Women and Violence in Post-War Russian Literature

Elizabeth Ann Skomp

School of Slavonic and East European Studies, University College London

PhD thesis

2003
Abstract

This thesis discusses and evaluates women and violence in Russian prose fiction after World War II (particularly from the 1970s to the 1990s), including the violence affecting or perpetrated by women. Using representative works and authors, I explore five major ways of viewing textual violence; authorial and narratorial judgements offered about the events related are of particular interest. By drawing on a rich historical, cultural and literary context, I highlight the significance of violence as a motif in recent Russian literature. The first chapter of the thesis focuses on images of women and the depiction of violence in the novels of Vladimir Nabokov, ranging from the utilization of violence as cliché, drawing on cinematic conventions; to an exploration of text as apologia for brutality; to the consequences of muddling imagination and ‘reality’. The analysis then segues into an evaluation of the role of misogyny and the male gaze in producing violence and violent fantasies in the works of Viktor Erofeev and Eduard Limonov; these elements are also examined in the short prose of Iurii Miloslavskii, with an additional emphasis on his portrayal of harsh street life. The analysis of the texts of contemporary Russian women writers forms the core of the thesis: Liudmila Petrushevskaia exposes the violence of everyday domestic life in her prose while also subverting the mundanity of the quotidien through the introduction of supernatural elements. Tat’iana Tolstaia, Nina Sadur, and Svetlana Vasilenko portray grotesque females both as victims of violence and as aggressors. The final chapter explores gynocentric space and discourse about violence in texts by Iuliia Voznesenskaia and Elena Makarova; an examination of illness and other forms of violence to the body follows, with analysis of texts by Natal’ia Sukhanova, Elena Tarasova, Larisa Vaneeva, and Marina Palei.
# Table of Contents

Establishing a Context: An Introduction to Women and Violence in Post-War Russian Literature .......................................................... 1

Women and Violence in the Prose of Vladimir Nabokov ................................................. 27

Misogyny, the Male Gaze, and Fantasies of Violence: Examining Erofeev, Limonov, and Miloslavskii ................................................................. 60

The Brutality of *Byt*: Women and Violence in the Prose of Liudmila Petrushevskaia ................................................................. 85

Violence and the Female Grotesque in the Prose of Tolstaia, Sadur, and Vasilenko ................................................................. 108

Hospital Literature, Violence, and the Female Body .......................................................... 153

Conclusion .......................................................................................................................... 196

Bibliography ......................................................................................................................... 199
Establishing a Context: An Introduction to Women and Violence in Post-War Russian Literature

According to the literary and cultural critic Natal’ia Ivanova, ‘unmasking the violence in everyday life is contemporary culture’s primary task’.\(^1\) Although she referred to Russia, the global prevalence of violent acts points to the need for coherent analyses and explanations of this phenomenon. Social and political commentaries on violence abound, but there is a comparative dearth of studies of violence in literature.\(^2\)

Currently no substantial work exists on women and violence in Russian literature. Given the prominence of violence in Russian history and the frequent incorporation of violence into Russian literature over the past two centuries, it is in fact surprising that the topic remains relatively understudied.\(^3\) However, the frank depiction of gender-related violence in Russian literature increased dramatically during the final decades of the twentieth century: this may be attributed in part to the suppression of much literature during the Soviet period as well as the increasing number of contemporary women writers. The reality of Russian gender relations juxtaposed with the ‘false equality’ of Soviet society indicates that there is much to be discovered through the examination of these interpersonal dynamics in literature.


\(^3\) A forthcoming volume on violence in Russian literature and culture, edited by Marcus Levitt and Tatyana Novikov, will help begin to fill this gap. For an analysis of violence in Russian culture and literature in a different context, see Irina Reyfman, *Ritualized Violence Russian Style: The Duel in Russian Culture and Literature*, Stanford, CA, 1999.
Given the historical role of violence in Russian life and the immediate importance of studies of violence in today's world, I believe my work will make a significant contribution to the body of scholarly work on contemporary Russian literature.

In my thesis, I aim to discuss and evaluate the representations and functions of women and violence in Russian prose fiction after World War II (particularly during the period from the 1970s to the 1990s), including the violence affecting or perpetrated by women. Of particular interest are authorial and narratorial judgements about the events related, as well as any interpretation offered within the text of the often horrifying events in fictional life. Though I believe that close reading and a text-based approach are the most productive ways to begin literary analysis, I include theoretically based interpretation where appropriate. My pluralistic theoretical approach is best described as broadly post-structuralist, incorporating narratological analysis as well as discourses on power, gender, and violence. Though any study of violence in literature is enhanced by a discussion of the issue's social dimensions, a purely social textual interpretation would unnecessarily narrow my analysis: I will examine women and violence in these texts in terms of the major ways in which Russian authors utilize it as a motif. Russian literature has a long tradition of reflecting life and presenting philosophy embedded in the pages of its works, and even when contemporary Russian literature is not overtly characterized by realism, much of it nevertheless relays the disturbing yet painfully real aspects of the ‘violence in everyday life’ pinpointed by Natal'ia Ivanova. Though a solely social interpretation of literature may be limiting, the socio-cultural perspective in interpreting the role of violence in contemporary literature cannot be ignored completely. While many previous studies of violence in literature have approached the topic from a purely social perspective, I have chosen to approach my study of
violence in post-war Russian literature in a different way: certainly it would be ironic to use such an approach in light of the fact that so many works I consider are sharp responses against Socialist Realism. Though social awareness would be valuable in a different context, I am more concerned with the function of violence in text.4

In charting the territory of women and violence in Russian literature following the Second World War, I do not attempt to make an exhaustive list of every violent episode. Rather, I have tried to identify what I believe to be the most significant techniques of engaging with or portraying violence. The same is true of my presentation of the historical background of this literature.

*  

Any study of violence must necessarily include a definition of terms. In his essay ‘The Idea of Violence’, the Australian philosopher C.A.J. Coady identifies three types of definitions of violence; namely, ‘wide’, ‘restricted’, and ‘legitimist’. A wide definition of violence permits an excess of abstraction, while Robert Wolff’s legitimist definition, focusing on the ‘illegitimate or unauthorised use of force to effect decisions against the will or desire of others’, is too limiting.5 I will use Coady’s definition of the second category, which he borrows from the philosopher John Harris. In Violence and Responsibility, Harris states, ‘An act of violence occurs when injury or suffering is inflicted on a person or persons by an agent who knows (or

4 See Laura E. Tanner, ‘Introduction’, in Laura E. Tanner, Intimate Violence: Reading Rape and Torture in Twentieth-Century Fiction, Bloomington, IN and Indianapolis, IN, 1994, pp. 3-16. Tanner discusses the possible connections between reality and the representations of violence in text. Drawing on the ideas of Wolfgang Iser, she posits that ‘empirical violence hovers in the background of its representational counterpart to qualify the reader’s response to a literary text. At the same time, literary representations of violence perpetuate, revise, or transform the reader’s attitude toward empirical violence, often in ways of which the reader is not fully aware’ (p. 7). So, although Tanner is not suggesting that we read every text in light of a larger social context, she does emphasize that we can never be completely free of that social context and that it informs our readings and assessment of any piece of literature. Further, as Michael Kowalewski writes, ‘Literary occurrences of violence are not the result, exclusively, of either actual violence or of verbal representation. They result from fusions of the two […]’. See Kowalewski, Deadly Musings, Princeton, NJ, 1993, p. 60.

ought reasonably to have known) that his actions would result in the harm in question.\(^6\) Harris adds that ‘negative action’, or causing harm by failing to act, also constitutes an act of violence. The above definition is especially suitable for a discussion of those incidents which are not straightforward acts of physical violence. Comparatively, Kowalewski understands violence ‘as an act of aggression that is usually destructive, antisocial, and degrading in its consequences and that usually seems deliberate.’\(^7\) As we will see, the intent behind a violent act is often as significant as the result it produces.

Violence is widely acknowledged as an ever-present cultural motif, one which may be viewed simultaneously on multiple social levels. As Twitchell notes,

> The act of violence is many things at once. At the same instant it is the individual man acting out relations of sexual power; it is the violence of a society – a hierarchical, authoritarian, sexist, class-divided, militarist, racist, impersonal, crazy society – being focused through an individual man onto an individual woman. In the psyche of the individual man it might be his denial of social powerlessness through an act of aggression. In total these acts of violence are like a ritualized acting out of our social relations of power: the dominant and the weaker, the powerful and the powerless, the active and the passive, [...] the masculine and the feminine.\(^8\)

Within a small social unit, institutionalized violence may even be viewed as inherent in the family structure. As Millett explains, ‘Traditionally, patriarchy granted the father nearly total ownership over wife or wives and children, including the powers of physical abuse and often even those of murder and sale. [...] the father is both begetter and owner [...]’\(^9\)

---

Similarly, violence extends through centuries of literary tradition. Following from René Girard's argument in *Violence and the Sacred*, Twitchell notes the violent classical and Biblical 'myths of played-out revenge'. Leslie Fiedler, in his treatment of American fiction, notes that representations of violence and terror have long been present in literature. He sees the 'urbanization of violence' as relatively new, having appeared in literature during the 1930s. By urbanization, he has in mind that 'violence is transferred from nature to society, from the given world that man must endure to the artificial world he has made, presumably to protect himself from the ravages of the first.'

A variety of studies address violence in culture and literature. Despite the presence of some themed studies of violence and a few readers on violence which place the subject in an interdisciplinary context and offer a useful theoretical background, as Spilka notes, 'There is at present no literary history of the incidence of domestic violence in fiction. Although the subject now commands widespread public attention in England and America as a national social issue, its literary study has barely begun to surface.' In an attempt to explain this phenomenon, he states, 'Suppression, denial, disguise - these long-standing male responses to domestic violence contribute obviously to the meagerness of present literary studies.' Though

---

15 Ibid., p. 20.
this field of study continues to grow, much analysis of violence in literature continues to relate textual violence to contemporary social issues.\(^{16}\)

* *

Though some prominent contemporary Russian women writers – among them Tat’iana Tolstaia, Liudmila Petrushevskaia, and Nina Sadur – reject their categorization as ‘feminists’, it is worth exploring the differences between male and female elaboration of violence as a motif or as subject matter. Suleiman poses the question of ‘whether the “putting into discourse of ‘woman’” by a woman writer is comparable, in its meaning and effects, to its putting into discourse by a male writer’: in a broad sense, the idea of the male gaze (and its female counterpart) informs my analysis on the authorial level.\(^{17}\) Tanner explains the usefulness of gaze theory vis-à-vis violence in literature:

Frequently, in an attempt to reveal the body in all its material specificity, literary representations of violence appropriate the conventions of film, either relying upon a highly visual mode of narration or undermining the distancing conventions of reading to direct the reader’s gaze upon a scene in a manner similar to the enforced perspective of the camera’s frame.\(^{18}\)

Authorial gender is significant in the portrayal of textual violence: Mark Spilka writes that ‘authors can also be considered accountable in their treatments of such collective problems. With male authors there is the same necessity for honest acknowledgment

---


of their personal stake in patriarchal privileges; with female authors there is the same need to avoid collusion with patriarchal demands.19

* 

Although women and violence are the primary subject of this thesis, they must be examined in a context together with men.20 As Warren Rosenberg writes,

No study of violence can ignore the importance of how attitudes about the body, particularly the male body, have been culturally constructed [...] [V]iolence, functionally perceived, constitutes a radical embodiment that makes one immediately present to oneself and thus creates the illusion of self-integration. Certain narratives provide a mimesis of that action, offering plots that lead protagonists from confusion and frustration to some redeeming act of violence that appears to satisfy the desire for a unitary self.21

Michael S. Kimmel notes Leverenz’s idea that ‘ideologies of manhood have functioned primarily in relation to the gaze of male peers and male authority’.22 Kimmel goes on to say, ‘Violence is often the single most evident marker of manhood. Rather, it is the willingness to fight, the desire to fight’.23

Placing violence within a gendered context, Kaufman states that ‘violence by men against women is only one corner of a triad of male violence. The other two corners are violence against other men and violence against oneself’.24 Kaufman engages with Herbert Marcuse’s ideas presented in Eros and Civilization, in which Marcuse echoes the Freudian notion that violence is substituted for desire (and

---

19 Spilka, Eight Lessons in Love, p. 16.
20 For studies of masculinity and violence in literature, see Doug Robinson, No Less a Man: Masculist Art in a Feminist Age, Bowling Green, OH, 1994; and Kaja Silverman, Male Subjectivity at the Margins, New York, 1992.
23 Ibid., p. 132.
becomes an emotionally gratifying activity); he adds that '[t]he social context of this triad of violence is the institutionalization of violence in the operation of most aspects of social, economic, and political life'. Further, the triad is 'grounded in structures of domination and control' which 'generate, and in turn are nurtured by' violence.

* 

In order to explain why domestic violence takes place, Draitser presents a panoply of reasons: one might be the desire to neutralize the danger a woman presents; another might be that a wife is asserting her independence too strongly; a third would be that violence is considered an indicator of love; a fourth would be the exhibition of hyper-masculine behaviour; a fifth would be a retaliation against the mother (if, psychologically speaking, the wife is equated with the mother). He adds, 'The notion that beating improves a woman is deeply rooted in the Russian psyche'.

Also rooted in the Russian psyche is the 'association of sex with violence'. Draitser notes, 'Nearly three dozen Russian word combinations describing physical violence – pelting, pounding, thrashing – are based on roots that denote both male and female sexual organs [...]. And the verbs for a sex act generally denote inflicting pain on a female'. Gender-related violence, then, is embedded in the Russian language on a linguistic level. Draitser also identifies numerous 'nicknames for the male organ in contemporary Russian street language connoting wounding objects'.

---

25 Ibid., p. 2.
28 Ibid., p. 153.
29 Ibid., p. 158.
30 Ibid., p. 158.
31 Ibid., p. 158.
Violence emerges from a number of situations and circumstances. In Russian literature, we may classify the main types of violence as that which emanates from domestic surroundings, the violence taking place on the streets, and other types of violence which arise from specialized contexts. In the latter category, this might include wartime violence or the violence taking place in camps, as well as political violence during the time of the Stalinist terror. For the purposes of this thesis, I will concentrate on more everyday violence as identified by Spilka. Domestic violence and violent incidents occurring within or arising from the fabric of everyday life will be my main area of focus. If we track the progress of depiction of violent events in this literature, we see an increasing tendency to depict what was previously taboo; particularly in late-Soviet and post-Soviet literature, there appears to be an authorial desire to push the limits of acceptable expression and violate remaining taboos. For the Western reader, this desire seems almost antiquated or even anachronistic; however, we must remember the historical and literary context and consider the limitations placed upon authors who wished to write without fear of reprisal.

While scholarly study of the topic of women and violence in contemporary Russian literature is still somewhat limited, its prevalence in contemporary literature is striking. As previously noted, there is a rich tradition of portraying violence in Russian literature; indeed, violence surfaces in an array of works too numerous to mention individually. Depending on limitations of creative expression at a particular time, the type or explicitness of the violence has varied. Beginning with the Domostroi, which in effect includes instructions for the corporal punishment of one's wife if she fails to fulfil her domestic duties, we see violence espoused and condoned in print. Violence is acknowledged as a part of life, even in the folk lyrics of

32 V.V. Kolesov and V.V. Rozhdestvenskaia (eds), Domostroi, St. Petersburg, 1994.
chastushki, particularly the ‘Semenovna’ cycle. Draitser notes that violence against women has been a significant motif in Russian folk culture, historically and up to the present day. He notes certain proverbs and sayings which reveal ‘medieval Orthodox teachings according to which a woman is intrinsically evil and potentially as dangerous as the devil itself.’

Violence in Russian literature has appeared in a wide variety of contexts, ranging from the carnivalesque sex and violence of Maikov’s Elisei; to Mikhail Artsybashev’s quasi-pornographic Sanin, featuring violence and melodrama; to the Socialist Realist class and politicized violence of Mikhail Sholokhov’s Tikhii Don (The Quiet Don) and Maksim Gorkii’s Mat’ (Mother). We see the linking of violence with jealousy and infidelity in Nikolai Leskov’s Ledi Makbet Mtsenskogo uezda and rape, murder, and suicide surface in the works of Aleksandr Kuprin and Leonid Andreev. In a few cases, entire literary movements have been associated with violence in their texts: both the Symbolists and the Futurists, for instance, were known for their violence and misogyny.

Violence has also played a significant role in Russian and Soviet humour. As Draitser notes, ‘the motif of violence against an unmarried girlfriend or a wife of many years permeates the whole body of contemporary Russian folklore.’ To provide some evidence for this cultural embedding, Draitser notes that ‘[a]t least

---


34 Draitser, Making War, Not Love, p. 149. Kate Millett asserts that ‘[t]he uneasiness and disgust female genitals arouse in patriarchal societies is attested to through religious, cultural, and literary proscription.’ See Millett, Sexual Politics, p. 47.

35 Draitser, Making War, Not Love, p. 152.


37 Draitser, Making War, Not Love, p. 149.
twenty proverbs and sayings in the famous Dahl collection approve of wife-beating as benefiting marriage.\textsuperscript{38}

* 

Recent years have seen the flowering of studies on Russian women’s writing.\textsuperscript{39} While these studies were informed in part by groundbreaking studies on women’s writing in British and American contexts; their Russian counterparts now form a fairly substantial body of work on their own.\textsuperscript{40} Coupled with the increased attention to Russian women’s writing have been a number of volumes on the role and position of

\textsuperscript{38} Ibid., p. 151.


women in Russian history and culture. Recent work on masculinity in Russian culture indicates a desire within the field to examine gender studies from both sides.

The pejorative epithet *zhenskaia proza*, or women’s prose, has long been used to describe literature which takes as its primary subject domestic issues or love and romance. Barker notes that ‘[p]ost-Stalinist women’s prose works have largely been characterized by a return to themes such as home, family romance, and descriptions of daily life, shorn of their Stalinist varnishing.’ Women have always had a strong role in the home, even as they pursued careers and other relationships outside the domestic environment. Because of the traditional placement of woman within the domestic sphere and the home, I have chosen to use domestic violence as the centre of my study. Other types of violence, such as wartime violence or violence resulting from incarceration in camps, will not be a focus of my study.


to the Socialist Realist tradition.46

Gillespie also identifies a trend of distaste for and apprehensions about the female body which may be traced through many years of Russian literature. For instance, 'In his shorter works, such as Vii and Nevskii prospect, Gogol barely conceals his disgust and his fear of the female body'; and '[i]n Tolstoy's The Kreutzer Sonata, the female body arouses male desire and then disgust, and ultimately leads to violence and murder'.47 In the same way, Gillespie takes care to note that not all literary predecessors in the 20th century were practitioners of socialist realism: 'In the 1920s especially, some writers who did not share the materialistic outlook of the regime took particular pleasure in destroying the human body, pulling it apart bit by bit.'48

One such author is Isaak Babel. Particularly in Konarmiiia, 'all manner of violence is done to the human body: shootings, stabbings, rape, mutilation occur almost on a day-to-day basis, and horrific wounds are described with a sensuous fascination'.49 In contrast, a contemporaneous writer who often introduced seemingly senseless violence into his works was Daniil Kharms.50 Gillespie posits that 'the reader's sense of discord comes from the fact that, despite the extreme violence shown, none of the victims shows any feeling or pain'.51

47 Gillespie, 'Textual Abuse', p. 2.
48 Ibid., p. 5.
49 Ibid., p. 6.
The female body occupies an important place in the texts considered in this thesis, particularly those authored by women. According to Barker and Gheith,

One of the most persistent *topoi* that Russian women writers have struggled with has been that of the body — a set of constructs and paradigms so deeply embedded in Russian national and cultural consciousness that even now they are still powerfully deployed as metaphors within contemporary Russian women’s fictions. In western feminist theory, the relationship between women’s writing and the body has been informed by the age-old binary division between mind and body — spirit and matter. From the time of the early Christian fathers, women’s bodies have been consigned to the dual domains of the maternal or the sexual, venerated on the one hand, damned on the other.\(^{32}\)

The ‘same tensions which are present in western thinking about women’s bodies are pervasive as well throughout Russian literary and cultural history, with the added difference that a powerful folk tradition linking the image of the mother with the “damp mother earth” (*mat’syra zemlia*) placed the image of the Russian mother not only in close proximity to the Mother of God “Bogoroditsa” but to the land itself in all its various incarnations — as fertile, as suffering, as depleted, garnering ever more loyalty and love the more she suffered.\(^{33}\)

I view the subject of women and violence in Russian literature both as a subset of women in Russian literature and as a subset of violence in Russian literature. While, as expected, not every incidence of violence is gender-related, we see that episodes of violence involving women have a specific character. Though I am mentioning some specific characteristics of gendered violence and remarking on the various types of violence one might expect to find in Russian literature, the most important points are the roles women play and, based on the cultural position they occupy, why they play these roles.


\(^{33}\) Ibid., p. 10
It may be useful to trace the history of the depiction of female characters in Russian literature as heroines or otherwise, describing the limits within which women acted and were acted upon, particularly because the increase in gender-related violence in Russian literature appears to coincide with the de-idealization of women. Although the history of the depiction of women in Russian literature has been studied by several scholars, it has been most famously analysed by Heldt.  

Heldt has identified 'doom, disgrace, and death' as the punishments assigned in Russian literature to those who deviate from the feminine ideal. She adds that traditionally, women writers have stressed suffering rather than perfection in their heroines. Heldt discusses the convention of silencing 'threatening' female characters through murder, but a continuing influence is exerted even after death. She notes that in this case, woman is more powerful when silent, and she views silence as a form of 'terrible perfection'.

Gillespie notes, 'In works by male authors, emancipated or self-motivated women are viewed as negative characters who have abandoned Nature and their roots, they are “whores” and “sluts” who seek to subvert the established order and male hierarchy of society. Those women who affirm their own status as loving mothers, and who also look after the home and the family, offer a solid bedrock of conformism

---


56 Ibid., p. 7.

57 Ibid., p. 24.
and sexual subordination which enhances and preserves male-dominated official values’.\textsuperscript{58}

In my study of the texts analysed in this thesis, I have found that women appear both as aggressors and victims. Sometimes they are hapless or unwitting sufferers; at other times they appear to be punished for not filling a typical or expected feminine role (whether that consists of being physically unattractive, being sexually promiscuous, or otherwise violating what might be considered the feminine code of appearance and behaviour). In still other texts, women serve as the conduit for male fantasy and function as receptacles – or raw materials – to receive the brunt of any male desire (whether it be sexual, violent, or otherwise).

Quite often we may see violence undertaken as an effort to define the self and to assert one’s identity: this may also partially explain why violent women have not been prominent in Russian fiction until recently. Heldt writes, ‘Socially limited, but morally superior – women have a double burden within a tradition of fiction which focused on self-definition, but excluded women from the self to be defined’.\textsuperscript{59}

*  

In order to provide a more recent historical context for violence in Russian literature, particularly as regards the breaking of taboo, it may be useful to consider Robert Porter’s categorization of alternative prose, particularly because many of the writers analysed in this thesis may be categorized within such a group.\textsuperscript{60} He names a

\textsuperscript{58} Gillespie, ‘Whore or Madonna’, p. 108.  
\textsuperscript{59} Heldt, \textit{Terrible Perfection}, p. 61.  
number of characteristics of alternative prose.\textsuperscript{61} Firstly, such prose may be anti-Soviet (or at least failing to conform to Soviet ideals); in contrast to standard Soviet prose, alternative prose 'tells the truth' or, again, at least refrains from bogus idealization.\textsuperscript{62} Another major characteristic is the possible absence of a social or civic role.

Porter proceeds to mention an article in \textit{Literaturnaia gazeta} in 1989 in which a reader found fault with much contemporary literature: according to her, in such literature there were 'no deep thoughts, no beautiful feelings, no attractive characters, not the least ray of hope', as well as 'filth' and 'dirt'.\textsuperscript{63} Interestingly, this reader meant this statement to apply to female writers such as Narbikova, Petrushevskaia and Tolstaia. This reader's letter also spawned a point-counterpoint pair of articles on 'alternative prose' and 'bad prose'. Sergei Chuprinin, who presented his views on 'alternative prose', held 'reality responsible for the unsavoury nature of alternative prose, not its creators'.\textsuperscript{64} He also identified its non-didactic and sceptical elements.\textsuperscript{65}

As Porter sees it, 'the general breaking of taboos is arguably the most salient characteristic of the literature under discussion'.\textsuperscript{66} Of course, two of the strongest


\textsuperscript{63} Ibid., p. 6.

\textsuperscript{64} Ibid., p. 7.

\textsuperscript{65} Ibid., p. 8.

\textsuperscript{66} Ibid., p. 19.
taboos were the explicit mention of both sex and violence. Goscilo posits that 'the authors' self-conscious effort at polemical outrage could strike the educated Westerner as quaint or, even worse, anachronistic posturing.' Goscilo's comment draws attention to the thorny questions of applying Western parameters to Russian literary texts. Therefore, any account of women and violence in Russian literature must acknowledge the possibility of gaps or tensions between Western and Russian perceptions. In their introduction to Engendering Slavic Literatures, Chester and Forrester also note the potential problems of applying a Western frame to non-Western texts: 'When Western feminist theory, film theory, or psychoanalytic notions of the self are applied uncritically to Eastern European cultural scenes, the conclusions they produce face the danger of degenerating into absurdity.' In this thesis, my appropriation of western theoretical constructs is not meant to suggest that these are the only theories one might use to read the texts in question; rather, I have selected theories I feel illuminate the given texts.

Porter chooses to recognize 1978-79, the time of the Metropol' affair, as the most efficacious starting point for alternative prose. As envisioned by Porter, Viktor Erofeev, and Goscilo, among the literary predecessors for this group are Nabokov, Joyce, Zamyatin, Platonov, the obriuity, writers of the Russian absurd, writers of the 1920s, and Sasha Sokolov.71

---

67 For an analysis of Russian attitudes towards sex, see Igor Kon and James Riordan (eds), Sex and Russian Society, Bloomington, IN, 1993.
As Eliot Borenstein has noted, 'Ironically, if one wishes to find obscene language in Russian texts and films, one must look up rather than down: it is “high” culture that has availed itself of the linguistic opportunities afforded by the easing of censorship.'72 While it is true that the authors who have seemed most determined to shatter the remaining taboos are producers of ‘high’ literature, parallel phenomena in popular culture must not be ignored. I have already mentioned sex and violence as two of the greatest taboos to be broken, and I would argue that it is impossible to completely separate ‘high’ culture from its popular counterpart. As is well known, Nabokov drew on popular culture and the conventions of cinema. Limonov, though he has received a significant amount of critical attention, is by no means universally accepted as a ‘serious’ writer. Further, the immense popularity of detektivy, which contain a great deal of violence, even if stylized points to the fact that the phenomenon of presenting violence in text is not exclusively a ‘high’ cultural one.73

* 

In the period following the Second World War, I am most interested in the period from the 1970s through the 1990s, during which time we see a dramatic increase in the direct portrayal of violence. Both in terms of production of primary texts and accompanying criticism, we see a relatively recent surge in writing about violence and evaluating such texts. We may explain this presence in part through the fledgling field of gender studies in Russian literature and culture. Most of the current volumes analysing the topic of gender in this area have appeared within the last few

---

years; indeed, the average Russian still is unlikely to recognize the word ‘gender’, much less attach any kind of meaning to it.

Various theories are given for the increased portrayal of violence in Russian literature during the last few decades. As Aiken and Barker note,

Women’s extensive involvement in activities outside the home since the mid-1970s has been advanced as one reason for the alarming increase of depictions of violence against women both on the screen and in print. This notion that woman has strayed from her proper role as nurturer and protector of the family is shared not only by men but by women as well, thus eroding much of the work on gender inequality conducted by recently established women’s organizations.74

Tatiana Zabelina suggests that as the Soviet period progressed, the focus on violence connected with class and government issues produced a culture ‘of Soviet people unaccustomed to thinking about violence as a violation of the rights of the individual and unable to see the problem of violence towards children and women’.75 Draitser posits that in the late and post-Soviet era ‘the problem of wife-beating became even worse because of the increased stress of male life’; again, we see the Freudian notion of displaced or transferred anger.76 Regardless of the roots of this explosion, it is clear that recent years have seen a dramatic increase in the presence of violence in text.

* 

In this thesis, I will explore what I see as the five major ways in which violence and women are presented in post-war texts of Russian literature (namely, Nabokovian artifice; male gaze, misogyny and fantasy; Petrushevskaiian byt and its

76 Draitser, Making Love, Not War, p. 155.
brutal aspects; the grotesque female as aggressor and victim of violence; and violence as surfacing in gynocentric space and as it occurs to, on, or within the female body). I will begin in Chapter 1 with an analysis of women and violence in the texts of Vladimir Nabokov. In some way, almost all the texts I consider in this thesis are engaging with or reacting to the prescribed norms of Socialist Realism. This is one reason why Nabokov provides a useful starting point for my analysis: he makes it clear that he is not attempting to reflect real life within his literary creations. Both the prevalence of violence in his texts and the ways in which he evaluates women (whether implicitly or explicitly) allow for the posing of numerous questions regarding women and violence in his works. We may also examine a development of the treatment of violence in Nabokov's works in which he plays with the notion of portraying violence as artificial or even ridiculous. The early novels *Laughter in the Dark* and *King, Queen, Knave* utilize violence as cliché, especially drawing from cinematic conventions. In the writing of *Lolita* and *Ada*, Nabokov explores the text as apologia for brutality. Narrators Humbert and Van Veen engage in the writing of a confession and a memoir respectively, and each man details the brutish acts he has committed and witnessed. *Look at the Harlequins!* and *Transparent Things* provide an amalgam of earlier Nabokovian themes and techniques, and they highlight the consequences, including terrible loss, of muddling imagination and 'reality'. Finally, examination of Nabokov's use of intertextuality as it relates to violence is essential to an understanding of his use of the theme. There is not a single female narrator in these novels, so the depiction and analysis of violence originates from a male point of view both on the super-textual and intra-textual levels.

This male perspective gives way to a more explicit analysis of the male gaze in Chapter 2, when I will move to an analysis of other works by male writers. In this
analysis, I will highlight the role of fantasy as regards violence in male-authored texts. In some instances, the idea of violence as a product of the imagination – which is not necessarily acted out – may prevent horrific real-life consequences. A brief examination of the psychological implications of the production of such fantasies will also be included. At the centre of this analysis are two novels: Limonov's *Eto ia, Edichka* (It's Me, Eddie) and Viktor Erofeev's *Russkaia krasavitsa*. In his novels, including *Eto ia, Edichka*, L'histoirie de son serviteur (His Butler's Story) Eduard Limonov seems to advocate brazen violence and misogyny as an essential component of life, while Erofeev breaks taboos through his presentation of a subversive female narrator. Iurii Miloslavskii tells male-narrated short stories of a harsh life on the streets that translates into an equally brutal domestic existence. At best, women are servants or pawns; at worst, they are victims of abuse or violent death.

The core of my thesis is formed by the analysis of texts of contemporary Russian women writers. The post-Communist years to date have witnessed an explosion in publications by women writers, and each of them has a vivid and distinctive view of the particular challenges and problems confronting women in the late 20th century. Petrushevskaia, the subject of Chapter 3, is often called the most significant Russian woman writer of her time. She exposes the violence of everyday life in her prose and juxtaposes the quotidian with supernatural elements.77 Her predominantly female narrators are both victims and aggressors: most display a curious mix of grit, cunning and cruelty. Some instigate violence, some retaliate, and nearly all suffer. Petrushevskaia's novella *Vremia: noch'* (The Time: Night) is a

---

77 Valentina Brougher notes a heightened interest in the occult during the 1990s, particularly supernatural, magical, and fantastic elements. See Valentina Brougher, 'The Occult in Russian Literature of the 1990s', *Russian Review*, 56, 1997, 1, pp. 110-24. Brougher sees this interest in part as 'an attempt to resume the discourse about the rational and irrational in human life' from the 1920s (p. 111).
fitting centrepiece for an examination of the brutality she portrays, as are several of her short stories. Especially striking is Petrushevskiaia's dispassionate elaboration of appalling events as normal behaviour. While the action of many of Miloslavskii's texts, which present violence in a similar way, takes place on the streets, the setting for Petrushevskiaia is most often within the home. As many critics have noted, Petrushevskiaia transforms the idea of home as a safe and secure place; in her works, domestic bliss is almost non-existent. It may be that individuals resort to violence in order to maintain the illusion of some sort of control over their lives, and it is particularly significant that many of these violent women also happen to be mothers – a sharp and ironic contrast to the typical veneration of the mother in Russian culture.

From the world of Petrushevskiaia, we may move away from somewhat realistic depictions but still focus on the idea of what it means to be a typical or 'appropriate' Russian woman. In Chapter 4, I will examine the depiction of women and violence in the works of Tat'iana Tolstaia, Nina Sadur, and Svetlana Vasilenko vis-à-vis magical realism and the grotesque. Particularly in the works of the latter two authors, I will examine the concept of the grotesque female and the consequences of her inappropriate behaviour. As presented in Nabokov, the unseemly or dishevelled female earns the disdain of the author and/or other characters; in Sadur's Lug and Vasilenko's Durochka, these women receive a tremendous amount of abuse and criticism and may even be read as martyr figures of sorts in a quasi-religious context. Tolstaia links violence and alterity in her novella Limpopo and presents a range of associations with violence in her short stories while also presenting elements of magical realism in a Russian context. Among her techniques are the subversion of traditional notions of romantic love, juxtaposing male rage and female suffering;
shattering the Russian myth of childhood; and presenting various permutations of the weak man and the devouring woman.

The final chapter of the thesis has a dual focus; as with the preceding two chapters, all the works included were written by women, including Iuliia Voznesenskaia, Elena Makarova, Natal'ia Sukhanova, Marina Palei, Elena Tarasova, and Larisa Vaneeva. This chapter focuses on hospital literature as well as texts concerning the body and violence done to it. The main thrust of the segment on hospital literature is that of gynocentric space and the ways in which women writers have created a contemporary variant of the historically male subgenre of hospital fiction. The gynocentric environment allows for free discussion of the issues that befall women — issues about which they might not normally speak. My focus is examination of the discourse that arises in such a setting as well as the subjects of these conversations. Finally, the last segment of this chapter addresses violence done to the body from within it and outside it in both literal and metaphoric senses. This provides a fitting conclusion to the thesis as it draws together many of the elements explored in previous chapters.

In selecting texts for inclusion in my thesis, I have been faced with difficult decisions. As mentioned earlier, I have not undertaken an exhaustive analysis of violence in recent Russian literature. Because I have chosen to highlight what I see as the major trends in the incorporation of violence into Russian texts, this has necessitated the exclusion of certain works. Although writers such as Vladimir Sorokin, Viktor Pelevin, and Valeriia Narbikova (both of whom include violence with some frequency in their works) might be seen as literary descendants of Nabokov in their own right, the complexity of their verbal games and the fragmentary nature of
their plots have led me to the conclusion that this is not the most appropriate venue for a short (and therefore incomplete) analysis of violence in their texts. Further, Sorokin and Narbikova appear to be engaging in a very calculated and specific reaction to the traditions of Socialist Realism, and I have not undertaken a systematic exploration of violence in Socialist Realist texts. Among some of the writers I do consider, I have chosen to omit full-length works such as Tolstaia’s *Kys* (The Slynx, 2000) and Sadur’s *Sad* (The Garden, 1997) because other works in their oeuvre demonstrate more clearly these writers’ approach to the incorporation of violence in text.

---

78 Sorokin, in a sustained reaction to Socialist Realism, goes beyond the mere shattering of taboo to shock and repel the reader. Among his main works utilizing violence are *Serdtsa chertykh* (The Hearts of Four, 1991), *Trdtsataia liubov’ Mariny* (Marina’s Thirtieth Love, 1982–84), and the short stories ‘Delovoe predlozhenie’ (A Business Proposition, 1992), ‘Otkrytie sezona’ (The Opening of the Season, 1991), and ‘Zasedanie zavkoma’ (Meeting of the Factory Committee, 1991). Drawing on a Soviet political context, Pelevin challenges gender stereotypes in ‘Mittel’spi’l’ (Mittelspiel, 1991); he engages in a polemic against Chernyshevskii’s utilitarian novel *Chto delat’?* (What is to be Done?) in ‘Deviatyi son Very Pavlovnoi’ (Vera Pavlova’s Ninth Dream, 1992). Narbikova, who engages with Russian history and her literary predecessors in a dizzying array of references, most notably presents violence in *Okolo ekolo* (Around the Echo, 1990) and *Ad kak Da* (aD kak dA) (Hell as Yes, 1990).

79 As Goscilo mentions, ‘Ideology and social relevance, the hallmarks of socialist realism, remain the imperatives of Soviet literature, albeit now reoriented in accordance with the devaluation of former truths and truisms and the concomitant valorization of erstwhile heterodoxy.’ See Goscilo, ‘Alternative Prose and Glasnost Literature’, p. 121.
Women and Violence in the Prose of Vladimir Nabokov

Violence consistently surfaces in the oeuvre of Vladimir Nabokov.¹ As is well known, Nabokov claimed to shun any sort of social interpretation of literature: according to him, art is artifice. However, his artificial worlds often are optimal locations for exploring the occurrences manipulated in and extracted from 'reality'.² In this sense, his work provides an appropriate starting place for examining the conjunction of artificiality and violence.

By examining the aggressors and victims of violence in Nabokov's prose, we may discover who is being punished and what is worth fighting for. Beauty, for instance, is valued highly: Nabokov's works are infused with an ideology of aesthetics. At first glance, moral commentary seems to be absent, and the reader must probe further to uncover any sort of authorial pronouncement. The key appears to lie within the poetry of John Shade (the protagonist of Pale Fire): in Mary McCarthy’s introductory essay to the novel, she notes Shade's belief that 'for the agnostic poet, there are only two sins, murder and the deliberate infliction of pain'.³ Given this dictum, the actions and beliefs of Nabokov's characters may be viewed within a largely amoral world, in which much is permitted. We also see the presentation of moral relativism in conjunction with violence: in Lolita, Humbert Humbert’s views on violence change according to the 'victim' he considers; in Laughter in the Dark,

¹ For the purposes of this chapter, I have chosen to use the English translations of Nabokov's novels. Because Nabokov was heavily involved in the translation of his own works — and because of his pronouncements regarding literal literary translations, we know that his intent was to reproduce 'as closely as the associative and syntactic capacities of another language allow, the exact contextual meaning of the original' (Vladimir Nabokov, 'Foreword', in Alexander Pushkin, Eugene Onegin, trans. Vladimir Nabokov, Vol. 1, p. vii), we know that his intent was to reproduce 'as closely as the associative and syntactic capacities of another language allow, the exact contextual meaning of the original'. Additionally, violence emerges as a motif in both the Russian and English versions of his novels.

