1983)

When it comes to breaking the first rule of communist morality, Lena, the protagonist of “Immortal Love” is the worst offender. The story opens with Lena on her knees before her lover, Ivanov, as he prepares to leave town and rumors floating through the workplace that Lena will abandon her mentally ill mother, caring husband, and disabled son to follow Ivanov. Lena befriends the local librarian, who also has a reputation of skipping town and leaving behind maternal duties in favor of romantic interests, and the two plan their relative trips together. The rest of her friend’s story remains unknown, but Lena stays away from the city for seven years and returns only when her husband, Albert, comes to retrieve her. Although we do not know all of the events that took place in those seven years, we know Lena suffered some tragedies: three years after enrolling in a new institute, she is taken from the dorm to a psychiatric hospital, possibly as a results of her break up with Ivanov. Ivanov, who loses nearly everything to alcoholism, quickly dumps Lena and although the narrator does not pretend to know his reasoning, her assumptions are clear: “But whatever happened, whatever the honest reason was for him to dump Lena, the fact remains a fact: the instinct to continue the family line was not satisfied and in this, it’s possible, was the whole deal.”<sup>178</sup> In other words, Lena’s history of having a child paralyzed from birth was enough to turn Ivanov away, consciously or not.<sup>179</sup>

The issues at work in this story are many, including problematic depictions of motherhood, childcare, marital life, and physical and mental disabilities. But most important to my argument is Lena's notable, if ethically disputable, attempt to follow her heart. Keeping in mind how sacrosanct the image of the mother is in Russian culture, presumed to be not only a natural role for women, but also the most fulfilling and rewarding, Petrushevskiaia's choice to create characters who enthusiastically forgo this predestined duty directly contrasts commonly held beliefs and the works of many literary predecessors and contemporaries. Although the overbearing "totalitarian Petrushevskian mother" as described by Helena Goscilo is probably a more common figure, the negligent or absent mother, such as Lena, can be just as blasphemous.<sup>180</sup> The impudence of her actions is only increased by her family situation at home, where her help is desperately needed: her mother, "loses her mind" three months after Lena's son is born with a brain hemorrhage that renders him paralyzed and mute for life.<sup>181</sup> The doctors inform Lena and her husband that while insanity may run in the family, the sight of a paralyzed child most likely served as the catalyst to the decline of her mental health. Albert, whom the narrator regards as the hero of the story, is able to bear the burden that Lena cannot and manages the household in her absence for seven years. Lena's willingness to promptly leave her family for the sake of a passionate affair, particularly one based on unrequited love, is therefore remarkable, given the backdrop of a overtly prescriptive and controlling society that puts the greater good above all else.

Lena's fantasy of finding a more adventurous lifestyle manifests in Tonia, the librarian. Tonia is described as "avoiding her maternal obligations and, somehow having convinced everyone at work, she left her child with her parents, went to that same city, where her beloved lived, her target, and furthermore went there uninvited, unexpected, slept at the train station, hid

behind some stairway, and waited for her beloved to appear...”<sup>182</sup> Lena, it seems, also entertains dreams of such an existence; she recognizes in the opening of the story that her lover, Ivanov, does not feel as strongly about their romance as she does, meaning her desire to abandon her home, job, and family is based on either self-delusion that her path will somehow lead to a fulfilling relationship or on the decision that a life of hiding in stairways is nonetheless more attractive than her current situation. While the importance of delusions, escapism, and fantasies will be covered in more detail in the next chapter, Lena’s actions here nevertheless show her willingness to quickly and unhesitatingly break with social convention for her own [anticipated] reward.

Judging by the actions of many of Petrushevskaiia’s heroines, Lena included, there is something to be said for unrequited love and unfulfilling relationships, from the most lackluster to the pernicious and toxic. Women who chase after uninterested men, remain in loveless and sexless marriages, or deliberately misconstrue working relationships with male colleagues overpopulate Petrushevskaiia’s fiction. As Dalton-Brown succinctly puts it in her analysis of “Temnaia sud’ba,” a brief piece about a middle-aged woman who falls in love with an ever-disappointing, unattractive, and married man-child: “A role in a tragedy of doomed love is, however, infinitely preferable to her previous grim and barren existence.”<sup>183</sup> The decision to choose any romantic affiliation over the status of being single is telling of societal values of the time, which view marital union as a microcosm of larger structure of the communist collective. Any relationship, it seems, was better than being alone. Petrushevskaiia’s heroines often fly in the face of this commonly held “truth.” For them, attempting to assert control over their lives is preferable to an unhappy relationship, even if they are then alone.

Furthermore, the depressing romantic tales we see in Petrushevskaja recall the crisis of masculinity, in which men's inability to provide for their families worked doubly as justification for increased rates of alcoholism and domestic abuse and as justification for blaming working women for upsetting the presumed natural gender hierarchy and forcing their male counterparts to feel ineffective.<sup>184</sup> Petrushevskaja's writings anticipate the urgency with which this question was to be addressed during the economic changes that followed the fall of the Soviet Union.

The ideal union is as fictitious in Petrushevskaja as in Soviet history; if Soviet officials and professionals marketed an image of its citizenry as a hard-working, loving, and supportive family, Petrushevskaja's heroines fail pathetically at convincing others of similarly romanticized versions of their love lives. Both state and individual were lying to themselves and others, claiming a fantasy far better than reality could evidence. Lena, as previously mentioned, shows no shame in the opening scene, on her knees in front of Ivanov while colleagues walk by and stare, yet convinces herself their love is worth sacrificing family ties to keep. In "The Violin" ("*Skripka*") a woman's shabbily crafted stories of an affectionate husband and concerned group of girlfriends fall far short of persuading other patients in the maternity ward. Apart from wanting to avoid the stigma of being a new single mother, her persistence in maintaining the lie shows how highly valued the status of wife or partner was. Maya Johnson considers the pattern in Petrushevskaja's stories of women in disappointing relationships and posits the commonly accepted notion of female sacrifice as a redemptive power. She writes:

Perhaps there is even a kind of masochism to this mentality - a variety of self-inflicted martyrdom, related to national conventions that see women's suffering as a redemptive force . . . [and] a central theme of Russian culture. And many contemporary women admit that their tradition of heroic self-sacrifice is a form of power play, a way of retaining their aura and hence their status.<sup>185</sup>



Admittedly, the word “self” in “self-inflicted martyrdom” may be cause for debate; Tatiana Rovenskaia discusses how the state’s unrealistic expectations for women set them up for failure, leaving martyrdom as one of few options left.<sup>186</sup> However, Johnson’s ideas on the nuances of relationship power dynamics within Petrushevskiaia’s writing is spot on. Protagonists such as Lena do not always choose to be in unequal relationships, but their efforts to capitalize on such inequalities speaks to their tenacity and resourcefulness.

*Our Crowd (Svoi krug, 1988)*

Written in 1979 and published in 1988, the novella is comprised of a series of stream-of-consciousness diary entries, in which the unnamed narrator retells the happenings of her group of old friends and peers, who now resemble enemies more than loved ones. Every Friday evening, they meet at the home of the popular Marisha to drink away the stress of work and parenting. In her journal, the narrator describes the endless scandals that occupy their attention over the years, ranging from affairs to ridicule, among constantly wavering alliances and rivalries. Filled with allusions to incidents of direct physical violence, including rape, beatings, and mysteriously disappearing teeth, the novella shows the underlying culture of violence to be most disturbing.

The violence that does not leave bruises is most troubling and pervasive. The narrator’s group of friends mirrors within itself crises prevalent on national levels; their relationships are based on exploiting trust and utilizing deception to gain power. The weekly parties become the arena on which the battles are staged. Each discussion becomes an opportunity to strike; under what seems to be shallow chatting about recent gossip, those who strive for power search for chances to make jabs at one another. Verbal abuse, specifically that which calls into question another’s status, is what affect theorist Sarah Ahmed might call an object of shame, circulated as

a social good in this case, and used as a weapon to display dominance.<sup>187</sup> Each instance of creating unhappiness in a rival is a victory for the attacker, as if positive emotions are a zero-sum game with a finite amount of happiness available. Leaving no room for respite, the narrator's diary revisits countless similar occurrences of verbal conflict, strewing together a narrative of ongoing psychological trauma. Their atmosphere is one of suspicion in which old friends and newcomers alike are constantly battling for social influence for selfish purposes and using whatever tools they can find, including manipulation, lies, and derision, to regain any sense of control.

But apart from popularity, our narrator is confronted with a critical dilemma. A diagnosis of terminal illness, which remains as unnamed as its bodily owner, interrupts the narrator's plans for the future. Her first instinct is to worry for the well-being of her son, Alesha. As she strives to secure a safe and prosperous future for Alesha, she faces the decision of when and to what extent she should compromise her sense morality in times of crisis.

The narrator considers possible future caretakers for her son, but sees limited options. Her ex-husband and Alesha's father, Kolia, is far from reliable, first and foremost due to his own lukewarm attitude towards his son. Lack of love aside, Kolia is unfit to parent and seems to be aware of the fact; it is not coincidental that he begins to see himself in his son precisely when Alesha exhibits weakness and failure, a pattern that anticipates Kolia's inability to fulfill the masculine ideal. Alesha struggles to cope with his disharmonious home life: he forgets how to eat, slovenly spilling food and drink all over himself, and begins wetting the bed regularly, for which his father punishes him with a slap across the face. Just like his young son, Kolia is fully dependent on others for basic care. Following the trope of his literary ancestors dating from Oblomov, he relies on his wives (first the narrator, then Marisha) to take on a role closer to his

mother than his partner and his role as head of the household is largely symbolic instead of pragmatic.

At the time of publication, the crisis of masculinity was a popular topic of discussion and remains consistent for the male characters throughout the story. Literary representations of men's "marginalization" takes root in the idea that only crisis and terror can result if men's long-held presumed natural role as household patriarch is disturbed by strong-willed, working women. With their role as breadwinner challenged by economic stagnation and their role as parent challenged by the symbolic national father-leader (be it Lenin, Stalin, Khrushchev or Brezhnev), men found themselves estranged from both spheres and faced new, probing questions of identity, ability, and duty. Furthermore, it is worth remembering that all Soviet citizens were somewhat disempowered, given that the effective power resided in the Part and the state. Patricia Carden describes the men of *Svoi krug* in the following terms: "men turn out to be marginal, manipulated by women, or incapable of successfully winning through to capture the hoped-for prize."<sup>188</sup> It stands to note first that there are some problematic implications of Carden's comments. I would categorize the men more as lazy than "weak," as the root of their inactivity seems to be lack of interest and, given their positionality in a heavily patriarchal society, it is difficult to imagine that Kolia, if he tried, could not attain at least a shallow image of financial success. Even if the "hoped-for prize" in the work is the social standing and increased influence for which the women in the story so desperately fight each other, the men hold the position in the novella of being an equally hoped-for prizes; their presence as lover/husband, despite how they more often than not become another burden to care for, is the symbolic trophy of the women's on-going competition. Nonetheless, the men's role in the novella and Carden's observation reflect the crisis of masculinity and men's perceived "incapab[ility]" to fulfill their equally perceived predestined

role of leader. As if adapting the 19<sup>th</sup> century's superfluous man (*lishnyi chelovek*), Kolia and his literary brothers wander through life struggling to find their calling. Unable and unwilling to be a father, Kolia leaves Alesha's mother to fend for their son's safety by herself.

With husband and recently deceased parents crossed off the list of possibilities, the narrator fears for the worst outcome of caretakers: the state. She knows that an abandoned child's fate of being transferred from orphanage to orphanage, eventually lost in a broken system of neglect and abuse, would be a fate worse than death.<sup>189</sup> Petrushevskaja was intimately familiar with that life. As a child, she spent time in an orphanage outside of Ufa during wartime and later detailed incidents of physical abuse from her time there in short stories.<sup>190</sup> To avoid damning Alesha to such suffering, the narrator knows she must take drastic measures. She crafts a plan, but keeps it hidden from both her friends and the reader until the last moment. The events are recounted sporadically and out of order, but the evening essentially plays out thusly: before her annual Easter party, she sends seven-year-old Alesha to their dacha alone, deliberately not giving him the key and instructing him that under no circumstances should he knock on the door and interrupt their party if he returns. When she opens the door to show her guests out at the end of the evening, they find young Alesha sleeping next to the door. She jumps into action and brutally beats him until blood appears. Her friends, shocked by the scene, grab the boy and take him from her, carrying him out of the apartment in an image that, as one scholar points out, recalls Christ taking his followers out of hell.<sup>191</sup>

Ironically, only this and the bed-wetting scene show acute, physical violence and in both Alesha is the target. The adults may suffer from the ongoing psychological violence that surrounds them, but only the child becomes a victim of physical abuse.<sup>192</sup> His mother's beating after the party is a physical manifestation of the abuse and neglect already being enacted upon

him. The beating, her long-term intentions notwithstanding, invites comparisons to the eternal melancholic. Abandoned by her family, friends, and the unfulfilled promises of the socialist state to look after its citizens, the narrator confronts her own fear of unwillingly abandoning her son via the continuation of violence. Just as she lacks the ability to secure her child's future, she lacks the ability to stop the cycle of abuse. Alesha's parents, themselves victims of the totalitarian state, thus have become the perpetrators of more violence.<sup>193</sup>

As scholars have already noticed, themes of individuals struggling in a cruel world are common in Petrushevskaja's writing; as if exploring the limits of human nature, Petrushevskaja's texts pose difficult questions of morality in traumatic times. In the words of Stephanie Sandler, there "is something about the world these characters inhabit that makes horrifying forms of behavior seem inevitable and routine."<sup>194</sup> As laying all blame on their environment would remove agency and responsibility from Petrushevskaja's characters, I am hesitant to agree that their worlds cause their actions. However, there is something to be said for the idea that the environment of pressure and violence brings out the worst parts of humanity. Trapped in a shrinking space filled only with mistrust, suspicion, and competition, they sense the lack of possibilities of escape and react at times from panic and fear, at times with shrewd cunning. Petrushevskaja's works, published during a time when the suspected moral destitution of a nation was creeping into popular discourse, are a synecdochial portrait of contemporary readers' worst fears taken to their absurdist extremes.

Closing the novella are the narrator's reflections on her decision to beat her son. In her typical self-assertive tone, she interprets her actions as ethically unproblematic. She pictures Alesha visiting her grave years later, placing flowers on her tombstone, and forgiving her for her actions,

Alesha, I think, will come to me on the first day of Easter, ideally as we agreed, I showed him the road and the date, I think he'll figure it out, he's a very smart boy, and there, among painted eggs, plastic wreaths, and a tired, drunk, happy crowd, he will forgive me for not giving him a chance to say goodbye, for giving him a blow to the face instead of a blessing.<sup>195</sup>

Her conviction that the ends justify the means is possibly an attempt to convince herself as well as her audience. Natalia Ivanova observes that this scene brings together images of death (the narrator's grave) with life (Alesha at an older age) to create an image of "grotesque carnivalization."<sup>196</sup> I would point out that it also illustrates many other binaries at work in the text as well: first, the protagonist's own struggle with gaining and losing a sense of agency (losing control of her health and attempting to control her son's future); second, the possibility of escape (inescapable death and Alesha's chance to escape to a better life), and lastly, the text's final word on whether or not the subjects are condemned (whether or not Alesha will forgive his mother, as she imagines). The extensive presence of binaries threaded throughout the plot replicates the tensions of uncertainty that haunt the narrator. Placing the forward-looking scene in a graveyard, where a child visits his parent's tombstone, spotlights the likelihood of repetition through generations and casts aspersions on hopeful predictions of a better future for Alesha.

At the same time, the ambiguity surrounding the narrator's situation lends itself to another purpose: the frequency of similar dilemmas for women in reality. The narrator's scenario may be unique in the specific details of her situation, but the larger theme of struggling to retain control over one's life is preserved in part due to these blurred images. Ewa Thompson remarks on the fleeting nature of Petrushevskaja's heroines: "Petrushevskaja makes sure that her stories about these women are fragmentary, that they lack beginnings and endings [...] Nothing remarkable ever happens to them, they appear from nowhere and disappear into nowhere."<sup>197</sup> Their ephemerality represents many women's life experiences in the Soviet era; some lives

ended unnecessarily early and were forgotten almost immediately, while others' stories were never told, ignored by the regime and scratched from the record of history.

While unexpected twists of plot and convention of genre within the text may catch them off guard, audiences of *Our Crowd* were warned from the beginning. The title of the work is indicative of how the audience has fallen prey to Petrushevskaiia's trap. *Svoi* can roughly be translated as "one's own," with an emphasis on belonging and being one's rightful possession. *Krug*, meaning circle, in this context is understood to be a social circle. Being in one's "own circle" then comes with a host of connotations: one, naturally, finds a feeling of belonging there and is an accepted member of that community, however small. Assumptions that follow might be that one is welcome there and can rely on other members of the circle for support. Petrushevskaiia inverts these meanings; the circle is not a place of warm acceptance, but of mutually destructive mocking and derision. Falling for the false ideal of the intelligentsia as a closed community of considerate great thinkers, the narrator and her peers have tricked themselves into thinking they belong in the *krug*. But Petrushevskaiia's greatest achievement is that she tricks the audience into believing the same thing. Audiences are invited to monitor the author's journey under the pretense that we, too, are educated, intelligent, elite audiences. Petrushevskaiia's narrative leads one to believe that our ability to pick up on subtle hints throughout the text differentiates us from the characters and from other, less observant readers. As one scholar points out, her readers become her "victims" just as do her heroes, someone "whose expectations are doomed to disappointment, but who perhaps perversely enjoys that sense of the ideal remaining unattainable."<sup>198</sup> Just as she exposes the base pleasures of the intelligentsia, she exposes the audience's equally barbaric desires; just like Romans watching gladiators, we take pleasure in observing others fight each other.

*Our Crowd* involves a gradual sense of loss of agency, both for the individual and on a generational/national level for anyone living through the aftermath Stalinism. The text represents loss of personal agency on several levels: first, the narrator's personal struggle to decide her child's fate; second, the still-unresolved national traumas and continued strained living conditions; third, the novella's structure as a reproduction of the futile search for resolution; and fourth, the novella as a performative act by the author that wrestles with a traumatic past. Her work re-presents the senselessness of the violence it depicts; purposely denying respite mimics the environment in which violence was not the exception, but the rule. Blurring boundaries of time and space, the narrator's journal replicates the extensive invisible hand of state repression, in that one can no longer remember a time before its presence because it seems it has just always been there. Petrushevskaja offers no resolution; she presents us with shocking scenes and walks away, leaving us to sit in discomfort and unease.

Overall, Petrushevskaja's protagonists challenge the rules from the outset. Some, such as Lena in "Immortal Love" and Klarissa in "Klarissa's Story" feel starved of love, attention, and validation, and therefore breach the social contract of the nuclear family to seek gratification elsewhere. Others, such as the narrators of "Such a Girl, Conscience of the World" and *Our Crowd*, face potential crises and must reevaluate their moral values and reassess which sins, from simple lying to encouraging or even enacting physical violence, are justifiable and when. Both narrators sacrifice previously held beliefs of acceptable behavior for women (as a friend or wife in "Such a Girl, Conscience of the World" and as a mother in *Our Crowd*) and find themselves betraying friends, spouses, children, and themselves. Relationships, either romantic, platonic, or familial, become tools that can be used and manipulated in attempts to gain agency.



One Russian reviewer seems to feel that this environment limits the development of Petrushevskaja's heroes and writes that because they must "act strictly by a designated system, limited by the confines of *byt*," they are also "predictable," and can only "walk and symbolize."<sup>199</sup> As much as I understand the concern, I would argue that the obstacles surrounding her heroes, instead of minimalizing their actions, ultimately allow them to function outside dominant thought. Forced into moral gray areas, they attempt to eschew traditional codes of conduct in order to maintain agency. Leaving questions of ethical justification aside, their responses to an oppressive environment that vilifies personal gains and limits individual freedoms suggest a deeper drive to control, or at least influence, their lived experiences.

Petrushevskaja's texts are impressively complex and one dissertation chapter cannot begin to cover all of the ways in which her texts engage with the apprehensions of *perestroika* literature. The content of her writing works to disorient readers, while her use of time, space, dialogue, and pauses underscore the discomfort. Her stories, set in an ambiguous time between the Thaw and *perestroika*, depict the consequences of authoritarian institutions posturing as father-figures for the entire nation in the attempt to regulate behavior in both private and public spheres, while failing to provide efficient housing, healthcare, or employment. As were many women living in post-Thaw Soviet Russia, Petrushevskaja's characters are faced with difficult decisions; left in a constantly shrinking place, with few opportunities for escape or improvement, many of them become perpetrators of the same type of violence of which they were victims. With space, wellbeing, rest, trust, and support all severely lacking, families struggle to remain intact and all too often fall to the pressure of their environment. Sigrid McLaughlin reminds us that despite the grim nature of Petrushevskaja's depiction of the world, her writing charges characters and audiences alike to "remain humane," even in the darkest of situations.<sup>200</sup>

Although many fail to meet this tall order, McLaughlin's observation reveals another distressing truth of Petrushevskaja's writing: for better or worse, the individual is ultimately accountable for maintaining a sense of moral responsibility.

*Liudmila Ulitskaia's Tolerance: The State of the Field*

In their introduction to the first monograph on Ulitskaia, Elizabeth Skomp and Ben Sutcliffe write that Ulitskaia's works "follow a moral master plot in which characters struggle to retain their principles in an ethically deformed society," a statement that can easily be applied to Petrushevskaja as well.<sup>201</sup> In this section, I aim to show how both writers create stories of individuals fighting larger systems of oppression to regain agency, but do so in starkly different – and telling – ways. Fighting for survival under totalitarian regimes, their protagonists are pushed to search for agency – and indeed, even the existence of a space in which to exert agency – outside of the state and society's Foucaultian gaze. They both show how individual behavior can work to resist forms of disciplinary power, but the complex nature of these actions is unique to the situation. In other words, both women depict morally desolate worlds in which each individual must decide for herself the appropriate course of action to survive, but while Petrushevskaja shows the moments when individuals negotiate morality for their own survival, Ulitskaia relates stories of coming together to stand up to codes of the dominant social order.

Their contrasting authorial stances and narrative techniques enhance these differences. While Petrushevskaja seems to stand back from her creations, leaving them to their own devices to decide their fate, Ulitskaia remains intimately close to her protagonists, watching over them and protecting them through their journeys. Her authorial voice is always palpable and her narrators present material with heavy doses of compassion and understanding instead of derision

or disrespect. Even when describing those on the margins of society, Ulitskaia's prose takes care to maintain the humanity and dignity of all its subjects.

Writing in a respectable tone is necessary for Ulitskaia's larger philosophy of collective tolerance, which becomes clear to readers almost immediately upon picking up one of her works.<sup>202</sup> Skomp and Sutcliffe note that Ulitskaia's texts contain the author's implicit answer to the question of how to save one's morality in trying times, something noticeably absent in Petrushevskaja. In their words, and as the title *Ludmila Ulitskaya and the Art of Tolerance* foreshadows, the answer lies in collective tolerance.<sup>203</sup> Ulitskaia forwards collective tolerance of other's lifestyles, including religious, cultural, and ideological diversity, as the primary answer to the world's most pressing issues. In her view, societies and governments should allow a greater range of individual lifestyles and refrain from attempting to control their subjects' private lives. Consistent through many of her earlier shorter works and all of her later novels are themes of understanding, community, and compassion to a degree nearly unprecedented in the late-Soviet context. Her narratives illustrate sentiments of panic, yet ultimately call for empathy and solidarity in times of crisis, even at the cost of personal agency.

Instead of reiterating Soviet ideology's emphasis on laboring for the collective good, the beaten dead horse of socialist realism, Ulitskaia's portrayals of camaraderie differ from communist morality in its acceptance of a diverse range of beliefs. Communist morality pushes for a collective good, but only as long as it is in service to the ultimate goal of a perfect communist society; again, the first guideline of the 1961 Moral Code stresses one's "allegiance to communism." A collective good centered around any other goal would not be allowed under communist morality. While it would be foolish to claim that Ulitskaia's prose does not show clear biases for some ideological values over others (indeed, she has been accused of being,

among other things, a provocateur and not showing adequate love for her country due to her “shame and gendered weakness”), her literary depictions of a collective good tend to show community as its driving cause, without any specific political ideology attached to it.<sup>204</sup>

Ulitskaia illustrates two spaces as venues in which to build such communities and practice collective tolerance. The first is culture, broadly defined as both artistic ventures and individual lifestyles. In fact, the criticism cited above is in response to Ulitskaia’s 2014 essay, “Goodbye, Europe!” (*Evropa, proshchai!*), in which she warns against the Russian government’s attempts to regulate its subjects’ culture: “The government puts out seedlings in those areas which do not belong to the government, in culture, subjecting it to its own interests, and in the private life of a person, attempting to manipulate his consciousness.”<sup>205</sup> For Ulitskaia, art and private life are areas that cannot be controlled by the state, regardless of how earnestly it tries to do so. In this way, her philosophy of collective tolerance speaks directly to – and directly against – the aims of communist morality. If the guidelines of communist morality attempted to dictate the individual’s conduct in private and its accompanying strict censorship of publishable materials attempted to limit the scope of available beliefs, Ulitskaia’s prose shows how these gestures were futile. At the end of the day, Ulitskaia’s strongest protagonists retain the prerogative to decide their actions both public and private.

In addition, her portrayal of collective tolerance reaches beyond the limits of the Soviet ideology’s capacity for tolerance. Leaving behind classical images of the New Soviet man and *stakhanovites*, she describes with detail and warmth those either ignored or pushed to the margins of society, including the physically and mentally disabled, the elderly, women in sex work, various religions outside of Eastern Orthodoxy, and the LGBT community. Even though other Russian authors had broached some of these topics before, Ulitskaia’s depictions of non-

traditional relationships stand out through her unwavering sympathy toward her subjects. As Sutcliffe points out, her characters act not according to patriarchal gender roles or more offensive ideas on homosexuality (in Russia some critics consider homosexuality as similar to pedophilia, even today), but on “individual emotion and experience.”<sup>206</sup> Her writing does not “symptomize perversity,” but instead reinserts humanity into portrayals of non-traditional relationships.<sup>207</sup> To be fair, there has recently been understandable criticism of her depiction of gay relationships, specifically painting them as uniformly uncomplicated and almost one-dimensional instead of as based on the complex nature of human relationships. Nonetheless, her writing represents a large step for the progress of LGBT rights in Russia; positive, welcoming inclusion of such a wide variety of relationships and diverse populations rarely appeared in Russian literature, especially as early as the immediate post-1991 era, before contemporary discourse on LGBT rights entered into popular discourse in Russia.<sup>208</sup>

The significance of this theme of tolerance goes beyond challenging the idea that non-traditional relationships, in whatever form, are based on perversity, as more conservative ideology in Russia often claims. Although this challenge in itself is an admirable feat, Ulitskaia’s incorporation of non-traditional relationships into her texts holds additional meaning: by depicting non-traditional relationships based on the universal feeling of love, she shows how living outside the boundaries of social acceptance allows individuals to thrive. Breaking the taboos on romantic love and what is was “supposed” to be, her characters are able to preserve their emotional health in a way the rest of society disallows. Their bonds, which Ulitskaia takes great pains to depict as based on love and sincerity, serve as sanctuaries from Russia’s harsh 20<sup>th</sup> century. Her sympathetic and detailed writing, described by some as “evok[ing] compassion and admiration without bathos,” presents non-traditional sexualities without judgment,

condemnation, or ridicule.<sup>209</sup> In spite of Ulitskaia's sometimes naively sanguine view of same-sex couples (as inherently sophisticated, uncomplicated, and effortless), these relationships become almost an act of civil disobedience that allows them to live outside and against the rules of the time.

#### “Bron’ka” (1989)

In her first published short-story, Ulitskaia introduces the theme of testing societal taboos for the sake of spiritual fulfillment, a topic upon which the author will continue to expand throughout her career. Even though the stage on which to propose this idea is a contentious one that at times overshadows the author's larger ideas, the text nonetheless shows how some individuals ventured to work against communist morality in search of greater meaning.

