

Primitivist or Moralist?: The Biological *Ethos* in Boris Pil'niak's Shorter Prose

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ABSTRACT

Helen Graves Halva: Primitivist or Moralist?: The Biological *Ethos*
in Boris Pil'niak's Shorter Prose
(Under the direction of Madeline G. Levine)

The so-called “woman question” raised by the “nihilists” of the 1860s and debated by the realist writers, notably Tolstoi, evolved into a reevaluation of traditional sexual morality in the modernist movements of the twentieth century. In the wake of the dramatic social changes wrought by the 1905 and 1917 revolutions, there also arose a “neo-nihilist” reexamination of women’s emancipation issues, represented by political and cultural public figures such as Aleksandra Kollontai. This dissertation examines approximately twenty stories and novellas written between 1914 and 1936 by Russian/Soviet writer Boris Andreevich Vogau (pseudonym Pil’niak), and several units from his first novel, in order to present an interpretation of Pil’niak’s views on and position in that debate, based on close readings of the texts mentioned.

This dissertation argues that Pil’niak, considered by many commentators a champion of primitive man and instinctive behavior, in fact defines a biological morality based on pre-marital virginity, permanent sexual fidelity to a single mate, personal integrity and self-awareness, and a reproductive mandate. In Pil’niak’s *ethos*, which evolved over time, human mating is to be governed first of all by love, and sexual union is inseparable from the procreative purpose. The most basic human role is to be a loving mate and parent, and the overarching purpose of procreation is to rear children to become loving, humane, and authentic human beings, an activity that is best undertaken within

the nuclear family. This dissertation further argues, by presenting the Tolstoian subtext of three of Pil'niak's stories, that Pil'niak's basic moral views, especially concerning the family and personal integrity, are essentially in harmony with those of Lev Tolstoi. The dissertation also explores Pil'niak's evolution away from his early valorization of "primitive" human life uncorrupted by urban "culture," an evolution that was virtually complete by the mid-1920s.

To the memory of Boris Pil'niak.

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Chapter I

Introduction

Basic Writing Chronology and Biography

Boris Andreevich Vogau, better known by his pseudonym Pil'niak, was born in Mozhaisk, Russia, outside Moscow, in 1894. He began publishing, although usually anonymously, in small local newsletters even in his teens, but he considered 1915 to be the beginning of his true literary career. This was the year which saw his first few publications as "Pil'niak" as well as his first true love, which was to impact his thematics greatly.¹ His pre-revolutionary short stories focused primarily on nature and animal life, earning him a reputation as a "physiological writer," as well as on family and professional life in Zemstvo communities and small provincial towns --- I refer to this phase as his "early domestic period." The 1917 October Revolution did not change his interest in these themes but added a new focus on life under revolutionary conditions; this concentration led to his blockbuster first novel, Golyi god,² a sort of montage of experiences supposedly of the Revolution and famine year 1919 but actually reflecting events and conditions occurring as early as 1918.

This novel put him on the literary map, with the work's chaotic form reflective of the conditions prevailing in the Revolution/Civil War period. The year of its publication,

¹ This particular year, so crucial in Pil'niak's personal and professional life, is chronicled in "Boris Pil'niak: 1915 god. Istoriiia liubvi i tvorchestva," by Pil'niak's granddaughter, Kira Borisovna Andronikashvili-Pil'niak. Boris Pil'niak: Opyt segodniashnego prochteniiia (Moskva: Nasledie, 1995) 153-171.

² Usually translated The Naked Year or The Bare Year, written 1918-1920, first published 1922.

1922, was also a watershed year in that Pil'niak then had his first taste of international travel, which would add depth and breadth to his works. He traveled to Estonia and Berlin in 1922, to England the following year, to the North Pole in 1924, and so on. These travels opened his eyes and mind in new ways. Abroad he found himself an apologist and interpreter of the Revolution, and his own experiences in different cultures engendered new perceptions of his homeland, the larger world, the Revolution, and the human condition. His works written in 1922-1924 included greater emphasis on cultural issues while continuing his explorations of personal and family life under post-revolutionary conditions, now those of the New Economic Policy. One fruit of his sojourn among the émigré community in Berlin was a novella, "Tret'ia stolitsa"³ (1923)⁴ which simultaneously explored, (a) on a socio-cultural level, the moribund old-world European civilization and the still primitive but vital culture now developing in Russia, catalyzed by the Revolution, and (b), on the individual personal level, male-female relationships. The "Angliiskie rasskazy"⁵ (1924) and others inspired by his trip to England continued the exploration of ancient, petrified cultures, the will to colonize, culture clashes, and the development of an entirely new culture in Russia, while sometimes focusing directly on his own experiences in Britain. His genres expanded to include travel sketches and quasi-journalistic pieces as well as artistic literature (fiction).

³ "The Third Capital," also published as "Mat'-machekha," "Mother-Stepmother."

⁴ Dates in the Introduction are dates of first publication unless otherwise noted. In remaining chapters they are dates of writing.

⁵ "English Stories": "Speranza," "Otryvki iz 'Povesti v pis'makh,' kotoruiu skuchno konchit'," ("Excerpts from 'A Tale in Letters,' which is Boring to Finish") and "Staryi syr" ("The Old Cheddar Cheese") were published together in 1924; later stories based on his impressions of English culture included "Zhenikh vo polunochi" (1927, "The Bridegroom at Midnight") and "Bol'shoe serdtse" (1926, "A Big Heart").

This period of writing, approximately 1919-1924 (publication often lagged a year or two behind), was stylistically Pil'niak's most complex, characterized by fragmentation, genre-mixing, asynchronous plotless narration ("bessiuzhetnost"), wordplay, mixed lexicons, and other ornamental devices. This is usually referred to as his "ornamental" period --- ornamentalism was a prevalent literary trend of which his works were merely the most prominent example. Some of his best known ornamental works include the novels Golyi god and Mashiny i volki⁶ (1925), short stories "Pri dveriakh"⁷ (1920) and "Riazan' -iabloko"⁸ (1922) as well as the novella "Tret'ia stolitsa." In terms of political ideology, if one can call it that with apolitical Pil'niak, this period marked the writer's changing view of the Revolution, not unique to Pil'niak among the writers of the day, from a spontaneous peasant uprising which would restore the "real Russia" to its pre-Petrine, rural roots (a Slavophile concept) to a more forward-looking view of the Revolution's promise of new cultural horizons, an elevated spiritual and intellectual human culture which could be made possible largely by industrialization. This transition, especially with respect to the writer's gradual and tentative embrace of technology, can be seen by comparing his first two novels, Golyi god and Mashiny i volki, the first glorifying the "spontaneous revolution" and the second giving "machines" their due.

This period was also very significant with respect to Pil'niak's later career and ultimate fate. Critical response to his first novel and his earlier stories generally acknowledged his significant talents as an observer and writer, even with great enthusiasm for Golyi god. However, the political situation in the early days of the Soviet

⁶ Machines and Wolves

⁷ "At the Gates"

⁸ "Riazan' Apples"

Union cannot be dismissed. As early as 1922-23 Pil'niak's works were being judged by critics and others (e.g., Voronskii, Trotskii) not only on their artistic merits but also on the view of the Revolution he portrayed. Politicization of literature began early, and all Soviet writers were subject to such evaluation. The literary diversity characteristic of the early twentieth century's Silver Age was gradually being constrained to what would result in the Socialist Realism mandate of 1934. Over the next decade independent publishers and journals would be replaced by state organs, literary schools or loose groupings such as Pereval, Serapion Brothers, Proletkul't, the fellow travelers (of which Pil'niak was one) and unions such as the Russian Association of Proletarian Writers (RAPP) and the All-Russian Writers' Union would be eliminated and melded into a single unit, the Union of Soviet Writers.

In about 1925 the general literary stylistic tenor changed as demands for accessibility and mass culture were increasingly mandated. Pil'niak, like most others, abandoned the ornamental style for a more straightforward narrative technique in which plot and story were more dominant. In the period 1925-29, Pil'niak's subject matter began to focus more on individual life experiences and universal concerns of both individuals and cultures; life conditions resulting from the Revolution were still present in his works, but were relegated to the background in deference to broader concerns such as opposition to violence, barbarism, poverty and philistinism. This is a largely overlooked but very rich period in his production of short stories and travel sketches. A journey to the far north inspired themes of man's struggles with nature (e.g., "Zavoloch'e,"⁹ "Gibel' Sverdrupa,"¹⁰ "Nerozhdennaia povest'"¹¹ all published in 1925,

⁹ This title, "Zavoloch'e," is not usually translated.

and the later novel Dva dvoynika,¹² never published in Russian in Pil'niak's lifetime). His seaplane trip to remote areas of north and central Russia resulted in several travel sketches and a novella, "Ivan Moskva" (1927). In autumn 1925 he traveled by boat around the Mediterranean, visiting Greece, Palestine, Constantinople, and other areas, his experiences then inspiring "Rasskaz o kliuchakh i gline"¹³ (1926) about some Odessa Jews' resettlement in Palestine, and other works. Stories and a novel resulted from his travels in the Far East (1926) as well. Culture clash and imperialism were themes of such stories as "Bol'shoe serdtse" and "Zhenikh vo polunochi" (both 1927) which could also be categorized as "English stories" and included universal human themes as well. Pil'niak's life-long literary focus on the challenges of the individual human life became further nuanced under the impact of his personal life during this period; he had left his first wife, Masha (Mariia Alekseevna Sokolova), and their two children in April 1924 and married the actress Ol'ga Shcherbinovskaia in 1925. Reflections on love, marriage, divorce, and family make-up occur in his works during this period in such stories as "Zhuliki,"¹⁴ "Chelovecheskii veter,"¹⁵ "Grego-Trimuntan"¹⁶ (all 1925), "Staryi dom"¹⁷

¹⁰ "The Ruin of the 'Sverdrup'"

¹¹ "The Unborn Story"

¹² Twins

¹³ "Story of Springs and Clay"

¹⁴ "Swindlers"

¹⁵ "The Human Wind"

¹⁶ This title, "Grego-Trimuntan," is not usually translated.

¹⁷ "The Old House"

(1926), “Pookskii rasskaz”¹⁸ and “Vernost”¹⁹ (1927), “Zemlia na rukakh,”²⁰ and “Nizhegorodskii otkos”²¹ (all 1928).

A fateful event in Pil’niak’s career occurred in late 1925 in the form of the operating room death of Red Army Commander Frunze. Pil’niak’s story “Povest’ nepogashennoi luny,”²² its foreword explicitly (hence provocatively) denying any connection with Frunze’s death, appeared in Novyi mir in April 1926 while Pil’niak and his new wife were on a long trip to the Far East. The plot and imagery in the story strongly suggested that Stalin had given the order for Frunze’s death. The journal issue was quickly withdrawn and republished with another story replacing “Luna,” and the editors released an apology for their gross error in printing the tale. Critic and publisher A. K. Voronskii, to whom Pil’niak had dedicated the story, published a repudiation of the dedication. Pil’niak, upon return to Russia in August, was blacklisted from publication, at least within publishing organs under the control of Izvestiia, to whom he appealed by letter for restoration of publishing rights.²³ His apology, professing ignorance of slandering Stalin, was published in the January 1927 issue of Novyi mir. While Pil’niak was at best extremely naïve in publishing something that could so easily be construed as describing Stalin’s complicity in Frunze’s death, it is also true that Voronskii was a close

¹⁸ “An Oka Story”

¹⁹ “Fidelity” or “Authenticity”; publication data is from 6-vol. coll., vol. 4, 475.

²⁰ “Earth on her Hands”

²¹ “The Nizhnii Novgorod Slope”

²² “Tale of the Unextinguished Moon”

²³ Mne vypala gor’kaia slava . . . : Pis’ma 1915-1917, comp. B. B. Andronikashvili-Pil’niak (Moskva: Agraf, 2002), to “Izvestiia TsIK,” 21 Nov. 1926, No. 206, 304-309. All letters further referenced in this dissertation will be from this volume unless otherwise noted.

friend of Frunze and, it is supposed, gave Pil'niak many details concerning Frunze's personal life and death and knew the exact content of the tale before it was published. According to Pil'niak's son, Boris Borisovich Andronikashvili-Pil'niak, the actual apology letter, on Izvestiia letterhead, was not written in Pil'niak's handwriting but was only signed and dated by him (with trivial editorial corrections in Pil'niak's hand).²⁴ This scandal was very destructive to his career and cast its shadow over events in his later life.

Restrictive cultural policies and increased political censorship continued to limit diversity of expression and content as Stalin consolidated his power. Criticism supposedly directed at Pil'niak's works became more about the man --- and the category of writers he belonged to --- than about the aesthetic and substantive qualities of his writings. Pil'niak's next major "error" occurred in 1929, with the publication in Berlin of the novella "Krasnoe derevo."²⁵ The Party at this time had already determined the necessity of purging from the writers' ranks "fellow-travelers," those who had not professed total commitment to Communism and the Proletariat; the Party's ultimate goal was the creation of a single union of writers which could be more easily controlled. Pil'niak, then president of the Moscow section of the All-Russian Writers' Union, and Evgenii Zamiatin, president of the Leningrad section, were made the targets of a defamation campaign, ostensibly for publishing their works abroad,²⁶ and in Pil'niak's case for apparently positive literary references to Trotskii and for negative depictions of Communism as implemented in the provinces. The campaign, led by Boris Volin of

²⁴ Letter to Editors of Novyi mir, 25 Nov. 1926, No. 207, note 3 p. 311.

²⁵ "Mahogany"

²⁶ Soviet writers routinely published works abroad for copyright protection not available at home.

RAPP,²⁷ was controversial and even Gor'kii, who disliked Pil'niak both as a person and as a writer, came to Pil'niak's defense. Ultimately Pil'niak refuted Volin's accusations and explained, in a letter to the Literaturnaia gazeta (on whose pages the campaign had largely been waged),²⁸ his intent in "Krasnoe derevo" as an attack on philistinism rather than on Communism, his reasons for publishing it abroad, and his commitment to the historic progress being made in the USSR and to Soviet literature

Unfortunately this was not the end of this story. Pil'niak's subsequent use of much of "Krasnoe derevo" in his "construction novel" Volga vpadaet v Kaspiiskoe more²⁹ (1930) was interpreted by many, especially in the West, as his capitulation to the Soviet regime, his attempt to rehabilitate himself by writing in the prescribed Socialist Realist manner and by lauding the technological achievements of the new regime.³⁰ This early construction novel does seem to laud the successes of the five-year-plans initiated by Stalin in 1928 in that the background of the novel is the construction of a dam reversing the direction of river-flow; however, its real thematic essence concerns male-female relationships and human values. Even the control of nature being exerted through

²⁷ RAPP at this time was still hoping for hegemony, and opened this campaign in its own interests, fearing Pil'niak's influence as chairman of the All-Russia Writers' Union.

²⁸ To the Editors of Literary Gazette, 28 August 1929, No. 233, 333-339. This letter has been construed by some as an abject apology.

²⁹ The Volga Flows Into the Caspian Sea

³⁰ See Vera T. Reck, Boris Pil'niak: A Soviet Writer in Conflict with the State (Montreal: McGill-Queens UP, 1976) for details of this and other political issues in Pil'niak's life. Reck's information, which led her to consider Volga Pil'niak's "penance" for the sins of "Krasnoe derevo," needs to be comprehensively updated with more recent (*glasnost'* era) revelations and research.

human technology is described as being in cooperation with, rather than imposed on, nature.³¹

Pil'niak's troubles continued to grow in the early thirties as he analyzed his writing process in a collection called Kak my pishem.³² Describing his "process" as essentially an intuitive one, where ideas came to him during states of half-sleep, he made himself the target of still more criticism (Zamiatin and Belyi were similarly criticized) from the Marxist critics who accused such writers of trying to escape the rationalistic Communist reality by withdrawing into the unconscious. Again, at this point criticism focused not on the aesthetics of Pil'niak's writings, but on him, his creative processes, and attitudes attributed to him.

After a struggle which included appeals to Stalin³³ himself, Pil'niak acquired a visa for travel to the U. S. in 1931 for a previously arranged consultancy at a movie studio and spent about six months in America; his travel and work experiences and observations were published in O'kei: Amerikanskii roman³⁴ (1932), really a travelogue rather than a novel. Reflections on his 1930 sojourn in Tadzhikistan had already appeared in several works, notably the travel-oriented publicistic work Takzhikistan: Sed'maia sovestskaia³⁵ (1930) and would appear in more, most notably Dva dvoinika. More travels followed in 1932, to Japan and the Far North, then in 1934 to Scandinavia. He was

³¹ See Irene Masing-Delic, "Boris Pil'niak's The Volga Falls to the Caspian Sea as Trotskyite Sophiology." SEEJ 52.3 (2008) 413-438 for insight into this interpretation.

³² How We Write. (Leningrad: Izdatel'stvo pisatelei v Leningrade Svetoch, 1930) 124-129.

³³ To I. V. Stalin, December 1930, No. 239, 345-349; draft of letter.

³⁴ OK: An American Novel

³⁵ Tadzhikistan: The Seventh Soviet Republic

divorced from his second wife in 1932, and in the following year he met and married his third wife, film star Kira Georgievna Andronikashvili; their son Boris Borisovich was born in October 1934. During the 1930s Pil'niak's writing tended to travel sketches, vignettes describing the current Soviet reality (by then well into the teenage years of the new regime) interspersed occasionally with short stories of high literary quality, many about universal themes such as death and about aspects of Russian or foreign cultures. Notable events in this period include the 1932 "Reordering of Literary Organizations" which eliminated existing literary groups and created the single Union of Soviet Writers, and the first congress of the new union, at which Pil'niak was a speaker, acknowledging his past "mistakes" and pointing out the change in perspective his world travels had given him. In 1936 Pil'niak received one of the dachas in the Peredelkino writers' community, next door to Boris Pasternak, a long-time friend.

Pil'niak's most productive year of the decade, certainly quantitatively, was 1934, when he produced at least twenty short works between March and November. However, these were virtually the swan's last trills. Late this year Pil'niak wrote the story "Rozhdenie cheloveka"³⁶ immediately after the birth of his son, Boris. This story, to be analyzed below (Chapter II), dramatized the effects of pregnancy and birth on an unmarried Soviet prosecutor. Here Pil'niak's foregrounding of the "instincts" associated with the individual life cycle phases of birth, love, reproduction, and death became too much for the official establishment bent on glorification of the new regime and its technological progress (its alleged "victory over nature"), and the critics, as always basing more on ideology than artistic expression (artistic expression itself and its

³⁶ "Birth of a Human Being" or "Birth of a Man"

accessibility to the masses having become by now cornerstones of ideology), were outspoken in their condemnation. At this point Pil'niak's ultimate fate became ever more predictable. His 1935 novel, Sozrevanie plodov,³⁷ about the ability of Palekh icon-painters (under the new regime) to transfer their presumably obsolete skills to the (economically and culturally valuable) decoration of lacquer-boxes, still had too much universal-life "biological" emphasis and too complex a form to satisfy the literary establishment. His Trotskiite ties and refusal to repudiate his thematic focus on man's individual life paths in favor of glorification of the great Soviet future led ultimately to his doom despite his efforts to redeem himself with a final novel, Solianoj ambar³⁸ (written 1937, published only posthumously in 1990). He was taken from his son's third birthday party and arrested for Trotskiite associations, espionage for Japan, and other charges on 28 October 1937 and executed on 21 April 1938.

Although some publication of Pil'niak's works continued abroad in Russian and in translation, they disappeared from the Soviet literary scene until the 1976 publication of an anthology of selected short stories plus Golyi god, and O'Kei: Amerikanskii roman two decades after his official rehabilitation in 1956. Only since the period of *glasnost*' in the late 1980s and 1990s has there been a real resurgence in the publication of his works and research in biographical materials, as well as critical examination of his *oeuvre* as works of art.

³⁷ The Ripening of Fruits

³⁸ The Salt Shed

Scholarship

As the brief biographical sketch above shows, Pil'niak's literary work was not merely exposed to criticism on aesthetic and thematic grounds (literary form and content), but above all to ideological censure; political "mistakes" expressed through his literary works quite literally cost him his life. In the following sections I will describe the basic trends in Soviet and Western criticism of Pil'niak's works, emphasizing the relationship of the critical commentary as it pertains to my own thesis about the writer's most important concerns and also demonstrating how consistently, in both Russia and the West, criticism has been more about the man Pil'niak than about the merits and flaws of his literary *oeuvre*. Even today, Pil'niak is more a victim of clichés than are his contemporaries such as Zamiatin, Babel', and Olesha. In Soviet times he was ultimately condemned for his ideological failures, but also later in Russia he has been seen almost exclusively as a glorifier of the "primitive Revolution," with little attention paid to the evolution of his views and his art. In the West there has been an unbalanced concentration on his early ornamental works, probably because of his status as "most representative" of the ornamental style but perhaps also partly owing to a desire to salvage what was seen as aesthetically viable before the writer allegedly "sold out" morally to maintain his position and lifestyle. Rather than undertake an exhaustive critical study, I will be examining a few milestones in Pil'niak's critical reception history, first Soviet, then Western, with occasional interjections of smaller items of special interest, followed by a final summary of trends since the *glasnost'* era.

Mainstream Soviet Criticism

A. K. Voronskii, founder of the thick journal Krasnaia nov',³⁹ wrote the first significant critical study of Pil'niak's work in 1922,⁴⁰ encompassing Pil'niak's first two anthologies of short stories, S poslednim parokhodom⁴¹ (1918) and Byl'e⁴² (1920), plus Golyi god, "Ivan-da-Mar'ia,"⁴³ and "Riazan'-iabloko" (all 1922) and a few others that had been published individually. I will spend some time on his assessments, as they initiated the themes that would dominate Soviet criticism of Pil'niak in his lifetime. Voronskii enthusiastically applauded Golyi god as Pil'niak's best work to date. He was generous in praise for most of Pil'niak's writings up until then, considering him a writer of great talent and promise, even though still unformed.

He identified Pil'niak's major themes as, along with the Revolution, nature, "physiology," "biology," "love," and "woman" (56). Pil'niak, he said, was a so-called "physiological" writer in that his animals and people were essentially similar in their motivations and behavior (54). Calling attention to the amount of space Pil'niak devoted to women, especially with respect to their "physiology" in his works, he expressed concern over the almost "pathological" nature of love described in "Ivan-da-Mar'ia" (56), calling into question the appropriateness of such themes in contemporary literature. To prove his point, he cited the (in)famous passage in which the female protagonist claims that "the whole revolution smells of sexual organs" (56). Such "pathology," Voronskii

³⁹ Red Virgin Soil

⁴⁰ A. K. Voronsky, "Literary Silhouettes: Boris Pil'niak," Art as the Cognition of Life: Selected Writings 1911-1936, trans., ed. Frederick S. Choate (Oak Park, MI: Mehring Books, 1998) 51-76.

⁴¹ With the Last Steamer

⁴² Bygones

⁴³ "Ivan and Maria"

argued, would inevitably result in “Rozanov’s sexual mysticism or the transformation of the world into a brothel” (57). Pil’niak’s stories, he continued, thanks to Pil’niak’s sexually oriented “creed,” “are overloaded with rapes and sexual acts,” but the female characters are merely cutout figures, either “slave, mother or lover, and not a woman with all her womanly-human qualities” (56). Voronskii associated Pil’niak’s physiological, naturalistic worldview with the writer’s positive interpretation of the Revolution as returning Russia to an animalistic, prehistoric condition, to its original Slavic identity, in which European bourgeois culture and mechanization would be eliminated along with urban centers while life continued in agricultural harmony with nature (58-60).

Much of Voronskii’s essay was devoted to stylistic elements in Pil’niak’s work, some of which he praised while deploring others. He recognized Pil’niak’s links with literary forbears Remizov, Belyi, Chekhov and Gor’kii. Citing Pil’niak’s oft-quoted claim that “[w]ords, for me, are like coins to a numismatist,” he lauded Pil’niak’s extreme economy of expression and his ability to use few (usually) well-chosen words to squeeze “a whole system of images and conceptions . . . into each sentence” (74). Voronskii further defined Pil’niak’s basic writing method --- his unique choice of words and untraditional narrative construction --- thus: “to seek the primeval, the innocent, that which is not besmirched by today” (74), articulating a value system I would apply to Pil’niak’s larger worldview and values as well. However, the critic saw drawbacks to Pil’niak’s extreme linguistic eclecticism and grammatical and narrative iconoclasm, which were, to Voronskii’s view, often overdone, making the writer seem “too original and innovative” (74). Like so many after him, Voronskii criticized Pil’niak’s works as fragmented and lacking unity, unconventionally constructed at word, sentence, and

paragraph level, resulting in chaotic construction of the entire work. He characterized Pil'niak's works as plotless ("bez fabuly"); in his view, they were actually prose poems which lacked any kind of real narrative development or expression. Even his extravagant praise of Golyi god included the assertion that the work was not, technically speaking, a novel, since it lacked unity of construction, plot, and other generally accepted qualities of the genre (65).

Although Voronskii did focus largely on the literary qualities of Pil'niak's work, other parts of his essay made it clear that even in 1922, a writer's attitude toward the Revolution as expressed in his works was already a criterion for judging the quality of literary texts. Naming Pil'niak as the primary "chronicler ["bytopisatel'"] of the Revolution" (65) and naming Golyi god the writer's "best and undoubtedly most significant work" yet published, he praised Pil'niak's portrayal of nation and society turned on end in Golyi god (65), the iconic correspondence of the plotless, chaotic, fragmented form with the revolutionary experience, the positive depiction of energetic young Bolsheviks in the novel (as well as in the short story, "Metel'"⁴⁴ (1922)) and other elements of the work. However, he made the point earlier in the essay that "[f]or now, we must simply note that the Russian Revolution emerges favorably in his works," asserting that in the Revolution "is found the sole salvation for the modern writer." Without this revolutionary focus, he went on, "sorrow, mysticism, despondency, slush and weak-willed romanticism" (56) will prevail in literature. These comments gave warning that (a) there were problems with Pil'niak's perception and portrayal of the epoch and (b) perhaps Pil'niak's other themes should be repudiated or abandoned. Voronskii devoted two entire sections of his essay to the Revolution itself and to stylistic and thematic

⁴⁴ "The Snowstorm" or "The Blizzard"

interpretations of the Revolution as portrayed in Golyi god, rebutting various views expressed by Pil'niak in the work. He provided an indulgent interpretation of the perceptible Slavophile elements in the novel, stating that they did not represent a real desire on Pil'niak's part to return to pre-Petrine Russia, since, clearly, Rus' of that era was by now part of the inaccessible past. Pil'niak's apparent yearning for that time instead indicated an expression of nationalism and a longing for a new but genuine "Rus' of the worker and muzhik" (64). In his "dialogue" with Pil'niak's vision of the Revolution, he asserted that, rather than a return to nature and a repudiation of mechanization as suggested in the novel, the Revolution truly signified "[t]he forward movement of the human spirit [which] is measured by the power of man over nature" (62). He explained Pil'niak's apparent opposition or at least ambivalence toward the forward-looking, technological aspects of the Revolution as manifestations of "an inner conflict and disharmony in the artist himself, in his inner core" (72), one that needed to be resolved if Pil'niak was to realize his great gifts. Voronskii closed with a challenge to Soviet writers, and to this writer in particular, to replace their current thematic foci with a new concentration on the Revolution: "[W]e must align ourselves completely with those who can be sensed throughout the new Rus'. (Out with the pre-Petrine Rus', out with the romanticism of sex, out with the excesses of naturalism, etc.) [. . .] Why? [. . .] Because Pilniak has real talent, and because talent and the revolution are now inseparable. And even more so because today a truly great artist can only be a prophet-artist, artist-leader and artist-tribune" (76).

This is the first --- and perhaps most indulgent and tactful --- draft of the picture of Pil'niak, his works, and the criteria for their evaluation which would emerge in Soviet

criticism over the next fifteen years. To be noted are Voronskii's perceptions and criticisms of Pil'niak's "physiological" framework; his emphasis on potentially "pathological" attitudes concerning sexuality and love; his concerns about Pil'niak's ideological stance with respect to the Revolution, which results in an assessment of Pil'niak the man and writer as internally conflicted; his association of Pil'niak with Slavophilism; and his recommendation that the writer abandon his themes of primitivism, sex and romance, as well as his "naturalism" (e.g., biological forces affecting human behavior, focus on sexually explicit scenes).

Lev Trotskii was not a professional literary critic, of course, but a political figure whose "guidance" of literature was symptomatic of the times and the newly mandatory role of ideology as the paramount concern of art. In a 1923 article devoted to Pil'niak,⁴⁵ Trotskii praised Pil'niak's sharp eye, good ear, and ability to convey the chaos of the Revolutionary period. However, his assessment was generally negative and perhaps even threatening, which carries some irony in view of Pil'niak's ultimate arrest for imputed Trotskiite associations. Trotskii commented on several of Pil'niak's "revolutionary works" between 1920 and 1922. Pil'niak's attitude toward the Revolution was his issue. As did Voronskii, he criticized Pil'niak's apparent ambivalence toward the Revolution; he found too many dichotomies and oppositions in Pil'niak's works and sought the author's commitment to a clear stance. He found that the works had two basic axes: some rotated around the invisible axis of Revolution, the others around the all too visible axis of the author's subjectivity (10) (and his superfluous prophetic predictions). Fragmentation was a problem too; great eras such as the Renaissance or Reformation

⁴⁵ L. Trotsky on B. Pilnyak (Letchworth, Herts, England: Prideaux Press, 1979).

were (appropriately) viewed as integral wholes, and presentation of the revolutionary era in the form of disparate fragments demeaned its significance and implied its transient nature (9). With respect to content, Trotskii condemned Pil'niak's valorization of the past as opposed to the forward movement of the Revolution, as well as the writer's (peripheral) provincial settings and characters which, Trotskii advised, should be replaced by urban revolutionary centers such as Petrograd and by party activists. Pil'niak was "not an artist of the revolution," but a "fellow-traveler" (14), an uncommitted observer on the sidelines with no real investment in the new regime. Not only that, but Pil'niak was a realist in romantic's clothing, shaking in fear at what the Revolution would ultimately mean. Even artistically, Pil'niak merely emulated Belyi, modeling his work on Belyi's worst aspects, at that (24). Trotskii closed with the warning that talent might not be enough to ensure Pil'niak's success. Again, focus was on the political attitude and the man himself, in a much less nuanced and sympathetic way than in Voronskii's review.

The formalist Viktor Shklovskii weighed in a little later, in 1925.⁴⁶ He too was primarily negative. As one might expect, his concerns were primarily stylistic. Although Pil'niak's works were a veritable treasure-trove of Shklovskii's favored devices (*ostranenie*, repetition, delay, baring the device, etc.) somehow Pil'niak was not using them correctly; this meant, according to Shklovskii, that his modernism was only superficial. Even here Pil'niak's orientation toward the past was a problem, this time in a literary sense; literature should be about making things seem new, and Pil'niak's use of literary images from previous (Symbolist) works merely repeated the past and made his art static. His use of literary stereotypes was a result, ultimately, of Pil'niak's lack of

⁴⁶ "O Pil'niake," *LEF* 3 (1925): 126-36. See Mary A. Nicholas for an interesting deconstruction of Shklovskii's evaluation of Pil'niak. "Formalist Theory Revisited: On Shklovskij 'On Pil'niak,'" *SEEJ* 36.1 (1992): 68-83.

originality and even perhaps laziness. Shklovskii joined the chorus of critics bemoaning the random fragmentation of Pil'niak's works and the struggle to find some sort of unifying element. To Shklovskii, Pil'niak's works were just random collections of fragments which could be disassembled and reassembled at will, and the reader's necessary effort at finding the relationships between the fragments quite literally led to headaches. Although Shklovskii himself saw the writer's role as creating unity and challenging the reader to find and interpret it, the types of fragments Pil'niak created and the way he connected them was not acceptable to the critic. He did praise what he considered Pil'niak's attempt to present a new form that replaced plot (*siuzhet*) as the organizing principle, but, overall, Shklovskii, too, was critical of Pil'niak, primarily on the grounds of artistic form.

In 1928 two somewhat complementary articles about Pil'niak were published in a series called Mastera sovremennoi literatury.⁴⁷ One focused on Pil'niak's role in Soviet literary history, the other more on his place in literary-ideological history. The first of these, "Mesto Pil'niaka,"⁴⁸ had been written by Viktor Gofman the previous year; it was largely critical of Pil'niak. Opening his discussion of Pil'niak's leading role in the "recovery" from the "prose crisis" following the passing of Symbolism as the major trend in narrative fiction in the mid-late 1910s (and after the wartime hiatus in prose publication), he asserted Pil'niak's dominance of the new scene by citing the "Pil'niakovshchina" phenomenon (the many forms of emulation of Pil'niak's extravagant

⁴⁷ Masters of Contemporary Literature. Mastera sovremennoi literatury. Boris Pil'niak: Stat'i i materialy (Letchworth, Herts, England: Prideaux Press, 1977), first published 1928.

⁴⁸ "Pil'niak's Place" 7-44.

ornamental style). He interpreted Pil'niak's function as clearing the literary slate by breaking all literary boundaries (with respect to genre, unity, sentence structure, musicality, orthography, literature vs. non-literature, etc.), thus making way for the new literature which the new social structure would require. Focusing primarily on Pil'niak's ornamental works of 1921-24, chief among them the novels Golyi god and Mashiny i volki, Gofman catalogued Pil'niak's perceived stylistic flaws, not only mentioning compositional habits that could use correction as had Voronskii before him, but also depicting them as Pil'niak's crafty attempts to hide his own lack of talent and his work's lack of substance behind the smoke and mirrors, sound and fury of ornamental devices. Gofman's major concern was the plotlessness and lack of narrative movement in Pil'niak's prose of the early 1920s. He argued that by using ornamental devices to create apparent unity of time and place, apparent plot movement, and apparent unity of narrative voice, Pil'niak had produced only apparent literature, and what's more, he did it deliberately to confuse critics who were trying to grasp the meaning of his works and to bedazzle readers into thinking there was artistry and substance when in fact there was none (moving here to criticism of the man as well as the work). Like Voronskii, he criticized Pil'niak's fragmented presentation, tendency toward vignette rather than narrative, exaggerated linguistic play and literary iconoclasm. He added to the list of flaws Pil'niak's tendency to reuse texts, moving them from one work to another and even "plagiarizing" (as opposed to quoting) from others,⁴⁹ and his use of deliberate obfuscation, the creation of literary puzzles and riddles and use of other devices to make his texts unduly "difficult."