² Nabokov felt this word was meaningless when presented without quotation marks.

³ For the purposes of this chapter, I have chosen to use the English translations of Nabokov's novels. Because Nabokov was heavily involved in the translation of his own works — and because of his pronouncements regarding literal literary translations, we know that his intent was to reproduce 'as closely as the associative and syntactic capacities of another language allow, the exact contextual meaning of the original' (Vladimir Nabokov, 'Foreword', in Alexander Pushkin, Eugene Onegin, trans. Vladimir Nabokov, Vol. 1, p. vii), we know that his intent was to reproduce 'as closely as the associative and syntactic capacities of another language allow, the exact contextual meaning of the original'. Additionally, violence emerges as a motif in both the Russian and English versions of his novels.
Albinus fantasizes about violence; in Ada, Van Veen revels in it. As we will see, violence often appears to have aesthetic or formal significance. Shade's assertion of a moral violation is almost surprising. Instead, there seems to be a privileging of style—and in Shade's words, we observe what this privileging permits—everything save the ultimate moral violation.

Nabokov's later works appeared in Russian contemporaneously with other third wave literature. On the one hand, it is possible to view him as a stylistic predecessor to some contemporary authors: on the other, we may view him in the same context as the other writers considered in this thesis. Arnold McMillin notes, 'The gradual discovery of Nabokov's work by Russian writers and readers has been one of the most significant literary developments of the post-Stalin era', although we might normally associate Nabokov with the first wave of emigration. By placing an analysis of violence in Nabokov's works in the first chapter of this thesis, I hope to highlight some ways in which violence is presented in text; as we will see, many of his techniques are appropriated by the writers of Russian alternative prose.

* 

The connection between women and violence in Nabokov's novels may be articulated through an examination of the portrayal of female characters in his texts. Of particular interest is the typical bifurcation of woman into the categories of victim or aggressor. Equally common in Nabokovian fiction is the undertaking of violence for (that is, on behalf of or for possession of) a female character, as in a duel. The desire to eliminate rivals appears to be one of the most common incitants of violent activity and further emphasizes the hierarchy within the relationship between predator

---

and prey which often surfaces in Nabokov's writing. Schiff notes that women rarely are portrayed in a positive light: 'In his fiction Nabokov was killing off wives well before his marriage: The books are full of dead wives, fickle wives, lost wives, dim-witted, vulgar, slatternly, ineffectual, scheming wives.' Further, even those women who do not deviate from the feminine ideal are relegated to a secondary role:

Most of the benevolent female characters in Nabokov are women we barely see; inside or outside the parentheses, quickly, efficiently, and often in childbirth, they die. They fail to materialize even in the works that bear their name. The faithless, treacherous, obtuse women claim their roles front and center; the literature is full of simperers, sirens, underaged, willing, and unwilling sexpots.\(^5\)

In all of Nabokov's prose considered here, there is not a single female narrator.\(^7\) The male gaze is inescapable on two levels, that of the author and the narrator: the communication and expression of female characters are conveyed solely in male terms, thus presenting at best a skewed or biased view. Lolita and Ada, arguably the centrepieces of the two eponymous works in which they respectively appear, ultimately can express themselves only through Humbert and Van. It should be noted that Ada's commentary surfaces occasionally in Van's memoir, but typically women are consigned to a secondary narrating role and a secondary role within the plot.

To date, little criticism amid the vast body of Nabokov commentary has thoroughly explored the role and depiction of women in Nabokov's works. This is perhaps due to his notorious unconcern in his works for women, especially women and the creative process. Though art and artistry are chief among Nabokovian

\(^{5}\) Stacy Schiff, *Vera (Mrs. Vladimir Nabokov)*, New York, 1999, p. 45.

\(^{6}\) Schiff, *Vera*, p. 161.

\(^{7}\) I have exempted novels such as *Bend Sinister* and *Invitation to a Beheading* from this commentary, as these works, though certainly presenting violent scenarios, are almost exclusively dominated by males.
themes, all his ‘creative’ characters are men. Women, frequently marginalized, often appear ridiculous.

Charles Nicol explores the notion of Nabokov’s feminine ideal and points to Nabokov’s own commentary from *Speak, Memory*: the young Nabokov’s ideal of woman (taken from Malory) ‘was Queen Guinevere, Isolda, a not quite merciless *belle dame*, another man’s wife, proud and docile, fashionable and fast, with slim ankles and narrow hands.’

Violence may seem excessive or gratuitous when used repeatedly to emphasize a violent nature, such as that of Van Veen, Humbert Humbert or Hugh Person. It is also worth considering whether violence may be logical if a character has a violent nature, thus making these actions foreordained or preordained. Other characters try to explain away the violent acts they commit or the violent thoughts they have, though they clearly realize that their impulses are abnormal. Chief among these characters are Albert Albinus and Humbert Humbert.

In this chapter, I propose to track the development of the depiction of violence in Nabokov’s prose; in this way, I hope to highlight Nabokov’s changing perspective. The events of *Laughter in the Dark* (1931) and *King, Queen, Knave* (1928) are directed by the convention of violence as cliché. Alfred Appel, Jr. notes that *King, Queen, Knave* exemplifies Nabokov’s concept of ‘cinematic poshlost’. In the writing of *Lolita* (1950-55) and *Ada* (1966-69), Nabokov explores the text as apologia for brutality. Humbert and Van Veen engage in the writing of a confession and a

---


9 Alfred Appel, Jr., *Nabokov’s Dark Cinema*, New York, 1974, p. 34. In his book on Gogol, Nabokov states that poshlost ‘is not only the obviously trashy but also the falsely important, the falsely beautiful, the falsely clever, the falsely attractive’, and Appel adds that it is a ‘blending of pretentiousness, vulgarity, and cliché, insidious and cruel when it unintentionally mocks or parodies human needs and desires’ (p. 42). This definition may be linked to some of the debate surrounding the seemingly gratuitous inclusion of violence in much contemporary cinema.
memoir respectively, and each man details the brutish acts he has committed and witnessed. *Transparent Things* (1969-72) and *Look at the Harlequins!* (1973-74) provide an amalgam of earlier Nabokovian themes and techniques and are so finely tuned that their unreal qualities are their most striking features. These novels highlight the consequences, including terrible loss, of muddling imagination and 'reality'. Finally, examination of Nabokov's use of intertextuality as it relates to violence is essential to an understanding of his use of the theme.

* Failed murder plots figure at the story's centre in both *Laughter in the Dark* and *King, Queen, Knave*.10 In these two novels, women encourage and even commit acts of violence. *Laughter in the Dark* has often been noted for its cruelty; indeed, Nabokov maintained that he 'saw the world as cruel' at the time he wrote it.11 The theme of the love triangle gone sour is central to both novels. The clichéd, even hackneyed quality of this construction is notable, and the tragic ending of each story may be a simple adherence to the convention. Appel notes the usage of 'thriller conventions' in *Laughter in the Dark*, as well as folk tale devices, including but not limited to the intrigue of entrapment, enchantment, and illusion.12 The opening passage of *Laughter in the Dark* contains stylized language in some way reminiscent of a folktale, and we as readers are told to anticipate 'profit and pleasure in the telling' (5).13 Though it might seem that Nabokov, ever the stylist, already tinkered with and

---

10 As noted by Julian Connolly, the sadistic elements in *Laughter in the Dark* were greatly amplified in the novel's English translation. Despite this significant difference between the two versions of the story, I have chosen to consider the English version because of its demonstration of the range of violent and sadistic elements among Nabokov's characters. See Connolly, 'Laughter in the Dark', in Vladimir E. Alexandrov (ed.), *The Garland Companion to Vladimir Nabokov*, New York and London, 1995, pp. 214-25.
12 Ibid., pp. 260-61.
13 Vladimir Nabokov, *Laughter in the Dark*, London, 1961. Bibliographic information for primary sources throughout the thesis will in the first instance be given in a footnote; page numbers will be given in parentheses immediately following textual quotations.
satirized established tropes at this early stage in his career, he chose to view the use of these conventions as a failure, calling the characters in this novel 'hopeless clichés' (262).

*Laughter in the Dark* chronicles the fate of Albert Albinus, who destroys his family life by falling in love with Margot Peters, a girl working at a cinema he visits. Unbeknown to Albinus, Margot carries on another affair with the cartoonist Axel Rex, and Rex and Margot together cruelly conspire to control and ruin the life of Albinus. Violence may be contextualized through an examination of cinematic elements in the novel and an examination of its central characters.

The cinematic motif is of primary importance in *Laughter in the Dark*. Albinus enters a movie theatre at the end of a thriller film, and violence is presented at one stage removed from the primary narration. On the screen, 'a girl was receding among tumbled furniture before a masked man with a gun' (14). The positioning of this film image early in the text introduces violence as a significant plot element as well as presenting the notion of violence as romantic or exciting. With the cinematic image of the victimized female fresh in his mind when he first sees Margot, Albinus thinks, 'No, you can't take a pistol and plug a girl you don't even know, simply because she attracts you' (9). The scene onscreen contextualizes Albinus's comment. Albinus seems to be governed by the laws of the thriller genre, and the fact that characters' impulses in *Laughter in the Dark* so frequently manifest themselves as violent or destructive thoughts seems to point to a source in popular culture.\(^1\)

Because all of Albinus's actions are clichéd and apparently hewing to a set pattern,

---

this poses the interesting question of whether any moral judgement be levelled: can someone who acts mindlessly be blamed?

Characters in *Laughter in the Dark* repeatedly employ violent language, whether figuratively or with a literal intent. This creates a paradox of sorts in the case of Albinus, whose conscience troubles him because of his attraction to Margot. However, conscience seems to be absent in his unconscious thoughts about her: ‘Like to crush her beautiful throat. Well, she is dead anyway, since I shan’t go there anymore’ (16). Unfortunately, his solipsistic theory proves irrelevant, since he cannot stay away. Albinus tries to kiss Margot ‘with the violence of shyness’ (30). He is an extremely melodramatic man, and his rather ridiculous sentiments also appear to derive from cinematic sources. He vows to kill himself if he cannot have Margot, to shoot himself if his wife dies of grief, and to kill Margot when he suspects she has been unfaithful (though his resolve is much greater in theory than in practice). Margot taunts him, ‘Kill me, but don’t torture me any longer! By the way, I’m too hot. I think I’ll take off my coat.’ (166-67). Albinus writes a letter to his wife apologising that his affair ‘has bruised our family happiness as a knife of a madman slashes a picture’ (65). This is a curiously impersonal comparison, and Albinus seems torn between the sophisticated world of art, class, and culture and the base temptations of the cinematic world. Though Albinus frequently draws on violent language, it is evident that he is not a violent person.

Aside from the cinematic sources of violence in *Laughter in the Dark*, Nabokov implies a link between social class and brutal behaviour. Marogt, who did not grow up in a well-to-do family, Margot often had her ears boxed as a child, and we are told that her commonest movement is one of self-defence (18). She even tells Albinus that she was ‘flogged, tortured’ at home (70). Otto, Margot’s brother, is
frequently associated with brutal and physically threatening behaviour. When Margot accepts a motorcycle ride from a young man, he begins ‘to squeeze and fumble and kiss her so violently’ that she becomes dizzy (20). When she returns home, Otto punches and kicks her, causing her to fall and bruise herself.

Margot clearly has a cruel streak, and this, combined with her charm, is dangerous. She and Martha of King, Queen, Knave arguably are two of Nabokov’s cruellest female characters. At a dinner party, Margot wants to bum one of the guests with her cigarette and actually begins to do so (96). She pinches Rex violently when he gropes her at the première of her film; there she becomes upset by her poor acting and wants to bite someone or to scratch the actress Dorianna Karenina’s face (133). Later, Albinus thinks Margot will strike him when he tells her his wife Elisabeth will not divorce him.

Axel Rex is linked with Margot both romantically and in his brutality and cruelty. His mentally ill mother suffers a fatal fall down the stairs immediately after he leaves home, and as a child, he had poured oil over mice and ignited them, as well as abusing cats on occasion (101). Though Rex’s cruelty to animals would seem to foreshadow his cruelty to humans, his actions are ascribed to mere curiosity and coldness. Violence and cruelty mean nothing to Rex because he is a heartless creature. Rex later remarks that ‘Death often is the point of life’s joke’ (129). Rex and Margot, easily the most heartless characters in the story, appear to deserve one another.

Tragedy strikes when Albinus is blinded in an automobile collision as he and Margot desert Rex at the cottage where they have been staying. Rex hints in a letter that Albinus’s blindness is some kind of punishment, and this insinuation is ironic given Albinus’s essentially harmless character. Rex later embellishes and describes
Albinus’s condition as caused by ‘a violent mental shock’ (179), adding that he is ‘subject to fits of the most violent insanity’ (180). After his brother-in-law rescues him, Albinus desires a final meeting with Margot so that he can shoot her. However, his blindness severely disadvantages him, and he is shot instead. Throughout the story, Albinus’s attempts at violence are impotent, perhaps best illustrated through an incident when Margot locks him in his bedroom and he shakes the door violently but cannot open it. The cinematic motif is revisited at the end of the novel, in the ‘[s]tage directions for last silent scene’ (207).

*Laughter in the Dark* has one unusual twist: its ending does not conform to the hackneyed conventions or at least disappoints the reader expecting a neatly resolved conclusion to the text. We expect Albinus to triumph at the story’s conclusion, but his ultimate humiliation turns out to be assassination by Margot, who has managed to manipulate him one final time.

*King, Queen, Knave* centres around a love triangle formed by the protagonist Dreyer, his wife Martha, and Dreyer’s nephew Franz. Martha, the central female in the text, is also its cruelest character. Perhaps most shocking is her lack of sensitivity – like Axel Rex, Martha appears to lack a conscience. For her, violence and cruelty lack any moral dimension. Her thoughts and mental images are unusually brutal in nature, and she possesses a morbidly active imagination. When she tells Franz of a holiday she and Dreyer once took, she says, ‘One imagined those mountains might crash down on the hotel, in the middle of the night, right on our bed, burying me under them and my husband, killing everybody.’ (30). Martha’s cruelty extends to Tom, the family dog, and her treatment of the animal disgusts Dreyer. Sadly, Tom’s

---

fate is planned by Martha, who tells the gardener that 'hysterical Tom had bitten her' and that he must be put to sleep without Dreyer knowing what has happened (224).

It is implied that Martha’s cruelty may be inherited: her grandfather was suspected of drowning his wife. Martha once violently slams the door after Dreyer, and is ‘wringing the neck of the lock’ (41). In Martha’s foul mood in the aftermath of a car crash, she remarks, ‘But even our chauffeur was not hurt, which is a pity’ (50). However, the chauffeur is later killed in an accident with a streetcar. She even laughs at a crippled man who slips on the ice in front of the Dreyers’ house (126).

Martha’s coldness is also emphasized through her sexual frigidity. In a past affair, when her lover kisses her and she feels nothing, she strikes him in the face with her elbow (55). When she begins to plot Dreyer’s death in earnest, she becomes still colder and more calculating. ‘After all, car accidents are not necessarily fatal; much too often one gets away with bruises, a fracture, lacerations, one mustn’t make too complicated demands on chance: exactly that way, please, make the brains squirt out’ (137-38). Imagery in the house reflects Martha’s frustration with her husband: ‘the house was suffocating from him’, and there is a ‘strangled rose in each individual vase’ before a party (141). Dreyer’s love of jokes prompts him to stage a scene in which he appears before the guests disguised as a robber. Though Martha recognizes Dreyer’s ruse from the beginning, she screams more loudly than anyone else, noticing with satisfaction that the engineer next to him is about to draw his gun. To Martha’s disgust, it is Franz who finally unmask Dreyer.

Like Albinus, Martha and Franz derive their sense of reality from popular culture: this is a plausible explanation for the clichéd plan the two develop for Dreyer’s death.16 When Martha decides that poisoning is inferior to shooting, she

---

draws her ideas for the murder from 'elaborate and nonsensical shootings described in trashy novelettes, and thereby plagiarizing villainy' (178). Appel considers the possibility that Nabokov, not Fate, is primarily responsible for Martha's death. Though an author always constructs the fates of his characters, Nabokov doubly highlights this aspect of artifice within the text with his own appearance near the end of the novel.

Martha fantasizes extensively about widowhood and Dreyer's death. She becomes obsessed, and she adopts the murder of her husband as her primary goal in her affair with Franz. For her, 'The words "bullet" and "poison" began to sound about as normal as "bouillon" or "pullet," as ordinary as a doctor's bill or pill. The process of killing a man could be considered as calmly as the recipes in a cookbook' (161). It is evident that Franz and Martha are visualizing two different Dreyers, possibly because Franz is incapable of emotionally dissociating himself from the prospect of murder. For Martha, the violence she envisions has a clearly sexual dimension (which varies depending on whether she is with Dreyer or Franz). According to Martha, Dreyer 'threatened her with a priapus that had already once inflicted upon her an almost mortal wound', while for Franz, Dreyer 'was lifeless and flat, and could be burned or taken apart, or simply thrown away like a torn photograph' (178). While making love to Franz, 'she would feel again that Dreyer was perishing, that each frantic stroke wounded him more deeply, and finally, that he collapsed in terrible pain, howling, discharging his intestinal fluids, and dissolving in the unbearable splendor of her joy' (200).

Franz is physically very weak in comparison to the robust Dreyer. He is physically taken aback by a playful slap Dreyer gives him as they are on their way to

---

17 Ibid., p. 249.
play tennis, and Dreyer measures the height of the tennis net ‘with the thoroughness of an executioner’ (187). Franz begins his affair with Martha with apprehension, and he imagines that Dreyer will emerge from the curtains as a ‘jester turned executioner’ (123).

Martha even tries to trick Dreyer into writing his own ‘suicide’ note as he practises English composition. She later decides that strangulation is the best method of murder, as it requires no weapon save a pair of hands:

Sometimes at night, when he approached her with a tender little laugh, she felt an urge to dig her hands into his neck and squeeze, squeeze with all her might...She realized how difficult it was in these circumstances to reason logically, to develop simple, smooth, elegant plans, when everything within her was screaming and raging. (199).

Martha and Franz each seem to be losing their vigour, while Dreyer appears to become more lively and robust with each passing day. Unlike Martha, Franz does have a conscience, but Martha’s manipulation of him is so successful that his guilt primarily lurks in his unconscious. Franz begins to have terrible nightmares, including murdering one of his co-workers with Martha’s help, appearing as the dead chauffeur in another dream, and hearing his death sentence in a third. Franz is affected by hearing of the chauffeur’s death with all its blood and gore. Martha attributes his reaction to ‘nerves’. (133).

Franz hails from an environment that is not particularly nurturing. As a child, he once received such a severe ‘backhand whack in the face that he flew off his chair, hit his head against the sideboard and lost consciousness’ (93). This echoes Margot’s unhappy childhood and emphasizes the relationship between class and brutality.

After an otherwise respectable man has ‘dismembered a neighbor’s child’, a female ‘robot’ is found in his flat. Dreyer is intrigued because of his own scheme to introduce moving mannequins at his store and goes to see this ‘artificial woman’ in
the police museum. During Dreyer's visit, he ponders the concept of murder. To him, murder is 'shabby and stupid', and he thinks 'what a talentless person one must be, what a poor thinker or hysterical fool, to murder one's neighbor' (208). He notes that the murderers are typically pale and badly dressed – essentially in all ways the opposite of Dreyer himself. This appears to be a further manifestation of the class theme. Then, as part of a private game, he entertains himself by inventing crimes for people he passes on the street, including 'plump, motherly housewives' (209). Ironically, he is happy to see the 'familiar, [...] perfectly human faces' of Franz and Martha upon his return home.

In an ironic reversal of Martha's relentless planning, Franz finds himself wishing for Martha's death at the conclusion of the novel. Her death from pneumonia, while Dreyer himself survives, is a fitting irony and, perhaps, a fitting punishment for Martha's inhumanity. In the end, it may also serve as a moral judgement.

*

The cinematic motif is of continued importance in Lolita and Ada, most notably in the climactic scene of Lolita when Humbert kills his rival Quilty. Ada is a movie actress, thus linking her with Lo's fascination with 'starlets'. However, the most important connection between the theme of women and violence and these two novels is the concept of memoir as atonement. We are reminded of Shade's naming of the two sins that exist for the 'agnostic poet', as mentioned at the beginning of this chapter. The infliction of pain is at the centre of Lolita and Ada – especially in relation to Dolores Haze (Lolita) and Lucette Veen, two young and seemingly innocent females.
Appel remarks that Humbert creates ‘a way station for the trash-afflicted reader and indiscriminate moviegoer who believes that sentimentalized violence, predictable by virtue of Pop conventions, is truly the heart’s revenge’. An excellent example is Humbert’s statement, ‘I pulled out my automatic,’ realising what a ‘fool reader’ would assume (280).

Humbert’s link with violence is established through his history with Valeria, his first wife. She attracts him because of a certain girlish quality she possesses, though she is certainly an adult, not a nymphet. When he learns of her infidelity, he is angry, but ‘[t]o beat her up in the street, there and then, as an honest vulgarian might have done, was not feasible’ (27). He strikes Valeria when she refuses to divulge the name of her lover (28). Humbert’s thoughts progress more outrageously as he ponders the situation, and

Humbert the Terrible deliberated with Humbert the Small whether Humbert Humbert should kill her or her lover, or both, or neither. I remember once handling an automatic belonging to a fellow student, in the days [...] when I toyed with the idea of enjoying his little sister, a most diaphanous nymphet with a black hair bow, and then shooting myself. I now wondered if Valechka [...] was really worth shooting, or strangling, or drowning. She had very vulnerable legs, and I decided I would limit myself to hurting her very horribly as soon as we were alone. But we never were (29).

This passage reveals Humbert’s misogyny: expending the effort to commit a truly violent act against a woman is not worth his time.

Despite his dismissal of violence in the case of Valeria, Humbert’s efforts to displace his anger are not entirely effective: ‘the vibration of the door I had slammed after them still rang in my every nerve, a poor substitute for the backhand slap with which I ought to have hit her across the cheekbone according to the rules of the

---

movies' (29-30). Humbert, an intelligent narrator well aware of the banality of clichés, regularly invokes them to satisfy the vulgar reader's expectations and then to subvert these expectations. Margot, Albinus, and Martha, however, seek inspiration and meaning in these clichés, and their manipulation of them is free from irony. Because of Humbert's literariness, we may wonder whether he really has the 'vulgar reader' as his expected audience.

Just as Lo is leaving for camp, she dashes upstairs to deliver a good-bye kiss to Humbert. Humbert then plays with the reader's expectations, stating that he hears her downstairs, 'alive, unraped' (66), leaving the reader to imagine that Humbert harbours the worst intentions. He regularly calls himself a brute and a monster, though it is evident that he does not seriously believe he should be classified as such. In Lolita, violence emerges in parodic Freudian dream interpretation, and Nabokov also creates this link in Transparent Things. Humbert muses on the possibility of committing a 'serious murder', but explains that he could only become 'brutish' through a 'spell of insanity'. He adds, 'Sometimes I attempt to kill in my dreams' – but this attempt, sometimes involving a gun, is always thwarted by a certain impotency (47).

Humbert provides the reader with an extensive description of his first night alone with Lolita in order to prove that he is not 'a brutal scoundrel' (131). However, he likens himself to a vampire, an entity commonly linked with eroticism and violence. He later describes the 'purplish spot on her naked neck where a fairytale vampire [Humbert, of course] had feasted...' (139). The vampire parallel resurfaces

---

when Humbert, extracting the poison from an insect bite on Lo’s shoulder, ‘sucked till I was gorged on her spicy blood’ (156).

Lo calls Humbert a brute on multiple occasions, and as they drive along, she half-playfully threatens to alert the authorities:

You revolting creature. I was a daisy-fresh girl, and look what you’ve done to me. I ought to call the police and tell them you raped me. Oh, you dirty, dirty old man! (141)

Lo herself is not without a violent streak. Charlotte Haze, Lolita’s mother, considers this ‘spite’ on Lo’s part, but notes the annoying activities of school-age boys which must be bothersome to Lo, including ‘twisting one’s arm, banging into one with loads of books, pulling one’s hair, hurting one’s breasts, flipping one’s skirts’ (46). These are evident precursors to more offensive acts, and Charlotte herself apparently suffered from them when young. Interestingly, Lo’s retaliation is not directed at a male classmate but at a female - at her former school, she sticks ‘Viola, an Italian schoolmate, in the seat with a fountain pen’ (46).

Lo seems relatively unaffected by the violence she encounters in quotidian life. If anything, she is fascinated: ‘she studied the results of head-on collisions,’ ready to believe any details given in her Hollywood-pulp magazines (165). While on the road with Humbert, Lo stares with interest at ‘some smashed, blood-bespattered car with a young woman’s shoe in the ditch’ (174). As they drive away, Lo remarks not about the scene in general but that the woman’s shoe matches exactly a shoe she would like to buy. It appears that Lo becomes increasingly hardened and indifferent to the horrors of the outside world as her relationship with Humbert becomes more strained and painful. She is a passionate moviegoer, and ‘underworlders’ [film noir] are one of her favourite types of movies. The underworld setting is certainly a violent place, in which
heroic newspapermen were tortured, [...] there was [...] the stupendous fist fight, the crashing mountain of dusty old-fashioned furniture, the table used as a weapon, [...] the pinned hand still groping for the dropped bowie knife, the grunt, the sweet crash of fist against chin, the kick in the belly, the flying tackle; and immediately after a plethora of pain that would have hospitalized a Hercules, [...] nothing to show but the rather becoming bruise on the bronzed cheek of the warmed-up hero embracing his gorgeous bride (171).

Further, Red Rock, one of the sites which Lo longs to visit on their first trip, is the landform ‘from which a mature screen star had recently jumped to her death after a drunken row with her gigolo’ (210).

Lo’s callousness also surfaces in the language she uses to enquire about Charlotte: “Where is she buried anyway?” “Who?” “Oh, you know, my murdered mummy.” Humbert responds that ‘the tragedy of such an accident is somewhat cheapened by the epithet you saw fit to apply to it’ (286). This is of course ironic, given Humbert’s predilection for the gory or violent turn of phrase.

Humbert takes pains to emphasise Charlotte’s dark side while she is still alive. She analyses Lo’s emotional development and dwells on every possible negative aspect. Following Lo’s departure for Camp Q, Charlotte ‘attacked and routed such of Lo’s little belongings that had wandered to various parts of the house to freeze there like so many hypnotized bunnies.’ (81). After Charlotte obtains Humbert’s secret diary, he finds the ‘raped little table’ which she has prised open; Humbert’s subjective view of the world allows metaphors of sexual violence to permeate his everyday speech (96).

Just as Humbert has allowed his fancy to run wild when plotting a possible fate for Valeria, he begins to develop a plan for removing Charlotte. It is important to note that Humbert plans violence against Valeria to punish her for her infidelity – an act to which he is driven because of a deep emotional reaction. Charlotte, however, is merely an inconvenience to him. Based on Humbert’s earlier comments, we would
suspect that he does not care enough about Charlotte to kill her, and he claims, ‘I did not plan to marry poor Charlotte in order to eliminate her in some vulgar, gruesome and dangerous manner’, yet he does view Charlotte as the primary obstacle keeping him from Lolita (70-71). He does realise that ‘[n]o man can bring about the perfect murder; chance, however, can do it’, and mentions the famous case of a French woman stabbed in a crowded street by a jilted lover (84). Humbert concocts a plan for drowning Charlotte at Hourglass Lake and proves himself to have been a thorough planner, considering almost every possibility save that of a neighbour’s sudden appearance on the scene. When the moment comes, Humbert cannot force himself to kill Charlotte, though he notes, ‘I could visualize myself slapping Valeria’s breasts out of alignment, or otherwise hurting her – and I could see myself, no less clearly, shooting her lover in the underbelly and making him say “akh!” and sit down’ (87).

Humbert describes Charlotte’s death in great detail (she is hit by a car), including the fact that a robe ‘concealed the mangled remains of Charlotte Humbert who had been knocked down and dragged several feet by the Beale car’ (98). Humbert sees himself as his wife’s indirect murderer: she accidentally steps in the path of a car while on her way to mail an incriminating letter immediately following her discovery of Humbert’s journal detailing his true feelings about Lolita and her mother. He writes, ‘Had I not been such a fool – or such an intuitive genius – to preserve that journal, fluids produced by vindictive anger and hot shame would not have blinded Charlotte in her dash to the mailbox’ (103). Twinges of guilt plague him.

Appel has identified the role of cars as perpetrators of violence, and in this respect, it is interesting to juxtapose Charlotte Haze’s death and Lolita’s attitude to the car crash she and Humbert pass. Vehicles also prove to be destructive in two of
Nabokov's short stories. Nina dies in a car crash in 'Spring in Fialta', and the narrator has tried unsuccessfully to tell her of his love for her. In 'Details of a Sunset', Mark dies en route to his fiancée's house but never gets to read the farewell letter she has written him. Not only do these vehicles bring about several deaths – in each one the car (or bus) serves as a convenient obstacle preventing conflict. Here, violent death displaces potentially violent emotional outbursts. The connection between cars, death, and sex may be expanded: in Lolita, not only is a car responsible for Charlotte's death, but it is also the means of transportation by which Humbert travels with Lolita, and a car provides the escape necessary for the continuation of their sexual relationship.\(^{21}\)

Just as Humbert cannot bring himself to kill Charlotte, he claims he is unable to use force in his relations with Lolita. Shortly after they move to Beardsley, Humbert and Lo have a rather heated domestic dispute, which turns physical when Lo tries to extricate herself from Humbert's grip: 'I held her quite hard and in fact hurt her rather badly for which I hope my heart may rot, and once or twice she jerked her arm so violently that I feared her wrist might snap' (205).

Humbert's tactics become more and more desperate as his relationship with Lolita progresses, and her submission becomes increasingly reluctant. At one motel, Humbert suspects that Lo has been with another man in his brief absence, and he resolves to learn the truth through brutally pawing her:

I said nothing. I pushed her softness back into the room and went in after her. I ripped her shirt off. I unzipped the rest of her. I tore off her sandals. Wildly, I pursued the shadow of her infidelity; but the scent I travelled upon was so slight as to be practically undistinguishable from a madman's fancy (215).

\(^{21}\) In a contemporary variant, J.G. Ballard's novel Crash makes an explicit link between violent car crashes and sexual gratification.
As they drive along, Humbert's awareness of Lo's deceit continues to grow. He realises that Lo has altered the written licence plate number of the man following him; to punish her, Humbert slaps her forcefully (227).

Because of Humbert's periodic pointed references to murder, the reader might still reasonably think that Lolita would be his obvious target, especially given his mounting frustration. However, he emphasizes, 'I could not kill her, of course, as some have thought. You see, I loved her. It was love at first sight, at last sight, at ever and ever sight' (270).

Trilling has noted Humbert's 'ferocity' and 'open brutality to women'. Beginning with Valeria, Humbert's relationships with women all appear to have a violent dimension, including his relationship with Rita, whom he chooses as a female companion after Lolita’s departure. Humbert notes that she seems to be heading towards a violent end, as she suggests 'playing Russian roulette with my sacred automatic; I said you couldn’t, it was not a revolver, and we struggled for it, until at last it went off' (259). Significantly, no one is injured: the reader's expectations have been thwarted again.

Humbert’s grotesque tussle with Quilty has often been cited as the prototypical example of 'cinematic' violence in Nabokov's works. Worth mentioning here because the tussle is actually a delayed battle over Lolita, the ludicrous qualities of the scene are significant. Humbert is aware of the 'copulation of clichés' he presents, and he also refers to the film-like qualities of this passage (315). Appel suggests that the battle between Humbert Humbert and Quilty is about 'manhood, sexuality, and guns', an American cliché. This is the only murder that Humbert actually commits, despite his extended fantasies about dispatching numerous other

---

23 Noted by Appel, The Annotated Lolita, p. 120.
characters in his narrative. Near the end of the story, Humbert refers to G. Edward Grammar,
a thirty-five-year-old New York office manager who had just been arrayed\textsuperscript{25} on a charge of murdering his [...] wife, Dorothy. Bidding for the perfect crime, Ed had bludgeoned his wife and put her into a car. [...] It appeared to be a routine highway accident at first. Alas, the woman’s battered body did not match up with only minor damage suffered by the car. I did better (287-88).

Nabokov specializes in exceptionally persuasive narrators who may convince the reader that cruelty and violence are necessary or normal. In both Lolita and Ada, the text is the product of penance or catharsis and demonstrates a significant link between violence, guilt and the writing process. Humbert sublimes violent impulses and emotions into the writing of his confession, while Van may be atoning for Lucette’s death through the writing of Ada.\textsuperscript{26} Grief, guilt and immortality are central to Lolita and Ada: some characters become more important after they die and are, in fact, immortalized within a text. Humbert knows his confession will not be made until after Lolita dies, and the writing of his memoir in some ways purges him of his guilt. Lucette Veen is fairly insignificant until her death, but the guilt Van feels for having incited her to suicide pervades his writing.\textsuperscript{27}

In Ada, Van and Ada possess the ‘rhetorical ardor of storytellers’, thus preventing unbiased reporting. Incest no longer figures as a taboo, and Van’s ability to manipulate words often makes his otherwise brutish behaviour acceptable. Remembering his arousal on first contact with Ada, Van describes the resultant

\textsuperscript{24} Appel, Nabokov’s Dark Cinema, p. 145.
\textsuperscript{25} Nabokov’s use of arrayed in place of arraigned was an intentional pun (Appel, The Annotated Lolita, p. 445).
\textsuperscript{27} In Bend Sinister, Krug’s wife also becomes more important after her death, and Krug’s grief for his wife is a major part of the story.
excitement in his dreams, ‘signaling fire and violent release’ (37). This early image links Van’s passion for Ada with a wide array of violent events.

Van often considers resorting to violence in real or imagined encounters with Ada’s lovers, but early in their relationship, he imagines a virginal Ada fleeing from his advances, possibly to seek assistance from an imagined footman at Ardis who is ‘punchable with sharp-ringed knuckles, puncturable like a bladder of blood’ (79). In a duel with Ada’s lover Percy de Prey, Van intends not only to triumph but to cause his opponent considerable pain: he ‘contemplated him, hoping for a pretext to inflict a certain special device of exotic torture that he had not yet had the opportunity to use in a real fight’ (218). When Van is warned of Ada’s infidelity through an anonymous letter, he wonders how to determine which servant composed the note. He remarks, ‘To interview them all – torture the males, rape the females – would be, of course, absurd and degrading’ (228). The fact that he even considers the possibility is an important clue to Van’s brutality. He soon finds out that the maid Blanche was the letter’s author, and he threatens to strangle her if she is at all reticent about the details of Ada’s infidelity. Blanche describes Monsieur le Comte as ‘crushing [Ada] like a grunting bear’ (236).

For Van, avenging the betrayals becomes a matter of survival, for ‘he had to destroy, or at least to maim for life, two men’. He further comments, ‘The rapture of their destruction would not mend his heart, but would certainly rinse his brain’ (238). However, his temper and natural volatility embroil him in an almost ‘accidental’ duel with Captain Tapper on his way to meet Ada’s lover Rack. The walking stick he acquires shortly after his first encounter with Tapper has an ‘alpenstockish point capable of gouging out translucent bulging eyes’ (241). In fact, canes are an

important weapon for Van.29 He walks along ‘beheading’ plants as he states that Ada’s lesbian relationships are insignificant – for Van, only heterosexual relationships equal true betrayal (Ada 158-59). Boyd notes the ‘double deflowering’ occurring here, and it is significant that flowers may represent the female genitalia.30

Van eagerly anticipates his duel with Tapper:

Shooting it out with that incidental clown furnished unhoped-for relief, particularly since Rack would no doubt accept a plain thrashing in lieu of combat...At first he toyed with the idea of killing his adversary: quantitatively, it would afford him the greatest sense of release; qualitatively, it suggested all sorts of moral and legal complications. Inflicting a wound seemed an inept half-measure. He decided to do something artistic and tricky, such as shooting the pistol out of the fellow’s hand, or parting for him his thick brushy hair in the middle (243).

Before the duel with Tapper actually takes place, Van composes a flippant note to be read by his father in the event of his death: ‘Dad, I had a trivial quarrel with a stranger whose face I slapped and who killed me in a duel near Kalugano. Sorry!’ (244). Van is injured in the duel, but he emerges alive. When he arrives to challenge Rack, Van finds him in the hospital. His plans are seemingly thwarted, as Rack cannot even walk and is not even conscious of Van’s lecture to him. Van also cannot deliver Percy de Prey to a violent end, as Percy is killed in the invasion (where he is wounded in the thigh and then shot in the temple). Ada’s two suitors seem to have received a punishment regardless of Van’s inability to ‘punish’ them himself. Van the narrator muses, ‘What a strange coincidence! Either Ada’s lethal shafts were at work, or he, Van, had somehow managed to dispatch her two wretched lovers in a duel with a dummy’ (254). Van is also well aware of the role of satisfaction and vindication in duelling, because ‘the dying duelist dies a happier man than his live foe ever will be’ (265). Van has extensively planned revenge against the blackmailer Beauharnais. In

30 Ibid., p. 42.
fact, his father earlier ordered a blackmailer of his own to be mysteriously shot, and Kim was ‘carried out of his cottage with one eye hanging on a red thread and the other drowned in its blood’ (347).

Nabokov underscores a symbolic link between sex and violence: nearly every member of the family of the creator of the Villa Venus chain of brothels suffers a violent death. Events at one Villa Venus take an unexpected turn – the services of boys must be discontinued after an Earl discovers his kidnapped son has been pressed into service there as a male prostitute – and the Earl kills the man his son is with ‘by mistake’ (279). While the murder committed by the Earl might be read as a punishment for homosexual activity, a further connection is made between homosexuality and violence when a lesbian in charge of one of the houses strangles two of the girls working for her. Whether heterosexual or same-sex, the act of coitus itself may be read as destructive: ‘Highborn gentlemen [...] proved to be such violent copulators that some of their younger victims had to be hospitalized and removed to ordinary lupanars.’ (280).

Despite his frequent invocations of violence, Van believes in the inherent banality of violent death:

all ends are banal – hangings, the Nuremberg Old Maid’s iron sting, shooting oneself, last words in the brand-new Ladore hospital, mistaking a drop of thirty thousand feet for the airplane’s washroom, being poisoned by one’s wife, expecting a bit of Crimean hospitality, congratulating Mr. and Mrs. Vinelander. (346).