The story follows an impoverished young girl who moves into the closet of a Moscow apartment building with her mother as part of Stalin's resettlement plans just before the war. Two years later, fourteen-year-old Bron'ka becomes pregnant with the child of her sixty-nine-year-old algebra tutor, Viktor Petrovich Popov. Despite her mother's screams and neighbors' teasing, Bron'ka refuses to identify the father and continues to have one son a year for four years straight. Only three decades later, while catching up with her childhood friend, Irina, does Bron'ka admit the father was the pensioner Viktor Petrovich. Their fifty-five-year age difference kept her from naming him, knowing it would bring not only the aversion and anger of other residents of the *kommunalka*, but also possible legal action.<sup>210</sup>

Their relationship is problematic for obvious reasons, but Ulitskaia's text aims to show the power of human connection and its ability to transcend social taboos about age difference in romantic relationships. First, the narration attempts to carefully tiptoe around the topic of

pedophilia and frames the relationship as founded upon a bond strong enough to overcome large differences and outside opinions. Almost as if in anticipation of audience objection, Bron'ka's brief remarks that Viktor Petrovich resisted her advances seem to want to excuse his actions, which today would be considered statutory rape.<sup>211</sup> In addition, the narrator goes to pains to show that Bron'ka is not an average fourteen-year-old, but rather someone "otherworldly" and mature beyond her years.<sup>212</sup> Convincing or not, with these notes it seems Ulitskaia wants to quickly absolve Viktor Petrovich of guilt in order to focus on her primary message of human connection as the route to emotional self-preservation.

Secondly, parts of Ulitskaia's argument inadvertently undermine itself. For example, the source of Bron'ka and Viktor Petrovich's original bonds can be called into question. Apart from adolescent ennui (Bron'ka recalls that before meeting Viktor Petrovich, she felt unsatisfied, unfulfilled, and constantly craving something beyond "eating, sleeping, and chatting,"), Bron'ka can never explain how exactly Viktor Petrovich fills this void for her.<sup>213</sup> His photography undoubtedly plays a role, as she remembers the intrigue she felt at seeing his pre-war photos of various members of the intelligentsia, but it is difficult to know if these photos became a springboard for an intimate connection or if to some extent they represented an unrealistic, romanticized image of bygone aristocratic life that comforted poverty-stricken Bron'ka during wartime.

Alternative interpretations of the nature of Bron'ka and Viktor Petrovich's relationship that take into account the inherent power dynamics in relationships with such a large age difference may merit additional discussion in the future. But for the time being this project will adopt the standing interpretation, advanced by critics at the time of publication, that the two felt mutual love and respect for each other.<sup>214</sup> One reviewer, for example, shows no hint of

hesitation accepting the narrator at her word and, ultimately, seeing through directly to Ulitskaia's deeper message: "While everyone in the apartment house assumes [Bron'ka] is just a lost teenager who continuously gets pregnant, in reality Bron'ka is experiencing a great and extraordinary love, which ties her to a remote but very real past."<sup>215</sup> With this in mind, the text works to demonstrate how socially constructed regulations on romantic relationships are easily conquered by emotional bonds.

Moreover, visible in this short story are Ulitskaia's nascent ideas of the redeeming power of humanitarian values. The narration shows a clear bias for Bron'ka's life choices and the parts of intelligentsia doctrine (namely, striving for greater meaning), that she embraces. In what becomes an almost Rostov-Bolkonsky parallel, Bron'ka and her mother are foiled by their neighbors, Anna Markovna and daughter Irina Mikhailovna, identified as the "cultured people" (*"intelligentnye liudi"*).<sup>216</sup> While Simka and Bron'ka are driven by emotion more than reason, Anna and Irina are restrained and value standing on ceremony.<sup>217</sup> Simka and Bron'ka's living space is portrayed as chaotic family life filled with love, whereas Anna and Irina prioritize proper etiquette and decorum over any feelings of familial affection. Irina's immediate reaction upon seeing the successes of Bron'ka's large family (all four boys grew up to either achieve professional success, have large families of their own, or both) speaks volumes of how success is measured in Ulitskaia's worlds: Irina, staring at the photos of Bron'ka's family, unexpectedly feels a strong dissatisfaction with her childhood home life and, briefly, shame at her family history of prosperity.<sup>218</sup> Upon hearing Bron'ka explain how her existentialist doubts pushed her to want more from life than most teens, Irina's assumptions about wealth and worth become clear: "This small, former hussy, laughing stock of the entire courtyard, wasn't supposed to have such complex feelings and deep emotions."<sup>219</sup> Later, she looks back at her life in comparison to



Bron'ka's and envies Bron'ka's romantic past, calling her own "cheap" and "deprived of color."<sup>220</sup> Not unlike Tolstoy, Ulitskaia once again underscores the value of personal connection over financial stability or the status of being *intelligent*.

Although her argument at times falls flat, Ulitskaia's idea that some rules are meant to be broken are clear even in her first published work. Bron'ka, sensing absence of higher morals in her immediate surroundings, is able to escape to a more fulfilling intellectual space in her relationship with the much-older Viktor Petrovich. By directly defying social norms and Soviet law, Bron'ka finds meaning in a world that largely lacks it. Almost as if picking up where Petrushevskaja left off, Ulitskaia strives to show that not all is lost and that intelligentsia values – compassion, trust, appreciation for the arts – can be salvaged, even if some members of the intelligentsia cannot.

### *Sonechka* (1992)

The eponymous heroine of Ulitskaia's first novella is one of her most studied characters. Sutcliffe writes that Sonia's character is presented as "a rare note of honesty" for its time and Evgeniia Shcheglova says her ability to "overcome elementary jealousy, envy, vanity, and other trivialities" makes her unforgettable.<sup>221</sup> As with some of the author's other creations, Sonia is lauded for her patience, understanding, wisdom, and self-sacrificing nature. Her ability to accept all that comes to her, a notion so powerful to Ulitskaia that it also serves as the title of an interview with her in 2000, is considered by many to be both her saving grace and a model for others to follow for spiritual salvation in times of crisis.<sup>222</sup> In all, she becomes the personified archetype of what is now considered Ulitskaia's overarching message of humanitarian values.

But in many ways, Sonia may be considered an empty character, a side of her that has not yet received much scholarly attention.<sup>223</sup> I argue that while Sonia's perception of the world around her is noteworthy in its sympathy and compassion, much of her behavior reveals her to be a passive recipient of events around her. Through much of her life, Sonia merely reacts to what happens to and around her; she is rarely proactive or efficacious in her living conditions. Instead, much of life seems to simply happen to her. The one space where Sonia exhibits a clear feeling of control is in her reactions to these events. If ever initially dissatisfied with something, she invariably alters her perception of it instead of taking any decisive action to change it, be it her career or her husband's infidelity.

Ulitskaia depicts Sonia's ability to accept everything that comes to her almost as a supernatural power that allows Sonia to survive in conditions in which many would simply fall apart. Sonia's impenetrable contentment and unending empathy that Sutcliffe and Skomp so artfully explain serves as a model to audiences living through the uncertain immediate post-Fall era. Termed the "Wild 90s," it was an era where a number of national crises appeared just after the fall of the Soviet Union and stemmed from uncontrolled inflation, an emerging black market, rapidly increasing crime rates, the appearance of pornographic materials in public venues, anxiety around increased Western influence, and a feeling of national embarrassment on the world stage. Readers expecting similar themes of trauma and distress in *Sonechka*, a story that begins just before the Second World War, will be disappointed. Despite the narrative's easily identifiable historical setting, Sonia avoids engaging in discussion about large historical events. As if providing an alternative for those overwhelmed by the uncertainty of whatever political climate, Sonia prioritizes the intimate and private over the national. In doing so, she also shows Ulitskaia's focus on, as Rosalind Marsh rightly observes, "the personal moral values that ensured

the survival of her heroines.”<sup>224</sup> Through Sonia’s calmness and openness to whatever life throws at her, Ulitskaia’s text shows how rationality and compassion can be guiding torches through times of both national and personal tragedies.

The novella follows the life of Sonia, a somewhat uninteresting bibliophile who marries a much older man, Robert Viktorovich, just before the start of the Second World War. Apart from her passionate love of reading classic literature, not much makes Sonia stand out and she is described mostly as a quiet, passive person. At the age of fourteen, her first love lures her into an alley, only to slap her in the face twice while classmates secretly watch from the bushes. When she takes physically ill from embarrassment, it is not the support of classmates or an inward source of strength that pull her out of depression, but instead the distraction of a different classmate’s suicide. Instead of facing these struggles, her troubles with the bully resolve themselves when he moves to a different town, although her fear of men and intimacy remains. Years later her intuitive passive reactions reappear; when Robert proposes to her, it is precisely the ghost of this memory that keeps her unable to respond accordingly or even look him in the eye until he stands up and begins to walk away.<sup>225</sup> Sonia’s nature as largely acquiescent is clear from the novella’s opening.

In addition, the stark contrast between Sonia’s creative talents and that of those around her signals a deeper inequality. Robert’s skill as an artist are reiterated throughout the novella; his friends who gather regularly at their house are all dissident writers and artists; their daughter, Tania, is a skilled flautist. The closest the narrative comes to mentioning a talent of Sonia’s is in her housekeeping. Robert at times observes her cooking or cleaning and notices “a convincing artistry, a high sense of purpose and beauty of Sonia’s house work” although his immediate comparison of housework to the work of ants and the narrator’s qualification of Sonia’s work as

“base” (“*nizmennye stoly i khleba*”) suggest that Sonia’s skills are not as valid as the others’ more artistic endeavors.<sup>226</sup> Sonia lacks the ability to even fully process or understand her loved one’s art. Her only understanding of her husband’s paintings is based on “womanly credulity” that left her unable to understand “the complex special tasks, much less [his] elegant decisions”; instead she could only “feel in his strange games a reflection of his personality.”<sup>227</sup> Even when discussing literature, presumably Sonia’s strongest field of knowledge, Robert lays out arguments that are “not fully understood by Sonia” and, relying on his personal acquaintance with some writers during the war, drives her to tears with what she considers the “inexhaustibility of his biography,” undoubtedly a hint of her own relative inexperience and unworldliness, not to mention the possible undertone of Robert being more sexually experienced.<sup>228</sup> Sonia seems to be aware of the incomparability of faculties. She remains in disbelief that her husband can love her, especially after finding out that she is unable to give him more children (thus limiting her ability to create physically as well as artistically) and tells herself that her entire life is an unexpected blessing that she does not deserve.<sup>229</sup>

But it is precisely in this mindset, in which Sonia constantly lauds the talents of those around her and considers herself undeserving even of their presence, that Sonia’s unique strength manifests itself. Several times throughout the novella Sonia whispers her own personal motto: “Good lord, good lord! For what do I get such happiness?”<sup>230</sup> With every burden and obstacle, Sonia’s immediate reaction is to see the good and thank the heavens for it, almost as if trying to will into existence personal contentment. Sarah Hudspith points out that Sonia is comfortable in every home they occupy because for her, the most important physical space is next to her husband; similarly, Sonia seems able to adapt to any scenario because for her, the most important mental space is one of acceptance.<sup>231</sup>

Sonia's mental grit is tested most several years later when her daughter, Tania, falls in love with a classmate, Iasia, and invites her to their annual New Year's Eve party. Iasia is a beautiful eighteen-year-old Polish refugee orphan who, after her mother's death eight years prior, survived on her looks and ability to capitalize on her male suitors' affections. At the time of the New Year's Eve party, Tania's love for Iasia succinctly personifies Ulitskaia's underlying theme of love without borders: "[Tania] pined for an elevated companionship, union, connection, commonality that had no borders, no boundaries."<sup>232</sup> Ulitskaia writes Tania's feelings for Iasia not as a stage of pubescent experimentation, as she describes Tania's previous sexual experiences with male peers, but as a deeper desire for intimate bonds, both physical and emotional, with another person. Although their relationship quickly loses all hints of romance, Ulitskaia's portrayal of same-sex attraction as based on human connection instead of physical lust is noteworthy for its time.

Before leaving the next morning, Iasia, knowing no other way to show gratitude than through physical intimacy, begins an affair with Robert. When she moves in with them shortly thereafter at Sonia's behest, the affair continues and soon becomes public. Once again, Sonia is a passive recipient of the events around her; when she catches on to their relationship, she not only does not find fault with Iasia's or Robert's betrayal, but instead accepts the infidelity as the natural and just ("*spravedlivo*") next stage for Robert, who she feels deserves to have a young beauty next to him at all times.<sup>233</sup> After Tania finds out about the affair, she immediately moves to Saint Petersburg, disappointed in her mother's weakness, her father's betrayal, and, most of all, her best friend's deception. In her absence, Robert, his lover, and his wife continue to live in peaceful union and even begin appearing in public as a love triangle, not hiding from anyone the nature of their relationship and prompting considerable speculation. Their love triangle

continues until Robert's unexpected death from a brain hemorrhage, at which point Iasia moves to Poland and Sonia spends the rest of her days in content solitude with her books.

Overlooking the many problematic decisions made by Ulitskaia's characters, the actions in *Sonechka* form an example of living outside the accepted code of communist behavior. Iasia, put in a disempowered social position from birth, is able to survive, and eventually thrive, only as a result of her willingness to break the rules of acceptable sexual behavior. Tania, frustrated by the lack of intellectual connection she feels with male classmates, is able to experience a more complex feeling of love that includes excitement, intrigue, and inspiration, only because she explores her sexuality outside heteronormative confines. And Robert, an open critic of Soviet authority, benefits the most from disregarding social norms: in his numerous travels abroad, his art and that of his friends, late night conversations with other dissidents, and even in his romantic life, which lasts until his very death (which takes place on top of his young lover, no less), Robert's experiences are richer precisely because he pays no heed to communist morality.

One of the novella's first reviewers writes of Ulitskaia's characters: "While the characters in all these stories occasionally inspire our pity, they manage to construct, and perhaps even control, their lives despite the odds."<sup>234</sup> Sonia is one such example. Although her actions prompt questions of the limits and utility of self-sacrifice, one wonders if the perception of agency is worth the cost of socially constructed dignity. In other words, Sonia's mentality of blind optimism allows her to construct a perception of her life that is more rewarding than the one that society assigns her.

If adultery and premarital sex were considered inappropriate and dangerous behavior for communist citizens, then public acknowledgement of a consensual love triangle would have been incomprehensible to the expert moralists who helped mold widespread public opinion. In

remaining in her marriage and taking pride in the beauty of her husband's love, as she remarks feeling during their first public appearance, Sonia privileges harmony over dignity, family over reputation, and others over herself. With Sonia, Ulitskaia first and foremost promotes the importance of compassion and understanding, but underlying this is a suggestion that in the end, individuals have the ability to find happiness for themselves if they wish. And one should note that, ironically, Sonia's actions can also be read as a partial and accidental endorsement of some communist values: her actions ultimately show her as sacrificing her individual needs for the sake of the collective good of her immediately family.

*Medea and Her Children (Medea i ee deti, 1996)*

*Medea and Her Children* follows the long life of Medea Sinoply, who witnesses first hand the multiple tragedies that took place on the Crimean peninsula between 1900 and her death, some seventy years later. The plot is comprised of interpersonal events within Medea's extended family, ranging from adultery to building trust, with large historical events interspersed throughout the text. Specifically, Medea and her family witness the Russian Civil War (in fact, the first attacks on the peninsula take place as a direct result of Medea's father's death on a bombed ship in 1916), a "hasty evacuation" in 1918 at the hands of the Bolsheviks, prolonged times of famine during the wars, (Motia, clearly traumatized by the experience, struggles with binge eating as soon as she's able to find stable employment), the region changing hands between the Communists and the Nazis during WWII, Stalin's deportation of Crimean Tartars (explained further below), the KGB's infamous surveillance efforts and intimidation of suspected dissenters (illustrated through Ravil, a Tartar man who is promptly followed and soon thereafter taken by authorities when he returns to Crimea to speak to Medea), the corruption of the Soviet

system (depicted through, among others, Valerii Butonov's disillusionment upon learning his sports competitions were fixed well before they took place), and a host of other man-made disasters. The novel, apart from telling the story of one family, tells the story of the entire region and creates a literary illustration of the hundreds of real life stories silenced by state power. Due to the long-standing conventions of censorship not only on literary writings, but also on news production and academic research, the voices of those who suffered were suppressed throughout much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Ulitskaia, writing during *perestroika*, seems to intend to tell at least some of these stories through her novel.

One of the largest tragedies that Medea witnesses – and one of the least acknowledged, undeniably important to the author – is Stalin's policy of deporting the Tartar population from Crimea to the harsh, undeveloped, and unforgiving lands of Soviet Uzbekistan in May, 1944. Framed as a "population transfer" meant to help develop new territories in the Soviet Union and increase populations (and Soviet access to the Middle East), Stalin subjected several ethnic populations, including Crimean Tartars, to inhumane and life-threatening treatment, including being transferred thousands of miles in overcrowded cattle trains to uninhabited (and uninhabitable) parts of the Uzbekistani steppe and lowlands. Ulitskaia creates a discomforting picture of how the event took place early in the novel, signaling her view of how significant the deportations are in Crimean history and the importance of retelling those stories. In a letter to her sister, Medea explains how she personally retold (and thus continued the history of) the deportations to a young Tartar who attempts, unsuccessfully, to return to the region:

I told him of how the Tartars were deported from here at two in the morning, without being given time to gather their belongings, and how Shura Gorodovikova the Party boss came herself when they were being sent away, and helped them pack their things, and cried buckets, and the very next day had a stroke [...] In our region there was nothing like it even under the Germans, although it wasn't Germans but Romanians we had here. I know, of course, they took the Jews, but not in our region.<sup>235</sup>



Forbidden to return to the peninsula until Gorbachev's *perestroika* era, the Tartar population was for all intents and purposes removed from Crimea; forbidden to appear in official documents, the deportation was likewise deleted from Crimean history. Apart from the death of thousands of ethnic Tartars, what resulted from Stalin's Crimean Deportation was a notable and strained change in the demographic makeup of Crimea. Where Tartars had lived, Christian populations and, less often, Jewish populations, took over and became the majority. Ulitskaia, always one to point out the importance of preserving individual history, seems to make this part of history one of her main accomplishments in this novel.

But ultimately, Ulitskaia forwards the family as the final answer to surviving national tragedies. When wars, famine, and oppressive government regimes threaten safety, one must turn to their closest kin for support and strength. Ulitskaia's narrative technique reflects her own prioritization of the personal over the public because although all of her family members struggle with their own victimization at the hands of the state, the plot of the novel follows the family's personal development over time – through marriages, births, divorces, fights, and forgiveness. Throughout the area's (and nation's) crises, Medea also faces personal experiences with unemployment, poverty, orphanhood, widowhood, and lifelong childlessness (despite the novel's title), which causes psychological struggles of depression, low self-confidence, and a recurring identity crisis. These events, not the changing hands of power, drive the novel.

Together, Medea's life experience sets up binaries that the novel ultimately breaks down: state/individual, us/them, diversity/homogeneity, and obedience/resistance, among others. Through these binaries she makes clear the values she feels can sustain one through tragedy: community, intimacy, openness, and forgiveness. Medea's saga, at once both a historical narrative that traces one of the most tumultuous times in Russian and Soviet history and a novel

on romance, emotion, and drama, shows the intersection of the political with the personal. Years before the publication of this novella, critic Tatiana Kazarina recognized how these two levels of history come to a crossroads in Ulitskaia's writing:

Indeed, Ulitskaia is absorbed by family histories of troubles and discordance, not to mention successes and celebrations – but all of them – are of quotidian (*bytovogo*), not worldwide (*mirovogo*) importance. Her heroes are regular people, not figures of the state level. Over the past years, women-prosaists have succeeded in convincing everyone that it is simpler to realize an “exit into the Astral” from the quotidian nook, and that upon examination, the partition between the communal kitchen and the most profound metaphysical depths turns out to be extremely thin. Ulitskaia stands here [...] <sup>236</sup>

Kazarina's sense that there is more to quotidian literature (*bytovaia*) than what meets the eye is spot on and has since been supported by several other scholars. <sup>237</sup> The idea that prose writing set in everyday locations, such as the communal kitchen referenced by Kazarina that can address profound existential issues, is no longer contentious. But I would argue that Ulitskaia's preference for the regular, everyday, and personal over the events and individual people of big history runs deeper than showing the value of the daily lived experience. For Ulitskaia, the everyday not only has value as well, but is indeed often more powerful than the actions of big history. When the two collide, the personal will always prevail for Ulitskaia. When large historical events begin to threaten the everyday safety and agency of the individual, Ulitskaia paints the personal realm, particularly the familial unit, as the ultimate tool of resistance. As Skomp and Sutcliffe first noted, “the large conflicts that have distorted the twentieth century can be mitigated, if not resolved, on a personal level by individual actions.” <sup>238</sup> Surviving, loving, and thriving become acts of civil disobedience under a regime that largely aimed to divide and conquer.

In addition, Medea's family shows glimpses of more direct efforts to challenge state (usually Soviet) power. For example, Aleksandra's first husband, Aleksei Kirillovich, is starkly

anti-Communist. An *intelligent* and academic researcher, he spends the early years of his career in southern Germany, “with the indefinite status of displaced person and the position of research worker in a secret scientific institution which brought together the intellectual potential of occupied Europe.”<sup>239</sup> Needing to remain within the confines of political ideology, which was aggressively placed upon academia, including scientific research, Aleskei attempts to continue his real research interests through forcibly predetermined scientific “results.” His article, just as “pessimistic” as his view on the Communist regime, does not last long and he dies soon after its publication. Still, his views and his attempts to provide insight into human behavior through scientific research (while not too directly working outside the confines of Communist ideology), show just one example of an individual’s attempt to challenge state power.

But more often, Ulitskaia portrays choices within one’s personal life as holding the capacity for resistance to power from above. Specifically, she forwards ignoring ideas of discrimination as one primary way. Either through sexuality, race/ethnicity, or religion, Ulitskaia’s characters consistently privilege individual connections over who “should be” with whom. For example, Medea, a Christian, marries Samuel, a Jew, and both are able to put aside their religious differences for the sake of love and intimacy, which challenges first the Tsarist government’s mandate of Eastern Orthodoxy and then the Soviet government’s ban on religion altogether.<sup>240</sup> Skomp and Sutcliffe point out that Medea and Samuel’s ability to come together despite their religious and spiritual differences shows the author’s prioritization of “family and ethics above all other loyalty.”<sup>241</sup> Religion – and the ability of individuals to overcome religious differences – is such a crucial and recurring theme in Ulitskaia’s work that she has regularly been criticized for it. In a similar way that many women writers are criticized for being “too feminine” in their writing (or, in the West, how some artists are criticized for “forcing”

gender/race/other into everything), Ulitskaia's early works caught scorn for being "too Jewish." Lev Kuklin, for example, claims that "Everything she writes is in one way or another permeated with the topic of Jewishness [...] of the chosen people, the distinction of members of that race, before other people and before God."<sup>242</sup> But critics such as Kuklin, whom Evgeniia Shcheglova later called "Homo Bottomfeederus" in her response to his comments, have clearly missed the point. Ulitskaia does not forward any specific religion, doctrine, or set of beliefs above others. Instead, she aims to show the shallowness and ultimate danger of believing too strongly in any one ideology. Portraying couples of different religious backgrounds in loving, supportive, and connected marriages, such as Medea and Samuel, is one way she aims to show the individual's ability to work past cultural divides. For Ulitskaia, the individual's ultimate power is the ability to choose morality over church (or party, or class, or ethnic ...) loyalty.

To be sure, Medea and her kin face several challenges that threaten to undermine the author's ultimate belief in the power of family. For much of their lives, the family members are far from devoted to each other and most of the adults commit adultery at least once. The only notable exception is Medea herself, who remains physically and emotionally celibate after the death of her husband, Samuel, despite his ongoing affair with Medea's sister, Alexandra, whose history of successive affairs and marriages points to her own preference for sexual freedom. Even upon finding out about the affair a year after Samuel's death and learning that he fathered a child with her sister, Medea remains faithful to her deceased spouse. The younger generations, too, struggle with following through with their commitments. Georgii has not felt anything for his wife in decades and easily succumbs to the kind glances of a neighboring vacationer, Nora. Nike, for her part, not only immediately seduces the attractive, well-built Butonov despite being fully aware of her younger cousin's, Masha (also married), unmistakable attraction to him, but

does so once again the very night Masha sleeps with him. Medea's extended community of kin may reflect the author's trust in personal values over state policy, but their behavior shows that, for the most part, licenses of marriage are taken just as seriously as other government documents. Furthermore, in doing so they continue to challenge the tenets of Communist morality, which stress not only the importance of loyalty, but also women's primary roles of wife and mother. Their intention may not reach further than physical pleasure, but their actions show a small, yet undeniable effort to work against the dictated status quo, imposed from the top down.

Ultimately, no government power can be trusted in Ulitskaia's texts. As Grigorii tells his young niece,

You're a half-wit, Masha. You think all the evil in the world comes down to Soviet power. [Medea] had one of her brothers killed by the Reds, another by the Whites; in the war one was killed by the Fascists, and another by the Communists. For her all governments are the same. My grandfather Stepanyan was an aristocrat and a monarchist, and he sent her money when she was orphaned as a young girl. He sent her everything they had in the house at that time. And my mother was married by my father who was, forgive my mentioning it, a red-hot revolutionary, just because Medea told him, 'We've got to save Elena.' What does it matter to her who's in power? She's a Christian, her allegiance is to a higher authority. And never say again that she's afraid of anything.<sup>243</sup>

Grigorii may believe that Medea's ultimate authority is God, but I would still argue that she views religious loyalty as skeptically as party loyalty. While some sense of spirituality is undoubtedly seen as more reliable and honorable than political drives, morality is the final answer for Ulitskaia.

Morality is more trustworthy than party for Medea not only because of its inherent values of good and evil, but also because of its consistency. As already mentioned, Medea's life (just as the lives of the other characters and of the novel's contemporary readers), witnessed a rotating door of changing power or, as she calls them, "violent and rapid change – revolutions, changes of government, the Reds, the Whites, the Germans, the Romanians; some neighbors being

deported, new neighbors, outsiders with no ties, imported [...]”<sup>244</sup> Her sense of morality, in stark contrast, remains stable throughout her many years (a rare, admirable quality that her husband recognized was only present in Medea and no one else). One’s internal sense of right and wrong, compassion, and empathy, regardless of whether or not it stems from a religious doctrine - and the courage to live by these convictions in the face of threatening external forces - is the only value that will conclusively save humanity from itself.

Overall, Ulitskaia’s writings come together to form a message of principle over party, which becomes in and of itself a political act. In journalist Masha Gessen’s recent article, “The Weight of Words: One of Russia’s Most Famous Writers Confronts the State,” she remarks on the dissident role Ulitskaia’s writing has come to play:

[Her interview on Gorbanevskaya] also showcases the human qualities that Ulitskaya seems to prize most: personal loyalty—not to be confused with niceness, which Gorbanevskaya did not possess—and a boundless capacity for inclusion. Ulitskaya speaks of her friend with admiration as if for a member of a higher caste. “I wasn’t a dissident,” she explains. “I was a girl who washed the dishes in the kitchen while they talked. I remember all of them, but hardly any of them remembered me.” Now, at seventy-one, she has become a voice of moral authority for differently minded Russians, and one of Russia’s most famous writers.<sup>245</sup>

Ulitskaia’s oeuvre has come to mirror the very message within it: power lies not in large political movements, but in one’s everyday choices, in the innumerable, consistent, minute, sometimes unnoticed string of decisions that come to make up our entire lives.

Ultimately, I continue to believe that there nonetheless remain limits to Ulitskaia’s ideas on inclusion, or at least as she portrays them in prose. As mentioned above, her writing retains some hints of an underlying hierarchy of physical appearance (see the continued emphasis on Sonia’s whiteness, for example, or the recurrent exoticization of characters from the Far East) and a romanticized, rather simplified view of the Russian intelligentsia (strongly contrasted by Petrushevskaya’s vilification of the class with equal strength). However, Ulitskaia’s furthering of

the idea of tolerance – and the level of tolerance that her writing shows to previously disparaged groups, such as the LGBT community, disabled bodies, religions outside of Eastern Orthodoxy, women who enjoy sexuality, outspoken political dissidents, and others – is nevertheless notable for its time, notwithstanding the underlying remnants of privilege. Set during the unforgiving Soviet era, written in the turbulent years of *perestroika*, and published in the Wild 90s, these works stand apart from the crowd in many ways, not in the least for their emphasis on compassion. At a time when many other forms of media, from high style literature to pulp fiction to educational pamphlets, stressed messages of Othering, Ulitksia’s prose stands out as one of the few voices calling for community. Controversial though they may be, her works, just as her characters, nonetheless remain a step towards resistance.

#### *Some Concluding Thoughts or Working with What You Have*

The topic of personal agency in the post-Stalinist Soviet Union has created some contention among historians and scholars of the era. Yurchak makes the astute observation that the dominating binary of Soviet versus Western ideological discourse, in which Soviet history is presented as constructed solely in a top-down manner, removes from the narrative all possibilities of individual agency on part of the citizens. The next step is to investigate specifically how perceptions of agency manifested themselves and the greater implications they held for each individual.