⁴⁹ For example, an unattributed passage from Bunin's "The Gentleman from San Francisco" appears in "Treti'ia stolitsa."

Gofman identified the beginning of a new literary period and style as the 1920s moved into their second half, one which made ornamentalism and its concomitant plotless narration and stick-figure characterization passé (or ideologically undesirable in a land of mass culture). He commended Pil'niak for changing with the times by clarifying and simplifying his narrative style, especially in the move to writing travel sketches (Gofman did not suggest that Pil'niak produce other forms of traditional fiction!). However, he made no serious effort to critique the twenty-five or so items published by Pil'niak after the end of the ornamental phase.

In Gofman's observations, there are several items of special significance for the reception of Pil'niak's works. One is his recognition of the autobiographical base of Pil'niak's writings --- which the critic disparaged, since it did not engender the expected unity in Pil'niak's authorial voice (28). Unlike Voronskii, Gofman did not specify the themes in Pil'niak's work, but his perception of Pil'niak's structure (although he denied that Pil'niak had a structure!) is intriguing. He denigrates Pil'niak as "the most rationalistic writer of our time (of the type of Merezhkovskii or Leonid Andreev)."⁵⁰ As a result of this rationalism, according to Gofman, "[Pil'niak's] themes (few as they are) live above/outside his literary works, which serve as particular illustrations" (of the themes) (21). This is a very accurate description of Pil'niak's overall literary structural tendencies, although his individual works or segments are really provocative explorations rather than explicit, didactic "illustrations"; however, Gofman found this structure

⁵⁰ Undoubtedly he had in mind Pil'niak's tendency toward schematic and analytical presentations such as binary and tertiary paradigms, allegories, and the like. "Pil'niak --- samyi ratsionalisticheskii pisatel' nashogo vremeni (v rode Merezhkovskogo ili Leonida Andreeva). Pri ego pisatel'skom metode eto privodit k tomu, chto temy ego (ikh nemnogo) zhivut *nad* proizvedeniiami, kotorye sluzhat chastnymi illiustratsiiami." (Gofman's emphasis)

inappropriate to true “literature” and characteristic of a sort of literary elitism, the practice of creating works for an audience of other writers rather than the mass readership. In this article, Gofman was (surprisingly) reticent on Pil’niak’s political ideology and attitude toward the Revolution, except that he did deprecate Pil’niak’s reliance on man’s “base nature” in the images surrounding the Revolution, citing the Mar-Junction train scene⁵¹ in Golyi god in which man becomes beast. He echoed Voronskii’s criticism of Pil’niak’s naturalistic tendencies, asserting that Pil’niak’s entire “revolutionary theme is orchestrated in a ‘physiological’ style (‘smells of sexual organs’)” (37-38).

In tandem with Gofman’s article, G. Gorbachev published “Tvorcheskie puti Borisa Pil’niaka.”⁵² He too was critical of Pil’niak, although forced, as was Gofman, to acknowledge the writer as the major force of early 1920s Soviet literature, “the most talented and characteristic representative of plotless ‘ornamental’ prose” (49). Like Gofman, Gorbachev opened with a focus on the literary crisis of the revolutionary years which led to the ornamentalist phenomenon ultimately personified as “Pil’niakovshchina,” a term defined here by Gorbachev as “the going term for a number of ‘formal’ and distinctive ideological features of literary phenomena,” more specifically “plotlessness” (49). Unlike Gofman’s, however, Gorbachev’s association of Pil’niak with ornamentalism explicitly tied the writer with the “fellow travelers” (“poputchiki”), whom Gorbachev defines as those “non-proletarian writers” with “incoherent worldviews” who were “receptive” to the Revolution but were simultaneously “portraying” and “distorting”

⁵¹ This segment was also published separately in 1921 as “Poezd No. 57, smeshannyi” (“Train No. 57, Mixed”).

⁵² “The Career of Boris Pil’niak,” Mastera 45-74.

the Revolution in artistic creation, an ideological condition also included in the term “Pil’niakovshchina” (49).⁵³ Like Gofman, Gorbachev was critical of Pil’niak’s plotlessness, asserting that up through Mashiny i volki there was not a single “story” (“fabula”) in Pil’niak’s works (49). He went on to list the “ornamental” devices Pil’niak inherited from Belyi, then the (even more annoying) ones Pil’niak himself had invented, such as the unexpected transitions between time and place which resulted in a surreal sense of disorientation or delirium (52) and other forms of deliberate obfuscation also condemned by Gofman. However, Gorbachev did not dwell on Pil’niak’s flaws of the ornamental period, but moved on to look at the writer’s transition, literary and ideological, to a new phase. He noted, as did Gofman, Pil’niak’s accommodation to the new, more straightforward prose form of the mid-1920s, again encouraging the travelogue (rather than creative fiction), which would accommodate Pil’niak’s lyricism and his tendency to mix truth and fiction (57). Categorizing them according to compositional structure, Gorbachev critiqued approximately twenty-five works Pil’niak had published since Mashiny i volki, the novel which was traditionally considered his last heavily ornamental work. But of all those works, he managed to find only one that contained satisfactory plot development ---“Zhuliki” (1925), which he commended for its gradual unfolding of action, well motivated digressions, and its “genuinely unexpected ending which illuminates the opening moments of the story in a new way” (57).⁵⁴ Having found Pil’niak’s new attempts at prose with more directed narrative unsatisfactory, the

⁵³ “[Poputchnik,] v tom smysle, kakoi imelo eto slovo v te gody, kogda ono oznachalo pisatelei neproletarskikh, s putannym mirovozzreniem, ‘prinimavshikh,’ ‘izobrazhavshikh’ i odnovremenno iskazhavshikh revoliutsiiu v khudozhestvennom tvorchestve.”

⁵⁴ This “enlightening ending,” I would say, is very characteristic of Pil’niak’s best short works and exists effectively in at least a few of the particular group of stories Gorbachev dismissed so readily here, such as “Pookskii rasskaz.”

critic itemized still more flaws in a catalogue of all the undesirable ornamental qualities which Pil'niak had not managed to purge from his new efforts: wordplay, riddles and puzzles, lists, an overabundance of different lexicons, excessive emotional language, emphasis on the tawdry and ugly, and so forth.

From literary style Gorbachev turned to ideology, and his lecture was aimed not only at Pil'niak but at all the fellow-travelers of his ilk as well. Pil'niak's view of the Revolution had made a drastic reversal, from valorization of old, primitive, Slavic Rus' and joyous anticipation of its return, to a new worship of machine technology ("the cult of the machine") which he had previously rejected. Gorbachev associated this sea change with the fellow-travelers as a group. He compared Pil'niak's portrayals of the Revolution and its effects on Russian life in the two novels, Golyi god and Mashiny i volki, especially with respect to the change from peasant- and nature-worship to worship of the machine as a force liberating the human soul. Like Gofman, Gorbachev spoke insinuatingly of Pil'niak's "cleverness." Pil'niak was in fact just a provincial intellectual, a *petit bourgeois*, hiding behind the peasant's joy at the coming of the Revolution but really just waiting for it to pass. The writer's new enthusiasm for technology, evidenced as early as "Povestiakh o chernom khlebe,"⁵⁵ was just "publitsistika"⁵⁶ (66). Pil'niak did not grasp the true impact of the Revolution, whose most fundamental aspect was social class restructuring. Instead of opposing city to country in Golyi god, and man as enslaved by labor to man liberated from it in Mashiny i volki, Pil'niak should have been opposing aristocrats and proletarians, Communists and non-Communists, various class factions

⁵⁵ Using this term, Gorbachev probably had in mind two works, both published in 1923: "Povest' o chernom khlebe" ("Story about Black Bread") and "Chernyi khleb" ("Black Bread").

⁵⁶ "advertising," "public relations messages"

within the overall society. Pil'niak's inability to oppose differing segments of the same society --- his inability to understand the essential value of the Revolution as class-related --- boiled down to Pil'niak's (incorrect and inconsequential) view that all men were ultimately brothers (73). To Gorbachev's dismay, he found neither positively portrayed workers, nor valorization of a changed class structure, in either of the two novels he compared. Even in his travel stories such as "Rossiia v polete"⁵⁷ (1926), about people in remote northern regions, Pil'niak valorized the wrong things about the post-revolutionary nation: unmoved by the crucial issues of class structure (of the governing regime, of the economy, and of society), Pil'niak erroneously chose to glorify "the growth of culture and literacy, technology, roads," "Europeanization," and "the strengthening of Russia" (70).

Gorbachev was also very critical of what he saw as the dominant underlying emotional content and direction --- rather than the guidance of logic and reason --- of Pil'niak's work. Pil'niak, he said, was ultimately a lyric poet who used the emotional resonance that pervaded all his work to try and instill some inappropriate idea, not necessarily a clearly defined or consistent one, in the reader (60-61). This was another sign of his crafty, furtive nature, as was his attempt, via pseudo-philosophical themes and digressions, to convince readers that profound thoughts were being expressed and that deep reflection on their part was required (72). In fact, the critic asserted, Pil'niak excelled at clearly articulating trivial thoughts on insignificant themes irrelevant to the times, such as the now obsolete ways of life of peasants or Englishmen, the sexual passion of women in feverish delirium, the relative difficulty levels of "passing through

⁵⁷ "Russia in Flight"

death” oneself and killing another, and the like, in an attempt to give them the status of philosophical pronouncements (71-2).

Gorbachev’s article was one of the preludes to the persecution of fellow-travelers as it would crystallize in the campaign against Pil’niak and Zamiatin in 1929.

The publication of “Nizhegorodskii otkos” in early 1928 evoked almost rabid responses to its theme of incest and mention of Nietzschean ideas of the superiority of the outstanding individual over the masses; here was a new expression of a “pathological form of love” so prevalent in the writer, as noted earlier by Voronskii. V. Bliumenfel’d charged that Pil’niak’s “evolution” was taking a very wrong direction:

“The Nizhnii Novgorod Slope” tells about Artsybashevian days and high school students perishing under the burden of “sexual problems.” Nietzsche and a high school student going out on a robbery for the sake of “supermanhood,” Nietzsche and --- the inexpressible Pil’niakovian reflections about the fact that “the greatest human happiness is sometimes an abomination, abomination is sometimes happiness, and each person, like the epochs, drinks his cup of life his own way” --- talentless “cosmic” banality in all its trashy nakedness also sometimes ends up on the pages of our thick journal.⁵⁸

L. Averbakh, chairman of RAPP, complained that Pil’niak probably thought the story “daring” but wondered how such a “worthy, cultured mother, with an even worthier, fine, high-strung, handsome young man, who resembles Blok himself, for a son” could end up associated with incest and an Oedipus complex. That Pil’niak connected the incest image with that of the Proletarian Revolution enraged Averbakh further --- such a “tasteless

⁵⁸ This quote opens with “Neladnuiu evoliutsiiu sovershaet B. Pil’niak.” [“Otrazhenie literatury v zhurnalakh,”] *Zhizn’ iskusstva*, 14 (1928): 5, cited in K. B. Andronikashvili-Pil’niak, “Iz tvorcheskoi istorii romana ‘Solianoi ambar,’” *Boris Pil’niak: Opyt segodniashnego prochtenia* (Moskva: Nasledie, 1995) 11-32. 23 and n. 12.

attempt” to associate these images “smells of necrophilia or digging up graves, something even more repulsive in art than in reality.”⁵⁹

Marxist B. Brainina’s 1933 review⁶⁰ of a new (1932) anthology⁶¹ of Pil’niak’s works is especially interesting because of her attempt to articulate a coherent Pil’niakian “philosophy” based on that particular group of stories, which had been initially published at various times over twelve years (1919-1930). Unlike Gorbachev, she completely ignored the change in Pil’niak’s ideas over that period and interpreted the works as though they had been written virtually concurrently. Some of her comments, typical of Marxist critics, are presented below.

She damned the writer with faint praise in her opening comment on Pil’niak’s skill at depicting the intelligentsia --- that is, the “quasi-intelligentsiia,” and *bourgeois* social elements, very backward peasants, and other negative personage categories (16). She then moved to criticism of his insufficiently developed worldview, his “inability to rise above” the psychology of his characters, and his excessive emphasis on his own philosophy (16). Like earlier reviewers, she objected to the tawdry elements in his works (specifically the mention of child-molesters), his emphasis on the “elemental, biological, and semi-pathological,” and his assertion of biology as the determinant of human behavior (16).

⁵⁹ “Literaturnyi fel’eton,” Na literaturnom postu, 13 (1929): 27, 30-31, cited in K.B. Andronikashvili-Pil’niak, “Iz tvorcheskoi istorii” 23 and n. 13.

⁶⁰ “‘Filosofia’ Borisa Pil’niaka,” Khudozhestvennaia literatura 6 (1933): 16-19.

⁶¹ Rasskazy (Moskva: Federatsiia, 1932).

Brainina turned first to the short story “Bez nazvan’ia”⁶² (first pub. 1926), in which the mutual love of an engaged couple (unexpectedly) dies after they execute their orders to kill an anti-revolutionary agent. Brainina objected to Pil’niak’s valorization of “laws of nature” impacting the couple’s behavior and his concern about the “death of love” that occurred because their taking of a life was equivalent to their breaking of a law of nature (16). To Marxist Brainina, a killing done in defense of the Party was more than justified and had nothing to do with love. Pil’niak’s concern about the death of love and his view that “laws of nature” caused that death showed his lack of appropriate revolutionary values as well as his obsession about nature’s dominance.

She then discussed “Metel’,” which had first been published a decade earlier, in 1922. This story, one of whose subplots centers on an old deacon’s question of how men first came to milk cows, drew her ire because it showed Pil’niak’s orientation toward the past rather than the future. His snowstorm image of the Revolution, a blizzard which left everything in “absolute quiet,” further demonstrated that what he sought was not (revolutionary) change and progress but primeval inertness; he was expressing a “philosophy of hopelessness” and “death” (17). Pil’niak’s vision of history as the progression of births, weddings and deaths, a change only measured in generations, denied the true progress which involved class struggles, war, and advancements that could be registered chronologically, again showed his deficient concept of history. She did not consider, in her discussion of the “real” changes taking place in chronological history, that perhaps, as even Gorbachev had pointed out, Pil’niak’s perception of the Revolution and its meaning had changed since 1922. Brainina also criticized “Staryi dom,” originally published in 1926, for depicting the (inappropriately) sentimental

⁶² “Without a Title,” also published as “Sil’nee liubvi” (“Stronger than Love”).

attachment of a good Komsomolka to her old family home, where generations of her family had grown up. To Brainina this represented an unnatural attachment, not to be experienced by a Communist, to family and clan, an attachment that again demonstrated Pil'niak's emphasis on biological connection. Brainina saved her heaviest ammunition for the pièce de resistance, "Mat' syra-zemlia"⁶³ (1925). In this story, Brainina saw further evidence of Pil'niak's belief in nature's and biology's ultimate dominance over human will and reason; she attributed the worldview of the remote, backward forest peasants to Pil'niak himself. Among her many criticisms of this tale was her objection to Pil'niak's depiction of a good Communist woman, Arina, who is without explanation "unnaturally" drawn to a "wolf cub" which she has taken in as a pet but which remains hostile to her despite her maternal treatment of it (19). In Brainina's view, the attack by this animal and Arina's angry counter-attack could not possibly motivate "tears and loneliness" in a good, rational Communist woman. Furthermore, in this story the primitive, lawless peasants resist conversion to Communism; the good Communists who are there to implement Socialist governance and guard the state's forests are ultimately driven insane or killed, leading Brainina to conclude that Pil'niak, sympathetic as he was toward the peasants as representatives of Mother Earth, in fact was predicting and hoping for the defeat of Communism (19). Brainina's review was followed by a printed (editorial?) paragraph claiming that works in Pil'niak's anthology had been printed without distortion, along with the "philosophy" that pervaded his works. The paragraph invited the reader to ask to what degree the writer had liberated himself from his "biologism and anti-historicism, from his hopeless 'theory' 'of absolute peacefulness,' [. . .] and other 'hypotheses of eternity'" (19).

⁶³ "Damp Mother Earth"

The 1935 publication of “Rozhdenie cheloveka,” concerning the transformation caused by pregnancy and childbirth in an unmarried Soviet prosecutor, was the final straw, literarily speaking. The fact that Pil’niak then applied that title to an entire anthology filled with his previously published stories about birth, love, mating, reproduction, death and universal life experiences rather than themes consistent with Socialist ideology convinced many that he was incorrigible. V. Goffenshefer mocked the entire idea of a woman in the new society being completely transformed by new feelings based on sexuality and motherhood. He charged Pil’niak with blighting the image of Soviet women around the world with his image of a Soviet prosecutor with her idiotic ravings about the maternal experience.⁶⁴ Iu. Dobranov’s commentary was typical, referring to Pil’niak’s “reassertion of the primacy of biology and the glorification of the voice of ‘sperm and blood’”⁶⁵ --- a rather bizarre interpretation of a story in which a non-biological father lovingly adopts another man’s (rejected) infant son. Other critics published entire articles devoted to condemnation of the story.

We can conclude that mainline Soviet criticism in Pil’niak’s lifetime focused on fault-finding: of his ornamental form (in part because it made reading difficult for proletarian comrades) and the concomitant haziness of idea; of his ambiguity at all levels, from his complex prose from which it seemed so hard to derive a logical set of events or an “idea” or “theme,” to his ideological stance vis-à-vis the Revolution, technology, and the new Soviet society; of his persistence in writing about (recognizable) themes of nature, love, individual life events, past history, and Slavophilism; of his failure to

⁶⁴ “Ot instinktov ‘feodal’nykh’ k instinktam sobach’im,” *Literaturnyi kritik* 3 (1935): 122-129.

⁶⁵ “Svidetel’stvo o bednosti,” *Kniga i proletarskaia revoliutsiia* 1 (1936): 102-3. Cited as translated by Browning, *Boris Pilniak: Scythian at a Typewriter* (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1985) 66 and 205, n. 54.

recognize and glorify the class struggle and the historical progress it was engendering; of his failure to show commitment to the Party and Communist cause. With respect to Pil'niak's ornamental form and the attitudes behind it, while in fact the criticism was directed at the entire groups he had come to represent (fellow-travelers, Serapion Brothers, etc.), it was highly personalized and often approached denunciation. Individual critics had their own specific areas of concern, such as the lyricism and emotional communication to the reader so condemned by Gorbachev. In this time and place, all was judged by the measure of ideological support for the party-line, hence there was no tolerance for ambiguity, polysemy, aesthetics for its own sake, or even "abstract" themes, i.e., those which were deemed to be uninteresting to the Proletariat. No true examination of Pil'niak's nature-theme or "biological" thematics took place during this time because that entire topic was judged unworthy of the attention of critics serving the Proletariat.

Western Criticism

Western critics of course have examined many of the same elements of Pil'niak's writings (form, unity, ambiguity, basic themes, views of the Revolution, etc.) as did the Soviet commentators, but generally (not exclusively) in a more positive light, finding his ornamentalism creative and provocative and the search for unity and meaning more stimulating than frustrating. Over time, however, a tendency has emerged to think of Pil'niak only within the frameworks of ornamentalism, primitivism, biologism, and the tawdry "pathological" elements mentioned above, those elements which were expressed in the relatively brief period of his ornamental and revolutionary prose (1920-24). While several reviewers have mentioned the change in his style and content in the mid 1920s, they have done little to examine his post-1925 works, other than the ones which were

associated with his political difficulties (“Luna,” and “Krasnoe derevo”; and Volga, which has until recently usually been subjected to very superficial interpretations). Later works, if mentioned at all, have usually been dismissed for one reason or another --- as reportage rather than fiction, as ideologically orthodox, and so on. A small canon of Pil’niak’s works, primarily novels and novellas of the ornamental phase and works arousing controversy, has been studied repeatedly, but with the exception of highly focused analyses, little has been done to examine the evolution of his *oeuvre* with respect to his stylistics, themes, or views. This is particularly true in regard to his shorter works, which have been virtually ignored.

Perhaps the earliest serious Western criticism of Pil’niak is represented by D. S. Mirskii, who lived in England and actually met Pil’niak on his 1923 visit. Mirskii wrote two introductory articles for a small volume of translations of Pil’niak’s pre-revolutionary works⁶⁶ (since the ornamental ones were “practically untranslatable” (“Pilniak,” xxiii)) in 1924 and another for the Alec Brown translation of Golyi god in 1928.⁶⁷ Mirskii’s goal was to educate the English reader about the new trends in Russian literature since Chekhov. He described the “crisis in prose” mentioned by Gofman and Gorbachev and explained the development of essentially plotless, ornamental prose in which form was far more important than content as a natural outgrowth of the (primarily Symbolist) prose influence before 1917 and the experimental poetry that continued to be published during the 1918-1921 hiatus in prose production. His description of this new

⁶⁶ “Russian Fiction Since Chekhov” and “Boris Pilniak,” introductions to Boris Pilniak, Tales of the Wilderness, trans. F. O’Dempsey (New York: 1925). Reprinted by Hyperion Press (Westfield, CT., 1973) vii-xxiii.

⁶⁷ “The Post-Revolutionary Russian Novel,” introduction to Boris Pilnyak, The Naked Year, trans. Alec Brown (New York: Payton and Clarke, 1928), unpaginated.

prose was focused on the Leningrad Serapion group whose characteristic indirect narration tended to produce novels that were obscure on first reading, and were also characterized by eclectic use of words and lexicons, “coarse and crude” descriptions, a fascination with the “elemental” nature of the Revolution and a totally aesthetic portrayal of it, a portrayal totally devoid of substantive ideas (“Since Chekhov,” xviii). While Mirskii, who was by then developing Soviet sympathies, was quite negative on these (and other) stylistic aspects and as hungry as the Soviet critics for straightforward narration, plot, compositional unity, and traditional organizing techniques, his criticism was explicitly directed at an entire literary school, of which he (again explicitly) named Pil’niak’s prose as the most representative; therefore Mirskii’s evaluation lacked any tone of personal or professional attack on a single author. The little book of translations included only a small excerpt from “Tret’ia stolitsa” (1923) in order to show its “untranslatable” quality; the other (coherent, translatable) works included pre-revolutionary nature stories, a few early revolutionary tales (some as published separately before inclusion in Golyi god), and those few directly narrated ones (e.g., “Prostye rasskazy,”⁶⁸ 1921) that showed “Soviet daily life” --- since, in Mirskii’s view, it was the first portrayals of Soviet *byt* that actually drew attention to Pil’niak (“Pilniak,” xxii-xxiii). With respect to Golyi god, he pointed out its lack of plot and narrative, its structure as a succession of vignettes presented from different viewpoints, and its dynamic form which corresponded to the impression of life during the Revolution. He categorized the fellow-travelers, Pil’niak among them, as writers who portrayed the Revolution as an external force operating on individuals and society rather than an event in which the characters

⁶⁸ “Simple Stories”

actively participated. Mirskii's comments about post-Symbolist trends indicated his disappointment with what he saw as a total lack of "political or ethical judgment or choice" in Golyi god.⁶⁹ While Mirskii was as negative on the forms and obscurities and lack of "content" in the ornamental period as were the Soviet critics, his targets were entire groups within a "literary" movement (Serapions, fellow-travelers), with Pil'niak merely as an example. Reading Mirskii's sometimes scathing comments, subjective as they are, conveys a much greater sense of evaluative objectivity with respect to literary history than do almost identical concerns as expressed by Gofman and Gorbachev.

If Soviet literary criticism of Pil'niak was distorted by a focus on ideological correctness, criticism in the West has been tainted by an inordinate emphasis on perceived moral weakness. In 1934, after Pil'niak's visit to the U. S., Max Eastman set a tone of moral condemnation which haunts American criticism of Pil'niak to this day. Eastman's "The Humiliation of Boris Pilnyak,"⁷⁰ in which he characterized Pil'niak as having prostituted his allegiance to truth (as professed by Pil'niak in "Pisateli ob iskusstve i o sebe"⁷¹) through multiple recantations following the "Luna" attacks in 1926 and the 1929 campaign against Zamiatin and Pil'niak, ostensibly for publication of their works abroad. Eastman made it quite clear that these attacks were totally spurious and designed to force literature to serve Communist ideology; however, he portrayed Pil'niak as self-serving, one who compromised his authorial honesty by making multiple abject public recantations, by re-writing "Krasnoe derevo" into Volga vpadaet v Kaspiiskoe

⁶⁹ Introduction to Golyi god; unpaginated.

⁷⁰ Artists in Uniform: A Study of Literature and Bureaucratism (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1934) 104-125.

⁷¹ "Writers about Art and Themselves." "Pisateli --- o sebe," Novaia russkaia kniga 2 (Feb 1922) 42-43.

more in praise of the new five-year plans, and by presenting a glowing account of Communism's progress in Tadzhikistan (Sed'maia sovetskaia (1930)), all in order to remain, as others had referred to him, "one of the richest men in the Soviet Union" (104, 124), to continue his world travels, to visit and condemn America,⁷² and the like. Eastman concluded: "Probably no work of art in the world's history was ever completed in more direct violation of the artist's conscience, or with more unadulterated motive of self-preservation than Pilnyak's The Volga Falls to the Caspian Sea" (125). Various aspects of Eastman's story have been by now refuted,⁷³ and it is to be hoped that these clarifications will serve to eliminate this extraneous element of "literary" criticism of Pil'niak.

Although some of Pil'niak's works continued to be published in the West after his arrest, little criticism appeared until the early 1960s, when Evelyn Bristol⁷⁴ and Peter Wilson⁷⁵ published summary articles on Pil'niak. The 1970s and 1980s were rich with studies of Pil'niak, either focusing on a specific period or historical trend, or summarizing individual artistic achievement in a number of "histories of Soviet literature" and similar studies written or assembled by Helen Muchnic,⁷⁶ Gleb Struve,⁷⁷

⁷² O'Kei: Amerikanskii roman, written and first published 1931.

⁷³ See for example Kenneth N. Brostrom, The Novels of Boris Pil'njak as Allegory, Diss. U Michigan, 1973 (Ann Arbor: UMI, 2007), 269-274; Browning, Scythian, 47-49; Brian D. Harvey, "Whose Artists in Uniform? Boris Pil'njak and American Writers in the Early 1930s" Russian, Croatian and Serbian, Czech and Slovak, Polish Literature 62.3 (2007): 293-322.

⁷⁴ "Boris Pil'nyak," Slavonic and East European Review 41 (1963): 494-612.

⁷⁵ "Boris Pilnyak," Survey: A Journal of Soviet and East European Studies 46 (1963): 134-42.

⁷⁶ Russian Writers: Notes and Essays (NY: Random House, 1971).

⁷⁷ Russian Literature Under Lenin and Stalin: 1917-1953 (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1971).

Johannes Holthusen,⁷⁸ Max Hayward,⁷⁹ John Garrard,⁸⁰ Edward J. Brown,⁸¹ and others. usually examining Pil'niak in some larger context. While these studies expressed positive and negative evaluations, there was no tendency to judge Pil'niak on ideological grounds. I will summarize the views of a few of these scholars.

Evelyn Bristol's article was generally positive and extremely comprehensive. She traced the evolution of Pil'niak's genres, themes, styles, construction techniques, etc., throughout the course of his career, primarily in the context of his modernistic traits and their gradual disappearance. She focused on the texts rather than on the man himself or his political problems and considered specific examples of his novels, novellas, short stories, travelogues, and journalistic articles. In general she was more concerned with content and form rather than with determining the author's political or moral stances. She first examined his themes, which in her view consisted of two basic areas of exploration: some works represent "his reflections on national cultures from Russia to the Far East; other works are studies of the universal, and even biological, aspects of individual life" (495-6), these two thematic directions often being "intertwined" in a given work (496). Bristol recognized, perhaps more clearly than any other commentator before the late 1970s, the ultimate prevalence of the second strain: "Pil'nyak's more universal subjects [. . .] are perhaps more fundamental in his work" (496). She agreed with other commentators on the initial source of these subjects, that they began "from Rousseau-like

⁷⁸ Twentieth Century Russian Literature: A Critical History, trans. Theodore Huebener (NY: Frederick Ungar, 1972).

⁷⁹ Writers in Russia: 1917-1978 (NY: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983).

⁸⁰ The Russian Novel from Pushkin to Pasternak (New Haven: Yale UP, 1983).

⁸¹ Russian Literature Since the Revolution, 1963 (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1982). Originally published 1963 but comprehensively updated in 1982.

defence of the rights of the natural life” (496). She distinguished Pil’niak’s longer from his shorter-form works thematically, identifying the larger works as historico-cultural investigations, the shorter works tending to focus more on individual personal or natural life, while sometimes retaining cultural themes as well. At least in his first decade of writing, “[s]ex and death remained the core of Pil’nyak’s concern, but in the later stories problems of love, marriage, family and death are treated in a more subtle and complex manner, and tainted with degeneracy and corruption” (496). “These themes,” she said, “remained an essential part of Pil’nyak’s art” even during his revolutionary phase (1920-24) (496-7). Bristol acknowledged the complexity of the relationships among his works but did not explore them, her focus being rather to chart his evolution as a writer. Her chronology had three or four groupings: earliest stories (1915-1920), and early 1920s (1920-1925), sometimes referred to together as “the first decade”; then the late 1920s (1925-1929) and the 1930s. She examined many aspects of Pil’niak’s art as she strove to define its evolution; I will present a few of them.

Bristol found the earliest period to be characterized by “post-Tolstoyan” short stories devoted to themes of natural, instinctive life, sex, and death, including love, marriage, and family life (496). These stories were followed by chronicles of the Revolution.⁸² His early narration was straightforward and traditional, and his first decade saw a progression from “story-telling” to “story performing” (505) as the artist experimented with ornamental techniques. It was then that Pil’niak developed and ultimately abandoned the ornamental style which was characterized by puns, wordplay,

⁸² By this she means the small stories and vignettes which were published individually, many to be later included in *Golyi god*: “Arina” (1919), “Imenie Belokonskoe” (“The Belokonskoe Estate”) (1918), and others, along with his larger novelistic works.

repetitions, and other devices to draw attention to the narrative process. Diversity characterized Pil'niak's writings of this period. The cultural aspect of his thematic was initially manifested in his interest in provincial Russian culture (early stories) but came to the fore first in his Slavophile "Peter the Great" stories (1920-23) such as "Rasskaz o Petre"⁸³ (1921) and "Sankt-Piter-Burkh" (1923), and next in his revolutionary works --- including all five of his early novels. Both short and long works in this period included studies of old Russian cultures in the tradition of the nineteenth-century literature of Turgenev and Gogol' but contrasted with new social elements: Communists, anarchists, peasants, etc. His Slavophilism was evident in Golyi god, "Mat' machekha"⁸⁴ (1922) and other works of his first decade. In this ornamental period (1920-1925), language and organization underwent the most change as ornamental qualities developed, and "his narrative manner, the way in which he presented his subjects, was as complex and interesting as his compositional methods" (504, my emphasis). According to Bristol, Pil'niak constructed his works primarily by placing fragments in such a way as to provide organization by comparison and contrast; additional organizing techniques were used in the longer works. Narration was ornamental and plotless. In this period deliberate, obvious lines were drawn between "factual" and "fictional" elements of the works; various "real world" documents alternated with more subjective narration, the author entered the text in first person, etc.

In the late 1920s Pil'niak simplified his narrative style, more so in short stories and reportage than in novels and novellas which retained more complexity. Emphasis on plot increased, especially in the shorter fictional works. The vocabulary and narrative

⁸³ "A Story about Peter"

⁸⁴ Also published as "Tret'ia stolitsa."

style in this period became more neutral, except in “Krasnoe derevo” and Volga, which kept some ornamental traits. Thematically, Bristol considered Mashiny i volki to open this period (usually it is placed in the “ornamental” period because of its stylistics), representing Pil’niak’s first attempt at expressing new ideas. Instead of asserting the Slavophile values of Golyi god, Pil’niak now argued for urban proletarian technology over rural spontaneity; as opposed to Gorbachev, who detected authorial ambivalence, Bristol detected a firm pro-machine stance on the part of the writer in Mashiny i volki. The later 1920s saw Pil’niak avoid revolutionary subjects and focus on foreign cultures and minority groups. Bristol recognized (correctly, in my view) that Volga “relie[d] essentially on a plot concerning love and marriage” and was characterized simultaneously (and secondarily) by “many unamalgamated digressions” concerning the construction project (504). Bristol perceived a decline in the sense of the fun and spirit in Pil’niak’s writing in this period,⁸⁵ although she could still detect it in the “parodies” “Telegrafnyi smotritel’”⁸⁶ (1928, Pushkin) and the opening of “Shtoss v zhizn’”⁸⁷ (1928, Lermontov). Toward the end of this period the deliberately presented boundary between “factual” and “fictional” faded, she observed, citing the story “Mal’chik iz Trall”⁸⁸ (1928) about a couple’s visit to Turkey as one whose factual or fictional base is ambiguous (501). In 1929, Russian provincial culture reclaimed Pil’niak’s interest in “Krasnoe derevo” and its

⁸⁵ It is unfortunate that Bristol did not get to read Soliano i ambar, in which the writing sometimes has almost Pushkinesque effervescence.

⁸⁶ “The Telegraph Master” or “The Telegraphist”

⁸⁷ “A Stake on Life”

⁸⁸ “The Boy from Tralles”

successor, Volga; in both of these, according to Bristol, Pil'niak denigrated the provincial culture.

Bristol detected Pil'niak's abandonment of self-conscious narration and clear demarcation of fact and fiction in the 1930s. She viewed "his refusal to distinguish categorically between fiction and non-fiction" as "proof" that the writer "considered the creative reflection of one mind sufficient to be called art" (511) rather than as some kind of character flaw. She described Sozrevanie plodov (1935), for example, as an indiscriminate combination of reportage, "fictionalised autobiography and genuine fiction" (500), and "Mastera"⁸⁹ (1937) as "fictionalised journalism" (501). Genre-mixing did not stop, though; for example, Pil'niak called reportage- and travel-based O'Kei a novel. The preponderance of journalism and travel literature over fiction caused the virtual disappearance of plot, which retained strength, according to Bristol, only in "Bol'shoi shlem"⁹⁰ (1934) and "Rozhdenie cheloveka." Pil'niak "sovietized" his works, even cultural studies such as O'Kei (USA) and Kamni i korni⁹¹ (1933, Japan), the former as a vilification of America and the latter as a rewriting (and recantation) of his earlier work, Korni iaponskogo solntsa⁹² (1927), which had earned the writer accusations of fascism. In Bristol's view, Pil'niak's presentation of beneficial new aspects of the new Soviet society in his works of this period was only superficial, portraying work and the arts, friendship, and morality as "bound up with the proletarian outlook" (499). This superficiality was epitomized in Sozrevanie plodov, although parts of that work and

⁸⁹ "Masters" or "Master Craftsmen"

⁹⁰ "Grand Slam"

⁹¹ Rocks and Roots

⁹² Roots of the Japanese Sun

others continued to express Pil'niak's family values. According to Bristol, "Rozhdenie cheloveka" was one of Pil'niak's last important pieces and clearly demonstrated his uninterrupted valorization of family life, especially in comparison to revolutionary obligations.