In fact, Van often plots the death of Ada’s husband: ‘Van had murdered good Andrey Andreevich Vinelander so often, so thoroughly, at all the dark crossroads of the mind, that now the poor chap [...] presented all the depressing features of an unnecessary resurrection’ (401). He even imagines a lively duel which never takes place (417). Generally, in the back of Van’s mind lurk ‘plans of rape and riot’ (449).
The young Lucette often spies on Van and Ada during their furtive trysts. Ada mentions, ‘[W]e are watched by Lucette, whom I’ll strangle some day’ (119). This comment does prefigure Lucette’s death, though she will die by her own hand. Van is also associated with suicide: he must deliver a lecture on the ‘Psychology of Suicide’, and he contemplates killing himself on several occasions (350-51, 561). His thoughts of jumping to his death provide a link to Lucette’s own suicide. While on a cruise ship with Van, Lucette overdoses on pills and jumps over the ship’s rails to drown herself (388-89). This death is closer to murder than suicide, since Van is largely responsible for Lucette’s despair. His full realization of the seriousness of her infatuation with him appears to come only after her death (despite numerous hints which should have alerted him to Lucette’s despair), and Boyd notes that Van and Ada are both ‘a study in the moral blindness that can accompany even the most exceptional intelligence and love’ (93).

Following Lucette’s death, she gains considerable prominence in Van’s life. His increased attention to her in the text indicates to some extent his remorse. Comparatively, Humbert is even more direct about his use of text as an intended homage to Lolita. He writes that his only regret is that he did not ‘leave the town, the country, the continent, the hemisphere, – indeed the globe – that very same night’ instead of consummating his relationship with her, and his confession may be read as a labour of love and an offering to his Lolita (123). Just as Lucette does, Lolita becomes even more important in her absence. Indeed, the final line of Humbert’s confession affirms that life within a text ‘is the only immortality you and I may share, my Lolita’ (309).
The tension between death and art is of primary importance in Transparent Things. For Nabokov, death becomes a 'mere figure [...] a transposition of terms', and sixteen deaths occur in Transparent Things.31

At the novel’s outset, the protagonist Hugh Person buys a figurine of a female skier, carved ‘by a homosexual convict, rugged Armand Rave, who had strangled his boyfriend’s incestuous sister’ (13).32 This purchase anticipates Hugh’s relationship with a woman named Armande, who is an avid skier and eventually dies when accidentally strangled by Hugh.

Violence is linked with Armande from her initial appearance in the novel. When Hugh first meets her, she reveals to him that she likes ‘books about Violence and Oriental Wisdom’ (26). Nabokov clearly intends these to be unusual and slightly exotic literary interests for a woman, and her naming of the first interest further prefigures her murder. The motif of violence and unsettlement remains with Hugh: in his diary, he writes that he has experienced a unique ‘romantic tumult’ (27).

In Transparent Things, the violence of dream-life proves to outweigh the violence of conscious life. Hugh suffers from severe insomnia, and the resultant complications eventually ruin his life. His medical remedies often produce disturbing dreams, and one ‘erotic’ dream involves violating with various implements a ‘sleeping beauty’ who is ‘more or less disarticulated’ (59). Hugh’s analyst questions him about ‘destructive urges’ in his dreams and follows her questions with some Freudian pseudo-jargon about the meaning of dreams and the impulses they represent. ‘In fact at puberty sexual desire arises as a substitute for the desire to kill, which one normally fulfills in one’s dreams; and insomnia is merely the fear of becoming aware in sleep of one’s unconscious desires for slaughter and sex’ (61).

The analyst proves to be exceptionally persistent in her questioning, also foreshadowing Armande's death:

By the way, when did Mr. Person begin to hate Mrs. Person? No answer. Was hate, maybe, part of his feeling for her from the very first moment? No answer. Did he ever buy her a turtleneck sweater? No answer. Was he annoyed when she found it too tight at the throat? "I shall vomit," said Hugh, "if you persist in pestering me with all that odious rot." (61).

Nabokov's well-known distaste for Freud surfaces in Hugh's rejection of the analyst's interrogation and interpretation of his dreams. Ultimately, Hugh's dreams influence his waking life rather than vice versa as suggested by the analyst. A fairly extensive discussion of strangulation appears in the novel, in which two methods of strangulation, essentially including a frontal approach and one from behind, are outlined. The latter approach is both 'safer' and 'more professional', and it 'consists in pressing both thumbs hard against the back of the boy's or, preferably, girl's neck and working upon the throat with one's fingers' (79-80). Hugh accidentally strangles Armande as part of a dream in which he attempts to save Giulia, his lover, from a suicidal window-jump during a fire. The realization of what he has done comes to Hugh only after he awakens.

At the story's end, the image of the skier figurine is re-presented in the hotel room Hugh visits to evoke Armande's image once again. Hugh's fiery death can be connected to his re-creation of the romantic scene from early in his relationship with Armande: Nabokov's characters are often punished for their attempts to return to the past.

According to D. Barton Johnson, *Look at the Harlequins!* takes as its primary theme

the mystery of personal identity and the transcendence of the self to be found in love and art. More immediately, LATH is a parody of (auto-)

biography that plays off the naïve expectations of readers (and writers) who confuse art and life, imagination and reality.33

In particular, the women in the book have been described as 'strikingly artificial', thus casting the violence in this book in a different light than the other texts considered in this chapter. In Nabokov's earlier novels, cruel characters who lack a conscience and compassion are disturbing. Here, the presence of evident artifice precludes such a feeling: the amorality of Vadim Vadimych's life suggests that the violent events presented are necessary for advancement of the plot.

Vadim Vadimych's wife Iris is shot, and Starov, her murderer, also shoots himself. It is a horrific death, in which Starov fires from such close range 'that he seemed to prod her with his large pistol' (61).34 The description suggests that the gun is like a phallus, and the language chosen introduces an element of sexual violation into the death of Iris.

Because Look at the Harlequins! is in some ways an amalgam of Nabokov's previous work as well as a parodic autobiography of sorts, many of Nabokov's textual figures and ideas resurface. Vadim Vadimych draws attention to the absurdity of suicide for the creative individual. Vadim himself says he 'never experienced the least urge to commit suicide, that silly waste of selfhood (a gem in any light)', but realizes he must have looked like a man contemplating suicide, attired in dark colours and sobbing as he walked (75).

Vadim also chooses his words as only a writer would - as when he is talking with a friend who cannot leave any thought unfinished. For him to do so 'is almost as bad as a lifer's recollection of that last little rape nipped in the sweet bud by the intrusion of an accursed policeman' (78).

When Annette has worked as Vadim’s secretary for some time, he confesses his love to her, but she describes their first embrace as ‘brutal’. In fact, their first ‘tryst’ is unsuccessful, and Vadim laments that

by the time I had her in a passably convenient position of surrender, I was an impotent wreck. We were lying naked, in a loose clinch. Presently her mouth opened against mine in her first free kiss...I hastened to possess her. She exclaimed I was disgustingly hurting her and with a vigorous wriggle expelled the blooded and thrashing fish. When I tried to close her fingers around it in humble substitution, she snatched her hand away, calling me a dirty débauche (gryaznyy razvratnik). I had to demonstrate myself the messy act while she looked on in amazement and sorrow (94).

During a moment of frustration with Annette, Vadim strikes ‘a fat anonymous book’ (99). After their daughter Isabel is born, the quality of the couple’s sexual relations deteriorates. Vadim is haunted by ‘echoes of her pangs in the darkest corridors of my brain and a frightening stained window at every turn – the afterimage of a wounded orifice’, again tempting the reader to formulate a Freudian interpretation (110). Later, he cannot rid himself of thoughts of infidelity by any means, ‘short of castrating’ himself (112).

In hopes of consummating his affair with Dolly von Borg, Vadim arranges to meet her at the home of her friend Bridget Dolan. Unbeknownst to him, there is a party taking place, and Dolly’s boyfriend Terry Todd is in attendance.

I am not a fighter. I only hurt my hand against a tall lamp and lost both shoes in the scuffle...Dolly, retransformed by the alchemy of her blazing anger...virtually tore my necktie in two, yelling she could easily get me jailed for rape but preferred to see me crawling back to my consort and harem of baby-sitters (118).

Annette drowns after the couple’s separation, and her death is mentioned almost casually: ‘the prettiest lakeside got swept away, and the drowned bodies of its two occupants were never retrieved’ (129). Bel is seemingly indifferent to her mother’s death, but this appears to be due to abuse suffered at the hands of Annette’s
friend Nelly Langley: 'Langley was mean and cruel and hated her, and only last year whipped her; she had welts all over (uncovering for display her right thigh, which now, at least, was impeccably white and smooth).’ (135).

Vadim Vadimych talks with his ‘long-lost fellow traveler’, Oleg, about his novel *A Kingdom by the Sea*, and this scene allows Nabokov to poke fun at critical misinterpretation of *Lolita*. Oleg, emphasising the sordid elements of Vadim's presumably controversial publication, calls the book an

obscene novelette about little Lola or Lotte, whom some Austrian Jew or reformed pederast rapes after murdering her mother – no, excuse me – marrying mama first before murdering her – we like to legalize everything in the West, don't we, Vadim Vadimovich? (172)

Vadim then punches Oleg to defend the honour of his work.

The terrible deaths suffered by Vadim Vadimych's wives serve primarily to remove them from the scene. In a sense, this periodic marital reshuffling becomes 'necessary' if the 'you' mentioned (no specific name is ever given for this individual), Vadim's last love, is to enter the scene in the final segment of the book. Violent death thereby assumes a utilitarian function.

*  

The theme of women and violence frequently functions as an inter-textual tool in Nabokov's works. There are echoes of Anna Karenina and Madame Bovary in *Ada*. Notably, Lucette's stream-of-consciousness thoughts prior to her suicide echo Anna's thoughts before her own death. Lucette is also linked to Ophelia and a watery grave, and Lucette herself draws attention to this through her punning.

*Laughter in the Dark* owes some elements to Tolstoi's story 'The Devil'. Nabokov acknowledges this influence in the name of the actress Dorianna Karenina,

---

who apparently is unfamiliar with Tolstoi. Tolstoi composed two endings to ‘The Devil’. In the first, Irtenev commits suicide because he is tormented by his adulterous desire for the peasant Stepanida. In the second variant, he shoots Stepanida and then serves a prison sentence. Clearly, *Laughter in the Dark* borrows from the second variant, as no Nabokovian protagonist would commit suicide out of tormented lust. Stepanida is a fitting predecessor for Margot, though Margot possesses a cruel streak absent from Stepanida’s character.

Allusions to the strangulation of Desdemona in *Othello* and murder in Wilde’s ‘The Ballad of Reading Gaol’ figure in *Transparent Things*, and allusions to Prosper Merimée’s novel *Carmen* abound in *Lolita*. Appel explains:

> Like H.H., José Lizzarrabengoa, Carmen’s abandoned and ill-fated lover, tells his story from prison (but not until the third chapter, when the narrative frame is withdrawn). The story of love, loss, and revenge is appropriate. The *Carmen* allusions also serve as a trap for the

---

37 I have included here a few of the appropriate stanzas from Wilde’s poem, printed in Richard Ellmann and Robert O’Clair (eds), *The Norton Anthology of Modern Poetry*, 2nd edn, New York, 1988, pp. 115-

---

He did not wear his scarlet coat,
    For blood and wine are red,
And blood and wine were on his hands
    When they found him with the dead,
The poor dead woman whom he loved,
    And murdered in her bed.

Yet each man kills the thing he loves,
    By each let this be heard,
Some do it with a bitter look,
    Some with a flattering word,
The coward does it with a kiss,
    The brave man with a sword!

Some kill their love when they are young,
    And some when they are old;
Some strangle with the hands of Lust,
    Some with the hands of Gold:
The kindest use a knife, because
    The dead so soon grow cold.

Some love too little, some too long,
    Some sell, and others buy;
Some do the deed with many tears,
    And some without a sigh:
For each man kills the thing he loves,
    Yet each man does not die.
sophisticated reader who is misled into believing that H.H., like José, will murder his treacherous Carmen.\textsuperscript{38}

The lyrics of the popular song ‘Carmen’ also resonate here, including ‘O my charmin’, our dreadful fights…and our final row, I And the gun I killed you with, O my Carmen, I The gun I am holding now’ (61-62). In a parenthetical reference, Humbert remarks, ‘Drew his .32 automatic, I guess, and put a bullet through his moll’s eye’ (62).

The connection between Charlotte Haze and Charlotte in \textit{The Sorrows of Young Werther} is worth noting. It is in fact an inverted connection, as the two women meet very different fates. Charlotte Haze is killed just as she learns of Humbert’s passion for her daughter, while Werther shoots himself because his Charlotte has married someone else. Quilty, as part of his ‘cryptogrammic paper chase’, once uses the pseudonym ‘Lucas Picador’. Appel notes that

\begin{quote}
  in \textit{Merimée’s novella}, Lucas the picador is Carmen’s last lover; Jose, tired of killing her lovers, kills Carmen. In bullfighting, the picador is the member of the company who uses a lance to annoy and weaken the bull just prior to the kill. Although Quilty seems to cast himself as the picador, it is the tired bull who will ultimately make the kill (427-28).
\end{quote}

Lo explains what strange activities children participated in at Quilty’s Duk Duk Ranch, and Humbert remarks parenthetically that ‘Sade’s Justine was twelve at the start’ (276). The sadistic link to Quilty’s desires (namely his taste for exotica) should be noted: Appel remarks that in \textit{Justine}, ‘[t]he title character…exists solely for the pleasures of an infinite succession of sadistic libertines. She undergoes an array of rapes, beatings, and tortures as monstrously imaginative as they are frequent’ (442).

Concluding with the examination of inter-textual violence in Nabokov’s works, it is possible to chart the evolution of his use of violence and brutality. From

\textsuperscript{38} Appel, \textit{The Annotated Lolita}, p. 358.
his textual borrowings, Nabokov employs violence as cliché, eventually develops the concept of memoir as atonement for 'the deliberate infliction of pain', and finally presents violence as a dark element in the inseparable mix of imagination and reality that pervades his final novels. Women in Nabokov's texts range from the cruel female who inflicts violence to the attractive female exuding a dangerous sexuality to the bothersome or unsightly female who must be removed from the scene.

Pervading the links between women and violence in Nabokov's novels is the authorial and narratorial male gaze. As we will see, this gaze remains an important element utilized by male writers in the decades following the production of the novels discussed in this chapter: it is a useful tool for comparing the possible textual differences stemming from gender difference.
Misogyny, the Male Gaze, and Fantasies of Violence: Examining
Limonov, Erofeev, and Miloslavskii

In their study of Assyrian art, Bersani and Dutoit note a 'sexually induced fascination with violence'.¹ Millett elaborates upon this idea, positing that

[p]atriarchal societies typically link feelings of cruelty with sexuality, the latter often equated both with evil and with power. This is apparent both in the sexual fantasy reported by psychoanalysis and that reported by pornography. The rule here associates sadism with the male ("the masculine role") and victimization with the female ("the feminine role").²

It seems that male writers more often link violence with sexual fantasy than do female writers, and we can see ample evidence of this in the work of a number of contemporary male writers, including Eduard Limonov, Viktor Erofeev, and Iurii Miloslavskii. Costlow, Sandler and Vowles place this link between sex and violence in a larger context, noting: 'Kollontai and more recent feminists remind us that the sexual adventures of heterosexual men have, in Russia as elsewhere, sometimes involved violent repression of women'.³ They also identify Erofeev's 'grounding of some forms of sexual pleasure in the destruction of the human body'⁴ and observe that the writing of Limonov and Erofeev 'often depicts the violent sexual abuse of women'.⁵

³ Costlow, Sandler and Vowles, 'Introduction', p. 17.
⁴ Ibid., p. 30.
⁵ Ibid., p. 31.
Heldt notes that traditionally, women in Russian literature, whether 'idealized or demonized, [...] emerge as the locus of male desire projected onto their bodies (or spirits, if nonsexual body/soul conventions prevail'). One of my aims in this chapter is to pursue the ways in which this male desire manifests itself. The main focus of the chapter will be a comparison of misogyny and the male gaze as presented in Limonov's *Eto ia, Edichka* (It's Me, Eddie, 1976) and Viktor Erofeev's *Russkaia krasavitsa* (Russian Beauty, 1980-82), followed by an examination of violence in the male-centred world portrayed in the short stories of Iurii Miloslavskii.

It is worth noting that Limonov, Erofeev and Miloslavskii all are omitted from major dictionaries of Russian literature, and all have had the seriousness of their writing questioned. The presentation of violence in the works of these contemporary male writers appears to be located on the borders of serious and popular writing – where high and low culture intersect. As noted in the introduction to this thesis, violence and other taboo-shattering textual elements hardly are the exclusive domain of artistic literature.

**The Male Gaze**

I want to frame my analysis with a discussion of the male gaze and its implications. Gaze theory originated with feminist film critics but has translated easily to literary texts. As E. Ann Kaplan writes, 'Two basic Freudian concepts – voyeurism and fetishism – have been used to explain what exactly woman represents and the mechanisms that come into play for the male spectator watching a female

---

Laura Mulvey has identified three aspects of the male gaze which I will adapt for literature as follows: the first is the gaze of the author (from outside the text) and the second is the gaze of men within the narrative. I will not be discussing the third aspect of the male gaze – spectatorship, though a reader-response analysis of these texts differentiating the male and female readership certainly would be interesting. The primary thrust of this theory is that the gaze contributes to the ‘eroticization and objectification’ of the female. Further, gaze is differentiated according to gender. E. Ann Kaplan notes the elements of action and possession in the male gaze which are absent from that of the female. The female gaze is thus essentially passive. In psychoanalytic terms, the gaze serves to neutralize or destroy the threat of woman. Karen Horney’s 1932 article ‘The Dread of Woman’ highlights what Kaplan calls the ‘apparently contradictory attitudes of glorification and disparagement’. Kaplan adds that ‘the gaze is not necessarily literally male, but to own and activate the gaze...is to be in the masculine position’. As we will see, Edichka looks, while Ira is the object of multiple male gazes. Kaplan writes, ‘Women [...] have learned to associate their sexuality with domination by the male gaze, a position involving a degree of masochism in finding their objectification erotic’. Domination and masochism may readily be aligned with violence, and the association of these elements with female sexuality implies a certain complicity in female objectification. In textual terms, however, this complicity often is absent, and female characters are subjected to a male gaze which may define their identity and shape the way in which they are perceived.

---

11 Ibid., p. 30.
In *Subversive Intent*, Suleiman notes the ‘fundamental aggressiveness’ of the avant-garde. Subversion of the status quo is a primary characteristic of the avant-garde, and, as is well known, violation of literary taboos became exceptionally popular following the dawn of glasnost. In their use of *mat* and description of sex and violence, Limonov, Erofeev, and Miloslavskii all pushed the boundaries of acceptable expression. Olga Matich has identified Limonov as ‘[belonging] to the Russian avant-garde tradition. Systematic subversion of literary and cultural norms and social radicalism characterize both his poetry and prose, before emigration and after.’ Similarly, Deming Brown comments on Erofeev’s post-*Metropol* fiction:

> Not only were his works loaded with explicit physiological and sexual detail that made them seem nasty and cynical; their displays of sadistic cruelty, of extreme pain inflicted on innocent individuals – and often their destruction – were at times simply repulsive. At the same time, his stories did not seem to be simply mischievous challenges to public taste or mere self-indulgent exercises in indecency. For one thing, they were written with considerable literary sophistication and virtuosity; for another, their concern with the ugly and the pathological suggested the possibility of a deep moral dimension.’

Serafima Roll has noted the recurring theme of re-surfacing as a way of contextualizing violence in many of Viktor Erofeev’s short stories. She writes, ‘As a cultural paradigm, it [re-surfacing] underlines a renewed interest in all kinds of social issues: rampant violence, political oppression, racist and nationalist ideology, Russian imperialist politics, male chauvinism, sexual colonization, the suppression of

---

bodily drives and sexuality'. Whereas Erofeev’s work may be characterized as highly stylized and poetic, even self-consciously literary, Limonov appears to be self-consciously anti-poetic.

Eduard Limonov was born in Kharkiv, where he also spent his childhood. After moving to Moscow, he emigrated to the West in 1974, living first in New York and then in France. Born Eduard Savenko, he took ‘Limonov’ as a pseudonym. Karen Ryan-Hayes describes Limonov as ‘an extremist whose satire borders on vituperation’. She writes that Eto ia, Edichka, ‘breaks virtually every canon of both official and dissident Russian literature’. Ryan-Hayes writes, ‘Limonov insists on the ambiguity of labels such as good and evil; Elena especially defies such rigid classification. She is not [...] good despite her corruption; depravity is part of her new American character’ (447).

In this segment of the chapter, I will discuss Eduard Limonov’s Eto ia, Edichka (It’s Me, Eddie) and Viktor Erofeev’s Russkaia krasavitsa (Russian Beauty) with reference to their manifestations of misogyny and revelations of violent fantasy. These revelations sometimes cross over into ‘reality’ (and in using this word, I iterate Nabokov’s statement that the term must always be contained within quotation marks).

Eto ia, Edichka and Russkaia krasavitsa invite comparison on a number of points. Both are written in the style of ‘confessional prose,’ and the reader is

---

17 Roll, ‘Re-Surfacing’, p. 27. See Erofeev’s Izbrannoe, ili karmannyi apokalipsis, Moscow, 1993, for gender-related violence in ‘Devushka i smert’ (Death and the Maiden), pp. 129-37; and ‘Zhizn’ s idiotom’ (Life with an Idiot), pp. 178-94; violence which is not explicitly gender-related figures in ‘Galoshi’ (Galoshes), pp. 172-78; ‘Telo Anny, ili konets russkogo avangarda’ (Anna’s Body, or the End of the Russian Avant-Garde), pp. 120-31; and ‘Popugaichik’ (The Parakeet), pp. 195-204.

18 Various critics have noted the acidic connotations for the pseudonym; a double meaning may be seen in the title of Limonov’s political publication Limonka, which is the Russian slang term for a hand grenade.


encouraged to interpret the contents as 'reality'. Estelle Jelinek has noted that 'intense feelings of hate, love, and fear, the disclosure of explicit sexual encounters, or the detailing of painful psychological experiences are matters on which autobiographers are generally silent'. As both Eto ia, Edichka and Russkaia krasavitsa are memoirs of sorts, it is significant to note that neither Erofeev nor Limonov follows the convention for autobiography: emotions and sexuality come to the fore in each novel. Karen Ryan-Hayes suggests that 'Bruss's analysis of Lolita as autobiography is eminently relevant to Limonov's work':

For Nabokov, autobiography is viable only when one recognizes that it creates truth as much as expresses it; thus his burlesque of autobiography in Lolita exposes the delusions of sincerity and the narcissistic indulgence of the confessional tradition. Not only does his own autobiography flaunt its artificiality, but achieves an almost Olympian impersonality as well, suggesting that no autobiographer ought to depict himself without first becoming aware of how much fiction is implicit in the idea of a "self".

In such texts, the workings of the imagination are an expected component: no matter how outlandish the fantasies, the reader is expected to accept this information as part of the narratorial persona. Edichka and Irina Tarakanova, both of whom are protagonists prone to excess, also link the texts, and each of them exists on the margins to some extent. Cynthia Simmons has noted in detail the liminality of Edichka's character and behaviour; like Edichka, Ira tends towards socially unacceptable behaviour and experiences some alienation. Finally, the texts share some similarities in narrative style: each is intentionally titillating or shocking, with

---

22 Quoted in Ryan-Hayes, Contemporary Russian Satire, p. 113.
frequent use of obscenity and graphic sexual description. Simmons' category of 'aberrant discourse' may also be applied to these texts. 

Limonov's *Eto iа, Edichka*, the now infamous story of the immigrant Edichka and his adventures in New York, presents a semi-autobiographical male narrator who persistently has violent fantasies (particularly focusing on harming females), on which he occasionally acts. He claims to do this as retribution for lost love, and in some ways, the text tracks his search for self and his process of self-discovery. Edichka's description of female characters invariably includes an assessment of physical appearance and sexual suitability, as well as an often cruel appraisal of their flaws. The implications of the 'fictional memoir' have often been discussed in connection with Limonov's text, especially with regard to his personal politics and his professed love for weapons.

Edichka has an antagonistic relationship to most people around him, particularly women. Most of his extreme behaviour stems from the departure of his wife Elena. Despite this, he claims that love is the most important thing in his life.

Ann Shukman has commented that 'Edichka has a curious innocence: it is quite without sadism for one thing. There is no rape, no sexual violence.' Here my view differs from Shukman's: although Edichka does not actually rape or abuse women, he does ponder the possibility at length. His fantasy life is such an important element of the novel that it merits extensive mention.

---

25 Ibid., p. 5.
26 This phrase was appended to the title in the English translation; see Eduard Limonov, *It's Me, Eddie*, trans. S.L. Campbell, New York, 1983. I have chosen to call attention to it here because of the questions the text raises in terms of the narrator's connection to the author: they share a name and numerous biographical details. Limonov's former wife Elena chose to capitalize on her semi-fictional portrayal in the novel by publishing her own (quasi-pornographic) book: see Elena Shchapova, *Eto iа*, *Elena*, New York, 1984.
Edichka’s misogyny stems not only from the perceived wrongs done to him by Elena but also from imagined female scorn, and he admits that Elena represents all females for him (48). His desire to use and abuse various women alternates with his resolve to abandon romantic involvement with females altogether. His imagined vindication with Elena takes shape in various ways, whether strangling her (he actually keeps a rope under the bedroom rug), planning to rape her, or killing himself (we learn that he has attempted suicide three times). When he attempts to reify his fantasies into reality, he becomes frustrated (e.g. buying a pair of handcuffs only to find out they are intended as a toy). The mere possibility of revenge gives him some comfort after Elena’s betrayal. Edichka elaborates on his pre-Elena misogyny, saying that only with her did it subside. Of course, because of her it also returns. He hates the mystery of women (and this links to Freud’s discussion of the uncanny: he presents the female genitalia as simultaneously heimlich and unheimlich). After Elena, Edichka says he would rather have a fantasy than a vulgar woman. He claims to be much more attracted to mannequins that live women - but he admits they also frighten him and tells of his bizarre daydreams in which he rips away their clothing and attempts to violate them. Because Elena has humiliated and used him, he must now return the favour to the entire female gender. Edichka’s misogyny is not a passive one; rather, he desires to punish all women for what Elena has done to him. He mentions his attraction to ‘malformed specimens’ (129), and his relationship with a Jewish woman called Sonia is marked by indifference and occasional cruelty. He

28 In Limonov’s novel His Butler’s Story, Eduard receives a letter from a girlfriend after she has attempted suicide: ‘I get the feeling in bed that you’re using one woman to revenge yourself on the whole female race. What I’d really like is for your Elena to finally come back to you so you could “live happily ever after and die the same day”, and then Limonov would stop taking revenge on women as a group, and wouldn’t be in such a hurry to take personal revenge on as many as he could, and would be kinder and more attentive and would write different kinds of books’ (p. 246).
characterizes unloved women as disgusting and pathetic, and claims that witnessing them in their most humiliating moments is 'worse than murder' (136).

When Edichka tells his friend Kirill of his desire for a male lover, he envisions himself as the feminine figure. He now wants someone to take care of him – in short, he now wants to adopt a passive role. He has already expressed some envy of women, and now he wants to assume their position; he demonstrates this through expressing his love for strong men and his desire to be dominated. Raymond, Edichka’s first potential lover, also expresses a hatred for women, calling them unclean, greedy, and repulsive (74). He too implies that homosexuality in some cases derives from misogyny. But once Raymond reveals his materialistic, bourgeois side, Edichka associates him with the American capitalists who now attract Elena, and he fantasizes about slitting Raymond’s throat [‘although it wasn’t he who had raped me, I had raped myself’] (87).

Kaplan suggests that ‘dominance-submission patterns are apparently a crucial part of both male and female sexuality as constructed in western capitalism’. This is significant both for Edichka in New York and Ira in late Soviet Russia in which commodities and material goods are a constant presence, and where sex, love and death themselves become part of the exchange.

Edichka views American civilization as the entity that truly stole Elena from him; he desires the destruction of this world (43), and he says that this experience has caused him to lose interest in ‘cultured white women’, whom he labels ‘monsters of indifference’ (177). He also rejects ‘dried-up American women intellectuals’ (210). His homosexual encounters then seem to centre on the opposite criteria: black men who appear to be vagrants. With his new choice of lovers, he appears not only to be

29 Kaplan, ‘Is the Gaze Male?’, p. 27.
rejecting the white American females who have caused him such emotional pain: it also seems as though he is attempting to violate a taboo deeply entrenched in Russian culture.

Edichka’s first consummated homosexual encounter begins with a tussle in which a man sitting in a vacant lot attempts to strangle him, and Edichka duly notes the parallel with his attempted strangulation of Elena (99). After sleeping with a man, Edichka thinks he identifies with Elena and can now understand what she feels.

While in a drunken stupor, Edichka conflates fantasy and reality until it is no longer clear which acts of violence he perpetrated against Elena and what he only imagined. He tells of his fascination with a movie in which a killer is commissioned to murder an ex-model, but he falls in love with her even though he is gay – this plot is a clear twisting of the Edichka-Elena story (145). In a scene redolent of cinematic cliché, Edichka imagines walking in on Elena and one of her lovers, shooting them while they lie in bed (147). Others share his view of violence as a fitting punishment for infidelity: his friend Alexander tells him he was a fool not to kill Elena and says he would kill his own wife if they did not have a child (94). When Edichka thinks of taking revenge on Elena, he considers what his childhood friends in Kharkiv would have said – he should have knifed her.

Edichka describes his pain in terms of powerlessness: his fantasies of violence represent an attempt at retaliation but also evince his attempt at asserting power. When he comes up with the idea of raping Elena, he cries even as he makes preparations to enact his plan (46); he notes, ‘The dream of raping Elena went hand in hand with the dream of killing her’ (he has hidden a noose under the bedroom rug), and he also thinks of his own death (47). Edichka writes that because of this noose (and by extension, because of the killing fantasies), ‘maybe that’s why I escaped the
outbursts that could have led to murder, after all I was sure that I could always kill her, that I could at any time' (47-48). Later in the text, Edichka emphasizes the fine line between his fantasy life and reality when he asks rhetorically about Elena, ‘Didn’t I want to embrace her corpse? Didn’t I write suicide notes and then strangle her? Or was that just something I imagined?’ (165)

The psychoanalytic critic Jessica Benjamin writes that violence is predicated on the denial of the other person's independent subjectivity and autonomy. Violence is a way of expressing or asserting control over an other, of establishing one's own autonomy and negating the other person's. It is a way of repudiating dependency while attempting to avoid the consequent feeling of aloneness. It makes the other an object but retains possession of her or him.30

Interestingly, we learn of Elena's identification with the title character in The Story of O, who infamously relinquishes her selfhood to permit her complete subjection and objectification (156). Ironically, Edichka dismisses Elena's identification with pornographic film heroines as nonsense while also devising these elaborate fantasies of her injury and death (149).31

In his calmer moments, Edichka's imaginings are revealed not as violent but merely as disturbing. Remembering Elena, he wonders why they never had a child. In one fantasy, he dreams of kidnapping Elena, impregnating her, and locking her up for the subsequent nine months (278). In this way, he thinks, he would always be able to keep a piece of her.


When Edichka recalls some of his encounters with his former wife, he paints himself as a magnanimous, forgiving individual and her as an inherently flawed creature — despite describing Elena as unwise, evil, and unhappy (294), if he loves her, he must ignore these obvious flaws. This insight comes near the end of the text, when he has finally begun to come to terms with his new relationship to her.

Matich notes that Eto ia, Edichka ‘is a contemporary variation of Oblako v štanax in that it combines revolutionary rhetoric and violence, personal megalomania and literary taboo-breaking with vulnerability in love’; she also reminds us that in Oblako v štanakh as well as Fleita-požvonochnik, ‘the lyrical hero is rejected by the women he loves in favor of a better-established husband or lover’. Edichka himself feels that fate keeps linking him to Maiakovskii.

* *

In Russkaia krasavitsa, Erofeev presents a memoir from a female point of view, that of the ‘Russian beauty’ Irina Tarakanova. Elisabeth Rich suggests a connection between Irina Tarakanova and Nabokov’s Lolita, and she takes care to note that ‘the kinship between the two novelists is based on more than sexual taboo-smashing and the predilection for shocking, supposedly decadent art; their literary philosophies are quite similar’. Azhgikhina and Goscilo claim that Irina, a female narrator, is used by the author to voice ‘his own purely male complexes and

---

33 For an analysis of Maiakovskii and misogyny, see Aleksandr Zholkovskii, ‘O genii i zlodeistve, o babe i vserossiiskom mashtabe (Progulki po Maiakovskomu’, in Aleksandr Zholkovskii and Iurii Shchelgov (eds), Mir avtora i struktura tekst: studii o russkoi literature, Tenafly, NJ, 1986, pp. 255-78.
34 Irina’s name suggests a link to Princess Tarakanova, a pretender to the throne during the time of Catherine the Great. Of course, there is irony in a beautiful woman bearing a name meaning ‘cockroach’.
problems'\textsuperscript{36} The novel opens with Ira in her gynaecologist's office for an abortion (which she does not have, although she gruesomely refers to herself as the 'grandmother of Russian abortion' on the basis of her past visits) (7). The father of her unborn baby is her now-dead elderly lover Vladimir Sergeevich.

Sex, violence and death are repeatedly linked for Ira, drawing on beliefs deeply embedded in Russian culture. The notion of beauty's power to overcome death pervades the text, but later the beauty herself (krasavitsa) becomes preoccupied with her own death. Misogyny in this text is manifested in one way through the portrayal of Irina, who often condemns herself ('Sometimes I seem to myself like an unhappy and stupid woman'; she calls herself lazy and compares her body to rotting fruit (24). Ira undermines herself as a narrator, saying that she 'has no connection at all with literature' (22). She also reinforces her own unreliability: in the middle of the text, she attempts to retract everything she has written up to that point (119). Her purported ignorance of literature seems calculated to distance her from Erofeev, though as Porter and others have noted, Ira betrays a much greater conversancy with the Russian literary tradition than she admits at first. Rich suggests that Irina's love for the poetry of Aleksandr Blok stems from a possible identification the female figures in Blok's poems, who range 'from the Beautiful Lady (a creature of perfection) to the Stranger, the Snow Maiden and the "slut" Katya in the masterpiece "The Twelve", all of whom stand as symbols of sex and bring a sort of oblivion that will pave the way toward rebirth.'\textsuperscript{37}

Irina is affected by the male gaze in an extra-diegetic sense through the way she presents herself, and the gaze also becomes apparent through the speech and

\textsuperscript{36} Nadezhda Azhgikhina and Helena Goscilo, 'Getting Under Their Skin: The Beauty Salon in Russian Women’s Lives', in Helena Goscilo and Beth Holmgren (eds), \textit{Russia. Women. Culture.}, Bloomington, IN, 1996, pp. 94-121 (p. 94).

actions of other characters. Commentary comes from numerous men and Ira's own beliefs about females. Ira looks down on most other women – because of her beauty, she tends to view other women as inferior and claims to disdain men as well, taking female lovers as a reaction. Even her female friends are subject to her cruel appraisals, and female jealousy appears to play a major role – Ira claims never to have met another woman as beautiful as herself. Ira believes herself to be the object of jealousy as well: when her acquaintance Stepan accidentally hits her with his car, she believes he wanted to cripple her and impair her beauty. She is convinced her looks are the most important thing about her, and this privileging of her physical appearance suggests a comparable importance for the gaze.

Kaplan mentions the cult of the female star, in which women 'are positioned, and position themselves, as objects for a specifically male gaze'. Ira is similarly positioned and positioning, also revealing her ambivalence as she simultaneously rejects and embraces the male gaze. To some extent, she accepts her own objectification, even while reflecting that men have always looked at her as though she were a piece of meat. She acknowledges the male gaze and compares herself to a film star, cognizant of the fact that fading beauty brings fading glory and diminished status for women like herself.

The gaze extends to judgements about Ira's sexual behaviour. Ira portrays herself as obsessed with sex and reveals she has had over a hundred lovers. One acquaintance states that promiscuous women like Ira and her friend Ksusha should be shot. She bears a scar on the bridge of her nose as a reminder of the beating she suffered for her infidelity to her second husband (88). When Ira is sacked from her job, numerous people testify against her, including her own grandfather. Most of the

38 Kaplan, 'Is the Gaze Male?', p. 33.
attacks centre around her promiscuity. Noting Ira's despair, her friend Ksiusha suggests that they commit suicide at the same time. When Ira becomes desperate for money, she decides to pose nude for a men's magazine, later realizing that her beauty has been cheapened. These photographs in the magazine present the most literal example of the male gaze within the text. The premise of the pictures is that Ira is in mourning for her dead lover – Vladimir Sergeevich is even mentioned in the magazine – and the caption states that this is proof that 'beauty conquers death' (232).

In the aftermath of the uproar over the publication, wild rumours of imprisonment, public suicide, and human trafficking reach her family (e.g. that Ira was traded at the border for some corn and a computer).

Despite her non-traditional behaviour, Ira displays surprisingly reactionary views about sexual mores. She declares her opposition to equality and her support for sexual tension and taboos because she believes eroticism is destroyed under conditions of sexual equality, adding that sex is more important than intellect for a woman - and says this is as it should be.

There is an element of melodrama to Ira's story, including a brief fantasy in which she lies in a bath full of blood – she fears social humiliation and feels that dying in disgrace would be her only option (60). A subtext of violent fantasy pervades her relationship with Vladimir Sergeevich: when she first meets him, she imagines he will strangle her for her ignorance because she misinterprets his reference when he compares her to the golden fish of Pushkin's tale (67). When she tells Vladimir Sergeevich she will grant him his wish if he will marry her, he laughs so hard he nearly drives off the road, and Ira imagines their death in a violent crash.

Ira later attends a concert with Vladimir Sergeevich and makes a scene by throwing oranges at the performers; we later learn that she has created this
disturbance because of Vladimir Sergeevich's refusal to marry her (140-43). One man calls her uncultured, and Ira takes this very seriously - she constantly attempts to escape her provincial upbringing by portraying herself as a cultured and high-class woman. Because of the scene she makes, she imagines a violent reaction from Vladimir Sergeevich, even murder. She realizes that her actions have cheapened her, and she no longer possesses the status of the golden fish. She chalks this up to typical female hysterical behaviour. Instead of striking her, Vladimir Sergeevich presents a fantasy denouement for their relationship in which he is a colonel, she is a nurse, and he shoots her because of her infidelities with the other officers (159-61). He is not immune to indulging his own fantasies - arguably this is the cause of his own death. Benjamin notes the 'violence of erotic domination', which she describes as a 'controlled, ritualized form of violence that is expressed in sexual fantasy and in some carefully institutionalized, voluntary sexual practices'. She adds that this fantasy 'embodies the desire for both independence and recognition' as well as 'yearnings for selfhood and transcendence'. For Ira, participating in Vladimir's violent sexual fantasies mean that she is defining herself on his terms.