The aim of this chapter has been to reexamine the fictional works of Petrushevskiaia and Ulitksiaia in order to find various ways in which individual women living during the Thaw and Stagnation eras reacted to various external threats – regarding finances, housing, healthcare, or childcare – and found a route to agency within personal relationships.<sup>246</sup> In an era of increased

authoritarian involvement in personal lives, carried out via written law, widespread propaganda, community watchdog organizations, and an overall atmosphere of suspicion, these women challenge (either deliberately or inadvertently) accepted beliefs of what life factors remain within the individual's control. In personal relationships with others, they lie, cheat, exploit, manipulate, threaten, ignore, or, on the contrary, love, feel, understand, accept, and empathize. They seek meaning far beyond the boundaries of "proper" relationships as espoused in the multitude of documents created during the first decades after Stalinism. Ultimately, their efforts are not always successful and at times do more harm than good. At best, some find material or spiritual support from loved ones, which allows either an easing of daily worries or an escape from others' antipathy. At worst, some continue the cycle of violence directed against those nearest to them, while inadvertently further isolating themselves within spaces of antagonism and deception. But taken as a whole, these stories help fill in the gaps in the recorded historical memory of the daily minutia of the private in Soviet life and how individuals sought to retain feelings of control.



### Chapter III

#### **Delusional *Devushki***

“Madness (*bezumie*) is a language. Culture expresses itself in this language as eloquently as it does in the language of reason (*razum*).”<sup>247</sup>

Mikhail Epstein

“... persistent, repetitious practices of power can simultaneously provide a body (or, better, collectivized bodies) with predicaments and potentials for realizing a world that subsists within and exceeds the horizons and boundaries of the norm.”<sup>248</sup>

Gregory Seigworth and Melissa Gregg

While coping strategies during times of crisis may lead to valuable insight on how individuals struggle, overcome, and thrive, repercussions of one’s failures to cope are just as informative. In Russian women’s literature of the 1980s and 90s, scenes of failing to cope outnumber and overwhelm those of successfully confronting difficulties. While many strive to retain feelings of autonomy through various uses of physicality, as shown in Chapter I, or by reworking dominant codes of socialization, as in Chapter II, many fail on both fronts. Unable or unwilling to continue the psychological labor of mediating between the desired dominant and the present real, they retreat to alternative realities based on fantasy, delusion, hallucination, madness, and paranoia. Eager to escape oppressive ideological dogma, they create their own alternative psychological and social worlds in which they have more influence, safety, peace, and occasionally even joy. Often, the line between sanity and insanity, or at least the presence of mental illness, becomes blurred. The women in these texts perceive messages of their own

limited subjectivity from several fronts of disciplinary power, including economic, political, and societal restrictions. But Petrushevskaja and Ulitskaia's heroines face additional, more personal challenges: abusive, unfaithful, and/or absent husbands; equally greedy and malicious children; isolation and/or abandonment; and a deep sense of being unfulfilled (interestingly, this last is the only quality universal to all such protagonists). Left without better options, they escape into the freeing possibilities of the imagined. They create for themselves the precise sense of autonomy and sovereignty that their current situations deny them, even when it exists only in their imagined alternatives. This chapter shows how Petrushevskaja and Ulitskaia [re]work canonical tropes of madness, suffering, and transcendental space, both physical and psychological, to depict what happens when individuals have reached their last straw. Madness, one of the most prevalent topoi of the Russian canon, encompasses not only suffering and martyrdom, but also unexpected hints of optimism as some forge for themselves feelings of subjecthood denied them by the patriarchal Soviet system. In these texts, protagonists attempt to psychologically find new spaces as a result of their inability to reconcile the ideological ideal they cannot fulfill with their personal reality. I read these attempts as a form of resistance in its own right. That is, their extreme escapism and refusal (or, at times inability) to live in Soviet mainstream society challenges and interrogates the very authority that leaves them powerless.

### *Whose Suffering Matters?*

In Russian culture, suffering is a two-sided coin. On the one hand, suffering is, of course, an inherently painful experience. And certainly, the region's long history of troubled times leaves no lack of causes for suffering. At the same time, however, suffering in Russian culture has come to be seen as noble, strengthening, character-building, and at times a quintessential part

of the Russian life experience. I mention this now because in many of the stories analyzed below, the protagonists are pushed to explore alternate realities as a result of the harsh suffering in their current realities, not unlike the “normalization of violence” upon which Berlant comments in her contemplations of cruel optimism. Suffering a loved one’s death, a family’s abandonment, physical violence at the hands of a partner or the state, or years of struggling to survive on a daily basis leads these heroines to explore alternate realities, via self-delusion and fantasy, hallucinations, comatose visions, or death.

In Russian culture, suffering cleanses the spirit and grounds the mind. This notion, perhaps, originally began as a response to oppression; Russia has had a difficult history from its beginning, but this past century was particularly tumultuous. With the era of revolution begun in 1905, Russia and its Soviet alter-ego entered into over one hundred years of various wars, famine, oppression, mass imprisonment, executions, state surveillance, bankruptcy, government collapse, and unsteady transitions in economic, political, and social life. Hardly allowed a moment to breathe, Russian culture has come to value suffering not only on an individual level, but on a national level, as generation after generation has been asked to sacrifice dearly for the promised, scarcely delivered good of the nation.

Women, whose sacrifice drives the texts below, demonstrate a value of suffering that is notably internal, even centripetal. If male suffering in literature points the finger at specific enemies (in stories set in war, imprisonment, or the workplace, for example), women in the texts below can only blame the system in which they are entrenched. Their suffering is at times for others, such as husbands or children taken too early by violent governments both domestic and foreign, but often their suffering is rooted in everyday violence and lacks any notion of a redemptive greater meaning. In creating these texts, these writers work to document the myriad

of crises facing Russian women that have been for so long swept under the rug in state, media, and popular discourse.<sup>249</sup> As mentioned in the introduction to this dissertation, women in the Soviet era had to juggle an array of concerns for everyday survival that either did not typically affect men, such as childcare and domestic housework, or affected them differently, such as healthcare and employment.<sup>250</sup> Together, these concerns constitute a Soviet life experience that necessitates a particular type of daily suffering for women, one based on the constant performance of labor (either at a job, at home, or while running errands), caring for multiple family members, regular concerns with reproductive health (during pregnancy, attempting to avoid it, or caring for its results), and the ever-present, if not always explicitly stated, pigeonholed role of wife and mother (succinctly termed by one scholar as the “social-cum-literary role of woman as martyr and nurturer”).<sup>251</sup>

All this is not to conflate martyrdom with all forms of suffering. As briefly mentioned in the previous chapter, some scholars have discussed the redemptive powers of suffering in late Soviet women’s literature. Certainly, dominant power often regards such rhetoric as beneficial during times of war, as the idea that grieving the death of loved ones brings meaning to pain and bolsters the idea that in mourning women are fulfilling the sacred role of mother-martyr. Commonplace beliefs in presumably inherent differences between men and women’s natures - that women are ‘naturally’ more empathetic and nurturing - are also offered as possible consolation. But the suffering seen in the selected texts lacks any greater meaning and has nothing to do with women’s surmised maternal nature. Indeed, the impossibility of eventual redemption is a driving factor in Petrushevskiaia’s writing. As such, applying the discourse of martyrdom in this context is unproductive and citing such gender differences to explain or justify

women's suffering is to, firstly, deny any possibility of change or advancement and, secondly, to authorize possible further causes of suffering.

In the short prose works of Petrushevskaja and Ulitskaia, women suffer not because it is their genetically or divinely determined role in society, but as a result of the harsh environment in which they are situated. Petrushevskaja's heroines are older women, abandoned, forgotten, or neglected, who suffer because they long for the love and support they expected to accompany family life. Ulitskaia's may vary in age, but their suffering is similarly rooted in deep emotional turmoil caused by failed promises of both state and loved ones. Texts of both writers reflect larger anxieties concerning a perceived crisis of moral bankruptcy, on the part of both individuals and collectives, that sets the stage for so many works in *perestroika* women's literature. This backdrop of nearly constant suffering, personal and national, eventually pushes these heroines to seek out alternative ways of being.

### *Doctrinal Madness and Mental Health in the Soviet Union*

Of course, suffering and madness are not synonymous and it would be both incorrect and insensitive to conflate the two. However, in the texts of Petrushevskaja and Ulitskaia, unceasing suffering often precipitates signs of presumed madness. As such, I feel the unique and complex history and changing understanding of madness in the Soviet Union merits some attention. While themes of madness permeate Russian literature and culture since long before the Soviet era, the Soviet Union and the literature that depicts it presents a new understanding of what it means to be "mad." The category of mental illness in the Soviet Union included not only more well-known diseases like schizophrenia, but also the "illness" of anyone unsupportive of socialism. Actively speaking out against the ruling ideology could be

considered dangerous to the good of the collective and thus prompted detainment in a mental facility. The etymological breakdown of the word “dissent” in Russian reflects the political subtext. “*Inakomyslie*” – the perceived illness with which such individuals were diagnosed/charged - comes from “*ina-*” the root for “*inoi*” or different, another, or other; and “*mysliie*” from “*myslit*,” to think. Dissent, therefore, is the act of thinking differently from everyone else. In the late Soviet context, dissent was very much considered a mental shortcoming, whether the actions were deliberate or not; if deliberate, they were all the more dangerous, if not, they revealed a deeper medical illness. A symptom of one’s intellectual inability to grasp the beauty of communism, *inakomyslie* required swift and severe treatment.

Accused of “psycho-pathological mechanisms of dissent” (*psikhopatologicheskie mekhanizmy inakomysliia*), many dissidents were silenced almost as soon as they voiced such ideas. As Fedor Kondrati’ev explains, the problems stemming from this understanding of mental health had very real consequences and were used in directly political ways:

[That] a person might behave ‘not like others’ [*ne tak, kak vse*] not only because of a psychological illness, but specifically as a result of one’s own moral directive, in agreement with one’s conscience – it simply wasn’t allowed. From this came the following: if [one isn’t] like everyone else, he is acting against the political system and [they] must search for a ‘psycho-pathological mechanism’ of dissent.’ [...] Dissent, coming from the conscience, can never be suppressed with any doses, even retributive [ones] of any medicinal injection, but breaking [one’s] will, forcing [one] to be silent because of the danger of losing [one’s] health from these injections in special hospitals – this [they] could do.<sup>252</sup>

As such, understandings of mental health were easily abused by political motives. Diagnoses of mental illness were utilized as tools to imprison and devalue political, ideological, and moral dissidents.

However, another form of “madness” was even more popular in the Soviet era than dissidence, even if its study and recognition only came later. Mikhail Epstein, quoted in the

epigraph to this chapter, articulates it best in what he terms as “doctrinal” madness, or madness resulting from a stubborn, unflinching dedication to following one set of ideological conventions, even when such behavior is no longer rational or healthy. This “illness of totalitarianism” was so pervasive in late Soviet Russia that to a large extent it became the dominant culture. That is, it was not only on an individual level that one might suffer from doctrinal madness, but in fact it could infect a society, a generation, a government, or even a nation. Conventions of belief, be them spiritual, political, scientific, or societal, had to fit within the strict framework of Soviet ideology, even when doing so required decidedly awkward manipulation of logic or had adverse side effects.<sup>253</sup>

To be sure, both Petrushevskaja and Ulitskaja at times focus their critical gaze on individual moments of doctrinal madness and those who either actively perpetuate it or unknowingly, naively follow it. In their texts, doctrinal madness unquestioningly falls into the dominant culture. Mainstream society and its doctrinal madness are reflected via individuals who populate the everyday: neighbors, coworkers, government authorities, and at times family members. Those labeled as mentally unstable, delusional, or simply weird by their peers are depicted as the select few rational enough to see through the irrational doctrinal madness of their surroundings. In this chapter, I focus on those moments of attempted exploration, when individuals either intentionally or accidentally find themselves stepping outside dominant space into a previously unimagined existence where dominant rules no longer apply. In extraordinarily different ways, Petrushevskaja and Ulitskaja both portray the potential benefits available in these other spaces, even when felt only temporarily. While these journeys into the unknown sometimes fail to completely liberate the individual from the pressures of conformity, the experience nonetheless introduces an alternative effort at subjective self-construction – that

is, they discover the belief that one has the ability to change something - that disciplinary power designates as impossible.

### *Escapism as Resistance*

In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault reminds us that denying individual agency is key to disciplinary power's success; systems of power are able to continue in part thanks to the message that no other way of being is possible.<sup>254</sup> Keeping individuals from imagining an alternative form of governance is the first step in preventing said alternative. This chapter analyzes what happens when individuals, particularly women, step outside of these boundaries and enter into alternate realms, social or psychological.

But first, something should be said for what pushes individuals to the brink. Jack Halberstam's *The Queer Art of Failure* offers valuable insight into lived experiences outside dominant social orders. Halberstam explains that failing is not, well, failure. Put another way, failing to succeed at a goal whose value is precarious and debatable can later become a blessing in disguise. He articulates the value of failing: "Under certain circumstances failing, losing, forgetting, unmaking, undoing, unbecoming, not knowing may in fact offer more creative, more cooperative, more surprising ways of being in the world [...]. Perhaps most obviously, failure allows us to escape the punishing norms that discipline behavior and manage human development [...]"<sup>255</sup> His last comment speaks most directly to Petrushevskaja and Ulitskaja's texts. Halberstam's writing is particularly illuminating in the Soviet context because of the parallels between the American dream and the promised communist utopia in the Soviet Union and between both cultures assessing of success and failure based on dominant ideology. Failures on either front allow for one to "poke holes in the toxic positivity of contemporary life."<sup>256</sup>



Furthermore, Halberstam engages with how these promoted ideals, and the repercussions of failing to achieve them, have distinctly gendered differences. Women who do not or cannot live up to their gendered ideal, such as heteronormative marriage, childbearing/rearing, and domestic bliss, in the best scenarios find themselves recipients of these “unexpected pleasures.”<sup>257</sup> I argue that these are precisely the failures mourned in the texts of Petrushevskaja and Ulitskaja that push them to search for “unexpected pleasures” in alternate consciousnesses.

In addition, we would do well to remember that their failures do not automatically invalidate their efforts. A failed attempt to escape oppressive ideologies is nonetheless valuable in what it reveals about that ideological culture. Furthermore, their goals, even if not achieved, expose their ultimate desires and, thus, their most pressing concerns. Some of Petrushevskaja and Ulitskaja’s protagonists ultimately fail to escape, but their journey nonetheless remains transformative.

Berlant’s thoughts on cruel optimism, explored in the introduction to this dissertation, also guide the analyses that follow. In *Cruel Optimism*, she investigates the details, complications, and contradictions of our attachments to happy objects after they are no longer happy.<sup>258</sup> All attachments, Berlant states, are optimistic in a way, even when they manifest themselves within other affects, even shame. She explains that feelings of optimism are attached to symbolic objects (a job, a promotion, a relationship, a milestone, etc.), although they would be more accurately described as “clusters of promises.” *Cruel* optimism is that which comes to hinder, halt, handicap, or harm the individual, unable to let go of the attachment to the object.

Berlant elaborates:

What’s cruel about these attachments, and not merely inconvenient or tragic, is that the subjects who have x in their lives might not well endure the loss of their object/scene of desire, even though its presence threatens their well-being, because whatever the content of the attachment is, the continuity of its form provides something of the continuity of the

subject's sense of what it means to keep on living on and to look forward to being in the world.<sup>259</sup>

For many of the heroines read below, this sense of cruel optimism is attached to ideological promises of the communist ideal. Raised under the Socialist dream that promised not only an overarching (indeed, worldwide) communist utopia, but also personal satisfaction via the progress of the collective, they experience a crueler optimism than many. Their optimism, either communal or personal, is always-already accompanied by the cruelty of its impossibility. Berlant's work speaks directly to this: as the author herself posits, is cruel optimism better than none at all?<sup>260</sup>

For some heroines, the question appears unanswerable. In the texts analyzed below, those unable to continue the weight of ideal versus real explore alternative possibilities. Teresa Polowy's work with Edwin Ardener's muted group theory in Tatiana Tolstaia's prose addresses the same condition. While Ardener's original writings focused on the creation of dominant and muted groups through mainstream linguistic strategies, Polowy extends the idea to observe other distributions of power in Tolstaia's prose, expressed through female sexuality, commonplace understandings of gender roles, and the use of the supernatural as a literary trope. In her analysis, as did Ardener in his original study, Polowy views the dominant group as overwhelmingly male and the muted as female. Women, both contend, constitute the non-dominant group (in fact, Ardener's first article on his theory is entitled "Belief and the Problem of Women").<sup>261</sup> Hence the title of Polowy's article, "Female Space," and my borrowing of the same term in my analyses below.

In this chapter, I select a few of Petrushevskaja and Ulitskaia's works that I feel best exemplify the desire to escape everything assumed in the modern world – the inequalities, privileges, barriers, codes of conduct, and expectations based on gender, class and disability

statuses, or age.<sup>262</sup> I argue their various attempts to break into a consciousness outside of these assumptions, whether they are successful or not, reflect on the difficult nature of the time and the particular challenges facing individuals who are disempowered in Soviet society. Their perceived “failures,” intertwined with and interdependent on suffering, reinforce the strength of their cruel attachments and eventually push them to seek out alternative, wild spaces. I hope my analyses will bring forward first a deeper understanding of how the texts work, but also a more nuanced understanding of the various life experiences of individual women in late Soviet Russia.

*Liudmila Petrushevskaja: “Imagination is the Only Weapon in the War against Reality”*

In a word, Petrushevskaja’s portrayals of madness are deliberate. Always treading the line between the real and the unreal, the author is able to portray delusion, fantasy, hallucination, and the surreal with a delicate pen that never allows for finite conclusions.<sup>263</sup> Artfully crafting an infamously dubious narrative voice, Petrushevskaja ensures her readers are rarely able to ascertain when protagonists’ fears are based in reality and when they are a result of hallucinations or other deceptive visions, or of “the obsessively garrulous narrator harboring ghastly secrets that surface through a colloquial, often agrammatical language designed for defensive obfuscation,” as Goscilo states.<sup>264</sup> Some of her heroines display symptoms of serious mental illness, some experience visions caused by medical, alcohol, or other chemical abuse, and some are undeniably triggered by intimate emotional trauma.<sup>265</sup> And while some visions are specific enough to trace their roots in well-known historical events, such as Sima’s fear of Stalin’s NKVD officers in *Vremia: Noch’*, most are left vague enough to be seen more as a response to a long history of trauma than a reflection of their catalysts. Still others seem to fall

victim to daydreams and fantasies gone wild; what first begins as a pleasant distraction from everyday stressors slowly encroaches into reality until the two are no longer distinguishable from one another. Interestingly, whether the hero is aware of her transition is not always made explicit; some may not realize they are slipping away, while others may do so fully aware and even enthusiastically. Petrushevskaiia rarely delves into the reasons behind such behavior explicitly, although some general plot lines can be discerned; aiding disorientation is the author's complex mixing and embedding of conventions of genres. Petrushevskaiia employs what she terms "*sluchai*" (or incidents) to combine features of folklore, mysticism, reality, and gossip into texts that read as just realistic enough to be possible, but never dull enough to be probable.<sup>266</sup> This chapter focuses on how Petrushevskaiia carefully writes glimpses into these alternate realities, (Polowy's phrase "female space") of heroines who inevitably find a world more rewarding than their contemporary reality. Each protagonist's created social order may not be free of all difficulties, but they invariably find (or build for themselves) a sense of belonging within dominant subjectivity that they lacked in their previous life.

Embedded within these depictions is a biting critique of Soviet culture. Petrushevskaiia portrays heroes, predominantly women, who figuratively and sometimes literally go insane from the everyday struggles of living in an era whose government and society she sees as morally bankrupt. Other scholars have explored Petrushevskaiia's use of the fantastic and some have come to a similar conclusion. For example, a recent dissertation takes on the onerous task of tracing folkloric origins of Petrushevskaiia's fairy tales; in the process, author Victoria Sevastianova engages in the discussion of how Petrushevskaiia's use of the fantastic allows the protagonist an escape from a seemingly hopeless Soviet society, although her larger discussion is reserved for arguing that drawing from folklore works toward reclaiming a national identity, a

conclusion I feel is too nationalistic to accurately describe Petrushevskaiia's art.<sup>267</sup> Still, Sevastianova's writing aids my discussion in that she points out how portrayals of fantastic worlds show desires for escape from a seemingly dismal reality and reflect how "the heroines, or the author herself, are entirely disenchanting in finding any solution by ordinary means or in the real world."<sup>268</sup> Nina Kolesnikoff's research achieves something similar in her analysis of the influence of the *bylichka* in Petrushevskaiia's *Songs of the Eastern Slavs (Pesni vostochnykh slavian)*, which features the supernatural extensively. However, she seems to disagree with the idea that these supernatural narratives carry subversive undertones; she writes that the fantastic in Petrushevskaiia's writing is only for entertainment purposes, without any hint at commentary on everyday reality. Still, her discussion overlaps with mine in her affirmation that the author shows "the line between the real and the unreal is intentionally blurred. The reader never knows which events actually took place and which were imagined by the character."<sup>269</sup> As a final example, Leslie Milne's work comes closest to my research question. Writing about how Petrushevskaiia's use of the supernatural draws from folklore, urban legend, and contemporary "low culture" in a way that engages with "literary antecedents from 'high' culture," (most likely in an attempt to defend Petrushevskaiia's text from the derogatory term "women's prose" (*zhenskaia proza*)), Milne shows the hidden potential in Petrushevskaiia's tales: "Each uses the supernatural to reveal 'another world' behind the realistically depicted quiet horrors of everyday life with which Petrushevskaiia's literary name was initially associated."<sup>270</sup> Although her study focuses on Petrushevskaiia's ability to combine images of "low" and "high" art, her insight on the transformative abilities of the supernatural directly inform my discussion of Petrushevskaiia. Looking at the short story, "The Little Sorceress," Milne notes that exploring an alternate understanding of reality (in this case, through a magical Barbie doll who endows mean-spirited

individuals with more compassion) opens the possibility of seeing the world in new ways: “We have, however, been presented with a utopian vision of a better society and a demonstration of the human emotions needed in order to create it in reality.”<sup>271</sup>

It would be misleading to suggest that all of Petrushevskaja's depictions of the fantastic end so hopefully; rarely, if ever, does the author include a prescription for addressing social ills. However, my analyses below will show how Petrushevskaja's depictions of extreme escapism often include notes of what might be carefully described as a compromised happy end (ironically, even Petrushevskaja's short story “Happy End” (*Kheppy end*, 1995) has a resolution in which the protagonist is, at best, only slightly better off than in the beginning). Her heroines rarely solve long-term personal struggles or reconcile interpersonal disputes or material hardships, but through escapism, they experience alternate ways of living that allow for temporary respite from an oppressive patriarchal ideology. Through paranoia, delusions, and visions occasionally bordering on insanity, Petrushevskaja's heroines construct female spaces and non-dominant subjectivities.

“*There's Someone in the House*” (*V dome kto-to est'*, 1996)

“There's Someone in the House” is one of the author's most curious, complex, and concise works; yet, surprisingly, it remains one of her least studied by Russian and Western scholars alike. In under 3000 words, Petrushevskaja's economy of language and chillingly absent narrative authority take center stage. The text tells the story of a troubled, unnamed middle-aged woman who comes to believe a poltergeist has invaded her apartment and started attacking her. Strictly speaking, the plot is largely lacking in action. Instead, the complexities of abandonment, isolation, hopelessness, paranoia, violence, and mental health are explored through the narrator's

tactful and precise remarks on the woman's thoughts. As is traditional for Petrushevskaja, the narrator maintains a deliberate distance from her subject, maintaining a stoic and seemingly objective tone; she is not omniscient, but instead provides only a few carefully chosen glimpses into the woman's internal dialogues. Through these dialogues, however, what appears on the page is a story of a crushed (even "failed," to borrow Halberstam's term) woman who accidentally finds resolution through an [imagined] encounter with a poltergeist.

Also consistent in Petrushevskaja's works is the blurred line between the imagined and the fantastic. It is possible, and very likely, that the woman (hereafter m-d, explanation to follow) is suffering from some form of mental illness that leads to paranoia and/or hallucination; but if we keep Petrushevskaja's taste for the unreal in mind, it is also possible a poltergeist has taken up residence in her apartment and started a daily assault on her. The text is written to deliberately and preemptively negate any finality of interpretation.

But, as mentioned earlier, my primary concerns with the protagonist do not rely upon the accuracy of any medical diagnoses, but instead what these visions, experiences, and, in this case, new perspectives provide to the heroine. In "There's Someone in the House" the m-d's perceived set of battles with the poltergeist brings purpose, clarity, and eventually, release from long-term emotional pain. This transformation will lie at the center of my analysis of this text. More than the actual or fictitious nature of her tormenter, I am interested in how the m-d goes through a process from abandonment to paranoia to hope. I argue that the disappointments in her previous life (her failed romantic relationship, whatever happened previously to result in her having no family, no friends, and no job) can be seen as the type of failure that drives Halberstam's argument and, pushing the m-d to reassess her own assumptions, leads her to isolate herself in a small apartment for an unknown length of time, where she creates her own

female space, to borrow Polowy's term, and in this space journeys to overcome her cruel attachments to the unattainable. Only because of her previous "failures" is the m-d open to exploring (and able to explore) any alternative consciousnesses.

Whatever the state of her mental health, the m-d's paranoia is clearly rooted in deep emotional suffering. She is painfully alone. With a history of childhood trauma only briefly revealed through a short, painful flashback and a still-lingering heartbreak in her more recent past, the m-d feels abandoned by those she loved. Her feelings of rejection are clear from the beginning of the story, when the narrator refers to her as a "human cockroach": "A person fears everything when [s]he is left to live alone with the cat, everyone left, the whole former family, leaving this human cockroach (*chelovecheskogo tarakashku*) to sit alone in plain view."<sup>272</sup> In many ways, one might say the m-d has "failed" according to the conventional understandings of success of the time. These painful memories and a clear lack of any support network push the m-d to withdraw from society and remain isolated in her apartment for unknown lengths of time.

Isolation does not serve the m-d well, at least at first. Without friends, visitors, or partners, the closest she gets to socialization is watching television. As happens with the protagonist of Petrushevskia's "Waterloo Bridge" (1995, explored below), the only excitement in the m-d's life for years comes from television: "[She] watches television as much as she can (*do upora*), plunged into the bluish rays, she dives into these sweet worlds, experiences fear, becomes interested, senses longing, that is, she lives a full life (*zhivet polnoi zhizn'iu*)."<sup>273</sup> Her obsessive relationship with television echoes her more pervasive psychological and emotional escapism. Doing her best to repress unpleasant memories and ignore the large discrepancy between the glamourized excitement shown on television and her own disappointing reality, she uses television as a replacement and distraction.



As consistent with many of the author's other texts, Petrushevskaja's narrative technique amplifies the protagonist's largest struggles. In this case, Petrushevskaja evokes the question of naming. Her narrators and heroines both exhibit telling habits of allocating names – or refusing to do so – to actors in painful memories. Just as the m-d is unable to address her troubles past and present, she is literally unable to name them. She can only bring herself to refer to her ex as a very ambiguous “Someone” (*Nekto*) and the poltergeist as “It” or “That One” (*Ono, Tot*), always capitalized; in fact the only character who gets a proper name is the cat, Lial'ka. The m-d's own identity also falls under threat of her extreme denial; not only is her full name never revealed, but the words used to describe her remain notably depersonalizing; first she is introduced as “the woman” (*zhenshchina*), then becomes “the mother-daughter” (*mat'-doch'*), and finally her name is abbreviated to just “m-d.” This narrative strategy affects the text in several ways, but most directly related to my thesis here is how the de-identifying term “m-d” both mirrors the protagonist's inability to confront her troubles, thereby exacerbating her drive to escapism, and boils her identity down to her reproductive ability and normative roles within patriarchy. Considering the heavy pressure on women in the Soviet era to live up to their symbolic maternal status, the m-d seems to be suffering from an identity crisis caused by her inability to live up to the symbolic, patriarchal ideal. Halberstam writes of the inadvertent inability to live up to unfair ideological ideals: “gender failure often means being relieved of the pressure to live up to patriarchal ideals.”<sup>274</sup> While the m-d may not yet possess the self-awareness or retrospection to feel relieved, we can nonetheless recognize that these are the dreams and aspirations the m-d is mourning.

Halberstam's thought continues: “not succeeding at womanhood can offer unexpected pleasures.”<sup>275</sup> Indeed, the m-d finds (or, one might argue, creates) the excitement she craves

once the poltergeist moves in. She never sees him, but senses his presence through sounds and a series of unhappy accidents: a shelf mysteriously falls, she hears a random bang in another room, her records inexplicably fall to the ground and shatter. Believing these to be signs the poltergeist wants to harm her by destroying her belongings, she preempts his next attack by breaking the rest of her things herself with a hammer, including her beloved television. But even after her dishes, clothes, furniture, and the like are smashed or thrown out the window she feels her efforts are not enough. She decides that to be fully safe from the poltergeist's violent attacks, she must leave her apartment and begin a new life as a wanderer. Only then will the poltergeist not have a way to hurt her. Dressed only in a nightgown, the m-d steps outside, puts her cat in the hallway, locks the door behind her, and starts down the stairs to begin her new vagabond life.