Another early very positive and perceptive study of Pil'niak was done by Robert Maguire⁹³ in the context of the role of the journal Krasnaia nov' in the early Soviet period. His substantive comments on Pil'niak focused primarily on the writer's works as published in the journal until the 1926 "Luna" disaster which made it more difficult, in several ways, for Voronskii to publish Pil'niak.⁹⁴ Maguire discussed Pil'niak's very early nature stories (also cited by Voronskii in his "silhouette" of Pil'niak) and "novels" such as Golyi god, Materialy k romanu⁹⁵ (1924) and Mashiny i volki, which were excerpted, if not published in entirety, by the journal. In the pre-revolutionary animal stories Maguire identified Pil'niak's allegiance to instinct, to the natural, to his assertion that "nature knows best" (101). Maguire defined the writer's basic theme as being expressed in three oppositions ("instinct versus intellect, nature versus civilization, and chaos versus logic") which Pil'niak initially couched as a conflict internal to each man between order-seeking intellect and "formless," "timeless" instinct, where instinct "constitutes the ground of all being" (102-03). In larger works, according to Maguire, Pil'niak externalized these dichotomies, expressing them as East versus West, Slavic soul versus European rationalist, noble savage versus civilized man in a larger Slavophile thematic which

⁹³ "Red Virgin Soil": Soviet Literature in the 1920's, 1968 (Evanston: Northwestern UP, 2000) 101-124.

⁹⁴ Voronskii lost his post at Krasnaia nov' in 1927 for suspected Trotskiite associations; he was arrested in 1937, even before Pil'niak.

⁹⁵ "Materials for a Novel"

Maguire associated with Eurasianism. In Maguire's view, Pil'niak developed this externalization into a cosmic struggle in the timeless realm of myth: Golyi god, for example, showed the struggle of the anarchic agricultural peasant (East, instinct, chaos) versus urban Russia and its ordering tendency (West, intellect, logic). Maguire pursued this opposition as it was cast in Materialy k romanu, interpreting the ornamental stylistics to show that this, "like all Pil'nyak's work, has a unity which is created not merely by the pervasive central myth, but also by a carefully crafted repertoire of formal devices" (118) such as repetition, text fragments from other works, literary allusions, and the like. Maguire, like Bristol, recognized that Pil'niak's work evolved and fell into several categories over time, citing the writer's abandonment of Eurasianism, ornamentalism, and allegorical form in the mid-1920s, when, in Maguire's view, he became literarily irrelevant, an "anachronism" (127).⁹⁶ Maguire lamented this dismissal of Pil'niak as an artist and the lack of attention given to his subsequent "changed" works, since he judged some of Pil'niak's post-1925 writings to be among his best. With respect to Pil'niak's personal moral stances, Maguire sensitively described the "Luna" publication affair with respect to the pressures on both Voronskii and Pil'niak, casting no moral aspersions on either man.

Edward J. Brown in Russian Literature Since the Revolution examined Pil'niak as an "intellectual" writer in the early revolutionary period, "intellectual," that is, in terms of his ties to the intelligentsia and the Russian literary heritage, and to contemporary writers (Serapion Brothers) whom Brown characterized as independent thinkers. This is a particularly interesting article in view of the other critical opinions that have been

⁹⁶ Pil'niak's leadership of the All-Russia Writers' Union in the late 1920s, not to mention the degree of Marxist opposition to him and to his continued publication, would appear to contradict this view of his new total literary insignificance.

expressed. As opposed to Maguire, Brown evaluated Pil'niak negatively in several ways, but especially, it seems to me, as a person. Brown saw Pil'niak's early support of the Revolution as a pretense, even in the writer's (by no means unique) view of the event as a purging storm restoring essential Rus', and he assessed Pil'niak's work as "possibly the most discordant note in Soviet literature" (77). Like so many others, Brown saw in Pil'niak a "biologist"; he claimed that even Pil'niak's autobiographical outline (identifying his four ethnic bloodlines: paternally German and Jewish, maternally Slavic and Mongol) supported his biologically-based philosophy (77), and Brown cited the nationalistic Slavophile philosophy expressed in Golyi god to support this conclusion. He also detected the writer's bias toward genetic categorization in, for example, the Pil'niakian notion of "the need for the nobility to regenerate itself through intermarriage with the lower classes," which Brown characterized as Pil'niak's "insistence on blood and genes" (80).

Pil'niak's style, according to Brown, was "derivative" (especially of Andrei Belyi), but Brown did give Pil'niak high marks for his "original imaginative power" in the elaborate, unconventional narration of his ornamental works and that of his "more normal, stylistically more conventional stories, which are noted for vivid narration," such as "Chelovecheskii veter" (78). Brown was positive on Pil'niak's ornamental extremism: "To read him is not easy, but it is rewarding" (78). With respect to Golyi god, Brown did criticize the novel's total lack of "a single central idea"; but on the same page, he identified "[t]he decay of old values in the midst of hunger and misery [as] its central theme" (79). Brown had many positive comments on Golyi god, however. Form followed function; the confusing construction and narration, redundant character names, etc. made

the reader feel that he was present on the chaotic revolutionary scene. In line with other commentators, Brown assessed Pil'niak as a "Scythian," one who considered Russians semi-Asiatic and Western Europe a corrupting element (79). Brown especially praised Pil'niak's emotional communication with the reader, for example in the "original emotional empathy" conveyed to the reader in Pil'niak's sensitive descriptions of the aristocratic and degenerate Ordynin family (80) and in the reader's experience of "a kind of aesthetic empathy for each fragment in the philosophic medley" of characters (81). This emotional communication is very much the same as what Gorbachev was referring to when he accused Pil'niak of "instilling something" into the reader; the Soviet critic experienced this author-reader communication as something negative, a sign of the writer's evil intent, Brown as a positive demonstration of the writer's skill. Again in contrast to some Soviet critics, Brown judged Golyi god "a virtuoso performance [, . . .] a symphonic structure of themes and ideas," some with a long history in Russian literature (i.e., Slavophilism) along with other new ones (81). He lauded its linguistic wealth, convincing speech patterns, authorial presence, the mix of external documents with subjective narration, and other stylistic features which "presents the most immediate, moving, and, if one may be allowed the word, realistic account of the period" (81-82).

Brown shared Maguire's perception at least of the writer's instinct-intellect opposition, and praised it, claiming that "in Pilnyak's best work, a struggle is taking place between biological, blind forces and the directing hand of rational, organized man" (82) and seeing Pil'niak as a consistent supporter of the anti-rationalist forces. Brown interpreted "Luna" in this vein as well; as one of the earliest to interpret this particular

work outside the framework of Frunze's death, he asserted that "Luna" was really a "protest against the effort to subject all life to a rational plan" (82), a story which probably concerned a typical "party bureaucrat," a "soulless *apparatchik*," rather than real historical individuals (83). He concluded: "The fact that the characters and events in it are so much like reality is a tribute to Pilnyak's artistic sensitivity" (83). Brown considered Volga, along with "Krasnoe derevo" and "Ivan Moskva," to be the articulation of an old versus new opposition (83). Volga failed as a "reconstruction novel" glorifying new technological achievement because, in Brown's view, it built up sympathy in the reader for the fading past which would be forever destroyed once the dam was put in operation (83-84). Pil'niak, according to Brown, "has no real sympathy for the builders of the dam who, when they reverse the river's flow, will leave not a trace of the Russian past" (84).

While Brown was very positive about certain aspects of Pil'niak's works, it seems that he was infected by the Eastman influence and did not respect Pil'niak the man. He, too, interpreted Volga as the writer's attempt to write a pro-Soviet "reconstruction novel" in order "to make amends for 'Krasnoe derevo'" (83). He also suggested that Pil'niak later mentioned Voronskii as the source of the "Luna" story in order to absolve himself of blame in that 1926 affair (83). He considered Pil'niak's response to the attacks by RAPP after the publication of "Krasnoe derevo" a "reduction to recanting impotence" (85). Brown judged all of Pil'niak's post-Volga work to be insignificant, especially in light of the literary phenomenon the writer had been in the early 1920s. Like the Soviets, he condemned Pil'niak for his apparent devotion to the past, warning that in mourning the writer's fate,

we should not forget his attachment to the old and primitive, his mystical belief in the Slavic soul, and his emotional distrust of Western scientific rationalism. [. . .] He was kept from the full realization of his powers as a writer not only by the Soviet state, but by his insistence on using the literary form to preach a set of sterile notions. The artistic level he might have reached is evidenced in powerful scenes from The Naked Year and in many beautiful short stories. But he always returned to the pretentiously cryptic statement of an arid philosophy. (86)

This closing statement, especially with the reference to the “beautiful short stories,” makes me wonder what, beyond the novels and novellas he mentioned in this article, Brown had actually read, if even all of those. Even Volga is much less a work about dam-building than about male-female relationships, as Bristol pointed out. Maguire observed, accurately, in my view, that the Slavophilism was left behind in 1925; the myth-building stopped at about that same time. I would argue that such “arid” and “sterile” notions and philosophies occur rarely if at all after the mid-1920s.

Victor Erlich provides another negative assessment of Pil’niak, the man and the writer.⁹⁷ He describes Pil’niak in the context of the revolutionary period’s prose crisis cited by Gofman and Gorbachev. Erlich viewed Pil’niak as “one of the most representative literary figures of his era” in “his unselective responsiveness to virtually all the styles, techniques, and quests available to an early twentieth-century Russian prose writer and his near-obsession with the ultimate meaning of the Russian revolution” (157) (an “obsession,” I must say, in some cases forcibly shared by many of Pil’niak’s day, and encouraged especially by Soviet critics and ideologues who, in contrast to Erlich, did not find enough of it in his works). He described Pil’niak’s early nature works, “Nad

⁹⁷ “The Novel in Crisis,” The Russian Novel from Pushkin to Pasternak, ed. John Garrard (New Haven: Yale UP, 1983) 155-175.

ovragom”⁹⁸ (1916), “Smertel’noe manit”⁹⁹ (1918), and “Mat’ syra-zemlia” (written 1924, first published 1925, concurrently with the supremely ornamental Mashiny i volki at the very end of Pil’niak’s “ornamental” period), as “couched in the vein of somber poetic realism,” “subdued and succinct performances” in contrast to the (ornamental) “novels that followed” (157). Erlich’s chronology here is strange, since although in fact the two early stories he cites preceded Pil’niak’s ornamental phase, “Mat’ syra-zemlia” followed it, retaining a number of ornamental elements.

Erlich designated Pil’niak’s “trademark” themes as “nature versus civilization, the call of the wild, [and] the indomitable power of the instinct” (157). He objected to what he considered Pil’niak’s consistent cast of characters (159-60), his “obtrusive, if not obsessive historiosophic concerns” (160), the writer’s predilection for construing ideology as myth (165), and his “authorial addiction to dichotomies such as Russia/Europe, East/West, Moscow/Petersburg, city/village, nature/civilization” in their function as the primary organizing principle to prevent the ultimate disintegration of his novels (160-61).

Like Voronskii, Trotskii, and others, Erlich sought a unifying, decisive stance expressed by the author in his literary works. He rejected Schramm’s¹⁰⁰ argument that Pil’niak’s early novels were polyphonic and open-ended, leaving the reader to draw his or her own conclusions (162-3). He asserted instead, with Gofman, that Pil’niak’s responses to the Revolution (and other issues) were primarily emotional (for example, a relishing of

⁹⁸ “Above the Ravine,” also published as “Tseliaia zhizn” (“A Whole Life”).

⁹⁹ “Death Beckons”

¹⁰⁰ Adelheid Schramm, Die frühen Romane B. A. Pil’njaks. Eine Untersuchung zur “ornamentalen Prosa” der zwanziger Jahre (München: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 1976) 102, cited in Erlich 162.

the Revolution's exhilarating energy without a true expression of "pluralistic vision or a genuine sense of complexity" (163)) and that Pil'niak's emotional reactions which informed the works ultimately influence the reader. Erlich, like Voronskii and others, attributed Pil'niak's lack of a firm stance on issues (e.g., Revolution, technology) to his own internal ambivalence. He considered the ending of Mashiny i volki an evasive escape from decisively addressing the novel's fundamental nature-technology dilemma into a non-sequitur, the unified mourning by proletarians and peasants after the death of Lenin. Gorbachev and Bristol, on the other hand, find a decisive pro-machine stance.¹⁰¹

Erlich resumed his condemnatory thread against Pil'niak's fragmentary compositional methods, including the writer's "blatant manipulation" of "recognizable" texts, some not his own, and other devices such as authorial intrusion into the literary text (159). He cited these particular tendencies as blurring the "distinction between fact and fiction" (159). In contrast to Bristol, Erlich saw this tendency not as a statement about the nature of art, but as a sign of Pil'niak's internal ambivalence with respect to "the relative merits of truth and illusion" (165), tying it further to Pil'niak's quick recantations when under political pressure and his conversion of "the pointed candor of 'Mahogany' [. . .] to the essentially meretricious and hyperbolically celebratory tenor of The Volga Flows into the Caspian Sea" (167). Erlich was concerned also about Pil'niak's inconsistent regard for the truth-illusion boundary within his works, perceiving this as Pil'niak's quest

¹⁰¹ In my view such dichotomies in Pil'niak often describe elements that are in tension and must somehow be balanced, rather than elements that must --- or even can --- be chosen one over the other, all or nothing. Indeed, it has become clear since Pil'niak's day that the philosophical issue posed by Pil'niak --- who is ultimately master, man or machine --- is not easily resolved, and even in the twenty-first century the conflict between ecology and industry has certainly not disappeared.

for great “mystiques which move men and women to heroic action” (166).¹⁰² Erlich did have a few good words for Pil’niak, judging the writer original and successful in writing large-form fiction (in the early 1920s) which corresponded in form with the anarchic, “traumatizing historical experience” of the times (167) and in “an exuberant eclecticism [that] was unmistakably his own” (174).

During this pre-*glasnost*’ period a number of individual smaller analyses of specific works or trends were published in the Western (non-Soviet) press. A representative sampling of these works follows, to give an idea of the aspects of Pil’niak’s works that were predominantly subjected to scrutiny. Novels which had received little attention before were evaluated: Milivoje Jovanović¹⁰³ analyzed the montage effect in Dva dvojnika, and Michael Falchikov,¹⁰⁴ straddling the *glasnost*’ line, continued examination of that novel and opened discussion on Sozrevanie plodov and Solianoj ambar, exploring their relevance with respect to the new Soviet man. A. R. Tulloch¹⁰⁵ studied the basic man/machine dichotomy in Mashiny i volki. Philip Maloney¹⁰⁶ examined anarchism and bolshevism in several of Pil’niak’s works. Judith

¹⁰² I view this not as an issue of personal or professional honesty, but as Pil’niak’s portrayal of the power of the individual’s imagination or sustaining dream, the human (or artist’s) perception of different kinds of realities or “truths” which can be effective in transcending the challenges of personal life but not applicable to a larger societal level.

¹⁰³ “Smisao montažnog postupka u književnom delu: Na materijalu romana Borisa Piljnaka Dvojnici,” Savremennik: Mesečni Književni Časopis (Beograd, Jugoslavija) 36 (1972): 201-14. Jovanović was a Yugoslav literary scholar during the Tito period of relative independence from the USSR.

¹⁰⁴ “A New Soviet Novel for a New Soviet Man? Two Late Works of Boris Pilnyak.” Irish Slavonic Studies 8 (1987): 31-47, and “Solyanoi ambar: Pilnyak’s Great Soviet Novel?” Irish Slavonic Studies 14 (1993): 69-86.

¹⁰⁵ “The ‘Man vs. Machine’ Theme in Pilnyak’s Machines and Wolves,” Russian Literature Triquarterly 8 (1974): 329-339i.

¹⁰⁶ “Anarchism and Bolshevism in the Works of Boris Pilnyak,” Russian Review: An American Quarterly Devoted to Russia Past and Present 32.1 (1973): 43-53.

Mills¹⁰⁷ and Jerome Rinkus¹⁰⁸ evaluated formal and thematic elements in “Mat’ syra-zemlia.” Edith Frankel¹⁰⁹ and Elena Semeka¹¹⁰ explored literary (rather than political and historical) elements of “Povest’ nepogashennoi luny.” Elena Tolstaia-Segal¹¹¹ examined elements of Eurasianism and other themes or philosophies uniting and distinguishing the works of Pil’niak and Platonov. Carol Avins¹¹² analyzed the East-West theme in “Tret’ia stolitsa.” These studies made strong contributions to Pil’niak scholarship, but they covered isolated themes rather than providing comprehensive analysis of the writer’s larger *oeuvre* or specific examination of his “biological” tendencies in depicting individual or universal human experience. Some studies did repeat the already often stated (e.g., Tulloch’s vision of Pil’niakian elementality).

Larger studies focused on Pil’niak also came out during this period. Vera Reck¹¹³ published her study of Pil’niak’s political difficulties, taking basically the same stance as Max Eastman, but without the vehemence he expressed; hers is primarily a historical study which needs significant updating in view of the new information which has become available since the days of *glasnost*. Adelheid Schramm performed a formal analysis of Pil’niak’s ornamental prose, primarily the novels Golyi god and Mashiny i volki and the

¹⁰⁷ “Narrative Technique in Pil’nyak’s ‘Mother Earth,’” Journal of Russian Studies 28 (1974): 13-21.

¹⁰⁸ “Mythological and Folkloric Motifs in Pilnjak’s *Mat’ Syra-Zemlja*,” Russian Language Journal XXIX:23 (1975): 29-35.

¹⁰⁹ “A Note on Pilnyak’s ‘Tale of the Unextinguished Moon,’” Soviet Studies 24.4 (1973): 550-553.

¹¹⁰ “The Structure of Boris Pil’njak’s ‘*Povest’ nepogašennoj luny*’: From the Structure to a Determination of the Genre,” The Structural Analysis of Narrative Texts: Conference Papers, Eds. Andrej Kodjak, Michael J. Connolly, Krystyna Pomorska (Columbus: Slavica, 1980) 145-71.

¹¹¹ “‘Stikhiinye sily’: Platonov i Pil’niak (1928-1929)” Slavica hierosolymitana 3 (1978): 89-109.

¹¹² “‘The Third Capital’: Russia and the West in Fact and Fiction” SEEJ 22.1 (1978): 39-51.

¹¹³ Boris Pil’niak: A Soviet Writer in Conflict with the State.

smaller works which were reworked into their larger texts, in Die frühen Romane B.A. Pil'niaks: Eine Untersuchung zur "Ornamentalischen Prosa" der zwanziger Jahre. T. R. N. Edwards¹¹⁴ examined about five of Pil'niak's works in the context of "irrationality" in prose, briefly exploring the Tolstoian subtext of "Luna" in the process.

However, some scholars did begin looking at Pil'niak's works in a more comprehensive way. Reinhard Damerau examined Pil'niak's conception of history and man in his 1976 dissertation, Boris Pil'niaks Geschichts- und Menschenbild, with his major textual focus on Pil'niak's biography and his novels and novellas. Damerau took an essentially biographical approach to the evolution of Pil'niak's ideas in various arenas. He tied Pil'niak's literary and philosophical development, as manifested in his works, with his life experiences, covering their development over his entire career, including the writer's attitudes with respect to the Revolution, religion, Eurasianism and Scythianism, the evolving Soviet reality, nature, love, and more. Kenneth Brostrom, too, developed a comprehensive theme, analyzing four of Pil'niak's longer works¹¹⁵ as allegory within the framework of the writer's search for faith and development of a larger worldview. He emphasized the power of human love and man's ability to transcend the limitations of the human condition in his analysis of Pil'niak's later, more "nihilistic" works.

¹¹⁴ Three Russian Writers and the Irrational: Zamyatin, Pil'nyak, and Bulgakov (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1982).

¹¹⁵ Dissertation, The Novels of Boris Pil'niak as Allegory, 1973. Brostrom treats only four works in detail, all published in 1930 or before: Golyi god (written 1920, first published 1922), Mashiny i volki (written 1924, first published 1925), "Ivan Moskva" (written and first published 1927), and Volga vpadaet v Kaspiiskoe more (written 1929, first published 1930). "Ivan Moskva" is a novella (*povest'*); the rest are novels. Brostrom has separately published interpretations of other Pil'niak works as allegory.

In 1979 Peter Alberg Jensen published Nature as Code: The Achievement of Boris Pilnjak 1915-1924.¹¹⁶ While critics from Pil'niak's very earliest publishing days have pointed out the writer's reliance on nature's laws, the "biological" nature of his prose, his attention to the powers of instinct, and the like, Jensen provided the first serious, comprehensive analysis of the role of nature in Pil'niak's works. He examined the artistic texts of 1915-24, some of which had never been published, plus letters, other writings, and biographical information in his development of his thesis, which is Pil'niak's early belief in the "rightness" of nature. Jensen examined only the works up through Mashiny i volki, which in his view represented Pil'niak's change in orientation from the belief in nature's "rightness" to at least an acceptance of the potential value of technology to human well-being. Jensen performed analyses of most of Pil'niak's fictional writings up through the 1924 composition of Mashiny i volki, relating the form to the content of each work, and the works to one another as well as to his larger thesis, that Pil'niak's *oeuvre* in those early days was expressing his belief in the ultimate rightness of nature. Jensen also noted the Tolstoian element running through Pil'niak's earliest works, resulting in a planned (but never realized) larger "Tolstoian project," a novel involving an early story cycle (112-119). Other commentators (Voronskii, Bristol, Maguire, etc.) also mentioned Tolstoi as an influence on Pil'niak, especially in the latter's early works, but they did not develop the association in any substantive way (except perhaps Edwards, briefly, with "Luna"). Secondly, at least one of the "Tolstoian" elements recognized by Jensen in Pil'niak was his stance as a moralist. A few other commentators (e.g., Maguire) have mentioned a moral quality in some of Pil'niak's work,

¹¹⁶ Copenhagen: Rosenkilde and Bagger, 1979.

but if morality has been mentioned at all in Pil'niak criticism, usually it has been to deny the existence of any moral dimension to Pil'niak's writings (e.g., Mirskii). Not only was Pil'niak monothematic (at this point in his career), said Jensen, pointing to "the fact that Pil'niak expressed one idea --- the idea of nature's rightness" (117) --- but Pil'niak had developed an entire biological or reproductive ethic which pervaded his early works (107-120).

Another major comprehensive work coming out of this time period was Gary Browning's biography, Boris Pilniak: Scythian at a Typewriter. Browning included biographical information, a chronological presentation of many of Pil'niak's works relative to his life and political events, a basic interpretation of Pil'niak's *oeuvre*, and brief individual analyses of thirty-some works which Browning deemed Pil'niak's artistic best. He perceived Pil'niak's four basic themes as "instinct, ideology, Russia's heritage and destiny, and culture and 'barbarism'" (79) and presented the writer as expressing definite, unambiguous stances, for example against barbarism and philistinism. Browning also emphasized the quality of love in Pil'niak's value system. This volume by now is in great need of updating, but it remains even today the most comprehensive and detailed view and assessment of Pil'niak's life and work.

Overall, emerging from Western criticism up to the beginning of the *glasnost'* period is a picture of Pil'niak as a serious artist creatively arraying the artistic means at his disposal to achieve certain literary purposes. Mainline Soviet criticism, on the other hand, depicts a flash-in-the-pan writer, one who came onto the scene showing great promise but was ultimately judged as a sham, hiding his lack of talent (and other flaws) behind the flamboyance of ornamentation. Pil'niak's ornamental forms were examined

exhaustively in both critical traditions but were generally perceived more positively in the West. Western critics, while far from unanimous in their interpretive findings, seemed to have less trouble sorting through the fragmentation and other formal elements to identify themes, ideas and stances in Pil'niak's works. These themes include at least Slavophilism, nature, the Revolution and resulting Soviet daily reality (*byt*), local and international cultures, and universal human themes of love, sex, and death, themes which Pil'niak tended to express in terms of dichotomies or oppositions: old vs. new, East vs. West, country vs. city, chaos vs order, instinct vs. intellect, etc. A few critics seemed disappointed not to find a clear opinion or stance on some issue (e.g., Revolution, industrialization) expressed in the works, but most accepted ambiguity and polysemy favorably. There was a tendency to judge Pil'niak on a moral basis because of his perceived cowardice and self-interest in dealing with political pressure. Focus on his works has been extremely unbalanced in terms of the time periods scrutinized, which have been limited almost exclusively to the 1920-25 ornamental period, and the works examined (early nature stories, ornamental novels and novellas, works such as "Luna," "Ivan-da-Mar'ia," "Krasnoe derevo," and Volga, which were the subject of controversy). With the primary exception of Bristol, most critics have paid only lip service to the evolution of Pil'niak's art, directing their attention almost exclusively to the canon described above. Short fiction and reportage have been left unexamined in any systematic way except in Bristol's brief article, Jensen, and Browning. There was a sense of Pil'niak's obsolescence following his ornamental period, but even those who have praised his post-ornamental work (e.g., Maguire, and ambiguously Brown) did not follow up with its serious analysis.

Glasnost'

The period of *glasnost'* initiated by Mikhail Gorbachev in the late 1980s opened a new season of Pil'niak scholarship both at home in the USSR and abroad; at this time the need for assessment of ideological orthodoxy had passed, and the writer's attitude toward the Revolution could be discussed purely academically. The novels Dva dvoinika (written 1933)¹¹⁷ and Solianoï ambar (1937) were published in Russia for the first time, and many of the works published in Pil'niak's lifetime were anthologized and printed anew with new introductory forewords. A great deal of biographical and historical information has now been researched and made public. Much of Pil'niak's correspondence has appeared in print for the first time. The writer's son, B. B. Andronikashvili-Pil'niak, has published a comprehensively annotated if not fully complete set of letters written by the writer between 1915 and 1937.¹¹⁸ N. Iu. Griakalova has edited and printed Pil'niak's correspondence with publishers Lutokhin and Miroljubov,¹¹⁹ with poetess Mariia Shkapskaia,¹²⁰ and Pil'niak's letters from Japan.¹²¹ N. N. Primochkina has published the

¹¹⁷ This 1933 novel was published in Polish translation in 1935 and 1939. Michael Heller reconstructed the Russian text from earlier published works and translated from Polish to publish it in 1983 as Dvoïniki (Twins) in London. Pil'niak reworked his Dva dvoïnika text in 1935 to result in Odinnadtsat' glav klassicheskogo povestvovaniia (Eleven Chapters of Classical Narration), which was first published abroad as Dvoïniki: Odinnadtsat' glav klassicheskogo povestvovaniia in 2003.

¹¹⁸ Mne vypala gor'kaia slava . . . : Pis'ma 1915-1917, sost. B. B. Andronikashvili-Pil'niak (Moskva: Agraf, 2002).

¹¹⁹ "Pis'ma Borisa Pil'niaka V. S. Miroljubovu i D. A. Lutokhinu," Russkaia literatura: Istoriko-literaturnyi zhurnal 2 (1989): 213-234.

¹²⁰ "Dialog Marii Shkapskoi i Borisa Pil'niaka nachala 1920-kh godov," Russkaia literatura: Istoriko-literaturnyi zhurnal 4 (2004): 40-53.

¹²¹ "Boris Pil'niak: Pis'ma s Vostoka: K prebyvaniu B. Pil'niaka v Iaponii v 1932 godu," Russkaia literatura: Istoriko-literaturnyi zhurnal 3 (2002): 170-84.

writer's letters to Gor'kii;¹²² Dagmar Kassek, his letters to Remizov;¹²³ and Dany Savelli, letters from Pil'niak's first Far East trip in 1926.¹²⁴ Pil'niak's granddaughter, Kira Borisovna Andronikashvili-Pil'niak, has written several articles about Pil'niak's childhood, especially his teenage years,¹²⁵ his personal and professional life in the decisive year 1915, and autobiographical elements in his final novel, Solianoi ambar.¹²⁶ Articles have come out about Pil'niak's personal and literary relationships with Zamiatin, Chukovskii, Esenin, Platonov, and others. Researchers have examined specific periods or events in his lifetime, such as his visits to England, Japan, and the Arctic. In 1991 A. P. Auer initiated a biennial symposium on Pil'niak in Kolomna, where new research, biographical as well as literary, is presented and subsequently printed. A conference marking the centennial of Pil'niak's birth resulted in new examinations of Pil'niak's life and works published as Boris Pil'niak: Opyt segodniashnego prochtenia.¹²⁷

In terms of current literary research, Mary A. Nicholas is a significant researcher who spans the late Soviet-to-*glasnost'* period and thereafter. Her studies are wide-ranging

¹²² "Pis'ma Borisa Pil'niaka k M. Gor'komu," Russkaia literatura: Istoriko-literaturnyi zhurnal 1 (1991): 180-89.

¹²³ "Uchitel' i podmaster'e? Sem' pisem Borisa Pil'niaka Alekseiu Remizovu," Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie 61:3 (2003): 247-72, 446.

¹²⁴ "Shest' neizdannykh pisem Borisa Pil'niaka o ego pervom prebyvanii na dal'nem vostoke (v Kitae i v Iaponii) v 1926 g.," Cahiers du Monde Russe 42:1 (2001) Jan-Mar 139-58, 188, 192.

¹²⁵ "Detskie gody . . . ostavliaiut na vsiu zhizn' otpechatiki . . .," Literaturnoe obozrenie: Zhiurnal khudozhestvennoi literatury, kritiki i bibliografii 5-6:259-260 (1996): 117-26.

¹²⁶ "Iz tvorcheskoi istorii romana B. Pil'niaka 'Solianoi ambar,'" Boris Pil'niak: Opyt segodniashnego prochtenia (Moskva: Nasledie, 1995) 11-32.

¹²⁷ Moskva: Nasledie, 1995.

and include Pil'niak's position in the Modernist trend,¹²⁸ an analysis of Shklovskii's "O Pil'niake,"¹²⁹ a study of the female voice in "Pil'niak,"¹³⁰ an examination of Pil'niak's own statements about writing,¹³¹ a comparative analysis of the text and film versions of "Povest' nepogashennoi lunny,"¹³² and a comprehensive study of the Soviet production novel in which Volga is discussed in the context of Pil'niak's view of the writer's role in building the new Soviet society.¹³³ M. Falchikov has examined Dva dvoynika with an eye to determining its place in the Pil'niak and Soviet canon. Among the most active Russian Pil'niak scholars today is Vladimir P. Kriuchkov, who has investigated thematic, formal, historical and textual issues in a number of individual works and cycles (such as the Petersburg stories,¹³⁴ "Luna,"¹³⁵ etc.) and published a comprehensive analysis of motifs and intertextuality in Pil'niak's 1920's works,¹³⁶ primarily discussing the novels, in 2005. A.P. Auer himself has written numerous articles about various aspects of Pil'niak's life

¹²⁸ Boris Pilniak's Modernist Prose: Reader, Writer, and Image. Diss. U Pennsylvania, 1988 [Dissertation Abstracts International, (50:1) 1989.] and "Boris Pil'niak and Modernism: Redefining the Self" SR 50.2 (1991) 410-21.

¹²⁹ "Formalist Theory Revisited: On Šklovskij 'On Pil'niak,'" SEEJ 36.1 (1992): 68-82.

¹³⁰ "Russian Modernism and the Female Voice: A Case Study" Russian Review 53. 4 (1994): 530-548.

¹³¹ "Pil'niak on Writing," SEER 71.2 (1993): 217-33.

¹³² "Genuine Facts and Real People: *The Tale of the Unextinguished Moon* in Fiction and Film," Russian Studies in Literature 40.2 (2004): 78-97.

¹³³ Writers At Work: Russian Production Novels and the Construction of Soviet Culture (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell UP, 2010).

¹³⁴ For example, "O 'prazdnoi mozgovoï igre' v 'Sankt-Piter-Burkhe' B. A. Pil'niaka," Voprosy literatury 2 (2005): 66-110; "Povest' Peterburgskaia . . ." B. Pil'niaka i "Peterburgskii tekst" russkoi literatury: Intertekstual'nyi aspekt (Saratov: Nauchnaia kniga, 2005).

¹³⁵ "Pochemu luna 'nepogashennaia'? (O simvolike 'Povesti nepogashennoi lunny' B. Pil'niaka)," Russkaia literatura: Istoriko-literaturnyi zhurnal 3 (1993): 121-127.

¹³⁶ Proza B. A. Pil'niaka 1920-kh godov (motivy v funktsional'nom i intertekstual'nom aspektakh) (Saratov: Nauchnaia kniga, 2005).

and work, but these generally remain focused on individual topics or works rather than forming a comprehensive analysis.¹³⁷ In the past twenty years, a number of Pil'niak's previously little-researched works have been explored in detail, some for virtually the first time: these include "Shtoss v zhizni" (Kriuchkov and N. Moranjak-Bamburać),¹³⁸ "Zhenikh vo polunochi" (D. Kassek),¹³⁹ "Metel'" (S. Iu. Gorinova).¹⁴⁰ Numerous studies of Golyi god and, especially, "Povest' nepogashennoi lunny," continue to make their way to the presses, as do analyses of formal devices such as refrains and rhythms and folkloric or other subtexts. The "Luna" criticism now focuses more on literary theme, imagery, and message rather than the supposedly (political) allegorical interpretation. One important aspect of Pil'niak's ornamental prose has received a new and more objective examination in N. Iu. Griakalova's study of Pil'niak's plotless prose.¹⁴¹

Pil'niak's works are also being examined in larger contexts, such as the Moscow text (Clint Walker),¹⁴² Russian sexual imagery of the NEP era (Eric Naiman),¹⁴³

¹³⁷ For example, "Kak mnogomu ia uchilsia u Bloka: (Blokovskoe nachalo v poetike B. A. Pil'niaka)," B.A. Pil'niak: Issledovaniia i materialy, vyp. 3-4 (Kolomna: 2001); "Istoriia --- ne nauka mne, no poema: I. I. Lazhechnikov v tvorcheskoi soznanii B. A. Pil'niaka," Dom Lazhechnikova: Istoriko-literaturnyi sbornik, vyp. 1 (Kolomna: 2004); "Satiricheskie traditsii Saltykova-Shchedrina v proze Borisa Pil'niaka," Filologicheskie nauki 2 (1990): 13-19.