Vladimir Sergeevich dies while in bed with Ira, and abrasions and bruises cover his body (105). When the police arrive after Vladimir Sergeevich dies, Ira must reveal details which damage his reputation if she is to avoid arrest - she must explain why he is scratched and bloody. She asks, 'Was I supposed to go to jail for his fantasies?' (124) Sex and violence went hand in hand for Vladimir, and so Ira maintains that she did not kill him; rather, he died of ecstasy. This example fits very well with what Jessica Benjamin has written about the role of the body in the linking of sex and death. She states,

39 Benjamin, 'Master and Slave', p. 292.
40 Ibid., p. 292.
The body stands for discontinuity, individuality, and life. Consequently the violation of the body in erotic violation breaks the taboo between life and death and breaks through our discontinuity from the other. While this break is the hidden secret of all eroticism, it is most clearly expressed in erotic violation. The breakdown of the tension within the individual between life and death, between assertion and loss of self, occurs in the form of violator and violated. One person maintains his or her boundary and one allows his or her boundary to be broken.

Though this violence serves to unite Ira and Vladimir, the transgression of the boundary results in Vladimir's death, and Ira spends the remainder of the text attempting to achieve this unity again. Of course, she comes to realize that it may only be achieved through her death.

For Ira, 'death began because there was no one to love', and the passing of Vladimir Sergeevich signals the beginning of her obsession with her own death. Ira's friend Veronika, whom she calls a witch, prophesies death for Ira in the near future. Ira tells Veronika of her rape fantasy dreams and later recounts the tale of her actual rape. After the fact, she is reluctant to call the police, fearing they will mock her. Veronika gives Ira the idea of martyring herself – but first Ira must decide the purpose of her suffering. Ira's occasional religiosity may be contrasted with her more frequent travesties of religion: for example, when Ksuisha enquires about Vladimir Sergeevich's impotence, she asks Irina "Have you resurrected his Lazarus?" (92). Ira's conversion to Orthodoxy is significant – particularly the fact that she converts because of fear. Although the motifs of salvation and martyrdom will be explored in greater detail in my analysis of Sadur's Iug and Vasilenko's Durochka in Chapter 4, it is important to note Ira's travesty of the salvation motif; she even mentions having a monument built in honour of her genitalia.

41 Ibid., p. 296.
Ira styles herself as a modern-day Joan of Arc and imagines her own immolation; and she claims to be seeking immortality through her own death. She admits to wanting to save herself rather than Russia and hears a voice saying that she has slept with so many men that it is time for her life to end. She determines to run around a battlefield and believes she’ll be attacked by an evil spirit – either the one who appears in her rape dreams or possibly the ghost of Vladimir Sergeevich. Though Ira has determined to die, she admits she is terrified. She vividly imagines the evil spirit as a violent destructive force which rapes and dismembers her. Ultimately the spirit doesn’t take her, and she leaves the field alive, still believing her death is imminent.

Following her unsuccessful attempt at self-sacrifice, Ira is visited by Vladimir Sergeevich’s corpse (which mysteriously appears five years younger than before his death), and he finally offers to marry her. The corpse rapes her, but she begins to enjoy the experience, requesting only that he not kill her (392-95). After this experience, she emits a corpse-like smell and comes to believe that she is decomposing while still alive. When the two talk about setting a date for their wedding, it is made explicit that Ira will kill herself to join him, and she ponders various methods of suicide, thinking she will likely wait to give birth first. The open ending of the text presents some ambiguity as to whether Ira dies, gives birth, or both as she goes to marry Vladimir Sergeevich.

_Eto ia, Edichka_ has its own open ending - as the narrator says, he is ready for anything, whether it be glory or his 'own senseless death' (322). Such an ambiguous or open ending shared by the two texts may be read vis-à-vis Mark Lipovetsky’s view: in his work on Russian postmodernism, he has identified the cultural pervasiveness of
a temporary death which one must undergo in order to be born again or to obtain a new quality. Temporary death is connected with liminal states, with the incursion of the forces of chaos which can no longer be held back by any social restrictions. Moreover, isolation, exile, the removal from one’s “normal surroundings” – these are the essential conditions of a rite of passage.\textsuperscript{42}

Through Edichka’s fantasies about Elena’s death, he comes to a tenuous acceptance of his own displacement and his uncertain future. Ira achieves isolation from those around her and undergoes a death in some form at the conclusion of \textit{Russkaia krasavitsa}, passing into a final unity with Vladimir Sergeevich. In the end, these liminal characters are not reinstated into mainstream society; rather, each comes to terms with his or her marginal status.

* Iurii Miloslavskii, like Limonov, was born in Kharkiv. The rough life on the streets clearly affected both authors, and each man had an adolescence steeped in danger and physical brutality as well as criminal activity of various types.

In his introduction to \textit{Urban Romances}, Nicholas Luker notes that ‘the brutality of [Miloslavskii’s] urban pieces with their incest, rape and murder appears so grossly at variance with his sensitive religious and cultural writings inspired by the Middle East [...] has astonished many commentators’.\textsuperscript{43}

The almost exclusively male world of \textit{Skazhite, devushki, podruzhe voshei} (Girls, Tell Your Friend, texts written 1987-92) hinges on violence and cruelty. Part of the life of the street includes inflicting injury on others and seemingly enjoying it. Humiliation and pain (interspersed with elements of torture, such as one man forcing another to drink blood) figure prominently in the narratives. Everyday objects such as

crutches, eyeglasses and sugar cubes have a double life as weapons: the attribution of violent functions to these objects demonstrates a preoccupation with violence on the part of the author as well as his characters.

Women are mentioned incidentally or appear as minor characters. They are most commonly characterized as sexually promiscuous, particularly when they are also mothers. Costlow, Sandler and Vowles have commented on the writings of philosopher Giorgii Gachev about 'adult male fantasy' vis-à-vis idealization of the maternal in the context of sexual desire: Miloslavskii de-idealizes the maternal to the ultimate degree. Gender-related violence in Miloslavskii's stories emerges as a subset of a world where violence is a dominant feature.

David Lowe comments that Miloslavskii's short stories provoke curiosity because of their protagonists - thieves, juvenile delinquents, and, in general, the dregs of urban Soviet society - types who are forbidden entry into official literature. Miloslavskii's characters all have extremely primitive needs and come to a bad end. His cruel world embraces neither justice nor spirituality: prison-camp mores seem to have taken root outside the barbed-wire fences. The narrator's pretense of objectivity and concern for literary form call to mind Isaak Babel's voyeuristic aestheticism.

In 'Smert Manona' (The Death of Manon, 1978), the narrator tells of the rape of a girl named Katia. The story of her rape and abandonment by a gang of young men seems horrific, but the narrator comments that all such stories are the same. Rape and blackmail feature in 'Liubov' (Love, 1980). When Tomka wants to invite her boyfriend back to her workers' dorm, she must take preventive measures ahead of time. She threatens to name her rapists if anyone gives her boyfriend any trouble.

---

46 Miloslavskii, 'Smert Manona', in Skazhite, devushki, podruzhke vashei, Moscow, 1993, pp. 82-90.
‘Gorodskie romansy’ (Urban Romances, 1978) might best be described as a set of very short sketches. In ‘Vuliary’ (The Vuliars), the narrator muses that he never saw the oldest Vuliar because he was shot for cannibalism before they met. The youngest Vuliar is a thug. The middle son laughingly (his degree of seriousness is unclear) threatens to cut off his mother breasts and pin them to her ears (159). Such envisioned dismembering of one’s own mother, particularly the idea of cutting off the breasts, providers of life-sustaining milk for a child, is striking, and the removal of the breasts is in some way a negation of motherhood.

The bruises on Ninka’s (the mother’s) legs likely indicate abuse by some man. We learn that the middle son slept with his mother: when his mother becomes extremely upset, it is unclear whether the real crime was incest or that her son had not paid for the service. His sentence is reduced since the severity of the crime is reconsidered – rape and attempted murder are downgraded to ‘grievous bodily harm in the course of the crime’. Public opinion turns against Ninka; she loses her looks, but the narrator assesses the situation neither in terms of punishment nor reward, namely, what could such a woman expect from life other than to have some children, satisfy a huge number of men, drink and smoke excessively – ‘isn’t that enough’?

In ‘Oruzhie’ (The Weapon), we see that real weapons are just as prominent as everyday objects co-opted for violent use. One anecdote involves a character named Mazai cutting off a woman’s nose; the dismemberment motif recurs throughout Miloslavskii’s texts. The narrator is worried about humiliation in front of girls (and he wishes death on a friend because of this). Male anxiety thus serves as the justification for the envisioning of a violent act.

'Il'govskie' (The Il'govskiis, 1989), presents the situation of Ella, a blind girl who was abandoned while her father was in prison. 49 'She was quickly dragged off by anyone who felt like it and taught whatever they wanted her to know – the usual story with disabled female adolescents, deaf, dumb or blind, who are abandoned in a place full of young and irrepressible males. For all the scabrous talk, even in the dark, a man is likely to be ashamed and afraid to get rough with a girl who can see and hear him; and who, having seen him is likely inadvertently to blurt something out at the wrong time and place. And if she does, what then? You can only shut the brazen bitch by ripping her apart...'.

'Syn Liudmily Ivanovny' (Liudmila Ivanovna's Son, 1979) begins with the story of the teacher Liudmila Ivanovna. 50 We learn that she is a teacher who is not particularly fond of rowdy children; however, she has an adolescent son, Vovka, who for a year has been 'doing time in a juvenile corrective colony for taking part in a gang rape' (83) (he has received a three-year sentence). It is mentioned that in Krasnograd, gang-rapes of underage girls are a normal way to pass the time if one is an adolescent boy. Major Isaev, the district chief of police, advocates strict physical punishment for rapists and describes this in extremely graphic terms. Because of the increase in the number of rapes in the town, stiffer penalties are devised for rapists. Public opinion means that it is dangerous for the rapists to be out on the streets before their trial: what this means is that despite the fact that life seems to be exceptionally rough, this does not mean people are without standards. Of course, Liudmila Ivanovna worries about what her son's actions will mean for her reputation as a strict and respected teacher. At the conclusion of the text, a girl fatally shoots Vovka with

49 Miloslavskii, 'Il'govskie', in Skazhite, devushki, podruzheke vashei, pp. 133-36.
an air rifle in the park. He dies, floats out of his body, and observes the ridiculousness of the scene from above. It is perhaps appropriate that he is killed by a woman.

‘Stebanutye’ (Crazies, 1983) presents the idea of rape in a slightly different context. It is the story of a man who has escaped from prison. He has a rape fantasy dream in which he is dragging his sister up a hill; he finds a woman and rapes her purely because she can’t resist; then he is alarmed when her face is about to be revealed. Presumably this reflects some kind of anxiety regarding incest. Fantasy is followed up by reality.

A second rape scene is recounted after this unnamed man encounters a woman near the train station. She struggles, and he thinks that he will kill her if she gives him any trouble. He asks her name (Lenochka), and it is surprised how little is recounted of her cries (if in fact she is verbally resisting). Instead, they can hear someone nearby shrieking and the sound of a loud slap. What is overheard is an argument among some men about the ‘imbecile’ Lena who has wandered off somewhere; when they find her, they beat her for a few minutes and then leave.

‘Ombra Adorata’ (Ombra Adorata, 1992) also draws on violent fantasies in an interesting way and signals something of a departure from the character of the previous texts. It includes a violent game and fantasies of dismemberment. To some extent, this is a text about the protagonist Agunov’s interaction with his first love Zhanna; his personal history and reminiscences. At the beginning of the text, we are presented with a scene in which Agunov and his friends play a game with Zhanna. One boy trips her; she kicks Agunov, shoves him against a bridge, he kicks her in the stomach and fights an urge to kick her over and over. Zhanna spits on Agunov as he hits her, and he feels ashamed as well as intrigued by the whole situation.

The narrator notes that the 'rules' of the game would allow physical punishment in the form of defiling or rape - to be exacted by the male, and it is mentioned that this is the 'morality of the town's youth culture'. Interestingly, despite the cultural prescription to behave in a certain way, Agunov is unable to follow through on the rape; however, it is not clear whether this is due to his detachment or because of some innate decency he possesses - it is likely the former.

Despite Agunov's unwillingness or inability to commit rape as mentioned above, there is a very different situation in his fantasy life. He has 'wicked dreams' which include the dismemberment of his neighbour Milia (and abuse - he imagines her enjoying him 'teasing' her breasts with nail clippers) and another neighbor Klavdiia. He wakes up with his gums bleeding, perhaps symbolic of the bleeding from the imagined acts. However, his dreams of Zhanna are different - perhaps more mysterious and less violent.

At the conclusion of the text, Agunov is riding with a Caucasian taxi driver who brings up the subject of women. He has his final fantasy of Zhanna during this ride, and this includes whipping and raping her at his pleasure: he revels in the thought that he has at least another half hour to indulge this fantasy.

With the exception of the fantasies presented in 'Ombra Adorata', the ways in which Miloslavskii deals with violence are very different from the stylized, fantasized violence addressed by Limonov and Erofeev. Miloslavskii's violence, far from being framed in terms of fantasy, are very much grounded in harsh realism. One could say that these fictional worlds are even harsher for men than for women. Violence against women is almost a matter of course and certainly not the most shocking or horrific type of abuse documented in these texts: one also would not say that it is routine, but
it is an expected part of life. This largely realistic presentation of violence is akin to that discussed in the next chapter.
The Brutality of Byt: Women and Violence in the Prose of Liudmila Petrushevskaia

Of all the writers considered in this thesis, Liudmila Petrushevskaia appears to engage most directly in the 'unmasking' of violence as formulated by Natal'ia Ivanova. Dalton-Brown has observed that Petrushevskaia calls some of her short stories istorii rather than rasskazy, thereby implying some kind of link to 'real life'. Though some critics have called Petrushevskaia’s work hyper-realistic, this realism provides significant insight into some of the pressing issues facing contemporary Russia.

This chapter seeks to explore some of the main functions of violence in Petrushevskaia’s prose. By presenting a stark picture of domestic life in the late Soviet period, she presents alternatives to the traditional hierarchy and exposes alternate views. French feminist theory holds that gender-related violence and power are inextricably linked, and violence functions as a tool for controlling behaviour. Typically, male violence against women is interpreted as an act reinforcing the patriarchy, but this is only one facet of the larger issue as explored by Petrushevskaia. The majority of Petrushevskaia’s protagonists are female: though some are victims and some are aggressors, both must constantly confront violence in everyday life.

As the result of strong critical and popular reaction, controversy has long swirled about Petrushevskaia’s drama and prose. This phenomenon may be attributed in part to Petrushevskaia’s ‘unswervingly direct renderings of Russian byt. [...] Growing unrest on all domestic fronts since Gorbachev’s ascension and decline

---

seems only to have confirmed her observations \[\ldots\]. Critical animosity initially rendered the publication of any of Petrushevskaia's prose work an impossibility. Her frank treatment of sexuality and erotic themes, unacceptable during Soviet times, almost certainly contributed to the delay in publication of her work. Her fame as a dramatist preceded the development of her reputation as a prose writer, though she composed several of her stories long before she wrote her early plays. Helena Goscilo presents a more detailed explanation for the relatively late acceptance of Petrushevskaia's prose, namely that her

morose emphasis on (self-)destructive human drives and intolerable external pressures, as well as her explicit references to sexual and physiological realia, violates the decorum of two gendered Soviet myths: the euphemistically couched personal concerns supposedly exemplified in ladies' literature; and the emotional affirmation of family life that official policy imposed upon women and cemented into the spurious national paradigm of femininity that for decades continued to stifle them.

One of the most compelling aspects of Petrushevskaia's technique is her portrayal of seemingly shocking situations in a matter-of-fact way. The narrators and author often appear indifferent to the horror of these scenes; in any case, they reserve judgement. The moral legitimacy of violence simply is not considered. To a certain degree, Petrushevskaia's work reflects a larger cultural trend in its exposure of issues previously excluded from public fora. Maya Johnson compares the reception of Petrushevskaia's writings to that of the film Malen'kaia Vera, postulating that the

---

6 Controversial themes surface much less frequently in Petrushevskaya's drama, thereby accounting for the earlier publication of her plays.
7 Goscilo, *Dehexing Sex*, p. 20.
controversy created by the film reflects to some extent ‘the contemporary Russian climate, at once appreciative and disparaging of dialogue on painful domestic issues’.8

Petrushevskaia herself seems to encourage a connection to everyday life in the reading of her work: ‘There are three steps to understanding my works: the first is to realize what miserable creatures these people [in the story or drama] are; the second is to feel sorry for them; and the third is to recognize yourself in them...My stories ask: can one really live that way? and the sensitive reader will answer: no. His task then is to discover how to live differently...The task is to remain humane under all circumstances’.9

A certain austerity characterizes the language and the very material of Petrushevskaia’s texts; as Carden notes, there is the recurrent motif of the ‘economy of scarcity, which is more than economic, it is moral and emotional as well. There is not enough food, enough housing, enough love, enough truth.’ Emotion and sentimentality are secondary to bare, stark description; perhaps Petrushevskaia’s own experience as a journalist leads her to portray her protagonists as reporters of sorts from the domestic front.

There is much of the universal in Petrushevskaia’s works: though the setting is firmly grounded in late Soviet Russia, the acts of violence perpetrated and suffered are not specific to Russia. The texts also fit into the larger context of Russian culture. Francine du Plessix Gray notes the tendency in Russia to see women’s suffering as a redemptive force... [and] a central theme of Russian culture’. She adds that ‘many contemporary women admit that their tradition of self-sacrifice is a form of power

---

play, a way of retaining their aura and hence their status. Suffering women usually figure at the centre of Petrushevskiaia's stories; Johnson suggests that 'every one of them is stubbornly flawed', and Giorgii Viren has described them as 'vicious, cynical [...] she-wolves protecting children'.

Though her work falls outside the typical province of 'women's writing', the most common backdrop for Petrushevskiaia's stories is the home, and many of her characters are suffering women, especially mothers. One of Petrushevskiaia's innovations is the subversion of popular notions of comfort into the unpleasant and vice versa, creating chaos within narrative: '[she] transforms the fabled refuge of home into a claustrophobic environment of spiritual laceration, sadistic exposure, and ceaseless emotional vampirism. [...] She envisions home as the quintessential site of psychic warfare and emotional evisceration, materialized in multiple forms of physical violence'.

The female body is often the locus and recipient of all manner of violent activity. Helena Goscilo suggests that in some Russian literature

> [f]emale bodies 'document' their owners' suffering and degradation: they bruise, hemorrhage, and break; they endure rape, childbirth, abortion, beating, and disease; they succumb to substance addiction, incontinence, and sundry dehumanizing processes – all painstakingly detailed in slow motion.

Though Goscilo does not identify Petrushevskiaia as one of the foremost utilizers of such documentation, it would be difficult to find a Petrushevskiaian heroine not bearing a physical or emotional scar (a Kafkaesque testament to her trials and travails, 'inscribed' on her very flesh) – or telling the tale of someone less fortunate who does.

---

12 Quoted in Johnson, 'Women and Children First', p. 98.
13 Johnson, 'Women and Children First', p. 129.
14 Helena Goscilo, 'Inscribing the Female Body', in Goscilo, *Dehexing Sex: Russian Womanhood During and After Glasnost*, Ann Arbor, 1996, pp. 87-116 (p. 89). In the final chapter of this thesis, I
In several of Petrushevskaia’s texts, tension exists between the real and the unbelievable or extreme. The latter category may be related to the supernatural or, alternatively, hyperbolize the events of daily life. As Punter characterizes the Gothic, the worlds portrayed are ones infested with psychic and social decay, and coloured with the heightened hues of putrescence. Violence, rape and breakdown are the key motifs; the crucial tone is one of desensitised acquiescence in the horror of obsession and prevalent insanity.¹⁵

This acquiescence materializes amid the horrors of daily existence, reifying the ambiguous attitudes of characters towards the events in their lives: the emerging message is that they are beyond despair. Thus it seems that several of Petrushevskaia’s characters are largely unaware of, even indifferent to, the world around them. Galia, the protagonist of ‘Rasskazchitsa’ (The Storyteller, 1972), unflinchingly tells of her family’s hardships and of the physical abuse she suffers at the hands of her father, shocking her co-workers with her calm demeanour. The personal lives of Petrushevskaia’s women matter much more to them than the greater surroundings (for example, the narrator in Svoi krug (Our Circle, 1988) has difficulty remembering major historical events but no trouble recalling specific details of social gatherings).¹⁶ However, it is worth considering whether Petrushevskaian characters can be anything but short-sighted, given the tremendous emotional and physical demands placed upon them.

*  

A close examination of Petrushevskaia’s novella Vremia: noch’ (The Time: Night, 1992) and selected short stories will elucidate her disturbing technique of

---


¹⁶ Carden, ‘The Art of War’, p. 43. For this reason, Carden considers Petrushevskaia’s writing to be essentially apolitical.
lifting the veil from the reader's eyes to reveal the brutality spawned from the interactions of quotidian life. Her characters are remarkable for their frequent and atypical subversion of the established 'power ladders' of society. Weak, infirm, uneducated women are often those lashing out against others, whether in retaliation or as instigators.

The creation of an apocalyptic element is one of the primary functions of violence in Petrushevskaia's works, working as a decentring force and thereby engendering a search for order and meaning in the text. Though violence is rarely the primary plot, it is always present as an undercurrent coursing through the narrative. In Vremia: noch', the narrator Anna Andrianovna projects violence into the world around her, arguably reinforcing and exaggerating the tendency towards violence in her own family. We cannot tell to what degree Anna has misrepresented her family members, nor to what degree she has influenced them. The manipulation of social taboos is central to Svoi krug, as is the dichotomy of positive actions and negative actions. 'Gripp' (Influenza, 1988) also presents violence through negative action and highlights a reversal of gender roles, while 'Diadia Grisha' (Uncle Grisha, 1987) presents senseless violence that befalls a male victim instead of the woman who expects it. In 'Mest' (Vengeance, 1990), jealousy provokes violence, but psychological violence and the patterns of mutual abuse are equally important. Suicide, self-sacrifice, and self-destruction, as well as subjective 'readings' of intra-textual violence, figure prominently in 'Takaia devochka' (This Little Girl, 1968), while 'Ali-Baba' (Ali-Baba, 1988) also highlights self-destructive behaviour. 'Medea' (Medea, 1990) shows the functioning of violence at multiple levels within

---

17 Spilka, Eight Lessons in Love. Spilka presents a chart outlining dichotomies in the social hierarchy, including categories of gender, race, religion, economic status, etc.

18 In this case, apocalypticism is devoid of religious significance: religion is an element conspicuously absent from Petrushevskaia's prose.
the text and presents the notion of a violent mother. 'Bednoe serdste Pani' (Pania's Poor Heart, 1988) and 'Ditia' (The Child, 1993) highlight the complex issues of abortion, motherhood, and child abandonment. In Petrushevskaia's *Pesni vostochnykh slavian* cycle, supernatural elements combine to produce a sometimes violent world that bears little resemblance to reality.

* 

Petrushevskaia's longest prose work to date, the novella *Vremia: noch*, is rife with violent scenes. The text chronicles the travails of the poet-narrator Anna Andrianovna and provides what is perhaps the richest array of episodes of domestic strife in any of Petrushevskaia's writings. Anna must struggle to make ends meet; look after her grandson Tim; make arrangements and potentially care for her unwell elderly mother; contend with her promiscuous daughter Alena's ever-multiplying brood of children, and her son Andrei's money problems, trouble with the law, and general hooliganism. Amid such domestic chaos, and the fact that family members are constantly moving in and out of her flat, it is not altogether shocking that Anna Andrianovna seems drawn to violence both in word and deed: her tendency is to describe even non-violent behaviour using the lexicon of a battle or struggle, and she routinely laments that she feels as if she is being torn to pieces. Goscilo describes Anna Andrianovna's world view as follows: 'What Anna Freud called "identification with the aggressor" [...] perfectly captures the syndrome of generational replication in

---

20 Petrushevskaia has named Dostoevskii as her favourite writer, and his influence on her writing is pronounced. Robert Porter identifies several Dostoevskian elements in *Vremia: noch*, including 'claustrophobia, people on the outer edge of sanity, bickering over money and material matters, scandal scenes and swings of mood, criminality'. See Porter, *Russia's Alternative Prose*, p. 62. There is also a possible link with Ivan Karamazov's idea that only human derive pleasure from suffering, and that the suffering of innocents points to the non-existence of a God.
which Anna Adrianovna [sic] is unknowingly trapped. Anna visualizes all aspects of life in brutal terms, even describing conception as an 'explosion' or 'eruption'. She also describes the relationship between mothers and children in rather stark terms: 'Love them and they'll tear you to pieces, don't love them and they'll leave you either way' (489). Anna identifies a 'mystic link' between herself and Anna Akhmatova, thus implying the search for a niche for her own work among the texts of struggle in Russian literature and culture (465).

The violence inflicted by women produces psychological humiliation rather than actual physical harm. During an argument with Anna, Alena throws a tablecloth at her. Anna describes it as a somewhat ineffective effort, commenting that 'a tablecloth isn't the sort of thing you use to kill someone. I calmly peeled it off my face and that was all. There was nothing lying on it, this polyethylene tablecloth, no crumbs or glass or an iron.' The tablecloth covering Anna's face signifies a momentary shift in the balance of power to Alena: she has successfully inhibited her mother, whose voice dominates the text. The tablecloth symbolizes Alena's effort, albeit a weak one, to stifle her mother's consistently overbearing voice and project her own into the text. Anna undermines Alena's narrative voice through her savage comments about the contents of Alena's diary, creating discourse space which is an amalgam of their conversational and authorial voices.

This is Alena's only appearance as an aggressor; she plays the role of victim through the remainder of the novella. After accidentally finding Alena's diary, Anna reads a passage about Alena's feelings the morning after a night with a lover. The

22 Anna's invocation of the iron image may be another indicator of her literary knowledge, referencing a scene from Vasilii Aksenov's Bumazhnii peizazh, Ann Arbor, MI, 1983, in which a socially conscious old woman hurls an iron wrapped in newspaper at the suspected traitor Velosipedov.
lexicon of the diary clearly illustrates that Alena feels as though something within her body has been attacked; the seduction has resulted not only in emotional turmoil but also (literally) in internal physical turmoil. Alena writes, 'I cried under the shower jet, washing my panties and washing my whole body, which had become foreign, as if I were watching it in a pornographic movie\textsuperscript{23}, my alien body [...] Some kind of slime seethed in me, everything swelled and ached and burned, something happened that had to be cut short, stopped, stifled, otherwise I would die. [...] All that remains is to throw myself somewhere under a train' (470).\textsuperscript{24} Alena creates associations between sexual encounters and violence, unfailingly assigning herself a passive role, and her post-coital ruminations focus on abandonment and physical pain.

When Alena leaves a tryst at a lover's flat, she accidentally leaves a wet pair of underwear draped over the shower curtain. Anna imagines the confrontation between the jilted wife and her husband, culminating with the wife slapping him 'with someone else's wet panties right on his face, on his glasses!' (476). The underwear represents sexual betrayal, and the pain is inflicted through shame. Though there is a physical aspect to the blow, it is clearly intended to cause psychological harm.

Alena goes on to describe a rural encounter with another man, Sasha, and his chosen method of flirtation, the aggressive tactic of stepping on her foot. This gesture establishes the aggressor-victim dichotomy for their relationship while also setting the stage for her description of the ensuing painful and humiliating sexual encounter, which is described through metaphors of gore and physicality rather than romantic notions: 'He told me the pain would pass the next time, told me don't shout, be quiet, you have to summon up your strength, he had summoned up his strength, and I just snuggled up to him with every little cell of my being. He wormed his way into the

bloody mess, the shreds of my body, like a pump, pumping my blood, the straw under me was wet, I squeaked like a rubber toy with a hole in the side [...] I feared only that he’d leave me’ (473). A friend who sees Alena’s bloody slip screams, assuming that someone has been viciously attacked, and thereby reinforces an already clear link between sex and violence.

Anna may be at least partly cognizant of the larger implications of her negativity. She recalls a scene in which the wife of her lover appeared and slapped Anna’s face in a rage. Attempting suicide, she slashed her wrist, and Anna notes that ‘a woman with a thirst for destruction can accomplish a lot! She destroys herself – then look – something new looms, also destructive, somehow it accumulates in the bones and it lives – that’s my case, that’s just how I am, I’m also that way with others’ (496). Significantly, Anna identifies self-destruction and masochism as female territory, a recurrent notion in the texts discussed in this essay. Anna clearly recognizes her own destructive impulse and genuinely believes that negative reinforcement can elicit positive results. She intentionally scolds Alena harshly, noting the ‘invigorating power of insults’. (511) In other words, what does not kill these characters makes them stronger, and verbal abuse actually serves as a negative motivator. Violence or emotional abuse is continually employed as a manipulative tool.

Though the women in the story seem capable of inflicting serious physical harm only upon themselves, there is no such limitation for Andrei, the major male character in the story. Violent accidents or encounters seem to have been an integral part of his life since childhood. He is covered in scars from sports-related injuries, has come home covered in blood, and once was stabbed in the leg with a broken steel

---

24 Alena may be likening herself to Anna Karenina.
bed leg. Andrei is constantly in search of money, and his threats encompass both emotional and physical violence as he bangs on the door of the flat with full force and threatens his own family. Anna tries to justify his behaviour, believing he still bears the psychological scars of prison life. She describes Andrei’s threats to kill himself by jumping from a window, commenting on a previous drunken suicide attempt in which he broke both legs. Though Anna refrains from condemning Andrei completely, she does not hesitate to report his brutality in detail.

By the end of the story, even Tima has progressed from a squirrelly yet innocent little boy to a budding monster in Anna’s eyes. She describes Tima’s murderous glances at his sister and mentions a battle to answer the phone in which Tima kicks Anna in the shins, she pushes him away; he gathers strength and lunges at her again, delivering a blow to her kidneys. In this instance, Anna’s incurable pessimism and obsession with violence appear to have taken root in her young grandson.

The development and presentation of other characters emanates from Anna’s relentlessly negative worldview. The wholly auto-diegetic narrative invites questions of subjectivity and solipsism as Anna constructs scenes from her life. Due to her consistently bleak outlook, Anna has the unfortunate tendency to jump to unwarranted conclusions and unfailingly imagines that the worst possible scenario will transpire. When she accosts a man who kisses his daughter on the lips, Anna assumes she is preventing a crime of incest, though she considers her own ‘passionate’ love for Tima perfectly innocent and normal. She considers herself a moral crusader of sorts, and, in a separate incident, believes she is preventing a rape or sexual assault when she interrupts an affectionate couple. These assumptions infect domestic life as well: just before Alena gives birth, Anna arrives home to an empty flat, sees some dried blood
on the bedspread, and first assumes that Alena has been murdered by her boyfriend. Only later does she realize that Alena has gone into labour. Here Anna re-invokes the clear link between violence, sex and female blood. In the final scenes of *Vremia: noch*, Anna returns home to complete silence and initially fears that the children are dead, gradually realizing that Alena has taken the entire family and gone. Though Anna’s worst fears ultimately are not realized, the fulfilment of her wish for a tranquil home is an empty pleasure: she has constructed her own lonely fate. As Goscilo sees it, ‘The story’s conclusion pushes the analogy between narrative and life to its logical limit by conflating the two. Petrushevskaja literalizes the metaphor of Anna Adrianovna’s [sic] deletion not only of Alena’s, but of all independent voices [...]. [Her family’s] escape, however, is not into death, but into life outside the reach of her totalitarian narrative power.’

* 

Though much shorter than *Vremia: noch*, *Svoi krug* presents a no less complicated delineation of the manipulation of power, control and ultimately, violence. *Svoi krug* received considerable critical attention upon its publication, and Petrushevskaja was harshly criticized by friends and acquaintances for the story’s unflattering depiction of the intelligentsia. Many of the issues Petrushevskaja raises mirror those of contemporary everyday life, and Carden notes that in *Svoi krug*, Petrushevskaja addressed issues subsequently raised in the press: ‘At the time of the story’s publication [...] Russian newspapers and journals were full of revelations concerning the mistreatment of children: abuses in orphanages, mothers abandoning babies, mistreatment of disabled children’.

---

25 Goscilo, 'Mother as Mothra', p. 113.
Svoi krug is the chronicle of a circle of friends who gather weekly. The story’s narrator is a tactless and sick woman whose observations are undermined by her deteriorating vision and who periodically initiates her own ostracism by the group through her insensitive comments and behaviour. Violence is condemned by the group: Andrei, one of the members, is temporarily banned from attending the weekly gatherings after giving another group member a black eye while in a drunken rage. Cognizant of this taboo within the circle, the anonymous narrator decides to beat her innocent son in front of them so their sympathy will prevent him from being taken to an orphanage when her own health worsens — and she eventually attains an ultimately painful victory. The physical and moral deficiencies of the narrator and other characters are apparent throughout the story. The narrator astutely realizes that her own transgression of the taboo will elicit humane responses from her estranged husband and other members of the group. Through her own reprehensible action, she forces the others to become better human beings, even if only for a short time. Here, violence is blatantly employed to affect social behaviour.

The actions of the oversexed Zhora are effectively a ritualized form of seeking attention from other members of the group. When he apparently attempts to rape a visitor at one of the weekly gatherings, the other members of the group treat the spectacle as a joke. In this case, sexual violence is an acceptable form of fantasy — a safe means of flirting with a taboo. Carden illustrates at length Svoi krug as a battlefield and considers the relationships between the characters as acts of war, with women triumphing in the struggles for power. She also notes the ‘primacy of sexual motivation’ in the text, stating that ‘[s]exual conquest is one more weapon in the bid

29 Several critics have noted the connection between the opening lines of Svoi krug and those of Dostoevskii’s Zapiski iz podpol la (Notes from Underground). Svoi krug begins as follows: ‘Ia chelovek zhestkii, zhestokii, vsegda s ulybkoi na polnykh, rumianykh gubakh, vsegda ko vsem s nasmeshkoi’ (p. 213).
for power, and one sexual realignment can lead to a breach in the social fabric, as when the young Lenka Marchukaite sits on the lap of the narrator's husband, crushing him 'both physically and morally' as well as inciting the jealousy of their friend Marisha. The unreliability of the narrator may also be noted: because of her illness, her eyesight is worsening.

*  
The narrative of 'Gripp' implicitly suggests that a wife's supposed 'neglect' was responsible for her husband's suicide, since she turns her back on her husband just before he jumps to his death from the windowsill. According to the narrator, a mother, naturally tenacious, certainly would have 'somehow found a way out of the situation [...]’ – such a pathetic fate could only befall a man. (259)

Their tumultuous family life culminated in the wife leaving with the child but shamefacedly returning to gather her possessions (she is humiliated by having to renege on her promise never to return to the flat). The husband kills himself during this visit, and her decision literally to turn her back on him 'could be considered a direct instigation of suicide.' (261) Her seemingly passive refusal to acknowledge her husband's threat of suicide certainly constitutes a 'negative action': she is deliberately insensitive to his evident vulnerability, intensified by illness and despair. Just as shocking is her decision to remain upstairs sorting her things for nearly an hour after her husband jumps. This scene exhibits elements of a classic battle of wills and illustrates several significant reversals of the power ladder: the husband is ill, weak, weepy and generally dependent, while the wife refuses the role of nurturer and instigates the fateful (and fatal) power struggle.

*  

31 Ibid., pp. 48-49.
A male victim is presented in a different context in 'Diadia Grisha' (Uncle Grisha, 1987). The narrator is a woman who tells of the murder of her meek and gentle landlord, Grisha. She notes ironically that though she was wary of being attacked while walking home in the dark from the station, she emerged unscathed, but Grisha was later murdered in the same area (180). The narrator is never seriously concerned for her safety, somehow believing herself immune to the surrounding dangers. When she does consider the perilous possibilities that might befall her, they seem unreal, like romanticized notions taken from a gangster movie. However, she adds, 'I didn’t experience the kind of horror you can feel just watching a movie – the imaginary scenes that passed through my mind were somehow removed from fear, they didn’t arouse any kind of sensation – they were simply like one of the possible variants' (181). After Grisha is murdered by some thugs during a trivial argument over a cigarette, this episode of unexpected violence haunts the narrator.

*M*

'Mest' (Vengeance), features Zina, a single mother, and her neighbour Raia, who is so jealous of Zina that she becomes physically ill. Because of her hatred for Zina’s child, Raia leaves hazardous items lying about as if accidentally so the child will injure herself. When Raia loses patience with the child’s crying, she washes the floor with caustic soda, splashing some of it underneath the door to the area where the child lies. She later hacks through Zina’s door with an axe and espies a considerable amount of congealed blood on the floor. She nervously awaits learning the fate of the little girl from Zina. When Zina returns, she tells Raia she has buried the girl and life resumes its normal course. While Zina feigns insanity, Raia’s pains and ailments intensify until she cannot feed herself; nor can she sleep. In this instance, violence on

---

the body in the form of illness seems to be a punishment. In her misery, Raia asks Zina to obtain some morphine for her, but Zina refuses to help her neighbour commit suicide. By grabbing a bottle of pills with her teeth, Raia manages to overdose on medication, and she dies slowly and miserably as Zina observes. Finally, Zina admits to concocting a ruse about the child’s death. In reality, little Lenochka is alive and well at a children’s home: Zina had replaced the caustic soda with a harmless solution, and the blood on the floor resulted from an innocent nosebleed. The subjective interpretation, or misreading, of the nosebleed, is the springboard from which Zina begins her manipulation and slow torture of Raia.

With ‘Mest’, Petrushevskaja probes the realm of female jealousy. Raia’s chosen method of killing Lenochka is significant. As she scrubs the floor, she uses an ordinary household cleaning material to poison the child — a practical female instinct, perhaps, to use one of the materials central to her daily labours. Several power struggles ensue between Zina and Raia, and Zina’s emotionally controlling behaviour, through her deception of Raia, contributes to a pattern of mutual abuse.