As mentioned previously, direct connections between signifier and signified are difficult to identify in Petrushevskaja. The writer's mysterious nature, ambivalent tone, and abstract messages render any definite conclusions about the m-d inherently specious. However, when contemplating the m-d's obvious sense of jeopardy in this text, one wonders to what extent the m-d's efforts of self-defense against the poltergeist may reflect many individual's similar fear of government intrusion. Certainly, a never seen but always felt presence consistently threatening any perception of stability or privacy would not be a new concept to any late Soviet readership.

Returning to the primary concern of this chapter, the m-d discovers many such "unexpected pleasures" of failing at patriarchy, not the least of which is newfound confidence. Signs of her transformation are present long before her decision to remove self and cat from shelter: ridiculous as her strategy may be, destroying her own belongings shows that she already feels the ability to take control in some way, even if seemingly irrationally. If the scant details of her previous life betrayed internal feelings of powerlessness – she was unable to reconcile with

her mother, incapable of maintaining her relationship with her ex – her decision to challenge the poltergeist’s invasion shows a change in mindset.

One of her most powerful moments comes with her “final” victory: immediately after closing the door for, presumably, the last time, the m-d “in a robe and slippers, stood at the top of her fate, her own boss, having now defeated It (*Togo*).”<sup>276</sup> Left behind by family and friends, the m-d creates a new, imagined world in which she is no longer a middle-aged single childless woman (indeed, possibly the greatest failure in a patriarchal society), but instead a heroic and victorious warrior in a noble battle against a foreign invader. Of course, her victory over the poltergeist leads to an immediate confidence boost: just a few steps outside of her apartment door, she changes her mind and returns to her apartment. But this time, she has a starkly different perspective. Looking at her home with “new eyes,” she feels “like everything here was new, foreign, interesting [...] My God, what a new life now opened in front of the m-d [...]”<sup>277</sup> In just a few days, she has cleaned up her apartment, thrown out the rubble from broken furniture, given old clothing and dishes to some homeless people, and made plans to reuse old bits of fabric for new dresses and skirts. In short, “she decided to continue living.”<sup>278</sup>

Returning to the discussion of escapism as hopeful, the m-d’s journey certainly fits the bill for Berlant’s cruel optimism. Her internal suffering is inextricably linked to her cruel attachments to the many losses in her life and the vague hope she may recover some of the happiness she attributes to them. Her isolation and emotional turmoil are the cruel accompaniments. The cruelty of these attachments temporarily spills over into her budding attachment to the poltergeist: What most likely began as a brief curiosity evolves into the impression of an evil spirit set on destructive violence.

Apart from the poltergeist, there seems to be another catalyst of the m-d's transformation. Part of her newfound confidence is inextricably linked to the only properly named character, Lial'ka the cat. Only the m-d's pity for the helpless cat, whom, she imagines, would quickly become a victim of hunger, children's torments, men's boots, or stray dog's attacks if left on her own, convinces the m-d to return home. In many ways, Lial'ka becomes a stand-in for family life to the m-d, helping the m-d find fulfillment in an otherwise empty life. That is, she reinterprets her relationship with the cat to once again fulfill the gendered expectations of patriarchal society and, in turn, no longer considers herself a failure. Lial'ka's dependence on the m-d clearly allows her (the m-d) the feelings of maternity and nurturing she craved but could not find before. The m-d first notices her cat's full dependence on her when she picks her up to take her outside and leave the apartment forever: the cat "started trembling with a soft shaking, like a boiling teakettle. Like a train before departing. Like a very sick child in fever. She shook, clearly, afraid for her life." The cat's helplessness without the m-d is emphasized several times; apart from her frightened trembling, she's described as "dejected," "hunched over, slouched," even as "death itself, sitting on the stairs, dressed in emaciated fur" with "her frightened soul frozen by the breath of death."<sup>279</sup> In fact, the m-d's eagerness to clean the apartment is based on the belief that it will help the cat more quickly recover from her recent encounter with this "breath of death." With this in mind, we see how the m-d has reinterpreted societal norms in a beneficial way. Dissatisfied with her position in mainstream society, she borrows similar codes of conduct and builds her own world in which she is the hero.

Lial'ka's inadvertent ability to bring meaning to the m-d's life also explains the protagonist's name. While the second half of the hyphenated phrase, "daughter," is easily explained by the m-d's flashback to violent arguments with her mother, the "m" remains

mysterious until the cat begins to show vulnerability and a need for help. Lial'ka's new need for attention, care, and warmth motivate the m-d to literally pick up the pieces of her life and, eventually "continue living."

The m-d's transformation reveals the precise moments of change that drives Berlant's writing. In general, Berlant explains that cruel optimism can become so painful to the individual that she comes to a crossroads, "when the loss of what's not working is more unbearable than the having of it, and vice versa," which then prompt "practices of self-interruption, self-suspension, and self-abeyance that indicate people's struggles to change, but not traumatically, their terms of value in which their life-making activity has been cast."<sup>280</sup> The m-d's reevaluation of her life circumstances and her journey to defeat the poltergeist show these moments of self-interruption, suspension, and abeyance. She renegotiates her conception of success, or at least of not failing, that then allows her a more peaceful existence.

Unexpectedly for any Petrushevskiaia text, deeper analysis of "There's Someone in the House" reveals an uncharacteristically optimistic outlook, relatively speaking. Despite various perceived failures in her life and the time spent in isolation brooding over them, the m-d is able to find hope for her future. Her apartment becomes her own wild/female space in which she can experiment with alternative understandings of the world and her place within it. She is able to slowly move away from the mainstream social conventions that label her a failure and create her own space in which she is leader, victor, and protector.

*"Waterloo Bridge" (Мост Ватерлоо, 1995)*

Middle-aged Baba Olia shares more than one direct parallel with the aforementioned m-d: her husband left her years ago; her daughter is too busy with her own life to spend time with

her aging mother; she lives a primarily isolated life, socializing only through work; and her name stems from her presumed primary utility to society as a maternal figure.<sup>281</sup> That is, she “fails” at womanhood in a patriarchal society, just as the m-d does, and just as Halberstam’s contemplations describe. In addition, Baba Olia also escapes her underwhelming reality via media, as did the m-d via television. When she discovers the 1948 American film *Waterloo Bridge* by happenstance, she becomes enamored with the glamorous romantic drama on the screen between stars Robert Taylor and Vivien Leigh. Baba Olia immediately relates to the movie as an object of cruel optimism and what begins as a daytime distraction from loneliness and ennui becomes a dangerous self-delusion as she quickly descends into her lovingly termed “other life.”<sup>282</sup> As if no longer concerned with her previous quotidian duties, which included work and taking care of older “moldy” relatives, Baba Olia’s life becomes completely centered around the film, at times to the extent that she prompts serious concern from her daughter and jeopardizes her work as an insurance salesperson.<sup>283</sup> Ultimately, Baba Olia loses all interest in both the former and latter; in a mysterious last scene that has divided scholars since the story’s publication, Baba Olia convinces herself a strange man who approached her on the street the night before was actually American movie star Robert Taylor, come to save her from the ungrateful world around her.

The time between Olia’s discovery of the movie and the closing scene can be considered her personal wild, female space of transformation. Drawn to the adventure and emotion of the Hollywood film, Olia cannot keep herself from attempting to live vicariously through it. The extent of Olia’s escapism to this other world can be felt from her immediate reaction: “Baba Olia saw upon the screen all her dreams come true: herself when she was in the wildlife reserve, with a pure lovely face, slender as a reed; and her husband, too, as he should have been, in that other

life which for some reason she had never had.”<sup>284</sup> This other life quickly supersedes reality and becomes the center of Olia’s existence: she goes to the theater nearly every day to rewatch the movie, spreads the word of Taylor’s glory to other lonely women in their fifties, founds and leads a cult-like Robert Taylor fan club, creates special rituals to celebrate his birthday, and writes odic poetry to and about him that she feels other women in the fan club are too daft to fully understand.

In a direct sense, Olia is attempting to escape from what she sees as the disappointing path her life has taken and its many perceived failures: the marriage for which she left a prestigious music conservatory has fallen apart; she has a distant, at best, relationship with her daughter; and her efforts at work go largely unnoticed, as does her constant running around to take care of elderly relatives and the graves of those who have passed. One scholar even likens her antisocial nature to something similar to a holy fool, saying that Olia is “depicted as a prophet, she is suffering, she is misplaced and misunderstood.”<sup>285</sup> But more generally, Olia is escaping not only from her individual problems, but also issues many women of her generation faced. Specifically, Olia was born around the turn of the century and has lived through several wars, famines, and Stalinism. Most of her adult life has centered around constant sacrifice, fear, and a struggle to survive. It is therefore not surprising that she is drawn to the melodramatic nature of the American movie; it shows her a range of passions she never had the luxury of chasing in her youth. The movie-object, then, is doubly cruel: it both reminds her of the optimistic future “for which some reason she never had” and stands in the way of Olia improving her actual life circumstances (her obsession interferes with her work, prompts arguments with her daughter, and causes distance between herself and clients and other fan club *starukhi*).

As is common in Petrushevskaja's texts, the protagonist's inner struggles are reflected within the narration of the story. Much like the m-d in "There's Someone in the House," Olia has significant difficulty addressing emotional sore spots. Unable to directly say her ex-husband's name, or reference his infidelity or his new, younger wife, she refers to them only as "HIM" (*ON*) "THAT" (*TO*) and "HER" (*ONA*), always in all capital letters. Similarly, the narration abruptly changes topics as soon as any of these painful memories emerges. Her escapist tendencies in language mirror her escapist behavior in society, through which she seems to try to avoid the emptiness of her current situation. In other words, Olia is already vulnerable to, possibly even looking for, a source of distraction from reality before she happens upon *Waterloo Bridge*. In fact, her first trip to the theater is prompted by boredom at work, causing her to seek excitement in a daytime matinee. Petrushevskaja's decision to have Olia use personal pronouns to reference points of emotional trauma only underscores Olia's inability to face reality.

Olia's own name also holds clues to the depth of her situation. As noted briefly earlier, including the term "Baba" in the heroine's name points to the assumed importance of her societal role as a [grand-]mother, nurturer, and caretaker, as well as a somewhat underhanded job at her age. Her names, *babulia*, *mamasha*, and *baba*, all define her only by relation to others. Carol Adlam notes a similar pattern in another Petrushevskaja text, "The Telltale Girl" (*Rasskazchitsa*) and notes that utilizing a third-person narrator, as Petrushevskaja so often does, inserts into the story a distance that further underscores the audience's viewpoint of the protagonist as "other." In a statement that can just as easily be applied to Olia as this other protagonist, Galia (not to mention to a handful of Petrushevskaja's other characters, including the m-d) Adlam writes that Petrushevskaja's narrators "almost eschew the representation of direct speech" and that "This



indirect narrative technique reinforces the impression that Galia is merely the sum of others' reactions to her."<sup>286</sup> The story's first description of her, which emphasizes her ability to care for others while no one cares for her, echoes these assumptions of gender and caretaking abilities.<sup>287</sup> Just as the m-d, whose name is literally decided by her relation to other people, Baba Olia is pushed to identify herself by how she meets (or, in many cases, fails to meet) societal expectations for her gender.

But the name "Baba Olia" also lends itself to another purpose; this *baba* becomes symbolic of all *babas* and represents a demographic much larger than herself. She signifies many women her age who feel abandoned by family, partner, and state. In a way, Olia becomes an everywoman voice for her generation. Sally Dalton-Brown's interpretation seems to rest on the same reasoning; she explains how Petrushevskiaia breaks the myth of home life as something sacred to be cherished, as previously portrayed in Socialist Realism, and instead depicts the home as ultimately unable to live up to expectations, Dalton-Brown wonders: "Perhaps the narratives [these women] seek are indeed those of classical tragedy or myth, which their contemporary narratives, however, palely imitate, and their tragedy is that of parody, of fragmented voice swallowed by the void which separates reality from such myths."<sup>288</sup> In terms of Dalton-Brown's interpretation, Olia may be chasing the classical tale of intense romance and drama depicted in the film, but her largest tragedy remains the disconnect between her fantasy and her reality. While I disagree with the implied conclusion of Dalton-Brown's interpretation (that Olia is trapped in reality, unable to access the other world of myths), I believe her explanation of Petrushevskiaia's portrayal of home life as disillusioning is accurate.

Despite her best attempts, Olia soon falls victim to the film's "witchcraft" (*navazhdenie*) and behaves just do as the very pathetic "old ladies" (*starukhi*) she views with disdain on her

first day at the theater. But her efforts are to no avail and Olia knows it: “She already felt it herself, that she was plummeting downward somewhere...”<sup>289</sup> In what becomes a much more female “female space” than depicted in most of Petrushevskiaia’s other works, these older women create an alternative society in which they have their own rules, rituals, hierarchies, and values. Just like Polowy’s muted group space, the *babas*’ space is not accessible to the dominant culture. While the lack of men in the *Waterloo Bridge* festivities is self-explanatory, Olia’s clients’ unenthusiastic responses to her logorrheic speeches on the film’s actors and insistent poetry readings show the difference lies not only in gender. Instead, the *babas*’ space belongs to those at the intersection of gender, age, marital status, and, to a great extent, disillusionment. Just like Olia, the other *babas* are disillusioned with how their lives have turned out compared to the idealized utopia they were sold by propaganda. Such disillusionment relates not only to their disappointment in family life, but also in the state. Set one year after Stalin’s death, the story shows an aging generation who grew up with grand promises of a future communist utopia (used to justify aggressive state policies regarding industrialization, collectivization, prison camps, and war) and lived to see the lackluster result. Smith astutely observes that Petrushevskiaia’s portrayal of these movie séances and the events surrounding them has a subversive effect as it mocks the contemporary society’s religious zeal for both Soviet ideological dogma and Christian tradition. Inevitably, the movie showings come to resemble “anarchy and orgies” of old ladies, to borrow Smith’s phrase.<sup>290</sup> Similarly, Adlam suggests Petrushevskiaia’s narrative techniques combine to result in a challenge to the epistemological status quo; that is to say, Petrushevskiaia’s narratives call into question axioms of the Soviet era. These anarchic old lady orgies become a safe space of freedom, exploration, and celebration for its members, where they can live alternate lives and question everything they previously assumed to be true, should the desire arise.

Historian Barbara Evans Clements reminds us that the cultivation of gynocentral social circles is in and of itself a form of resistance: “Such female-dominated activities may be considered forms of resistance rather than forms of accommodation because they enabled women to achieve independence from male control.”<sup>291</sup> While the ultimate fate of the other fan club members remains unknown, the club’s activities easily provides, at the least, a sense of respite from the male surveillance and influence they sensed in other social spaces. This female space surrounding the American movie and its fan club gives these *starukhi* the luxury of exploring a range of deep emotions and fantasies previously unavailable.

But Olia does not consider herself a typical *starukha*, like the other fan club members. It quickly becomes clear Olia’s fulfillment comes not only from helping to create this space, but also from taking a leading role in founding and building this unique community of women. In my reading of the story, I see this as a way Olia is able to once again play the role of mother. The significance she attributes to her presumed maternal duties is made explicit when the narrator reports:

And finally Granny Olya knew what she would do with her life. [...] Her chief purpose now, Granny Olya believed, was not to issue insurance policies and collect payments due, but to instil [sic] in her clients, submerged as they were in earthly cares – to instil [sic] in them the thought that there was another life, a differently, heavenly, superior life, now showing – for instance – at 7 and 9 pm at the cinema on Karetny Street [...] Why exactly she did this Granny Olya did not know, but it had become essential to her to bring people happiness, a new happiness, to recruit yet more fans for ‘Robbie’ [*Robik* – N.M.]; and towards these occasional new recruits (all female) she felt a maternal tenderness, while at the same time displaying a mother’s strictness, for she was their guide to that other world, and the guardian of its rules and traditions.<sup>292</sup>

In short, baba Olia once again lives up to the ‘grandmother’ root of her name, *baba*. The implications of this part of Olia’s transformation are significant. First, it shows a situation in which the protagonist escapes into a non-dominant space only to fulfill dominant space expectations of her, a topic which neither Polowy’s nor Ardener’s writing addresses. In other

words, a large part of Olia's desire to leave her current reality is because she no longer fulfills what she sees is the assumed role for women of wife and mother. Her inability to reconcile herself with her husband's infidelity and daughter's distance, as well as her consistent, if unseen, efforts to care for older generations, show she still wants the status of caretaker. When exploring the non-dominant space (both the mental preoccupation with the film and the social community of its fans), she does not shed these expectations of woman as caretaker. Instead, this space allows her to fulfill the role even more than she did in reality. Similar to the m-d, Olia renegotiates her conception of success, previously based upon patriarchal and ideological value assumptions, until her current situation allows her to fit comfortably inside it. The introduction of the movie into her life and the events that follow are her moments of "self-interruption," as Berlant writes, that prompt her to reassess popular conventions and their applicability, or inapplicability, to her life.

Moreover, Olia's appreciation of her leading role for the "Robik" fan club shows an underlying desire for power, which lies central to my interest in perceptions of subjective construction. Of course, desiring power is not automatically negative. Instead, the contrast between Olia's pre-movie life, in which she felt no control over how others viewed her, is directly contrasted with her self-assigned maternal role in her new life. Once again, the protagonist of the story escapes her current social sphere and enters into an alternate world that allows her the sense of belonging within a social order that the rest of society denies her.

Lastly, the ending of the story deserves some attention, although it does little to tie up loose ends. Walking home from the movie theater late at night, Olia is approached by a strange man who inquires about her shoe size. Olia is confused at first, but the next day, during her daily screening of the movie, she decides the strange man could have been none other than Robert

Taylor himself, come to save her “at literally her last step in life, when she was just about to fly away...”<sup>293</sup> A few questions remain unanswered. First, the appearance of the man has divided scholars on whom, if anyone, he is meant to represent. Smith argues that the man’s dark, moustached appearance evokes the image of Stalin, which then supports her argument that Robert Taylor has been a surrogate for the famous leader’s mourning followers. Dalton-Brown, on the other hand, writes that the scene is reminiscent of the closing of Gogol’s “The Overcoat” (*Shinel’*), as the deteriorated nature of the man’s coat is emphasized in the description. Considering Petrushevskiaia’s mysterious, often deliberately so, nature, I am hesitant to agree that either reference was intended on the author’s part. However, I feel both interpretations offer some valuable insight. Generally speaking, both scholars’ insights on the text are new and valid, but their arguments are based upon the assumption that the details of their interpretations (regarding Stalin and Gogol) are also true. Dalton-Brown’s reading of the story probably stems from the text’s heavily absurdist overtone, which easily resonates with Gogol’s writing (for example, the man asks Olia what size shoes she wears; when she responds “39” – a larger-than-average shoe size – he says “how small!”). While absurdism is certainly a quality of Petrushevskiaia’s writing that merits attention, I do not know that a ragged coat and a misinterpretation of women’s feet is enough to justify a direct connection. Smith’s ideas that the text is commenting on “the psychological effects of the totalitarian political system on ordinary people” and that the cult of Stalin shows how society is “vulnerable and can be triggered into mass hysteria again” certainly contains some truth, regardless of whether or not the last scene is in direct reference to Stalin.<sup>294</sup> Her analysis of the text actually focuses on its subversive potential, specifically through the images of old lady orgies and of a poet, Olia, who undermines that profession with her superficial writing. I agree with Smith’s analyses that the text addresses

issues of the aftermath of Stalinism through a population all-too-eager to fill emotional wounds with escapist visions.

Whether Olia's delusions are an aftereffect of fantasy or of emotional trauma remains unclear, as does whether she is unable or unwilling to leave these delusions. Olia's identity crisis from feeling she has failed as wife and mother pushes her, deliberately or not, to create an imagined world in which she once again considers herself to successfully fulfill the ideological model of what women were expected to be.

Petrushevskaja is a complex artist. To boil down even just these two of her works into a firm conception would be a trivialization. However, from the myriad of pressing issues that comprise these tales, one line running throughout these and many of the author's other works is concern about the perceived moral bankruptcy of Soviet society in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Sutcliffe notes that in Petrushevskaja's text, "Suffering becomes a stage." Speaking on the theatricality of her prose and her ability to "depict suffering through laughter," which ties Petrushevskaja to a long Russian literary tradition dating back to Gogol' and Dostoevsky, Sutcliffe speaks to the value of the social critique within her works. Ironic and darkly humorous as her stories may be, their subtext reveals the Soviet state "as either neglecting or victimizing women," and, I would add, a range of underlying crises within social spheres, all of which work together to cause suffering for the same people who perpetuate them. While Petrushevskaja's acerbic critique of the Soviet era should not be our only takeaway from her works (as, indeed, Berlant reminds us that we should avoid "turn[ing] the objects of cruel optimism into bad and oppressive things and the subjects of cruel optimism into emblematic symptoms of economic, political, and cultural inequality"), I contend that it is nonetheless one of the author's most

notable literary contributions, especially for its relatively early time of creation and publication.<sup>295</sup>

Dalton-Brown, whose work has been utilized extensively throughout this project, names her monograph on Petrushevskaia *Voices from the Void*, a phrase which, I feel, concisely sums up the author's desperate and fearful cry for help. These voices seem to scream from the other side of some unknown, dark parallel universe. What stands out in a handful of her stories are voices who are tired of screaming and choose to explore alternate consciousnesses. They create for themselves new worlds, even if imagined ones, in which they hope to find respite and fulfillment. They are still anti-heroines; that is, they are imperfect, to say the least. They actively and unabashedly participate in the power techniques that oppress them; they contribute to the value assessment of that which remains unattainable to them. Catriona Kelly puts it more simply: "Her narrators are always indwelling, involved, no better than those they observe."<sup>296</sup> By renegotiating for themselves popular conceptualizations of success and failure, these protagonists create worlds temporarily curb their suffering. Perhaps most significantly, we can recognize that these heroines are most likely better off left to their delusions and imagined worlds than they were in reality.

#### *Liudmila Ulitskaia: The Perks of Being a Wallflower*

Of the three thematic units explored in this dissertation, this last topic – escapism, madness, and the blurred line between the imagined and the impossible – shows the most agreement between the two authors. Although the conditions that lead each heroine to extreme escapism differ, the intrigue, excitement, and revelations found in their various fantasies share the common thread of exploring possibilities of alternative lives that allow more autonomy – and

even a sense of sovereignty - than their everyday realities. Both Petrushevskaja's and Ulitskaia's heroines venture into previously unknown psychological territories, expanding their understanding of the world to include what was previously considered impossible, and through this discover completely new feelings of power over self. In short, they are able, even if only temporarily, to imagine a different, other way of living, completely outside the social norms ingrained in their current reality.

Ulitskaia has come close to addressing this play with otherworldliness in a 2000 interview, although she does so in a way that also perpetuates some traditional expectations of gender performance. Essentially, Ulitskaia begins by reiterating common differences between men's and women's life experiences according to conventional gender norms, but she then moves on to consider what she calls a "third gender." Although Ulitskaia is only discussing gender identity (which she then mistakenly conflates with sexual orientation), her understanding of this third gender seems to come close to the alternate worlds and concept of female space that interest me:

A man's world and a woman's world are two different worlds. In some places, they intersect but not fully. There are spheres of predominantly male interests and areas of female interests. In the woman's world of greater significance are questions pertaining to love, family, and children. For a woman, men's problems of struggling for a place under the sun, selecting a career, and hierarchical concerns are less important. There probably is even a certain biological prerequisite for this. With animals, only males are classified as alpha-males, beta-males, and so on; female hierarchies never line up; there is simply no need for this. But at the same time one should not forget that gender itself, for all its obvious duality, does not represent something absolute. We are well aware of types of "masculine" women and "feminine" men even within the conventional limits of the norm. *And if one goes beyond these boundaries, there opens up an entire special area of a "third" gender, with its own aesthetics, problems, and system of relations.* So I think that today we can speak not only of male and female literature but of homosexual literature, too -- or, more correctly, not of literature but of culture as a whole. (emphasis added)<sup>297</sup>



It seems, then, that the idea of exploring different ways of living has not been far from Ulitskaia's thoughts, even if she does not consider her own work to bear this label (in the interview she goes on to list Irving Welsh's work, not her own, as a study of culture). Still, one wonders to what extent the author would consider parts of her own writing as additional examples of exploring "third genders."

Russian scholar Anna Tsurkan seems to have a similar question in mind when writing a review of Ulitskaia's collection of early short stories, *Poor Relatives (Bednye rodstvenniki)*. Tsurkan comments, "Throughout the entire collection extends the thread (*krasnoi nit'iu*), the topic of penetrating into the subconscious of a person [...] that status, when a person loses control over himself, also becomes a way of transferring from the visible reality to the invisible, yet another way of surpassing the boundary."<sup>298</sup> In this excerpt Tsurkan connects two of my primary research interests in *perestroika* and post-Soviet women's writing: losing control and transcending boundaries. Ulitskaia's text works to show groups who no longer worry themselves with playing by the rules of dominant ideology; many suffer internally from being labeled as "failures" in respect to dominant, patriarchal, and Soviet conceptions of success. Instead of continuing their attachments to the imperfect and impossible ideal, they construct their own communities, even if they are the only inhabitants of them, with their own rules, value assessments, traditions, and so on, thus constituting another example of cruel optimism.

In addition to depicting individuals' experiments with consciousness, Ulitskaia also takes pains to portray the "other worlds" of those on the margins of society. Many of her stories delve into the life experiences of those typically not included in "high" literature, such as the LGBT community, people suffering from mental and physical disabilities, and the extremely poor. In the analyses that follow, I look at how the author's descriptions of these communities can, in

many ways, be considered another illustration of a muted-group. These underrepresented communities become a version of Polow's "female space." Ulitskaia delves into the characteristics that separate them from the dominant group, including shared values, social norms, and etiquette. In this sense, Ulitskaia's texts often show two such variations of female space: the internal mental and spiritual journeys individuals experience through their madness, hallucinations, and/or escapism; and the community of those not included (or not welcome) in the dominant culture.

Ulitskaia's depictions of muted groups, however, come with a rather serious shortcoming. Although it is doubtful the author intended this, her illustrations of underrepresented communities often have a subtext that is ultimately problematic. At times, she inadvertently furthers troublesome stereotypes or utilizes ignorant platitudes that undermine the very community she is trying to praise. While I will explain the details of these unfortunate misunderstandings as they appear, I should acknowledge now that these misconceptions ultimately end up supporting the existence of the precise other worlds I am attempting to analyze in her writing. For example, Ulitskaia's deeply worrisome and somewhat racist description of young Kazia (from the Far East) in "Lialia's House" and his skin complexion allows her to portray him, and the protagonist's time with him, as an escape from modern Moscovite society. In other words, exoticizing his race underscores the protagonist's sensations of being in another, more exciting world when she is with him. Therefore, I will speak to these points as they arise and address how their presence at times supports this conceptualization of female or alternative space and, in many cases, provides the precise escapism the heroine seeks.

*"Lialia's House" (Lialin dom, 1993)*

“Lialia’s House” is one of Ulitskaia’s more controversial stories. Ol’ga Aleksandrovna, or Lialia, is a teacher of French literature who has a torrid love affair with her teenage son’s newest classmate, Kazia, who moves to the city from the Far East. Not unlike the previously examined story “Bron’ka” (see Chapter II), “Lialia’s House” risks strong undertones of pedophilia, yet ultimately (although somewhat problematically) emphasizes connections among individuals in spite of social conventions of appropriate dating ages. Short though the story may be, it also engages with issues of infidelity, erotic male physicality, unashamed female sexuality, *intelligentnost’*, spirituality, and compassion. These topics provide a clear link between the overarching themes of the previous chapter of this dissertation and the current one. While the beginning of the story addresses questions of stifling conventional norms and the breakdown of morality in the late Soviet era, the ending delves into the realm of the fantastic by sending Lialia on a supernatural vision/hallucination brought on by extreme shock that transforms her into a more sentimental and hyper-feminized version of her former self.