¹³⁸ Kriuchkov, "'Lermontovskii shtoss' v povesti 'Shtoss v zhizn' B. Pil'niaka," Russkaia literatura: Istoriko-literaturnyi zhurnal 3 (2006) 229-38; Moranjak-Bamburać, "Fakt i fiktsiia: Shtoss v zhizn' B. Pil'niaka," Russian, Croatian and Serbian, Czech and Slovak, Polish Literature 29:1 (1991) Jan. 1 101-12.

¹³⁹ "Rasskaz Borisa Pil'niaka 'Zhenikh vo polunochi' (1925 g.) (popytka analiza)," Russkaia literatura: Istoriko-literaturnyi zhurnal 2 (1992): 169-175.

¹⁴⁰ "O smyslovoi dominante v rasskaze B. Pil'niaka 'Metel'," Vestnik Sankt-Peterburgskogo Universiteta. Seriia 2, Istoriia, iazykoznanie, literaturovedenie 3:16 (July, 1994): 94-96.

¹⁴¹ "Bessiuzhetnaia proza Borisa Pil'niaka 10-kh – nachala 1920-kh godov: Genezis i povestvovatel'nye osobennosti," Russkaia literatura No.4 (1998): 14-38.

¹⁴² Transformation Metaphors in the "Soviet Moscow Text" of the 1920s and 1930s, diss. University of Wisconsin-Madison, 2006. UMI DA 3222955, 2006.

¹⁴³ Sex in Public: The Incarnation of Early Soviet Ideology (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1997).

masculinity in early Soviet literature (Eliot Borenstein),¹⁴⁴ portrayals of the folk in texts by Belyi, Pil'niak and other writers (I. Anisimova),¹⁴⁵ and apocalyptic fiction in the Soviet 1920s (Clairon Palmer)¹⁴⁶ and others.

In summary, Pil'niak is now receiving long-overdue attention from scholars world-wide, and the attention is appropriately devoted to an understanding of his life, works, and contributions rather than his stylistic inadequacies, moral failures, and inappropriate political ideology. He is being included in larger literary examinations of times, movements, trends, and comparative themes; and heretofore ignored, superficially examined (or prejudicially approached) and little-studied works are beginning to receive their due. To date, however, scholarship still consists primarily of an eclectic and piecemeal approach to individual works and specific thematic, aesthetic, and biographical elements or to an assessment of Pil'niak's role in some larger context. Even large works that focus on Pil'niak's texts (rather than his place in a literary trend or larger theme) are limited to one or two works, usually novels or novellas.¹⁴⁷ Little has been done in this period to identify and assess overarching themes across Pil'niak's *oeuvre*, especially to include his shorter fictional works, nor has an attempt been made to systematically

¹⁴⁴ Men Without Women: Masculinity and Revolution in Russian Fiction, 1917-1929 (Durham: Duke UP, 2000).

¹⁴⁵ Imagining the Folk: Authenticity and Modernity in the Texts by Belyi, Larsen, Toomer, and Pil'niak, diss. U of South Carolina, 2008. DA32229.

¹⁴⁶ Resilient Revelations: Apocalyptic Fiction in the Soviet 1920s, diss. Northwestern U, 2007. DA3249022.

¹⁴⁷ See for example Woo-Seob Yun's Studien zu Boris Pil'njaks *Krasnoe derevo* und *Volga vpadaet v Kaspijskoe more* and Hee-Sok Kim's Verfahren und Intention des Kombinatorischen in B. A. Pil'njaks *Erzählung 'Ivan-da-Mar'ja*, both München: Verlag Otto Sagner, 1993 and 1989 respectively. The latter includes a comparative study of the three deaths in "Ivan-da-Mar'ia" with Tolstoi's "Three Deaths."

include newly discovered information into a coherent and comprehensive personal and literary biography of the writer.

Departures from Mainstream Criticism

In all the criticism, Soviet, Russian, and Western, much time and space has been devoted to Pil'niak's form, especially during the ornamental period in which he came to literary fame and of which he is still considered the most representative writer. This is a perspective I am not interested in examining here, partly because it has already been adequately treated. I am interested in content, that is, dominating themes, and the themes I see dominating Pil'niak's fiction can indeed be described as "biologically based," as Bristol would say, but they are much more than that. With Bristol I see that Pil'niak's universal themes of human life, love, sex, and death are most fundamental to his art. The dichotomies, the oppositions, the cultural explorations, the Revolution and technology and their impact on daily life are all present, but it is mankind (man and woman) and the question of what constitutes "right living" that drive Pil'niak's works. As does Gofman I see themes that reside outside of Pil'niak's works, themes that are expressed in various ways by the fragments of a given work, or even by the smaller works as individual wholes; each work or fragment serves as an exploration of a major theme, and unlike Gofman I find that an interesting and effective artistic presentation.

Too much has been made of the influence of instinct in Pil'niak's work. It is not the "indomitable power" described by Erlich (157), nor is man's allegiance to it as "deep and spontaneous" (79) as Browning considers it, not even in the very early phases where the "nature theme" is predominant. The human being is always at some higher remove from nature and capable of self-control as a result of self-examination, although even

Pil'niak's owls and wolves have elements of human behavior, for example mating for life or seeking vengeance. Instinct may be Pil'niak's "ground of all being," as Maguire calls it, in that it provides a suggested pattern to life: in the cycle of birth, life, (love), mating, reproduction, and death for animals, plants, and man that serves as a refrain through so many of his works. Instinct is a guide, a purpose or goal, not a mandate or some kind of conveyor belt that carries people, regardless of their individual choices, through life. Pil'niak's people sometimes ignore the call of instinct, especially with respect to the "natural" cycle of life events; often they discover too late that they have wasted their lives through devotion to career or some other pursuit and have missed their chance at "krepkaia zhizn'"¹⁴⁸ ("robust life"). If instinct were to be obeyed without question, then Pil'niak would valorize war and martial instinct, which he does not; he would praise rather than condemn promiscuous men who scatter their seed (so as to propagate the species in the Darwinian sense) rather than maintaining fidelity as an "odnoliub" ("lover of one woman") to a beloved woman who has "chosen him forever." Maguire is correct when he describes the conflicted situation of Pil'niak's individual man, who is "both agent and victim, pulled by the competing claims of intellect, which wills toward consciousness and seeks it in a self-definition through system and order, and instinct, which is formless and timeless, and constitutes the ground of all being" (103). Potent and worthy as is the biological instinct to seek sexual union and procreate, this drive must be controlled by the conscience, and life must be lived deliberately and according to

¹⁴⁸ Pil'niak used this term in his personal notebooks to denote the kind of life he had hoped to spend with his first fiancée, Nadia Pavlovich. In notes preparatory to a story he wrote: "Krepkaia zhizn'. . . Doktor zhenat. Na nego posiagaet pomeschitsa. Samoe glavnoe to, chto u nikh krepkaia zhizn' --- zdoroiaia, spokoinaia, sviataia, takaia, kakuiu ia khochu sozdat' s Nad'koi, i oni schastlivy." ("Robust life. . . The doctor is married. A woman landowner pressures him. The most important thing is that they have robust life --- healthy, serene, holy, the kind of life I want to create with Nadia, and they are happy.") K. B. Andronikashvili-Pil'niak, "1915" 162-3.

principle by people who are self-aware. Furthermore, operating on instinct that is not informed by love brings, if not doom and disaster, then infinite sadness.

The tawdry aspects of sex in Pil'niak have drawn too much attention, as sensational items tend to do, without anyone seriously considering whether the "tawdriness" might be there to instill revulsion rather than enthusiasm for it. Gofman, Voronskii and Naiman cite Pil'niak's tendency to describe the Revolution in "physiological" terms, and both of the latter point out the excessive number of rapes there are in Pil'niak's fiction, at least during the revolutionary period; apparently they interpret this not as a reflection of historical realities but as a personal fascination with rape on the part of the writer. Naiman goes so far as to assert that "[r]ape becomes the single most representative revolutionary act in Pil'niak's fiction," and "'Beast' is a word with positive value" (60). Brainina objects to a reference to child molesters, Gorbachev to stone phalli and worshipful male feelings prior to the sex act. Virtually every essay that mentions the thematic content (as opposed to the form) of Golyi god mentions the scene at Mar Junction where starving people arriving on a train in search of grain are, along with others, reduced to a bestial state. This is a very effective scene, depicting total squalor and desperation. But dramatization of an event does not equate to valorization. That picture is but one more of the dangling illustrations of the theme, this time of the specific theme of the Russian Revolution and the universal theme of what deprivation, in this case indeed biological deprivation, can do to human beings. Is there "pathological love" in Pil'niak's works, as Voronskii and Brainina assert? Absolutely, and Kseniia Ordynina, cited by Voronskii, certainly offers a striking example. Does Pil'niak examine bizarre, taboo forms of love, such as incest? Certainly he does. But these are among the

exploratory illustrations that are suspended from those main themes and those larger questions, in these cases: “What is love? How is it to be expressed? Is sex without feeling really making ‘love’? What are the prerequisites for healthy love?” In my interpretation of Pil’niak’s presentation of these themes it is quite clear that “bestiality” is not what he glorifies. Men are more than animals, and sex is not just sex, animal behavior to continue the species, but a spiritual event which sanctifies both partners, a divine event especially in its (pro-)creative potential. In all the lists of Pil’niak’s dichotomies (city/country, intellect/instinct, civilization/primitivity, and so on) I have found no mention of a biology/spirit opposition, but it exists and is an important one; it is the spiritual side, at least in human relations, that Pil’niak values, although both must be accommodated. Sex for its own sake, or solely in pursuit of bodily pleasure or physical health, is roundly condemned.

As for primitivism, Pil’niak’s early works certainly indicate the value he places on human harmony with the natural world, and that assessment does show up, as so many critics mentioned, in Golyi god and other early works in which the chaotic, primitive “close-to-the-earth” cultures --- peasants and “Asia” in that novel --- seem favored for their aboriginal and essential harmony with nature (rebellious peasants) and for the raw, chaotic energy (Asia) that they represent. These are not new ideas but are associated with Slavophile, Scythian, and Eurasianist philosophies. However, as Maguire pointed out, Pil’niak abandoned the Slavophile theme in 1925. I observe a trend in which Pil’niak, over time, changes his view of aboriginal cultures and begins to assess men and their cultural groups less in terms of their primitivity, the degree of “naturalness” of their condition, and more in terms of their cultural allegiance to the daytime sun’s nurturing

aspect as opposed to the night's chaotic, destructive one. Ultimately, it seems to me, and as I hope to demonstrate, Pil'niak ceases to valorize "cultures" according to their proximity to aboriginality but instead evaluates them in terms of their ordered creativity and nurture of life.

Related to Slavophilism is an ethnicity issue, the idea of the essential Slavic (genetic) identity and its supposedly favored status in Pil'niak. Brown cites Pil'niak's description of his own bloodlines (German, Slavic, Jewish, and Mongol),¹⁴⁹ as well as his Slavophilism, as evidence of the writer's ethnic or racial focus, his emphasis on "blood and genes" (77). Brainina described the Komsomolka's draw to the family home as an expression of (inappropriate) attachment to "rod," family or clan (17). Dobranov, in his criticism of "Rozhdenie cheloveka," cited the work as glorifying "the voice of 'sperm and blood'" (an inattentive and erroneous characterization, since the future father of the family is not the child's biological father). Pil'niak's focus on ethnicity is in actuality more symbolic than real; he may treat peoples and cultures as defined by ethnic qualities, but with respect to the individual, he directs no special value to creating or maintaining ethnic or genetic relationships. In fact, while Pil'niak certainly appreciates genetic heritage and family relationships, especially over multiple generations, from his very earliest works he provides positive presentations of "families" which lack genetic ties; later works show that well-constituted families are grounded on ties of love, rather than genes.

In virtually all discussions of Pil'niak's literary roots, the names of Belyi, Remizov, and Tolstoi come up, the first two with respect to form, Tolstoi primarily with

¹⁴⁹ Pil'niak's description can be found in "Avtobiograficheskie zametki," *Romany*, sost. Igor' Shaitanov (M: Sovremennik, 1990) 25.

respect to Pil'niak's nature writings. Voronskii, in his article on Babel', stated that Pil'niak, Babel', and a few other writers of the day were "physiological" writers whose literary ancestor was Lev Tolstoi.¹⁵⁰ Bristol too considered Pil'niak's early works to have Tolstoian connections. Jensen even referred to one of Pil'niak's earliest attempts at the large form, a novel to be based on an early story cycle, as a "Tolstoian project" (110-117). Pil'niak's early story "Smerti"¹⁵¹ (1917) is often compared with Tolstoi's "Three Deaths." Hee-Sok Kim elaborated a comparative analysis of this Tolstoi story with the deaths in "Ivan-da-Mar'ia" and T. R. N. Edwards briefly analyzed the Tolstoian subtext to "Luna" (127-133). However, except for these small, disconnected analyses, the larger Tolstoian thematic in Pil'niak has remained unmined. I perceive a significant Tolstoian subtext in some of Pil'niak's works, not limited to the early nature stories, and while there are many points on which he is not in total accord with Tolstoi, some of his works are definitely in a supportive dialogue with Tolstoi's writings, especially in the realm of sexual morality.

I have said that conscience is as important as any physical instinct in Pil'niak. Mirskii commented that there was no "political or ethical judgment or choice" in Golyi god. Edwards in turn claimed that "Pil'nyak [was] not concerned with Tolstoyan or any other morality, any more than he [was] interested in Marxism: these problems simply [did] not engage his attention" (94).¹⁵² Maguire, however, hinted at a morality expressed throughout Pil'niak, praising the light touch with which the writer presented the moral in

¹⁵⁰ Aleksandr Voronskij, "Isaac Babel," 1925, Twentieth Century Russian Literary Criticism, ed. Victor Erlich (New Haven: Yale UP, 1975) 186.

¹⁵¹ "Deaths"

¹⁵² Probably Pil'niak's final novel (1937), Soliano ambar, which contains some extended discussion of Das Kapital, was not available to Edwards when he was writing.

“God ikh zhizni” and suggesting that his touch with later moral pronouncements was (unfortunately) not so light (102). Jensen claimed that an entire “sexual” or “reproductive” morality is expressed at least in Pil’niak’s first decade of writings. My position is that Boris Pil’niak is a moralist in the tradition of the early Tolstoi. Pil’niak was definitely continuing the debate on sexual morality with the family as his main focus, and he was first and foremost a moralist when dealing with these themes. The most essential of the questions dangling from Pil’niak’s externalized themes is one of “How, then, shall we live?” His stories and even smaller fragments show alternative answers to this question, explorations of human issues and potential solutions. His answers in this arena are sensitive and sometimes ambiguous, but his main stance is quite clear. Pil’niak’s primary message concerns the individual human life and how it is to be lived, and this message results in a moral mandate.

Voronskii, Bristol and others remarked on Pil’niak’s themes of love and women. Voronskii claimed that Pil’niak’s woman characters were like stick-figures, each a symbol of a female role (“mother, slave, lover”), but lacking the qualities of real women in all their human aspects. In fact, in the earliest stories many women are indeed very sketchily and symbolically depicted; either they are merely *samki* (females of the species) or they are unloving mothers, faithless wives, etc. However, as Bristol pointed out, Pil’niak’s stories of universal themes, especially love and marriage, become more subtle and complex with time, and the same can be said of his portrayals of women. Women are very important in the Pil’niak *oeuvre*. Many of Pil’niak’s stories are told from the female point of view or about a woman as the main character. Women to Pil’niak are in fact related to the nurturing side of Mother Earth and have a divine quality associated with

their own capacity for motherhood (a quality they may sacrifice through wrong living). Good women are respected for their intellect as well as their beauty and sexuality, but a woman's role is above all to nurture, on a personal or cultural level; women who choose death- or destruction-oriented professions or activities are condemned (as is the "pathological" Chekistka in "Ivan-da-Mar'ia").

Erlich, for one, was concerned about the fluidity of the boundary between fact and fiction in Pil'niak's works. Truth and falsehood also emerge as thematic elements in his works, sometimes couched in those terms and sometimes in terms of reality and imagination. Some of his works can be viewed in terms of his exploration of this boundary. Pil'niak clearly sees value in the sustaining dream, and what appears to be deception, especially of the self, may not always be condemned. As with family-building and all other human endeavors, the criterion for judgment on truth-telling or "falsehood" is the presence or absence of love and of the power to transcend the human condition on the individual level.

Goals and Structure of the Dissertation

In this dissertation I depict the evolution of Pil'niak's biological *ethos* over the course of his writing career, its development from a more biological to a more spiritual orientation, but one in which even the earliest elements have at least as much "spirit" as "biology." Most of his moral views are present from his earliest works but become more nuanced as he matures. This evolution occurs with respect to individuals as well as groups; I examine his changing attitude on the collective level by analyzing his portrayal of the peasantry. I show that Pil'niak recommends some instincts as appropriate guides to

human behavior which foster well-being, but that in the final analysis he asserts love as the ultimate determinant for right living.

My primary approach to this task is close reading of the artistic texts, concentrating on short-form fictional works. Because many elements of the sexual *ethos* may be present in any given work, the creation of clearly defined categories of presentation will be impossible. For this reason I group the works in my analysis according to major evolutionary patterns or subjects and point out additional relevant aspects to the *ethos* as they are encountered in the texts. This is not a biographical study *per se*; I mention biographical elements where they are relevant to the works or themes at hand.

Chapter II shows the chronological development and refinement of Pil'niak's basic *ethos* over his career, starting with its earliest expressions in the pre-revolutionary stories which I will consider "baseline" elements. I next present a representative example of the themes encountered in his "early domestic stories," those written before his perspective was impacted by foreign travel. Then, through analysis of a series of works, I describe the evolution of Pil'niak's ideal view of man's collective relationship with nature, again starting from very early stories up through "Mat' syra-zemlia" (1924), which I consider the termination of his "peasant idyll" and the culmination of the transformation of his criteria for judging "savages" as "noble" or "barbaric." Returning to Pil'niak's depiction of the individual human life, I then examine two stories from the mid-1920s which depict ideal examples of love and marital relationships, and conclude with the 1934 "Rozhdenie cheloveka," which, at least in the short form, serves as Pil'niak's final statement on biological morality.

In Chapter III I explore the Tolstoian subtext and dialogue in three under-studied works, using two early stories, “Kak obyknovenno” (written 1914-15) and “Veter pered martom” (written 1919), followed by the later “Tul’skaia literatura” from 1936.

Chapter IV contains explorations of important additional aspects of Pil’niak’s *ethos* explorations: virginity concerns, the incest potential, and parent/child relationships and issues.

The final chapter explores Pil’niak’s views on truth and imagination and defines his stance in the ongoing morality debate in Russian literature.

My contribution consists of a comprehensive analysis of Pil’niak’s moral mandate and its development, including an analysis of his evolution toward a more balanced concept of “primitivism,” and an examination of gender roles in the *oeuvre*. In contrast to other systematic research, I rely almost exclusively on his short-form fiction. I further develop the embryonic discussion on his Tolstoian heritage and subtext as manifested through heretofore little-studied shorter works. My explorations result in a new assessment of Pil’niak as a moralist throughout his *oeuvre*.¹⁵³

I. Introduction to Pil’niak’s Biological *Ethos*

Biography

Scholarship

Departures from Mainstream Interpretation

Goals and Structure of the Dissertation

Chapter II: The Role of Biology in Pil’niak’s *Oeuvre*

A. Baseline Works: Pil’niak’s Earliest Positions on Biological Morality:

Animal Stories: “Tselaiia Zhizn’” (1915) and “Pozemka” (1917)

¹⁵³ Jensen also considers the early Pil’niak a moralist but does not examine his evolving *ethos* in detail.

“Biological” Human Story: “God ikh zhizni” (1915)

Culture Complicates Nature: “Kak obyknovenno” (1914-15)

B. The Early Domestic Phase: “Veter pered martom” (1919)

C. Harmony with Nature: Day or Night, Cosmos or Chaos?

“Proselki” (1919)

Elements from Golyi god (1920)

The Heart of Darkness: “Mat’ syra-zemlia” (1924)

D. Perfection Stories: Meditations on Rightness

A Perfect Match: “Vernost’” (1927)

A Perfect Union: “Zemlia na rukakh” (1928)

E. The Final Statement:

Motherhood and Love Ascendant: “Rozhdenie cheloveka” (1934)

Chapter III: Pil’niak Channeling Tolstoi? Yes and No

A. Introduction: The Tolstoian Subtext

B. Procreation: “Kak obyknovenno” (1914-5)

C. Anna Karenina nashego vremeni?: “Veter pered martom” (1919)

D. Love and/or Truth in Marriage: “Tul’skaia literatura” (1936)

Chapter IV: Investigatory Parameters

A. Mating, First Love, and Expectations: “Ivan-da-Mar’ia” (1921)

B. Love’s Boundaries: The Incest Temptation

“Smertel’noe manit” (1918) (controlled)

“Pookskii rasskaz” (1927) (sublimated)

“Nizhegorodskii otkos” (1927) (realized)

C. Parents and Children

Good Father, Bad Mother: “O Sevke” (1914); “Oдно” (1915);

Maternal Transcendence, Paternal Rejection and Acceptance

“Staryi syr” (1923)

“Chelovecheskii veter” (1925)

“Grego-Trimuntan” (1925)

“Pookskii rasskaz” (1927)

The Role of Genetic Tie to Progeny: How Important?

C. Conclusion: Mind Over Matter: Imagination and Reality, considering

elements of “O Sevke,” “Ivan-da-Mar’ia,”

“Chelovecheskii veter,” “Grego-Trimuntan,” “Pookskii
rasskaz,” “Tul’skaia literatura”

Pil’niak’s Voice in the Sexual Morality Debate

Notes

Texts: I have considered only those single-authored works of artistic fiction which concern individual personal relationships, and/or the communal relationship with nature; I have excluded travelogues and sketches, quasi-journalistic works, publicistic writings, etc. Also, I have limited my consideration, with one exception, to works published in the author’s lifetime; and again with one exception, to his shorter works. A major aspect of Pil’niak’s biological *ethos* is man’s relationship with death; space here allows only for consideration of birth, love, mating, and procreation. As mentioned above, I include biographical elements where they are relevant to the development of the *ethos*.

Dates: In the introduction I have dated works according to publication, as that would impact their critical response. For the rest of the dissertation I specify dates of the writing, rather than the publication, of the works; I am using Gary Browning's chronology unless otherwise noted.

Primary texts: Wherever possible I have relied on the 2003 six-volume Sobranie sochinenii¹⁵⁴ of Pil'niak's works for citation purposes, as this is the most comprehensive collection now available and contains originally published versions of works that were later republished in edited form due to censorship issues, or in some cases were not republished at all. However, this collection is not complete. Therefore I have used versions from other anthologies, or in their originally published form, where necessary.

Translations: All translations are mine unless otherwise noted.

¹⁵⁴ Boris Pil'niak, Sobranie sochinenii v shesti tomakh, sost. K. Andronikashvili-Pil'niak (Moskva: Terra-Knizhnyi Klub, 2003).

Chapter II

The Role of Biology in Pil'niak's *Oeuvre*

Baseline Works: Pil'niak's Earliest Positions on Biological Morality

Pil'niak published his first story under his own name, a sketch called "Vesnoi,"¹⁵⁵ in 1909 at the age of fourteen. He had a few other sketches published anonymously in a journal which specialized in publishing works of new authors (and always did so anonymously) in those early years. His first adult publication under his own name was in 1915, when he considered his adult writing career to have begun.¹⁵⁶ I am examining a few stories from his very earliest adult writings, 1914-17, in an attempt to articulate the biologically-related moral values evident at the very beginning of his career.

Pil'niak stakes out a straightforward set of values pertaining to life and procreation in two animal stories, "Tselaia zhizn'" ("A Whole Life")¹⁵⁷ and "Pozemka" ("The Snow Wind"),¹⁵⁸ along with a human life-cycle story "God ikh zhizni" ("A Year of their Life")¹⁵⁹ and a Tolstoian morality tale, "Kak obyknovenno" ("As Usual").¹⁶⁰ The first work is an almost completely unromanticized, Darwinistic story describing the life

¹⁵⁵ "In Springtime"; Browning 12.

¹⁵⁶ K. B. Andronikashvili-Pil'niak, "1915" 155-56.

¹⁵⁷ Also published as "Nad ovragom," "Above the Ravine." Written July, 1915, first published in 1916.

¹⁵⁸ Written 1917, first published 1918.

¹⁵⁹ Written December 1915, according to Browning, but dated by the author "1916"; this could merely indicate the change of calendars in effect at a later publication date. First published 1917.

¹⁶⁰ Written 1914-1915, according to K. B. Andronikashvili-Pil'niak, "1915" 157. Story first published 1923, never republished.

cycle of two eagle owls, their mating, breeding, and finally the female's acquisition of a younger, stronger mate when the current one ages beyond his ability to provide.

“Pozemka” is a similarly naturalistic story of the leader of a wolf pack, with the added elements of mourning, premeditation and vengeance (or, one could say, justice) for a mate who had been trapped and killed. “God ikh zhizni” portrays the mating year of a pair of primitive humans who remain highly motivated by instinct, but in whom spiritual and cultural elements also begin to appear; this is a sort of temporally limited human version of “Tselaia zhizn’.” The fourth tale, “Kak obyknovenno,” is a morality tale with a more sophisticated, contemporary story line demonstrating the new complexities that enter human life as altered by culture, requiring that humans not only moderate the animalistic drives and seasonal behavior ordained by “instinct” but also apply reasoning ability and an active conscience. Now right human living requires self-awareness and self-control to maintain purchase on the path which nature has ordained.

Animal Stories I: “Tselaia zhizn’” (1915)

“Tselaia zhizn’”¹⁶¹ depicts the thirteen-year life cycle of a pair of eagle owls, from just before their mating through the male's death. This seems truly a nature story, in which emphasis falls on ever-present natural danger and the precariousness of survival¹⁶² and on the unsentimental acceptance of death as a necessary hazard of the struggle for life. The birds' lives are organized by the seasons: spring for courtship and mating, summer for hatching and training of fledglings, autumn for the fledglings' departure in face of approaching winter, and winter exclusively for the survival effort. The narrator

¹⁶¹ I am citing from “Tselaia zhizn’,” B. A. Pil'niak: *Sobranie socheninii v shesti tomakh*, t.1 (Moskva: Terra-Knizhnyi Klub, 2003) 295-303. This collection will be hereinafter referred to as “6-vol. coll.”

¹⁶² Browning sees in this an allegory to human life: “Nowhere is the allegory of man's condition more convincing than in Pilniak's subtle emphasis on the precarious nature of life” (97).

repeatedly reminds the reader that the birds are totally directed by seasonal instinct, incapable of anything approximating conscious thought: “On ne umel dumat’. On delal eto potomu, chto tak veled tot instinkt, kotoryi pravil im” (302).¹⁶³ The male’s paternal instinct is aroused in the season of birth and rearing, and directs all his attention and energy to the offspring,¹⁶⁴ although each autumn the birds part with the year’s fledglings “bezrazlichno” (“indifferently”) (302). This totally instinct-driven male bird nevertheless experiences some vague sensation of paternal pride; “[on] ne umel dumat’, i edva li chuvstvoval, no chuvstvovalos’ v nem, chto on gord, u svoego priamogo dela, kotoroe vershit s velikoi radost’iu” (301).¹⁶⁵ He is biologically drawn to mate with his female, but her “change of season,” in comparison to *estrus* in mammals, is not apparent to him; he is said to be “smushchennyi, vinovatyi tem, chto ne predugadal veleniia samki, veleniia instinkta, vlozhennogo v samku” (300),¹⁶⁶ when his mate unexpectedly rejects his advances at the end of her mating season. Although he is still drawn to her, her instinct prevails. Ultimately the male becomes unable to provide for his mate, due to a wound he sustained so long ago in the courtship competition. Having spent virtually her entire mated life on the nest, she leaves it now and finds a younger, healthier mate who defeats the old one, leading to his death; finally wolves consume the old male’s body. This behavior acknowledges the necessity of accepting death, both one’s own and that of

¹⁶³ “He was not capable of thought. He did this because the instinct which governed him so ordered.”

¹⁶⁴ “[V]sia zhizn’ ego byla zapolnena instinktom, perenosiaschim vsiu voliu ego i zhizneoshchushchenie na pentsov” (301). “His whole life was informed by instinct, which transferred all his will and sense of life to the fledglings.”

¹⁶⁵ “he was not capable of thought, and just barely of feeling, but it made itself felt within him that he was proud, in his primary business, which he did with great joy.”

¹⁶⁶ “embarrassed/confused, guilty that he had not divined the commands of the female, the commands of the instinct implanted in her.”

others, as right and natural. It also asserts Pil'niak's view of death's physical, material aspect --- even in the final decade of his writing, Pil'niak will emphasize the ultimate material fate of human bodies, which are returned to an elemental natural state, usually via consumption by worms, wolves, or other animals.¹⁶⁷

In this and all his "wild animal stories," Pil'niak chose to write about animals whose instinctive behavior humans would do well to emulate, those whose instincts cause them to mate for life, the female to accept or reject the male's advances and to maintain the home; the male to give priority to the female's food supply during the mating period, and to be a significant provider of protection, food and care to his young as well as to his mate, not only traveling far and wide for provisions but guarding the nest and rescuing the awkward young who fall from it.¹⁶⁸ The strength of the paternal instinct and male role in the upbringing of offspring are especially noteworthy. Despite the professed omnipotence of instinct, the inability to think, and the indifference with which the young are allowed to flee the nest, the male is said to experience pride, guilt, and a sense of satisfaction in fulfilling his role effectively, implying that these emotions have an instinctive base.

"Biological Human Story": "God ikh zhizni"¹⁶⁹

This story repeats themes from "Tselaiia zhizn'" but focuses on a single human couple for only the first year of their relationship.¹⁷⁰ This forest couple, Marina and

¹⁶⁷ I have found no evidence of Pil'niak's belief in any kind of afterlife other than in the works (including progeny) and memories a person leaves behind.

¹⁶⁸ Browning refers to this story as an "animal allegory" (97), Jensen as a "universal parable" (109).

¹⁶⁹ I am citing from "God ikh zhizni," 6-vol. coll., vol.1, 312-321.

¹⁷⁰ Structurally the stories are quite similar as well, with ten ("Tselaiia zhizn'") or eleven ("God . . .") chapters similarly ordered: natural setting, mating, etc.

Demid, lives with a young bear, Makar, in a small hunter/trapper community in the far northern taiga. As with the owls, human and animal activity is ordained by the seasonal flow: spring for mating and births, summer for life and growth, autumn for conception of offspring and preparation for winter, winter for gestation during nature's death period. The narrator implies, rather than asserts, the influence of instinct. These people are very close to nature and obedient to its rhythms but are slightly insulated from it as cultural forces have begun to influence human life. Whereas the owls lived outside in an elevated nest, Demid and Makar, soon to be joined by Marina, live in a wooden dwelling; the immediacy of nature is still evident, as its smells, sounds, temperatures and sights are said to enter or be felt inside the cabin. As with the owls, males choose their mates in a competitive springtime ritual in which the dominant male wins his choice of mates. A primitive level of culture is evident from the "rules" and practices of these mating gatherings. The young women assemble for this ritual and sing songs of "Lada" (320, 321),¹⁷¹ drawing males of the appropriate age.¹⁷² These almost subhuman women indifferently follow the males who have chosen them, totally submitting to the males' will. The males, on the other hand, seem better endowed cognitively and linguistically and initiate the pairings, as well as provide for their families through hunting and trapping, territory allocation, housing, and care.

Whereas "Tselaiia zhizn'" focuses more on male instincts, the female gets her due in this story. Like the owls, "Marina ne umela dumat', --- ee mysli vorochalis', kak

¹⁷¹ Folklorist/historian B. Rybakov identifies this Slavic pagan deity and her daughter Lelia as goddesses of springtime; he further associates them with autumnal goddesses of birth and procreation (Rozhanitsy). "Both pairs of goddesses are extremely archaic, with origins in the hunting culture of the neolithic," according to Linda Ivanits. She references Rybakov's research in her Russian Folk Belief (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, Inc., 1992) 17; see also her note 63, p. 210.

¹⁷² Marina is twenty when she joins the mating ritual; Demid's age is not specified.

ogromnye, tiazhelye bulyzhnikhi, --- medlenno i neukliuzhe. Ona umela chuiat' [. . . .]" (316).¹⁷³ She follows Demid home and joyously submits to him ("otdalas'," (316), also used to refer to the female owl) sexually at his invitation. She seems to obey a nesting (or cosmogonic?) instinct, cleaning her room and decorating it symmetrically with animal skins and embroidered items; this again suggests a primitive level of culture and aesthetics. At this point the spiritual realm accessible to humans is introduced: she hangs an icon of the Bogomater' (the Christian Mary, "Mother of God") in the corner, making her room, which still smells of the taiga, similar to --- in a phrase which repeats as a refrain --- "lesnuiu molel'niu, gde lesnye liudi moliatsia svoim bozhkam" (316).¹⁷⁴ This is a major step forward from the owls, a recognition of the fundamentally religious nature of man and very early evidence of Pil'niak's sanctification of motherhood. This icon may represent a true spiritual reminder of the Orthodox Mother of God but is more likely, in this time of apparent *dvoeverie*,¹⁷⁵ to be a fertility amulet. In any case, it indicates the sacred nature of woman, of wife, and of potential motherhood. This room ultimately becomes the "family room" where Demid, Marina, and Makar spend their evenings in cozy companionship, a place that is rarely mentioned without the "forest chapel" epithet. Marina, having been chosen to wife, makes this place holy.

The bear represents another sign of human superiority over the animal kingdom. The bear was the sacred totem of primitive forest Russia, actually considered the lord of

¹⁷³ "Marina was incapable of thought---her thoughts rolled about like huge, heavy cobblestones, slowly and awkwardly. She was able to sense"

¹⁷⁴ "a forest chapel, where forest people pray to their gods."