*  

‘Takaia devochka’ (Such a Little Girl) highlights the appeal that suicide and self-abuse seem to hold for women with an abundance of misery in their lives. This appeal is revealed through the story of the narrator’s relationship with her acquaintance Raisa. Before the narrator recognized the patterns of her husband Petrov’s infidelities, she was on the point of defenestration. Both the narrator and Raisa, are characterized by their hopelessness and desperation as well as their desire and subsequent efforts to commit suicide, but the narrator takes Raisa’s attempt to join her as a bit of an insult, considering her own plight far more dire. There is also a

---

sacrificial element to their relationship: the narrator opens the story in an almost elegiac tone by remarking of Raisa, 'Now it's as if she died for me.' (184)

In many ways, Raisa permits terrible abuse in her life and exhibits a number of self-destructive tendencies. The first is her habit of freely giving her body to any man who desires it; in fact, she is a prostitute. Ironically, when a man named Grant attempts a tryst with Raisa, the ensuing description smacks of rape. ‘And he added that he had the impression that she went along with it all because she was afraid of something, simply losing her mind from fear. And it left him with a kind of rotten residue in his soul, as if he’d offended someone, though she said nothing and didn’t resist. But we calmed him so he wouldn’t worry. She gives everyone that impression. (189)

Raisa is presented as a weak and vulnerable character, and her Tatar lineage automatically situates her on a lower rung of the power ladder. She also abuses her own body. The narrator comments that ‘[t]he doctor found [Raisa] completely emaciated and nearly dystrophic. She looked as if she were a person living through the blockade.’ (191) To some extent, Raisa is responsible for the violence she suffers. Eventually, Raisa sleeps with Petrov with the misguided aim of luring him back to his wife, but the narrator interprets this as a betrayal, concluding, ‘And she ceased to exist for me, as if she had died.’ (199) Using Harris’s definition of violence, Raisa’s deed is also an act of violence – and this is a particularly lamentable instance because of Raisa’s insufficient consideration of the situation.

Petrushevskaia further outlines the methods and consequences of self-destruction in ‘Ali-Baba’.36 The story’s eponymous heroine is an alcoholic who steals in order to finance her addiction. Despondent and lonely, she goes to a bar and picks

up a man named Viktor. When she awakens and discovers he is incontinent, this is the last straw in her miserable existence. She overdoses on the sedatives she has brought with her, but Viktor awakens in time to read her suicide note and to call the ambulance. Though Ali-Baba is a pitiful character, Petrushevskaia bestows no sympathy on her. Her name echoes the folk tale’s Ali Baba, but it has added resonance in Russian slang, in which baba translates as a derogatory term for a woman.

Not surprisingly, Ali-Baba has a history of violence in her relationships. Her volatile ex-boyfriend once dangled her over the edge of the balcony in a fit of rage, forcing her to hang from a balcony by the sheer strength of her bent fingers. The description of this man’s calmness is unnerving – while she hangs there and the doorbell rings incessantly, he ponders aloud what he will tell the police about her ‘suicide’ (if no one saw) or his own supposed efforts in self-defence (if there were witnesses).

When others finally arrive at the scene, Ali-Baba begs them not to call an ambulance and call unnecessary attention to the situation. The doctors sedate her without fully investigating the scene, implicitly acknowledging that domestic violence is a perfectly natural part of life. Following the doctors’ departure, he throws her out of the house. At the conclusion of the text, Ali-Baba imagines telling the stories of her previous suicide attempts to the other women in the psychiatric ward, creating for the reader a link to Scheherazade and the notion of storytelling as survival.

* 

A taxi ride frames the story ‘Medeia’ (Medea), during which a number of tragic stories are told by the driver and the female narrator. Meta-diegetic violence

---

emerges through the narratives exchanged. The narrator relates the sad story of a woman who goes to visit her mother-in-law in Siberia with her two children. It is the middle of winter, and her baby son catches pneumonia. Because of the lack of hospitals and medical care, he dies during the train ride home. Her husband meets them at the station, assesses the situation, breaks his wife's jaw, and consequently receives a four-year jail sentence. Petrushevskaia presents a male insinuation that mothers are entrusted with special, at times unreasonable, responsibilities. When the mother later instigates a violent scene with her daughter at a newspaper office, the results include the deprivation of her 'parental rights' and her pronouncement as psychologically abnormal and incompetent by the courts.

The narrator also tells of an acquaintance whose son hanged himself. Though he warned family members of his suicide plans, no one responded until he had already killed himself. She also mentions that some people in her apartment building killed a woman with a knife, and they have been sentenced to hang for this crime. In relating these tales to the grieving taxi driver, the narrator tries to be helpful; however, by misreading his verbal narratives, she makes several unknowingly insensitive comments. The driver is haunted by the image of his daughter and what he believes to be his own culpability in her brutal death: he had no idea the murder would occur and thus took no action to prevent it. His wife eventually surrendered to the police, carrying the bloody knife. The driver alludes to the 'curing' of the violent impulse, saying that his wife is not beyond hope. In 'Medeia', the extra-diegetic and meta-diegetic levels of the text are fused because of the taxi driver's personal story: he serves as the link between the story's frame and embedded narratives.

*
'Bednoe serdtse Pani' is set in a hospital ward for patients with special problems related to pregnancy and childbirth. The narrator, who is a patient at the hospital, relates the story of Pania, a 47-year-old woman who has come for an abortion. Pania's difficult life is emphasized in every way: she suffers from heart trouble and therefore risks dying in childbirth; her husband is undergoing cancer treatment; their family is destitute; and even while in the hospital, Pania must 'train' herself to walk twelve kilometres home from the station when she returns from the hospital.

As a new mother, the narrator imposes her own judgements on Pania and reads violence into Pania's situation, calling her a murderer. When bureaucracy delays the abortion procedure, the narrator cannot understand why the doctors 'planned to kill a person in the seventh month', and Pania eventually must be cut open so the child can be removed from her body (453). When the narrator visits her own baby in his ward, she sees a tiny baby girl sleeping inside an incubator, and she is tormented by the question of whether this is Pania's 'dead' child.

Because Pania fails to conform to the Russian cultural prescription for the role of a mother, she receives the harsh judgement of others despite her own extenuating circumstances. A more egregious violation of the venerated institution of motherhood is presented in 'Ditia', the story of a mother who abandons her newborn baby and hides it in a pile of stones. Narratorial judgment is evident from the first lines of the story: we are told that the mother 'had no justification' for committing 'her black deed' (456). After being taken to the hospital by the police, the woman refuses to feed the child to whom she had given birth just an hour and a half earlier.

38 Petrushevskaia, 'Bednoe serdtse Pani', in Bal poslednego cheloveka, pp. 451-56.
The narrator cannot understand why the other members of the woman’s family do not condemn her, and she considers them somehow complicit in her crime. A very different attitude to abortion is exhibited in ‘Ditia’ than in ‘Bednoe serdtse Pani’: the narrator believes this would be preferable to being a ‘child-killer’ (457).

It is significant that the child is rescued by two men who immediately take it to a maternity home. The attribution of violent and negligent impulses to a woman while simultaneously attributing compassionate characteristics to men is highly unusual in Petrushevskaya’s work and further underscores the heinousness of the mother in abandoning her child.

*  

Violence linked with the supernatural and the absurd comes to the fore in Petrushevskaya’s cycle of stories entitled *Pesni vostochnikh slavian* (Songs of the Eastern Slavs, 1990). In her analysis of the cycle, Nina Kolesnikoff likens the texts to the *bylichka*, a ‘particular subgenre of oral story’, because of the mixture of supernatural and realistic elements in the cycle.\(^40\)

Supernatural elements in ‘Materinskii privet’ (A Motherly Hello) serve to correct misperceptions about the past and heal emotional wounds. While in the army, Oleg kills out of his displaced anger at his dead mother for her supposed betrayal of his father and her sexual promiscuity; his anger dissipates and turns to guilt, thanks to the redemptive acts of his mother, who reveals her true past from the grave.\(^41\) This motif is modified slightly in ‘Ten’ zhizni’ (The Shadow of Life): while ‘Materinskii privet’ demonstrates how the supernatural may elicit atonement for past violence, in ‘Ten’ zhizni’, it surfaces to prevent violence.\(^42\) After two women are murdered and


mutilated, the orphaned Zhenia finds herself in the hands of the perpetrators of these crimes. She is rescued by an old man and woman who remind her of her own parents; she believes they may have returned to protect her from harm. Violence in a ‘Novyi raion (A New Region)’ proves to be absurd rather than connected with the supernatural.\textsuperscript{43} A man who feels trapped in his marriage plans and carries out the brutal murder of his wife. Though he is particularly careful to avoid leaving clues in his wake, he goes mad when he attempts to confess and no one will accept his culpability in the crime.

As Kolesnikoff sees it, ‘On the one hand, \textit{Pesni vosto\'nyx slavjan} intend to horrify by confirming the existence of the supernatural in the real world. On the other, the tales are supposed to comfort the reader, by describing the supernatural in concrete terms and thus eliminating some of the fear connected with it.’\textsuperscript{44} She posits that Petrushevskaia ‘has transformed the traditional folk genre of “byli\'ka” into a modern horror story’.\textsuperscript{45} In some versions of the text, the stories are given the title of ‘Moskovskie sluchai’ (Moscow Incidents), suggesting a link to the absurdist violence of Daniil Kharms. Certainly these texts differ from those discussed earlier in this chapter in that they do not obviously have a foundation in daily life.

*  

Though Petrushevskaia shuns the label of social critic, many of her works do provide a commentary on the state of everyday life and the plight of ordinary Russians, especially Russian women. She thus succeeds in bridging the gap between her fictional worlds and reality. As Mark Ledbetter notes, in the post-modern era, ‘no text is isolated from the culture and the histories of the persons who produce it or

\textsuperscript{44} Kolesnikoff, ‘The Generic Structure of Ljudmila Petru\v{s}evskaja’s \textit{Pesni vosto\'nyx slavjan}’, p. 225.  
\textsuperscript{45} Ibid., p. 228.
from the persons who read it, nor is literature isolated from the power structures embedded in and embodied by these cultures and histories (143)\textsuperscript{46}.

Writing destined to transcend its temporal and cultural specificity must by definition possess something of the universal. Petrushevskaia presents scenes with great currency for contemporary Russia which also reveal elements common to humanity regardless of cultural dimensions. In her works, Petrushevskaia has stripped away the veneer that often provides a glossy coating for reality, thereby providing an uncomfortably direct assessment of existence in late Soviet Russia – or of the harsh truths of any existence. The violence in her prose, though abundant, is anything but gratuitous. Instead, it functions as a prism, unsentimentally reflecting and refracting the many lapses in human behaviour and drawing attention to the disordered elements below the surface of society and text.

\textsuperscript{46} Mark Ledbetter, \textit{Victims and the Postmodern Narrative, or, Doing Violence to the Body: An Ethic of Reading and Writing}, New York, 1995, p. 143.
Violence and the Female Grotesque in the Prose of Tolstaia, Sadur, and Vasilenko

This chapter aims to explore the motif of violence and its functions in the short prose works of contemporary writers Tat’jana Tolstaia, Nina Sadur, and Svetlana Vasilenko. Violent incidents in the works of Tolstaia, Sadur and Vasilenko generally exhibit elements of magical realism and the grotesque.¹ I will begin with a discussion of magical realism and its applicability to Russian literature, showing how Russian magical realist texts in part constitute a reaction to socialist realism. I will explain how the grotesque may be viewed as a possible subset of magical realism and will elaborate on the concept of the female grotesque, particularly as it pertains to the protagonists of three key texts — with a focus on the components of abjection and madness.² In this chapter, the analysis will centre around three texts: Tolstaia’s Limpopo (Limpopo, 1990), Sadur’s lug (The South, 1992), and Vasilenko’s Durochka (Little Fool, 1993-98).³ The three texts may be linked most effectively through a comparative examination of their female protagonists and the various forms of violence they experience. Analysis of other short prose works which further illuminate each author’s approach to violence will follow.

¹ In his talk at University College London on 30 April 2001, Stephen Hart referred to a ‘feminized’ version of magical realism exemplified by the prose of Isabel Allende. Whether Tolstaia, Sadur and Vasilenko present a feminized Russian variant of magical realism is a question requiring further discussion; Tolstaia, for instance, has rejected the notion of herself as a writer of feminized prose.
² Jane Ussher highlights the importance of ‘recognizing the connections between discourses of madness and other discourses such as that of misogyny, power, sexuality or badness.’ See Jane Ussher, Women’s Madness: Misogyny or Mental Illness?, Amherst, MA, 1991, p. 12. She also posits that violent behaviour is treated differently depending on who does it: men are ‘bad’, while women are ‘mad’ (p. 171).
³ Though Sadur’s novel Sad (The Garden) contains a number of violent scenes, I have chosen to make lug the centre of my analysis of Sadur’s work because it illustrates many of the major points I wish to make about Sadur’s fiction; further, Olia may be fruitfully compared with Judy and Ganna. For a text-based reading of Sad coupled with theoretical analysis of its key motifs, see Karin Sarsenov, Passion Embracing Death: A Reading of Nina Sadur’s Novel The Garden, Lund Slavonic Monographs, Lund, 2001.
In a world of extremes, where the excessive and hyperbolic become commonplace, those who do not fit in are targets; they become the victims of violence and are most often females who are punished for their transgressive, unacceptable behaviour. The authors’ approaches to the inclusion of violence in their texts may be differentiated. Tolstaia engages in the reification of vicious metaphors (to use a concept presented by Alexander Zholkovsky), while Sadur sketches violent scenes in parable form. Vasilenko’s prose is notable for its presentation of both the brutal and redemptive aspects of human nature through her portrayal of Soviet and post-Soviet life.

The motifs of itinerancy and martyrdom provide a useful framework for examining violence vis-à-vis the protagonists of the key texts. In Iug, Olia appears to be on an aimless journey which is articulated as a spiritual pilgrimage only at the close of the novella, while Ganna’s development as a saint is evident from early on in Durochka. Each character experiences suffering mixed with physical and emotional violence, and both are labelled as madwomen by those they encounter. Although Judy’s reception in Limpopo is based largely on her status as a non-Russian, the narrator judges her according to Russian standards. In this case, the pattern of victimization is imposed on her – she is the victim of the viciously reified metaphor. Heldt notes that ‘the more powerless women have been in actuality, the more powerful the myth that has arisen of their redemptive, caregiving, nation-identified essence.’ Sadur and Vasilenko follow this pattern of myth-making, creating a contemporary variant of the downtrodden, saintly female that is so deeply entrenched in Russian culture. Olia is saved by religious pilgrims, and Ganna completes her

---

transformation from (passive) martyr to (active) saint, becoming a healer. The rebirth and redemption Olia and Ganna experience appear to serve as a ‘cure’ for their perceived madness. Judy is ‘sacrificed’, Olia is saved by religious pilgrims, and Ganna completes her transformation from passive martyr to active saint, becoming a healer. The rebirth Olia and Ganna experience appears to serve as a ‘cure’ for their madness; because Judy dies, she does not undergo this transformation, and in the final analysis, salvation appears to be inaccessible to her because of her alterity.

* Magical Realism

Though most often associated with Latin American literature (particularly the works of Gabriel García Marquez), magical realism has found extended application in a wide variety of world literatures, and some critics consider it as synonymous with the principles of postmodernism. According to Zamora and Faris, ‘we may suppose that the widespread appeal of magical realist fiction today responds not only to its innovative energy but also to its impulse to reestablish contact with traditions temporarily eclipsed by the mimetic constraints of nineteenth- and twentieth-century realism’. Indeed, we may view the magical realist elements in the texts of Tolstaia, Sadur and Vasilenko – as well as their evident resistance to mimesis – as reactions to nineteenth-century realism and novels of grand scope, as well as reactions to Socialist Realism from earlier in the twentieth century. As Natal'ia Ivanova notes: ‘In Russian literature of the Soviet period the grotesque developed outside of official ideology and literature. Totalitarian ideology proscribed the grotesque, the hyperbolic, and the

---


fantastic'; each of these elements is an integral part of the texts of the authors discussed in this chapter. Further, grotesque, hyperbolic, and fantastic elements may be seen to comprise a Russian variant of magical realism. Zamora and Faris posit that ‘[i]n magical realist texts, ontological disruption serves the purpose of political and cultural disruption: magic is often given as a cultural corrective, requiring readers to scrutinize accepted realistic conventions of causality, materiality, motivation’. 

Magical realist texts often erase or blur expected boundaries, and by their very nature, they are subversive. ‘The propensity of magical realist texts to admit a plurality of worlds means that they often situate themselves on liminal territory between or among those worlds – in phenomenal and spiritual regions where transformation, metamorphosis, dissolution are common, where magic is a branch of naturalism, or pragmatism’. Liminality is a characteristic shared by Judy, Olia, and Ganna; none is accepted by mainstream society. Transformation in the form of spiritual conversion is an important factor in the character development of both Olia and Ganna.

The evident proliferation of magical realist texts in contemporary or postmodern literature may be placed in a larger cultural context. Faris, for example, suggests that ‘postmodern storytellers may need magic to battle death...they inherit the literary memory, if not the actual experience, of death camps and totalitarian regimes, as well as the proverbial death of fiction itself’. Here we see the possibility of the Russian incarnation of magical realism functioning as a response to the

---

12 Ibid., p. 6.
prescribed forms of socialist realist expression, and we may see socialist realism as
the literary memory or experience of a totalitarian regime. The notion of the positive
hero of socialist realist novels – and perhaps the idea of the positive hero in general –
is also reacted against: Judy, Olia, and Ganna undergo the suffering and quests typical
of such characters, but as mentioned earlier, they are primarily acted upon, not active.
None of these characters evolves to a higher consciousness or awareness as a direct
result of suffering, although the latter two do undergo a spiritual conversion.

The idea of the female martyr presented in Gorkii's *Mat'*(Mother) is
reworked interestingly by Tolstaia, Sadur and Vasilenko. Clark notes that with the
publication of *Mat'*, 'a new variety of secular hagiography was introduced.' The
eponymous protagonist, a victim of domestic violence at the beginning of the novel,
becomes a politically conscious activist. In the end, she is martyred for her beliefs:
although she is a victim both at the beginning and the end of the text, she emerges as a
ture martyr because of the transformation she has experienced. Elements of sacrifice,
oordeals and suffering mentioned by Clark all appear in the works discussed in this
chapter, but to a completely different end – that is, not political consciousness. Clark
notes that 'in the great Soviet society, whether told within fiction or
without, all are orphans until they find their identity in the “great family”.' Judy,
Olia, and Ganna all remain isolated and alone in the world; if a new identity is
discovered, it is very much accidental rather than the result of an effort to join the
collective society.

Faris refers to Jean Weisberger’s identification of two types of magical
realism: ‘the “scholarly” type, which “loses itself in art and conjecture to illuminate or
construct a speculative universe” and which is mainly the province of European

---

15 See Clark, *History as Ritual*, pp. 177-78.
writers, and the mythic or folkloric type, mainly found in Latin America. It seems plausible to view the Russian manifestation of this tradition as an amalgam of the two types. Indeed, elements of the fantastic and the grotesque may readily be found in Russian literature of the 19th and 20th century, including the works of Gogol, Bulgakov, and Dostoevskii, among others. David K. Danow identifies a harsh version of magical realism: 'This is the nightmare world of the Second World War, which is here juxtaposed to the relatively dreamy magical realism of Latin America, where violence finds a peaceful and joyous counterpart, coupled with at least the possibility of resurrection from evil or villainy, a potentiality that is absent from grotesque realism.' I would like to suggest that Russian magical realism consists at least in part of this 'harsh' realism (and it is related to the dark elements of the fantastic and Gothic as seen in Petrushevskai).

Faris identifies what she considers to be the 'primary characteristics of magical realist fiction', including an irreducible element of magic, thorough descriptions of the phenomenal world (creating the 'realism' in magical realism), textual contradictions inspiring doubt in the reader, and freedom from standard ideas of time, space and identity. She also enumerates several secondary characteristics of magical realist texts, with the aim of more effectively situating them within the realm of the post-modern. These characteristics include the presence of meta-fictions, literalization of metaphor, narrative freshness or primitiveness, repetition of shifting references, metamorphoses, opposition to the established social order, folkloric

---

16 Ibid., p. 135.
17 Faris, 'Scheherazade’s Children', p. 165.
elements, and carnivalesque elements, including linguistic excess. Many of the elements of the grotesque coincide with characteristics typically attributed to magical realism. Jeanne Delbaere-Garant sees grotesque realism as one of the logical extensions of magical realism (along with psychic realism and mythic realism), and a grotesque dimension frequently is evident in the female characters of Tolstaia, Sadur, and Vasilenko.

The Female Grotesque

As mentioned earlier, the grotesque may be seen as fitting within the boundaries of magical realism. I want to interrogate the notion of the female grotesque using Mary Russo’s formulation. Russo identifies two poles within the grotesque: the Bakhtinian carnivalesque and the Freudian uncanny. She avoids identification of any essential characteristics of the grotesque, preferring instead to typify it in more general terms. Indeed, naming specific characteristics of the grotesque would run counter to Russo’s explanation: the concept of the grotesque is always subjective, and it is closely tied to normalization because what is grotesque is a deviation from the norm. Hyperbolism and excess often characterize such deviations, and grotesque status thereby implies some sort of transgressive activity. However, in the texts discussed in this chapter, the characters are not complicit in

---

22 One of my reasons for choosing to use Russo’s formulation of the grotesque is its gender-specific concentration on females. Drawing on Caryl Emerson’s work, Alexandra Smith notes the problems of applying Bakhtin to analyses of the ailing or imperfect female body. See Alexandra Smith, ‘Carnivalising the Canon: The Grotesque and the Subversive in Contemporary Russian Women’s Prose (Petrushevskaia, Sadur, Tolstaia, Narbikova)’, in Ian K. Lilly and Henrietta Mondry (eds), Russian Literature in Transition, Nottingham, 1999, pp. 35-58 (pp. 57-58). For Bakhtin’s analysis of carnival, see Mikhail Bakhtin, Tvorchestvo Fransua Rable i narodnaia kul tura srednevekovia i Renessansa, 2nd edn, Moscow, 1990.
their alterity or liminality. They seem unaware of and perhaps unwilling or unable to control their outsider status. In this sense, the female links naturally with the grotesque: Russo notes that ‘women and their bodies, certain bodies, in certain public framings, are always already transgressive – dangerous, and in danger’.\(^{23}\) Freud’s essay ‘On the Uncanny’ highlights part of this complex perception of the female. He identifies the female genitalia as a (seemingly paradoxical) collocation of the unheimlich (uncanny) and its opposite heimlich; they are frightening yet possess a ‘secret familiarity’.\(^{24}\)

**Abjection and Madness**

If we accept Russo’s formulation of the bipolar grotesque, we may situate Kristeva’s notion of abjection as an extreme of the uncanny.\(^{25}\) Abjection proceeds from alienation, and Kristeva argues that abjection is essentially different from and more violent than uncanniness. I have already remarked on the importance of the journey motif in each of the three main texts. The deject (or abject figure) embarks on a journey, strays, accepts the accompanying risk, and achieves salvation in corresponding degree to this straying.\(^{26}\) Kristeva states that abjection is caused by ‘what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite’.\(^{27}\)

There is a clear link between abjection and pain: this is a site where violence and the grotesque merge. Violence is merely a literalization of this relationship, and abject figures frequently are the victims of violence: they are punished for their

---


transgressive, unacceptable behaviour. Further, Kristeva frequently uses a violent lexicon to elaborate her theory of abjection and develops the notion of narrative as a locus for suffering in twentieth-century 'abject literature'.

Grotesque females, abjection and supposed transgression combine to some degree in *Limpopo* and certainly in *Iug, Durochka*, and Vasilenko's *Shamara* to create putative madness in the protagonists of these texts. In Lillian Feder's work on madness in literature, she defines 'madness as a state in which unconscious processes predominate over conscious ones to the extent that they control them and determine perceptions of and responses to experience that, judged by prevailing standards of logical thought and relevant emotion, are confused and inappropriate.' Examining this definition, it is easy to see that liminal characters on apparently aimless journeys who fail to conform to accepted standards for female behaviour might be interpreted as madwomen.

* 

In 1987, Tat'iana Tolstaia entered the Russian literary scene to great critical and popular acclaim. Known for their highly stylized, elaborate language and lack of grounding in contemporary Russian society, 'Tolstaia's texts are totally and wonderfully out of place in the 80s and 90s.' Critics have noted that Tolstaia's carefully constructed images and turns of phrase usually outshine the characters and plots in her fiction. Because of her frequent allusions to earlier Russian literature and her own literary pedigree, it is tempting to identify Tolstaia with some of her predecessors. She shares Nabokov's idea of the primacy of art and Gogol's predilection for dehumanizing his characters. Just as Dostoevskii repeatedly linked

---

27 Ibid., p. 4.
violence and childhood, so Tolstaia at times paints a complex childhood world with a dark side. Because Tolstaia is a contemporary woman writer, critics have probed for her opinions on feminist issues. Tolstaia has repeatedly stated her wholesale rejection of feminism, and she demonstrates a complete lack of sympathy for female characters (though it might be argued that she displays little sympathy for any of her characters, regardless of gender).

Because Tolstaia's short prose works intersect both thematically and technically, it is perhaps most fruitful to examine her work in terms of recurring motifs. Dalton-Brown identifies 'three main topoi' for Tolstaia, including the mundane world and a longing for escape from it, the enchanted world, and finally settings described in wholly exotic terms. Violence unquestionably qualifies as a recurring motif in Tolstaia's texts; it surfaces time and again with symbolic and metaphorical functions. Rarely, if ever, does realism figure in the portrayal of violence in her work (*Limpopo* is a possible exception): it often possesses an unreal and even absurd quality. Much of the violence in her work is gender-related and stems from a grotesque twisting of romantic love.

* 

In its treatment of Russian racism, the novella *Limpopo* – Tolstaia's longest work until her recent novel *Kys* (The Slynx, 2000) – provides a framework for the recurring episodes of violence in the text. Dalton-Brown has noted that *Limpopo*, unlike Tolstaia's other works, has some thematic currency because of its indirect

---

30 For a detailed analysis of many of these motifs, see Helena Goscilo, *The Explosive World of Tatyana N. Tolstaya's Fiction*, Armonk, NY and London, 1996.
discussion of racism. Limpopo, the name of a river in southeast Africa, immediately
connotes linguistic and geographic remoteness from Russia; throughout the text,
characters view non-Russianness or foreignness as a threat. Helena Goscilo has called
Limpopo a sociohistorical satire; at the centre of this satire is an examination of
official ideology and bureaucracy, where violence emanates from battles of ideologies
and minds. The novella tracks the concrete and abstract journeys of its main
characters, all of whom experience death in some form by the text’s conclusion.

Limpopo explores violence from a number of angles, ranging from the
symbolic violence directed towards Judy for her foreignness to the gratuitous, racist
violence of Zmeev and Perkhushkov (is he violent?) Lenechka eventually assumes
the role of both victim and aggressor, while Judy and Olgga Khrystoforovna exemplify
opposite poles of violence as directed towards females. Violence in Limpopo most
often surfaces through victimization of the other. This may take the form of actual
physical violence, symbolic gestures, feelings betrayed through speech or narratorial
commentary, or dehumanization through animal comparison. The latter technique
links to ‘grotesque realism’; as Danow explains: ‘In seeking to elaborate further a
poetics of grotesque realism, we must look to representative instances of allegorical
imagery and unusual metaphor, as well as to analogies made to the animal world,
where predator and victim are tellingly portrayed.

At the centre of the novella is the ill-fated relationship between the poet
Lenechka and his African bride Dzhudi (hereafter Judy), an aspiring veterinarian who
figures as an ironic inversion of Doktor Aibolit, a popular figure in Russian children’s
literature. The optimistic, regenerative element of the relationship between Judy and

34 Goscilo, The Explosive World of Tatyana N. Tolstaya’s Fiction, p. 175.
Lenechka resides in their (unfulfilled) hope that they will have a child. Placing the victimized Judy at the centre of the analysis, it is possible to examine her as an abject figure representative of the other.

*Limpopo* opens with the narratorial statement that ‘Judy’s grave was dug up last year and a highway was built in its place’ (270). From the beginning of the novella, doing violence to the memory of an individual emerges as an important element. Judy’s ambiguous African heritage is also associated with mystery and violence; in fact, her given name is not actually Judy but a ‘tender, lyrical’ name that one must ‘howl’ to pronounce (271). As she is known by a name not of her own choosing, Judy is denied her true identity on a very basic level. The narrator cannot remember the name of Judy’s homeland and ‘couldn’t find it in the new atlas’ (275).

The extravagant description (one of the characteristics identified by Zamora and Faris) of Judy’s homeland provides one example of magical realist elements in the text. The narrator mentions an indigenous festival which Judy’s fellow citizens conduct with ‘poisonous blue flowers stuck in their wiry hair, and [...] necklaces made of dogs’ teeth’ (271). This ritual adornment seems to contain a potential violence, the latent threat of the dogs’ teeth and the poisonous flowers serving as a highly romanticized means of viewing the violence of the *other* in its alterity. Judy’s native land emerges as a wild and savage place: ‘Evidently, after the routine battles, partitions, witchcraft, and cannibalism, Judy’s compatriots pulled apart the hills, the smoky river, and the fresh morning valley, sawed the crocodiles into three parts, drove away the people, and scorched the straw huts’; in fact, civil war is presented as the explanation for Judy’s presence in Russia (275). Grotesque exaggeration and an emphasis on the ‘exotic’ marks the description of these Africans, contrasting sharply with the mundanity of Soviet life as envisioned by the narrator. This exoticism (and,
it is implied, lack of refinement) is further emphasized when Judy and Lenechka stay in the narrator's flat, eating food straight from the pot in which it is cooked, walking around naked, and building campfires indoors.

Abject figures rarely are permitted to express themselves in text, and Judy is no exception. Her actions are reported through narratorial speech, but she utters a complete sentence only once: 'No, this is not life' (317). Her silence is 'powerless and black', like the 'lonely, obedient silence of a beast' (303). This link with animals is emphasized both in her physical description (she has dark brown 'dog eyes') and in her chosen vocation (272).

Animal associations continue throughout the text. Judy cheeps, and the bureaucrat Antonina Sergeevna bleats – and the car in which the entire group is riding is referred to as an ark. Judy's death is compared to that of a dog (317), and after she dies, Lenechka loses his reason and begins to act like an animal, running into the forest on all fours (326). This dehumanization functions on a variety of levels. Some characters are described as animals because of their flaws or deficiencies; some characters describe others as animals and thereby betray their racist beliefs; some become animal-like through their despair.

Though other characters develop as the text progresses, Judy remains static. Judy has neither personal nor professional achievements, and the narrator considers her a burden (317). Judy is further dehumanized by the narrator, who finds nothing when she peels away Judy's scarves and layers of clothing in a literal and symbolic effort to discover what lies beneath them.

Boundaries and their transgression emerge as a central motif in the text. Judy and Lenechka each occupy a position outside official ideology, and the narrator, like
Lenechka, belongs to the outcast group of intellectuals. Lenechka’s attraction to Judy arises from her exotic qualities and the opportunity for symbolic protest.

Lenechka’s association with violence continues, both literally and figuratively: Helena Goscilo has noted Tolstaia’s penchant for the literalization of metaphor. We learn that Lenechka ‘was a fighter for truth, wherever he imagined it to be’ (276). The fight for truth becomes literal in the description of his hypothetical complaint about damp linen on a train. Lenechka would flail and crash through the cars, threatening to smash up the train: in the engineer’s cabin and the radio room, and especially the restaurant car, ‘he’d smash the mashed potatoes and splatter all the borscht with the blows of his powerful fists, and he’d bury all, all, all of them under an avalanche of boiled eggs raining down’ (276-77). Death and violence recur as motifs in Lenechka’s creative efforts, whether he attempts to add his own literary style to the obituaries he composes for the newspaper or produces decadent verses with dark themes.

Intellectuals appear as victims through violence and humiliation – Lenechka notes that intellectuals are always relegated to the background on political posters, with glasses ‘just asking to be smashed by, let’s say, a scrap of pipe or a piece of hardened cement’ (279). The narrator’s discourse on the fate of the ‘beasts of my breed’ (290), her fellow intellectuals, derives from language of the hunt and the animal world: ‘whoever wasn’t paying attention was shot and wounded, the hunters gloriously hunted, their whiskers are bloody, and fresh feathers are stuck to their teeth; and those who bounded off in all directions in a desperate craving to survive hurriedly donned alien skins, adjusted their horns and tails in slivers of mirrors, pulled on gloves with claws, and now it’s impossible to tear off the fake, dead fur’ (290). This refers to a movement from intellectuality to safer ideological ground, and the
narrator likens the position of intellectuals to the social position of people of colour, that is to say, lower or diminished. This repeatedly is expressed through violent metaphors. Perhaps it also implies that individuals in such positions must resort to brute behaviour in order to survive.

For male characters in the text, the issue of racism links with violence. Techniques for confronting the other include an impotent, ineffective rage; a surplus of aggression; or attribution of violence to this aforementioned other. The first instance arises in the career aspirations of Lenechka's Uncle Zhenia, who ironically attempts to obtain a sensitive diplomatic post in Africa. He is obsessed with purifying his flat by removing from it all foreign items; in a jingoistic gesture, he even destroys all the imported food in the house (281). His frustration with Lenechka for marrying a foreigner (especially a black foreigner) manifests itself in a screaming and thrashing fit (282). Such verbal abuse characterizes Zhenia's interaction with others, and his family's pet hamster dies after suffering through Zhenia's screams (283). As for many other Tolstaian characters, impotent rage often stifles the full expression of violence. Zhenia meets an untimely demise in Africa when he is 'torn into tiny pieces by one of their animals passing by' – a ludicrous death (282). Ultimately, that which he hates and fears destroys him.

Perkhushkov, the 'ideological dragon' of the region, is yet another male character who demonstrates impotent rage (305). He experiences a violent physical reaction (nostalgia as a physical ailment) to his temporary departure from his homeland. Perkhushkov repeatedly conflates violence and foreignness: while in Italy, he envisions all Italians as mafiosi. When he finally locates a fellow Russian
and embraces him, the man suffocates (311). The suffocation is a literalized comment on the dangers of 'idiotic socialist patriotism' and the violence of the state.36

The narrator makes a similar generalization and incorrectly attributes violence to a foreigner following Lenechka's disappearance. Long after Lenechka befriends a man called Amangeldiev largely because of his minority status and subordinate position in society, Amangeldiev's relatives appear hoping to find housing in the city. When they are unsuccessful in obtaining the necessary documents, they commit arson, destroy part of a children's play area, and disfigure trees planted by Pioneers (321-22). In this instance, violence is attributed to the other: non-Russians are thought to be uncivilized and therefore violent.

In Limpopo, women do not function solely as passive characters. The character of the bureaucrat Ol'ga Khristoforovna illustrates some elements completely absent from Judy's character. In the town of R., horrific events transpire as the result of a breakdown in the bureaucratic structure when fourteen people are boiled alive. Ol'ga Khristoforovna uses this opportunity to wreak havoc through violence and control: she is writing her 'battle memoirs' (298), possesses an engraved sword, and dreams of war and battles. Galloping along on horseback, Ol'ga Khristoforovna demands destruction of everything not to her liking, institutes new codes of behaviour and calls in a military unit to assist. She reinvents herself as a tyrant - her imperious demeanour, her sweeping decrees, and even her renaming of towns denote a complete control of the surrounding area.

After Ol'ga Khristoforovna commands everyone to lay down their weapons, some of the men discuss the possibility of shooting her to restore order. Zmeev (whose name derives from the Russian for snake or dragon), Ol'ga Khristoforovna's

assassin, delivers a brief oration on the merits of shooting (323). Later, when Zmeev flirts with Lenechka’s sister Svetlana, he ‘accidentally’ kills her with an overzealous embrace: the surplus of aggression seen in the character of Perkhushkov is revisited in Zmeev. Though Olga Khristoforovna is the opposite of Judy in many ways, she is no less transgressive. Because she is seen as a threat to society and order, she is killed. It is significant that these two grotesque females are ‘punished’ through dehumanization and death.

* * *

Tolstaia’s short stories iterate some of the violent motifs of Limpopo while highlighting other functions of violence in her work. A wide range of violent incidents is presented in these texts, featuring women in danger (as formulated by Russo) on one end of the spectrum and dangerous women on the other. This finally reveals the whole range of behaviour in Tolstaia’s prose. Male rage and the suffering of the transgressive female are juxtaposed in ‘Ogon’i pyf’ (Fire and Dust, 1986). Lost love, unfulfilled expectations, and violent imagery are linked with an unhappy childhood in ‘Vyshel mesiats iz tumana’ (The Moon Came out of the Fog, 1987), ‘Peters’ (Peters, 1986). Tolstaia also presents the idea of love as hunt and presents the notion of courtship in a predator-prey paradigm in ‘Okhota na mamonta’ (Hunt for the Mammoth, 1985) and ‘Krug’ (Circle, 1987). Violence and sexual jealousy emerge in ‘Poet i muza’ (Poet and Muse, 1986). Finally, the idea of the dangerous woman is presented in ‘Reka Okkervil’ (Okkervil’ River, 1985) and ‘Peters’. In Tolstaia’s short stories, some characters seem to want to escape into a fantasy world; for others, this presents horrors.

Recurring male rage sharply contrasts with female suffering, which finds its nadir in the unfortunate Svetlana, also known as Pipka, of ‘Ogon’ i pyf’ (Fire and
Dust): she is degraded, abused and violated at the hands of many men, and rumours eventually circulate of her violent, fiery death. However, her unreliability undermines her outlandish stories. This unreliability is reinforced by the fact that she is completely ignorant of geography, so she is unable to explain exactly where she has been. The narrator calls her ‘awful’, ‘crazy and capable of anything’ (80); some say that she’s not a person; others call her a thief, but what she is best known for stealing is men (despite her grotesquely rotted teeth). As in the texts of Sadur and Vasilenko, the inappropriate female may present a sexual threat to other women.

Pipka tells wild, mixed-up stories (82); she claims she was gagged, abducted, raped, had half her teeth knocked out, and was abandoned naked (82-83). She was then found by a wild mountain-dweller who kept her prisoner and then traded her to an ethnographer for a watch with no hands, during which time she was still kept naked.

Some men respond to her storytelling by exclaiming ‘a thousand and one nights!’ (83). This comparison to Scheherazade is not entirely unfounded, in the sense that Pipka does in fact use storytelling to stay alive. She is able to draw men into her fantasy to get them to help her or give her money – the stories are as innocuous as needing help to find a puppy or as outlandish as needing to buy food for her Siamese twin daughters. The narrator remarks that Pipka ‘envies no one, she has everything, only it’s imaginary’ (85).