Before her transformation, however, Lialia could easily belong in one of Petrushevskaja’s dark worlds, instead of Ulitskaia’s more optimistic ones. She embodies that part of the intelligentsia that has fallen from their original self-assigned role of leaders of the moral fiber of the Russian people. Despite her prestigious employment title, Lialia’s life is filled with the banal: chasing extramarital affairs, gossiping with coworkers, and getting in spats with close girlfriends. Lialia’s daughter, Elena, attributes her mother’s actions to her past as a member of the dissident 1960s generation (a *shestidesiatnik*), whose desire for freedom, she says, manifests itself most clearly in sexual debauchery. Until the introduction of young Kazia into their group of *intelligent* friends, Lialia struggles to find any satisfaction from marriage, love life, work, or family, the last of which seems particularly hurtful to her daughter. In this way, Lialia has not

necessarily “failed” at womanhood in the same way that Petrushevskaiia’s heroines have; she has a husband, a daughter, a job, economic stability and what seems to be a group of friends. However, her lingering disappointment and ennui signal that she has only met the requirements for success by patriarchal standards on paper; internally, she senses herself just as much failure as the other women who seek out adventure through escapism. Furthermore, showing the same feelings of failure among the intelligentsia works to further demythologize this societal class, a recurring theme in Ulitskaia’s oeuvre. Lialia’s apartment may still be the revolving door of artists, professors, students, ministers, and dissidents, but her actions show that any lofty ideas of existence beyond physical pleasure have long ago ceased to be a priority.

Lialia’s attitude toward Kazia, who moves into the apartment directly above hers and quickly befriends her son, does little to redeem her. Although much of her relationship with him is written in a way that reflects Lialia’s deep and genuine appreciation of their time together, I argue that the narrative ultimately shows how she continues to value physical pleasure above emotional or intellectual connection. This interpretation is noteworthy because it works against much of Ulitskaia’s usual message that portrays ideal romantic connections as based on emotional support, shared trust, and intellectual stimuli above all else. In this story, however, physicality, sexuality, and eroticism take center stage.

Kazia’s youthful energy and unique athleticism, a result of spending his childhood years as an acrobat in the circus, prompts Lialia to consider him the “sпры game” (“*podvizhnoi dich’iu*”), of which she is the hunter, that she cannot find among her generational contemporaries.<sup>299</sup> His own fascination with gymnastics and the so far unexplored possibilities of the human body (his largest goal is to fly) render Kazia an easy target for Lialia’s sexual advances. But unlike most relationships in Ulitskaia’s writing, what brings Lialia and Kazia

together is nothing except physical attraction. Despite her status as a member of the intelligentsia and the fact that this more sophisticated discourse among the visitors in her home is what first draws Kazia into her company, Lialia and Kazia have no real emotional bond. Tellingly, after their first encounter, they cease speaking at all during their time together. As such, the power dynamics between the two catch readers' attention from the beginning. Not only does the woman initiate the relationship, but she also continues to decide the frequency of their meetings and the nature of them. Kazia, "speechless and obedient," plays the role of passive receptor of Lialia's passion, as she takes out her frustrations with daily life on his body.<sup>300</sup> For all intents and purposes, Kazia becomes for Lialia little more than a handsome, living dildo available for her use whenever the need should arise. Having long considered herself "unattractive, old, and boring," she finds their time together an escape during which she can once again feel as youthful and spirited as her partner.<sup>301</sup> Kazia's body is Lialia's object of cruel optimism and, living up to its name as cruel, it only creates more problems for Lialia the more she attempts to cling to it. In what turns into an unexpected reversal of traditional power dynamics of gendered bodies, Lialia uses Kazia's body for her own benefit, either to explore her own complex range of emotions or simply for her own enjoyment of sexual pleasure.

Helena Goscilo recognizes the significance of Ulitskaia's illustration of physicality and female sexuality in Lialia. She writes, "What is particularly striking about some of these narratives is their deconstruction of a double binarism [...], women's unfettered sexual activity here, contrary to custom, does *not* pull the reader back into the ancient binary opposition between body and soul that automatically feminizes materiality and masculinizes spirit."<sup>302</sup> She later continues her thoughts: "[Lialia's House]" continues the process of wresting gender from a geriatric blueprint of femininity," and that such works by Ulitskaia and other contemporary

women writers, “encourage feminists to contemplate a utopian future in which that pseudonorm has become [...] a relic of a bygone era.”<sup>303</sup> First, Gosילו’s point reminds us that not only do women writer’s characters search for ways to live beyond the confines of communist morality and societal prescriptions, as addressed in the previous chapter, but also that the very writing of such characters is in effect an attempt to do the same. Furthermore, her remarks on “contemplating a utopian future” speak directly to the primary question of this chapter: how do these scenes of escapism show a desire to experience another way of living, outside of the stifling gender conventions of appropriate behavior?

But first, additional layers of how Ulitskaia portrays the middle-aged woman’s affair with the teenage boy merit attention. Centering on Lialia and Kazia’s sexual relationship without love is simultaneously both a sign of progress and of ongoing obstacles within the Russian women’s writing and Ulitskaia’s writing. More specifically, I propose that while the author’s efforts to show female sexuality in a positive, empowering, and pleasurable way is in and of itself a progressive step for 1990s Russian women’s literature, her ultra-exoticized depictions of Kazia’s foreign ethnicity and youthful physical strength still render the story problematic.

To be sure, Kazia’s ethnic origins are a loaded topic in the story. Described at times as Persian and at times as harking from the Far East, his exact heritage is not defined. This, too, reveals the deeper issues in the story; Lialia does not care where Kazia is from, she is simply attracted to his foreign appearance. Still, other signs of underlying racial hierarchies remain. Consider the following excerpt, in which the narrator describes Kazia’s physical appearance for the first time and takes on a tone more appropriate for describing paint swatches than a human: “The boy was magnificent. The crude blackness of the father had softened in him to a rich Persian brown, and the soft-matte skin was stretched [across] the forehead and cheekbones so

tightly that it seemed it almost wasn't enough."<sup>304</sup> As mentioned in Chapter I, Ulitskaia's writing regularly betrays hints of inadvertently perpetuating racial stereotypes. But apart from its problematic nature, the exoticization of Kazia's youthful and foreign appearance in this text also underscores Lialia's feelings of escapism. Ironically, both the inverted power dynamic between genders and Kazia's non-Russian (that is, non-White) background serve as ways Lialia escapes from her current surroundings. No longer the old, boring wife and mother she considered herself to be previously, with Kazia she feels as young as her partner and as exotic as she perceives his skin color to be. During one of their bedroom rendezvous, the narrator notes that all of Lialia's attention is "focused on only one thing: reaching that edge, where the powerful boy freed her from herself [...] freeing her from memory of soul and body."<sup>305</sup> The sexual bliss their encounters give her become an almost other-worldly experience, while his hyper-foreign appearance becomes a physical foreshadowing of the far-off adventure Lialia will experience while incapacitated.

Lialia's romance with Kazia ends abruptly when she walks in on him with her daughter, which then puts Lialia into a psychological state of shock no doctor or specialist can diagnose. This scene seems to be the apex of Lialia's cruelest optimism; her attachment to the object (Kazia's body) that promised, in her mind, a more optimistic future (emotional and physical intimacy), ultimately harms her the most (by further jeopardizing her relationship with her daughter).

Although she remains semi-conscious, with her eyes open and sitting upright, Lialia is able to perceive everything around her, but is unable to react. For the majority of her time in shock, she stares only at the renovated window in their kitchen. The brick around the window, it seems, gives Lialia a sense of order and stability that her affair with Kazia endangered. Lialia

spends her many semi-conscious days following the pattern between the bricks that are comfortingly repetitive, predictable, and orderly:

The brick layering of the walled-up window was for her extremely attractive. It was as if she knew that precisely in the cracks of the bricks, in their simple and correct, offset row rotation is a redemptive order, which by following she might bring together the destroyed portrait of her life. And maybe, the cement, having united for eternity the separate bricks, was so appealing to Ol'ga Aleksandrovna's eyes. The cement, binding the separate entities into one whole...<sup>306</sup>

As if paying penance for her previous escapism, these moments of escapism bring back to Lialia images of all she was attempting to abandon: order, predictability, sameness, and rigid brick lines that mirror similarly rigid standards of appropriate behavior.

While unresponsive, Lialia also experiences a surreal vision in which the bricks she so loves vanish before her eyes to show the handsome Kazia flying in the sky in front of her. When he flies away, Lialia also takes flight behind him and leaves her kitchen behind through the very window that for the previous days symbolized the inability of such escape and experimentation. Her flying time is short, but she magically finds herself in a desert. The desert is most likely Central Asia, judging by the combination of plants the narrator describes, but I would say that more important than the precise location is its resemblance to where Lialia believes Kazia is from. Her vision has brought her to what she views as his native land: an unknown foreign land that overwhelms with its vibrant smells, colors, and sounds. The magical land proves too much for Lialia, who is overcome by the beauty of everything she sees around her. After watching a stunning sunset and its accompanying rainbow, she is thrown back into consciousness in her kitchen.

Lialia returns to reality with a steady stream of tears from her overwhelming, at times crippling compassion for everything in life, from bugs and plants to stairs and dirty dishes. She immediately performs the role of ultra-mother, cleans the entire apartment, and takes up



domestic work with the zeal that used be reserved for her sexual conquests. Other scholars have mentioned that the last scene recalls Virgil's *Aeneid*, in which the titular character stares at a mural and, moved to tears, says "There are tears for things," which has been interpreted as a signal that Lialia's enlightened education allows her openness to such increased sensitivity.<sup>307</sup> Her semi-comatose stage, then, can be seen as a moment of Berlant's "self-interruption" and "self-abeyance" as she reassesses the conditions around her; now emotionally and physically harmed by her object-attachment, she reaches a breaking point at which she must decide whether the object of cruel optimism or the loss of it would be worse. While her husband remains oblivious to Lialia's spiritual transformation and her daughter disillusioned by marriage, the rest of Lialia's life is comprised only of constant sentimentalism.

The "success" of Lialia's journey into an alternate reality is up for debate. On the one hand, she returns from her adventure with a decidedly more optimistic and content attitude towards life. Although her new life seems somewhat empty (comprised only of domestic chores and an overwhelming sentimentality for even the most mundane activities), she has, in a sense, found release from her previous internal melancholy. On the other, she comes to this more peaceful existence not because she has overcome her ennui or found a more meaningful calling; instead, her consciousness has essentially been dumbed down to a level too simple to think beyond the domestic task at hand. If the narrator is sincere in portraying Lialia's transformation as positive, then this story belongs in the long line of Russian women's writing that perpetuates problematic understandings of gender roles (specifically, the underlying assumption that women are "naturally" more nurturing and thus have a moral obligation to play their "natural" role of mother and caretaker).<sup>308</sup> The moral of the story could, in this case, be seen as instructing women to avoid seeking sexual satisfaction and find greater fulfillment in their maternal and

wifely duties. Or we may surmise the moral to be that sometimes the best, at times only, escape from systemic oppression is incapacitating oneself into intellectual anesthetization. Or, in Berlant's words, some find it easier to "move toward the normative form to get numb with consensual promise, and to misrecognize that promise as an achievement."<sup>309</sup>

Without venturing to assume the author's intent, what remains is nonetheless a text that shows the possibilities that come from exploration and experimentation of different sorts. Lialia's adventures in consciousness – both with Kazia and in her illness – show the possibility of an alternative reality in which she embodies a renegotiated ideal. Her ultimate fate aside, Lialia experiences in her conquests with Kazia a freedom and empowerment she lacks in the rest of her life.

*"The Chosen People"* (*Narod izbrannyi*, pub. 1994 – written earlier)

Ulitskaia's "The Chosen People" (*Narod izbrannyi*) is a short story that conveys values crucial to the author's larger philosophy: gratitude, humility, and faith. With a simple plot focused on two women who beg for money outside of a church, Ulitskaia simultaneously addresses issues of the often understudied poorest socioeconomic class, portrayals of the disabled body and the problematic assumptions that shape it, the value of faith over organized religion, and the possibility of living an existence outside of conventional norms. In this section, I address each of these topics and how they at times overlap (such as the convergence of faith with a "higher," almost other-worldly understanding of the life experience), and at other times contradict each other (specifically, how well-intentioned descriptions of disabled bodies can ultimately perpetuate false and, at times, insensitive misunderstandings and/or stereotypes about them). Overall, I argue that this very brief text brings together several issues the author holds

most dear and, as is most important to this chapter, contemplates the possibilities of living by another set of rules, values, and convictions completely separate from the story's diegetic setting of late Soviet society.

The protagonist, Zinaida is a meek, disabled, and extremely helpless woman who depends on her mother for nearly everything, even well into adulthood. When her mother dies, Zina struggles financially, psychologically, and socially. Clueless, Zina follows her mother's only advice and goes to a nearby church to beg for money. After an unsuccessful first day of begging, Zina enters the church to light a candle; upon leaving, she is attacked by other beggars and only survives thanks to the intervention of Redheaded Katia (*Katia Ryzhaia*). Katia plays the role of guardian angel for Zina; she not only protects her from other beggars, but also provides the spiritual and practical guidance that Zina needs.

In many ways, Zina, Katia, and the group of beggars that gather outside the church can all be considered "failures" in Halberstam's use of the word, meaning they "fail" at oppressive conventions of success; in this case, they fail at being financially well-off. Following Halberstam's ideas, they are therefore privy to the range of "more creative, more cooperative, more surprising ways of being in the world"; that is, the unexpected benefits of thinking outside the box.<sup>310</sup> Unsurprisingly, Ulitskaia's tale does not end with a utopian resolution (one wonders if ideological promises of Communist utopia have permanently tainted the trope). However we witness seeds of something promising; although neither Zina nor Katia can be seen as currently on the precipice of an alternative reality free from unforgiving conformity, what remains are contemplations of building a lifestyle more dependent on internal calm than external stigma.

Berlant speaks to this type of optimism directly and explains that while cruel optimism often manifests itself as a cluster of rather specific and grandiose promises, it can also appear as

a conceptualized, even generalized new style of living. This notion comes closer to Zina's experience. Writing on an American short story, "Exchange Value" by Charles Johnson, Berlant reflects on one protagonist's dream of a calm, peaceful, uneventful life:

But [his fantasies ...] are aleatory and passive ways of inhabiting and making an environment in which attachments are not optimistically pointing toward a cluster of transcendent promises but toward something else, something bearable that holds off not just the imminence of loss but the loss that, inevitably, just happened. For [him] fantasy isn't a plan. It calibrates nothing about how to live. It is the action of living for him, his way of passing time not trying to make something of himself in a system of exploitation and exchange.<sup>311</sup>

Berlant argues that as the protagonist, a young, poor, African American boy, is situated in a capitalist society whose ideology conflates work ethic with financial success and financial success with emotional fulfillment, his fantasy of living an unremarkable life subverts such a mentality of exploitation. Of course, these two stories happen worlds apart, but shared between them is the implicit sense that one's everyday lifestyle holds the power to oppose nationwide popular ideology, even if done unknowingly. In this sense, Zina's new lifestyle has the potential to subvert commonplace understandings of "success" and "failure" in Soviet society. Instead of continuing to chase the goals assigned to her by oppressive societal prescriptions or becoming stuck in a melancholic state grieving her inability to reach these goals (and thus assigning herself blame) Zina's *nishchaia* status, as I hope to show, challenges and interrogates mainstream culture.

The moral of the story seems to come from Katia's speech on the difference between a "*nishchii*" (a poverty-stricken person) and a "*poproshaika*" (from "*poprosit*" – to beg, to ask for). Although both terms can roughly be translated as "beggars," the former most often denotes an economic class well below the poverty line, whereas the latter holds a negative connotation of those who ask for handouts from others. Katia explains that she wants to see Zina become a

“real *nishchei*” not just a “*poproshaika*.” She explains that *nishchie* differ in that they serve God, whereas *poproshaiki* have the singular goal of obtaining money. Furthermore, she tells of how she came to understand why *nishchie* are God’s people (hence the title of the story): having been jailed because of her husband and then turned out of her mother’s house, Katia went to a church to pray, where she saw a mute woman without arms or legs. Looking at her, Katia comes to feel that she has no reason to feel sorry for herself and that “every person, looking at [the *nishchaia* woman] thinks only: that’s unhappiness, worse than mine, worse than anything, and my situation, no matter where it goes, I can still live through.”<sup>312</sup>

Katia’s story calls for gratitude in times of trouble. No matter how difficult one’s life may seem, someone else is somewhere struggling more. Anna Tsurkan, in her review of the republication of the *Bednye rodstvenniki* series in which this story appears, picks up on this lesson and links the two themes I wish to address in my analysis: morality among the less fortunate (and the complications surrounding its depiction in this text) and entrance into alternative understandings of the life experience (the “dominant” and “muted” groups referenced in the introduction to this chapter). Tsurkan’s original words are difficult to translate without imposing a level of linguistic awkwardness, but a rough translation would be:

[Ulitskaia’s] characters – that is, “Little People” (*malen’kie liudi*), the elderly, the sick, and the poor, rejected by society, *marginally*, as it is now fashionable to say – are guided by a principle: never ask “for what [goal]” (*za chto*), ask “on whose/what’s behalf” (*dliia chego*). In Ulitskaia’s opinion, that is the logic of the true Christian, convinced that everything happening at the moment, even the most unfair [and] the most agonizing, is aimed at opening up within him a new vision, if only he understands it correctly [...] All of these conditions are considered boundaries; here only people, fallen out of the customary societal mentality (*sotsium*), can be found, those not needed [in regular society], not satisfied by it, and those not fully entered into it, that is, the elderly, the sick, children.<sup>313</sup>

This sense of gratitude is separate from religion, a theme that runs rather consistently throughout Ulitskaia’s texts. Although Katia and Zina spend most of their time at the church, Katia’s

message of morality is not specific to Eastern Orthodoxy. Zina's own ignorance of religious texts underscores that her compassionate (if naïve) nature, not her religion, should be admired: when Zina says she believes in Mother Mary (*Bozhiia Mater*'), Katia asks "and of whom is she the mother?" Zina, betraying her ignorance of doctrinal script, responds, "of her daughter."<sup>314</sup> As other scholars have already pointed out, Zina's unfamiliarity with religious scripture, in the text likened to a dunce in a classroom, does not betray an ignorance of ethical values altogether, despite what Redheaded Katia's immediate sneering laugh indicates.<sup>315</sup> Instead, this moment shows that Zina, more so than Redheaded Katia, understands the value of faith outside of doctrine. As with many of Ulitskaia's other characters, such as previously mentioned Medea (see Chapter II), "true" spirituality comes not from a stubborn loyalty to dogmatic rules of any one church (which, to the author, can be just as harmful as loyalty to party over ethics), but from a deep will to believe in something better, higher, and more just. Ulitskaia has addressed questions of religious diversity in many of her texts and continuously stressed a more universal understanding of spirituality based on compassion and servitude over any specific religion.<sup>316</sup> These moments, I argue, exemplify two major facets of Ulitskaia's writing: first, her portrayals of both government and/or military officials (as in *Medea and Her Children*) and of individuals who uncritically follow creed over logic (as Katia Ryzhaia) show her condemnation of doctrinal madness; a longtime critic of any ideology that claims to be infallible, Ulitskaia writes of the danger of trusting ideology over conscience. Secondly, scenes such as Zina and Katia's deep conversation about religion, spirituality, and their place in the world as impoverished, disabled *nishchie*, exhibit the author's ability to engage with questions of *bytie*.

But a few points of contradiction in the story deserve attention. First, I would argue that the moral of the story, as well intentioned as it may be, retains some unfortunate value

assumptions about disability status. Specifically, urging for gratitude only in comparison to others' disabilities does not echo the larger call for uplifting others that runs through Ulitskaia's work. Instead, it focuses on the need for another's suffering in order for one to feel reassured in one's own well-being and encourages pity for anyone presumed to be less lucky than oneself. If presuming to know others' happiness based on their outward appearance is already problematic, then using this presumed unhappiness to bolster one's own attitude on life seems nothing short of selfish.

Secondly, Ulitskaia is clearly doing her best to depict demographic groups that are conventionally on the margins of society (whom one Russian critic calls "*marginaly*") by focusing her story not only on the lowest socioeconomic class, but also including special attention to disabled bodies.<sup>317</sup> But this attempt, too, remains problematic. As with my last point of contradiction, making assumptions about one's emotional well-being based on disability status implies that those with disabilities cannot live as fulfilling lives as able-bodied people. Furthermore, Zina's own disability (never specifically named, but it seems to involve gastrointestinal issues that lead to obesity), and how it is compared to the mute woman without arms or legs indicates a presumed hierarchy of disabilities, which is inherently disrespectful to disabled people. The visibility of a disability also seems to play a large role, as assessment's of the disabled person's life is based on visual evidence: Zina's mother often fought her over her weight and Katia never speaks to the woman without arms or legs, only sees her from afar before coming to the realization that her conditions are not so bad in comparison). Skomp and Sutcliffe seem to run into the same contradiction in Ulitskaia's authorial voice in their reading of the text, but in the end choose to interpret it as ultimately in line with the author's larger philosophy of tolerance:

The irregular body elicits a variety of reactions: reflection and self-examination, seeing the disabled person as virtuous, or gratitude for one's own (comparatively) comfortable existence. Even as this range of external viewpoints may involve the misreading of disability, the multiplicity of responses links the imperfections of the flesh to introspection and subtly threatens the monolithic certainty of Soviet corporeality. Considering others' problems promotes both compassion and the reexamination of our lives that Ulitskaya defines as key to development. The irregular body thus aids the contemplation and tolerance the author upholds as essential traits of the intelligentsia.<sup>318</sup>

While I agree that Ulitskaia's efforts are well-intentioned and more inclusive than much prose published by her contemporaries, I have trouble writing her "misreading of disability" off as completely harmless. Furthermore, the "monolithic certainty of Soviet corporeality" they reference has already been challenged by other scholars, such as in Lilia Kaganovsky's *How the Soviet Man was Unmade*, as described in Chapters I and II of this dissertation. Still, their point that Ulitskaia's depiction of disabled bodies was most likely crafted out of well-meaning, but poorly-executed compassion is accurate.

These depictions also bring into discussion the theme of differing lifestyles, values, and assumptions on the margins of society - living outside of mainstream (or, in Polowy's words, "dominant") culture and, at times, exploring the possibilities of alternate ways of being, as discussed in the introduction to this chapter. The *nishchie* and *poproshchaiki* in this text do not have as positive an experience, but they still live in a world unseen by the dominant group, with their own rules (as indicated by the attack on newcomer Zina) and their own social hierarchy (Katia's power to call off the other *poprashchaiki*). Zina's liminal status in this new world serves as a narrative technique that allows the solidified member Katia to explain the rules of engagement, demographic makeup, and identity politics within the non-dominant community. Their extreme socioeconomic challenges aside, Katia's speech about the unique nature and purpose of *nishchie*, as chosen by God, hints of a more meaningful existence unrecognized by



and inaccessible to the dominant culture. *Nishchie*, she explains, “serve God,” a noble calling unavailable to most people.<sup>319</sup>

Portrayals of extremely poor, seemingly mad individuals who have the ability to sense a higher truth refer back to the tradition of the holy fool, or *iurodivyi*, in Russian culture. Madness, by some held as the “highest achievement of the human soul, [...] rising above the limitations of reason,” prompted Russian culture to revere holy fools as the finest and most quintessential symbol of the Russian soul until the late 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>320</sup> Their erratic behavior and scrambled speech were considered signs of their ability to sense supernatural and mystic realms inaccessible to the rest of us, inhabitants of the cave in Plato’s famous allegory. As such, they were also believed to have clairvoyant powers and were regularly asked for advice, predictions, and guidance. Traditionally, the signs of the holy fool are unmistakable: he is a wanderer, claiming as home neither house nor town; his clothes, when present, are ragged and often inappropriate for the [harsh Russian winter] weather; his health is in decline; his hygiene is olfactorily and visually repulsive; his speech is unintelligible; his behavior is strange, unbecoming, and at times simply offensive; and he is, almost without exception, a he.<sup>321</sup> Ulitskaia’s notably gynocentric writings depict a more realistic and humanized version of the holy fool, those who are living, breathing women with several other facets of their lives; their purpose within the text is not necessarily to deliver God’s word (although some work toward something along those lines as well). Instead, their most pressing concern is redemption of themselves and close loved ones.

In *Redheaded Katia*, we see something similar, however misled she may be at times. Still, she appears to Zina at precisely the moment when she is most needed (as Zina is being attacked by the other *poproshchaiki*), almost like a guardian angel from above, and imparts to

her what she sees as a deeper truth about the world around them. Zina, for her part, also shows signs of possessing *iurodivaia* qualities in the future, especially as she seems to understand an even more inclusive, compassionate, and “Christian” wisdom of the world than does Katia.

Other scholars have picked up on these notes within the text as well; Tsurkan’s closing comments on the collection of stories are centered on this idea:

To summarize everything said about Liudmila Ulitskaia’s heroines, what stands out is a deep connection of these images with a tradition to which, evidently, the writer has oriented herself and which acts in her work alongside later influences. This is the tradition of Russian classical Christianized (*khristianizirovannoi*) literature – a sympathetic lifting up of the little man (*malen’kogo cheloveka*), the holy fool, or the righteous eccentric.<sup>322</sup>

Tsurkan continues to discuss the many Biblical references and an overall tone she senses in Ulitskaia’s stories that “the action is taking place in front of a higher truth (*litsom vyshchei pravdy*).”<sup>323</sup>

Zina’s entrance into this higher life seems to be symbolized in the closing of the story, when she drifts off to sleep as Katia continues her thoughts on *nishchie*. Hovering between wakefulness and sleep, Zina senses that she has travelled to a different land, not unlike the one Lialia finds in “Lialia’s House.” In this new land full of flowers and plant-life, Zina sees her mother, but not as she was the last time Zina saw her. Instead, her mother is once again her youthful, healthy self, energetic, and smiling. While we do not know what follows after Zina awakes, the optimistic note of her dream indicates that she has come to terms with her new life as a *nishchaia*.

In summary, I argue that “The Chosen People” has its shortcomings, but it ultimately shows Ulitskaia’s belief in the transformative powers of living according to one’s own convictions (instead of those prescribed by state authorities or conformist Soviet ideology) and the possibility of reaching a higher truth not recognized by mainstream society. In other words,

she, too, experiments with the possibilities of creating one's own female space and breaking through power structures' prescribed affective markets. The culture of *nishchie*, as described by Katia, is centered upon serving a higher and nobler purpose that directly juxtaposes the avarice of both *poprashaiki* and those who walk past them on the street. Zina's dream, as well as her awkward first attempts to toe the line between *nishchie* and *poprashaiki*, show the liberating possibilities of changing one's lifestyle to a position outside of dominant culture, to return to Polowy's ideas. Her innate understanding of the value of spirituality over religion and her reassuring vision of her mother allow Zina a feeling of independence she never experienced before. Now, equipped with the logical knowledge needed to avoid conflict with *poprashaiki*, an instinct based on compassion for all instead of loyalty to one's own, and a comforting message from her mother on the other side, Zina has the ability to control her fate and, if she wishes, explore her own female space.

*"Bukhara's Daughter" (Doch' Bukhary, 1993)*

"Bukhara's Daughter" is one of Ulitskaia's better-known early short stories. It follows the young adulthood of Alechka, a newcomer in an unidentified Moscow neighborhood whom the local gossips derisively call "Bukhara," (a city in Uzbekistan) because of her Central Asian heritage. Bukhara, as the narrator also calls her, moves to Moscow with her rich husband, a doctor, when she is already showing in her pregnancy. When a daughter with Down Syndrome is born, her husband, who comes from a long line of proud men who bear one healthy son each, is unable to hide his disdain and leaves her within the first year of the child's life. Bukhara is able to easily manage without her husband's presence and raises her daughter, Mila, as a single-mother without much trouble. The action of the story begins when Mila is eleven years old and

Bukhara begins to show signs of a fatal illness. With her characteristically calm demeanor, Bukhara does not worry about her disease, but instead visits her hometown for a week and returns with a large bag of varied grasses and herbs obtained from a local healer. In a defiant and magically omniscient tone that will reveal the crux of the story, Bukhara tells her housemaid, “Pasha, I have a terminal illness. I cannot die now and leave Milochka alone. With these herbs, I will be alive for another six years, then I will die.”<sup>324</sup> Bukhara is inexplicably able to will herself to live exactly another six years and only dies when Mila is married, indicating to Bukhara that Mila’s future well-being is in safe hands.

This story addresses several issues that recur in Ulitskaia’s works, including objectionable depictions of disabled bodies that imply a hierarchy of various disabilities, underlying value assumptions about women’s worth being dependent upon traditional beauty standards, and some noticeably racist subtext in the narrator’s descriptions of skin tones (such as how Bukhara’s skin grows suspiciously darker as descriptions of her emphasize loss of beauty). But more importantly for the question on escapism posed in this chapter, Ulitskaia once again ventures into depicting a way of life outside of conventional social norms. More specifically, she illustrates two different alternative worlds: first through exoticized Bukhara, and secondly through disabled Mila and her husband, Grisha, who also has Down Syndrome. Put briefly, Bukhara’s Central Asian heritage and culture are exoticized by author and characters alike to portray her as an almost supernatural clairvoyant, positioned somewhere between social outcast and fearsome witch. Mila and Grisha, on the other hand, are illustrated as existing within their own world, or wild space, thanks to their disability, blissfully unaware of the taunts and mockery that follow them around town. In both cases, the protagonists are depicted as indisputably better off for their ability to ignore (or not notice) the cruel and unaccepting societies around them. As

such, it seems that the presumed moral of the story is similar to that in “Lialin dom” – when left without alternatives, ignorance can be bliss.