¹⁷⁵ "Dvoeverie" ("double belief") represents a historically Russian hybrid religious view combining pagan and Christian elements.

the forest.¹⁷⁶ This particular bear does have special status: that he has a name indicates a sort of equality with humans, and he displays elements of human intelligence and comprehension. But this bear has been domesticated, subjugated to the human lord; he lives in Demid's house, each male in his own room; Demid disciplines him when necessary, as he would a child (which also portends Demid's later paternal role). Furthermore, Marina displaces the bear not once, but twice: first when Demid brings her home and gives her Makar's room,¹⁷⁷ and later when Marina, experiencing the first nausea of pregnancy, displaces Makar from Demid's bed in the other room. The bear's presence (and subjugation to humans within the home) throughout the story exemplifies the desired harmony of man and nature. However, nature's unifying effect on man and beast and the hierarchical distinction between them are both underlined when Makar, having attained ursine maturity, leaves forever to find his own mate upon watching Marina give birth.

Continuity with humanity's more primitive, instinct-driven past and its more highly developed future form is shown in several ways. The description of Marina's appearance focuses on indicators of health and sexuality, suggestive of her animal role in procreation. Overwhelmed by the sensation of the baby's first movements *in utero*, she speaks (crude, inarticulate) "besstydneye, bessviaznye slova"¹⁷⁸ to Demid (319). But pregnancy transforms and humanizes her (as it will Mariia Antonova in "Rozhdenie cheloveka" in 1934), her foggy, intoxicated eyes becoming surprisingly bright, clear, and

¹⁷⁶ Folklore and other sources attest to this. Afanas'ev 57 is notable for showing the bear's terrible power. A. N. Afanas'ev, Narodnye russkie skazki v trekh tomakh (Moskva: Izdatel'stvo Nauka, 1984).

¹⁷⁷ Makar resists this, striking Marina. After Demid punishes him, Makar and Marina become friends.

¹⁷⁸ "shameless, disconnected words"

joyous and a new aspect of chastity developing in her (318).¹⁷⁹ Like the female owl on her nest, Marina remains primarily in her chapel-like room and occupies herself with the feminine tasks of keeping the fires burning, cooking, removing the pelts from the animals Demid has killed; outdoors, she keeps their plot of land clean. Her functions are creative and ordering. Marina's pregnancy impels her to weave and decorate items for the baby to wear. Demid, for his part, provides for his growing family materially and emotionally, staying home when Marina is nauseous, cutting the umbilical cord and washing the baby after its birth. She and Demid will raise the baby, clothe it, and care for it in ways not necessary for owls, wolves, and bears. More culturally significant are the lullabies she begins singing after her first awareness of the child's movement: predictions of his hunting prowess and his choice of the most beautiful mate, indicating her desire to produce an alpha male, a leader and builder of culture.

It is symbolically significant that Marina gives birth on the pagan equivalent of Easter, the day that decorated eggs are exchanged. All nature is mating and giving birth, the girls are heard singing their mating songs in the background, Makar leaves to find his own mate, and a new year begins with birth and mating.

Animal Stories II: "Pozemka"¹⁸⁰

This story was written a little later than the others under discussion here, but it adds a few dimensions to the nature/biology stance. This is actually one of Pil'niak's "death" stories, but the life-oriented portion of the thematic has a place in our discussion.

¹⁷⁹ This awakening of a sense of chastity (the word is mentioned twice: "tselomudrennoe," "tselomudrennonst") seems to me to be related to the awakening of the moral sense in the Garden of Eden; however, Marina's is a step forward, rather than a "Fall."

¹⁸⁰ I will be citing from "Pozemka," in Boris Pil'niak, *Byl'e* (München: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 1970) 104-112; this is a reprint of the Revel' publication of 1922.

The basic plot involves the leader (“vozhak”) of a wolf pack. After his mate is trapped and killed, the alpha wolf mourns in solitude for several days, then in turn “traps” and kills her human captor;¹⁸¹ these actions prevent the wolf-leader’s timely return to his pack. At his tardy return he is (expectedly) killed and a new leader established according to the natural order of wolf life.

The cyclic nature of wolf life is emphasized, but now along with the seasons of life (birth, mating, procreation, death) and the year (hunt for three seasons, starve for one), the cycle of leadership is included, in this case a seven-year cycle.¹⁸² The election of a mate, at least for the leader, occurs upon assumption of leadership status, rather than in a specific meteorological season. The leadership cycle ends, at least for this old alpha wolf, when his mate dies; then “u nego nichego ne ostalos’. On zhil, chtoby est’ i rodit’” (111).¹⁸³ Too old to compete successfully for a new mate, he will be unable to “rodit’ ,” hence his cycle is over, he must die, and the pack must acquire a new leader.

Like the owls and humans we have examined, wolves behave according to instinct, but now “pack” behavior is added to the instinctive drives of the individual. As with the human mating ritual above, there are “rules” to pack behavior, usually involving leadership. A new leader (with the help of the pack) replaces the current one by physical combat in “zverinoe vozmezdie” (111),¹⁸⁴ when the old one is perceived as not fulfilling his responsibilities in leading the pack to food and otherwise caring for it. Once a wolf

¹⁸¹ The human participation in the wolves’ lives is not an opposition, man to animal, but a representation of the perils that exist in a world in which all are in competition for survival.

¹⁸² It is significant that the leader’s mourning period is seven days and his leadership cycle seven years; the narrator emphasizes this parallel at the story’s conclusion. In biblical numerology, the number seven signifies completion of a cycle.

¹⁸³ “he had nothing left. He had lived in order to eat and procreate.”

¹⁸⁴ “animal vengeance”

becomes leader, death is his only way out; withdrawal is not possible. The pack obeys the leader, tolerating even the death penalty for a member's misbehavior, as long as the leader fulfills his functions. Other rules (not specified as such by the narrator) also come into play as pack instinct: when the pack is in doubt, it waits until a member (not necessarily the leader) takes action, then the entire pack follows, e.g., the attack on the dead calf which resulted in the leader's mate's death and the final attack on the leader which resulted in his replacement and death. Although these are still animals, and are merely repeating previous processes year after year rather than building any kind of cumulative culture, the leadership/pack relationship makes their instinctive behavior more sophisticated. The new leader chooses a mate with the best possible genetics, this new leader choosing the daughter of his predecessor.

Besides leadership qualities, the old wolf leader exhibits behavior suggestive of spiritual capacity. A young wolf led the undecided but starving pack to fall on the calf, causing the leader's mate to be caught in a hidden trap. The next day the leader, in clear revenge, tears the young wolf limb from limb. He then leaves the pack for six days, ignoring their nightly howling summonses, to mourn in his lair, visit the site of his mate's death until the final trace of her scent has disappeared, and roam the area in search of the humans who set the trap. Descriptions of his offspring (previously) playing near the entry to his lair suggest his memory of them in association with his lost mate. His body language (including tears) indicates deep mourning. In full awareness that the pack will kill him for his absence, he seeks out the farm of his mate's trapper, and devises his own figurative trap by scurrying to await the man at each end of a short stretch of road until

the human trapper cannot escape.¹⁸⁵ The wolf leader takes his revenge, runs the fields and forests for a day, returns to his pack to die, and meets his death at their fangs and claws exactly seven days after his mate's death. In seven more days, spring begins, along with a new leadership cycle for the pack.

The primary values promoted in this story include the acceptance of one's own death and the completion of one's own cycle, one's work having been completed with honor. However, it also suggests the instinctive qualities of mourning and avenging the loss of a loved one, even at great --- or ultimate --- cost. The wolf's vengeance may also indicate that a mate is to be fought for, even after her untimely death. His position as mate/father is more important than his role as leader, suggesting that one's biological life role within the family has precedence over a social or professional one. Elements of premeditation, calculation, and priority-setting are evident in this wolf, making him seem more humanly rational, but these too must be seen also as (valued) instinctive behaviors. Although the beginning of the wolf-pair's relationship is not depicted, it is clear that they were mates for thirteen years, living and procreating in health and gladness. The new leader-pair is united by strong genetic traits, as undoubtedly their predecessors were.

Nature Stories: Initial Values

In these three nature stories, certain "biological" values are apparent. Humans and animals should and do operate in harmony, not conflict, with instinct and nature's cycles. The universal struggle for survival in nature's hard world is emphasized more in the animal than human stories (in part because of the protective housing and tool usage afforded in human culture) but exists for all. There are no guarantees for survival. In the

¹⁸⁵ The story of this man's death is reworked to describe the death of Chekistka Kseniia Ordynina in "Ivan-da-Mar'ia" (1921), to be discussed below.

animal stories, Pil'niak has chosen to depict instincts whose human emulation will assure healthy survival and continuity of the individuals and the species; violence is limited to specific contexts such as food acquisition and competition for mates or leadership, acts which enhance survival; destructive violent instincts which lead to ongoing states of war or abuse are not represented. The common focus on “male” and “female” indicates gender specificity of at least some roles; the extension to “leader” adds another dimension to the social structure. Males are the selectors of mates, and they do so for healthy propagation and long-term union, rather than for transient pleasure or momentary response to *estrus* cycles in varying individuals (promiscuity). Unions are monogamous and monandrous. A male mate, like a leader, is to be replaced when he is unable to provide; the unwarranted death of a (female, at least) mate is to be mourned and, if possible, avenged.¹⁸⁶ Paternal and maternal instincts are strong with respect to propagation and care of offspring, with males acting as providers and protectors, females as offspring-bearers, nurturers, and keepers of the hearth, lair or nest. The masculine right to choose a mate is determined by combat with other males, and females generally accept their election. Sexual activity has procreation as its goal in all cases, and paired unions are characterized by mutual devotion. Human sexual activity on the physical level is associated with mutual desire and emotional, if not (yet) spiritual, union as well as physical. Chaste human femininity, and by extension sexual union and motherhood, is associated with holiness.

¹⁸⁶ It is not clear from these stories whether these particular generalizations are gender-dependent. I would expect vengeance to be an instinctive response to any unwarranted death, and any mate incapable of fulfilling his/her basic function (provider, defender, nurturer, propagator) to be eliminated, in accordance with the Darwinian tone.

There is no sense of cultural progress in the animal stories, only instinctive repetition of annual or social cycles year after year, although there is a sophisticated social dynamic in the wolf-pack. However, cultural development, however primitive, is indicated in the human story, in the development of territory, the use of tools, weaving, and constructed homes, evidence of religious belief, traditional music and art, collective mating and egg-exchanging rituals, and blessings for the next generation as expressed in Marina's lullabies. There is little sense of community in the trapping settlement, with isolated family units, but the mating ritual is a collective activity; communal behavior, especially the demand for effective leadership, is demonstrated in the slightly later wolf story.

Culture Complicates Nature: "Kak obyknovenno"¹⁸⁷

This is a thoroughly modern human story in contrast to the three discussed above: a depiction of the hazards of the contemporary "civilized" world as opposed to the primitive or "natural" one. The story is framed by a regular visit by a group of young men to a restaurant, Poloniia, where their conversations routinely end up with discussions of women. This evening's main "speaker," the journalist Mironov, relates the most memorable event in his life and its effects on him.

In his earlier life as a doctor, he was serving in a provincial town clinic. At that time he was engaged to Ol'ga, an intelligent, hard-working student of good family, an extraordinary young woman of serenity and purity. With all his heart he loved her, her

¹⁸⁷ I will be citing from "Kak obyknovenno," *Ekho: Dvukhnedel'nyi zhurnal*, 6 (1923) 1-4 (1 fev. 1923); additional elements of this story will be discussed below in the Tolstoi section. This story was written in 1914 but rewritten in 1915 after Pil'niak's extremely painful breakup with his fiancée, the poet Nadia Pavlovich. While the two were on a Volga cruise in summer 1915, she became ill and went to Moscow for medical treatment and an abortion, either spontaneous (miscarriage) or therapeutic, took place. The loss of this child and his subsequent recognition of the couple's significant differences in life values are reflected in many of Pil'niak's stories. See K. B. Andronikashvili-Pil'niak, "1915" 158-164.

thoughts and her soul, and he looked forward to their marriage and good life together. While she was away studying in Moscow, he whiled away the winter evenings playing chess with her good-natured father. However, in early spring, “kogda osobenno obstriaiutsia instinkty” (2),¹⁸⁸ without giving it any thought at all, he spent a night of passion with Natasha, his servant-girl, a village maiden of no particular beauty but incredible vivacity, energy, and cheer. A month later Natasha came to him, fearfully disclosing her pregnancy. With the sole goal of eliminating this problem as quickly as possible, Mironov immediately performed an abortion. Upon recognition that this deed was done, that the child was no more, and hearing Natasha ask what he was doing, Mironov was suddenly overwhelmed by the realization of the irreparability of his deed. He relates to his listeners the existential effects on the various individuals affected: Natasha, who, in a street encounter two years later was drunk, trying to spit in his face; Ol’ga, who returned two weeks after the abortion and asked if it was true “about Natasha” (2) and whose nobility of spirit totally humiliated Mironov as she gave him her hand in parting; Ol’ga’s father, who as an old man “understood everything better than” the speaker himself (3); and himself, abandoning his career and marriage plans, leaving town forever a month after the abortion. A single, unthinking night of bodily pleasure rippled forth in damage or destruction for everyone close to him, not just the two “lovers.”

The emotional and spiritual effects he observes and experiences are the most important (and appalling) to him. He describes the situation and state of mind of pregnant Natasha: having lost her virginity to a man she loved but who was engaged to another, she anticipated parental rejection, social ostracism, and divine punishment; she was

¹⁸⁸ “when instincts are especially intensified”

personally isolated and without friends or advocates; and ultimately she felt intense personal guilt before God and self-disgust as a vile being in a wonderful world. Mironov emphasizes the unexpectedness of his own post-abortion sensations: the heavy fog of depression followed by an unimaginable, unforeseeable sense of love for the baby itself and of his own vileness for killing it; a confused love for Natasha, not for herself but because she was carrying his child; shame for the outrage he, as a dirty child-killer, has committed against someone as pure, innocent, and good as Ol'ga; his own regret and his sense of bearing Natasha's sins within himself. And more.

Mironov has learned from this life-shattering experience. Sexual union is equivalent to conception; the two phenomena cannot be separated. He had entered the liaison with Natasha for a night of pleasure, to meet the demands of his body, an ordinary act done just "as usual." But he learned that sexual union was anything but ordinary. He concludes that sexual contact which takes place without openness to conception is evil --- this is why prostitution is so wrong, and even family birth control (leading to childless homes, or mini-brothels) must be condemned.¹⁸⁹ Abortion is more than reprehensible.

Who is guilty in this case? Natasha feels herself guilty, as does penitent Mironov, who sees himself as bearing Natasha's sins as well as having wrongly entered a relationship for pleasure rather than love and procreation. Although the story opens with a Bible citation, there is no traditional Christian interpretation of woman as temptress; both participants sense their own guilt, and the epigraph (Gen. 9:6) suggests that guilty Mironov, having shed human blood, will ultimately pay with his own. If there is anything to be blamed, it seems to me, it is the springtime mating instinct that has been so positively described (glorified?) in the other stories of this period. The sole explicit

¹⁸⁹ Birth control is not overtly alluded to but is implicit in Mironov's characterization of the childless home.

mention of instinct in this story pertains to Mironov's springtime motivation to seek momentary sexual release (and to do so unthinkingly) and forget his beloved fiancée.

This is an instinct that he clearly should have resisted.

Rules of the Game

These early stories present the biological moral principles of young Boris Pil'niak. Clearly as a young man in his early twenties he cannot have developed a full and complete ethical system, and the faulty science and medicine¹⁹⁰ informing "Kak obyknovenno" is readily apparent, but early elements of his later *ethos* can easily be detected here. Some of these elements will develop freely, and others will be modified in one way or another.

In the natural world of "Tselaia zhizn'," "God ikh zhizni," and "Pozemka," the goal is to survive, reproduce, and continue the species; in the case of human beings, this also includes the building of culture, generation by generation. Behavior is highly influenced by instinct and various natural cycles, with which humans should strive to live in harmony. Males compete in violence for their mates and then live out their lives (including sexual expression) with that one mate in harmony and devotion, fulfilling the impulses of maternal and paternal instincts to produce, rear, and release each healthy new generation. There is no evidence of promiscuity, only serial monogamy when a mate dies or cannot fulfill his/her life functions. Human women, in their wifely (hence potentially maternal) role are holy, set apart; humans also show a recognition of a higher controlling power, be it Nature or some sort of deity. Vengeance is instinctive and appropriate in the case of unjust or unwarranted harm or death. Death comes to all in time and is to be

¹⁹⁰ The pregnancy would not have been certain a single month after the sexual encounter, nor is it likely that Natasha would wait until mid-abortion to ask Mironov what he was doing, for example.

mourned when it is untimely; humans and beasts can be proud to have fulfilled their natural functions effectively and honorably.

The “natural” world and the “civilized” one still have some values in common, primarily the indissolubility of the tie between sexual union and procreation. Others include the acceptance of death at the end of one’s life cycle, at one’s physical return to the earth, and pride in having fulfilled one’s life function, defined primarily as having mated, procreated, and reared healthy (if human, creative and contributing) offspring.¹⁹¹ Mourning and at times vengeance (as retribution for injustice) are still appropriately driving forces in life.

However, the “civilized” modern world, where nature’s rhythms must confront culture, is much more complex. Instincts still have impact, but spirituality, reason, responsibility/guilt, and self-control must enter (and complicate) the picture. Humans must be self-aware and discerning in deciding which instincts and natural seasons to obey, and when and how to do so. Blind submission to instinct now leads more toward danger than away from it, as unthinking instinctive acts can ripple into unforeseen but deep and widespread damage and destruction. Humans must use technology with discernment; prevention and termination of pregnancy are wrong, as they misuse the sexual union, dissociating it from its procreative function. The social institution of

¹⁹¹ Another very early story, “Zemskoe delo” (“A Zemstvo Affair”), written in 1915 (dated by K. B. Andronikashvili-Pil’niak, “1915” 156), and published the same year, must be mentioned in this connection, although its main theme is personal and professional, rather than biological, ethics. In this story two elderly Zemstvo physicians achieve a moral victory within Zemstvo professional politics but finish as losers, having lost their jobs, to which they had devoted their entire beings. Both are single, without family, and end up with nowhere to go, no reason to live. The man laments that he had spent his life working but “[s]voei zhizni ne bylo” (“I had no life”); she says that “ia ne znaiu, kuda ia poedu, chto budu delat’ . . . zachem zhila . . .” (“I don’t know where I’ll go, what I’ll do . . . why I have lived . . .”) (53). In a Chekhovian conclusion, the man contemplates inviting her to live on his estate to grow flowers together but drives on without taking action. The narrator points out that it is already too late. To Pil’niak, (professional) work is important, but creating a family essential, for people as well as animals. Citations from Boris Pil’niak, “Zemskoe delo,” *Povesti i rasskazy: 1915-1929* (Moskva: Sovremennik, 1991) 38-54.

prostitution is wrong for the same reason. Men no longer chose mates through physical competition based only on genetic potential, but presumably through a negotiated process based on procreative potential and also on compatibility of intellect, family, spiritual state, companionship value, and life goals which involve propagating the species while building and developing human culture over the generations. One mate at a time is still the rule, as the purpose of mating is procreation, and infidelity to a chosen (hence holy) wife is blasphemous. Women by definition are initially pure but may be corrupted by men using them for momentary pleasure.

The Early Domestic Phase: “Veter pered martom”

Pil’niak’s works in the roughly defined period between the 1915-17 “Baseline” stories discussed above and 1922, when his career exploded with the publication of Golyi god and his foreign travels began, tended to focus on personal and family issues in the Russian provinces --- and of course, the Revolution and its effects. Certain themes associated with his biological *ethos* were frequently dealt with during this period: the maternal instinct and how it played out in different scenarios;¹⁹² marital issues such as infidelity, boredom, coldness, loss of love; single parenting; abortion and venereal disease; seduction and unwed pregnancy; and the role of technology vis-à-vis nature. Characters seem to migrate from work to work; at least some names recur (e.g., Agrenev, Polunin, Bitska, Ordynin, Arkhipov).¹⁹³ The characters, even if they bear identical names,

¹⁹² Such scenarios include barrenness, desire of an unmarried woman for a child, unwed pregnancy, maternal separation from child, maternal rejection of child, etc.

¹⁹³ This repetition of names tends to give the stories having common characters a cyclic character, such as the Polunin stories (“Polovod’e,” (1917), “Smertel’noe manit” (1918), “Snega” (“by 1919”)), which Jensen conjectures were to be combined in a larger novelistic work, a “Tolstoian project.” These stories feature the landowner Polunin and his union with a forest girl after his previous relationship with a sophisticated urban

tend to be similar but not truly identical in nature and circumstance, however. Engineer Agrenev, for example, appears in “Prostye rasskazy”¹⁹⁴ and “Veter pered martom,”¹⁹⁵ both times in a cold marriage, but the exact circumstances and his personal history and behavior differ, as does the name of his daughter. Cold, calculating women, hedonistic philandering men, youths on the brink of adulthood, methodical seducers, brothers seeking vengeance (or abortions) for their seduced, pregnant unwed sisters, children wise beyond their years: a basic typology of characters and situations is presented. The earliest stories show little subtlety in character portrayal: a character is all good or all bad. However, as time passes Pil’niak begins to explore why a wife might be cold or a husband unfaithful; such examinations result in more complex characters and more realistic conflicts. These early works usually take place in the countryside (pre-revolutionary estates, dachas, Zemstvo communities) and provincial towns; later these settings expand to include factories, revealing another perspective on Pil’niak’s concept of man’s appropriate (or inappropriate) relationship with nature and the earth.

The artistic merit of “Veter pered martom,”¹⁹⁶ to be discussed here, is not particularly striking --- it was never anthologized or republished in the writer’s lifetime -- - but it is very representative of sexual and biological themes treated in Pil’niak’s works

woman. The details are not sufficiently consistent to allow them to make up a coherent larger work such as a novel or novella, but they still form a unity of the cycle type. “Smertel’noe manit” will be treated below in Chapter IV, Investigatory Parameters.

¹⁹⁴ “Simple Stories,” written “by 1919” and first published 1921. Two of the stories in the cycle had been published previously: “Pervyi den’ vesny” (“The First Day of Spring”), written “by 1915” and first published separately in 1916; “Vsegda komandirovka” (“Always a Business Trip”), written “by Dec. 1918” and first published as “Pered komandirovkoj” (“Before the Business Trip”) in 1918. (Publication information for the latter is from note 8, Letter to P. N. Zaitsev, 6 Jan. 1919, No. 38 (60)).

¹⁹⁵ “Wind before March,” written February 1919; first published 1922.

¹⁹⁶ I will be citing from “Veter pered martom” in Boris Pil’niak: Povesti i rasskazy: 1915-1929 (Moskva: Sovremennik, 1991) 102-124.

at this time.¹⁹⁷ The one prevalent Pil’niakian motif that it lacks is the maternal drive manifested in such strength as to lead a woman to seek a single sexual encounter simply in order to produce a child to rear on her own. Formally this story is fairly complex, with non-chronological narration and multiple subplots presented according to the perspectives of the informing personas. For this reason a detailed retelling of the story will be necessary. The narration itself creates certain ambiguities, especially with respect to the time line and status of various relationships, as the story depicts a very liminal time in the characters’ lives. A second interpretation of part of this story will be presented in the Tolstoi chapter, below.

“Veter pered martom” takes place over the course of two late winter days in a remote forest settlement surrounding a dormant cement plant which is being returned to operation.¹⁹⁸ The plant itself is of course “unnatural,” being completely man-made and producing artificial material. “[S]urrounded by forests, lakes and swamps, remote, neglected, wild” (103), it is located in a depression by a limestone quarry, hence at lower altitude than the surrounding natural landscape. Its position and nocturnal flickering lights suggest hell. Various characters stand overlooking it at critical moments usually associated with past or imminent wrongdoing. The quarry, earth raped by man, is eerie and its wind emits wild howls which sound like voices in deathly anguish (“v predsmertnoi toske” (120)). The plant emits black smoke into the sky, and workers at

¹⁹⁷ A few other stories representative of this early domestic period (1917-1922) will be discussed below in Chapter IV, Investigatory Parameters.

¹⁹⁸ Jensen conjectures that this story is actually one Pil’niak referred to as “Taezhevskie zavody” when seeking its publication in 1919 (34, n. 28). The name “Taezhevskie zavody” does occur in the story text (106, 118), and Pil’niak’s letters 39, 40, and 43 to P. N. Zaitsev in February 1919 (61, 64-5, 67) refer to such a story. While this was written much too early to be considered a “reconstruction novel” like Gladkov’s *Tsement* (also, the plant rejuvenation is not foregrounded in the Pil’niak work), *Taezhevskie zavody* do play a role in *Golyi god* as the remote factories miraculously resurrected by the Bolsheviks.

shift change flow out of its exits in a black stream, “always alien and strange” (103).¹⁹⁹ This setting, an unnatural construct in the midst of nature, establishes a gloomy, “not right” atmosphere²⁰⁰ and exerts a sinister, chaotic influence on the local inhabitants; this atmosphere is deepened by the ever-blowing, consuming pre-March wind, said to “eat the snow” (103, 118, 126), part of the final blizzard of the season. This negative characterization of an industrial enterprise is an early expression of the intrinsic opposition between nature and machine technology which will take Pil’niak at least five more years to resolve. In this particular story, as in others of this period, the plant is a source and agent of chaos and destruction.

Significant personages include three “families” and two minor characters: (1) the Agrenevs: engineer Aleksandr, his estranged wife Anna, and daughter Ksenia,²⁰¹ who lives at home with Agrenev; (2) the Troparovs: Ol’ga, her engineer husband Sergei, and Sergei’s brother, “the student” Andrei, who is there to educate the plant workers about Communism; (3) the (Latvian) Bitskas: older brother Eduard Robertovich, pit foreman, and his nineteen-year-old sister Mariia; (4) eighteen-year-old Evgeniia, visiting her brother, the plant director, from Petersburg; and (5) the worker Koloturov (and his cronies). Each significant character (except Troparov and Koloturov, who are presented entirely negatively) is in some sort of personal crisis. The two engineer families are the most developed; as Jensen observes, each family member “represents a given emotional

¹⁹⁹ “vsegda chuzhie i strannye.”

²⁰⁰ The word “nekhorocho” (“not good”) is frequently used to describe the ambience surrounding the plant, quarry, and workers.

²⁰¹ Cyrillic “Ксения”

and ethical attitude to life, love and birth” (119). The individual perception of “freedom” is at issue in this story, as in many other Pil’niak works throughout his *oeuvre*.

The Agrenev Family

This family is the most positively presented group. They take life very seriously (if joylessly), expecting it to be difficult; they try to do the right thing and deal with life’s existential issues with honesty and mutual respect as they seek their way. The family is currently in disarray because of Anna’s recent departure. The separation was calm and amicable, without scandal, the husband “respecting human freedom” (112). Anna’s motivation for leaving the marriage was two-fold: she no longer loved Agrenev, and she was unsatisfied in a life devoted exclusively to the roles of wife and mother. Needing some sort of productive work, she went to work as a schoolteacher²⁰² and moved into teachers’ housing. She entered into an affair with the student Andrei because she knew it was time to “start over” (108); the coincidence of their political views brought them together, and she began to love him. She has since recognized that this relationship is wrong, since Andrei’s sole contribution to it is youthful sexual passion. Physical love without emotional warmth and spiritual affinity is meaningless to her as always, so she cannot justify their purely sex-based relationship, especially at the cost of separation from her child ---- maternal love, according to the narrator, is beyond human control (109).²⁰³ The teaching, too, just seems to boil down to mundane homework correction, rendering the work unrewarding (114).²⁰⁴ Ultimately she calls her husband and agrees to return to

²⁰² According to Pil’niak’s gender role *ethos*, teaching (nurturing children) is an appropriate job for a woman.

²⁰³ “[O]t rebenka ne mogla otorvat’sia, eta liubov’ ne podvlastna liudiam.”

him, at his request. She breaks up honestly with Andrei, citing the wrongness of their relationship (“nechistoplotno” (110)) and the inevitable pain caused by their breaking of life’s rules (109). She is sure, she says, that Agrenev is good and honest, but she does not know this about Andrei (109), and most of all she feels guilty before her daughter. Although she claims not to love Agrenev, she holds him in high esteem and expresses great regret for all the pain she has caused him and Ksenia.

Agrenev himself is an honest, honorable, sensitive husband and father whose views are probably most in line with those of Pil’niak in 1919.²⁰⁵ He shares Anna’s belief --- perhaps is even the source of it --- in some sort of cosmic balance, asserting that life has rules which one cannot ignore or break (114, 115).²⁰⁶ He sees marriage, once the

²⁰⁴ “Kazhdomu cheloveku otpushchena ego chasha, kotoruiu nado ispit’ --- ne khotela, ne mogla primirit’ sia s tem, chtoby byt’ tol’ko zhenoi, tol’ko mater’iu, --- no rabota ne dala nichego, krome tetradei” (114), Anna reflecting to herself.

²⁰⁵ There seem to be autobiographical elements in this story with respect to Agrenev and Anna. Pil’niak’s first child Natal’ia was born the previous year (late 1917, early 1918, depending on the calendar) and probably wife Masha became less sexually receptive to him at least temporarily. Pil’niak already had very strong feelings about the necessary relationship between sex and procreation and the father’s investment in the child’s birth (from the 1915 experience of losing his child with fiancée Nadia Pavlovich, whether this loss was in fact by real miscarriage, by abortion, or by abortion presented as miscarriage). Now (early 1919) Masha was likely not satisfied with just being a wife and mother and she was extremely busy with her work as a doctor in the typhus epidemic. Probably Pil’niak was contemplating the morality and options in their situation: sexless marriage until they want another child? adultery? Pil’niak even confessed, later, to a dalliance with Valentina Evgen’evna Chirikova in Natal’ia’s first year (Letter to D. A. Lutokhin, 10 Oct. 1923, No. 157 (237-8)). “The Kreutzer Sonata” and Anna Karenina were probably right there on Pil’niak’s shelf At least in autumn of 1918 Pil’niak was very depressed and feeling guilty (“dumaiu o tom, kakoi ia nekhoroishi” (“I think of how bad I am.”)) The truths he described in the same letter then to P. N. Zaitsev, his agent, appear in the story under discussion: “1.) Muzhchiny ne liubiat toi zhenshchiny, za kotoroi ukhazhivaiut; liubia, tak ne postupaiut. 2.) Brak ne est’ dolg k drugomu, a dolg k samomu sebe, --- pered samim soboi. 3.) Chelovek, izmeniaia, izmeniaet ne zhene, a sebe. 4.) Kogda chelovek glup, to eto nadolgo.” (“1.) Men do not love those women whom they pursue; when they love, they don’t act that way. 2.) Marriage is not a duty to another but to one’s own self --- before one’s own self. 3.) A man, cheating, betrays not his wife, but himself. 4.) When a person is stupid, it’s for a long time.”) To P. N. Zaitsev, 28 Nov. 1918, No. 36 (56-57). (The Troparov/Ol’ga/Mariia/Bitska plot exists with variations at least as early as 1915, so that is unlikely to be strongly influenced by Pil’niak’s current life. See for example “Pervyi sneg” (“First Snow”), written “by 1915” and first published 1917, for a similar brother/seducer/unwed pregnancy scenario, which K. B. Andronikashvili-Pil’niak (“1915” 157) considers a reworking of “Kak obyknovenno.”)

²⁰⁶ Agrenev is presented in the story only after Anna’s departure, so it is not always completely clear which attitudes and values result from his devastation at this time and which were part of his life view previously.

union has been established, as a duty less to another than to oneself in which (sexual) love is unnecessary (at least to him, with respect to Anna, who he believes is ultimately betraying herself more than him in her affair with Andrei). Lonely and devastated by Anna's departure, he reflects repeatedly on Anna's dalliance: that it must lack real love, since any sexual relationship entered without commitment and desire to have children is an "abomination" and "suffering" (112).²⁰⁷ It is clear to him that people should not and need not be controlled by sexual urges ("instincts"); that sex is part of a larger, naturally purposeful relationship and scheme of things. However, he is very aware that he is not privy to ultimate truth, that what to one person is indisputable is not necessarily true for someone else, and he tries to understand Anna's perspective, albeit with application of his own judgments. He attributes Anna's attraction to Andrei to its novelty (103), and her (idealistic) dreams of work, labor, and justification to unrealistic expectations of real life, which is necessarily mundane (113).²⁰⁸ Since Anna's departure, Agrenev has been striving to be "free," which to him means totally independent, in control of, rather than being controlled by, his needs, including instinctive ones.²⁰⁹ When Anna recognizes the

²⁰⁷ "Znal neprelozhno, chto liubvi nikakoi net, kak ne mozhnet byt', chto v zhizni soitis' mozhno odin raz, chtoby rodit', i inache nel'zia, nevozmozhno, inache merzost', stradanie." ("He knew unequivocally that there was no love, as there couldn't be; that in life a man and woman can unite only once, in order to reproduce, and otherwise it was not allowable, not possible, otherwise it was an abomination, suffering.") In Agrenev's belief system, a man is supposed to be an "odnoliub," mating once for life, as did the animals in the "Baseline" stories above; there could not be real love in Anna's relationship with Andrei, since only a permanent mating in order to build a family could justify a sexual relationship.

²⁰⁸ "Anna mechtala o rabote, o trude, ob opravdanii, ne znala, chto podlinnaia zhizn' --- zhizn' obyvatel'skaia [. . .]" ("Anna dreamed of work, of labor, of justification, (but) didn't know that real life was mundane life [. . .]")

²⁰⁹ He stops smoking, for example, to achieve freedom from a habit. "S togo dnia, kak ushla Anna, brosil kurit', khotel byt' svobodnym ot vsego, dazhe ot kuren'ia, ot vseh veshchei, istinno svobodnym, togda legko" ("From that day when Anna left he stopped smoking, wanting to be free of everything, even of smoking, of all things, truly free --- then it would be easy") (112). Pil'niak, too, would stop smoking (and drinking) when family pressures got to him, as he did in early 1924, having begun a relationship with future wife Ol'ga Sergeevna Shcherbinskaia but before leaving first wife Masha and the children in April of that

worthlessness of her relationship with Andrei and her irresistible need to be a mother to Ksenia, she consults with Agrenev; even after establishing that she does not love him, he tells her to return home, that pain ultimately cleanses and purifies, and that their unity is necessary for Ksenia; the highest duty of their union is ultimately to the child they have brought into the world. He sees this return home as Anna's sole moral option, since sexual relationships (such as hers with Andrei) solely for bodily gratification are indisputably abominable. He recalls the biblical injunction about vengeance (115),²¹⁰ knowing that Anna's behavior justifies divine retribution --- which would come, if it did, through her own self-destructive actions rather than literally by an act of God --- but hoping that true repentance (“obratnye puti”) can still preserve her from destruction.