After disappearing for several months, Pipka returns with a mouth full of white teeth and an accompanying explanatory story of kidnapping and human

---

38 Although we are told by the narrator that the name Pipka is merely a shortened form of the nickname Svetka-Pipetka bestowed upon the protagonist by the ethnographer, the pejorative connotations of this epithet should not be overlooked. ‘Pipka’ is a slang term for the male genitalia, and Limonov uses the same term in Eto ia, Edichka to refer to the female genitalia. Regardless of the gender intended, the
trafficking. When she finally disappears on a more permanent basis, various explanations surface, including her death: some say she was burned to death in a taxi accident. As the story goes, nothing remained when the fire went out but some lumps of coal. In the end, nothing remains of Pipka but dust.

* 

A second function of violence in Tolstaia's short stories is the shattering of the myths of childhood and a linking with disappointment in adult life. In 'Vyshel mesiats iz tumana', Natasha's supposedly evocative name contrasts sharply with the reality of her dull spinster existence and provides a juxtaposition of the fantastic with the mundane (176). Violent imagery repeatedly evokes childhood, not least through the children's counting rhyme that lends the story its title:

The moon came out of the fog,

He took a knife out of his pocket,

I'm going to cut you, I'm going to hit,

I don't care -- you are it! (176)

The association continues through the mention of wolves lurking near beds and cradles (177). Limpopo also presents the idea of childhood as a potentially frightening phenomenon, and the narrator's reminiscences of childhood conjure horrific images: a stern-eyed teacher named Saltykov-Shchedrin, who evokes images of the 'sadist's bloodstained apron' and the 'executioner's tense tongs' (276) For Tolstaia, childhood is a magical yet dangerous place.

---

39 Wachtel notes the embedding of the 'Tolstoyan myths of childhood [...] in the Russian cultural mind' and asserts that Tolstoi's views of childhood 'became both a literary and a sociocultural theme in Russia.' See Andrew Wachtel, The Battle for Childhood: Creation of a Russian Myth, Stanford, CA, 1990, p. 4 and p. 5.

40 Tolstaia, 'Vyshel mesiats iz tumana', in Liubish'- ne liubish', pp. 176-87.
Natasha’s misfortunes are described as a shattering kaleidoscope in which her world is crushed, and her parents die. ‘[S]uspecting her own female, unclean, wild animal nature, Natasha felt a foul wind blowing and blowing as if from below, at her belly, at her unprotected depths, night and day’ (178). This wind calls attention to elements of the female grotesque, particularly Natasha’s feeling that her gender is somehow responsible for the turmoil surrounding her. This turmoil extends beyond waking consciousness as turbulent dreams plague her: ‘Every night, ripping her fingernails, Natasha tore off the cold, felt doors, and behind one of the doors her dead father, his huge mouth gaping, blew with ashy lips a monstrous black bubble – a hellish balloon’ (178).

Like ‘Vyshel mesiats iz tumana’, ‘Peters’ is a story of lost love and unfulfilled expectations. The eponymous protagonist has difficulty adapting socially from childhood onwards. He is a weak and unimposing character; only through fantasy can he become aggressive and powerful, as when he envisions himself as a tiger (230). Innocently hoping to make friends, Peters approaches various people and inadvertently provokes strong reactions – ‘women shied away and men thought of hitting him, but after looking closely, reconsidered. No one wanted to play with him’ (231). Even a cleaning woman scorns Peters, humiliating him symbolically by flipping her rag in his face (239).

Peters is a liminal figure characterized by the impotent rage typical of men in Tolstai’s texts, yet he suffers as a Tolstaiian female character would. He devises

---

41 Tolstai, 'Peters', in Liubish - ne liubish, pp. 227-44. Thematically similar, 'Milaia Shura' (Sweet Shura) explores the past loves of Aleksandra Ernestovna and also points to the crushing of love and dreams; see Tolstai, 'Milaia Shura', Liubish - ne liubish, pp. 42-52.

42 There is a possible link to Babel and his short story ‘Kak eto delalos v Odessa’ (How It Was Done in Odessa), in which a tiger is equated with virility: ‘Imagine [...] you are a tiger, you are a lion, you are a cat. You can spend the night with a Russian woman, and the woman will remain satisfied with you.’ See Isaak Babel, ‘Kak eto delalos v Odessa’, in Babel, Izbrannoe, Moscow, 1966, pp. 165-73 (p. 165).
several unsuccessful suicide plans; finally, the only outlet for his rage is a complaint over the phone to the controller’s office (234). Futility clouds much of Peters’s life.

Eventually Peters contemplates retaliation through killing his German teacher, thinking,

Elizaveta Frantsevna, avert your eyes. Now I’m going to kill you […] and all those who promised and deceived me, seduced and abandoned me; I’ll kill them in the name of all fat and short-winded, tongue-tied and slow-witted men, […] prepare yourself, Elizaveta Frantsevna, I’m going to suffocate you with that embroidered pillow. And no one will ever find out (241-42).

Once again, Peters’s fantasy does not (and perhaps cannot) materialize. His only retaliation comes in the symbolic blow he deals when he leaves, crushing in his fist a card with a cat (242). Another example of symbolic or transferred violence occurs when Peters dreams that he brings home a chicken from the market and must disembowel it while his wife watches. The description suggests symbolic violence: ‘Peters himself had to rip open the breast of the chilled bird with a knife and an axe and tear out the slippery brown heart, the red roses of the lungs, and the blue breathing stem’ (243). In his old age, Peters has decided to want nothing and regret nothing, but it is unclear whether he has transcended victim status at last. It seems more likely that his resentment and rage simply have dissipated, and his only means of attaining true masculinity is through fantasies of violence.

Tolstaia also draws from the animal world to elaborate on the relationships between men and women, suggesting the latent violence inherent in all romantic relationships. In ‘Okhota na mamonta’ (Hunting the Woolly Mammoth), animal

---

43 Peters also fantasizes harmlessly about women. See ‘Sonia’ for the negative consequences of fantasy love: Ada Adolfova creates the imaginary Nikolai and is then forced to ‘kill him off’; Tolstaia, ‘Sonia’, in Liubish’ - ne liubish’, pp. 9-18.

44 Aleksei Petrovich, the protagonist in ‘Noch’, shares some of Peters’s traits: he has violent fantasies, his mother controls some of his actions and restrains him, and he has difficulty interacting with others. See Tolstaia, ‘Noch’, in Liubish’ - ne liubish’, pp. 105-14.
imagery is employed to describe the engineer Vladimir, who is somewhat ‘wild and hairy’ (194). Here, the technique of likening people to animals, in contrast to that employed in Limpopo, primarily serves to reinforce the hunt metaphor. Zoia, his girlfriend, is attracted to the primal and the powerful, and Tolstaia aptly paints her as a huntress. Zoia wants to marry (ensnare) Vladimir, and the story delineates a reversal or inversion of the typical predator-prey (and male-female) relationship.

Zoia consciously equates her relationship and the act of hunting, musing, ‘There are rules of the hunt: the mammoth withdraws a certain distance, I aim, release the arrow: Whoooosh! – and he’s finished. And I drag his carcass home: here’s meat for the long winter’ (202). At the conclusion of the text, Zoia tosses a ‘noose’ around Vladimir’s neck, finally ensnaring this ‘small, powerful, heavy, quick, hairy, insensitive animal’ (203). The capture is emasculating: in the final paragraph, Vladimir has become ‘it’ instead of ‘he’.

The hunt metaphor is elaborated in ‘Krug’ (The Circle), in which Vasili Mikhailovich observes the preparations at a beauty salon while waiting for his wife. Numerous images of females entrapping males are present: they are ‘ensnared hand and foot, hobbled and gagged’ (55). Vasili Mikhailovich attempts to extricate himself from this pattern of female entrapment: he ‘chewed through the chain and ran away from Evgeniia Ivanovna, his wife’ (59). An essential link appears between feminine beauty and supposed violence or cruelty. The narrator mentions a hat fearfully blinking it eyes, a cow suffering to produce the leather for shoes, a screaming lamb, and a weeping crocodile, among others (54). This frame of cruelty expands to encompass females themselves when Vasili Mikhailovich sees women being choked, burned with boiling water and attached to hideous metal wires, all in

the name of beauty (53-54). Alterity again links with violence: in this setting, it serves to isolate the female world from the territory known to Vasilii Mikhailovich.

* In 'Poet i muza' (The Poet and the Muse), Nina, enamoured of the ailing poet Grisha, nails her heart to his bed (248).\textsuperscript{47} Pain and love appear to be inextricably linked in Tolstaia's texts: this text presents a literal pain, while that experienced by characters such as Peters and Natasha is a more subtle form of longing.\textsuperscript{48} As with Lenechka in *Limpopo*, violence and creativity are inseparable for the painter Lizaveta. Her artistic techniques are unusually forceful: 'with cries, wheezes, and some kind of dirty rage she threw herself at the canvas, kneading blue, black, and yellow paint with her fists, and scratching the still-wet, oily mush with her fingernails...it was a terrible sight' (250-51). Lizaveta bears physical marks from her creative endeavours – her 'bony hands bloomed with ulcers from toxic paints, and similar ulcers covered Nina’s jealous heart, still nailed to the head of Grisha’s bed' (251). With this comparison, Tolstaia juxtaposes the link between love and physical suffering with the link between art and physical suffering.

For Nina, violence stems from sexual jealousy.\textsuperscript{49} When she concludes that Lizaveta must be destroyed (252), she encounters some difficulties. After evading pursuits and numerous attempts at bodily harm, 'finally, Lizaveta became a mere shadow' (253). Nina has proven successful: when Lizaveta visits Grisha at home, her 'shadow gnawed her hands to shreds and rolled about on the floor...' (254). Erika Greber notes the subversion of the conventional representation of the muse:

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{47} Tolstaia, 'Poet i muza', in *Liubish' - ne liubish', pp. 245-57.

\textsuperscript{48} In 'Chistyj list' (A Clean Sheet), love is also associated with pain: a 'heart transplant' is presented as a means of dealing with emotional distress. See Tolstaia, 'Chistyj list', in *Liubish' - ne liubish', pp. 154-75.
\end{flushleft}
What Tolstaia eventually presents is a demystifying, defamiliarizing and profanatory variant of the inspirational principle’s image [...]. Tolstaia’s concept differs from earlier images of the muse by women writers, most notably Akhmatova and Tsvetaeva, for whom the inspirational principle remained feminine (and veiled, cf. Akhmatova’s Muza, 1924) and divine and both of whom conceived of the relation between poet and muse as a relation between sisters.50

‘Poet i muza’ thus presents a possible link between art and love and suggests through the presence of a haunting, self-abusing muse that inspiration may be yoked with violence.

* 

The most ‘dangerous’ women in Tolstaia’s texts are those predatory figures who consume others literally or figuratively. Peters’ grandmother is clearly the dominant force in his early life, and she is presented as a devourer – ‘Grandmother ate Grandfather with the rice kasha, ate my childhood, my only childhood...’ (232). A woman may also be envisioned as a devourer or be otherwise negatively represented if she fails to meet male expectations. In ‘Reka Okkervil’, Simeonov is dejected upon realizing the vast differences between the public persona and the mundane reality of the once-popular singer Vera Vasil’evna.51 When Vera Vasil evna visits his flat, he thinks to himself that ‘Vera Vasil’evna died, she died long ago, was killed, dismembered and eaten by this old woman, and her bones were sucked clean’ (381). Vera Vasil evna is called a devourer of men, a recurring epithet in Tolstaia’s texts (381).

Rancour-Laferrière remarks, ‘Critics of Tolstaja’s prose have repeatedly noted its playful cruelty...This sadism in no way precludes the pity (zhalost ) which she also often expresses for her characters. But, of the two, pity is the derivative emotion, not

49 There is a possible link to ‘Khoziaika’ (The Proprietor), an 1843 text by Elizaveta Vasil’evna Kologrivova, in which a similar sexual jealousy prompts a muse to pester a Russian artist in Rome. I thank Mary Zirin for suggesting this link.
sadism. The narrator cannot take pity on her characters until she has *created* a bad situation for them.’ He continues by stating,

> One may object that Tolstaja is only reflecting reality when she depicts violence and suffering...But this will not do. Life is indeed hard, especially in Russia, but Tolstaja is not some socialist realist bent on the extirpation of either social or psychological evils. She is a free, creative spirit who sometimes *chooses* evil in order to move her narration forward...These images are not neutral, but sadistic. Any accompanying pity is derivative. Both the sadism and the pity are of course essential to Tolstaja’s magical talent.\(^52\)

While it is true that there are positive and regenerative aspects of the magical world in Tolstaja’s prose, her vivid utilization of alterity and subversion of the established conventions for the depiction of themes such as romantic love and childhood cast a fresh light on some of the classic themes of Russian literature.

* 

As in Tolstaja’s texts, magical realism and elements of the grotesque characterize the presentation of violence in Nina Sadur’s work.\(^53\) While lacking some elements of fantasy found in Tolstaja’s prose, Sadur’s prose includes grotesque realism and draws on folkloric motifs.\(^54\) Like Liudmila Petrushevskaya, Sadur developed a reputation as a dramatist before she became known as a prose writer.\(^55\) In 1986, *Novoe znakomstvo* (A New Acquaintance) became Sadur’s first published dramatic work, and her plays have been performed in Moscow since the late 1980s.

---

\(^{51}\) Tolstaia, ‘*Reka Okkervil*’, in *Liubish' - ne liubish'*, pp. 370-82.


\(^{53}\) Though considerably less violent, the work of Sadur’s daughter Ekaterina displays a number of similarities to that of her mother. See Joseph P. Mozur’s review of her novel *Das Flüstern der Engel* in *World Literature Today*, 74, 2000, 1, pp. 189-90.

\(^{54}\) See Sarsenov, *Passion Embracing Death*. Sarsenov notes the particular importance of metamorphosis in Sadur’s texts and in this way links them to Russian magical realism and folklore (p. 110).

\(^{55}\) As Catriona Kelly has noted, violence surfaces in a number of Sadur’s dramatic works, particularly in connection with power relations. *Zaria vzoidet* (The Dawn Rises) explores the dysfunctional power plays between a husband and wife, in which their adopted son becomes an unwilling pawn when the wife tries to coerce him to murder her. *Ulichennaiia lastochka* (The Trapped Swallow) explores the manipulative relationship between therapist and patient, a complex interaction resulting in a reversal of
The publication of her second play, *Poka zhivye* (If They’re Spared), followed in 1987, providing, as Catriona Kelly points out, in its ‘view of women’s culture as located between the mundane and the other-worldly’ a starting point for the exploration of this issue in her subsequent work. Though Sadur has joined several other contemporary Russian women writers in eschewing overt feminist sympathies, she has expressed an interest in the ‘relationship between eroticism, feminism, and demonology’, which may partially account for the magical realist and folkloric dimensions and the presence of numerous witches or witchlike characters in Sadur’s short prose works. Sarsenov has identified Sadur’s ‘obvious preoccupation with language’s magical aspects’. Sadur has admitted an interest in the imbrication of feminism with other elements present in her work, and the grotesque female surfaces as aggressor as well as victim in her prose. Parnell presents the idea that Sadur’s female protagonists ‘reject feminine qualities or connect them with dictatorial power claims.’

In an interview with Denis Salter, Sadur explains some of her artistic objectives: ‘I am interested in how human beings live within society and try to communicate with each other, but not in social problems as such. The object of art, I think, is the inner world of the human personality. There is no respect in our society for individuals and their civil rights.’ In Limpopo, Tolstaia draws attention to the violence of the state, and Sadur reiterates this notion in her short story ‘Utiugi i almazy’ (Irons and Diamonds, 1993), writing that the USSR ‘wasn’t a person after all,

---

56 Ibid., p. 434.
and didn’t seem alive until it crushed you with its four letters until your ribs cracked’ (311). In *Iug* (The South, 1992), Olia meets a merciless interrogator who identifies traitors and turns them over to be shot. She humiliates him by pulling his nose down to the ground: this may demonstrate a literal nose-tweaking at the old regime (257).

* 

Sadur’s *Pronikshie* (The Discerning, 1990) cycle of short stories presents a number of violent scenes. According to Gessen, these texts, ‘combining the most socialist-realistic of details and language with an ever-present mystical “it”, can be read as an ironic answer to the censor’. This cycle also reveals the darker side of magical realist elements in her prose: *Pronikshie* presents violence in the form of male suicide, wish-fulfilment in premonitions or dreams, and female jealousy in connection with witchcraft and spells. Kelly notes that violence against men acquires a particular prominence in Sadur’s short stories. She also proposes that Sadur has in some sense feminized the absurdist work of Daniil Kharms, ‘not only in the obvious sense of questioning whether women always have to be victims, but also by linking her alternative view of language with representations of extraordinary, and unpredictable, “feminine” behaviour.’ Peterson has noted the mediated character of the violence in this cycle and the fact that violent incidents are predominantly female-

---

60 Salter, ‘Under Western Eyes’, p. 73.  
63 Sadur, *Pronikshie*, in Sadur, *Sad*, pp. 281-307. Page numbers for individual segments of this cycle will be given immediately following their titles.  
She also groups these incidents into three categories: reactive, premeditated, and ritualized.

‘Chervivyi synok’ (Worm-Eaten Sonny, pp. 300-01) presents a male variant on the female grotesque considered in this chapter, exemplifying unusual female behaviour in its extreme accusations. This is an unusual technique: as Heldt notes, although women may often be depicted as grotesque figures, it is not in the Russian tradition to depict men as ‘sexually or emotionally grotesque’. The following lengthy quotation is included because of its unusual cataloguing of grievances:

All men are deceivers, freedom-lovers [...]. They eat us alive with our virginity, our future, our bones. They corrupt and infect us with death. They drink us up and crumple us like a milk carton [...]. You shouldn’t trust them [...]. A man is a beast. He’s swallowed a scorpion. He stings you. He tramples woman down [...]. They’re monstrous. They’re senseless. Their heads should be chopped off. Immediately [...]. Because of all of his dangerous life, worms appear in a man’s brain. And they gnaw his wrinkly brains, suck out the grey matter, and the man becomes even more brutish. And when he lies down, sleeps, the worms peek out of his ears: out of the left, a worm, and out of the right, a worm. Vanity and cruelty. And the man-bollard sleeps without a mask, and horrible is his face, and the suckling-worms look out and squeeeeeeak at how tasty he is (300-01).

‘Chervivyi synok’ both constructs an admittedly biased typology of male characteristics and labels violence as inherent in relationships between men and women. This text provides a useful starting point for an examination of violence in Sadur’s shorter works, as it emblematizes Sadur’s view of men. Though the dangerous female is striking precisely because she is an aberration, the dangerous male is all the more horrifying because he represents the status quo.

---

67 Ibid., p. 165.
68 Heldt, *Terrible Perfection*, p. 25.
69 It is significant that female scorpions often devour the male after mating: in ‘Chervivyi synok’, the male consumes the devouring female and thus neutralizes the threat she presents.
70 ‘Chervivyi synok’ provoked considerable negative reaction among male literary critics upon its publication.
In the Pronikshie cycle, Sadur uses dreams and premonitions to reveal violence. Dreams have a figurative significance in ‘Kol tsa’ (Rings, pp. 289-93). The narrator Larisa experiences violent dreams in which she sees her boyfriend as dead; she is also severely injured when a woman attacks her; and she eventually dreams of her own death. Larisa interprets these dreams as signifying that nothing will come of her relationship with a married man. In ‘Blesnulo’ (It Glistened, pp. 281-83), premonitions of harm to the protagonist’s boyfriend are to be interpreted literally – she foresees him twisting his ankle and later becoming crippled in a car crash.

Premonitions function as wishes in ‘Siniaia ruka’ (The Blue Hand, pp. 298-300). Maria Ivanovna is an ex-convict, and her flatmate Valia suffers from mysterious pains and blue hands characteristic of poor circulation. She begins to imagine various calamities befalling Maria Ivanovna, and as in many Sadur texts, a wish or premonition magically comes true. Warts begin growing on Valia’s face, and Maria Ivanovna is later found choked by a blue hand. At the end, Valia vanishes.

‘Shelkovistye volosy’ (Silky Hair, pp. 287-89) links friendship and jealousy. A woman with a sick son visits a fortune teller and learns that one of her old friends has cursed her by sticking a needle through her heart in a photograph. ‘Zlye devushki’ (Mean Girls, pp. 301-03) presents a spell as an epigraph before introducing the German Harry, who was born in a camp and has the ‘face of a beast’ (301). He beats his girlfriend Emka and threatens to kill her if she leaves him. On a table in their flat, a box containing two enchanted or cursed chocolates appears. Harry eats the chocolates, which magically reappear after he has consumed them, and he becomes ill. At the conclusion of the story, the friendship has been severed, and Harry becomes suspicious as the narrator breathes lightly on him, foreshadowing his death; magic has been used to neutralize the threat of a violent male.
In ‘Ved’miny slezki’ (Witch’s Tears, pp. 303-07), a young woman called Nadia visits a witch in hopes of casting a spell on her fiancé as revenge for his crimes of abandonment, incitement to abortion, and emotional abuse. There is a certain tension between the mundane and the fantastic: Nadia knows of the witch’s powers, and she believes the pig in the witch’s yard might be bewitched, but for a moment, the magic disappears as quickly as it materializes, and the witch is just an old woman. Violence pulsates in the witch’s home, creating an aura of which Nadia is keenly aware. After Nadia’s purse is turned into a dove, she senses that there is a palpable evil about the dove on the table, but ‘that which ruins us, attracts us’ (305). Though horrified, she cannot keep herself from watching as the dove kills itself by pecking a red gem in its breast that turns out to be its heart. This self-destruction is symbolic: Nadia will destroy herself through the curse she solicits. Nadia comes to understand how the curse may backfire: if her fiancé dies, so will her excuse for suffering. As the witch enacts the curse, Nadia becomes an apparition because she fails to heed the witch’s instructions and remain silent. Sadur has stated that a number of her stories may be read as parables, and the closing paragraph of ‘Ved’miny slezki’ suggests that this story may be read as an example of the resultant torment when those who suffer ‘turn to evil’ (307). It also indicates what may happen when love spells work in unexpected ways.\(^{71}\)

* 

In ‘Tsvetenie’ (Flowering, 1993), the narrator buys some sprigs at the market in order to protect herself from old Khazina, who may be a witch.\(^{72}\) She gives the suspicious Khazina two of the twigs she has purchased; although her own twigs flower, Khazina’s do not. In a dream-revelation, the narrator realizes that when

\(^{71}\) Sarsenov notes that both ‘Ved’miny slezki’ and Sad demonstrate the destructive effects of such incantations. See Sarsenov, Passion Embracing Death, p. 216.
Khazina dies, an autopsy will be performed on her in the morgue, and her body will be dismembered for analysis (316).

At the story's end, the narrator reacts to Khazina in a destructive fury. Not waiting for the twigs to bloom, she snaps the twigs, pours out the water, yanks Khazina out of bed and pushes her against the wall. 'Flashes burst in my brain. The plaster screamed from the friction. It smelled horribly of excrement. And my voice reverberated against the wall: “Yours are never going to fucking bloom, you stupid oaf!”' (316-17). 'Tsvetenie' juxtaposes physical degradation and biological regeneration, with the twigs providing a literalized metaphor of creation and destruction. Linguistic degradation is also present: the female narrator's use of *mat* marks her as transgressive, since taboos against females employing *mat* remain deeply embedded in Russian culture.

* 

The transgressive female emerges as the centre of Sadur's *Iug* and Svetlana Vasilenko's *Durochka*, which I will examine through a comparison of their respective female protagonists, Olia and Ganna, and the various forms of violence they experience. The path of transgression, suffering and redemption each protagonist takes demonstrates that hope may surface from bleak circumstances and that there is a place in society for these martyr-figures.

In *Iug* and *Durochka*, both writers modify the established Russian trope of the passive female. The role of the female victim is read not exclusively in a domestic context (indeed, both Olia and Ganna remain without fixed abodes for most of their

---

respective texts) but within a markedly religious one. Violence surfaces within this religious frame and is at once more subtle and complicated than comparatively straightforward male-on-female physical abuse, as evidenced both by the wide-ranging sources of violence and the idea that the women who suffer may as a result emerge as stronger, more complete individuals. In this way, Sadur and Vasilenko employ violence as a tool for revisiting gender stereotypes.

Grotesque realism combined with literal or figurative transformations may be said to characterize the presentation of violence in Nina Sadur’s work, in which the grotesque female surfaces as aggressor as well as victim. Sadur’s novella chronicles the spiritual journey of Olia to the South in hopes of recovering from a mysterious illness. She has no particular symptoms except a feeling of melancholy, but she gradually goes mad. In his interview with Sadur, Denis Salter notes her preoccupation ‘with characters [...] who manage to recover from a protracted period of spiritual and emotional destruction.’ In Iug, Olia’s transformation is seen through varying narrative perspectives: third-person narrative permits the reader to view Olia as she is seen by society, while stretches of first-person narrative reveal part of the workings of Olia’s inner world. While on the beach, Olia embarks on a mental journey of memories in which she travels through much of her life, beginning with childhood. Dark and violent images often accompany these memories, such as abusing and tormenting a German schoolboy with her friend Tania (238) and the disturbing consequences of inadvertently neglecting childhood pets and a stray dog (264-6). As

---

73 Barbara Heldt notes that some ‘sexual/religious symbolism [was] accepted by the Soviet reader, believer and atheist alike. In many rhetorical stances in the Soviet Union today the curse of communism is prayerfully exorcised by a sentimentalized discourse of religiosity.’ Barbara Heldt, ‘Gynoglasnost: writing the feminine’, in Mary Buckley (ed.), Perestroika and Soviet Women, Cambridge and New York, 1992, pp.160-175 (p. 163). Certainly this symbolism still retained currency during the years in which Iug and Durochka were written.

74 Salter, ‘Under Western Eyes’, p. 73.
the novella progresses, Olia appears to meet violence and suffering wherever she goes — it confronts her in recurring violent vignettes embedded in the text, including a cautionary tale told to a group of children (242) and an encounter with women who work at a slaughterhouse and a hospital (250-52).

Typical Russian associations with the South appear in *lug* — that of an exotic, lush, and highly romanticized atmosphere. Here, departure from one's normal surroundings presents the dual possibility of recuperation and transformation. However, despite the relaxed atmosphere, Olia's behaviour still seems strange to other vacationers. As Otto Boele notes, 'Directly related to the image of the South as a source of light and warmth is the idea of its life-restoring powers.' However, the landscape in *lug* is not presented as a wholly benign element. In winter, the sea turns wild and 'gnaws' at the town (243). Various functions are attributed to the sea, including cleansing, killing and ritual purification. Razor-sharp mussels on the beach are a threat (262), as is the sun, and because Olia's skin does not tan, her comparative pallor further serves as a physical reminder of her outsider status (248). The female protagonists of *lug* and *Durochka* face not only human threats — they are also oppressed and attacked by their natural surroundings.

The alternations in narrative perspective reflect the ebb and flow of Olia's powers of language. Paradoxically, she laments her inability to communicate with others and her loss of language through a stretch of first-person narrative (247-48),

---


and by the end of the novella, her descent into silence has become complete.\footnote{Feder notes a similar paradox in Antonin Artaud’s *Fragments of a Diary From Hell*: ‘Ironically, language – which he hated because it seemed to taunt him, ever eluding what he diagnosed as the verbally inexpressible, somatic sources of his psychic pain – was his chief vehicle for obsessively portraying this condition. Concrete, violent language was his principal means of conveying the rage and frustration of instinctual diffusion and repression’; see Feder, *Madness in Literature* (p. 260).} She couches her linguistic difficulties in terms of unease about communication and experiences a physical reaction to this social discomfort. As Olia descends into madness, fear also marks her relations with others, and when she encounters a man on a hilltop, she expresses her need to ‘say deadly things to people’ (249). For Olia, language has tremendous cathartic power, and when she loses this ability to vent her frustrations, she alienates the people around her. With no release, ‘everything inside is frozen and I want to vomit’ (249). She speaks of a violent trembling inside her body, and when she leaves the hill, an attack of nausea corroborates her statements.

Foucault identifies one explanation of madness as stemming from the inability to control passions or desires – in fact, the presence of these strong passions or desires provides a foundation for madness\footnote{Michel Foucault, *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*, trans. Richard Howard, London, 2001, p. 85.}, as in the case of Olia’s unacceptable actions. Her transgressive behaviour culminates in the attempted seduction of Kostia, her landlady’s fifteen-year-old son. Hovering between childhood and manhood, Kostia is a figure of emerging sexuality. Though it is unclear whether the seduction actually takes place, Kostia’s mother finds the two in bed together at dawn, and tells Olia, ‘I’m not going to kill you […] I’ll deal with you in a civilized way, I’m not even going to hit you’ (261). In her mind, violence is the logical retribution for the seduction of her son. Others at the house tie Olia up and plan to take her to the police, punching her in frustration and abandoning her on the beach after they cannot untie her bonds (261). These scenes follow a quasi-Christian pattern of punishment.
following sin; salvation only emerges as a possibility as the text progresses and Olia sinks further into abjection and misery.

Olia’s alienation and abjection are painfully obvious when she approaches a Georgian amputee on the beach and he asks her, ‘Who has it worse: me or you? Why does a woman need a brain anyway, or a voice? She needs legs and a face’ (270-71). Recognizing her incompleteness, he adds, ‘I’m cut off on the outside…but you have nothing left inside’ (270). He notices that Olia wears a ring with no stone, signifying her emptiness (271).

At the conclusion of Iug, Valia and Tonia, two religious pilgrims of sorts, find Olia on the beach. They call her Maria, symbolizing her spiritual conversion and newfound purity. Each of the women has experienced her own spiritual awakening after prolonged suffering, including domestic violence, abandonment, and illness. Sadur has commented that these women are ‘Christians who help her to understand the nature of love. She has, to that point, been a pilgrim who does not realize that she has been journeying towards a new life. This kind of unconscious journey is an eternal theme in Russian literature.’79 At the end of the text, the sea is calm, mirroring spiritual serenity and Olia’s rescue. After the ailing Tonia dies on the beach, Olia finally speaks, uttering her new name in an affirmation of her salvation and symbolic rebirth (277). With Olia’s rescue and redemption and recovered powers of speech at the conclusion of Iug, her new life begins.

*]

‘[R]edemption and resurrection through miracle’ features strongly in Vasilenko’s Durochka.80 Goscilo notes the belief in the ‘gendered nature of destructive aggression (masculine) and the salvatory impulse (feminine)’ which

---

79 Salter, ‘Under Western Eyes’, p. 73.
pervades Vasilenko’s texts as the foundation for the author’s feminism. Men are largely superfluous in her fictional worlds, and where they feature they show marked tendencies towards ‘sexual violence and “anomaly”’.

The publication of Vasilenko’s story ‘Za saigakami’ (Going after Goat Antelopes) in 1983 marked her literary debut; later, as a member of the ‘Novye amazonki’ (New Amazons) group, she played a major role in compiling, editing and publishing *Ne pomniashchaia zla* (She Who Bears No Ill, 1990) and *Novye amazonki* (1991). Vasilenko openly declares her feminism and has devoted a considerable amount of effort towards promoting the works of other Russian women writers in addition to her own. The group endured criticism for the ‘naturalism’ presented by the harsh and cruel conditions in many of its authors’ texts, though they considered it a faithful depiction of Soviet society. Despite the proliferation of violence and cruelty in her works, Vasilenko’s worldview is not uniformly bleak.

Goscilo identifies several putative links between Vasilenko’s biography and works. A aeronautic or nuclear backdrop looms behind many of Vasilenko’s stories, referencing her childhood in Kapustin Yar and reminding the reader that it is impossible to escape the (sometimes painful) technological lessons of the twentieth century.

*  

The motifs of salvation and redemption seen in *lug* also figure prominently in *Durochka*, Svetlana Vasilenko’s weightiest literary work to date. The itinerant protagonist Ganna, a mute and a saint-martyr figure, leaves an orphanage and

---

81 Ibid., p. xii.
82 Ibid., p. xviii.
83 Ibid., p. xii.
embarks on a journey in which she provides a promise of redemption and healing in various contexts. Though framed by scenes from the early 1960s, in which the narrator struggles to understand his deaf-mute sister, Ganna’s double Nad'ka, the bulk of the novella takes place in the 1930s. The Christian notions and folkloric elements of the central narrative contrast starkly with the hyperbolic imagery of nuclear war presented in the frame text, highlighting some of the leitmotifs in Vasilenko’s prose. Vasilenko uses a frame narrative to situate her protagonist in both the early Soviet period and the dawning of the nuclear age, presenting the idea of a female ‘holy fool’ in markedly different, though equally non-religious, contexts. The contrast between these two settings draws the concept of the holy fool out of a religious context and permits analysis of Ganna as a woman experiencing suffering and wonder. Embedded within the text are numerous bits of history and legend, all of which contribute to an understanding of the role of Ganna.

The narrative is divided into four segments; the first takes place in 1962 and at the orphanage; in the second, Ganna’s physical and spiritual journey begins. She continues wandering in the third part of the text, during which time she suffers and becomes a healer, and the final segment of the text returns to 1962.

Durochka’s title itself suggests that Ganna should be examined as a holy fool. Taking the holy fool out of a religious context, Rancour-Laferrière writes: ‘Psychoanalytically viewed, the holy fool was a sufferer, part of whose masochism was specifically provocative or exhibitionistic in style.’ He also states that the concept of the fool automatically elicits ideas of violence and punishment: for Russians, fools are, or should be, beaten often ‘or otherwise abused’ because they

---

85 The holy fool (iurodivyi), an important motif in Russian culture, is an itinerant individual who behaves strangely but often recognizes and reveals larger prophetic truths about society which others are unwilling to accept. He or she is a saintly figure who is also the object of ridicule and abuse. See Ewa Thompson, Understanding Russia: The Holy Fool in Russian Culture, Lanham, MD, 1987.
'must be "taught" by violent means'. This may explain partially the treatment Ganna receives from others who do not understand her behaviour, though when her healing powers are discovered, her reception changes dramatically.

Miracles and magical occurrences are integral to the text, notably Ganna’s revelation as healer and the seemingly miraculous birth at the conclusion of the text. Mystical and folkloric elements contribute to an assessment of the text as magical realist, and religious ideas provide a distinct alternative to the godless Soviet state: violent events throw these contrasts into sharp relief. For example, one massive fistfight, begun when a father who has become religious knocks out the teeth of his Komsomol son, encapsulates the tension between believers and the state (89-90).

Violence emanates from multiple locations in the text, ranging from the landscape to family dynamics to the Stalinist terror and the NKVD. Abjection is manifested in social rejection, Ganna’s muteness and the isolation some characters experience when demonstrating their opposition to the social order. Deviations from the norm are especially evident in the presentation of many female characters, including the orphanage director Traktorina Petrovna (who identifies herself as a Communist, not a human being) (44); Kharyta, the gentle, devoutly religious cleaner at the orphanage (presented as out of place in the non-religious Soviet context); a tearoom hostess called Katerina (who is shot in the heart by a jilted lover) and Kanareika, a drunken woman (who is shot by villagers who believe she is spreading cholera). Each of these women tries to help Ganna in her own way – even the die-hard Communist Traktorina Petrovna defends her at one point – and this common ground of compassion links the women on an essential level while also reflecting Ganna’s selfless and compassionate nature.

---

86 Rancour-Laferrière, Slave Soul of Russia, p. 21.
87 Ibid., p. 124.
Scenes of Ganna's chaotic existence at an orphanage inhabited mainly by deaf-mute children segue into a description of the local marketplace, which contains a number of strikingly violent images. The poetic description of purple potatoes (like the disembodied 'violet eyes of a child'), beets dangling (like severed heads), carrots (like 'broken and twisted fingers'), and 'bloody pieces of meat' suggest a grotesque, latent violence in the stuff of everyday life. The motif of muteness is reflected in the strangely quiet marketplace, where vendors signal prices with their fingers and nod or mouth agreement with their customers (26). Although the market looks like other markets, it also differs from them in some strange way (26). Muteness thus serves as a marker of abjection or otherness; for much of Durochka, Ganna can only utter 'Ga' as a cry of pain – which is also, of course, the first syllable of her own name. In a parallel to Ganna's muteness, the priest Father Vasilii tells of the church bell's clapper (literally, iazyk, or tongue) having been torn out: the church has been silenced (28).

As in lug, the landscape in Durochka emerges as a potentially destructive, oppressive element. The Akhtuba River represents Ganna's relationship to the world and its relation to her: though the river thrashes and abuses her, she still moves gently tries not to disturb its water. When Ganna rides into the steppe on a camel, she is injured by a thorny bush which later protects her [so nature is not only destructive but also protects] (81-83). She suffers and bleeds in the steppe, and salt eats at her wounds 'as if her soul were burned through' (85). The landscape shuns Ganna, then saves her when the Baskunchak Lake, formed from the tears of Tatar women, appears (85).

Paradoxically, at times it seems as though Ganna, the 'fool' in the text, possesses a greater wisdom and compassion than any of the people who surround her. When the children at the orphanage play house, Ganna takes the role of the mother.
When some of the children act as if they will 'arrest' Ganna's 'husband' and take him away, she 'threw herself' at them, 'hit them with all her strength, spat in their faces, scratched and bit, hit, hit, hit...' (39). At times, her insistence on truth seems to be beyond her control: when Marat devises a plan to poison Traktorina Petrovna, Ganna saves her at the last moment. This results in her beloved Marat being beaten and hanged (52-53); but in what appears to be an act of divine retribution, Traktorina Petrovna is crushed by a tree (54).

Apart from extreme sensitivity and compassion, additional characteristics distinguish Ganna from ordinary people. Traktorina Petrovna tells the other children at the orphanage, 'Ganna's a fool! She's crazy! Understand? She's not like you! She's like an animal! She's like a dog' (20). Despite this negative characterization, most of her other distinguishing characteristics mark her as exceptional. When Kharyta, who works at the orphanage, tells of discovering the infant Ganna, she reveals a female variant of the Biblical story of Moses (16). When snow falls on Ganna's head, it does not melt. She endures humiliation and beatings, and after she is raped, she is visited by the Virgin Mary, who calls her to heal and enables her recognition as a saint. Significantly, Ganna temporarily regains her power of speech when visited by the Virgin (105). Ganna is also compared to Christ: her wounds burn, and she is scratched by thorns (84); after being raped, she lies in the snow 'as if crucified' (104).