One cannot speak about “Doch’ Bukhary” without first grappling with Bukhara’s seemingly paranormal ability to will herself to live until her daughter comes of age. Long anathematized by the neighborhood for her Eastern traditions and cultural understandings, her return from her homeland with various healing herbs puts house servant Pasha most on guard. But true to her word, Bukhara is able to surprise Pasha with the accuracy of her prediction (or rather, declaration) of her future death. Other scholars have noted this moment as showing the convergence between *byt* and *bytie* so highly contested in *perestroika* and post-Soviet Russian women’s literature. In other words, to rebut some critics’ claim that women’s literature of the everyday does not engage with “higher” existential questions and the like, scholars such as Tatiana Kazarina have cited Bukhara as one example of when deeper questions on the meaning of life are addressed in domestic settings. Kazarina writes of Ulitskaia’s heroines (Bukhara explicitly included),

They are ready to do the possible and impossible for the sake of their goal and often in fact accomplish that which is outside the power of a normal person. [...] Ulitskaia’s heroines fiercely, aggressively, and it wouldn’t be a sin to say maniacally (*osatanelo*) strive to solve their life’s grand purpose (*sverkhzadachi*). And those around them simply cannot understand the logic of their behavior – because it is [a logic] beyond the limits and borders of ordinary life [...] For Ulitskaia, the most surprising particularity of *bytie* is [...] on a different level, to understand it one needs different optics, absolutely not the kind that arranges the ordinary.<sup>325</sup>

In this excerpt, Kazarina hits precisely on the topics that are central to my analysis of Ulitskaia in this chapter. Bukhara’s mission to take care of her daughter contrasts her husband’s reaction, which stands in for the logic of the “ordinary” that Kazarina references. Her husband’s immediate shame at his daughter’s disability, as well as his implied shame at her gender (again, he is the only outlier in several generations of Russian men who bore Russian sons) stands in line

with the logic of the neighbors who look down on Bukhara and those who tease Mila and Grisha for their disability. In the eyes of those around them, Bukhara and her daughter are “failures” by Soviet mainstream preconceptions of success; the difference between these heroines and others who are labeled “failures” by society, however, is that Bukhara and Mila do not seem to mind or even notice. Still, this status in their community allows for the “unexpected pleasures” mentioned by Halberstam. Bukhara, long before her ability to fight off a terminal illness to live through her daughter’s childhood years, is already an outsider as she without question accepts her daughter’s disability with love and warmth. Her equally warm acceptance of her husband’s infidelity and then divorce underscores that Bukhara does not follow the conventions of contemporary Moscovite society. Her supernatural self-healing abilities, so aptly referred to by Kazarina as a “*sverkhzadacha*” – literally, an “above task” – is only further proof that Bukhara lives, breathes, views, and understands the world on a different level than her acquaintances.

Although undeniably bleak, Bukhara’s death near the end of the story can also be seen as her final escape. After struggling to support her disabled child as a single parent for years, Bukhara’s death comes as a relief, releasing her from her psychological work of constantly worrying and of the physical labor of working low-paying jobs to provide for Mila. Bukhara clearly already occupies a space outside of the popular consciousness of her community. In this way, she is able to escape the harmful cultural assumptions and societal values of those around her. Her death, then, and its peaceful and precisely-planned nature (not only does she predict its time, but she also returns home before her death to spare Mila the trauma of witnessing it; she dies just a few days after arriving at her brothers’) becomes her last step of escaping the antagonism she faces in Muscovite society.

In contrast to Bukhara's supernatural abilities, her daughter's metaphorical other-worldliness has not been explored by scholars. Mila clearly has a different understanding of the world. Paralleled in her limited speech that, even until early adulthood, restricts much of her perspective to either "good" or "bad" ("Mila bad?" for example, to ask if her mother is mad at her), she lives an existence quite separate from those around her. Because it would be extremely problematic to assume that Mila and Grisha's worldview is automatically "less than" or symbolically "below" (as opposed to Bukhara's "above") due to Down Syndrome, I am hesitant to argue for that interpretation. Instead, I find it a more productive exercise to be focusing on how Mila and Grisha's life experience differs from the norm and how this ultimately allows them a more peaceful existence. As one example, Mila's lifelong struggle with long-term memory allows her to overcome with ease both the absence of her father and the later death of her mother (Pasha simply has to gradually hide Bukhara's belongings and Mila can no longer store the memory of her mother). But more importantly, Mila and Grisha's ignorance of how others view them allows them a fate much more blissful and fulfilling than that of those mocking them. Near the closing of the story, the narrator tells us, "Their marriage was lovely. But within it was a secret, unknown even by them: from the point of view of healthy and normal people, their marriage was not real."<sup>326</sup> The opinion of the "healthy and normal people," however, is clearly mistaken: before this excerpt, the narrator goes to great pains to show the many ways in which Mila and Grisha show love and affection to each other in small ways throughout their daily routine, such as walking each other to the bus stop and standing on tip toes once on the bus to look at each other through the window until the last possible second. These moments arguably show the intersection of *byt* and *bytje*; through seemingly small daily routines, Mila and Grisha are able to display a level of love, intimacy, and connection beyond that which is

accessible to everyone else. Their disability, instead of reducing what they understand, allows them to move beyond popular social conventions and experience a bliss absent in their contemporary society.

*It was a Graveyard Smash: Concluding thoughts on the Monster Mash in the Selected Texts*

In the early 2000s, several of Petrushevskaja's stories were [re]translated into English and published in the United States in three collections, which resulted in an immediate increased readership and popularity across the West. In one review of these collections, a *New York Times* critic briefly puts her finger on the crux of Petrushevskaja's dark literary imagination: "These stories teemed with grotesque and supernatural elements that masked the real terror: how unrelenting misery transforms human beings into monsters."<sup>327</sup> Indeed, these monsters populate and overwhelm both Petrushevskaja's and Ulitskaia's texts. The difference between the two authors and, I would argue, between the texts chosen for this chapter and their other popular works, is that in these stories, the monsters are no longer the protagonists. In stark contrast to much of her oeuvre, Petrushevskaja ventures in these stories to show individuals who are able to avoid becoming one more "monster" by retreating into extreme, sometimes delusional, escapism. Instead of succumbing to the amorality of their environments, as did some protagonists treated in previous chapters (*Vremia: Noch'* in Chapter I, *Svoi krug* and "*Takaia devochka sovest' mira*" in Chapter II), these heroines close themselves off, both mentally and physically, from the violent environment around them.

Ulitskaia's heroines, who were never monsters in the first place, react in a similar fashion; certainly, her prose reflects the same impression of ugliness and repulsion in the face of contemporary societal crises, but while her other heroines attempt to work their way through this



disintegrating moral milieu in various ways (the heroes of “*Vtorogo marta togo zhe goda*” and *Veselye pokhorony* in Chapter I, “*Bron’ka*” and *Sonechka* in Chapter II), the three texts above show individuals who instead withdraw from this climate entirely. Psychologically, socially, or spiritually, they manage to remove themselves, if only for a moment, from the hostility they see in the patriarchal popular culture.

One should note that several of these characters “fail” at reaching any full escape from that which torments them. Although some of Ulitskaia’s female protagonists find a new perspective on life that lessens their sadness, anxiety, or grieving, they never fully escape the oppressive world around them except, possibly, through death.<sup>328</sup> Petrushevskia’s women, on the other hand, fail miserably, ironically, and beautifully. At best, they isolate themselves in mental delusions where they can no longer hurt or be hurt by others; at worst, they inadvertently create vicious cycles of violence that repeat throughout generations. But even when a heroine’s fate seems worse off to those around her (particularly if she is outcast from society), her newly altered psychological state can still be seen as a level of relief, a freeing coping mechanism against oppressive material and psychological circumstances.

Of course, one of the clearest results from the authors’ fiction is a scathing critique of late Soviet culture. In a society in which the state was supposed to care for its citizens, Petrushevskia and Ulitskaia show its failure to do so and emphasize how women and children were often the first to fall through the cracks. In the late 1980s and 1990s, when these works were published, the Soviet Union was facing a myriad of domestic and international challenges, including a crashing economy, political unrest, extensive corruption, high crime and unemployment rates, and widespread shortage of basic goods. But beyond these tangible concerns lay anxieties about popular morale and oppressive ideological dogma, the

unattainability of which cause many to struggle with the feelings of failure that push them to explore alternate realms. Petrushevskaja and Ulitskaja's texts present these psychological struggles as the most dangerous. Tackling issues of deteriorating morality and an environment of widespread panic that would come to mark the later fiction of the "Wild 90s," these earlier works illustrate the desperation already palpable during *perestroika* and interrogate the often-furthered justification that those who are harmed come to harm others later. Through the authors' creative imaginations, they underscore the importance of maintaining one's personal conscience and sense of right and wrong, even if only by escaping into delusions. These stories show individuals who, after fruitless struggling to cope in reality, construct alternate worlds in which they once again have a sense of control (and, sometimes, even excitement, recognition, fulfillment). Long-term consequences notwithstanding (and in many cases not known), they care nothing about how their behavior comes off to others because they remain fiercely attached, sometimes willingly, to their newly constructed reality.

Escapism here is shown as a last resort coping mechanism prompted by continual struggles of living in an antagonistic and morally bankrupt society. These delusions, hallucinations, visions, supernatural experiences, and fantasies do not always fully deliver the protagonist from harm. Some are lucky enough to find temporary release from the psychological and emotional pains that push them to explore alternative consciousnesses in the first place, whereas others' endeavors to do the same only further harm or worsen their condition. However, their position in reality tends to subtend those in their imagined realities; they may be seen as outcasts or even as insane by their neighbors, but the sensations discovered in their inner psychological adventures easily trump any conventional conceptions of appropriate social conduct. This helps explain why in nearly all cases, we readers walk away from the text with the

ironic, painful conclusion that the heroines are better off left in their escapist dreams than in reality.

## **Conclusion**

### **Two Steps Forward, One Step Back**

This project has been about power. In the preceding chapters I have tried to provide in-depth textual analyses of pieces that illustrate some of the most subtle, yet influential moments in the ever-changing human experience as represented in the fiction of Liudmila Petrushevskaja and Liudmila Ulitskaja. I have looked at those scenes when moments of tension lead to a brief psychological jerk that temporarily awakens individuals to the invisible, always on-going process of the construction of subjectivity. The production and reproduction of subjectivity occurs constantly and invisibly, but a narrowed focus on some distinct spaces – the regulation of the body, coercive categorization of social relationships, and the endless possibilities of the imagination – can reveal perceptible shifts in the process. My aim was not to provide any overarching conclusions on human existence, but instead to investigate those brief illuminations when we notice the expansion, contraction, or steady continuation of how we perceive our own selfhood. The media through which I chose to do this is inherently limited – two authors, two decades, and a handful of works – but their examples lend insight into the omnipresence of societal discipline and the very real, tangible effects of power on the everyday.

*Where are they now? Petrushevskaja and Ulitskaja's Recent Shifts*

Since her rise to fame in the 1980s, Petrushevskaja has slowed her output of fictional prose and drama and with the exception of her memoir *The Girl from the Metropol' Hotel* (*Malen'kaia devochka iz Metropolia*) ten years ago, new writings from her are nearly nonexistent.<sup>329</sup> Of course, explorations into other creative fields are not new for the writer who also has a long career in film animation, screenplays, and children's books. Since the turn of the century, her most common public appearances are as an artist of media other than writing, including watercolor still lifes, portraits, and nudes, and as a soloist jazz/cabaret singer in nightclubs around Russia and Europe. In Russia, she has earned the reputation of one of the nation's most prolific living artists and now appears in more public interviews than could be imagined during her ten years of being ostracized from Russian publishing houses. In these interviews, she speaks regularly of personal hardship growing up during and after Stalinism, citing homelessness, poverty, and extreme hunger as regular occurrences during her childhood and early adulthood.<sup>330</sup> But this is not to say her current activity in the public eye is overtly political; instead, her music tends to focus on romance and emotions, she grants interviews to liberal and conservative outlets alike, and her account on Facebook is used more for self-marketing than engagement with contemporary issues. In some ways, Petrushevskaja seems to have chosen the path of her own protagonist Baba Olia and prefers to view the world through the romanticized lens of art and media.

However, Petrushevskaja's earlier works seem to continue to gain in recognition particularly due to their political characteristics, this dissertation being no exception. Despite her lack of new writings, Petrushevskaja's oeuvre has gained new fame and audiences thanks to their recent translations into English by Anna Summers. Categorizing Petrushevskaja's older stories

into thematically unified collections, Summers' *There Once Lived a Girl Who Tried to Kill Her Neighbor's Baby*, *There Once Lived a Girl Who Seduced Her Sister's Husband and He Hanged Himself*, and *There Once Lived a Mother Who Loved Her Children Until They Moved Back In*, and her 2017 translation of Petrushevskaja's memoirs have brought the author widespread readership and critical acclaim from the West, especially in regard to the works' function as documenting a part of history previously denied.<sup>331</sup> Ironically, then, Petrushevskaja and her work have followed two different paths since the 1980s and 1990s.

Ulitskaja, too, has received additional public and scholarly attention from the West, as she continues to publish tome-length novels and her earlier works are translated into English, German, and a few other languages. But more influential to her expanding reputation has been her political activism; in television appearances across Europe, editorials in Western newspapers, campus visits in America, participation in demonstrations and protests in Russia, and interviews in numerous countries, Ulitskaja with increasing frequency and boldness voices her opposition to Putin's policies. Focusing particularly on the current administration's hostile attitude toward LGBT populations, demonization of America and the West, biased voting practices in Russian elections, the illegal annexation of Crimea, and Russian military presence in Ukraine, Ulitskaja has shifted the focus of her public image from literature to politics. And the West seems to be responding positively, with her literary work and activism praised in *The New Yorker*, *The New York Times*, *The Guardian*, and *The Atlantic*, among others.<sup>332</sup>

While both Petrushevskaja and Ulitskaja's futures remain unknown, their subsequent career paths since 1999, the later temporal boundary of this research project, lend some insight to the texts read here. First, both authors have spoken publicly in ways that directly challenge Soviet official histories, Petrushevskaja in recounting the difficulties of her childhood and

Ulitskaia in interviews on her 2011 novel *The Big Green Tent*, which follows three boys who grow up to be *shesdesiatniki*, or dissidents of the 1960s. It seems, then, that the political and the social were never far from either writer's focus, even if not explicitly stated in their early works. Their semiautobiographical short stories and memoirs can be seen in part as cathartic attempts to address, rewrite, and reclaim painful memories from their past, but they also become reflective of the larger population's attempts to do the same with the tumultuous Soviet past.<sup>333</sup>

Secondly, I feel Petrushevskaja and Ulitskaia's divergent post-1990s journeys amusingly reflect their differing styles. That is, Petrushevskaja's turn to visual and musical art is not entirely unexpected considering the heavy influence of creative artistic expression, sound, and silence in her written works. Ulitskaia's more traditional narrative style, on the other hand, draws intentionally transparent parallels between the distinct events in her texts and national moments in Soviet history, thus foreshadowing her outspoken political engagement of the past decade.

Still, we would be wise to remember that attempting to link author biography to artistic creation is a slippery slope, potentially leading to misguided interpretations. There are limitations to the connections one might draw between a writer's expressed intention and the functions of her works. So while there are certainly influences from their biographies on their writings, this project nonetheless works on the understanding that intention and result often differ, meaning texts at times work in ways unplanned by their creators. To be more specific, my analyses posit implications of the political, the social, the subjective, and the individual beyond what either Petrushevskaja or Ulitskaia have explicitly addressed in public appearances. When it comes to issues of gender and sexuality, neither Petrushevskaja nor Ulitskaia identify as

feminists; however, this dissertation reads their works as nonetheless illuminative of the affects, nuances, and challenges within Russian women's life experience.<sup>334</sup>

*Where are we now? Women and children in Putin's Russia*

Russian women are in a tough spot. On the one hand, the standard of living has increased dramatically under the oversight of Vladimir Putin. Since he took office in 2000, the GDP has risen eightfold, average wages have risen, mortality rates are down, fertility rates are up, and the life expectancy has risen for both men and women.<sup>335</sup> But in many ways, women's political, economic, and social independence continues to be threatened. Current political parties may claim to promote gender equality, but like their Soviet predecessor, their calculated rhetoric and policies prove the opposite. Valerie Sperling convincingly shows in *Sex, Politics, & Putin* that contemporary Russian political policies and rhetoric not only perpetuate traditional gender norms (such as an emphasis on family values, "national-patriotic pride," and homophobia), but that embracing these values function as part of legitimation strategy adopted by both sides of the political spectrum. In her words, "the cultural framing of masculinity under patriarchy makes the assertion of masculinity a vehicle for power. Misogyny, which underlies patriarchal ideology, reduces women and femininity to a lower level of status and power than men and masculinity."<sup>336</sup> Examples of political rhetoric trickling down to tangible harmful effects on everyday Russians are plentiful. The 2012 "Foreign Agent Law," for example, requires all non-profit organizations that receive any donations from non-Russian sources to disclose themselves as "foreign agents," which often results in negative social and financial repercussions on the health of the organization. Non-profit organizations that focus on the rights of women, such as *Raizhi* (*Rossiiskaia assotsiatsiia issledovatelei zhenskoi istorii*), often fall into this category.



Financially hurt, too, are resources for battered women in Russia; while safe houses for women number below twenty across the nation, there is still no law in Russia against domestic violence.<sup>337</sup> In the public sphere, nearly ubiquitous labor discrimination (based on gender, but also race/ethnicity, immigration status, and economic class) and Moscow's 2011 passing of a 100-year ban on LGBT events indicate continued difficulty for any future civil rights efforts in Russia.<sup>338</sup> These conditions and the innumerable, unseen moments of misogyny that fill the everyday undeniably shape women's life experience in contemporary Russia. However, we would be remiss to attribute these perspectives solely to the Putin administration or even the paternal/patriarchal Soviet system. As Sperling rightly deduces, contemporary sexist policies in Russia are only allowed to exist because of long history of deeply a rooted misogyny in the Russian social and cultural tradition.

*Where are we going? Possibilities versus Probabilities*

Of course, the future of gender and sexuality rights in Russia remains to be seen. Politically, Putin's projected timeline of remaining in office until at least 2024 casts doubt on any optimistic hope for change in the near future.

In art, however, the cultural landscape does not seem as pervasively doomed (although coercive attempts to censor dissenting voices may easily intensify). As already mentioned, Ulitskaia does not seem to be slowing down and her work only becomes more openly political; in terms of gender, her 2001 novel *The Kukotsky Enigma* (*Kazus Kukotskogo*) most clearly engages with questions of sexuality, gender discrimination, abortion, and patriarchy. Her other recent novels also take on current pressing issues: *Daniel Stein, Interpreter* (*Daniel' Shtein, perevodchik*, 2006) revolves around questions of religious intolerance and immigration; political

dissidence and totalitarianism make up the focus of *The Big Green Tent* (*Zelenyi shater*, 2011). Lastly, she continues to participate in the effort, now popular among numerous Russian writers, to grapple with and mourn the nation's violent past century (Stalinism, the KGB, WWII, and the Holocaust are prominent in many of her works, but most recently in *Daniel Stein, Sincerely Yours Shurik* (*Iskrenne vash Shurik*, 2003) and *Jacob's Ladder* (*Lesnitsa Iakova*, 2015).

Other current Russian women writers are engaged in similar endeavours, although they, like artists of any national history, vary in ability and chosen content matter. Mariia Arbatova is possibly the most outspoken feminist among them and has received some public attention for her feminist activism, such as beginning the "Club for women who interfere in politics" (*Klub zhenshchin, vmeshivaiushchikhsia v politiku*) in 1996 and more recently speaking out against anti-LGBT policies in Russia. Her literary career, on the other hand, has not received the same critical praise as other current writers, not to mention Petrushevskaiia and Ulitskaia.<sup>339</sup> Tatiana Tolstaia lands at the opposite end of the spectrum; still writing today, Tolstaia demonstrates artistic talent beyond many of her contemporaries, but shows little interest in social commentary or women's concerns (and vehemently denies any sympathy for feminism).<sup>340</sup> Her writing is impressive enough to live up to her literary family lineage, but her views are no more feminist than her most famous ancestor. In terms of commercial success, the most popular Russian women writers are invariably authors of detective pulp fiction novels. Daria Donstova and Alexandra Marinina each have primary bibliographies that number in the hundreds and readership of several million copies.<sup>341</sup> But, again, these works may enjoy widespread popularity and commercial success, but their content matter rarely, if ever, delves into social commentary.

The future of the field, then, remains to be seen. This project has aimed to contribute to the growing body of scholarly work devoted to studying particularly why *perestroika* and post-

Soviet women's writing was – and, for many, continues to be – so contentious, popular, scandalizing, and yet at the same time deeply metaphysical, historically illuminating, and emotionally gripping. Part of Petrushevskaja and Ulitskaia's strengths, I maintain, come from the intersection of philosophically universal issues with socio-politically specific crises. The result? Stories of individual attempts, successes, and failures to navigate personal and national crises that simultaneously provide audiences brief glimpses into a politically-charged, tumultuous era and a myriad of ways individuals respond, resist, adapt, adopt, and continue the workings of power around us.

## Notes

### Notes to Introduction

<sup>1</sup> Clements, “Introduction,” 2.

<sup>2</sup> Chukovskaia, quoted in Goscilo, “Introduction,” in *Balancing Acts*, xv.

<sup>3</sup> Throughout this project, the definitions of my key terms follow Foucault’s understandings of the words as he explains in *A History of Sexuality* and *Discipline and Punish*. More specifically, I see the subject (and its grammatically derived related terms) as not only an individual person, but also her identity as continuously produced and reproduced by others and by the self. Subjective identity, as I see it, incorporates the various physical, social, and psychological processes that make up the individual’s understanding of self. The other term I wish to clarify is agency; although I use it significantly less often than I speak about subjects, I feel it is a particularly contentious term. When contemplating agency in my project, I do not mean to contemplate the existence of free will. Instead, I engage with conversations on agency only as it is *perceived* by subjects, not whether or not it is actually present, accessible, or possible. My discussions focus on heroine’s understanding of their perceived abilities, whether or not they act on them or are successful. As I feel that agency can never be conclusively proven or disproven, my primary focus in my research lies only on its perception, not existence.

<sup>4</sup> As just a few examples of studies of women’s writing before the Soviet era, see Barbara Heldt’s groundbreaking work *Terrible Perfection: Women and Russian Literature* and Catriona Kelly’s “Sappho, Corinna, and Niobe: Genres and Personae in Russian Women’s Writing, 1760-1820.”

<sup>5</sup> Examples include the life writing of Karolina Pavlova, Evgeniia Tur’, Sofiia Kovalevskaia, Ekaterina Dashkova née Vorontsovsa, Evgeniia Ginzberg, Nadezhda Mandelstam, among many, many others.

<sup>6</sup> For more, see Helena Goscilo, “Introduction,” in *Balancing Acts*, and Catriona Kelly, *A History of Russian Women’s Writing*.

<sup>7</sup> Clements, “Later Developments,” 268.

<sup>8</sup> Adele Barker and Jehanne Gheith, 5; Nancy Condee, 1; Goscilo, “Perestroika and Post-Soviet Prose,” 299.

<sup>9</sup> The first examples include Goscilo, “Women’s Wards and Wardens,” Condee, “Ludmila Petrushevskaiia: How the Lost People Live,” Heldt, *Terrible Perfection*, Kelly, *A History of Russian Women’s Writing*, Marsh, *Gender and Russian Literature*, McClaughlan, “Contemporary Russian Women Writers,” Dalton-Brown, “The Time is Always Night,” Gabrielian, “Vzgliad na zhenskuiu prozu” and “Eva – Eto znachit ‘zhizn’,” Lipovetsky, “Tragediia,” Gessen, “V poriadke sozhalenii,” Klimenkova, “Feminizm i postmodernizm” and *Zhenshchina kak fenomen kul’tury*.

<sup>10</sup> Alexandra Smith, “In Populist Clothes,” 107; Sally Dalton-Brown, *Voices from the Void*.

<sup>11</sup> Condee, 2.

<sup>12</sup> *Byt* can be loosely translated as “the quotidian” “the everyday” or “mundanity” here. Of import is that the term was meant to show the unremarkable, unexceptional quality of the work.

<sup>13</sup> For example, Irina Grekova, a popular writer of the 1960s, at times wrote of modest circumstances, but included notes of redemption and an ultimate beauty in life that alleviated Soviet critics’ initial reactions.

<sup>14</sup> Tat’ana Kazarina, “Retsenziia.” See also Anna Tsurkan, “Edinstvo v mnogobrazii.”

<sup>15</sup> This is not to conflate the domestic with the banal. In fact, Petrushevskaiia has voiced strong opposition to labeling her content as “everyday life”: “I never describe everyday life. I describe extraordinary events, do you understand? I describe incidents. I describe catastrophes... by absolutely never everyday life...” Condee, 9. See also Nyusia Milman-Miller’s dissertation on Petrushevskaiia and women’s experiences, *One Woman’s Theme and Variations: The Prose of Lyudmila Petrushevskaya* and Anna Uliura’s “One Scoring System for Men, Another for Women.”

<sup>16</sup> Elena Shcheglova, “O spokoinom dostoinstve.”

<sup>17</sup> World Bank, “Russian Federation, GDP (Current US\$);” Yuri Zhukov, “Putin’s Russia.” For a very thorough study of these conditions’ effects in literature and culture, see Borenstein, *Overkill*.

<sup>18</sup> Barbara Alpern Engel, 251.

<sup>19</sup> For more on the Madonna/whore binary, see Goscilo, “Introduction,” in *Balancing Acts*, and *Dehexing Sex*, “The Gendered Trinity of Russian Cultural Rhetoric.” For more on “*mat’ syra*

*zemlia*” and its influence on femininity in Russian culture, see Joanna Hubbs, *Mother Russia: The Feminine Myth in Russian Culture*. For more on Soviet women’s writing of female bodies and its juxtaposition to socialist realism’s depictions, see Beth Holmgren, “Writing the Female Body Politic (1945-1985).”

<sup>20</sup> Holmgren, 225.

<sup>21</sup> For a more in-depth study of the hospital in *perestroika* women’s prose, see Goscilo, “Women’s Wards and Wardens: The Hospital in Contemporary Russian Women’s Fiction.” For an early study of Petrushevskaja’s use of space, see Josephine Woll, “The Minotaur in the Maze: Remarks on Lyudmila Petrushevskaya.”

<sup>22</sup> For space, see Ewa Thompson, *Imperial Knowledge* and “Discourse, Memory, and Empire in Postcommunist Russia.” For *skaz*, see Nina Kolesnikoff’s “The Narrative Structure of Liudmila Petrushevskaja’s Short Stories.” For maternal lines, see Sutcliffe, “Mothers, Daughters, History” and Elizabeth Skomp and Benjamin Sutcliffe, *Ludmila Ulitskaya and the Art of Tolerance*.

<sup>23</sup> For more on postmodernist tendencies in Petrushevskaja, see Birgit Beumers and Mark Lipovetsky, *Performing Violence: Literary and Theatrical Experiments of New Russian Drama*. For more on her narrative techniques and play with genre, see Sally Dalton-Brown, *Voices from the Void: The Genres of Liudmila Petrushevskaja*, and Nina Kolesnikoff, “The Generic Diversity of Ljudmila Petruševskaja’s Plays.” For differing opinions on Petrushevskaja and the grotesque, see Caryl Emerson’s “Bakhtin and Women: A Nontopic with Immense Implications,” Natalia Ivanova’s “Bakhtin’s Concept of the Grotesque and the Art of Petrushevskaja and Tolstaia,” and Alexandra Smith’s “Carnavalising the Canon: The Grotesque and the Subversive in Contemporary Russian Women’s Prose.” For a look at postmodernist qualities of Ulitskaia’s writing, see Kazarina, “Rezentsiia na sbornik Ulitskoi.” For elements of authorial skepticism and a movement away from socialist realist journalistic tones in Ulitskaia, see Irina Kaspé’s “Certificate of What? Document and Documentation in Contemporary Russian Literature.” For more on national anxiety as portrayed in 1990s popular culture, see Andrei Nemzer’s “*Zamechatel’noe desiatiletie*” and Elliott Borenstein’s *Overkill: Sex and Violence in Contemporary Russian Popular Culture*. For more on exploration into alternative realms, see Chapter III of this dissertation.

<sup>24</sup> As just a few examples, see Goscilo’s “Mother as Mothra,” Josephine Woll, “The Minotaur in the Maze,” Maya Johnson, “Women and Children First,” and Tat’ana Prokhorova’s “Dochki-materi Petrushevskoi.”