Ksenia, the first child I will examine in any detail, plays a minor role but a crucial one in what she reveals about her parents and the precocious wisdom and essential rightness of children in Pil'niak's world. Agrenev and Anna are fundamentally healthy in taking their roles as parents (and their lives altogether) very seriously and they love Ksenia intensely, as she loves them. Ksenia lives with her father (along with a maid and nanny) in what used to be the family home. She is a normal playful little girl, albeit “not pretty” (111),²¹¹ with her own struggle in life. Agrenev wants to protect his beloved daughter from pain (as he protects himself), and plans to make her into a person for whom life is easy, who won't “measure [life] by instincts” (that is, by the pleasure principle and purely emotional gratification) and who “will know that one should do the

year. Letters to L. A. Lutokhin, 1 Jan. 1924, No. 171 (259-262) and M. M. Shkapskaia, same date, No. 172 (262).

²¹⁰ “Mne otmshchenie, i Az vozdam.” (“Vengeance is mine, and I will repay.”)

²¹¹ “nekrasivaia”

right thing because it is easier” to do so (112).²¹² As a father, he is concerned about her development, especially her “unchildlike” demeanor and behavior (112-113).²¹³ Like all good Pil’niak fathers, Agrenev is companionable and playful with his daughter; in this case he plays games with her at least partly in order to postpone difficult conversations about Anna. Ksenia is confused by his consistently positive characterization of Anna, which contrasts with the nanny’s reticence, but Agrenev evades her question about the reasons for Anna’s departure. Having seen her mother with schoolchildren, Ksenia observes that “there is a lot mysterious in God’s world” (112).²¹⁴ Delighted to learn that Anna is returning to them, Ksenia tells Agrenev that she knows all about Anna’s betrayal but that she, Ksenia, has forgiven her, and asks Agrenev if he has forgiven her as well (123).

The depiction of this family in particular is an early exploration of the nature of love, a task to which Pil’niak will devote much of his writing career. The use of the word “love” in this story seems predominantly tied to parental love and sexual desire, provoking the reader’s contemplation of the real meaning of love. There is compelling evidence for the broader meanings of “love” --- respect, consideration, spiritual affinity, desire for the well-being of the beloved, etc. --- in the Agrenevs’ relationship, and

²¹² “[. . .] Agrenev podumal, chto sozdast iz nee cheloveka, kotoromu budet legko i kotoryi ne budet merit’ instinktami, budet znat’, chto khoroshee nado tvorit’ uzhe potomu, chto eto legche.”

²¹³ “ne detskii,” really “not age-appropriate.” Children in Pil’niak’s works typically reason and behave “ne detski,” showing wisdom, understanding, compassion, and forgiveness beyond their years, but they also may display the sadness that results from such advanced discernment. Ksenia’s fearless claim of having seen a devil on the stairway that so upset Agrenev (112) has an autobiographical source. Pil’niak wrote on several occasions of his great-grandmother, who saw devils in corners or in other spots; he often argued that each person must be free to see his own devils. See, for example, letters to D. A. Lutokhin, 3 May 1922, No. 112 (165-170) and A. K. Voronskii, ~ 30 Sept. 1923, No. 156 (233-237). Pil’niak’s individualistic relativism is further reflected in this story by Agrenev’s confidence that he is not privy to ultimate truth (112). Pil’niak never departs from his advocacy of individual perception and experience.

²¹⁴ “Na bozh’em svete ochen’ mnogo tainstvennogo.” Ksenia here is echoing her nanny’s turn of speech.

sometimes the word is even used in such a comprehensive sense. Agrenev himself demonstrates these broader spiritual qualities (even if he does not refer to them explicitly as “love”): he does love Anna, he says; the house is empty without her; he cares enough to ask whether she loves him; and he invites her home anyway after her betrayal, for their daughter’s sake and for Anna’s redemption after the affair with Andrei. He tries to excise the pain he feels by eliminating --- by an act of will --- all his needs, desires, and dependencies, presumably his need for Anna (and the sexual expression connected with her) as well. Agrenev’s concern for Anna’s redemption and Ksenia’s well-being, plus Anna’s irresistible maternal love in the context of her admiration and trust for Agrenev, ultimately bring her home. However, in all the other paired relationships in the story, the word “love” is used almost exclusively to refer to sexual attraction and passion, which does accurately characterize the much narrower quality of those relationships.

The Troparov Family

Sergei Troparov is also an engineer and one of Agrenev’s associates; in contrast to Agrenev, however, he is presented totally negatively.²¹⁵ The narrator associates Troparov’s spiritually “empty” life with his desire to attract attention (104). The engineer’s view of freedom is hedonistic, even “Nietzschean”: beyond any morality, he has no respect for marriage or family, and is drawn to physical pleasure, especially the excitement aroused in him by “new” women, whom he discards when he becomes bored with them.²¹⁶ In a corruption of Chekhov’s value system, Troparov claims to value most

²¹⁵ His negative qualities include his opposition to the Revolution: ironically, he believes that revolutionaries (at least the Communists like his brother Andrei) seek only instant gratification of their own self-interest (110-111).

²¹⁶ At the plant director’s breakfast party, Troparov takes pleasure in the fact that three of the women present had been his lovers (118).

“the human body, health, intelligence, talent, and freedom from any kind of morality” (105).²¹⁷ He methodically seduces young, pure, inexperienced women with practiced ease --- using cute nicknames, flattery, and endearments accompanied by gradual physical contact, and the like. The joy he experiences in being the first to defile purity makes his behavior particularly heinous. As the story opens, he has tired of his previous paramour Mariia Bitska and is moving on to his next seduction. When Mariia waits for him in the cold wind to tell him of her pregnancy, he dismisses her before even hearing her news, explaining that “love is like the wind,” unpredictable in location and timing, and like the wind, love involves freedom --- the freedom of two bodies to join in joy, and then to separate (116).²¹⁸ Relieved when she rushes off in tears into the woods, he calls after her for show but feels nothing toward her, cheered as always when such relationships break off permanently. The next morning he is in hot pursuit of his next innocent, Evgeniia Maliantovich, whom he has already been eyeing. An example of the devastatingly inattentive husband as well as the unfaithful one, he ignores his barren wife, Ol’ga, with whom he no longer has a sexual relationship, claiming he does not “know” her (105). The

²¹⁷ “Moe sviatoe --- eto chelovecheskoe telo, zdorov’e, um, talant i --- svoboda ot vsiacheskikh moralei.” The first part of this quote is a close paraphrase of part of a letter written by Anton Chekhov, but the freedom-from-morality section was added by Troparov. A. P. Chekhov, pis’ma 3:11, A. N. Pleshcheevu, 4 okt. 1888, Polnoe sobranie sochinenii i pisem v tridsati tomakh (Moskva: Nauka, 1974-83).

²¹⁸ This philosophy may allude to the theories of Aleksandra Kollontai, a proponent of women’s rights who was active in the revolutionary movements 1903-27. She was widely believed to espouse free love. She did support the elimination of the nuclear family and the sense of “ownership” of one’s mate or children, as well as sexual relations not associated with traditional (obsolete) marriage. The “glass of water theory” was widely attributed to her --- that satisfying one’s sexual desires should be as simple as getting a glass of water. A more accurate citation is that “The [marital] sex act must be acknowledged as an act without shame or sinfulness, a natural, legitimate act, like every other manifestation of a healthy body such as relieving hunger or thirst.” (“Polovoi akt dolzhen byt’ priznan aktom nepostydnyim ili grekhovnym, a estestvennym i zakonnym, kak i vsiakoe drugoe proiavlenie zdorovogo organizma, kak utolenie goloda ili zhazhdy.”) “Tezisy o kommunisticheskoi morali v oblasti brachnyih otnoshenii”, Marksistskii feminizm: Kolleksiia tekstov A. M. Kollontai, Sost. i obshch. red. V. I. Uspenskaia (Tver’: Feminist press – Rossiia, 2003) 245.

narrator even presents him as responsible for her barrenness, pointing out that “Troparov ne dal Ol’ge Semenovne materinstva” (124).²¹⁹

Ol’ga, Troparov’s wife, is buxom and sexy. Ignored by her husband, she herself has had many affairs which are well known to the community. Once “naïve and pure” (124), she was probably one of Troparov’s earlier conquests, abandoned emotionally by him when he became bored with her. Ol’ga is miserable in every way. Barren because of some sort of repugnant female disease, she wishes desperately for a child. Like Agrenev and Anna, she believes in some sort of cosmic justice --- she perceives her venereal disease and infertility as nature’s punishment for her earlier desire not to have children (111) --- although the narrator blames her barrenness on her husband. Her life is an empty wilderness in which she spends her days bored and lonely. No diversions help: her love affairs just bring more pain; books are unrealistic, hence unsatisfying; she can’t devote herself to revolutionary activities because she sees politics as flimsy and transient. Each new dawn exacerbates her desire for escape.

Ol’ga is among the earliest in Pil’niak’s works to exhibit confusion between the female roles of mother and lover, confusion that the writer will explore more deeply in the later 1920s.²²⁰ She behaves maternally toward her brother-in-law Andrei, showing sympathy (with maternal embraces) whenever he begins to describe his life and

²¹⁹ “Troparov did not give Ol’ga Semenovna motherhood.” Exactly how Troparov failed in making Ol’ga a mother is unclear; possibly she just never conceived in their early relationship and they stopped having sexual relations when he became bored with her; or he influenced her in early marriage to avoid pregnancy so they practiced some sort of contraception (including abortion), or in some other way; in any case, they both ultimately rejected their ordained biological roles as parents.

²²⁰ This inner conflict brings to mind Otto Weininger’s characterization of women as part mother, part prostitute. However, in Pil’niak the mother-lover conflict always seems inspired by a relative, if only by marriage, suggesting potential incest. The incest temptation will be explored in Chapter IV, Investigatory Parameters. See Otto Weininger, *Sex and Character*, trans. Ladislaus Löb (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 2005) 188-210.

problems; however, she quickly turns each conversation to her own concerns, her love affairs, loneliness, childlessness, and sense of uselessness --- as though talking with an adult peer. Soon after his arrival, Andrei sensed that she was ready to have sex with him; again, this very weekend, he senses the potential for their union to come about.²²¹ Ol'ga even expresses an expectation that their relationship would become sexual. But when Andrei tells Ol'ga about dreaming of his mother and her maternal sanctity and value to him, Ol'ga promises to be as affectionate to him as a mother.

Andrei's dream and his response to it catalyze Ol'ga, eliminating her sexual interest in him. Suddenly recognizing that her maternal vocation will never materialize in the void of her current existence,²²² the *status quo* becomes no longer tolerable: "chto tak nel'zia, chto raz ne zadalos' edinstvennoe --- materinstvo, --- nado uiti, tvorit' dlia drugikh" (125).²²³ The verb here, "tvorit'," also means "to create," suggesting that her work for others will be a substitute for the creative activity of motherhood, childbearing and -rearing. She exits the story making good her intentions, walking away into the snowstorm with her packed hand-luggage to start a new life somewhere else.²²⁴ Calmly and happily, she leaves her coffin-like house, the falling snow covering the ground like a shroud or swaddling cloth . . . for a new life altogether.

Andrei is Sergei Troparov's younger brother. He has almost finished school in Petersburg and is working at the cement plant as a revolutionary trainer, teaching the

²²¹ Their tête-à-tête is interrupted by Troparov's arrival home (108).

²²² She also knows that that revolutionary activism is not an alternative vocation for her.

²²³ "[. . .] that this way can't go on, that since the only (important) thing, motherhood, didn't come about, it's time to leave, to do for others."

²²⁴ Other Pil'niak women also find such departure the only way out of irremediably empty lives; see for example Elena in "Chernyi khleb," dated by Pil'niak between old and new style Christmases 1922-23, first published 1923.

workers the rudiments of Communism and directing a Gor'kii play local amateurs are presenting. He is in the first throes of adulthood, enjoying his new independence, but the plant workers do not understand or accept him and he doesn't feel that "he has done what he would have liked to do" (111).²²⁵ Extraverted by nature, he especially values Anna as a link to social life. He is in fact aimless and unformed, having passively entered the affair with Anna for the physical pleasure, wondering on Saturday whether he loves her even as he simultaneously contemplates a sexual liaison with his sister-in-law Ol'ga. He is receptive to the chaos emanating from the quarry/plant and its workers, the "nekhorocho" quality of the place and night somehow exhilarating him, tempting him to leave the roadway and run into the pathless woods. According to the narrator, in order to "love" one must have talent for it, and Andrei lacks such talent (110).²²⁶ His view of freedom is doing whatever he wants, following his own desires and "instincts" in the one brief life he has to live. Like his brother, he has no desire to know the silly artificial constructs of good and evil (122). The end of his relationship with Anna does cause him pain (in contrast to his brother Sergei, whose only pain derives from personal inconvenience), but Andrei accepts pain as a necessary "instinct" resulting from freedom (122), whereas Anna and Agrenev want to alleviate suffering and avoid pain (122). Upset

²²⁵ "[Z]des' na zavode ego priniali ne za to, chem on byl, i on sdela ne to, chto emu khotelos' by sdela't." It is hard to tell whether he was "not accepted for what he was" for personal or political reasons. It must be remembered that Pil'niak wrote this in early 1919, the year that would be immortalized in his blockbuster novel as the "naked" year. He had only begun, in 1918, to write the stories that would ultimately make up that novel. The early proliferation of Communism was slow and chaotic, and the civil war was still in progress. Peasants and blue-collar workers tended to identify with "Bolshevism," which they perceived as a (native) Russian workers' movement, and to oppose "Communism," which they saw as a foreign (Marxist), intelligentsia-based movement. This conflict of perceptions underlay many social problems at this time. Andrei would have been viewed as a proponent of the alien, intelligentsia-based movement. Pil'niak himself was of the pro-Bolshevik, anti-Communist persuasion at least as late as May, 1922 (letter to D. A. Lutokhin, 3 May 1922, No. 112 (165-170)).

²²⁶ "Chtoby liubit' --- esli mozhno liubit', --- nado imet' talant, u Andreia ego ne bylo."

by Anna's rejection, Andrei lies around all day, depressed, reflecting. Yesterday's doubt about loving her has become today's "sincere" love, but this is a youthful "love," and her departure has hurt his masculine ego. However, the pain he feels, whatever he may say about it being a welcome instinct, is changing him. Deep down inside he has never felt "rightness" ("pravota" (123)) about his relationship with Anna. Emotional, he confides in Ol'ga about the breakup,²²⁷ acknowledging his own falseness and bad actions in the face of his newly awakened desire for goodness, and bursting childishly into tears in Ol'ga's maternally comforting embrace. Andrei describes his dream about the holiness and immutable value of his weak elderly mother, who represents the goodness and brightness he has just begun to yearn for. Andrei's reaction to the breakup with Anna and her lack of confidence in his goodness, his confession of his internal falseness and past bad acts, and his epiphany about his mother's sanctity, show a fundamental change toward the positive in him. He leaves for the workers' meeting, which he must lead, however unimportant it now seems to him in light of his own inner transformations.

The Bitskas

Mariia Bitska is nineteen, living with her brother and studying to become an agronomist. Her name and vocation indicate her positive qualities; she is an appropriately pure, maternally-oriented woman who is preparing herself to work in harmony with the earth. Lovely, innocent and naïve, nicknamed "Liza Kalitina"²²⁸ by Troparov during the seduction process, she had trusted him in their springtime romance despite the negative

²²⁷ Ol'ga had considered his romance with Anna "just for show" ("napokaz") (111).

²²⁸ This is an appropriate name, according to the narrator (115). It of course alludes to Turgenev's eponymous classic model of pure young womanhood in *Dvorianskoe gnezdo* (*A Nest of Gentlefolk*). Turgenev's heroine, however, unlike Mariia, would never enter a liaison with a married man.

rumors surrounding him, had fallen in love and surrendered to him “all she had” (105). She had been in the springtime of her life, when the world was full of exciting mysteries for her, and he was her charming lover. Crushed by his cavalier abandonment of her and recognizing that she has been undone,²²⁹ she confides, ashamed and humiliated, in her brother, destroying his hopes and dreams for her education (as well as, perhaps, his own). Like the servant girl in “Kak obyknovenno” and several of Pil’niak’s other female characters in the same straits, she is a good, pure (if foolish²³⁰) young woman who had trusted and loved her seducer, already loves his baby and is devastated by his abandonment of her.

Eduard Robertovich Bitska, her brother, is a more ambiguous figure. A foreign pit-foreman who sets off explosives in the quarry (thus violently exploiting nature), he is often described as looking cunning (“khitryi”), self-satisfied (104), and lizard-like (113), as well as resembling the “devil” Ksenia sees on the stairs (112, 122). He speaks with a decided Latvian accent, has not yet mastered Russian, and probably never will. He plays the violin, jokes, works hard and enjoys life. Among his non-Russian qualities are his enterprising spirit and personal initiative, although these are strikingly self-interested. At the age of forty he is achieving high school equivalency (“attestat zrelosti”) in order to go to law school (113, 114), so he takes Russian lessons from Agrenev. He has brought his sister to Russia for her education. To him, freedom means being master of his own life, setting his own goals and meeting them, but this freedom implicitly means controlling

²²⁹ She reflects on the same catalogue of consequences as were enumerated in “Kak obyknovenno”: unwed motherhood, unrequited love, family rejection, social ostracism, her own stupidity, guilt, and tainting of an otherwise beautiful world.

²³⁰ “glupaia devushka” (103)

others to his own ends and ignoring any larger communal benefit. Despite his handicaps, his energy, hard work and perseverance bring him success in his every endeavor. He does, however, use force to get his own way: he tells Agrenev he would not have let his (own) wife leave, laughingly showing a fist, and he beats Mariia upon learning of her pregnancy although apparently to his later regret.²³¹ His immediate response to her news of pregnancy is a sort of wild mourning dance and wail; after a day spent searching for Mariia's seducer he confronts Troparov, who is in the club with Evgeniia, his conquest-in-progress. Bitska, however, has himself been changed by his recognition of Mariia's love for both Troparov and the baby, and he approaches Troparov sensitively rather than aggressively. He tries unsuccessfully to withdraw Troparov to a more private place, then addresses him (Troparov has no idea of the pregnancy) philosophically with questions about life and love. He blames no one, since "we are [all] just scoundrels" (121).²³² Bitska bases his agitated emotional appeal on the holiness of love and sisters, on his own unfortunately loveless past, and on Mariia's (holy) love for both Troparov and Troparov's baby --- implying that Troparov has no concept of the value of love in life. The evening ends with Agrenev's physical attack on Bitska and his escort of Evgeniia from the room.

Evgeniia Maliantovich, sister of the plant director

²³¹ Bitska is an example of a brother reacting to the seduction and pregnancy of his innocent sister, which is a recurring motif in Pil'niak's early works. In "Pervyi sneg," for example, a doctor casually seduces a young woman, barely remembering her when her brother comes to extort money for an abortion (to avoid making the doctor perform it himself, as did the young doctor in "Kak obyknovenno"). While the Troparov/Mariia/Bitska theme is clearly a rewrite of this earlier story, the earlier brother is apparently more vengeful and self-interested than Bitska, being primarily concerned with vengeance on the seducer and the loss of future income due to his sister's necessary abandonment of her education.

²³² "Mi [*sic*] uzhe podletsy, [. . .]"

Evgeniia plays a small role in the story as Mariia's successor in Troparov's seduction/defilement sequence. She is the sister of the plant director, visiting from Petersburg, where she still lives in the parental home. Slightly younger but more sophisticated, cultured, and willful than Mariia, she too is young and naïve, another "pure maiden" (120)²³³ who easily falls under the sway of Troparov's smooth, methodically calculated advances. She capriciously insists on going out skiing with Troparov in the blizzard against her brother's wishes; the eerie sound of the wind howling like someone "in deathly anguish" as he kisses her while they are standing above the quarry and cement plant suggests that she, like Mariia, is in mortal danger from the developing relationship (120). She stands beside Troparov in the club as Bitska lectures him on Mariia's pregnancy until Agrenev leads her out, but the reader is not privy to her thoughts.

Koloturov and His Band

Koloturov is a young plant-worker whom Andrei tries to educate about Communism; he personifies a larger group of like-minded workers. Under the chaotic, destructive influence of the plant, he is an anti-social element, a ruffian, always drinking and fighting, who hangs out with a group of similarly-behaved hooligans. If he understands or supports revolutionary changes at all, he must be part of the "Bolshevik" faction, seeking the new system in a native Russian context and opposing "foreign, intellectual" Communism (represented by Andrei and Anna). Koloturov mocks the entire political message, trying to mutter that "all misfortunes come from the bourgeoisie and

²³³ "chistaia devushka"

proletarians” (103),²³⁴ but he doesn’t even know the right words. He does know the right (desired) words, however, when chastised by Andrei for fighting and drinking: after “spitting expertly through the gap knocked out between his teeth,” he acknowledges his bad habits but claims that he can’t eliminate them all at once (106). According to the narrator, Koloturov and other workers Andrei tries to educate appear virtually hopeless in attitude, expectation, and intelligence (106).²³⁵ He and his gang mock Andrei and Anna on the street. Koloturov drinks all day Sunday and goes that evening to the workers’ meeting Andrei is to lead. There he literally leaves the door open to the snowy, windy elements, snuffs out the illuminating candle with his hand, and incites the workers present to attack Andrei and Anna,²³⁶ killing them --- and demonstrating his alignment with the forces of chaos, destruction, and death.

Inconclusive

This story is open-ended. We know that Anna and Andrei are dead, tragically and brutally killed by mob action, each one at a point of just seeming to get his or her life together. Agrenev has learned of their deaths while escorting Evgeniia from the club, where all observers of Bitska’s address to Troparov are in an uproar reminiscent of Bitska’s earlier mourning dance and howl. The closing paragraph emphasizes the wildness of the forests, lakes, and swamps and of the final pre-March blizzard still whirling overhead; the forest itself creaks with metallic sounds like those of rusty bolts in an old lock, signifying the destructive presence of human technology. While new animal

²³⁴ “Vse neschast’ia proiskhodiat ot borzhiuzii i proletaristov.”

²³⁵ “Rabochie govorili bessmyslenno, vse vremia bozhilis’, obeshchali byt’ vernymi, tochno delali odolzhenie, iz pročitannogo nichego ne poniali, poprosili vzaimy deneg, do poluchki.” (“The workers spoke nonsense, cursed the whole time, promised to be loyal as though they were doing a favor, understood nothing of what had been read, and asked to borrow money until payday.”)

²³⁶ “razvedennaia uchilka” (“the divorced teacher”) (pejorative).

life is being created in the forests, police whistles are sounding in the cement plant. It appears, at least momentarily, that the evil influence of the factory --- the manifestation of man's devotion to technology through violent exploitation of nature --- has emerged victorious.

What do the fates of Andrei and Anna signify? Only theirs are clearly delineated. They were to meet for the last time after the workers' meeting at which they met their deaths. Did the cosmic law, from which there are no exceptions, wreak its vengeance on them? The two of them, as individuals, transgressed moral rules concerning human sexual behavior (including parental roles) and were therefore subject to judgment. However, Anna at least had been forgiven by those she had hurt the most, and certainly Agrenev hoped that Anna could escape judgment. In the larger collective society, however, man's violent exploitation of nature had incurred the wrath of Mother Earth, and the plant workers were the vessels and agents, Anna and Andrei the victims, of her chaotic response. Anna and Andrei perhaps would have survived to begin their brighter new lives in an environment not corrupted by an improper man-nature relationship. Their unexpected deaths may also be a reminder found in many Pil'niak works that life must always be lived well, since the future is never certain.

The reactions of Evgeniia, the future of Ol'ga, Bitska and Mariia, Troparov, Agrenev and Ksenia --- all these remain for the reader to imagine. Certainly there is much suffering ahead for all of them. The wisest and most conscientious characters, Agrenev and Ksenia, have lost the wife and mother who was just returning to them for a promising new beginning. It is to be hoped that Koloturov and his mob will be punished and, if at all possible, somehow reformed. But one can also hope --- in the longer term --- that

Evgeniia, having heard Bitska's accusations, will bypass Mariia's fate and reserve her love for a committed relationship with someone worthy of it. Perhaps Troparov, having lost his brother, wife, and whatever social esteem he might have had all in one evening, will see the light and change his ways --- or, on the other hand, destroy himself. Ol'ga, perhaps, will indeed find a new life of satisfaction in service, maybe new love and children, even if not her own biologically. Perhaps Mariia will experience unalloyed joys of motherhood²³⁷ and her newly-aware brother those of surrogate fatherhood, or perhaps even a mate and children of his own.

Freedom Theme

One of the themes explored by Pil'niak in this story, as in many others of this period and later, is that of freedom. Each character in this story has a different view of freedom and desire for it. The primary views of freedom are as self-will (Troparov, Andrei, and in a more constructive form, Bitska) and as freely chosen duty (Agrenev and Anna). To Troparov, (and in a differently articulated form, to Andrei, but still according to the pleasure principle and beyond good and evil (122)) --- freedom is amorality, following one's own desire for gratification, doing whatever one wants, without constraint by any morality at all (103, 106, 116). Explorations of this Nietzschean philosophy (or what is perceived as such) will continue up through Pil'niak's final works.²³⁸ Morality in general is at the center of all Pil'niak's "biological" writings.

²³⁷ Pil'niak will present a positive model of the life of an unwed mother in Rimma Skudrina ten years later, in "Krasnoe derevo" ("Mahogany," written and first published 1929) and Volga vpadaet v Kaspiiskoe more (written 1929, first published 1930).

²³⁸ These later works include Solianoj ambar, written 1937, the year of Pil'niak's arrest; first published 1990.

Freedom is more structured to Agrenev and Anna, who acknowledge morality. To Agrenev, freedom has several aspects. First, he believes in some sort of law of life, from which no one is exempt and which cannot be ignored or broken without cosmic retribution --- he is dedicated to preventing Anna from receiving that retribution, although she deserves it. In conjunction with this, where Troparov seeks freedom from morality (from Agrenev's cosmic law), Agrenev seeks freedom from dependence and desire, and secondarily from their consequences, pain and suffering. One achieves this freedom by an act of will, aligning one's actions with duty (doing the right thing) and rejecting those items in life that one might come to rely on (122).²³⁹ Anna adheres to Andrei's morality (freedom to follow her own desires) in leaving Agrenev and subsequently in joining Andrei, but she leaves Andrei by the same principle, choosing to live by Agrenev's "freedom" instead. She also recognizes that each person is allotted an ordained role²⁴⁰ which may not match the person's desires, but that there will be repercussions for refusing it. She learns that freedom is not going from man to man, from one system of morality to another --- a person must choose one and, having validated it, abide by it.

Biological Issues and Related Moral Stance

²³⁹ Anna describes Agrenev's sense of freedom thus: "Aleksandr govorit, chto svoboda --- eto zakon, iz kotorogo net nikomy isklucheniia, --- nikomu, --- i eshche --- eto volia: nado, nado osvobodit'sia ot vsego i poznat' tol'ko svoiu voliu, --- dazhe ot kuren'ia, ot voli, ot privyчек. Togda ne budet stradaniia." ("Aleksandr says that freedom is a law, from which there are no exceptions for anyone, not for anyone, and also, it is will: one must, he must, liberate oneself from everything and come to know only one's own will - --- even from smoking, from desire, from habits. Then there will be no suffering.")

²⁴⁰ The agent of this "allotment" is not specified, but Anna's reference to it as a "chasha, kotoruiu nado ispit'" (114) suggests Christ in the Garden of Gethsemane, indicating a divine or otherwise controlling cosmic force as the assigning agent. In Pil'niak's world, this agent is most likely to be Mother Earth, although that is not made as explicit in this story as in some of his other works.

Written only sixteen months after the Revolution, this story focuses on the eternal individual human issues of mating, maintaining a marriage, and parenthood and formulates a moral context in which these activities are to take place. The Revolution has its influence in the story, but even Andrei, the committed revolutionary, ultimately finds his upcoming workers' meeting very secondary in comparison to his personal life journey (as triggered by Anna's rejection).

Life is difficult and must be lived consciously and deliberately. In many cases it is ultimately made up of mundane activities which are less rewarding and less perceptibly significant than one might wish or expect; in this lies much of its challenge. Cosmic justice exists and will ultimately punish those who break life's rules. In later works, Pil'niak will identify these rules more explicitly with Mother Earth and her design for human behavior, a connection which in this story is more abstract (the chaotic influence exerted by the quarry/plant) and, when concrete, is mainly associated with maternal behavior. Ol'ga's disease and resultant barrenness are perceived as punishment for her previous rejection of her childbearing role and her infertility as a result of her husband's destructive behavior as well.²⁴¹ Anna's prospective punishment (other than suffering) for leaving her child is not specified, but can be averted only if "there are ways back" (115), that is, if Anna's remorse and return to her parental role are accepted by the cosmic powers (which possibly they are not, considering her fate).

Motherhood is primary in this story as in most of Pil'niak's "biological" works of this period. In spiritually healthy women the draw of mother to child is a force "beyond human control" and the positive influence of motherhood extends beyond the immediate

²⁴¹ Her rejection of motherhood could have been manifested in numerous ways: via birth control or abortion, either of which could have caused her disease; or by some other way entirely, initiated by Ol'ga herself or by her husband.

parent-child bond and may enable forms of “rebirth” in the midst of life. Barrenness is a major tragedy to Ol’ga, rendering her life desolate; Anna can’t live without her child; Mariia already loves her unborn baby; Andrei’s epiphany of his mother’s value to him opens him to a new life value system and inspires Ol’ga to leave and seek a productive life elsewhere; Mariia’s pregnancy awakens in Bitska an appreciation of love for others. Motherhood, however, is not to be bestowed or assumed lightly; the entire purpose of sexual union is to result in parenthood. Sexual contact is to take place exclusively in the context of a committed, loving relationship with openness to conception --- outside of that context, sexual union is an abomination, perhaps even within marriage if love has faded and additional offspring are not welcome. In several other stories of this period,²⁴² the maternal drive overwhelms unmated women, compelling them to seek mates for temporary liaisons in order to achieve motherhood. These women pointedly do not seek committed mates or permanent alliances, simply the opportunity to have a child which they will raise on their own --- these artificial liaisons may be left indeterminate, but if explicit they typically either fail to come about or have very negative outcomes, indicating their wrongness.

This story demonstrates Pil’niak’s highly moralistic stance as a writer and serves as very explicit proof that to him, biological instinct is to be respected and honored but under no circumstances given free rein. In work after work, at all periods of his writing, he speaks of the biological life cycle of birth/life/mating/reproduction/death so evident in the “Baseline” stories discussed above, and the instincts that guide man and beast through

²⁴² Such stories include, for example, “V ineinyi vecher” (“On a Frosty Evening”), written “by 1916,” first published 1918, and “Snega,” written “by 1919,” first published 1919; “Dva rasskaza” (“Two Stories”), written “by 1921,” first published 1922.

the cycle. “Veter pered martom” does not refer explicitly to this cycle but makes clear in other ways that mating and reproduction are inter-dependent acts ordained by nature. The author’s use of the term “instincts” in this story to refer to the human drives for pleasure, especially sexual, and for purely emotional gratification, and his condemnation of free obedience to these drives makes it abundantly clear that these are drives to be subjugated to the human will. Andrei’s “life by instinct” (122) is considered irresponsible libertinism; moral Agrenev seeks to rear Ksenia so that she will not evaluate “by instincts” (112). Except for the maternal instinct --- the desire for a child within marriage and the love of an existing child, even one *in utero* --- positive emphasis is on the exertion of human will to control desire-oriented urges.

Children, the goal of sexual union, are the ultimate treasures to be desired, loved, cared for, and cherished by parents, despite the difficulty and parental pain this might involve. It is better to be in a loveless marriage than to reject one’s parental responsibility (as did Anna temporarily and Troparov permanently). If there can be only one parent, it must be one with a caring, loving, responsible attitude --- regardless of parental gender. A true father in particular shares wisdom, guidance, and play with his child. A child is initially pure, loving, precociously wise, and generous in spirit.

If it is the role of a (spiritually) healthy wife to bear children, a spiritually healthy husband is to be caring, attentive, and devoted to her. It may have been Troparov’s neglect that initially failed to give Ol’ga motherhood; almost certainly his neglect led to her infidelities and possibly to her venereal disease as well. Agrenev is presented as a positive example, albeit rigid in his beliefs, loving and seeking to understand rather than

to judge Anna, enjoying her company, forgiving her for the sake of their daughter and essentially for the sake of Anna's soul.

As for choosing one's mate, Pil'niak presents only negative examples in this work, which focuses on the maintenance (or disruption) of marital union rather than its creation. Agrenev's and Anna's acquaintance and courtship are not depicted and Troparov's and Ol'ga's are only implied. However, it is abundantly clear that mating is not to be based on physical attraction, pursuit of bodily pleasure, or manipulation.

People are capable of change for the better, as is demonstrated by Bitska, Anna, Andrei, and Ol'ga. Remorse, repentance and forgiveness may be able to create "return paths" for those who have strayed. Sometimes the only way out of a completely empty, destructive situation is withdrawal from it in search of a new and better life.

Along with self-awareness, the experience of pain is an indicator of a character's value. Those who experience pain the most are those who are most fully human and sensitive to the importance of moral and emotional well-being --- these include Agrenev, Anna, Kseniia, Ol'ga, and Mariia. Bitska and Andrei both begin to experience pain, and this experience enhances their humanity: Bitska, when Mariia confesses her pregnancy, Andrei, (initially) when Anna breaks up with him and (ultimately) when he recognizes his mother's sanctity and significance in his life. Troparov and Koloturov do not recognize pain, neither their own nor that of others.

Love, more than biology, provides the answer which can transform lives. Anna, Bitska, Mariia, Agrenev, Ksenia, Ol'ga, and Andrei all learn, in one way or another, about the power of love and what it really consists of. Respect-filled, directed love for sibling, spouse, parent, child, even for oneself, is shown to be transcendent and

transformative. The only totally negative --- and unchanging --- characters are those who display no understanding for any kind of non-sexual love.

Harmony with Nature: Day or Night, Cosmos or Chaos?