The final segment of the text marks a return to 1962 and the reappearance of Ganna's double Nad'ka, who is mysteriously pregnant: one theory presented in the text is that she was raped by soldiers; another is that an 'immaculate conception' has occurred. The grotesque nuclear imagery at the end of Durochka, hyperbolic in its magnitude and proportions, suggests the ultimate threat of violence in the second half
of the 20th century. At the conclusion of the text, Nadia slowly levitates and gives birth to a blood-red sun (ironically, a dual symbol of salvation and the apocalypse) (125-26). This image links to the sun's red glow at the conclusion of Iug, again juxtaposing images of redemption and destruction.

Because Olia and Ganna are unable or at times unwilling to correct the misperceptions others formulate about them, their supposed madness enables their victimhood. Their liminal status as itinerant women results in accusations of criminal activity, abuse for failing to respond to others, beatings, and sexual violation. The dreamlike, disjointed quality of their narrated wanderings creates further ambiguity. At the conclusion of both works, salvation rescues the heroines from true martyrdom and prompts a reconsideration of their putative madness. Even if these women do not conform to expected roles as wives and mothers, they too may secure a place of relative acceptance in society: as a convert and a healer respectively, endowed with new powers, they are poised once more at the margins of society, ready to re-enter or to be reclassified as other permutations of the female grotesque. Whether Olia and Ganna achieve salvation because of or in spite of their suffering, they demonstrate a resilience crucial for survival in a harsh and ever-changing world.

*  

A dreamlike, disjointed quality is used to a slightly different effect in the 'video novella' Shamara (Shamara, 1990), which is composed of short and highly visual 'scenes'. These fragmented scenes trace the eponymous protagonist's quest for love and security from shore to dormitory to factory work, elucidating her

---

88 Vasilenko, Shamara, in Vasilenko, Durochka, pp. 127-82. The term 'video novella' precedes the English translation of the novella, but it accurately encapsulates the overall impression produced by the text. See Svetlana Vasilenko, Shamara, in Vasilenko, Shamara and Other Stories, ed. Helena Goscilo, trans. Daria A. Kirjanov and Benjamin Sutcliffe, Evanston, IL, 2000, pp. 3-58 (p. 3). The text was reworked into a film in Natal'ja Andreichenko's 1994 film version of Shamara, for which Vasilenko wrote the screenplay.
conflicted marriage to Ustinov and her rivalry with his love interest Natasha. The sharply bipolar swings and violent outbursts of Shamara, not to mention bizarre juxtapositions such as a rape and a seemingly tender love scene, result in a text that emanates chaos interspersed with moments of tranquillity. In this way, narrative discourse parallels plot.

Violence is implicit in the title of the text. The translators note that the name ‘Shamara’ is derived from ‘shamra’, ‘a word from the Caspian region that refers to a violent windstorm from the sea’. This also refers to the protagonist’s turbulent nature. Zinaida Shamarina herself embodies the transgressive female who functions as both violent aggressor and victim in a series of hyperbolic incidents: she is devoid of the ‘salvatory impulse’ that characterizes so many of the women in Durochka. In Shamara, men and women appear to possess a mutual hostility towards one another. Shamara presents her view that all men are ‘pigs’ (155), while Maks (Max) has a comparably dim view of women. He expresses support for a murderer who has been killing local women and adds, ‘You should all be destroyed’ (168).

Two major male characters feature in the text, including Shamara’s handsome, manly husband Ustinov and the buffoon Lera. The hermaphroditic and bisexual Lera seems to be the only remotely tender male in the text, but early in the text, a girl is abused by his gay gang. The girl at first smiles as she is pawed by the group and then begins to hit them as she tries to escape. From a certain perspective, ‘it was even beautiful’ (133). This aesthetic evaluation underscores the filmic imagery of the text but also presents the notions that there are positive aspects of violence.

The image of the male as sexual predator is present in the text’s opening segment when Shamara is chased by a tank on the beach. A metaphor of sexual
pursuit and attack is employed: the tanks pursue her lustfully. One, known as the 'lizard' (*iashcher*), pursues her, and the masculine pronoun is reiterated to give the impression of a male pursuing Shamara. Shamara expends all her energy attempting to escape, but the tank catches up with her. 'She lay at his feet, breathing heavily, unable to get up, as if she were loot' (130). Her dress has been torn from her, and the description of the scene is suggestive of rape.

A subsequent scene also follows this pattern of pursuit and violation. Ustin takes Shamara to a forest 'as if he were leading her to her execution' (151). He orders her to lie down on the ground and remove her dress, and she believes he plans to kill her. He catches her 'like an animal' and rips off her dress as she attempts to fight him off (152). After this episode, they lie tenderly on the ground, and the description suggests a romantic love scene (152-53).

Rape appears to be a recurring theme in the relationship between Shamara and Ustin. In a scene which reveals his violent tendencies, Ustin comes to the dormitory in search of Shamara: Natasha cowers in the room as he puts a knife to her throat (137). He relates the story of a woman being raped by eight men, then kisses Natasha without taking the knife away from her throat. After raping her, the men warmed up the woman's legs so she would be able to walk home. When Ustin leaves, Shamara emerges from the barrel in which she has been hiding and complains about her frozen legs, thus paralleling one aspect of the story Ustin has just told (138). She later admits to Natasha that she is the woman who was raped and that she chose not to prosecute any of the offenders until Ustin married her.

Shamara also experiences indirect suffering on Ustin's behalf. After sleeping

---

with his boss Max to obtain Ustin’s early release from prison, Shamara reveals she is pregnant. She induces an abortion at home, and her stomach begins to hurt as she watches Natasha and Ustin talk. She eventually fills half a bathtub with her blood, though it is unclear whether her physical pain derives from jealousy or the procedure she has performed on herself (176). After ordering Natasha to dump the foetus in the garbage, Shamara exclaims, ‘A Soviet woman isn’t afraid of abortions! A Soviet woman becomes even more beautiful from abortions!’ (176). This grotesque sentiment underscores Shamara’s irrationality.

Shamara repeatedly fails to conform to expectations for female behaviour. Her atypical actions mark her as a clear example of the female grotesque, exemplified by a scene in which she walks down the street with the noose around her neck while wearing her bathing suit. She is viewed by others as dangerous and unacceptable: when a new girl, Natasha, moves into the dormitory, the building superintendent Rimma Sergeevna warns her about Shamara: ‘Shamarina is a whore. She’s criminal [...] Don’t get mixed up with her [...] I’m afraid of her. She could calmly cut your throat’ (134). Upon hearing this description, Shamara appears and subverts expectations by behaving in an exceptionally affectionate and gentle manner. However, once alone with Natasha, she unexpectedly pulls out a fork and threatens to stab Natasha with it (135).

Shamara also appears to utilize her victim status in a calculating manner. After reuniting at the conclusion of the text, Shamara and Ustin plan to go away together but fail to appear at their leaving party. A beaten and bloody Shamara finally appears, mumbling incoherently and drunkenly. Claiming Ustin beat her because of his desire to stay with Natasha, she play-acts suffering in hopes of gaining sympathy. Her final words before leaving demonstrate her unwavering commitment to Ustin: ‘let
him beat me, let him even kill me’ before she would surrender him to Natasha (179). Shamara’s roles as both victim and sexually jealous aggressor are linked with Ustin: all the violence she inflicts and experiences is somehow connected to her relationship to him. She simultaneously embodies the dangerous and suffering female.

* 

In the works of Tolstaia, Sadur, and Vasilenko, we may view a progression in the association of gender with violence. As we have seen, through presenting hyperbolism and excess in a Russian variant of magical realism, Tolstaia links violence with alterity while also subverting some of the established myths of Russian literature. We have also observed the tendency of Sadur and Vasilenko to bring females to the fore, drawing on folklore, religious imagery and the concept of gender-specific aggression. Whether victims or aggressors, transgressive females become the centre of the texts in which they feature. Attention to the role of the female – and the female body – emerges as a significant concern for Russian women writers and will be a major focus of the next chapter.
Hospital Literature, Violence, and the Female Body

The tradition of 'hospital fiction' in Russian literature is most famously illustrated by such works as Chekhov's 'Palata No. 6' (Ward No. 6) and Solzhenitsyn's *Rakovyi korpus* (Cancer Ward); in this chapter, I will proceed to examine how contemporary women authors have adapted and updated this tradition. This feminized version of hospital fiction is notable in its presentation of women's space. What I propose to examine in the first part of the chapter is the way in which a gynocentric setting (one composed largely or entirely of women) removes strictures of taboo and encourages free, open discourse about subjects such as violence. The best example of such prose may be found in Iuliia Voznesenskaia's *Zhenskii dekameron* (The Women's Decameron, 1987), a modern-day retelling of Boccaccio's *Decameron*, in which ten women are quarantined in a maternity hospital. I will also comment on Elena Makarova’s ‘Na sokhranenii’ (For Preservation, 1989).

With the focus already on the body, the hospital provides an appropriate setting for the examination of body issues. Though discussion of the body (particularly women's bodies) is by no means limited to this setting, the inescapable realities of the body are manifested through a panoply of irregular appearances, smells and sounds. The second half of the chapter will highlight the previously unacceptable corporeality presented in these contemporary texts as well as their focus on perceptions of women's bodies and their irregularities or complications. Abortion, by far the most common means of birth control in the Soviet era, figures time and again in the works of several contemporary women writers. Principal texts include Natal'ia Sukhanova's 'Delos' (Delos, 1988), Marina Palei's 'Otdelenie propashchikh' (Ward of the Doomed, 1991) and *Kabiriia s obvodnogo kanala* (Kabiriia from the Obvodnii
Canal, 1991), Elena Tarasova’s ‘Ne pomniaschaia zla’ (She Who Bears No Ill, 1990), and Larisa Vaneeva’s ‘Khromye golubi’ (Lame Pigeons, 1990) and ‘Parad planet’ (Parade of the Planets, 1990). This segment will discuss the ways in which violence is done to the body — literally and metaphorically — and the concomitant effects of this violence.

The specific gynocentric setting I will examine in the first half of this chapter is the hospital, which is a particular kind of social institution. Erving Goffman defines a ‘total institution’ as ‘a place of residence and work where a large number of like-situated individuals, cut off from the wider society for an appreciable period of time, together lead an enclosed, formally administered round of life’.¹ Such institutions may be entered voluntarily (such as a regular hospital) or involuntarily (such as a prison or mental institution). Regardless of the will of the individual, these institutions share a number of commonalities, which accounts for the frequent comparisons between hospitals and prisons.

Goffman states that ‘in total institutions [...] territories of the self are violated; the boundary that the individual places between his being and the environment is invaded and the embodiments of self profaned’.² Precisely because institutional life contrasts sharply with day-to-day life in the outside world — because there are different boundaries — the individual’s interactions with others are altered too. Goffman’s work focuses primarily on the negative aspects of ‘total institutions’: while borrowing some of his commentary about their typical characteristics, I want to stress the ways in which the Zhenskii dekameron setting in particular may differ from such institutions. He states, ‘Although there are solidarizing tendencies such as

fraternalization and clique formation, they are limited'. I would argue that the element of solidarity is a critical part of the texts examined in the first half of this chapter. Because these women are moved to share their experiences, the exchange of narrative allows the reader to construct a catalogue of (among other things) violent incidents culled from daily life. In *Zhenskii dekameron*, we see the possibilities presented by this type of environment; in 'Na sokhranenii', we see the limitations.

In her writings on women's space, Mary Daly notes that such space is always located 'on the boundary of patriarchal institutions'. In these gynocentric spaces within a Russian context, women either operate in or on the bounds of patriarchal space (areas in which men hold power). Though Goscilo accepts the notion of gynocentric space as a significant area of focus for Russian women writers in recent years, she examines 'how contemporary Russian women's fiction genders space' rather than assuming that space is inherently gendered. She views women's hospital fiction as a counterpart to male prison camp literature; she sees the hospital as carceral space.

The hospital environment means *stasis* in a certain sense (Goscilo notes that there are both spatial and temporal restrictions), so it is limiting on the one hand but liberating on the other, and the patients' lives do not develop as they normally would. Because these women are confined – and in some cases because they are tied to a

---

2 Goffman, *Asylums*, p. 32.
3 Ibid., p. 66.
6 Ibid., p. 329. There is a body of work, albeit small, of women's camp literature which constitutes a more direct response to male camp literature. One such work, Elena Glinka's 'Kolyma Streetcar', is a realist work of camp literature documenting the mass rape of female prisoners, an act condoned by the guards. See Elena Glinka, 'Kolyma Streetcar', in Natasha Perova and Andrew Bromfield (eds), *Glas New Russian Writing*, 3, 1992, pp. 213-21.
largely gynocentric space – they begin to talk freely. Nigel Rapport notes the potential role of the institution as providing 'safe cognitive space' – and, correspondingly, safe communicative space. While they do spend time talking about the immediate matters confronting them in the hospital, they also reflect on their 'normal' lives and what is familiar to them outside the institutional setting. This appears to stem from a dual urge to identify with the community at hand and to tell others about one’s own existence outside the institution. We see the hospital simultaneously as a setting for the discussion of taboo topics – including violence – and it is also the site of healing, life, and death as well as a particular type of sanitized (and officially sanctioned) violence.

Goscilo believes that the 'hospital chronotope [...] conventionalizes the shocking juxtaposition of birth and death by organizing them into kindred activities differentiated merely according to the micro-space they occupy within the larger macro-unit of the hospital'. This setting may mean that violence is placed within a more acceptable framework: when confronted with the immediacy of life-or-death issues, we are no longer shocked by the violence of daily life. Sharing one’s own story becomes a way to identify with the group, and it is likely that others have similar stories to tell. This gynocentric fiction is the site of 'psychological revelations, critical turning-points, and opportunities for access to self-knowledge'.

Although Goscilo focuses on the patient as victim (and with good cause, given the often horrifying conditions described in these texts), I would argue that the

---

8 Goscilo, 'Women’s Space and Women’s Place', p. 330.
9 Ibid., p. 330. The hospital environment is present in Petrushevskaja's 'Skripka', in which a woman creates fictions about her own life in order to earn the compassion of her fellow patients. See the
element of communicative empowerment is at least as important as the element of victimization — and provides a catharsis of sorts, even when the subject matter is particularly painful. Goscilo notes that an ‘indifference to female psychology [among hospital staff] contrasts dramatically with the support and affirmation women generally find among their wardmates, even if the latter also prove a source of conflict and tension’; typically, patients share ‘biographies and confidences’ (especially those involving extreme suffering). I will focus on the relationships among the patients rather than their relationships with doctors or other hospital workers — or those in the outside world, for it is through these interactions that the narratives I want to analyse arise.

Among her various conclusions about hospital fiction, Goscilo states that ‘the most dispiriting from a feminist standpoint is that Russian men wield power […] while women by force of habit subordinate self-fulfillment to [a] series of gendered moral imperatives […] [T]he feminized chronotope of the hospital in women’s prose materializes the gender-specific dynamics of policy-sanctioned victimization’. In some texts, gynocentric space may be read as having political implications.

In contrast, Kelly argues: ‘If the hospital functions for some writers as a convenient metaphor of women’s subordination at the hands of men […] for others it functions as a conveniently partial form of social allegory, because it allows the displacement of indignation from the remote men who form the top layers of the

---

10 The hospital setting provides comfort through communication in Inna Varlamova’s *Mnimaia zhizn* (A Counterfeit Life, 1978), which presents the protagonist Nora’s battle with breast cancer. The text demonstrates the communicative possibilities presented by the hospital setting but also notes that women are more likely to listen to others than talk about themselves. Comparatively, in Irina Polianskaia’s ‘Chistaia zona’ (The Clean Zone, 1990), illness or presence in the hospital allows for open communication but may also produce feelings of isolation.

11 Goscilo, ‘Women’s Space and Women’s Place’, p. 335.

12 Ibid., pp. 336-37.
medical (i.e. political) hierarchy on to the more visible and accessible perpetrators of oppression, the women who make up its bottom layers'. She also notes that women are then most often seen as victims of other women in this context.

A brief examination of literary predecessors in the subgenre of hospital fiction will establish some of the conventions most often employed in this type of literature. These include, among others, the idea of suffering as beneficial, elements of solidarity among patients in a ward, and the grim possibility that time spent in a hospital may actually harm one's health. Chekhov's 'Palata No. 6' (Ward No. 6) centres on the friendship between Dr. Ragin and his patient Gromov. The redemptive value of suffering is emphasized: it is thought to give meaning to life. A prison stands in close proximity to the hospital, thus reinforcing (time and again) the comparison of the two types of inmates.

In Solzhenitsyn's Rakovyi korpus (Cancer Ward), the initial relationship between Rusanov and other patients is one of antagonism; Rusanov experiences both indignation and anguish at his plight. Solzhenitsyn explores the frustration, depression and melancholy accompanying those who suffer from cancer as well as those who treat it. Sontag notes that the 'controlling metaphors in descriptions of cancer' are drawn from military and warfare lexicon – as are those metaphors used in descriptions of treatment. In Rakovyi korpus radiation treatments are described using just such a military metaphor, and damage to the body is justified if life is preserved.

---

Though the gynocentric setting seems to be liberating for women, the same does not hold true for men as envisioned by Solzhenitsyn and Chekhov. In Rakovyi korpus, cultural expectations are reinforced, not erased. The patient Dema feels pressure to behave and talk 'like a man' when communicating with others in the ward. Although the patients confront death on a daily basis – it literally is before their eyes – there is a culturally pervasive fear of talking directly about death. Patients adapt to a different role in this setting, and they are united through the hope of a possible cure; however, when it comes to discussion of individual treatments, most of the patients remain silent out of a dual desire for secrecy or privacy and self-preservation.

Masha Gessen notes that Palei’s texts and others in the female-authored subgenre of hospital literature represent a departure from the male-authored literature in the tradition of Solzhenitsyn’s Rakovyi korpus in that they concentrate specifically on women’s experience. Palei says of her hospital fiction: ‘I just wanted to show the outstanding separateness of the transitional place called a hospital, which is where a person comes into this world and, most often, leaves it as well. The existential nature of this institution, which exposes the bases of life and death with shocking ease, is similar to the nature of military barracks, jail cells, space ships, concentration camp barracks...The list goes on’. Here Palei draws on largely male metaphors: what she does not mention explicitly is female authorial attention to gynocentric space.

* 

An interesting example of gynocentric space in a domestic context is presented by I. Grekova’s Vdovii parokhod (The Ship of Widows, 1981). The novel

---

**Gessen, Half a Revolution, p. 63.**
explores the interactions of five women left without husbands during the war. The women bond in the absence of men; closeness in their communal flat allows the women to communicate more openly and freely, even though rivalries and jealousies surface early on. When one of the women's husbands returns, the dynamics of the household change and approximate their pre-war conditions. In the absence of husbands, the women project their hopes and dreams on to the next available man: Vadim, the son of one of the women, fills an evident gap in their lives. Though the level of openness among the women does not match that seen in the other texts discussed in this chapter, Vdovii parokhod certainly may be considered as having paved the way for these texts. While violence is not so important in this text as gynocentric space, Vdovii parokhod demonstrates the communicative possibilities engendered by such a setting.

One of the best examples of gynocentric space in contemporary Russian women's literature is Iuliia Voznesenskaia's Zhenskii dekameron. Voznesenskaia was a member of the Al'manakh collective, which produced a samizdat women's journal in 1979, and she began to develop an interest in feminism. Zhenskii dekameron emphasizes female strength and solidarity. Most striking about the text, which introduces the narratives of women from very different backgrounds, is the presentation of difficult subjects such as rape and abuse in an open and occasionally lighthearted manner.

---

18 Quoted in Gessen, Half a Revolution, p. 62.
Zhenskii dekameron follows the same conventions as Boccaccio's Decameron, but with a twist: the stories are told by ten women in a maternity hospital. The women are empowered by the act of telling their stories: as Kolodziej notes, 'Even when they are victims, they control the flow of the narrative'. The women decide to begin their exchange of tales by discussing 'first love'; unexpectedly, some of these stories are more tragically than sweetly remembered. The 'first love' of Zina, a sometime vagrant and camp survivor, came in the form of rape by a soldier; now she is unable even to remember his name (20). Some of the other women relate their first sexual encounter rather than the first time they fell in love. The stories are remembered by - and remarkable to - the women because each narrative documents a turning point in the teller's life. The tales are told whether the subject is positive or negative, and the gynocentric setting gives women the courage to expose the violence lurking in their everyday lives. Even if they consider this violence to be unremarkable, numerous horrific circumstances and happenings are recounted. As Kolodziej points out, 'The violence and barbarity of men - and occasionally of women - described by Voznesenskaia's narrators are by no means the peccadilloes of lovable rogues or venial sinners'. Though this brutality often surfaces in a domestic setting, it also emanates from camp life.

Narratives from the camps crop up frequently, especially those told by Zina. Of course, the camp is an institution, albeit one lacking the positive communicative 'side effects' potentially accompanying a voluntary stay in an institution such as a maternity hospital. Nelia, an intellectual, began to fear men while she was in a camp: everyone mastered the idea that 'women meant security and men meant terrible

---

danger. They could beat you mercilessly, they could kill you on the spot, they could shoot a child like a pup just because he cried loudly' (41). This, in a nutshell, encapsulates the philosophy of the ten female narrators in Zhenskii dekameron. Though they do not subscribe to a reductive Manichaean view of the world based solely on gender, it becomes clear that in their lives one must tread cautiously around men. As Kolodziej notes, 'The men in the novel, like the government, are also portrayed largely as exploiters.'24

This exploitative tendency comes to the fore when the next day's topic elicits stories of seduction and abandonment. Albina, a flight attendant, interprets Nabokov's Lolita mainly as the story of an old man taking advantage of a young girl. She draws parallels to her own life, fantasizing about castrating such men (59-66). She envisions her first victim as the skating coach who took advantage of her when she was a child. Because she views this sort of sexual manipulation as an act of violence, she sees violent retaliation as a logical form of retribution. Her mother, who initially refused to believe Albina, commits suicide after finding out the truth of the matter. This episode of self-inflicted violence introduces the notion of the power of the female conscience—in Zhenskii dekameron, women who have failed to act—or who have wronged others—may eventually decide that violence against oneself is the only available form of absolution.

Not all the stories the women tell are based on firsthand experience, and this degree of removal enables the women to discuss particularly difficult situations. Nelia tells a story about a music school director taking advantage of one of his pupils—after impregnating her, he arranges for her to be drugged and forced to have an

23 Ibid., p. 226.
24 Ibid., p. 234.
abortion (73-75). Following this exchange, Zina wonders aloud if any woman has managed to avoid attempted rape altogether (75). The women bond through their shared plight as targets of violence.

The tone of the exchange becomes somewhat lighter when the women discuss sex in farcical situations, and these narratives do not contain violent elements. However, in relation to 'bitches', two stories are relevant to the topic. Zina tells of two friends in the zone who became pregnant by the same boyfriend (who had been cheating on them without their knowledge), conspired to castrate him and went together to terminate their pregnancies (106-08). The two women decide they should not be the only ones to suffer – since they were both studying to be doctors, they knew exactly how to castrate him. Introduced by Albina earlier in the text, this motif of physically punishing sexual offenders of various types is an eye-for-an-eye approach. Because so many of the women's grievances stem from male sexual misbehaviour, castration seems to them a direct, literal and fitting punishment. Interestingly, this story appears under the heading of 'bitchiness', apparently not because of the fact that retaliation took place but rather because of the type of retaliation the women devise. Though such women are viewed negatively, there is also an element of admiration among the ten storytellers for the resourcefulness displayed. Later, Olga tells the story of a young woman who commits suicide, killing her baby as well, because of her mother-in-law's extreme bitchiness (125-27). This tale presents a grotesque variation of the motifs of female self-sacrifice and suffering embedded in Russian culture and also points to the possible threat that women may pose to other women.
The female threat is presented in melodramatic terms when the women discuss infidelity and jealousy and Zina tells a story of lesbian infidelity in the camp (the narrator notes that the story 'almost exactly repeats the drama of Othello, Iago and Desdemona, but in a camp variant') (116). The story involves two women named Natashka ('Natan') and Ninka (137-40). When Natan is tricked by a girl known as Tsygan into thinking that Ninka has been unfaithful, Natan stabs Ninka. In the end, Natan becomes involved with another woman before Ninka is discharged from the hospital. Although the main players in this story all are women, Natan clearly is playing a 'male' role, as is evident through her name and her aggression and physical abuse of Ninka.

After numerous references to rape, the women devote an entire day to discussing rapists and their victims. Each of the women either has had personal experience in this category or knows someone who has: not one of them is a complete stranger to this sort of brutality. When Larisa must return home alone in the middle of the night after helping a dissident, she is attacked by a man who tries to rape her (163-68). She escapes by biting him, screaming, and running away. Larisa's story strikes a chord with the other women, who are apprehensive about walking alone in the dark – and it reinforces the idea of the lone woman as prey. Similarly, Ol'ga must walk home from the bus stop alone after working the evening shift (189-91). Two men offer to walk with her but then drag her into the bushes and attempt to rape her. She begins working the night shift so she can come home in the morning, but another man pulls her into a dark doorway, and she retaliates by punching him in the face. This narrative illustrates one of the types of everyday violence that a woman may face.
In a humorous variation on this theme, Valentina, a high-ranking party member, describes her revenge on a rapist who attacked her when she was walking alone at night (175-78). She has her mittens attached to her coat with string, and the rapist's testicles get caught in the string (she half-jokingly describes it to her frightened assailant as a special anti-rapist device). The humour that the women find in this situation underscores the overall optimism pervading the text: whether the women present their narratives as cautionary tales or merely as experiences they have had, there is hope to be found in many a bad situation. This is demonstrated through a story told by Irina, who was once in an elevator with a young man who tried to take her up to the attic and rape her (196-98). He thinks he must resort to rape because no woman would want to be with him. She manages to trick him, convinces him that force doesn't suit him, and one day she finally sees him in the lift with a young woman. She believes that the lesson she has taught him has helped to change his life.

Zina says, 'I myself can't remember which times I was raped and when I gave myself to them so as not to get raped' (169). She proceeds to describe the rape of a man by men in the camp, explaining that men who have been raped are then called 'Mashkas' and treated as women (169-71). Gender roles in the camps merit some attention: in single-sex surroundings, power struggles mingled with sexual desire result in some men acting (or being forced to act) like women and vice versa, as seen in the story of Natan and Ninka.

Galina was raped for political reasons: while she was taking some goods to her imprisoned dissident husband, a truck driver giving her a lift mistakenly thought she was the wife of one of the men running the camp (183-88). He rapes her – and invites his friend to do so as well – only later learning of his mistake and feeling terrible guilt
as a result. In this instance, we see rape truly as a crime involving power. The truck
driver's attempt to exact vengeance on those in power is misdirected: here we see the
female body used purely as an object to teach a lesson.

A didactic element is evident in one of the text's most sobering tales: it points
to the dangers of blindly trusting men. The story is presented by Al'nina, who tells of
being caught in the hands of a sadist who lured her to his home under the pretext of
having a 'birthday party'. When she becomes upset at his deceit, he beats her, rapes
her, and even tries to strangle her, none of the neighbours come to her aid even though
they obviously can hear her. When Al'nina hopes to find some witnesses to the
incident, a general living in an adjacent flat tells her that 'respectable girls' do not get
into such situations - and he adds that his own daughter would never do such a thing
(182).

The stereotypical association of males with violence is presented in an
interesting way when the discussion turns to money, and Zina relates the story of a
mother and daughter in the camp who both were convicted of murder (205-08).
These alcoholic women both slept with the same man. When they want money for
alcohol, they remember that he should have a thirteenth pay packet. When he says he
doesn't have it, they begin to torture him, beating him with a strap, burning him with
cigarettes, sawing through his legs and leaving him out on the balcony to die. When
his body is discovered, he is thought to have bled to death and then frozen. This is
one of the few parts of the text in which women are portrayed as violent, but this
portrayal seems to demonstrate the desperation of these marginal figures. Their
identification with alcoholism and violence seems to suggest that Voznesenskaia is
associating them with behaviour which is typically male; because this tale also
highlights the destructive effects of greed, it hints at the circumstances that may elicit this type of female behaviour.

A variety of explanations for female violence are presented during the telling of stories of revenge. Zina says many of the women in the camps were murderers: some killed a man out of self-defence, some killed a newborn baby because of poverty, and some killed for revenge or out of jealousy (239-42). She also makes a distinction between accidental death and premeditated murder, believing those in the latter group felt hatred for the people they murdered. Most of all, Zina fears those who murdered out of revenge: she believes such people never repent. One old woman (known as the Grasshopper) scared her in particular: she hacked her pregnant daughter-in-law into pieces with an axe while she was sleeping. In order to get even with her son, who had begun to side with his wife against her, she gave him a bowl of soup made from his wife’s flesh. In the end, the old woman’s conscience caught up with her, and she hanged herself from a wire at the camp. As with the suicide of Albina’s mother, we see the motif of female remorse and the idea that self-inflicted violence may be a way of achieving redemption.

Revisiting one of her earlier stories, Albina tells of the revenge she took on her rapist and those who refused to help her or admit to witnessing her rape (252-57). When she becomes involved with a young man named Fedia, she begins telling him all about herself, including the story of the sadist. She agrees to marry Fedia on one condition: he must avenge both the rapist and the general who refused to help her. Fedia concocts a scheme in which the general’s daughter ends up in the sadist’s flat. At the last second, Albina feels a twinge of guilt and calls the general to inform him of his daughter’s whereabouts. The next day, she learns that the rapist was tied up
and carted off to prison after nearly raping the general's daughter. It is perhaps significant that Fedia's plan, if left unchecked, would have resulted in the rape of the general's daughter - the interruption of the plan was due to female intervention on Al'fina's part. Rape, again seen as a crime of power rather than sexual passion, is envisioned by a male as the appropriate revenge.

A contrasting story of bodily violence and revenge reintroduces levity into the atmosphere. Ol'ga tells the story of Nastia and Misha, known for their loud rows about Misha's infidelities (262-64). Nastia tells him his penis should be cut off so he would stop deceiving her. Misha either listens or beats her, and eventually he devised a more creative response. One day, he unbuttons his trousers and pretends to cut off his penis (with the aid of a bottle of red ink and a ram's penis). In response, Nastia throws herself out of the window, saying she wants to die. Her relief at learning he is unharmed leads to their reconciliation and the end of his infidelity. Though it is unclear whether Nastia's distress stems from sexual anxiety or true compassion for her husband, the tale presents a male parodic complement to the above stories of female self-inflicted violence.

When the topic of the day is magnanimous deeds, Zina's story of 'selfless maternal love' has unexpectedly violent overtones (280-84). An old woman named Kazakova was married to an alcoholic, violent man who would chase her with an axe in his drunken rages. Though she would complain to the militia, they ignored it as a domestic matter.\(^\text{25}\) Zina says, "There's even a poem about that: "If he kills you, then come to us"" (282). Finally, Kazakova's young son snatched away the axe and clubbed his father with it, killing him. Though her son wants to confess, his mother

\(^{25}\) No domestic violence law existed in Russia until 1997; such incidents were considered 'private matters' to be handled within the family.
takes the blame for the crime herself. She dies in the camp, but her son cannot collect her body until after her full term has been served. This example demonstrates a context in which violence may be justified. Further, the tale presents an example of the Russian motif of the sacrificing or martyred mother.

With each of the women telling a tale of happiness, the novel ends on a positive note. It is worth noting that Zina tells the greatest number of stories involving violence: her narratives provide a point of comparison between institutions as apparently dissimilar as camps and hospitals. Through her anecdotes, we learn of atrocities and practically unbelievable situations in the camps. Goffman asserts: ‘It is characteristic of inmates that they come to the institution with a “presenting culture” […] derived from a “homeworld” – a way of life and a round of activities taken for granted until the point of admission to the institution’. 26 What Zhenskii dekameron demonstrates clearly is a clash and eventual merging of the worlds of the various women. Despite their markedly different backgrounds, they are able to come together and construct a common female experience through the stories they tell. In Zhenskii dekameron, the women’s narratives comprise the bulk of the text, while in ‘Na sokhranenii’, the primary focus is on events taking place within the hospital setting.

In ‘Na sokhranenii’, Elena Makarova casts the gynocentric setting of a maternity ward in a less positive light than does Voznesenskaia in Zhenskii dekameron. 27 Costlow, Sandler and Vowles have observed that Makarova focuses on the ‘body during illness, the handicapped or malformed body, the body at moments of vulnerability and exposure’. 28 The narrator, Natal’ia Ziablinova, has entered the

26 Goffman, Asylums, p. 23.
hospital due to a difficult pregnancy; other patients have entered the hospital because of infertility problems or because they are seeking abortions. Makarova employs figurative speech to exploit metaphors of fertility or barrenness, motherhood, and impregnation. The majority of the plot takes place on 8 March, International Women's Day, further emphasizing the centrality of women in the text.

A sharp distinction is made among the various reasons the women have entered the hospital, and this is further emphasized by the title 'Na sokhranenii' (literally, 'for preservation'). The close quarters of the ward foster resentment, and one patient in particular, Zina, seems bent on expressing her opinions to everyone, even when this means introducing unease and dissent into the ward. Zina shares her view on fertility: 'Some don’t want children, but get pregnant, like cats, have about fifteen abortions, and others would do anything, but they can’t have children. And plus there’s the morgue under the windows' (82). She adds that she believes the maternal instinct is the primary feeling experienced by women. She launches into a tirade against those who have come to have abortions, calling them criminals and murderers. For the narrator, who has been ordered to do nothing but lie quietly in bed if she wants to save her baby, this is particularly distressing. Rivalries among the women in the ward surface as they spend more time together, and there is a definite animosity between the patients and the staff of the hospital.

The institutional character of the setting is emphasized through patients' response to, disgust with, and occasional fear of the staff of the hospital. The atmosphere in the ward is compared to that of a brothel, another setting in which women gathered together may discuss men and the events of their daily lives. The narrator comments on the strange atmosphere, which she would compare to that in a
prison, a boarding school, even a tram - but not a hospital. The women talk about all aspects of their lives; though some are reluctant to be completely open with members of the staff – who are most often portrayed in a negative light, including the grotesque janitor Tetia Katia and the bribe-taking Ninon as well as the formidable Mastodonska – among themselves they talk about romantic entanglements and affairs, matters at work, and domestic difficulties. Some of the women exchange happy or tragic stories about maternity hospitals, while others commiserate about their husbands’ drinking. The reader is presented with numerous details of medical activities in the ward (temperatures taken, shots given, and the progress of individual patients reported).

Because the ward seems almost completely isolated from the outside world (the telephone is only for ‘official use’, and visitors are severely restricted – women can only see their husbands by shouting through the window or bribing one of the staff members for a secret meeting in the staircase) the ward is very much its own small microcosm of existence.

The narrator remarks that the hospital is located on a site suitable for a cemetery, with a morgue right underneath the windows. Dead people are right there, spreading infection. It does not escape the notice of many of the patients that the ward actually appears to be harmful to their health. At the end of the text, some of the patients are reading the Biblical creation story in Genesis. Explaining the text to another patient as she leaves the hospital, the narrator notes that the meaning of the story is that everything in the world was beautiful upon its creation, but was then spoiled. This spoilage provides a metaphor for maternity: though motherhood itself may be considered a pure and beautiful phenomenon, placing it within the context of an institution such as the maternity hospital elicits the worst aspects of human nature from patients and medical staff alike. Even though the narrator has come ‘for
preservation', the spoilage/preservation dichotomy shows, if not a moral decay, then certainly a lack of moral considerations. The concept of maternity is polluted by the events at the hospital - not because of women's choices vis-à-vis their fertility, but rather their surroundings and the events with which they must contend after they have entered the hospital.

The narrator is reminded of the story of Medea, which she compares to the story of one squeaky-voiced woman who has come to the hospital to have an abortion. After an argument breaks out in a line of women in the hospital, a staff member threatens that the instigator must undergo an abortion without benefit of anaesthesia. The squeaky-voiced woman laments that the patients now are being treated as though they aren't even human, thereby reinforcing the link between the dehumanization one may experience in other types of institutions, such as prisons and camps.

Costlow, Sandler and Vowles note that the most shocking aspect of 'Na sokhranenii' is 'how much the scene reminds one of prison memoirs...and the hospital staff are certainly as abusive as prison guards. Here, where the society has supposedly built an institution to preserve and protect life, [...] one finds instead an atmosphere of punishment and denunciation'. Here, institutional violence seems the greatest threat confronting the women after they are removed from the usual routine of their daily lives. In 'Na sokhranenii', what might have presented an opportunity for extended commiseration and camaraderie instead degenerates into a rudimentary struggle for survival and sanity.

*  

29 Ibid., pp. 31-32.
The maternity ward setting of both Zhenskii dekameron and 'Na sokhranenii' presents women as mothers or future mothers. Despite some attention to this aspect of their roles as women, there is little discourse related on a bodily level. The texts addressed in this segment of the chapter signal a shift in attention to the female body.

In their introduction to Sexuality and the Body in Russian Culture, Costlow, Sandler and Vowles posit that 'alongside the veneration of the mother in Russia exists a feeling of revulsion toward the maternal body. Writers like Berdyaev could speak reverently of motherhood while being repelled by every aspect of reproduction and pregnancy'. Although the texts analysed in this chapter are without exception written by women, the tension between veneration and revulsion is evident time and again, especially in their portrayal of the explicit details of childbirth and female illnesses. Catriona Kelly identifies the "feminine" tradition of critical realism, in which she situates writers such as I. Grekova, Natal'ia Baranskaia, and Petrushevskaia. She also identifies the tendency to use literature as a mouthpiece for condemning social ills such as abortion; as we will see, the hospital setting is used in conjunction with the issue of abortion to highlight male views of the female body.

In their analysis of sexual discourse in contemporary Russia, Costlow, Sandler and Vowles note a trend in which some writers 'refuse to idealize or even eroticize the body, instead representing it as ill or dead'. Barker and Gheith locate a specific form of 'anxiety about the body in Russian women's writing', which they attribute to anxiety specifically about the maternal body and how that body has been made to conform to the semi-sanctified mother figure in Russian cultural and religious history.

---

32 Costlow, Sandler, and Vowles, 'Introduction', p. 27.
33 Barker and Gheith, 'Introduction', p. 11.
Representations of the ailing female body are the focus of the second half of the chapter. In the hospital setting, the body already is the subject of close examination (both in a literal and literary sense). Much attention is paid to irregularities of or damage to the body, including illness, abortion, and suicide attempts or other forms of self-mutilation. While the violent nature of suicide and self-mutilation may be reasonably evident, the comparable violent components of illness and abortion may require a fuller explanation. Illness (especially cancer) often is described in terms of an attack on the body. This differs from other forms of 'violence' against the body in that it is an attack from within. Scarry likens the presence of pain to the presence of an 'enemy' in the body.\(^\text{34}\) Abortion may also be viewed as the forcible removal of an entity within one's own body. Political and ethical debates aside, abortion may be read as an act of violence on the body, with both physical and psychological repercussions.