<sup>25</sup> For more, see Nina Malygina, “Zdes’ i seichas,” Sutcliffe, “Mother, Daughter, History,” Tsurkan’s “Edinstvo v mnogoobrazii,” Goscilo’s “Introduction” in *Present Imperfect*, and Evgeniia Shcheglova, “Liudmila Ulitskaia i ee mir.”

<sup>26</sup> Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 12.

<sup>27</sup> Although, the works that constitute the body of analyses in this dissertation only range from 1983-1999, with the exception of one Petrushevskia story, “Istoriia Klarissy” published in 1972, before *perestroika*.

<sup>28</sup> Jack Halberstam, 7-8. Note on names: Although *The Queer Art of Failure* was published under the name Judith Halberstam, I have chosen to refer to the author as Jack Halberstam with corresponding he/him gender pronouns as the author has, since the date of publication, changed his first name and preferred gender pronouns. The citation, however, is listed as Judith for accuracy and record-keeping’s sake.

<sup>29</sup> Lilya Kaganovsky, 7.

<sup>30</sup> Although Berlant’s examples come from an American sociopolitical and cultural context, the themes of physical harm and her ideas on the affects that accompany it can easily be considered in the Soviet case.

<sup>31</sup> My use of Sara Ahmed’s term “happy objects” here is deliberate. As Berlant is discussing the potential difficulties that accompany associating affect with object-desire, Ahmed’s definition of “happy objects” as those to which we attach the expectation of happiness, “which then circulate as social goods [that] then accumulate positive affect value as they are passed around” renders the term applicable. Ahmed, 1.

<sup>32</sup> Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 28. Emphasis in original.

<sup>33</sup> Polowy explains that according to MGT, the “dominant” group is the part of a society that is privileged enough to constitute the social, linguistic, and cognitive topography of the culture, whereas the “muted” group is that which is typically voiceless (thus clarifying the source of the term), and left without input or influence on the structure of their society. While Ardener’s original writings focused on the creation of dominant and muted groups through mainstream linguistic strategies, Polowy extends the idea to observe other distributions of power in Tolstaia’s prose, expressed through female sexuality, commonplace understandings of gender roles, and the use of the supernatural as a literary trope. In her analysis, as did Ardener in his original study, Polowy views the dominant group as overwhelmingly male and the muted as female. Women, both contend, constitute the non-dominant group (in fact, Ardener’s first article on his theory is entitled “Belief and the Problem of Women”). Hence the title of Polowy’s article, “Female Space.”

<sup>34</sup> For more on Julia Kristeva’s thoughts on men’s influence on the various structures of power in a society, see her article “Revolution in Poetic Language.”

<sup>35</sup> Polowy, “Female Space,” 68.

<sup>36</sup> Polowy explains, “However metaphysically, that is in terms of consciousness, there is no corresponding male space to the female wild zone, since all of male consciousness falls within

the circle of the dominant structure and is therefore accessible to or structured by language. In this sense the wild is unknowable for men, for it is always imaginary, and the women who live in the wild zone burst beyond the confines of the dominant model into their own space.” Polowy, 77.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 217.

### Notes to Chapter Iß

<sup>39</sup> Helena Goscilo, *Dehexing Sex*, 95.

<sup>40</sup> Lauren Berlant, 105.

<sup>41</sup> Male writers, such as Evgeny Popov and Viktor Erofeev, also broke with traditions of physiology, but more often via showing bodily functions such as vomiting, defecation, and flatulence, not female corporeality. Furthermore, some women writers, such as Natali’a Baranskaia and Irina Grekova began experimenting with depictions of the body as early as the 1970s, but, as will become clear, their work does not contain the themes of violence and moral decay that lie central to my analysis.

<sup>42</sup> Catriona Kelly, 364.

<sup>43</sup> E. Ovanesian, 256.

<sup>44</sup> Nancy Condee, 1, 8-9.

<sup>45</sup> Jane Costlow, Stephanie Sandler, and Judith Vowles, 31.

<sup>46</sup> Lev Kuklin, 178.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> He later refers to her work as “*belletristika*.” In this case, “*belletristika*” refers to low-quality, popular fiction (in comparison to its counterpart, “*vysokaia literatura*,” or “high literature”). Iuzbashev, 221.

<sup>49</sup> Goscilo, *Dehexing Sex*, 89.

<sup>50</sup> T. N. Belova, 97.

<sup>51</sup> Elizabeth Skomp and Benjamin Sutcliffe, 49.



<sup>52</sup> Kaganovsky, 99.

<sup>53</sup> Goscilo, “Speaking in Parts and [W]Holes,” 150.

<sup>54</sup> Beth Holmgren, 225.

<sup>55</sup> Barbara Evans Clements elaborates in more detail, “But the [Communist] party did preside over, and to some extent direct, the establishment of a new social definition of womanhood. The ‘new Soviet woman,’ an ideal promoted by the government from the 1930s onward, was to be man’s equal, working with him in building bridges, flying airplanes, and managing factories. At the same time she was to continue to minister to the emotional needs of her husband and children. In practice this meant she was responsible for most of the housework and child care and was expected to defer to her husband.” “Introduction,” 10-11.

<sup>56</sup> For more, see Vera Dunham, *In Stalin’s Time*.

<sup>57</sup> Petrushevskaja, “Vremia noch’,” 662. Original: “[...] родила с помощью укола шестимесячного сына, тот мяукал всю ночь при открытом окне, пока она мыла полы в соседней комнате, ай-я-ай, потом к утру затих [...]”

<sup>58</sup> Goscilo, “Mother as Mother,” 105.

<sup>59</sup> Petrushevskaja, “Vremia: Noch’,” 619. Original: “Я считаю, что самое главное в жизни – это любовь. Но за что мне это все, я же безумно ее любила! Безумно любила Андриюшу! Бесконечно.”

<sup>60</sup> Costlow, Sandler, Vowles, 30.

<sup>61</sup> Petrushevskaja, “Vremia: Noch’,” 618-19.

<sup>62</sup> Kaganovsky, 25.

<sup>63</sup> Petrushevskaja, “Vremia: Noch’,” 620. Original: “плотской любовью,” “греховная любовь,” “его моча пахнет ромашковым лугом. Голова его, когда долго не мытая, его кудри пахнут флоксами.”

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 619, 632. Original: “мне мой возраст никто не дает,” “В общем, я никогда себя не теряла и в одной ситуации [...]”

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 670. Original: “Ужас, до чего мы не ведаем своего безобразия и часто предстаем перед людьми в опасном виде, то есть толстые, обвисшие, грязные, опомнитесь, люди! Вы похожи на насекомых, а требуете любви, и наверняка от этой Ксении и ее матери ихний муж гуляет на стороне от ужаса, и что хорошего, спрашивается, в пожилом

человеке? Все висит, трепыхается, все в каблучках, дольках, жилах и тягах, как на канатах.” For a detailed analysis of Anna’s role specifically as grandmother, see Doak, “*Babushka Writes Back*.”

<sup>66</sup> Kaganovsky, 130. Emphasis in original.

<sup>67</sup> Condee, 3.

<sup>68</sup> Foucault, 170.

<sup>69</sup> Connor Doak, 171.

<sup>70</sup> Petrushevskaiia, “Vremia noch’,” 649. Original: “Слова «иди в душ» не лезли вон, но стояли в горле как обида. С детства эта моя фраза вызывала у него рвоту отвращения (поскольку, понятно, эта фраза его унижала, напоминала о том, чего он стоит, потный и грязный, в сравнении со мной, вечно чистой, два раза в день душ и подолгу: чужое тепло! Тепло ТЭЦ, за неимением лучшего.”

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 623. Original: “свое тело, которое стало чужим, как будто я его наблюдало на порнографической картинке, мое чужое тело.”

<sup>72</sup> Sergei Epstein describes “doctrinal madness” as continued, narrow-minded adherence to rules of ideology, even when they are not logical or beneficial. Epstein, 272. While I explore further into Epstein’s idea as portrayed in Petrushevskaiia in Chapter III, but leave the topic for now as I feel Anna stresses more the lack of morality than obsession with ideology.

<sup>73</sup> Sally Dalton-Brown reads the ending as Anna being “defeated by the struggle to win some kind of happiness from life in Russia” and novel as having “an absence of moral criteria and of belief that existence could ever be better.” Dalton-Brown, “The Time is Always Night,” 150. Benjamin Sutcliffe, similarly, predicts that Anna’s children and grandchildren “will probably have similar fates.” Sutcliffe, “Engendering *Byt*,” 116. Josephine Woll seems to agree when she writes “Anna offers neither [her children] nor herself a genuine chance at renewal, only a repetition.” Woll, 195.

<sup>74</sup> Petrushevskaiia, interview by Sally Laird. In Laird, *Voices*, 41.

<sup>75</sup> Petrushevskaiia, interviewed by M. Zonina, 6. As quoted in Johnson, 99.

<sup>76</sup> Petrushevskaiia, “Nezrelye iagody kryzhovnika,” 10. Original: “[...] ели в столовых, где не хватало мест, так что полагалось выстаивать очередь к каждому стулу, на котором сидел едок. Очереди шли перекрестком от любого стола, четыре луча от четырех стульев, и сплетались между собой, голодные очереди, следящие за каждой ложкой, отправляемой в пасть сидящих как баре и не торопящихся никуда едоков, дорвавшихся наконец до сиденья.”

<sup>77</sup> Ibid. Original: “Очередь — воплощенная справедливость.”

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 11-12. Original: “Сил у ребенка двенадцати лет не хватает, чтобы справиться со своей буйной натурой, чтобы следить за собой и быть образцом поведения, аккуратности и молчаливости.”

<sup>79</sup> Ol’ga Vainshtein, 67, 78.

<sup>80</sup> Petrushevskaja, “Nezrelye jagody kryzhovnika,” 13. Original: “А мне очень важно было выглядеть по-человечески, девочка двенадцати лет, шутка ли! В старшем, шестом, классе, был маленький Толик [...]”

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 13. Original: “как отщепенец, грешная душа [...]”

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 15. Original: “Коллектив не любит, когда кто-то ведет себя изолированно, не так, опаздывает, не так одет. Коллектив — а девочка воспитывалась в коллективах с детского садика — карает сурово. Он издевается, молотит по голове, щипает, подставляет подножку, отнимает что только можно у слабых, дразнит. Бьет прямо в нос кулаком, вызывая кровянку. Дико смеется [...] Навсегда отбили чувство собственности. Все отдай!”

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 18. Original: “Потом — всю жизнь — я узнавала эту маску бессмысленной, каверзной, поганой улыбки, невольной ухмылки исподтишка, для себя, когда никто не видит [...] Я готовилась дорого продать свою жизнь. Что они могли сделать со мной?”

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 17. Original: “чувство коллективного гона, схватить!”

<sup>85</sup> Ibid. Original: “Как будто они все были охвачены одним чувством, групповым соображением охотников, которое делает всех единым организмом, сбивает в кучу над одним трупом.”

<sup>86</sup> Ibid., 21-22. Original: “У девочки, как оказалось, был талант страшно кричать, у нее был сильный, необычный голос, от низкого воя до высокого визга. И этот талант проявился в нужный момент.”

<sup>87</sup> Ibid., 19. Original: “они тоже произошли от темных времен пещер, каждая была потомком такой ловли и охоты.”

<sup>88</sup> Ibid., 23. Original: “Мы советский народ, мы сегодня сильны — и стоим мы за мир во всем мире.” “Сама сочинила?»

<sup>89</sup> Ibid., 29. Original: “тот мир не мог существовать в условиях Москвы, в коммуналке, среди соседей, в нашей комнате, заставленной книжными шкафами, в которых подло прятались клопы, а спать можно было только на полу под столом.”

<sup>90</sup> Ulitskaia, “Prinimaiu vse, chto daetsia,” 217.

<sup>91</sup> Monika Knurowska, 68, 69. Original: “она вводит телесность как творческий материал не только ради описания женской, но вообще – человеческой участи [...] Улицкую интересуется человек как единое целое, сочетание в нем психического и биологического”

<sup>92</sup> Costlow, Sandler, Vowles, 17.

<sup>93</sup> Christina Parnell, 312.

<sup>94</sup> Here, Ulitskaia shares something interesting with Petrushevskaja: each of the writers has a semiautobiographical story, (Ulitskaia “March 1953” and Petrushevskaja “Young Berries”), in which the narrator recounts physical harassment and violence in childhood. Similarities and differences will be explored further in the conclusion to this chapter.

<sup>95</sup> Near the end, the narrator tells us “He had a concussion of medium severity” (*U nego bylo sotriashenie mozga srednei tiazhesti*). However, it is unclear if this is a result of his fight with Lilia or his mother’s corporeal punishment for the fight. Ulitskaia, “Vtorogo marta,” 175.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid., 162. Original: “А зачем ваши евреи нашего Христа распяли?”

<sup>97</sup> Ibid. Original: “Спросил так, как будто распяли евреи этого Христа исключительно для того, чтобы дать ему, Бодрику, полное и святое право шлепать Лильку по задку ржавыми железными воротами.” Emphasis added.

<sup>98</sup> Ulitskaia, “Prinimaiu vse, chto daetsia,” 229-30. Italics in original.

<sup>99</sup> In her 2012 memoir, *Discarded Relics (Sviashchennyi musor)*, Ulitskaia goes into more detail on the events of the short story and recounts running into the same Bodrik years later, as an adult, near her old apartment. He confesses to having been in love with her during their adolescence and she recalls their childhood scuffles. Ulitskaia, *Sviashchennyi musor*, 130.

<sup>100</sup> Ulitskaia, “Vtorogo marta,” 163.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid., 171. Original: “дело было в том, что по симметрическим понятиям ее справедливости не мог Тонькин сын руку поднять на ее чистенькую, ясную, девочку, на ее розово-смуглое личико, оскорбить ее своим грязным прикосновением, этими ужасными царапинами.”

<sup>102</sup> Ibid., 173. Original: “Ах ты зараза!”

<sup>103</sup> Ibid., 144. Original: “движений, знаков, тайных бессловесных сообщений.”

<sup>104</sup> Ibid., 147. Original: “и одновременно засыпать, обнявшись таким отлежавшимся за сорок с лишним лет образом, что и непонятно – форма ли выпуклостей и вогнутостей их тел в определенны позах гарантирует их устойчивое удобство, или за эти годы, проведенные в ночном объятии, сами тела деформировались навстречу друг другу, чтобы образовать это единение.”

<sup>105</sup> Skomp and Sutcliffe, 33.

<sup>106</sup> Ulitskaia, “Vtorogo marta,” 146. Original: “потеряв братьев, племянников, многочисленную родню.”

<sup>107</sup> Skomp and Sutcliffe, 60.

<sup>108</sup> Costlow, Sandler, Vowles, 32.

<sup>109</sup> Goscolo, “Introduction,” in *Present Imperfect*, 6.

<sup>110</sup> Ulitskaia, “Prinimaiu vse, chto daetsia,” 229.

<sup>111</sup> While both physicality and sexuality is prevalent from the opening scenes of the novella, Ulitskaia is careful not to conflate the two. Her background in biology may help explain the author’s lucid understanding of the dangers of assuming all depictions of body parts, even reproductive organs, allude to the sexual. In the opening scene referenced here, the women's nudity does not inherently evoke anything sexual between them; instead, it is a sign of familiarity with each other and physical demands from their environmental conditions (both the naturally-occurring stifling heat and the social structures keeping them affording air conditioning).

<sup>112</sup> Kaganovsky, 4. Emphasis in original. Although Kaganovsky specifically mentions the Stalinist subject, I feel the idea rings true in any dominant social order.

<sup>113</sup> Ulitskaia, “Veselye pokhorony,” 75. Original: “Нинка в длинных волосах и золотом кресте, исхудевшая так, что Алик ей сказал: Нинка: ты стала как корзинка. Для змей.”

<sup>114</sup> Ibid., 96. Original: “Чем незначительней был предмет выбора, тем больше она мучилась.”

<sup>115</sup> Irina justifies their marriage to herself, “Basically, she could still understand why he married, but how he put up with so many years of her stupidity to the point of imbecility, her pathological laziness and slovenliness [...] specifically her limitless helplessness awoke within those around her, especially the men, a feeling of higher responsibility.” Ibid., 95. Original: “Впрочем, понять, почему он женился, еще можно было, но вот как он терпит столько лет ее

доходящей до слабоумия глупость, патологическую лень и неряшливость ... именно своей безграничной беспомощностью она возбуждала в окружающих, особенно в мужчинах, чувство повышенной ответственности.”

<sup>116</sup> Ibid., 170-71.

<sup>117</sup> Marja Sorvari, 268.

<sup>118</sup> Ulitskaia, "Veselye pokhorony," 84. Original: “Как ребенок, который еще не держит головки.”

<sup>119</sup> Ulitskaia, "Veselye pokhorony," 99, 178. Original: “О себе она говорила: я ставила на всех лошадок, в том числе и на еврейскую,” “Одиннадцать минут любви, можно проверять по часам.”

<sup>120</sup> For more on Soviet conventions of women’s clothing and its driving themes of “‘moderation,’ ‘simplicity,’ and ‘modesty’ as the supreme aesthetic criteria,” see Vainshtein, “Female Fashion, Soviet Style: Bodies of Ideology.”

<sup>121</sup> Ulitskaia, "Veselye pokhorony," 100. Original: “в специальном месте для богатых идиотов.”

<sup>122</sup> Ibid., 97. Original: “Умение ходить по проволоке очень полезно для эмигранта. Может быть, именно благодаря этому умению она оказалась самой удачливой из всех ... Ступин режет, сердце почти останавливается, пот заливает глаза, а скулы сведены безразмерной оскальной улыбкой подбородок победоносно вздернут, и кончик носа туда же, к звездам, - все легко и просто, просто и легко ... И зубами, когтями, недосыпая восемь лет ровно по два часа каждый день, вырываешь дорогостоящую американскую профессию... И решения приходится принимать по десять раз на дню, и давно взято за правило – не расстраиваться, если сегодняшнее решение оказалось не самым удачным.” Interestingly, the narrator notes Alik’s strength as also sourced in the ability to move past mistakes and in almost the exact same wording: “[...] the most important, and rare, thing that came from Alik was his complete confidence that life will start again next Monday, and yesterday can already be thrown out, especially if unsuccessful.” Original: “а главное, редкостное, что шло от него, - совершенная уверенность, что жизнь начинается со следующего понедельника, а вчерашний день вполне можно и вычеркнуть, особенно если он был не вполне удачен.” Ibid., 95.

<sup>123</sup> Nadya Peterson, 185.

<sup>124</sup> Ulitskaia, "Veselye pokhorony," 87-89.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid., 100. To be sure, Irina’s maintenance of femininity could theoretically also be considered the same type of labor of the ordinary that Berlant contemplates, as her image is quite

directly tied to her professional success. However, because such grooming is not necessarily crucial to her survival, I shall omit this for the time being.

<sup>126</sup> Tat'ana Kazarina. Original: "Ее героини сильны, и сверхъестественно сильны оттого, что "подключены" к общей корневой системе, тому слою существования, который наподобие большой грибницы, выпускает на поверхность побегов человеческих жизней, распоряжается рождением, взрослением, старением и умиранием, ведает судьбами и сроками."

<sup>127</sup> Maika only learns Alik is her father after his passing.

<sup>128</sup> "Pizdets" in Russian roughly translates as "Fuck" in this case, although it has other meanings as well.

<sup>129</sup> Ulitskaia, "Veselye pokhorony," 174.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid., 79-80.

<sup>131</sup> V. Petrova, as quoted in Nina Malygina, 157. Original: "различные по дарованию, по образованию, просто по человеческим качествам, сходились в одной точке: все они так или иначе покинули Россию... все они одинаково нуждались в одном - в доказательстве правильности того поступка."

<sup>132</sup> Sutcliffe, "Liudmila Ulitskaia's Literature of Tolerance," 497.

<sup>133</sup> In this case, it may be helpful to consider definitions of the body used in theories of affect. As Melissa Gregg and Gregory Seigworth define them, bodies are "defined not by an outer skin-envelope or other surface boundary but by their potential to reciprocate or co-participate in the passages of affect." Seigworth and Gregg, 2.

<sup>134</sup> Ulitskaia, *The Funeral Party*, 151.

<sup>135</sup> Something similar occurs in Ulitskaia's latest work, *The Green Tent*, when one of the main characters, Il'ia, who has, just as those in *The Funeral Party*, fled the Soviet Union to New York, writes in a letter to his son "Only a complete replacement of skin, an addition of a new outer layer with new receptors, equips one for survival." At the same time, there are differences. Il'ia, for example, refers only to the outer appearance of a person, and maintains that "You can contain in yourself all of your ideas, the most original ones and those that contradict with their incomprehensible way of life. No one is interested in this. But to enter their society, you have to perform all these petty rituals of communication, the idiot ballet of Western life." Ulitskaia, *Zelenyi shater*. 150-51.

<sup>136</sup> Malygina, 157.

<sup>137</sup> For an argument against the grotesque, see Iuzbashev, also quoted in the next citation. For a discussion of the metaphysical and “behind the mirror” (*zazerkal’em*) influences on the novel, see Malygina. For the ongoing discussion of the appropriacy of considering Bakhtin in *perestroika* women’s prose, see Caryl Emerson, “Bakhtin and Women: A Nontopic with Immense Implications,” and Natal’ia Ivanova, “Bakhtin’s Concept of the Grotesque and the Art of Petrushevskaiia and Tolstaia.”

<sup>138</sup> It is presumably this image that prompted Iuzbashev to write “There is even an attempt at the grotesque – after the hero’s death the half-crazed wife nonetheless continues to see him” in his criticism of the novella. Iuzbashev, it seems, uses this to dismiss Ulitskaia’s “attempt” to engage in existential discourse; however, as he fails to take into account the other ways in which Ulitskaia employs Bakhtin’s grotesque and cosmic body, or how she situates the philosophical and metaphysical within situations of *byt*, I feel his assessment remains unconvincing. Iuzbashev, 222.

<sup>139</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, 310.

<sup>140</sup> Ulitskaia, “Veselye pokhorony,” 202. Translation: Ulitskaia, *The Funeral Party*, 151. Original: “Происходящее нисколько не напоминало ничего, что она испытывала в жизни, и это было потрясающе.”

<sup>141</sup> Knurowska, 69.

<sup>142</sup> Although this chapter selects only a few works for textual analysis, the trope of the body plays a prominent role in many, many works by each author. A few examples include Petruhevskaiia’s *Our Crowd* (*Svoi krug*, 1988 – also read in Ch, III), “Ali Baba” (*Ali Baba*, 1988), “Hygiene” (*Gigena*, 1990), “As an Angel” (*Kak Angel*, 1998) and Ulitskaia’s “A Gift Not Made by Hand” (*Dar nerukotvorny*, 1994), “Chicken Pox” (*Vetrianaia ospa*, 1994), “Others’ Children” (*Chuzhie deti*, 1994), and *The Kukotsky Enigma* (*Kazus Kukotskogo*, 2001), among many others.

<sup>143</sup> Condee, 3-4.

<sup>144</sup> For more on women’s autobiographical writing in the Soviet era, see Anna Krylova, “In Their Own Words? Soviet Women Writers and the Search for Self.”

## Notes to Chapter II

<sup>145</sup> Ulitskaia, “Doch’ Bukhary,” 97.

<sup>146</sup> Because terms such as “private” “privacy” and “personal” can sometimes be ambiguous, I wish to define how each will be used in this context. The “private sphere” refers to one’s life at home, outside of work and school, which in other historical contexts may have come with an



expectation of “privacy” – or one’s right to keep some information about oneself or one’s actions to oneself – but this is not the case in 20<sup>th</sup> century Soviet Russia. The “personal” is used to reference topics possibly intimate to the individual, such as relationships, emotions, and beliefs. The Russian terms closest to these meanings help elucidate the gap: *lichnost*’ which stems from *litso* or “face,” is close to our understanding of the personal, but *chastnyi* roughly defined as “private” only refers to an economic status (for example, a private company or the famous *chastniki* – private taxis). “Private,” in the sense of not concerning others, does not exist as a term. In my argument, the binary of personal (*lichnyi*) and public is broken down, while privacy was never expected.

<sup>147</sup> Deb Field, 12.

<sup>148</sup> G. Kazin, “Sud tovarishchei,” 4, quoted in Yoram Gornitzki, “Delegalization in Russia: Soviet Comrades’ Courts in Retrospect,” 403.

<sup>149</sup> For an in-depth analysis of educational materials intended for women audiences and how they compared to literature of the everyday, see Elizabeth Skomp, “The Literature of Everyday Life and Popular Representations of Motherhood in Brezhnev’s Time.”

<sup>150</sup> Helena Goscilo elucidates the underlying, contradictory views on women’s writing popular among contemporary critics: “neither Petrushevskaiia, who considers her writing ‘masculine,’ nor the readers disquieted by her tough ‘unfeminine’ literary manner perceive the flagrant contradiction between their sweeping claim that gender is irrelevant to literature, on the one hand, and the gendered terminology they apply to Petrushevskaiia’s specific case, on the other. If one accedes to the untenable logic operative in educated Soviet society, which customarily invokes ‘femininity’ in discussions of all but the creative aspects of women’s lives, one would have to conclude that as soon as a woman picks up a pen or sits at a keyboard she miraculously sheds the gender she apparently displays everywhere else. In other words, the woman writer is a Lady Macbeth, ‘unsexed’ the moment she seizes her dagger/pen and prepares for action.” *Dehexing Sex*, 20. Since the boom of women’s writing in the 1980s and 1990s, it seems western scholars have decided to refrain from continuing the debate on the suitability of the term “feminist” for the genre in order to better focus on the content within it.

<sup>151</sup> Benjamin Sutcliffe, *The Prose of Life*, 6.

<sup>152</sup> Field, 5.

<sup>153</sup> Michel Foucault, 194.

<sup>154</sup> Aleksei Yurchak, 29.

<sup>155</sup> See, for example, Alexander Etkind *Warped Mourning*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013; and Boris Noordenbos “Shocking Histories and Missing Memories: Trauma in Victor Pevlevins *Capaev i Pustota*,” *Russian Literature* 85 (2016): 43-68.

<sup>156</sup> Alexandra Smith, 185.

<sup>157</sup> Elizabeth Skomp, “The Literature of Everyday Life,” 119.

<sup>158</sup> P. E. Filonovich, *O kommunisticheskoi morali – populiarnyi ocherk* (Moscow: Politicheskaiia literatura, 1963), 180. In Field, 14.

<sup>159</sup> For more on divorce rates in the Soviet Union, see Peter Juviler “Cell Mutation in Soviet Society,” in *Soviet Society and Culture: Essays in Honor of Vera S. Dunham*, ed. Terry L. Thompson and Richard Sheldon (Boulder: Westview Press, 1988): 42.

<sup>160</sup> Mary Theis, 103.

<sup>161</sup> This is not to imply that mental health is not at play in these scenarios, nor that all suicide attempts are pleas for attention. Rather, in each of these fictional narratives, the suicide attempts function as means to manipulation, while any underlying mental illness that may have prompted or exacerbated the situation receives much less, if any, narratorial attention.

<sup>162</sup> Petrushevskaiia, “Takai devochka, sovest’ mira,” 4. Original: “[...] из какой ямы выгреб [...]”

<sup>163</sup> Ibid. Original: “Но это все история, это никого теперь не касается, а важно то, что Раиса и сейчас этим занимается.”

<sup>164</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>165</sup> Petrushevskaiia, “Po doroge boga Erosa,” 65.

<sup>166</sup> Ibid., 4. Original: “Теперь она как бы для меня умерла, а может быть, она и на самом деле умерла.”

<sup>167</sup> Theis, 95.

<sup>168</sup> Quoted in Prokhorova, T. “*Rasshirenie vozmozhnosti.*” Original: “Талантливо, но уже больно мрачно. Нельзя ли посветлей?”

<sup>169</sup> Petrushevskaiia, “Istoriia Klarissy,” in *Kak mnogo znaiut zhenshchiny*, 16. Original: “Она, можно сказать, непрерывно продолжала свой спор с мужем, продолжала доказывать свою правоту и свою точку зрения даже тогда, когда находилась далеко от него, к примеру на службе, в гостях у подруг, в самых неподходящих обстоятельствах.”

<sup>170</sup> Ibid. Original: “...невоздержанный, не стесняющий себя ни в чем муж, ведущий свою грубую, тяжеловесную жизнь в одной комнате с Клариссой и ребенком.”

<sup>171</sup> Ibid. Original: "... как амеба, которая перемещается с места на место с примитивной целью уйти от прикосновений."