Pil'niak's early stories are marked by the combination or alternation of "nature" and "civilization" shown above in the "Baseline" section, where life close to "nature" was clearly the positive pole and "civilization" more morally hazardous, if not downright negative. The uncomplicated life of the forest people in "God ikh zhizni" was clearly superior to the more civilized contemporary Russian culture depicted in "Kak obyknovenno." A major shift in Pil'niak's attitude concerning the ultimate "rightness" of man's conformity with the natural world in the biological *ethos* can be traced in his attitude toward the peasantry, Sectarians, anarchists and other groups, as well as certain individuals, in works dating from about 1918 and onwards. I will examine the writer's views of these groups in two revolutionary works, the story "Proselki" (1919)²⁴³ and the novel Golyi god (1920),²⁴⁴ followed by an examination of the altered views expressed in the novella (*povest'*) "Mat' syra-zemlia" (1924).²⁴⁵ The simple "nature" versus "civilization" dichotomy becomes more complex as "nature" itself breaks down into a diurnal ordering, nurturing aspect and a nocturnal chaotic, destructive one. Individuals and groups align themselves more or less with one aspect or the other, and finally the

²⁴³ "Country Roads," dated by the author July 1919, first published 1920, and reworked for inclusion in Golyi god.

²⁴⁴ The Naked Year, completed 1920, first published 1922.

²⁴⁵ "Damp Mother Earth," dated by the author November 1924, first published 1925.

contest becomes one of “culture” versus “barbarity” with Pil’niak’s growing recognition that an idyllic return to pastoral pre-Petrine life is neither to be expected nor desired.

The Natural Life is Best: “Proselki”²⁴⁶

This story is similar to “God ikh zhizni” and “Tselaiia zhizn” discussed above in its description and positive evaluation of country life, but in this story the characters are peasants, the Kononovs. This story is more complex than the previous ones in that the Revolution has injected itself into Russian life, causing new challenges for all segments of the populace, and the “civilized” city is clearly opposed to the “natural” countryside in behavior, morality, and consequences.

This opposition is expressed immediately in the opening description of the winding roads (*proselki*) which the narrator equates to natural Russia and in the mention of the unnamed persons who would want them otherwise --- that is, straight and direct.²⁴⁷ Pil’niak’s initial view of the Revolution as a peasant revolt similar to those of Pugachev and Razin is clearly evident in this story. Peasant revolts, including the Revolution, are to the young Pil’niak welcome trends returning Russia to its essential pre-Petrine self. The narrator describes those “others”

кои стосковались идти по болотным тропам, коим
вздумалось вздернуть Русь на дыбы, пройти по
болотам, шляхи поставить линейкой, оковаться
гранитом и сталью, позабыв про избяную Русь, --- и
пошли. (65)
who yearned to go along swampy paths, who took a notion to jerk Rus'
up on its hind legs, to pass through the swamps, to put roads in a

²⁴⁶ I will be citing from “Proselki,” Boris Pil’niak, *Былё* (München: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 1970) 65-73. This is a reprint of the eponymous anthology published in Revel’, Estonia, by Bibliofil in 1922.

²⁴⁷ The Pil’niakian law “Nature abhors a straight line” is still in evidence at least as late as *Volga*.

straight line, to fetter them with granite and steel, having forgotten
about peasant Rus' --- and they set out.²⁴⁸

But now a folk rebellion is moving along these twisting country byways, to sweep away
“the unnecessary” and then disappear somewhere along the paths (65).

The human figures in this story are villagers who live in three almost animate huts
whose eye-like windows look out from under pine trees in a remote village, Pochinki,
reachable only via indirect paths through fields, forests, bogs, and the like. The narrator’s
note about the negative connotation of the village’s name (66)²⁴⁹ further presages its
opposition to something, which will turn out to be “the city” and its inhabitants. These
peasants share a surname, Kononov,²⁵⁰ but it is made clear that they have become a close
unit not entirely because of blood relationships: “Vo vsekh trekh izbakh zhivut
Kononovy. I ne rodnia --- no Kononovy, i ne rodnia --- no szhilis’ krepche rodnogo”
(66).²⁵¹ Writing in 1919, Pil’niak is already suggesting that the most successful, enduring
“family” relationships are not necessarily built on biological kinship.

These peasants live by means of the earth, by agriculture, by processing tar, by
stripping bast to make sandals, and by the forest beehives. That their ancient ways are
best is demonstrated by the patriarch, Grandfather Kononov, who can’t remember his
grandfather’s name but knows how his more remote ancestors lived in the old days

²⁴⁸ Their desire to “jerk Russia up on her hind legs” and fetter natural elements with granite and steel alludes to Peter I’s modernization and Westernization programs (and their aftereffects), as described in Pushkin’s The Bronze Horseman.

²⁴⁹ “Pochinki” once had the sense of “pustosh’, perelog,” suggesting an undeveloped area “out in the sticks,” a rural “backwater” area.

²⁵⁰ The Kononov surname is sometimes hyphenated, as with the Kononovy-Sivtsovy.

²⁵¹ “Kononovs live in all three huts. And not kinfolk, but Kononovs, and not family, but they came to live together more closely than by blood.”

(“starobytnye vremena”) “and how one should live” (66).²⁵² These villagers live in accordance with the seasons, young and old working at their various tasks virtually non-stop throughout the year, regardless of physical discomfort --- “as people are supposed to live.” Their calloused hands attest to their work ethic and their non-mechanized labor. They read the signs of nature and tradition, studying the changes in the night sky and the animal and plant worlds along with the traditions of the calendar,²⁵³ in order to know “mat’ svoiu syru-zemliu” (67)²⁵⁴ and live harmoniously with her. “Zhili trudno, surovo -- - i liubili svoiu zhizn’ krepko, s ee dymom, kholodami, znoem, nemogotoiu. Zhili s lesom, s polem, s nebom, --- zhit’ nado bylo v druzhbe s nimi, no i borot’sia uporno” (66).²⁵⁵ Each individual must make his own peace with the wood-goblins, the hardships, the animals and natural conditions. And they all know that for plants, animals, and human beings, propagation continues life even through death (67).²⁵⁶ Just so, as a new cohort of peasants comes of age each year, they marry and produce a child within the year, hence overcoming death in obedience to the laws of nature. Weddings are simple; a couple

²⁵² “i kak nado zhit’”

²⁵³ Such traditions include, for example, “V mai dozhd’ --- budet rozh’, mai kholodnyi --- god khleborodnyi.” (“Rain in May brings rye, a cold May [brings] an abundant grain-year.”) (67)

²⁵⁴ “their Damp Mother Earth.”

²⁵⁵ “They lived hard, harshly, and they loved their life robustly with its smoke, cold, heat, and sickness. They lived with the forest, the field, the sky --- it was necessary to live in harmony with these but also to struggle persistently.”

²⁵⁶ “Знали: как рожь, упав семенем в землю, родит новые семена и многие, так и скотина, и птица родит, и рождаясь снова родит, чтобы в рождении умереть, --- знали, --- что таков же удел и людской: родить и в рождении смерть утолить, как рожь, как волчашник, как лошадь, как свиньи, --- все одинаково.” (“They knew, like rye, having fallen as seed into the earth to propagate new seeds and in abundance, thus cattle and birds propagate, and being born, they again give birth, in order to die (only) in birth; they knew that such is the lot of humans as well, to propagate and in birth to make up for death, like rye, like baneberry, like horses, like pigs . . . all just the same.”)

merely bows to the winds and descends together to the floor, where the bridegroom “sows” his new wife as in season he would the fields (68).

However, issues become complicated by the Revolution. Young Ivan Kononov, having married Ul’ianka, goes off to World War I unworried about death, knowing that he has already sown the future. From the peasant perspective, there is no point in going to war, since that war is having no effect on Pochinki. But soldier Ivan learns that all of peasant Russia sees domestic current events as old Grandfather Kononov sees them, as a peasant rebellion associated with the land and (restoration of) the old ways of life (68). Ivan comes home to Pochinki and discovers the peasant rebellion there, at home, in a new regime in which the old masters and landowners have been replaced by the peasantry: “Zhemlia teper’ --- nasha! Taperia my shami --- kha-zia-va! . . . Bunt, zhnachit” (68-9),²⁵⁷ as Grandfather Kononov says.

Other effects of the Revolution, consistently referred to by the narrator as the “Bunt,” or rebellion, do arrive at Pochinki --- in the form of disease, to which half the population of the village is lost, wolves, famine, and the incursion of starving city-dwellers seeking to trade their (practically useless) possessions for grain. The peasants themselves run out of grain and can’t trade their crops, tar, and *lapti* for seed, tools and other necessities for planting. Regular peasant markets have disappeared in the wake of all the urban refugees seeking food, as the cities are (rightfully) dying. The peasants continue to abide by their seasons, working year-round, burying their dead, mating and propagating annually (albeit with more pressure to do so), sleeping peacefully on the stove in winter as from time immemorial, and rejoicing at the “Bunt.” Over two years of

²⁵⁷ “Now the land is ours! Now we ourselves are the owners! . . . It means Rebellion!”

civil war they adjust to more hardships, working harder and always cooperatively, now seeking more from forest than from field, but nevertheless:

Жили сурово. Смотрели на мир исподлобья, --- как избы их ---
из-под сосен, и --- радостно жили, как надо. Знали:

Бунт. В бунте пяди назад не отступят, пяди не спятят.

(70)

They lived harshly. They looked out on the world from under their brows, as did their huts from under the pines, and they lived joyously, as they should. They knew:

Rebellion. In the rebellion they would not give an inch, not retreat even an inch.

While the peasants stand firm, the byway rebellion out in the countryside is carrying death to the cities (71).²⁵⁸ In the cities, white paper (permits, ration cards, bureaucracy) has replaced blood (vitality). Lights, water, firewood, household pets, even mice and weeds are gone. It is every man for himself, each looking to take advantage of everyone else, and the rich, soft-handed restaurant patrons who love their wives without having children seek to lash out and postpone death for just one more day (72). The cities are described as dens of corruption filled with self-serving, self-interested people suffering from every moral malady from syphilis to sloth to selfishness. Such people fear death, as the peasants do not, because the urbanites have distanced themselves from nature in numerous ways, and in separating sexual union from procreation they have failed to reproduce and thus have lost their “immortality.” And it is the narrator’s hopeful expectation that the cities will die out as the nation returns to its essential pre-Petrine, peasant roots.

²⁵⁸ “I v goroda narodnyi proselochnyi bunt prines --- smert’” The popular rebellion would restore the former ways of life, for which cities were unnecessary and non-existent: “. . . narodnyi bunt, zhit’-de nado po staromu: ne bylo gorodov, i ne nado.” (“. . . the popular revolt, one must live as in the old days: there were no cities, and they weren’t needed.”) (69)

This early story, written during the Revolutionary/Civil War period, shows a highly polarized view of the (universally evil) city, with its urbanized lives and values, and the (universally good) countryside, with its largely nature-based patterns of life.²⁵⁹ The nature-bound peasant is moral, hardworking, loving, mentally and emotionally healthy, and honorable. His harmony with nature (even as she issues more challenges especially in her propagation/death cycle) and cooperation with his fellow man assure his survival and peace --- just as the opposite traits assure the destruction of the urbanites and their way of life.

Nuances Emerge: Golyi god²⁶⁰

Pil'niak's first novel is rife with elements of the author's biological *ethos*. However, at this point I will strive to limit the discussion to the depiction of Pil'niak's (evolving) concept of the appropriate human relationship to nature. As in "Proselki," elements of which appear in this larger work, "nature's" people are opposed to "civilized" ones, but now there are more subtleties in the group typologies and the "natural" cycles move from those governed by earth's four seasons to more

²⁵⁹ Obviously this story, as will Golyi god, represents Pil'niak's early erroneous interpretation of the Revolution as a spontaneous peasant uprising restoring Russia to its essential Slavic (un-Europeanized) agricultural essence and way of life. As various contemporary critics pointed out, Pil'niak had changed his views significantly by the mid-1920s. However, his belief that man must live in harmony with nature persists throughout his writing career, although his definition of the appropriate "harmony" does evolve.

²⁶⁰ I will be citing from Golyi god, 6-vol. coll., vol. 1, 23-180. Some of the groups and individuals I discuss here occur in separate stories published independently before the publication of the novel, in which they were included in reworked form. I have chosen to examine the novel because the relevant individual stories overlap and the versions reworked into the novel make a more coherent base for this analysis. The constituent stories as published individually include: "Smert' starika Arkhipova" ("The Death of Old Man Arkhipov," written 1918, first published 1918); "Na rodine Lazhechnikova" ("At the Homeplace of Lazhechnikov," 1918, 1918); "Imenie Belokonskoe" (1918, 1920); "U Nikoly, chto na Belykh Kolodeziakh" ("At Nikola, at White Springs," 1919, 1919); "Polyn'" ("Wormwood," 1919, 1920); and "Arina" (1919, 1920).

individualized, metaphorical ones. The urbanized environment is still said to be dying, as the Revolution carries death to the cities (122-3). However, this corrupt, doomed social segment now also includes the provincial aristocracy and merchant class (in opposition to the rural folk), and various degrees of “harmony with nature” can be discerned and evaluated in groups and individuals other than the peasantry. The aristocracy, primarily represented by the princely Ordynin family, is abortion-prone, syphilitic, promiscuous and otherwise sexually degenerate, even suicidal, and, in the current generation, barren (with the exception of Natal’ia Ordynina, referred to as “the only human being” in the family (81)).²⁶¹ The merchant class, represented by the Ratchin family, is patriarchal-tyrannical, corrupt, abusive, dissolute, and ultimately self-destructive as a class because of its greed and exploitation of people. These elements are presumably to be swept away by the Revolution, here presented as a cleansing storm eliminating non-essential, destructive layers of society which have encrusted essential peasant Rus’ --- a revolution still (as in “Proselki”) presented basically as a peasant uprising restoring Russia to its essential close-to-nature (primitive) peasant self and pre-Petrine religious and aesthetic culture, uncorrupted by Westernization. However, there are also intimations that alternative interpretations of the Revolution are viable.

The nature- and earth-oriented cultural elements include the peasantry --- represented by the same Kononov group as in “Proselki” --- as well as a pair of sorcerers (links to the traditional folk), a group of Sectarians, and a (revolutionary) anarchist commune. Each of these groups lives at a different degree of intimacy with the earth and

²⁶¹ “odna Natal’ia chelovek”

nature's cycles. I will examine their relationships with the earth and their life-procreation-death cycles vis-à-vis their lifestyles and weddings/marriages.

The folk sorcerers,²⁶² Arina and Yegorka,²⁶³ are not part of a larger community per se. They live in the forest as individuals and provide herbal remedies, magical and other assistance to neighbors, especially peasants, when needed. They are associated with the least communal primitive and ancient cultural elements and folkloric traditions of folk Russia and enjoy a totally free and spontaneous sexual relationship with one another, no formal marriage necessary. While they do appear monogamous --- there is no suggestion of other liaisons involving either of them --- neither is there any mention of any progeny from their relationship; this absence suggests the coming extinction of their kind.²⁶⁴ They are associated at different times and different ways with all three other "nature-defined" groups: the peasants, the Sectarians, and the anarchist commune, thereby confirming the ties of those groups with nature and ancient Russian culture.

The main peasant group is still associated with the surname Kononov, a community again described as related by surname but not necessarily by blood kinship. They live according to the meteorological seasons, make their living from field and forest, and have the strong work ethic, communal spirit, and calloused hands the reader

²⁶² Their categorization as "znakhar'/znakharka" (rather than "koldun/koldun'ia" or other terms) implies that they are "good" sorcerers, usually working to heal and benefit fellow man. Ivanits 85.

²⁶³ There is ambiguity in the nature of their relationship, based on the passage "Arina rodilas' u deda Egorki maem" (86). I interpret this to mean that Arina was born in the cabin of Grandfather Egorka (old man Egorka), not that he was actually her biological grandfather. Tulloch translates: "Arina was born in her grandfather Yegorka's house in May." Jensen (173) says "either the narrator has forgotten that she was originally [. . .] presented as his daughter or this does not matter among sorcerers." I agree with Browning (211, n. 11), who says that probably "Arina's mother simply came to Grandfather Egorka at the time of her delivery for magical help." Tulloch translation cited from Boris Pilnyak, *The Naked Year*, trans. A. R. Tulloch (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1975) 84.

²⁶⁴ I would consider them the last of their kind, the culmination of perhaps millennia of development, there being no place for further development of sorcery and its practitioners in twentieth-century Russia.

has come to expect (88-89). Their traditions (culture) and way of life are more developed in the novel than in the story, indicating more advanced cultural development.²⁶⁵ The wedding of Aleksei Kniaz'ev-Kononov and Ul'ianka Kononova occurs in winter, when death from famine and pestilence are rampant, amid bartering for and stockpiling of coffins for the dead; this indicates that for these peasants, as for the previous ones, life does indeed flow out of death, and the birth of a cow on the cold evening of the wedding presages a fertile marriage. That these peasants are depicted in springtime with their mating songs and dances and in winter with funerals, weddings, and story-telling to children (the novel concludes with the village hunkering down against the blizzard, grandfather telling wonder-tale *skazki* to the children on the oven, right after the wedding) --- rather than at other times, in other activities ---- indicates both their cultural tie with past generations and their unity with nature's seasonal cycles, which continues to insure their survival and propagation. As in "Proselki," a completely positive picture of the local peasant community is presented with respect to the relationship of humans to nature.

Pil'niak is also aware of the difficulties of peasants who enlist in the new regime and depicts these with sympathy and sensitivity. The Kononov peasant who becomes a party administrator, thus becoming progressively alienated from family and class, struggles to adjust to his new inactive, desk-bound administrative life and torments himself trying to understand how the masters kept their floors clean is a good example of

²⁶⁵ We hear the words of their courtship songs and some specifics about magical fairy tales (*vol'shebnye skazki*), for example, and the courtship/wedding process is much more complex than merely bowing to the winds --- it involves a love incantation (provided by the above-mentioned sorcerers), a prayer to the Bogoroditsa for a husband, Yuletide celebrations, vows and hospitality rituals, and even a Book of Rites.

the writer's current attitude, and also provides insight into the impact of Socialism's progressively more urbanized and regimented way of life on the peasantry.

The Sectarrians²⁶⁶ also live close to the earth and, at first glance, seem as positively presented as the peasantry. They can be viewed as an alternative version of peasant Rus'; as Gleb Ordynin --- a valid cultural thinker, even though he is from the degenerate Ordynin family --- says, "Vsia istoriia Rossii muzhitskoi --- istoriia sektantstva" (75).²⁶⁷ These Sectarrians are more culturally developed than the peasants, united not by an ancient relationship to the land (as is the peasantry) but by a conservative religious creed and "brotherhood" dating back at least to the days of Catherine II. Highly independent, believing that a community left to itself could live a thousand years, they acknowledge the Bible as sole authority and live by Biblical precepts,²⁶⁸ individual conscience, and laws of brotherhood and hospitality, acknowledging no government but their own. Universally healthy, attractive, hard-working, and dressed in white, they work their farms on the steppe from dawn to dusk just as their forefathers did, leaving their homes (which can barely be distinguished from the steppe itself²⁶⁹) open and food available to any of their brotherhood who might be in need.

²⁶⁶ The exact identity of this Sect is not known. Adelaide Schramm has associated it with the Stundists, a Protestant group whose creed was imported by German immigrants at the time of Catherine II, according to Jensen (143, n. 11).

²⁶⁷ "The whole history of peasant Russia is the history of Sectarianism."

²⁶⁸ "Edinaia Kniga est' --- kniga knige --- Bibliia, i zhit' nadlezhit bibleiskim obychaem. Chti ottsa tvoego i mater' tvoiu, liubi blizhniago, ne skvernoslov', trudis', dumai o Gospode Boge i o Like Ego, v tebe nesomom" (113). ("There is one Book, the book of books, the Bible, and life is to be lived according to Biblical principles. Honor thy father and thy mother, love thy neighbor, eschew foul language, work, and contemplate the Lord God and His Image, which is borne within you.").

²⁶⁹ "Khutora byli riadom, razmetal's' v balke, --- no esli i dnem na verstu pod"edesh' k nim, --- ne primetish' --- step' krugom pustaia, golaia." ("The farmsteads were right there, sprawled in the ravine, but

However, evaluating their Pil'niakian closeness to nature's principles is complex. While family is very important, as can be seen in the closeness of Donat and his son Mark, the entire "brotherhood" ethic of the group, the emphasis on honoring one's parents, etc., there are none of the usual cues to the value of mating and propagating --- no mention of procreation, seeds, life emerging from death, the universal springtime call to mating, and the like. Gender roles are very strictly defined, with a wife totally subordinate to her husband, who is her "master, but also brother, protector, and comrade" (111);²⁷⁰ this inequality recalls Marina's subordinate relationship to Demid ("God ikh zhizni"). According to their creed, marriage is not a "sacrament" as such, but is love, and a wedding requires only the parental blessing of the nuptial pair in a gathering of the community; the only holy rite is that of the "sacred Kiss" (113). Ritual death and rebirth take place only for Irina (not for Mark or any symbolic potential progeny), who spends the night before her wedding alone in "the women's hut," dying to her former self before her new life as a (married) Sectarian begins. But it is only Irina who dies and is (re)born, possibly only to represent her conversion to membership in the Sectarian cult and clan; no such ritual is mentioned for husband-to-be Mark. Potential progeny are not mentioned by bride, groom, or community. Irina seems totally oblivious to the sacred instinct of motherhood but glorifies that of survival. One can only assume, due to the obvious health and vitality of the community, that the emphasis placed on relationships with parents and brothers also applies to progeny.

even if you ride up to them at a verst's distance in daytime, you won't notice them --- the steppe all around is empty, bare.") And at night: "Dom Donata vpolz iz mraka srazu, i izba i dvor pod odnoi kryshei." ("Donat's house crept out of the gloom all at once, both cottage and yard under one roof.") Both citations, 106.

²⁷⁰ "gospodin, no i brat, zashchitnik, tovarishch"

Irina/Arina can be considered a more advanced version of the primitive Marina from “God ikh zhizni” in her desire to replace the freedom which cramps her with “slavery” to her husband Mark and the Sectarian lifestyle. Ultimately in her Sectarian life she is too busy with physical labor to think or reflect, and she finds this satisfying. She is a strong, intelligent, beautiful woman who seeks a Marina-like mental and emotional subservience. In my opinion, Pil’niak is not idealizing male superiority here but castigating the escapist and Darwinian values of an intellectual woman who fails to seek the maternal role. But Marina, who could (also) feel but not think, is governed by reproductive rather than survival instincts, hence is presented positively.

The Sectarians also have a “dark side,” their nocturnal occupation as horse thieves, indicating their affinity with the primitive Kirgiz in the later “Staryi syr” (1923) and with the thieving peasants in “Mat’ syra-zemlia” (1924) described below. In this activity the Sectarians show their harmony with the chaotic elements associated with nature’s nocturnal, unpredictable, destructive aspect.²⁷¹ This chaotic aspect is also an anti-social one, pitting them in a different way (as bandits; they are already a separate self-governing religious and social unit) against the larger external, non-Sectarian world being molded by the Revolution. One result of this “dark side” affinity is the community’s seemingly excessive association with the “survival” part of the cycle.²⁷² Anarchist Irina/Arina, the outsider who marries the Sectarian Mark, admires the Sectarians as Darwinian survivor-types who take what they want without asking,

²⁷¹ This aspect will be examined in more detail below, with the story “Mat’ syra-zemlia.”

²⁷² In contrast, even the wolves in “Pozemka” had one season of mating/reproduction with the three of “survival.” The Sectarians seem to have an abundant food supply and would need minimal emphasis on survival efforts in comparison to the desperate, starving people at the Mar Junction, for example.

resulting appropriately in survival of the fittest. She exultantly describes the revolutionary period as a time of “the struggle of instinct” (110), when a man must “be able to strangle a man and beat a woman” (109). Focused on survival of their community in the face of the prospective Communist regime, the group is already planning to move farther into the limitless steppe if necessary to avoid revolutionary conscription; their self-government precludes maintaining an army or supporting any outside regime. Even Arina’s repeated question “How many days, beautiful and joyful, are ahead of me?” (108, 112) seems to be assessing her survival odds rather than probing the quality of her future life.

The Sectarians are positively depicted with respect to their daytime harmony with the land and their authentic, real-life expression of the principles of brotherhood, but their nocturnal horse-stealing activity reveals a fundamental duplicity in them²⁷³ and a tie with the anti-social “razboinik” element of the Russian folk. The extent of their focus on survival (rather than reproductive or maternal) instincts is a result of their harmony with nature’s unpredictable, chaotic, destructive side.

The final group that seems to portray any kind of closeness to the earth is the Anarchist Commune at Porech’e.²⁷⁴ This is a motley group of high-principled, idealistic, intellectual people of various classes and nationalities who have settled on Prince Andrei Ordynin’s nationalized estate. Each individual has apparently joined the group from a different life situation and for different reasons. They take the estate by force in April, flying the black freedom banner, having come there, as anarchist Iuzik says, “to live on

²⁷³ For a group professing commitment to living by biblical principles, this activity shows deliberate transgression of at least two parts of the Decalogue, the prohibitions against stealing and coveting.

²⁷⁴ This section is at least partially autobiographical. Pil’niak spent several weeks at an anarchist commune near Peski/Kolomna in early summer, 1918, and was nearly killed in a shootout over property there. See Browning 13-14; and for Pil’niak’s own description, “Pisateli --- o sebe” 42-43.

the land and make life” (91). Arriving in springtime, they begin promisingly to till the land, milk the cows, and enter into the folk celebrations of mermaid week, St. John’s Day, and the like. Like the Sectarians, they work the land and govern themselves, in this case according to common rules they have drawn up and agreed upon. But they are totally devoid of authenticity. Few of the anarchists have any agricultural experience, some using their muscles for the first time ever --- actually they are merely playing at being peasants and commune-members. As Sectarian Donat points out, their farming is worthless, the young people incompetent, lacking know-how and devotion to their labor and land (101). By day they pretend to till the soil; by night they have unproductive, squabbling meetings. Former revolutionary (1905?) Semen Ivanovich, their elderly leader, seems to vitality-seeking Irina already tired, talking about noble principles “drily and angrily” (108). This sterile, superficial community, in contrast to the Sectarians, lacks the energy, strength, or commitment to even pretend to live by professed behavioral ideals. They are either uninterested in marriage or their attempts are abortive: anarchist Natal’ia completely dismisses archeologist Baudek’s marriage proposal (“Ostav’te, Flor” (95)²⁷⁵); and despite the commune’s approval of the marriage of Andrei and Irina, she chooses dynamic, decisive Sectarian Mark over pale, passive anarchist Andrei. Fragmented by petty squabbling on the inside, virtually destroyed in a gunfight during an attempted takeover by an external group, the commune ends in death and dispersal (Irina, married to Sectarian Mark, is one of the few survivors). This group does not understand

²⁷⁵ “Drop it, Flor.” Baudek is not a member of the commune. The very nature of an “anarchist commune” may preclude any kind of real mating and traditional propagation and child-rearing practices; that is, it may, like the Shakers, be short-lived and barren by definition.

nature, is not and never has been in real harmony with any aspect of it, and does not survive, much less procreate.

One group remains to be mentioned here, although it is usually described in terms of its relationship with technology rather than nature, and that is the Bolsheviks, or “leather-jackets.” This dynamic, self-taught, ethnically Russian group is described primarily in connection with bureaucracy, mechanization and factories rather than (biological) nature.²⁷⁶ Nevertheless, they are positively represented in their role as miracle-workers who do the impossible in bringing dead factories back to life; in view of this, they can be seen as part of a non-biological procreative cycle.²⁷⁷

On an individual basis, it may be Bolsheviks who model Pil’niak’s idea of right (modern) relationships with respect to the cycles of life, propagation, and death. This type of relationship with nature itself and her plan for human life will characterize right living in the urbanized cultural settings of his future works. Arkhip Ivanovich Arkhipov is descended from a family of serfs on the Volkovich estate, hence has a hereditary connection with the land. He and his father, Ivan Spiridonovich, grow crops and keep cattle. Dr. Natal’ia Ordynina, mentioned above as “the only human being” in the doomed Ordynin family, is a Bolshevik physician whose hospital apartment is characterized by natural elements: log walls, the smell of tar, large windows, and houseplants (163). In her professional capacity she informs Ivan Spiridonovich that he has terminal cancer. In

²⁷⁶ There is controversy about whether the “leather-jackets” are presented positively (e.g., Voronskii) or whether their valorization is ironic (e.g., Maguire). At least in their energy and ability to “do the impossible” in their resurrection of the factory I see them as valorized by Pil’niak.

²⁷⁷ Another autobiographical element: Pil’niak spent several months in 1920 in government sponsored travel to assess the potential for starting up factories in various regions of the USSR, and was very impressed by the will and vigor of the Bolsheviks in the group (Browning 24). Pil’niak himself attests to this in the novel (157).

response to this diagnosis, Ivan decides to accept that his life cycle is complete and commit suicide rather than suffer dehumanizing deterioration. Son Arkhip is sad to lose his father but supports the decision. Ivan's final advice to his son is "Ty zhivi, syn, dela svoego ne broesai! Zhenis', detei narodi, syn . . ." (56).²⁷⁸ Live, work, marry, reproduce --- the blessing of a dying man to his son.

Out of this deathbed blessing develops the relationship of Dr. Natal'ia Ordynina and Arkhip, who are already acquaintances. Both Natal'ia and Arkhip have made early mistakes in love and sexual relationships,²⁷⁹ which left Natal'ia, at least, feeling incapable of love. Somewhat cynical now at twenty-eight, she has conceived a cold but honest plan to get married at some point in order to have a child, expecting to give the man her body but not her soul.²⁸⁰ As a woman, she wants a child. Seeing romantic love as banality and suffering which would just contort her reason, she chooses to direct her energies to (or sublimate her instinctive drive in) the Bolshevik cause rather than to a romantic union (82-83). By autumn, however, the professional relationship between Natal'ia and Arkhip (who was instrumental in resurrecting the dead factory) has become more personal. His father's death, necessary as it was, inspired him to think of his own life. He proposes to Natal'ia in what seems a reflection of her own pragmatic marriage plan, looking forward to their having children together (with the benefit of their mutual good health, intelligence, and her superior education) and raising them well. She

²⁷⁸ "Live, son, don't abandon your work! Marry, have children, son . . ."

²⁷⁹ Her love affair involved an illegitimate pregnancy, followed implicitly by abortion and explicitly by emotional devastation; he, as a young man, had "sinned with women" (164). Successful matches in Pil'niak are often preceded by painful, hence purifying, inappropriate relationships.

²⁸⁰ Pil'niak makes clear in other works that such separation is not possible; in this case, Natal'ia Ordynina will become aware of her error and invest in a right, love- and procreation-based relationship instead.

acknowledges the supreme importance of having children but says that she doesn't love him "in that way" and characterizes his proposal as cold and "uncozy" ("neuiutno") (164).

Over time, they come to an understanding about the values of life ("chelovek nuzhen, chistota, razum!" (164))²⁸¹ and develop the necessary emotional ties. Even the owls outside seem to hoot "Ved' chelovek ne zhivotnoe, chtoby liubit' kak zhivotnoe" (165).²⁸² Visualizing their future right relationship, Natal'ia reflects: "Ne liubit' --- i liubit'. Akh, i budet uiut, i budut deti, i --- trud, trud! . . . Milyi, edinstvennyi, moi! *Ne budet lzhi i boli*" (165).²⁸³

In this eventually ideal match, both mates are agents of life: he revitalizes factories, she heals people, and both want to procreate and raise their children well. Both are self-aware and seek integrity in themselves and in their relationship. Both are associated with the land and nature but neither is bound to the earth exclusively by manual labor and climatic seasons, like the peasants. The wind blowing "gla—vbumm" (163) --- an acronym for the central paper industry --- as Arkhip approaches Natal'ia's apartment early in their courtship suggests the potential harmonization of industrialization and nature. In the apartment, their apparel shows their Russianness --- his *kosovorotka* and her hair in a garland of braids, and the armor of his leather jacket (the Bolshevik motif) has been left open, revealing his vest and Russian shirt (and

²⁸¹ "Man is necessary, and purity, and reason!"

²⁸² "Man is not an animal, to love like an animal."

²⁸³ "Not to love --- and (then) to love. Oh, there will be coziness, and there will be children, and work, work! . . . My dear one, my only one! *There won't be lying and pain.*" (Pil'niak's emphasis)

emotional vulnerability). Out of the appropriate, accepted death of Arkhip's father²⁸⁴ has come the union and planned procreation of a loving pair, who will work and raise children as they should be raised (building culture). Natal'ia, an aristocrat and *intelligent*, is the sole member of her family to enter the newly developing revolutionary world in this way, because she is indeed a "real person," a *mensch*, who will bring positive elements of culture (aesthetic and other spiritual values) into the mix. Love between humans is not just the sex act, based solely on instinct, as with animals, nor can the physical relationship be separated from the spiritual one. Their relationship grows over time, feelings develop and change, tenderness is added to reason. Loving and mating is about common values in life, loving one another in an emotional bond, fidelity within the relationship ("moi!!!"), and about raising children in some "right" way. Children are important, but the mate equally so. Early sexual mistakes have left lingering impact but can be relegated to the past, so life can go on. The placement of this final marriage agreement at the end of the novel, almost immediately before the final peasant chapter with the wedding, promises survival and progeny for this urbanized pair as it does with the peasants.

Eric Naiman, in Sex in Public, identifies rape as "the single most representative revolutionary act in Pil'niak's fiction" and considers bestiality valorized in Pil'niak's revolutionary and NEP works (60). In his analysis of Golyi god, Naiman focuses primarily on the last section of "Glava V: "Smerti: triptikh pervyi," significantly subtitled

²⁸⁴ The original discussion between Arkhip and his father makes it clear that there is no expectation of an afterlife, but the mystery of a snuffed flame --- now it's there, now it's not --- is presented. (55)

“Chast’ tret’ia triptikha, samaia temnaia” (141-55),²⁸⁵ which depicts brutal rapes and sexual slavery among desperate people seeking food near a steppe railway station (Mar Junction). I consider Golyi god the most polyphonic of Pil’niak’s works in its portrayal of the Revolution’s effects, positive and negative, on a variety of individuals and class/culture representatives. In appreciation of Pil’niak’s heavy usage of polar opposites in this work and others, I would cite the above relationship between Arkhipov and Natal’ia Ordynina as depicted in “Chast’ tret’ia triptikha (samaia svetlaia)” (162-65)²⁸⁶ in Chapter VI, in refutation of --- or at least in balance to --- Pil’niak’s alleged enthusiasm for revolutionary brutality. That such a balance is intended is clearly shown by the parallelism and opposition in the chapter and section titles within the structure of the work. Numerous additional positive spiritual values appear and are highly assessed in Pil’niak’s “revolutionary” (and other) writings, as I will show. The rapes in Pil’niak’s fiction are many, but they are not celebrated; any “enthusiasm” surrounding them is a (negative) sign of the degradation experienced by people who have been jettisoned to the bottom level of Maslow’s triangle and indeed tragically reduced to a bestial state. In this novel and elsewhere Pil’niak decries and opposes bestiality and barbarity; far from glorifying these, he promotes a morality which strives to eliminate them.