Stigma frequently accompanies illness, as well as abortion and suicide. Goffman notes that individuals with a stigma are 'disqualified from full social acceptance' and are to some degree set apart from others in society.\(^\text{35}\) The early Christian definition of stigma included 'bodily signs of physical disorder'; that is, actual physical marks or conditions.\(^\text{36}\) The stigma may be defined in part as an 'attribute that is deeply discrediting' and then further divided into discredited (a known stigma) or discreditable (one which might be discovered).\(^\text{37}\) Stigma still may be visible and often is linked with the body. Goffman names three very different types of stigma: those based on physical deformities; character defects; and those

\(^{34}\) Scarry, *The Body in Pain*, p. 52.
\(^{36}\) Ibid., p. 11.
\(^{37}\) Ibid., p. 13.
associated with race, nation, and religion. I will concentrate on the first two of these three and explore the ways in which the two are perceived to be linked.

In this context, it is worth introducing Scarry's discussion of pain, and gender differences in this area. There is a male tendency to externalize pain and a female tendency to internalize this experience. Interestingly, self-mutilation is primarily a female phenomenon: it may be rationalized as a means of concretizing the pain an individual feels. In a way, this behaviour serves to reify an emotional pain, serving the dual purpose of making the pain visible or physical as well as possibly making an indescribable, private pain visible to others. 'Physical pain is able to obliterate psychological pain because it obliterates all psychological content, painful, pleasurable, and neutral'.

The expression of pain also presents communicative difficulties. Scarry states that pain's 'resistance to language is not simply one of its incidental or accidental attributes but is essential to what it is'. Despite this difficulty, talking about pain is one of the only ways of releasing it. Because it is difficult to quantify pain, and because it is such a personal experience, any expression of it is bound to be subjective. Hearing about someone else's pain almost certainly means we are unlikely to understand it fully; we may even doubt its seriousness or the full extent of what is suffered. The idea that pain is subjective is introduced through a classical reference in Chekhov's 'Palata No. 6': "'Pain is the vivid impression of pain," Marcus Aurelius said. "Will yourself to change the impression, get rid of it, stop complaining, and the pain will disappear.'"
Because the existing vocabulary for pain is so limited, analogies and metaphors frequently are employed to describe it. There are two types: in the first, the external agent of pain is specified, and in the second, bodily damage (usually exaggerated) is pictured as accompanying the pain. These images or metaphors '[begin] to externalize, objectify, and make sharable what is originally an interior and unsharable experience'. Although the English word for pain derives from the Latin 'poena' (punishment), the Russian word for pain (bol) is etymologically linked to words signifying illness.

The presentation of illness in text has varied extensively as cultures have promoted different explanations for the emergence of an illness. It is possible to conceive of illness as punishment, as some kind of divine visitation for one's sins. But Sontag presents a somewhat bizarre counter-explanation: illness (cancer in this case) may arise not from what one does (e.g. smoking, eating poorly and so on), but rather from what one does not do: 'According to the mythology of cancer, it is generally a steady repression of feeling that causes the disease. In the earlier, more optimistic form of this fantasy, the repressed feelings were sexual; now, in a notable shift, the repression of violent feelings is imagined to cause cancer. [...] The passion that people think will give them cancer if they don't discharge it is rage. [...] [t]here are cancerphobes like Norman Mailer, who recently explained that had he not stabbed his wife (and acted out "a murderous nest of feeling") he would have gotten cancer and "been dead in a few years himself.") Though this justification certainly belongs in the realm of mythology, it is nonetheless interesting from a literary point of view to

---

42 Scarry, The Body in Pain, p. 15.
43 Ibid., p. 16.
44 Ibid., p. 16.
45 See Sontag, Illness as Metaphor, p. 39.
46 Ibid., p. 22.
consider the sources of illness and pain and whether an individual is psychologically culpable and complicit in his or her illness.

The link between the psychological and physical is central to the understanding of the functions of illness in text. Sontag suggests approaching this connection from either side: Sontag explores two different ways of looking at illness:

Illness expands by means of two hypotheses. The first is that every form of social deviation can be considered an illness. Thus, if criminal behavior can be considered an illness, then criminals are not to be condemned or punished but to be understood (as a doctor understands), treated, cured. The second is that every illness can be considered psychologically. Illness is interpreted as, basically, a psychological event, and people are encouraged to believe that they get sick because they (unconsciously) want to, and that they can cure themselves by the mobilization of will; that they can choose not to die of the disease. These two hypotheses are complementary. As the first seems to relieve guilt, the second reinstates it. Psychological theories of illness are a powerful means of placing the blame on the ill. Patients who are instructed that they have, unwittingly, caused their disease are also being made to feel that they have deserved it.‘

‘Female’ diseases or female dysmorphia may then presuppose female guilt - and this idea is particularly relevant to Tarasova’s text.

Goscilo cites certain 19th- and 20th-century sources for the body as providing clues to an individual’s character or moral fibre. In its contemporary manifestation, the body demonstrates or reveals experience. In the texts considered in this half of the chapter, bodily distortion and dysmorphia often are described in unflinching detail. As Goscilo notes, ‘Female bodies “document” their owners’ suffering and degradation: they bruise, hemorrhage and break; they endure rape, childbirth, abortion, beating, and disease; they succumb to substance addiction, incontinence, and

---

46 Ibid., pp. 56-57.
47 See Helena Goscilo, ‘Inscribing the Female Body in Women’s Fiction: Stigmata and Stimulation’, in Dehexing Sex: Russian Womanhood During and After Glasnost, Ann Arbor, MI, 1996, pp. 87-116 (passim). Some major Russian literary predecessors with illness as their subject include Tolstoi’s ‘Smert’ Ivanova Il’icha’ and Turgenev’s ‘Nakanune’.
48 Ibid., p. 89.
sundry dehumanizing processes – all painstakingly detailed in slow motion'. Of course, the symbolic potential of the body is vast: Goscilo notes the use of the body as a rhetorical device and warns of the dangers of reading injury to the body in a purely physical sense. More generally, in *S/Z*, Roland Barthes presented the idea that the human body is ‘the ultimate field of symbolism’, and Peter Brooks has noted ‘the use of the body itself [...] to represent meanings that might otherwise be unavailable to representation because they are somehow under the bar of repression’.

While texts such as Vasilenko’s *Shamara* evidence bodily violation, those such as Tarasova’s ‘Ne pomniashchaia zla’ present repeated bodily references to form an inescapable corporeality. Perhaps this is the lesson we must derive from the authors and works discussed in this chapter: one of the most important points about late Soviet and post-Soviet prose is that the body and its functions are all unavoidable. In today’s world, they can no longer be glossed over.

* 

Natal'ia Sukhanova’s ‘Delos’ provides a sharp contrast to *Zhenskii dekameron* and *Na sokhraneni*. Byron Lindsey notes that Sukhanova’s point of view is traditional and largely uncritical. What is *not* mentioned in this sanitized text is evident: the bodies in pain are glossed over. It is as though Sukhanova touches on the disturbing phenomena but is unwilling to explore beneath the surface. Unlike most of the other texts analysed in this chapter, ‘Delos’ is told from a male perspective. The

---

49 Ibid., p. 89.  
50 Ibid., p. 90.  
53 Natal'ia Sukhanova, ‘Delos’, *Novyi mir*, 3, 1988, pp. 69-84. The title ‘Delos’ is a classical reference to the Greek island where Leto was believed to have given birth to her twins Apollo and Artemis.
narrator’s inability to identify fully with the women in the text on a psychological and emotional level means that it is easier for him to pass judgement on them. As Barbara Heldt sees it, ‘Delos’ presents the idea that ‘women are foetal vessels and gynaecology determines being.’ She explains the presence of the male narrator by positing, ‘The male doctor-narrator is a sort of surrogate husband (the real ones are characteristically missing) who combines sympathy and prestige: hence the peculiar choice of a man to express what is closest to a woman in a story by a woman.’

The setting, as in Zhenskii dekameron and ‘Na sokhranenii’, is a maternity hospital, and the narrator, Anton Apollinarevich, is the head of the ward. At the beginning of the text, he speaks of a mishap at the hospital that he and his colleagues later analysed: he says, ‘There was no criminality’, but he nevertheless is plagued by feelings of guilt (69). We see the workings of the maternity hospital through his eyes and hear the horror stories of his profession. In one such case, the patient Diagileva refuses to have a Caesarean section, although there is a good chance the baby will die; both mother and child manage to survive.

Anton Apollinarevich condemns his own work – and by extension, the women at the hospital – lamenting, ‘I know nothing more degrading than the duty of helping a woman get rid of a baby! Is it really only me?’ (152). He also notes the hostility of the female staff towards the patients, even though every one of these staff members has been in their shoes at least once (see Kelly’s observation that women often appear to be the victims of other women). He proceeds to tell the story of

---

56 Ibid., p. 169.
57 Kelly, A History of Russian Women’s Writing, p. 366.
Dudaikha, who crushed her child between her legs as it was being born. He notes the fine line between sacred motherhood and diabolical cruelty. He gives childbirth an almost sacred, godlike status, and notes: ‘The one who chooses is the one who pays’ (73). Women experience the pain of childbirth, but they also have the right to decide whether it is something they will endure.

When Anton Apollinarivich wonders if an abortion is more painful than childbirth, a patient named Katia remarks that nothing is more painful than childbirth, with the possible exception of torture. She makes the distinction that childbirth is natural, while torture essentially is a social construct. Childbirth is a pain women are biologically destined to experience. He has heard several times that ‘deciding to have an abortion is more terrifying than giving birth – you’re afraid of giving birth, but it’s somehow different’ (78). He is horrified to discover that Katia has a full-term ectopic pregnancy, which is extremely rare, and he ponders the reasons for this. When he worries about removing the baby, he is afraid Katia will die in the process. Instead, the child dies due to an assistant’s negligence, and Anton Apollinarivich feels guilt and pain. Though his colleagues want to profit from the situation by writing about it in a medical journal, Anton Apollinarivich refuses to have any part in it.

Kelly sees ‘Delos’ as arguing both against abortion and for men’s right to control women’s bodies. However, she argues that Sukhanova’s piece is ‘typical in that the alienation of women from their own bodies has become one of the canonical themes of realist writing’ in recent years.58 This alienation is evident in all the texts under discussion, but equally their bodies may also alienate others. They are not seen as erotic or even attractive in most cases; rather, they are disgusting, repellent or merely saddening.

58 Ibid., p. 366.
Marina Palei’s ‘Otdelenie propashchikh’ is also set in a maternity hospital. Stark and even shocking details, a typical feature of Palei’s works, are related to the reader. As in ‘Delos’, the narrative is presented through the eyes of a male protagonist, albeit one much more cynical and disdainful than Anton Apollinarievich. This protagonist is Filipp Arnol’dovich Razmetal’skii, the Director of the Department of Gynaecology and Obstetrics. He appears to have been hardened by his experiences, and his attitude towards any human body – including his own – is cold and ruthless.

One of the first images in the text is of Razmetal’skii trimming his cuticles, ‘cutting off the extra flesh with a razor blade’ (154). This image provides a stark parallel to the flesh he removes from women’s bodies. He jokes about women poisoning themselves for self-handled abortions, and alternates between a crudely sarcastic manner and an abrupt businesslike one. Razmetal’skii lectures his assistants and patients when he ‘is sitting in the abortion theatre with the air of a martyr, having borne his cross in the form of a pair of uplifted female legs’ (155). In the context, this religious imagery seems grotesque; of course, he is not a creator but a destroyer.

His attitude towards his patients leans towards the irreverent or disrespectful: he addresses them in a bored tone, refers to them as sluts, and implies that they will be unable to control their sexual desires and will then complain of bleeding. Some of the patients are described in extremely unflattering terms. One ‘sexless creature’ comes in, and Razmetal’skii wonders under what circumstances someone could have found her attractive enough to impregnate (157). He concludes that it could only have been someone who was intoxicated or probably even an alcoholic. Further, the language

---

Razmetal'skii uses to describe the procedure he performs is significant. When a recent patient returns to Razmetal'skii, he is surprised to see her so soon, asking, 'Didn't I clean you?' (155). The doctor's disdain for his patients is clear, and the implication that a woman's womb is 'dirty' serves to reinforce this idea.

In his attitudes and actions, the young doctor Razduvaev is hardly better than his colleague: a scene is described in which he is demonstrating a procedure to a female student. In a grotesque juxtaposition of images, he guides the student's hand in the 'bloody hole' of the patient while using his other hand to grope the student's breasts (162). This disregard for the female body is also evident when some patients claim that Razmetal'skii fails to perform procedures effectively and that many women must return to him a second time: he rejects this notion, placing the blame on the 'irregular organisms' of the women as well as inadequate instruments and facilities (160).

Corroborating Goscilo's hypothesis that the female body documents life experience, the narrator comments, 'Women's lot [...] shows through like geography on their sweaty bodies: the scars from mastitis on their drooping breasts, the scars from Caesereans on their bellies, the flaccid ropes of veins on their ruined legs, the sagging stretch marks on their drooping flanks, flabby bellies like aprons, like purses, which have given birth many times...' (164). It is true that these marks on their bodies, so often a testament to pain they have suffered, have appeared there because these are normal occurrences for any childbearing woman. The analogy to aprons and purses is interesting because it reinforces women's domestic role and draws from language within the same field of reference.
The story of Znobishina emblematizes both the repellent female (who bears a monstrous baby) and the horrific conditions in the ward. Znobishina, who is over fifty, once came to the hospital for a termination; not a year later, she gives birth to a boy. She is ashamed that her child is yellow-green and froglike, a grotesquely deformed ‘bony greenish freak’ who becomes known as the ‘goblin’ in the ward (165). Razduvaev amuses himself by telling the nurses horrible tales of the deformed babies he has seen in his career (though these fables largely are products of his imagination), and these nurses secretly blame him - it is as though his overactive imagination created Znobishina’s monstrosity.

A young nurse says she must look after ‘a pathological baby who is going to die all the same because he was born a monster and his blood is all ruined’ (168). Though this perspective is presented by a female, the nurse is parroting what she has been told by her male superiors and presents a similar attitude to that of the female nurses in ‘Delos’.

The narrator asks, ‘A creature, lacking reason, submerged up to his neck in the lava of merciless torment, [...] lacking the ability to make comparisons – is he capable of feeling pain?’ (170). Only one of the nurses believes that the Goblin should be treated as the other babies are and not left to die: she cares for him despite his repellent physical condition. Finally Znobishina goes home, tired of awaiting the her son’s death, and shortly thereafter he dies alone in the hospital. The final lines of the text reinforce the notion that the dysmorphic and irregular body – particularly when the body in question is the child of a grotesque mother – is subject to abuse, neglect, and negative attention, and there is the implication that physical deformity indicates that an individual is also emotionally stunted.
The relationship between the external body and the soul is at the centre of Elena Tarasova’s ‘Ne pomniashchaia zla’, which met considerable resistance when its author attempted to find a publisher. Male critics in particular found the text objectionable; whether this was due to its emphasis on disturbing corporeality or because the narrator compared the rotting body to an empty soul is unclear. As Masha Gessen notes in her introduction to the text, ‘Most who have written about the piece note that it is graphically disgusting — a shocking departure from the disembodied idealizations of socialist realism. [...] She has committed the sin of sacrilege not only against the heroic narrative of Soviet literature but the ideal of beauty in the Russian literary tradition itself’. As we have seen in the works of Tolstaia, Sadur and Vasilenko, a reaction to the tradition of socialist realism has the power to evince strong negative critical reaction.

The narrator of ‘Ne pomniashchaia zla’ suffers from a mysterious degenerative disease. Tarasova’s text consists of the narrator’s reflections on the day of her thirty-third birthday, and the comparison to Christ’s age at his crucifixion is made several times: the idea of contemporary female martyrdom seen in Sadur’s ‘Iug’ and Vasilenko’s ‘Durochka’ resurfaces here. The narrator of ‘Nepomniashchaia zla’ states that she would willingly be crucified instead of Christ, ‘but no one would worship this kind of deity: gods shouldn’t provoke disgust...A purple-red, swollen carcass hanging on the cross...It seems people trust only beautiful and healthy things’ (212).

61 Gessen, Half a Revolution, p. 96.
Certainly there are elements of sacrifice and suffering, but we see the narrator not only as a victim but also as an aggressor. Her feelings of isolation (to some degree self-imposed and self-perpetuated) cause her to retaliate against society and to engage in self-destructive behaviour. A binary opposition is introduced between the soul and the body: ‘Everything that heals in the body continues to bleed and suppurate in the soul’ (191). Her physical description seems calculated to disgust the reader: her ‘heavy monstrous flesh’, her ‘fat purple thighs’ and general physical hideousness are emphasized (190).

Physical decay is presented as a significant element; illness is presented as an aggressor, whether physical or moral: we read that ‘the decay in her soul is contagious’ (190). The narrator’s body is described in terms of her soul; all her physical defects then reflect corresponding deficiencies in her moral character. The soul has a ‘long bleeding scar on its neck’, decayed teeth, and other deformities (191). We learn that she makes no effort to disguise or cover her literal or figurative scars, instead defiantly presenting to the world her disturbing appearance. She also appears complicit in her monstrosity: ‘Her hideousness had to be attained. One isn’t even born a cripple but has to slowly mould oneself with one’s own hands into someone frightening and eccentric’ (192).

The narrator has long ago decided to stop cleaning her room; the entropy of the space in which she lives reflects her internal disorder. Despite her conscious efforts to repel those around her, the young daughter of the neighbours continues to visit her, and – for reasons that are incomprehensible to the narrator – even begins to emulate her in certain ways (193)
Time and again in these contemporary texts by Russian women writers, the institution – be it a maternity ward or mental ward – wavers between a zone of comfort and a prison of sorts, and this is evident in the narrator’s reflection on her time spent in a mental hospital. At one of the institutions in which she has stayed, a sort of competition for the greatest suffering took place. She recollects the urge she had when in the mental hospital to strike her ‘captors’, but she resists, knowing that succumbing to such an urge would result in her physical restraint. She observes the grotesque predicament of Pirozhikha, an old woman who lies soaked in her own urine and is tied to her bed.

The title of the story is taken from the narrator’s observations of some of the other mental patients: though she might be tempted to retaliate physically against the staff of the hospital, she restrains herself. This is not true of the others: ‘In a fit of fury they could kill, could bite off a hated nurse’s ear – and for many years it would live on in hospital anecdotes and remembrances – but they never harboured, never hid their malice. All their malice was written on their faces, was contained in their voices. But they harboured nothing...THEY BORE NO ILL’ (205). Ironically, the narrator gains her eventual release from the hospital by claiming that all her problems were due to the fact that the man she loved had married someone else. By posing as a ‘typical’ woman with the expected female desires, she gains her freedom.

The narrator lives through a pattern of alternately experiencing humiliation and humiliating others. She is at once a victim and an aggressor; taunted by others in public and suffering from an illness that attacks her body, she retaliates both by verbally abusing others and by making herself as unpalatable as possible to those around her. Because she finds herself unable to control what she says to others (her
tongue betrays her), she rejects yet another part of her body. The enemy is not only outside her in society but also exists within her, and the self-hatred appears to have penetrated to the core of her being. When she travels on public transport, others push her and make hurtful comments concerning her weight and her repugnant appearance, even telling her that she should avoid such transport because she might 'maim someone' (208). Such incidents reinforce her isolation and encourage her hatred of her own body. Like the maternity hospital and the mental ward, the bania is a social institution, and like the others, it is a gendered location. The bania was the narrator's first exposure to naked flesh, and it was here that she conceived of the idea of 'flesh as taboo' – perhaps the first step in finding her own body disgusting.

This disgust eventually leads to the narrator's desire to harm herself: 'She cut her fingers with a dull knife, she extinguished matches on her palm, she stabbed at her veins with dull, rusty pins, and somehow she seared her hand with a knife that she had heated until it was red' (202). Though her body bears the scars of these endeavours, she is not the only individual inflicting abuse on her body. Her parents beat her as a matter of course, and after being beaten, 'she would lock herself in her room, and she would rip the blanket with her teeth out of pain, out of strong pain, so they couldn’t hear her crying. Then she would mend the blanket for several nights, until the next thrashing...' (203). It is suggested that the beatings continue in part because of the narrator's tendency to respond to them with harsh words and resistance. Only after a beating does she feel like she has escaped her parents, those who 'betrayed' her by giving birth to her – this bodily act, one of the most animal of them all, is the one she finds the most disgusting.

\[\text{Here Tarasova uses porka to indicate both the ripping of the blanket and the beating the narrator will receive.}\]
Although in some ways she lives like an animal, succumbing to her most base instincts, the narrator finds the very concept of her animal nature repellent. The only people to whom she reaches out are those like herself – the physically dysmorphic and social outcasts (202). Goffman identifies a phenomenon known as the 'gestalt of disability' – the assumption that a person with one disability or flaw will certainly have others; as this may include character defects or moral weakness, the implications of such a view are evident.\(^6\) Physical irregularities may be conflated with mental or emotional irregularities. The stigmatized individual may have a different view: 'insulated by his alienation, protected by identity beliefs of his own, he feels that he is a full-fledged normal human being, and that we are the ones who are not quite human.'\(^6\) There also is the possibility of cooperation or solidarity among the stigmatized to a certain degree. Finally, it is important to note that the society at large decides what is stigmatized, placing values on what may be considered normal and defining what is a deviation from the norm.

Eventually the narrator decides to commit suicide by slitting her wrists. She begins by overdosing on pills and then opens a pack of razor blades. Though nervous, she finds the sensation strangely pleasurable. As the blood is flowing over the floor, she is discovered by her father, who has suddenly returned to the flat to retrieve something he has forgotten. She resents her family for rescuing her, fearing that she will never again be able to muster up the courage to repeat this act. While reminiscing about all of this, she realizes '[s]he is not dying, but she is living her death...' (120). She entertains a series of fantasies about her own death, none of which involve other people. She retreats into herself, shunning all types of social

---

\(^6\) Goffman, *Stigma*, p. 16.

\(^6\) Ibid., p. 17.
interaction if possible.

At the conclusion of the text, the narrator remains isolated, spending yet another day in solitude and rumination. Only in the final line of the text does the narrator names herself as 'nepomniashchaia zla' – she who bears no ill, and only at this point do we realize that the narrator is also the protagonist (214). Up to this point, she has distanced herself from the 'creature' being discussed; her self-hatred has progressed to such a degree that she can only talk about herself in the third person. The final line of the text indicates some degree of acceptance of her position; like the others at the mental hospital, she claims to bear no grudge against society.

Like 'Ne pomniashchaia zla', Larisa Vaneeva's 'Khromie golubi' centres around various images of the distorted, dysmorphic, and abused female body. However, these images are presented through the eyes of a young female narrator as she relates her own story and that of her sister: their everyday existence is steeped in a dizzying array of violent scenes. Violence expands beyond the female gender: no body is safe, whether that or a man, woman, child, or animal, and cruelty is assumed as a natural part of life.

The narrator finds a pigeon with a broken leg as she is coming home from school. The girl feels the pain of the pigeon and even wants to show off her discovery – but her idea is thwarted when she arrives home to find no one there except her younger sister. When their neighbour Valera discovers what they are doing, he assumes they have broken its leg, not that they are trying to help the bird. The assumption that humans tend to behave cruelly and inflict pain on others pervades the text.

---

65 Larisa Vaneeva, 'Khromye golubi', in Vaneeva, Iz kuba, Moscow, 1990, pp. 47-70.
Disability is present in the beautiful Linda, a neighbour who is confined to a wheelchair. There is a photographic portrait of her in all her former beauty; the narrator describes it as the most beautiful face she has ever seen. In the portrait, Linda’s beauty is increased by her suffering. When her husband photographed her, Linda slipped and fell, and the metal ‘corset’ she had to wear reminded her of the apparatus she had to wear after falling from the seventh floor as a child. When recollecting this fall, ‘she thought that she had not fallen accidentally then, but deliberately, [...] desiring to have done with it as early as possible, so as not to suffer’ (53). However, the accident itself brought on a tremendous wave of suffering – ‘It was as if a premonition of the torment had provoked the torment itself, and the desire to avoid it brought it closer’ (53). The premonition of bodily harm and fantasies of bodily harm emerge as significant motifs in the text (with the latter echoing one of the major elements explored in Chapter 2).

Linda’s beautiful but distorted body may be compared to the battered body of Nina, who is beaten by her husband Valera as the young narrator observes. In an imagined conversation, the narrator says to him, ‘While she let out her strange euphoric cries, you tied her up [...] You didn’t use your full strength with each blow, though, but left a certain incompleteness, a certain impossible aching sweetness, in which was contained the continuation of Nina’s life. She was screaming: “Hit me, hit me, you sadist...Kill me! [Go on,] hit me! Hit me!”’ (56-57). The ‘euphoric’ dimension to her cries and the ironic statement that Nina has been ‘permitted’ by her husband to remain alive underscore the cruel worldview pervading the text. In a grotesque juxtaposition of scenes, Valera sets bags of candy for the children on the

---

table and whacks Nina on the ear.

A different form of abuse is visited on some of the narrator’s classmates. The German music teacher, Mr. Shnaidermann, has been exposed as a child pornographer, having photographed students in various stages of undress under the pretext of teaching them to sing. The narrator has varying responses to this – the first is that the children who have agreed to be photographed in this way will be beaten by their parents. She is then embarrassed, thinking that she can’t even look people in the eye and would rather hang or poison herself (61). During a class, the girl imagines the perverted old man emerging from the blackboard, beckoning crudely to her, while the teacher beats him on the head with the pointer. Finally, he is ashamed and jumps out of the window, breaking his leg with a loud crack as a result. In her fantasy world, violence may be used as a form of retribution.

The same sort of retribution is envisioned by the violent Valera. In an ironic fit of moral outrage, Valera threatens to make the German music teacher pay for his crimes, perhaps by choking him to death. The narrator relishes the thought of Valera’s hammer-like fist and again presents a fantasy denouement: ‘The skull cracks under his sledgehammer...The cutting pain of ecstasy in the groin, and oh! That’s his skull breaking into pieces!’ (66). Despite these elements of fantasy, there is evidence that the narrator realizes the implications of what she has imagined: she views the scene as an endless, vicious circle of ‘executioner and victim’ and notes that it is sometimes difficult to draw lines between the categories. Although she has identified with Valera in his threats against the music teacher, she distances herself from him when she states her opinion that Valera soon will beat his wife to death because ‘he’s used to it and he can’t do otherwise’ (67).
At the end of the text, Valera hangs himself in the toilet. The narrator is disgusted because he hasn't made the proper preparations (such as washing himself). It is evident that he has had a slow, prolonged, and humiliating death: he is found on the toilet seat in a state of sexual readiness. This inappropriate sexual reaction serves to link Valera with Shnaidermann and once again distances him from the narrator, emphasizing that she lives in a violent, dangerous world and sees the effects of this violence 'written' on the bodies of those she knows without ultimately embracing this worldview.

Vaneeva's 'Parad planet' also merits attention because of its portrayal of bodily issues amid a larger musing on the configuration of the universe. The protagonist, E.P. Saveleva, is an alcoholic, and her daughter is a drug addict. Saveleva physically abuses her daughter, once even breaking her arm with a boot brush. Though they sleep in the same bed, Saveleva sterilizes the sheets and disinfects the bathtub because she is afraid of contracting syphilis from her daughter. Saveleva also has been abused by her husband; he has tried to strangle her several times. She often dreams of hanging herself, finding herself on the executioner's block, or having her limbs severed. The brutal worldview seen in 'Khromye golubi' surfaces again in 'Parad planet', with the effects of the brutality both visible and envisioned on the female body.

Palei's *Kabiriia s Obvodnogo kanala* explores various notions of corporeality along with abortion, physical abuse, punishment for sexuality, and suicide attempts while also presenting a hospital setting. Palei reveals domestic violence in her documenting or cataloguing of the protagonist Mon'ka's physical state. Heaton notes

---

67 Larisa Vaneeva, 'Parad planet', in *Iz kuba*, pp. 71-89.
the centrality of the body in the text of Kabiriia as well as the possible acceptance of violence as a natural or expected part of life. She posits that "Kabiriia succeeds in reversing the traditional paradigm of the male aggressor and the passive female sexual object." She notes that men around Mon'ka are subject to a female gaze, the inverse of the male gaze explored in Chapter 2 of this thesis. Though Mon'ka hardly is a sexual predator, she is a voracious pursuer of men. The Kabiriia in the title is, of course, a reference to Fellini's 'Nights of Cabiria' and the prostitute who plays the main character. Like Cabiria, Mon'ka is a selfless figure who may be seen as a martyr of sorts: she is abused again and again, when she appears simply to be searching for love.

The importance of the physical is established at the beginning of the text through attention to Mon'ka's appearance and movements. At the beginning of the text, we learn that when there no men were present, Mon'ka 'would sit with her legs spread wide apart and listlessly pick at her fingernails' (142). Her physical appearance is marked by carelessness and disarray – possibly this dishevelled appearance indicates her sexual availability. Mon'ka's father beats her with a belt to keep her from running off with boys; he 'worked over her silently, with pleasure, from time to time voluptuously shrieking and sharply exhaling' with an evident sexual element to this corporal punishment (145).

The men in Mon'ka's family view her sexuality as threatening. She suffers beatings that are designed to curb her wildness, and she makes her first trip to a

---

70 Ibid., p. 72.
71 Ibid., p. 73.
prenatal clinic while only in the seventh grade. Her grandfather, who finds Monka's underwear stained with dried menstrual blood (a symbol of her sexuality), complains that it attracts mice. Her father says that her genitals should be 'sewn up like they do with cats' (161), and when she is locked in the kitchen at night so she will not run off, a hole is hammered up tightly with the bloodstained board that her grandfather uses to chop the heads off chickens. This image is a thinly veiled metaphor for the attempted containment of Monka's voracious sexuality.

The major discovery of Monka's life is that her body was intended for sexual pleasure (152), and it is significant that her relationship with her husband is only harmonious in a sexual sense. The glasses that Monka and her husband broke on their wedding day 'turned out to be only the beginning of the end of those innumerable glasses, plates, bottles, carafes, lampshades, and even mirrors and windowpanes' (165). Palei subverts the joyful wedding tradition of breaking glasses and translates it into an image of destruction in a domestic context. When Monka marries, she sees her daily life as something to endure. In light of this unhappiness, Palei ironically employs Edenic imagery both to describe the phallus of Monka's husband Kolia (a 'Tree in the Garden of Paradise') and a garden of flowering bruises on Monka's body (153, 163). Heaton notes the problematic character of victimization in the text: 'Although violence seems to be unblinkingly accepted by all the characters in the story, their acceptance does not suggest resignation towards violence to women in particular, but rather, resignation towards violence as an inseparable part of the inevitable violence of Soviet life in general'. However, Monka's suffering is directly linked to her gender and sexual allure or desires.

---

72 Ibid., p. 80.
Because of the discord in her married life and her physical ailments, Mon'ka tries to commit suicide several times - first by poisoning herself with iodine, then swallowing a handful of sewing needles. The hospital provides a comforting environment, and Mon'ka actually feels at home there. Despite this transitory comfort, Mon'ka dies from a heart problem at the conclusion of the text, and this final description of her physicality underscores the fact that Mon'ka's body pervades the text. Once again, we see the linking of the emotional with the physical: because Mon'ka still has not found love, her heart fails her in this sense as well.

*  

In Body Work, Peter Brooks notes that 'modern narratives appear to produce a semioticization of the body which is matched by a somatization of story: a claim that the body must be a source and a locus of meanings, and that stories cannot be told without making the body a prime vehicle of narrative significations'. As we have seen, discourse in the hospital setting leads into discourse about the body, particularly those texts in which illness or bodily distortion or dysmorphia is at the centre. The body is at the centre of the text and is to some extent not only the locus of meaning but the nexus of meanings. The inclusion of images of irregular or suffering bodies serves multiple functions: while highlighting previously unacceptable corporeal elements, it also allows for an examination of the psychology of illness, abortion and self-destructive behaviour as violence done to the body.

---

73 Brooks, Body Work, p. xii.
Conclusion

As we have seen, violence surfaces in a wide variety of contexts in Russian literature of the last few decades. Ideas commonly presented in conjunction with violence include the idea of violence as punishment for inappropriate women, violence as a reaction to the prescriptive constraints of Socialist Realism, violence as drawing on folkloric motifs or elements of Russian history, violence as a part of fantasy life, the ludic aspects of violence (violence as game), and violence discussed in the larger context of body issues and corporeality.

One of my goals has been to establish a foundation for the continued study of violence in Russian literature as well as to put the various episodes of women and violence into a larger context. We now see the ways in which these largely contemporary writers treat the topic.

The Nabokov chapter serves to establish some ways of looking at violence and also looking at women. Limonov and Erofeev use the convention of memoir as presented in Lolita and Ada; their use of violent fantasy links to the texts of Tolstaia and Sadur. Miloslavskii seems to present his own harsh variant of byt, in which males are at the centre; Petrushevskaiia's byt-related texts present a feminized account of this experience. While Petrushevskaiia subverts byt, she also introduces supernatural elements and brings attention to the female body. Tolstaia, Sadur, and Vasilenko present grotesque variations of the female, respectively using alterity, magic, folklore, religious motifs, and filmic elements to portray violence. All the female authors considered in this thesis focus to some extent on non-idealized representations of
women. In the final chapter, the authors considered use female space and the body as a frame for contextualizing violence.

An examination of other types of violence would be another direction in which to take this study, thereby expanding it beyond the domestic realm. Further areas of study might include a specific examination of violence and verbal games as a response to Socialist Realism; an exploration of violence in other genres and media, including poetry, drama, film, and music would also be interesting. Because most of the texts analysed in the thesis have come from 'high' culture, it might be fruitful to examine the role of violence in popular culture.

Despite the often depressing and disheartening subject matter covered in this thesis, it should be noted that this is only one theme frequently utilized by contemporary Russian writers. As Goscilo notes, 'Death, sickness, violence, destitution, and incessant domestic and romantic clashes recur with exhausting frequency in contemporary women's fiction, but such writers as Ulitskaia, Vasilenko, and Ekaterina Sadur posit inspiration, integrity, and spiritual wealth as indivisible from the realm they depict.' It is difficult to say whether the trend of representing violence will continue – particularly among contemporary women writers – but if we are to find any interstices between the literary and social, it appears that these writers may offer reason for hope.

Given the rich array of violent episodes in recent Russian literature and the increased attention to gender-related issues on the levels of both textual production and critical
analysis, there is reason to believe that future studies will undertake systematic analyses of violence in heretofore understudied areas of Russian culture and literature.

Bibliography

Primary Sources

Chekhov, Anton, Sochineniia v chetyrekh tomakh, Moscow, 1984.


, Russkaia krasavitsa, Moscow, 2002.


Limonov, Eduard, Eto ia, Edichka (It’s Me, Eddie), Moscow, 1992.

, L’historie de son serviteur (His Butler’s Story), New York, 1987.

, Podrostok Savenko (The Adolescent Savenko), Paris, 1983.


, King, Queen, Knave, London, 1968.


Narbikova, Valeriia, Okolo ekolo, Moscow, 1990.

, Ad kak Da (aD kak dA) (Hell as Yes), in Larisa Vaneeva (ed.), Ne pomniashchaia zla, Moscow, 1990, pp. 315-64.

Palei, Marina, Kabiria s Obvodnogo kanala, in Long Distance, ili Slavianskii aktsent, Moscow, 2000, pp. 142-214.


Pelevin, Viktor, Sochineniia v dvukh tomakh, Moscow, 1996.


Vaneeva, Larisa, *Iz kuba*, Moscow, 1990

(ed.), *Ne pomniashchaia zla*, Moscow, 1990,


**Secondary Sources**


Chester, Pamela, and Sibelan Forrester (eds), *Engendering Slavic Literatures*, Bloomington, IN, 1996.


Clements, Barbara Evans, Rebecca Friedman, and Dan Healey (eds), *Russian Masculinities in History and Culture*, New York, 2002.


Englestein, Laura. ‘There is Sex in Russia – and Always Was: Some Recent Contributions to Russian Erotica’, *Slavic Review*, 51, 1992, 4, pp. 786-90.


Goscilo, Helena, and Beth Holmgren (eds), Russia. Women. Culture., Bloomington, IN, 1996.

Goscilo, Helena, and Byron Lindsey (eds), Glasnost: An Anthology of Russian Literature under Gorbachev, Ann Arbor, MI, 1990.

(eds), The Wild Beach: An Anthology of Contemporary Russian Stories, Ann Arbor, MI, 1993.


Hubbs, Joanna, Mother Russia: The Feminine Myth in Russian Culture, Bloomington, IN, 1988.


, ‘A Stick with Two Ends, or, Misogyny in Popular Culture: A Case Study of the Puppet Text “Petrushka”’, in Jane T. Costlow, Stephanie Sandler and Judith Vowles (eds), Sexuality and the Body in Russian Culture, Stanford, CA, 1993, pp. 73-96.

Kelly, Catriona, Michael Makin, and David Shepherd (eds), Discontinuous Discourses in Modern Russian Literature, Basingstoke, 1989.


Kolesov, V.V., and V.V. Rozhdestvenskaia (eds), Domostroi, St. Petersburg, 1994


Kon, Igor, ‘Sexuality and Culture’, in Igor Kon and James Riordan (eds), Sex and Russian Society, Bloomington, IN, 1993, pp. 15-44.
Kon, Igor, and James Riordan (eds), *Sex and Russian Society*, Bloomington, IN, 1993.


Paperno, Irina, Suicide as a Cultural Institution in Dostoevsky’s Russia, Ithaca, NY, 1997.


Reiss, Albert J., Jr., and Jeffrey A. Roth (eds), Understanding and Preventing Violence, Washington, DC, 1993.


Rotkirch, Anna, and Elina Haavio-Mannila (eds), *Women’s Voices in Russia Today*, Dartmouth, NH, 1996.


Soriano, Marc, 'From Tales of Warning to Formulettes', in Peter Brooks (ed.), *The Child's Part*, Boston, MA, 1972, pp. 24-43.


Tanner, Laura E., 'Introduction', in Tanner, *Intimate Violence: Reading Rape and Torture in Twentieth-Century Fiction*, Bloomington, IN and Indianapolis, IN, 1994, pp. 3-16.