<sup>172</sup> Ibid. Emphasis added. Original: "Она оказалась не в силах достойно вынести свалившееся на нее презрение и равнодушие мужа, и даже прежняя ее, школьная ориентация защищаться пощечиной от оскорбления не вернулась к ней." "Можно сказать, что она в эти годы жила без руля и без ветрил, от толчка до толчка, чувствительная ..."  
"Кларисса в тот период своей жизни никак не могла успеть определить свою роль, свыкнуться с этой ролью и принять наиболее достойное решение."

<sup>173</sup> Barbara Alpern Engel, 252.

<sup>174</sup> Petrushevskaiia, "Istoriia Klarissy," 17. Original: "уход, ласку, и воспитание..."

<sup>175</sup> Ibid., 17. Original: "...все стабилизировалось и поплыло к естественной, к здоровой зрелости, к вереде зим и отпусков, к покупкам, к ощущению полноты жизни..."

<sup>176</sup> Ibid., 15, 16, 18. Original: "не вызывала ни в ком не то что восхищения, но и малейшего интереса," "глупой, мягкотелой," "в полную красавицу," "зрелой женщиной двадцати пяти лет."

<sup>177</sup> Dalton-Brown, Sally, *Voices from the Void*, 37.

<sup>178</sup> Petrushevskaiia, "Bessmertnaia liubov'," in *Kak mnogo znaiut zhenshchiny*, 24.

<sup>179</sup> A similar scene occurs in Petrushevskaiia's short story "Pania's Poor Heart" (*Bednoe serdtse Pani*) in which a husband yells through the window of a maternity ward at his wife "Bastard, bitch ... parasite ... You screwed up my life, ah you bitch, why did I get involved with you?" upon finding out his child was stillborn. Petrushevskaiia, "Bednoe serdtse Pani," 49.

<sup>180</sup> Goscilo, Helena. "Mother as Mothra," 105.

<sup>181</sup> Ibid., 23.

<sup>182</sup> Ibid.

<sup>183</sup> Dalton-Brown, 29.

<sup>184</sup> While discussion of the crisis of masculinity has garnered additional interest since the fall of the Soviet Union and Russia's turbulent economic transition towards capitalism, anxieties about men's inability to fulfill their presumed role of household breadwinner were already apparent since the increase of women's employment, especially around its apex in 1988. For a detailed

look at the issue's effects on individual men struggling to find work, see Ashwin and Lytkind, "Men in Crisis in Russia."

<sup>185</sup> Maya Johnson, "Women and Children First," 105.

<sup>186</sup> Rovenskaia, "Vinovata li ia?" and Gradskova, "Obychnaia sovetskaia zhenshchina."

<sup>187</sup> Sarah Ahmed's famous essay "Happy Objects" explores how happy objects, those that have been labeled as a means to happiness, are dependent on shared preferences, meaning that the objects do not always deliver the intended happiness and, at times, can cause negative feelings instead. The difference between these unfulfilling objects and those in Petrushevskaiia is that Petrushevskaiia's objects were never intended to transfer happiness. Ahmed, 37.

<sup>188</sup> Patricia Carden, 46.

<sup>189</sup> The theme of the orphan gained increased attention in late Soviet prose and continued in the post-Soviet era. Elena Chizhova's 2009 novel *Vremia zhenshchin*, winner of the Russian Booker prize, tells of a mute young girl who faces exactly such a fate when her mother is diagnosed with uterine cancer. The three older women who live in the same communal apartment assume care of the child and do all in their power to save young Sofia from the nightmare of life in orphanages, especially for disabled children.

<sup>190</sup> See Petrushevskaiia's "Young Berries" (*Nezrelye iagody kryzhovnika*).

<sup>191</sup> Amy Adams, 622.

<sup>192</sup> Although Lenka Marchukaite arrives at a party missing four teeth after owing Marisha money. Petrushevskaiia, "Svoi krug," 522.

<sup>193</sup> It is of utmost importance here to state that I do not mean to argue for the justification of this violence. Instead, I hope only to hypothesize about the theoretical external forces that may have in part influenced the narrator's decision.

<sup>194</sup> Jane Costlow, Stephanie Sandler, and Judith Vowles, 30.

<sup>195</sup> Petrushevskaiia, "Svoi krug," 538.

<sup>196</sup> Natalia Ivanova, 29.

<sup>197</sup> Ewa Thompson, 202.

<sup>198</sup> Dalton-Brown, 30.

<sup>199</sup> Kachalina. Original: "[...] *bykval'no khodiat i simvoliziruiut.*"

<sup>200</sup> McLaughlin, Sigrid. In Theis, “Not Following the Script,” 103.

<sup>201</sup> Skomp and Sutcliffe, 4.

<sup>202</sup> “Collective” here refers to support and solidarity among close loved ones, not the larger collective of communist ideology.

<sup>203</sup> Skomp and Sutcliffe, 4.

<sup>204</sup> Igor Bukker, “Otkrytoe pis'mo.”

<sup>205</sup> Ulitskaia, “Evropa, proshchai!”

<sup>206</sup> Sutcliffe, *The Prose of Life*, 100.

<sup>207</sup> Goscilo, “Introduction,” *Ludmila Ulitskaya and the Art of Tolerance*, xvii.

<sup>208</sup> Helena Goscilo fairly observes that Ulitskaia’s short story “Darling” (“Golubchik”) is “problematic not because Ulitskaya nurtures homophobic sentiments, but because she seems to have scant knowledge of homosexuality in contemporary praxis – its diversity and prevalence across social classes.” Goscilo, “Introduction,” *Ludmila Ulitskaya and the Art of Tolerance*, xvi.

<sup>209</sup> Margaret Ziolkowski, 356.

<sup>210</sup> Although there was no documented age of consent in the Soviet Union, Bron’ka exclaims that if anyone found out about the relationship, Viktor Petrovich would be convicted of defilement (“*rastlenie*”). Ulitskaia, “Bron’ka,” 68.

<sup>211</sup> However, Viktor Petrovich’s resistance came only after they had already slept together. Ulitskaia, “Bron’ka,” 67-8.

<sup>212</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

<sup>213</sup> *Ibid.*, 64.

<sup>214</sup> For example, Ruth Wallach writes in her 1999 review: “While everyone in the apartment house assumes she is just a lost teenager who continuously gets pregnant, in reality Bron’ka is experiencing a great and extraordinary love, which ties her to a remote but very real past.” Wallach, 714.

<sup>215</sup> Ruth Wallach, 714.

<sup>216</sup> After unpacking her things in her new apartment, Simka asks a neighbor “Where do the cultured people live here?” (“[...] *a voobshche gde zdes’ zhivut intelligentye liudi?*”). Ulitskaia, “Bron’ka,” 32.

<sup>217</sup> In *War and Peace*, two of the main families, the Rostovs and the Bolkonskys, are foils of each other. The Rostovs’ estate is filled with the noise and disorder that comes with extended family members living together, whereas the Bolkonsky estate is always solemn, family members are distant from each other, and formalities of etiquette are of utmost importance.

<sup>218</sup> Ulitskaia, “Bron’ka,” 58.

<sup>219</sup> *Ibid.*, 64.

<sup>220</sup> *Ibid.*, 70.

<sup>221</sup> Sutcliffe, “Mother, Daughter, History,” 611; Shcheglova, “Nesbyvshaiasia mehta.”

<sup>222</sup> See Ulitskaia, “Prinimaiu vse chto daetsia.”

<sup>223</sup> Sarah Hudspith briefly remarks on Sonechka’s inability to control her geographic location in her youth (“The first half of Sonechka’s life is characterized by movement from place to place, owing to the vagaries of fortune: she herself has no agency in these moves”), but does not discuss her passivity outside of this time or space. Hudspith, 772.

<sup>224</sup> Rosalind Marsh, 307.

<sup>225</sup> Ulitskaia, “Sonechka,” in *Tri povesti*, 16.

<sup>226</sup> *Ibid.*, 45. Later, when the narrator describes how Sonia puts all of her “unexplored religious fervor” into her homemaking, we are told “But this didn’t occur to Sonia” (“*No do etogo Sonia ne dodumalas*”). *Ibid.*, 52.

<sup>227</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

<sup>228</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

<sup>229</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

<sup>230</sup> *Ibid.*, 29, 33.

<sup>231</sup> Hudspith, 772-73.

<sup>232</sup> Ulitskaia, “Sonechka,” 46.

<sup>233</sup> Ibid., 59.

<sup>234</sup> Wallac, 714.

<sup>235</sup> Ulitskaia, *Medea and Her Children*, 10.

<sup>236</sup> T. Kazarina, “Retsenziia na sbornik L. Ulitskoi.”

<sup>237</sup> For an exhaustive bibliography on the topic, see Sutcliffe *The Prose of Life*.

<sup>238</sup> Skomp and Sutcliffe, 72.

<sup>239</sup> Ulitskaia, *Medea and Her Children*, 95.

<sup>240</sup> Religious tolerance has long been a pressing issue for Ulitskaia. However, I am choosing to only include tangential analysis of it for three reasons: First, because it is outside the scope of this chapter; secondly, because Ulitskaia focuses her pen on the issue more directly in a later novel, *Daniel Stein, Interpreter*, and lastly, because Skomp and Sutcliffe’s thoughts on the topic in *The Art of Tolerance* (chapter two), is already a thorough and insightful understanding of the author’s position.

<sup>241</sup> Skomp and Sutcliffe, 73.

<sup>242</sup> Qtd. in Shcheglova, 25.

<sup>243</sup> Ulitskaia, *Medea and Her Children*, 51.

<sup>244</sup> Ibid., 201.

<sup>245</sup> Masha Gessen, “The Weight of Words.”

<sup>246</sup> Of course, these topics appear in several Petrushevskiaia and Ulitskaia texts apart from those read in this chapter. Readers interested in finding more should look to Petrushevskiaia’s “Storyteller” (*Rasskazchitsa*, 1971), “Nets and Traps” (*Seti i lovushki*, 1974), “Ksenia’s Daughter” (*Doch’ Ksenii*, 1988), “The Flu” (*Gripp*, 1988), “Ali Baba” (*Ali Baba*, 1988) and Ulitskaia’s “Gulia” (*Gulia*, 2002), “The Orlov-Sokolovs” (*Orlovy-Sokolovy*, 2004), “Women’s Lies” (*Skvoznaiia liniia*, 2004), and “Genele – Purse Lady” (*Genele – sumochnitsa*, 2010) as just a few examples.

### Notes to Chapter III

<sup>247</sup> Mikhail Epstein, 263.

<sup>248</sup> Melissa Gregg and Gregory Seigworth, 7.

<sup>249</sup> “*Byt*” can roughly be translated as “the everyday” or that which makes up our everyday, domestic lives. Women first writing on such topics in the 1960s and 1970s, such as Natali’a Baranskaia and Irina Grekova, were by and large disregarded by literary critics for being too “simple” in their subject matter (as were many female writers long after the 1960s and 1970s). For more, see Ben Sutcliffe, *The Prose of Everyday Life*.

<sup>250</sup> For more information on how, specifically, these issues differed for women, see the Barbara Alpern Engel, *Women in Russia*.

<sup>251</sup> Teresa Polowy, “Female Space,” 71.

<sup>252</sup> Fedor Kondrat’ev, 181. Original: “[...] человек может вести себя «не так, как все» не только по причине психической болезни, а исключительно исходя из своих моральных установок, согласно своей совести – просто не допускалась. Отсюда вытекало и следствие: если не такой как все, выступает против политической системы – надо искать «психопатологические механизмы» инакомыслия. [...] Инакомыслие, идущее от совести, никогда никакими, даже карающими дозами лекарственных препаратов, задавить не удавалась, хотя сломить волю, заставить замолчать из-за опасения потерять здоровье от этих препаратов в спецбольницах могли.”

<sup>253</sup> Aleksei Yurchak’s analysis of the performativity of Soviet political activism illustrates several examples that speak to the larger contradictions between Soviet life and propaganda. While his work focuses on the disconnect between reality and ideology, his examples of how individuals strayed from expectations placed upon them by the party stem from this doctrinal madness, reflected in party governance. For more, see Yurchak, *Everything was Forever*.

<sup>254</sup> Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*.

<sup>255</sup> Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, 2-3.

<sup>256</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>257</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>258</sup> My use of Sara Ahmed’s term “happy objects” here is deliberate. As Berlant is discussing the potential difficulties that accompany associating affect with object-desire, Ahmed’s definition of “happy objects” as those to which we attach the expectation of happiness, “which then circulate as social goods [that] then accumulate positive affect value as they are passed around” renders the term applicable. Ahmed, 1.

<sup>259</sup> Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 24.

<sup>260</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.



<sup>261</sup> Edwin Ardener, "Belief and the Problem of Women."

<sup>262</sup> There are many other texts by each author that also deal with escapism, madness, and alternative consciousness. Interested readers can look for Petrushevskaiia's "The Flute" (*Skripka*, 1973), "A Murky Fate" (*Temnaia sud'ba*, 1987), "Youth" (*Iunost'*, 1987), "Mother and Father" (*Otets i mat'*, 1988), "Mother-in-law of Oedipus" (*Teshcha Edipa*, 1995), and "Milgrom" (*Mil'grom*, 1995) as just a few examples or Ulitskaia's "Happy Ones" (*Shchastlivye*, 1993), "Chicken Pox" (*Vetrianaia ospa*, 1993), "Genele – the Purse Lady," (*Genele sumochnitsa*, 1993), *The Kukotsky Enigma* (*Kazus Kukotskogo*, 2001), and "So It Is Written" (*Tak napisanno*, 2005).

<sup>263</sup> This is also Tsvetan Todorov's first requirement for the definition of fantastic. For more, see Todorov, *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*, 33.

<sup>264</sup> Goscilo, "Introduction," 2.

<sup>265</sup> I do not wish to claim that mental illness does not play a part in her writing; rather, Petrushevskaiia's narratives tend to focus more on the repercussions of individuals' actions than the stimuli.

<sup>266</sup> Nancy Condee, 2-3.

<sup>267</sup> Victoria Sevastianova, "The Fantastic in the Short Fiction of Liudmila Petrushevskaiia," 3-5. While I agree with Sevastianova's thesis to a certain extent, there are points at which I must diverge from her analysis. Firstly, she claims that the absence of happy and successful heterosexual relationships in Petrushevskaiia's works show feelings of false nostalgia for a romanticized past: "Thus, happiness in Petrushevskaiia's work is associated with single life and youth, specifically, with the sixties (the era of youth for Petrushevskaiia)" (10). Here Sevastianova is overlooking the social critique of late Soviet society that is deeply in Petrushevskaiia's writing. I plan to argue that the portrayals of a better past are reflective of actually happier times, not a misremembering in hindsight. The heroines' happiness is not associated with single life. The fond memories refer to the expectation of happiness in marriage and family life that was never realized; it was promised to them by Soviet ideology and then never delivered due to the failings of Soviet reality.

<sup>268</sup> Sevastianova, 8.

<sup>269</sup> "Whereas the traditional function of "bylička" was to explain the unknown in the world as the result of the interference of supernatural powers and to provide a warning about their nature and to suggest ways to neutralize their actions, the function of *Pesni* is clearly aesthetic and entertaining." Nina Kolesnikoff, "The Generic Structure," 224 (in text), 228.

<sup>270</sup> Leslie Milne, "Ghosts and Dolls," 270.

<sup>271</sup> Ibid., 284.

<sup>272</sup> Petrushevskaiia, “V dome kto-to est’,” 123.

<sup>273</sup> Ibid., 124. Original: “Хозяйка смотрит телевизор до упора, и, погруженная в голубоватое излучение, уплывает в сладкие миры, пугается, заинтересована, скучает, то есть живет полной жизнью.”

<sup>274</sup> Halberstam, 4.

<sup>275</sup> Ibid.

<sup>276</sup> Petrushevskaiia, “V dome kto-to est’,” 131. Original: “В халате и шлепанцах, она стояла на вершине своей судьбы, сама себе хозяйка, победившая Того.”

<sup>277</sup> Ibid., 132. Original: “Новыми глазами. Как будто все тут было новое, чужеватое, интересное [...] Господи, какая новая жизнь открылась теперь перед м-д.”

<sup>278</sup> Ibid., 136. Original: “...решила продолжать жить.”

<sup>279</sup> Ibid., 131. Original: “Пришибленная [...] сгорбилась, ссутулилась [...] Смерть сидела на лестнице, одетая тощей шкуркой [...] Дыхание смерти, видно, поморозило ее пугливую душу.”

<sup>280</sup> Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 27.

<sup>281</sup> The opening line of the story tells us that “Baba” comes from “babulia” or grandmother. In the original: “Ее уже все называли кто “бабуля”, кто “мамаша”, в транспорте и на улице. В общем, она и была баба Оля для своих внуков.” “Most,” 396.

<sup>282</sup> Ibid., 399. Original: “мир своей другой жизни”

<sup>283</sup> Ibid., 397. Original: “Заплесневелым”

<sup>284</sup> This translation comes from Joanne Turnbull (Petrushevskaiia, “Waterloo Bridge,” in *Nine of Russia’s Most Foremost Women Writers*, 115). All other translations of this work are my own unless indicated otherwise. Ibid., 398. Original: “Баба Оля увидела на экране все свои мечты, себя молоденькую, тоненькую, как тростинка в заповеднике, с чистым личиком, а также увидела своего мужа, каким он должен быть, и ту жизнь, которую она почему-то не прожила.”

<sup>285</sup> Smith, “In Populist Clothes,” 114.

<sup>286</sup> Adlam, *Women in Russian Literature*, 82.

<sup>287</sup> Petrushevskaiia, "Most," 397. Original: "Баба Оля была, однако, удивительно доброе существо, вечно о ком-то хлопотала, таскалась с сумками по всяким заплесневелым родственникам, шастала по больницам, даже могилки ездила приводить в порядок, причем одна."

<sup>288</sup> Dalton-Brown, 51.

<sup>289</sup> "Most," 400. Original: "Она уже сама чувствовала, что скатывается куда-то вниз." Petrushevskaiia,

<sup>290</sup> Smith, "In Populist Clothes," 113.

<sup>291</sup> Clements, "Introduction," 7.

<sup>292</sup> Petrushevskaiia, "Waterloo Bridge," trans. Joanne Turnbull, 118. Petrushevskaiia, "Most," 400-401. Original: "И наконец баба Оля окончательно определилась в жизни [...] И главной своей задачей баба Оля почитала теперь не страхование и не сбор взносов, а внушение погруженным в персть земную клиентам, именно что внушение мысли, что есть иная жизнь, другая, неземная, высшая, сеансы, допустим, девятнадцать и двадцать один, кинотеатр "Экран жизни", Садово-Каретная. [...] Зачем и почему она это делает, баба Оля не знала, но ей было необходимо теперь нести людям счастье, новое счастье, нужно было вербовать еще и еще сторонников "Робика", и она испытывала к редким новобранцам (новобранкам) нежность матери - но, с другой стороны, и строгость матери, была их проводником в том мире и охранителем от них правил и традиций."

<sup>293</sup> Petrushevskaiia, "Waterloo Bridge," trans. Joanne Turnbull, 121. Petrushevskaiia, "Most," 402. Original: "да еще и на буквально последнем шагу жизни, на отлете..."

<sup>294</sup> Smith, "In Populist Clothes," 115.

<sup>295</sup> Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 15. When speaking of Petrushevskaiia's creation and publication dates, I am referring to her nearly ten-year period of being blacklisted from publication just before *perestroika* removed many censorship regulations. Petrushevskaiia had been writing many of these stories in the 1970s, while blacklisted, so hers were some of the first exposé fiction works to be published after 1987.

<sup>296</sup> Catriona Kelly, 364.

<sup>297</sup> Ulitskaia, interviewed by Anna Gusteva, 80.

<sup>298</sup> Tsurkan, 137. Original: "Сквозь весь сборник красной нитью протягивается тема проникновения в подсознательное персонажа [...] такое состояние, когда человек теряет

над собой контроль, является способом перехода из зримой реальности в незримую, еще одним путем преодоления границы.”

<sup>299</sup> “Lialin dom,” in *Bednye rodstvenniki*, Moscow: Astrel’, 2013, 151.

<sup>300</sup> Ibid., 155. Original, “Бессловесен и безотказен”

<sup>301</sup> Ibid., 155.

<sup>302</sup> Goscilo, *Dehexing Sex*, 107.

<sup>303</sup> Ibid., 110.

<sup>304</sup> Ibid., 141-2.

<sup>305</sup> Ibid., 155. “вся была сосредоточена на одном: еще однажды достичь берега, где мощный мальчик освобождал ее от себя самой...”

<sup>306</sup> Ibid., 160-61.

<sup>307</sup> Goscilo, *Dehexing Sex*, 109.

<sup>308</sup> For more on how Russian culture has viewed “innate” gender roles, and how this differs from feminist critics’ views in the West, see the Introduction to this dissertation.

<sup>309</sup> Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 28.

<sup>310</sup> Halberstam, 3-4.

<sup>311</sup> Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 38.

<sup>312</sup> Ulitskaia, “Narod izbrannyi,” 219.

<sup>313</sup> Tsurkan, 136. Original: “Ее персонажи - как правило, «маленькие люди», старики, больные и бедные, отверженные обществом, маргиналы, как сейчас модно говорить, - руководствуются принципом: никогда не спрашивай «за что», спрашивай «для чего». По мнению Улицкой, такова логика истинного христианина, убежденного в том, что все происходящее, даже самое несправедливое, самое мучительное, если его правильно воспринять, непременно направлено на открытие в человеке нового видения. [...] Все эти состояния называются пограничными; в них могут находиться только люди, выпавшие из привычного социума, не нужные ему, не удовлетворенные им или еще не полностью в него вступившие, т.е. все те же старики, больные, дети.”

<sup>314</sup> Ulitskaia, “Narod izbrannyi,” 214.

<sup>315</sup> Skomp and Sutcliffe write, “Katia’s scoffing reaction misses the underlying wisdom of the remark: Christianity is a family of believers. Choosing to belong to it is an inalienable part of human existence – as when Medea shuns arcane theology, Zina identifies belief and support as the true bulwarks of Orthodoxy.” Skomp and Sutcliffe, 157.

<sup>316</sup> The quintessential text for understanding Ulitskaia’s position on religion is, I would argue, *Daniel Stein: Interpreter (Daniel’ Shtain: Perevodchik)*, published in 2006 (thus placing it outside the scope of this dissertation). The novel follows the eponymous hero who is born a Jew, passes as German and works for the Nazis during WWII, then converts to Catholicism and moves to Israel to found a Catholic church. The novel is laden with questions on religious diversity and moral responsibility and, ultimately, argues for compassion and understanding between all people.

<sup>317</sup> Tsurkan, 136.

<sup>318</sup> Skomp and Sutcliffe, 45.

<sup>319</sup> Ulitskaia, “Narod izbrannyi,” 220.

<sup>320</sup> Quote on madness in Epstein, 271; respect for holy fools in Russian culture in Thompson, 12-13.

<sup>321</sup> According to Goscilo, the closest representation of a *iurodivaia* in earlier Russian literature might be Dostoevsky’s Lizaveta in *Prestuplenie i nakazanie* or Mar’ia Timofeevna in *Besy*, although both are secondary characters. More recently, the protagonist of Svetlana Vasilenko’s “Durochka” has been studied as a holy fool by Helena Goscilo and Svetlana Kobets. For more, see Goscilo, “Madwomen without Attics” and Kobets, “From Fool to Mother to Savior.”

<sup>322</sup> Tsurkan, 137. Original: “Если суммировать все сказанное о героинях Людмилы Улицкой, бросается в глаза глубинная связь этих образов с традицией, на которую, вероятно, и ориентировалась писательница и которая действует в ее творчестве помимо более поздних влияний. Это традиция русской классической христианизированной литературы - сочувственное возвышение маленького человека, тип юродивого или праведного чудака (Н.Гоголь, Н.Лесков, Л.Толстой, Ф.Достоевский).”

<sup>323</sup> Ibid.

<sup>324</sup> Ulitskaia, “Doch’ Bukhary,” 120.

<sup>325</sup> Kazarina, “Retsenziia na sbornik L. Ulitskoi.” Original: “Они готовы ради достижения своей цели делать возможное и невозможное, и нередко впрямь совершают то, что обычному человеку не под силу. [...] Героини Улицкой яростно, напористо, не грех сказать "осатанело", рвутся к решению этой своей жизненной сверхзадачи. И окружающие

просто не в силах уловить странной логики их поведения — настолько она за пределами и рубежами обыденной жизненной тактики. ... По Улицкой, удивительная особенность бытия [...] — другого масштаба, для его восприятия нужна иная оптика, совсем не та, которой располагает обыденность...”

<sup>326</sup> Ulitskaia, “Doch’ Bukhary,” 134.

<sup>327</sup> Schappell, “Women on the Verge.”

<sup>328</sup> One might argue that Ulitskaia’s novel “The Kukotsky Enigma” (*Kazus Kukotskogo*) depicts a woman, Elena, who succeeds in finding a fully separate way of being. The second part of the novel shows Elena’s surreal hallucination/dreams as she lies on the verge of death; in the dream, she escapes into a completely other world. This other world follows a nonlinear, fractured timeline and through regular instances of the supernatural, characters from Elena’s life (both past and present) take the form of what one reviewer calls “symbolic versions of themselves” where they travel “through a shifting, timeless desert: a purgatorial landscape with ancient, biblical, connotations, which also symbolizes the erasure of memory” and, I would add, the unlearning of traditional social conventions. However, I have chosen not to include analysis of this novel in this chapter because it was published in 2001, outside the scope of this dissertation. For more on the novel, see Taplin, “The Kukotsky Enigma.”

## Notes to Chapter V

<sup>329</sup> Even *Malen’kaia devochka iz Metropolia* consists of several chapters that began as independent short stories, including “Nezerelye iagody kryzhovnika,” read in Chapter II of this dissertation.

<sup>330</sup> Petrushevskaja, “Pri Sovetskoi vlasti ia proshla GULAG” and her interview on the show *Komsomol’skaia Pravda* are just two examples of when she discusses this.

<sup>331</sup> See, for example, Summers’ article in *The New Yorker*, “The Down-and-Out Muses of Ludmilla Petrushevskaya,” Alexandra Schwartz’s “Sometimes a Small Redemption,” in *The Nation*, Elissa Schappell’s “Women on the Verge: Love Stories by Ludmilla Petrushevskaya” in *The New York Times*, and Sophia Martelli’s review of *There Once Lived a Woman Who Tried to Kill Her Neighbor’s Baby* in *The Guardian*.

<sup>332</sup> For more, see Masha Gessen’s “The Weight of Words,” Lara Vapnyar’s “Banned in the USSR,” Elizabeth Day’s “Lyudmila Ulitskaya: Why I’m Not Afraid of Vladimir Putin,” Leonid Bershidsky’s “*The Big Green Tent* and the Subversive Power of Books.”

<sup>333</sup> For more on recent Russian literature and national trauma during the Soviet era, see Etkind, *Warped Mourning*.

<sup>334</sup> Their reluctance to claim the term “feminist” is not uncommon among Russian women writers (or, presumably, Russian women in general). As the Soviet Union did not experience movements similar to third wave feminism in the 1960s and 1970s in the US, feminism still holds a negative connotation for many in Russian culture; more specifically, societal images of feminists as overtly masculine (in physical features and in behavior), as selfish/greedy, as man-haters, or as naive victims of a Western conception. For more, see Valerie Sperling, *Organizing Women in Contemporary Russia*. For Petrushevskaia’s disinterest in feminism, see Dalton-Brown, *Voices from the Void*, 6, 26. For Ulitskaia’s views, see Ulitskaia, *Sviashchennyi musor*, and Skomp and Sutcliffe, *Ludmila Ulitskaya and the Art of Tolerance*, 174.

<sup>335</sup> Zhukov, “Putin’s Russia.”

<sup>336</sup> Sperling, 4.

<sup>337</sup> Also perpetuating the normalization of domestic violence are conditions that make women’s reporting or bringing charges against spouses incredibly difficult. Sperling notes that police responding to domestic disturbance calls “by blaming the victim or accusing her of fabricating the charges” and even if charges reach court, the burden of proof is disproportionately placed upon victims. *Ibid.*, 183.

<sup>338</sup> *Ibid.*, 184.

<sup>339</sup> Her short story “My Name is Woman,” (*Menia zovut zhenshchina*, 1998) and play *On the Road to Ourselves* (*Po doroge k sebe*, 1999) are possibly her most famous and best received works, although the longer *Semiletka poiska* (2003) also deserves brief mention.

<sup>340</sup> See, for example, her 1991 interview with American journalist Alice Steinbach, in which she states “The end of feminism I meet – the academic end with theories and generalization and so on – I don’t like [...] We are in what I call the post-feminist society ... What most [Soviet] women want right now is not to work at all. They want home. They have no homes. There’s no apartments and no houses for most of our population and they want that. Women want a kitchen, women want a cradle for the baby.”

<sup>341</sup> Borenstein, *Overkill*.

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