Even at the beginning of Pil’niak’s writing career, development in his biological *ethos* is apparent. Peasants are idealized and presented unilaterally positively with respect to their innate harmony with nature, work ethic, sense of community, mental and emotional health, honor, integrity, and consistency with nature’s nurturing, sun-oriented

²⁸⁵ “Chapter V: Deaths: The First Triptych,” subtitled “The Third Part of the Triptych, the Very Darkest,” and published separately as “Poezd No. 57, smeshannyi” in 1921.

²⁸⁶ “The Third Part of the Triptych (the Very Brightest)” in Chapter VI: “Penultimate: Bolsheviks, The Second Triptych”

biological cycles of birth, mating, procreation, and death, and the struggle for survival when exposed to her chaotic, destructive aspect. Again, out of death comes life, and those who procreate do not fear death. Human closeness to and respect for nature has to be real and authentic (as opposed to that of the anarchists), but Pil'niak is already demonstrating the viability and appropriateness of symbolic or metaphorical death/birth cycles which are not prompted purely by instinct or biological calendar season. He is also distinguishing between a purely animal *ethos* and the human one which is fraught with more decisions and spiritual elements. Sexual love cannot be divided into spiritual and physical components, nor can it be separated from procreation. Similarly, man is not judged solely by his harmony with nature's cycles but also by the integrity which binds his professed creed with his behavior. Some groups seem to be akin to the earth's chaotic nocturnal aspect to varying degrees; this orientation leads (at least) to a focus on survival rather than procreation and to issues of integrity. For example, the Sectarians in their horse-stealing show themselves to be chaotic, anti-social elements in the larger society while maintaining integrity within their own group. The lack of integrity between creed and action or failure to honor ALL phases of the birth/mate/propagate/die cycle (as with the Sectarians, anarchists, and city-dwellers, in different ways) seems to spell doom. At this point in Pil'niak's *oeuvre*, circa 1920, the peasants still demonstrate the most perfect morality and relationship with nature, but the individual Bolshevik pair, Natal'ia and Arkhip, presents an ideal modern model for a social environment dominated more by culture than nature.

The Heart of Darkness: “Mat’ Syra-zemlia”²⁸⁷

Between the writing of the pre- and revolutionary stories I have examined above far and 1924, Pil’niak’s idyllic presentation of the peasantry changes in several ways. Amusing, indulgently narrated stories of ignorant villagers, such as the deacon in “Metel’” (1921) who locked himself in the bathhouse all winter to ponder the earth-shaking philosophical question of how people first started milking cows, appear along with ridiculous depictions of attic Satan-worshippers in “Riazan’ iabloko” (1921). Calm, devoted Marina of “God ikh zhizni” metamorphoses into a wild, subhuman peasant girl in a frenzied sexual relationship with farmer Grekov in “Chernyi khleb” (between old and new style Christmases, 1922-23) and even into Masha, the grotesque stone-age horse herder who so fascinated machine-fearing Andrei Roschislavskii in “Mashiny i volki” (1924). As early as “Veter pered martom” (1919) a senseless murder of Party organizers is perpetrated by a drunken mob of (formerly peasant) factory workers; Grekov, with his plans of a model farm, is similarly murdered (“Chernyi khleb”). “Mat’ syra-zemlia” is one of the last works in which Pil’niak describes the close-to-earth peasantry in any comprehensive way, and the picture he paints is quite different from the idealized idylls of his earlier works.

This story is very rich, and although the subject matter is harsh, it is one of Pil’niak’s finest --- perhaps the finest of all --- artistic endeavors. Among the themes of the story are duplicity and perception, and it opens appropriately with a peasant who, having fallen from a tree while stealing bark, has lost his eyes from hanging upside-down so long. The narrator goes on to introduce Nikita, the main hero of the story, a wolf-cub

²⁸⁷ I will be citing from “Mat’ syra-zemlia,” 6-vol. coll., vol. 2, 1-62. This work was dated by the author 20 November 1924, first published 1925.

(who, we learn in the final pages, is actually a fox) nurtured by the tanner and Communist Party member Arina. Arina is also specified as a hero of the tale, along with Communist forester Nekul'ev, sent to manage timber resources in the national forests, and nature herself, in the form of "summer, ravines, and whistles back and forth" is also a hero (377-378).²⁸⁸ The local peasants (here workers of forest rather than steppe) seem to welcome Nekul'ev, since the Revolution has made all the land the property of the people. They think Nekul'ev, as a Communist, must be eager, to help them claim their portions of the forest: "na to on i priekhal, chto lesa nashi. Teper' beri skol'ko khosh', bez vorovstva, po zakonu" (381).²⁸⁹ Nekul'ev, of course, as a trained forester and Party member, sees his role as preserving the timber reserves for use by the whole nation rather than by thieving peasants and other local residents.²⁹⁰ I will not be analyzing the entire story *per se*, however, but focusing on the presentation of peasants and "closeness to the earth" in this work.

²⁸⁸ "--- --- . . . Glavnyi geroi etogo rasskaza o lese i muzhikakh (krome lesnichego Antona Ivanovicha Nekul'eva, krome kozhevennitsy Ariny --- Iriny Sergeevny Arsen'evoi, krome leta, ovragov, svistov i posvistov) --- glavnyi geroi --- volchonok, malen'kii volchonok Nikita [. . .]." ("The main hero of this story of forest and peasants (besides the forester Anton Ivanovich Nekul'ev, besides the tanner Arina --- Irina Sergeevna Arsen'eva, besides the summer, ravines, whistles back and forth) --- the main hero is a wolf-cub, the little wolf-cub Nikita [. . .].")

²⁸⁹ "that's just why he came --- that the forests are ours. Now take however much you want, without stealing, according to the law."

²⁹⁰ Judith M. Mills, in analyzing the narrative technique in this novella, asserts that Pil'niak is demonstrating two revolutionary poles: "the 'natural' revolutionary pillaging the timberlands to survive, and the 'rational' ideologically oriented revolutionary, who would conserve them for national needs" (114). "Narrative Technique in Pil'nyak's 'Mother Earth,'" *Journal of Russian Studies* (Nottingham, England, Taylor and Francis) 28 (1974) 13-21. I am indebted to her article also for various aspects of analysis of this work, especially that of the hunting instinct and that of peasant time versus modern time, which she relates to the "besfabul'naia" narration of the peasant elements and the "fabul'naia" narration of the rational, Communist-related elements.

I have been examining the individuals and groups in earlier works with respect to their relationship to the earth. Here is what Pil’niak has to say about “Damp Mother Earth” late in this story:

Расспросить мужиков о матери сырой-земле, --- слушать человеку уставшему, --- станут перед человеком страхи, черти и та земная тяга, та земная сыть, которой, если б нашел ее богатырь Микула, повернул бы он мир. Мужики --- старики, старухи, --- расскажут, что горы и овраги накопили огромные черти, такие, каких теперь уже нет, своими рогами --- в то самое время, когда гнали их архангелы из рая. Мать сыра-земля, как любовь и пол, тайна, на которую разделила --- она же мать сыра-земля --- человека, мужчину и женщину, --- манит смертельно, мужики целуют землю сыновне, носят в ладонках, приговаривают ей, заговаривают --- любовь и ненависть, солнце и день. Матерью сырою-землей --- как смертью и любовью --- клянутся мужики. Мать сыру-землю --- опахивают заговорами, и тогда, в ночи запрягается в соху вместо лошади голая вдова: все познавшая, а правят сохой две голые девки, у которых земля и мир впереди. Женщине быть --- матерью сырой-землей. --- А сама мать сыра-земля --- поля, леса, болота, перелески, горы, дали, годы, ночи, дни, метели, грозы, повой --- --- Мать сыру-землю можно --- иль проклинать, иль любить. --- --- (416)

Question peasants about Damp Mother Earth, and if a tired person is to listen, there will appear before the person horrors, devils and that earthly craving, that earthly sustenance, by means of which, if the bogatyr Mikula had found it, he would have turned the earth around. Peasants --- old men, old women --- tell you that huge devils dug out the mountains and ravines, such devils as no longer exist, with their horns, at that very time when the archangels were driving them out of paradise. Damp Mother Earth, like love and sex, is a mystery, into which she divided – (for) she IS Damp Mother Earth --- humanity, man and woman; she beckons fatally; peasants kiss the earth as its sons, they carry her on their palms, they condemn by her, cast spells by her, for love and hate, sun and day. Peasants swear by Damp Mother Earth as they do by death and love. They plow Damp Mother Earth by incantations, and then at night a naked widow instead of a horse is harnessed to the plow – a woman who has experienced everything --- and two naked virgins, who have the earth and world still ahead of them, steer it. It is for a woman to be Damp Mother Earth. And Damp Mother Earth herself is fields, forests, swamp, groves, mountains, the distances, years, nights, days, blizzards, storms, and morning glory. Damp Mother Earth, one can either curse her or love her . . .

To these peasants, Mother Earth is mysterious, irrational, terrifying, and completely unpredictable, as opposed to loving, motherly, nurturing and seasonal. She does not operate in the ordered cyclical patterns of mating, birth, rearing offspring, dying, and surviving as does the Mother Earth of the steppe people, even of forest people Demid and Marina, examined above. Those people loved Mother Earth and knew how to work with her in the framework of seasonal cycles, primarily in the daytime (dawn to dusk), in awareness that struggles with storms, blizzards and other unforeseeable phenomena were just hazards of survival in a life which offers no guarantees. The forest peasants in “Mat’ syra-zemlia,” on the other hand, reflect nature’s dark side; they are very active (observable too in the Sectarians of Golyi god and the Kirgiz of “Staryi syr” (1923)) and in fact most comfortable at night, folklorically a time of chaos. Nature is incomprehensible and terrible to them, not at all something to be loved, and for this reason they perceive her in terms of devils, forest demons, house spirits, and the like and strive to at least influence her (control is out of the question) by magic spells and “severe ritualism.”²⁹¹ Ultimately a mystery, she controls everything, and one must be quick on one’s feet to survive. In accord with this view of nature, the peasants themselves become a chaotic, irrational, destructive social element.

The instincts that predominate in these peasants are not those of mating and procreating but of personal survival²⁹² (including hunting), aided by powerful intuitive senses. The rational Communists, namely Arina, Nekul’ev, and Nekul’ev’s assistants,

²⁹¹ This is a term used in folklore studies to describe the mentality of early man who feels compelled to perform rituals in a precise, unvarying way for them to be effective. This mentality is revealed in the precision of the instructions of the “priest” Ignat concerning, among other things, the use of the candles during the house-warming (“crawling in”) ritual (408).

²⁹² This survival emphasis is also associated with the anti-social, nocturnal side of the Sectarians, but the forest peasants lack the uniting creed and productive social culture of the Golyi god sect.

Kon'kov and Kandin, are at a significant remove from Mother Earth, due to their education and upbringing in a more “civilized” culture, so they have lost at least some of their survival instincts. The highly superstitious peasants see hazards everywhere and seek assiduously to avert them, as by house-warming rituals²⁹³ to neutralize the bad influence of the *domovoi*, and by avoidance of the remote area of the forest inhabited by the *Liad*²⁹⁴ in which peasants Katia, Kuzia, Egor and Mariasha experience total terror (388-9). They are hunters as well as foresters and intuitively know to nurture their prey until the moment of its use, as does Kuzia with the “wolf” cub whose pelt he makes into a cap, and Tsy-pin, in supporting Nekul'ev until the meeting for land distribution, at which he intends for the peasants to kill the forester (Mills, 17). Nor do the peasants hesitate to make a kill when the proper time has come. In contrast, Nekul'ev, a good-natured, intelligent, well-educated forester, loves the natural world and always expects the best from it; he is enthusiastic about coming to this region, this job. Not a hunter, he turns out to be squeamish about blood (the peasant's eye sockets, bloody from his hanging upside down, described above) and killing (Arina and the horses in the tannery). The refrain “on ne zamechal . . .”²⁹⁵ indicates his chronic failure to register events, qualities, or especially hazards in himself or the environment around him that might impact his survival; only over time and with repeated exposure to danger do his dormant intuitive powers begin to awaken. Living in the manor house of the former prince, even from the very start,

*он не замечал, что у него --- помимо сознания и воли ---
каждый шорох в доме, каждый глупый мышинный
пробег --- покрывают гусиной кожей его спину, и*

²⁹³ The house has been built primarily with stolen lumber, emphasizing the peasants' anti-social quality.

²⁹⁴ a “leshii,” or forest demon.

²⁹⁵ “he did not notice . . .”

появилась привычка не спать ночами, бодрость никогда не покидала, но все казалось по соседству кто-то --- не то третий, не то седьмой какой-то, --- и каждая ночь была, как все. (389, my emphasis)

he didn't notice that unbeknown to his consciousness and will, every rustle in the house, every silly mouse run, would cover his back with goose flesh, and there began the habit of not sleeping nights, his courage never leaving him, but it always seemed that someone else was there, maybe a third person, or a seventh, and every night was the same.

Only much later does Nekul'ev recognize that the house itself is a hostile presence, where his predecessors had been killed²⁹⁶ (and where people have been shooting at him), and that the “dom byl vrazhdeben etim lesam i stepi” (400).²⁹⁷ However, he must live there -- there is no way to avoid it.²⁹⁸ It is only in the instants just before his colleague Kon'kov brings the news that the peasants have killed Comrade Kandin that Nekul'ev becomes aware of his nightly gooseflesh (416).²⁹⁹ In contrast to the peasants who fear the wood-demon in an isolated forest glade, he and Arina feel completely comfortable making love in a remote, primeval spot, in similar isolation (421). In his love relationship with her, again and again “he was not aware” --- of the delicious food (horsemeat?) she was serving him, of the odor (blood) that permeated her entire surroundings including the pies she made him (420). Becoming aware, identifying the odor as blood, precipitates his rejection of Arina and his own ultimate destruction --- “Nekul'ev ponial zapakh Ariny i

²⁹⁶ According to the stories he was told upon arrival, his predecessor was indeed killed in the house (381), but the prince was killed by the bridge (383); in this section it says that both were killed in the house (400). This type of narrative inconsistency not only disorients the reader but also offers insight into Nekul'ev's state of mind as a person thrown into a totally alien, chaotic, and incomprehensible environment.

²⁹⁷ “the house was hostile to these forests and steppe.”

²⁹⁸ Contrast this house's enmity to its environment with the Kononovs' anthropomorphic huts and the Sectarians' homes which were almost indistinguishable from their environs; those were human abodes in harmony with their inhabitants and with their natural surroundings.

²⁹⁹ “I vdrug, Nekul'ev почувствовал, что вся кожа его в мурашкках, --- pervyi raz osoznal eti privychnye murashki, [. . .]” (“And suddenly Nekul'ev felt all his flesh creep --- for the first time he recognized these habitual goosebumps [. . .]”)

peresilit' ego ne mog" (421). Associated odors come to him again immediately before his final flight into insanity (423).

Arina is a very complex, ambiguous figure. Raised there in the forest, where her father ran a tannery, she had *petit bourgeois* roots but lost her mother at the age of thirteen, at which time she had to learn the tanning business (387). The elements of irrational (peasant/Mother Earth) and rational (Communist/Petersburg) are much more mixed in her than in the fully rational Nekul'ev.

У Арины Арсеньевной было детство, пропахшее
пирогамн, которое она хотела выпрямить в
петербургскую прямолинейность, --- и она возрастала
обильно --- матерью сырой землей [. . .] (419)
Arina Arsenievna had a childhood smelling of pies, which she wanted
to straighten out into Petersburgian linearity³⁰⁰--- and she matured
abundantly, like Damp Mother Earth [. . .].

She is associated with the local peasant world by her repeated association with *mat' syrazemlia*, her upbringing in the area, and her motif, the moon (associating her with the chaotic nocturnal world; Nekul'ev is associated with sun and daylight). Like the local hunters, she is able to kill (horses) when the time comes for their use in her tanning operation. But she had chosen to restructure herself into a more rational make-up, hence her education in Petersburg and her Communist revolutionary career. Like Arkhipov and the factories in Golyi god, she restarted her father's tannery after the Revolution, and she and Nekul'ev first meet when she applies for a permit to strip bark for use in the tannery. The Petersburg experience has tainted her and diluted her earth-related elements: having postponed romance (love, procreation) from the proper time because of the Revolution, she is thirty and a virgin when she first gives herself to Nekul'ev. She does not recognize

³⁰⁰ It is exactly this Petersburg *priamolineinost'* that is opposed by the winding rural roads in "Proselki."

the falseness of Nekul'ev's profession of love (and perhaps he doesn't either) (419). On the other hand, the remnants of uncorrupted Mother Earth that remain in her are associated with the dark, chaotic, bestial aspect, which leads her to nurture the cub and slaughter horses rather than love a man and produce and nurture a child of her own. Her romance with Nekul'ev is very secondary to her devotion to the cub. More significantly, she herself is so permeated with the odor of horse blood that she does not recognize the tell-tale scent of the cub, failing to recognize it for what it is, a fox.³⁰¹ She misdirects her substantial maternal instincts to the cub, whose natural enmity toward her grows throughout the story until it finally attacks her.³⁰² The peasant Kuzia, on the other hand, immediately recognizes the cub as a fox, and he "spokoino ukhvatil za shivorot lisenka, zakutal ego" (426).³⁰³ Arina's doom is caused, in the bigger picture, by (a.) the corruption of her life-oriented instincts (survival, procreative, and maternal) by her progressive, rationalist education (the Petersburg influence, which she chose to experience) and by (b.) the direction of her remaining instincts to the dark side of Mother Earth. More immediately her death is due to her inappropriate occupation with the cub which keeps her from escaping the approaching Cossacks. Her death by impalement can be seen as a grotesque, lethal form of coitus resulting from her chosen alienation from the "natural" loving, nurturing female role associated with the daylight aspect of Mother Earth.

³⁰¹ Foxes, like polecats and skunks, emit an unpleasant odor. The emphasis placed on the cub's strong, offensive odor makes it clear that any local outdoorsperson would recognize the species.

³⁰² The narrator even comments: "I ne nado, ne nado bylo skloniat'sia vecherami nad volchonkom, smotret' emu v glaza, nezhnye slova govorit' emu i vdykhat' ego --- gor'kii lesnoi zapakh!" ("And she shouldn't, she shouldn't have bent over the wolf-cub in the evenings, looking him in the eye, saying tender words to him and breathing in his scent, that bitter forest scent!") (420).

³⁰³ He "calmly grabbed the fox by the scruff of the neck and wrapped him up."

Arina has too much darkness/Mother Earth in her for Nekul'ev, who mistakes her essential being as she has mistaken that of the cub: "Arina otdavalas' Nekul'evu vseiu mater'iu syroi-zemliei, --- Nekul'ev dumal, chto v rukakh ego solntse" (421).³⁰⁴ But he is not embracing the sun but the moon,³⁰⁵ the nocturnal aspect of Mother Earth. When he realizes that the smell permeating her is that of the blood of the horses she kills for their leather, he flees, distraught, never to see her again; this discovery is the main catalyst to his madness.

Many commentators who treat this novella³⁰⁶ associate this cub, in its wolf manifestation, with the essential (noble but wild) nature of the peasantry in this work. However, I find that the real identity of the cub as a fox is more representative of the peasant in this story, especially because of the story's numerous folkloric motifs.³⁰⁷ The fox is perhaps the most prevalent animal figure in Russian animal tales (*skazki o zhivotnykh*),³⁰⁸ outwitting all and sundry, especially the wolf, who is usually portrayed in

³⁰⁴ "Arina gave herself to Nekul'ev in the full spirit of Mother Earth --- and Nekul'ev thought that the sun was in his arms."

³⁰⁵ The moon is a complex motif when examined across Pil'niak's *oeuvre*, as it does have some "ordering" as opposed to chaotic qualities (regular phases, control of the tides, etc.). In this particular work, however, its main significance is in its opposition to the sun's illuminating, ordering, nurturing daytime aspect; the moon illuminates, if at all, only weakly and indirectly and has little influence on the unpredictable, nocturnal, destructive aspect of nature. With respect to Mother Earth, Communist Arina is a hybrid of the chaotic nighttime elements and the moon's ordering aspect, but she still has too much of the nocturnal chaos for sunny Nekul'ev.

³⁰⁶ For example, Mills, Browning, and Pil'niak's contemporary critic B. Brainina make this association.

³⁰⁷ For an analysis of this story in terms of its folkloric and mythological associations, see Jerome J. Rinkus, "Mythological and Folkloric Motifs in Pil'niak's *Mat' syra-zemlja*," Russian Language Journal, XXIX.103 (1975): 29-35.

³⁰⁸ Russian *skazki* are usually described as falling into three categories: *skazki o zhivotnykh* (animal tales), *bytovye skazki* (tales of daily life), and *volshebnye skazki* (wonder-tales; these are what Western readers usually think of as "fairy tales," which focus on the transformation of the hero to a higher level of existence, using common motifs such as quests, competition for the hand of the princess, magical elements and substances, and the final wedding as a promise for "living happily ever after").

these *skazki* as stupid, like the bear. Although no animal tales are related or alluded to in this novella, they would be well-known to peasants and when such tales concern humans at all, the humans are usually peasants. The duplicity of a fox perceived as a wolf is consistent with the duplicity that dominates the behavior of the peasants and with the main theme of animal *skazki* as personal survival by the use of one's wits, regardless of the cost to others. The fox dies for its pelt, at the hands of Kuzia, his peer in nature's dark, violent world, where chance, wits, and strength determine survival, a world in which "sometimes you eat the bear, sometimes the bear eats you." Next time Kuzia may not be so lucky . . . ³⁰⁹

One of the differences between the peasants previously examined and the ones in this story is in their perception of time. Pil'niak's works in general are dominated by cyclic, rather than linear, time; the seasons of the year, the months flow past, time is never-ending and cyclic, with each generation repeating the life phases of its forefathers. However, in this story even the annual seasonal cycles are missing; there are just days and nights, and they seem to go on forever, marked only by generalized temporal words and phrases like "then," "next," "at night," "again," etc. Mills points out that various incidents are re-narrated but "not placed in the context of time" (15). This loss of temporal orientation reveals that even time has lost its orderliness and become chaotic in this nocturnally based world. For the peasant, nothing essential in life changes with the passage of time; even holidays and seasons go unremarked in this story. Kuzia, the storytelling peasant whose *skazka* narration is interrupted again and again, can be assured

³⁰⁹ This competition of fox and man reflects that of wolf and man in "Pozemka" --- two equal competitors for survival in the natural world. This equality emphasizes the bestial qualities Pil'niak associates with the peasants in this story, who are not idealized components of nature as in "Proselki" but barbarians.

that it will continue at a later time, conclude and be infinitely retold (Mills, 16). Peasants see the new Communist foresters as just replacements for the princes who have been there throughout human memory; the peasants even address Nekul'ev as "barin," removing their hats in his presence as though they were his serfs.³¹⁰

The need for historical linear time, in which things actually get done and conditions change, is evident in the Communists Arina and Nekul'ev, however. For them, the Revolution has made things different (or should have). Arina, who has returned to (re-)start the tannery her father used to run, sees her life as something that must be totally restructured. Just as her childhood home has been restructured to become a workers' barracks, etc., relegating her living space to the attic, "nado bylo vse perestravit', delat' zanovo i po-novomu" (420).³¹¹ But the peasant attitude (which denies chronological change or progress) comes to dominate poor Nekul'ev. His two letters remain unfinished and unsent; the minutes of the one "worker's committee" meeting³¹² held under his auspices reveal that ultimately no action was taken; any real plans were tabled, and no one even signed up to become a Party member (412). Ultimately the "progress" of time in the story is measured by Nekul'ev's descent into madness under the influence of the chaotic, irrational elements surrounding him: from his hearty, enthusiastic arrival and repair of the manor/office, through his developing awareness of the duplicity dominating the environment and his initially unnoticed but growing anxieties, to his horrifying

³¹⁰ Nekul'ev does seem to act as a "master," living in the manor, eating food provided by the peasants, and responding squeamishly to their eating habits. However, his efforts to treat them as respected comrades rather than underlings contribute to his ineffectualness. As with everything else he attempts, he is unable to get them to stop removing their caps in his presence.

³¹¹ "It was necessary to reshape everything, to do it all anew and in a new way."

³¹² This is a meeting of workers initiated by Communists Nekul'ev, Kon'kov, and Kamdin; it is not the same village soviet meeting to which Nekul'ev is summoned by Tsylin.

identification of Arina's all-permeating scent and the experience of primal nocturnal fear that precipitates his final flight.

As in previous depictions of peasants (and other Russians), stories play an important role in daily life. But gone are the inspirational wonder-tales told by the family patriarch to his grandchildren on the warm stove in winter, some alluded to even by the dissolute aristocrats in Golyi god;³¹³ now what we see are "true" stories of local events reported as fact, and *skazki* of the "bytovoi" type (tales of everyday life). These serve not to tie the current generation with honored past roots and inspire the listener with the potential for transformation, as do the wonder-tales, but to entertain the insider and perhaps intimidate the outsider. Their common element is cleverness, the ability to outwit others and often to reverse the social hierarchy in the process, and such tales (should) serve as cautionary tales for Nekul'ev. Soon after his arrival at the forest junction Nekul'ev is told two true stories, one of the death of his predecessor, the previous Communist forest manager (who was gutted by peasants, stuffed into a grand piano and thrown, piano and all, into a ravine (381)), the other of the prince's death at peasant hands as he was trying to escape from his manor (now Nekul'ev's office and lodging) in 1917 (383). The forester Kuzia is known for his skill as a storyteller, and his narration of a specific *skazka* is interrupted several times during this novella. At its conclusion, Nekul'ev finally understands this story as the bad omen it is (411).³¹⁴ These stories show

³¹³ Lidia Ordynina, for example, asks why young Prince Ivan burned her frogskin, an allusion to "Tsarevna-Liagushka" ("The Frog Princess"). Afanasiev 267-269, referenced in Golyi god (70 and elsewhere).

³¹⁴ "Skazka pokazalas' emu nekhoroшим veshchaniem." The story in brief is this: Pretty Annushka, wife of wily Il'ia, visits three churches, at each of which the priest propositions her. She reports this to Il'ia, who crafts a plan. Annushka sets a schedule for the priests to visit her; as she is drinking with one, the next arrives and the first must hide in a bin in the storeroom; at Il'ia's arrival, the third and last must hide. Thinking to humiliate them when they escaped, cold and naked, Il'ia tries to put the bin they are hiding in

that everyone is corrupt, everyone tricks and is tricked, and the refrain of Kuzia's story, that what starts as a joke can turn into something else entirely, becomes almost chilling.

Everyone associated with the peasantry is indeed two-faced. Tsypin, the watchman of the local soviet, meets Nekul'ev upon arrival and arranges his transport to the manor-house, making sure to tell Nekul'ev the story of his predecessor's death. It is allegedly Tsypin who, when the peasants had decided to kill the prince, warned him to escape, and upon requesting and receiving a silver piece for the aid, was the last to see the prince alive --- a coincidence that hints at Tsypin's guilt in the prince's death. After Tsypin is elected president of the village soviet, he summons Nekul'ev to a meeting to discuss the allocation of the forest to the inhabitants; in one of Nekul'ev's first bouts of awareness of personal hazard, he observes the change in Tsypin's facial expression, from calm and good-natured while they ride in together, to cunning and malicious upon arrival at the meeting (396) where Tsypin expects Nekul'ev to be killed by drunken peasants. (Nekul'ev's providential escape convinces the locals that he is a sorcerer or devil.) Kuzia and Egor, the forest guards assigned to assist Nekul'ev in his duties, give lip-service to their forest preservation responsibilities but watch his routine and organize theft-brigades, deliveries of *samogon*, and other mischief when he is otherwise occupied, not to mention robbing him blind themselves. And in contrast to the steppe peasants, the forest people are devoid of honor among themselves: Ignat, the old priest/sorcerer, foretells the

out in the cold, but it is too heavy with the fat priests inside. It falls and breaks, splitting the skulls of the priests. To dispose of the bodies Il'ia tricks the local drunkard into tossing each frozen corpse into the river and sinking it under the ice. The drunk, with additional vodka as his reward, remembers nothing of the venture. Thus the refrain (410 and elsewhere): "[K]hotel Il'ia Ivanych posmeiat'sia nad popami, a vyshlo naoborot" ("Il'ia Ivanych had wanted to make fun of the priests, but it came out otherwise.") Mills (16-17) interprets the "bad omen" as Kuzia's conclusion of the tale: "Vot i skazke konets, i mne venets." ("And ends the story, to me be the glory.") (411), which makes Nekul'ev aware that Kuzia has not only finished his tale but will survive to tell it many more times, whereas he, Nekul'ev, will not bring anything he starts to completion.

blindness of Kuzia's and Katia's bullock as part of their house-warming ritual, then proceeds to blind the animal himself, fulfilling the prophecy;³¹⁵ another peasant first colludes with and then deceives his brother-in-law in black-market dealings (403). The peasants' politeness, obedience, or groveling to Nekul'ev's face is replaced by sometimes lethal malice behind his back.

Whereas pure, virginal Marina ("God ikh zhizni") was a sanctifying presence, placing an icon in preparation for her sacred maternal role, the peasant women in this tale are travesties of feminine sanctity. Egorushka's wife Katiasha, instead of creating an icon-corner as did Marina, uses stickers from beer shipments to decorate an icon case which her husband Egor had made from a mahogany cabinet looted from the estate. The three children of peasant mother Mariasha³¹⁶ live in cockroach-infested filth, since she considers soap "unclean." They run around dirty and naked, covered with open sores; they are bathed at most once a year, and only the eldest, at six, can talk. Her husband Kuzia speaks freely of some feminine ailment that plagues her. Mariasha attempts to seduce Nekul'ev, to whom she sells (at more than double the cost) milk and eggs rather than feed them to her hungry, swollen-bellied children. (Nekul'ev is physically too squeamish to eat with this family in its filth, and morally too squeamish to eat his own food in front of their hungry children.) These family units compare unfavorably even to the wolf and owl families in Pil'niak's earliest stories. They show no evidence of love or of nurturing spiritual or cultural values (other than fear-based tradition). There is no sense

³¹⁵ This represents Nekulyev's interpretation of the events (413).

³¹⁶ Both names, Marina and Mariasha, are variants of "Mariia," the name of the archetypal mother-figure, but of course Mariasha is ironically named.

of family as a cultural unit, children as treasured promises of parental immortality, or self-aware navigation of life in any sort of moral or spiritual sense.

Soviet critic B. Brainina, in her review of Pil'niak's 1932 anthology Rassказы, condemned this particular story as a portrayal of Communists doomed to defeat by the primeval forces of nature as represented by the peasants and wolf-cub (18-19). However, since the story depicts what is already a second attempt to convert the area to the new Socialist *stroi*, one would expect the Communists to regroup and keep trying. It is true that three of the four Communists perish and one escapes, but the "main hero," the wolf/fox cub, is also dead at a peasant's hands, his skin now worn as a hat. This in itself would seem to imply that the future of these peasants, if they are symbolized by the cub, is already at risk. In my reading, a bright future for this peasant group is not even implied --- survival over the long run promises to be just that, repetitious survival at basic sustenance levels, living in filthy primitive conditions with no spiritual or cultural development. In fact the total lack of honor among the peasants and their habitual deception even of one another suggest that the community might eventually self-destruct on its own.

These dark-side peasants, while interesting symbolically, are not attractive as human individuals nor are they viable, desirable cultural elements, and Pil'niak makes no attempt to make them so. Their relationship with the dark side of Mother Earth has negated rather than enhanced their value. These peasants are stupid, bestial, and completely uninterested in bettering themselves, their progeny, or any aspect of the world. Where Ivan Koloturov-Kononov's difficulties in comprehending the new regime were sensitively portrayed and the peasant superstitions seemed charming or amusing in

Golyi god and other early works, here the superstition and lack of comprehension show up as naked, ugly ignorance, and the behavior as brutality. These peasants lack integrity even among their own community and in fact appear to be devoid of any positive spiritual or moral component. They do not appear to love Mother Earth, each other, or anything else. Their existence seems primarily directed by survival and hunting instincts, and they operate from and by means of fear rather than love. Even motherhood is totally degraded. Maternal instincts are totally lacking in Mariasha and disturbingly misdirected in Arina; the one is motivated only by survival and self-interest, the other engaged in the work of death, neither exhibiting any nurturing qualities. In Pil'niak's future works the qualities the peasants have demonstrated here will appear as barbaric elements to be overcome in individuals and groups. Healthy "closeness to the earth" is to be sought by individuals and groups in a civilized context with respect to the ordered, nurturing daytime aspect of Mother Earth.

Perfection Stories: Meditations on Rightness

Until the mid-1920s there were four basic themes in the Pil'niakian *oeuvre*: man's (and animals') relationship with nature and her cycles; contemporary sexual behavior; the impact of the Revolution on Russian groups and individuals; and examinations of cultures and their interactions. Now we will jump ahead to the later 1920s and examine two stories which present Pil'niak's meditations on ideal mated relationships:

"Vernost'"³¹⁷ and "Zemlia na rukakh."³¹⁸ There is still an emphasis on the birth-life-

³¹⁷ Usually translated "Fidelity," dated by the author 12 December 1927, first published 25 December 1927, per K. B. Andronikashvili-Pil'niak, compiler of the six-volume anthology from which I will be citing: vol. 4 (475). I will be citing from "Vernost'," 6-vol. coll., vol. 4, 180-187. I will refer to the story as

procreation-death cycle, but now we see more explicitly and in new ways the critical element distinguishing humanity from the rest of the biological kingdom: love.

Appropriate human love is manifested in the mating and procreation process in “Vernost”³¹⁸ and in the long-term union in “Zemlia na rukakh.”

In 1927-28, when he wrote the two works to be examined here, Pil’niak seems to be processing the events of the past few years, including the passage of time. Much had changed in the ten years since the October Revolution, and Pil’niak himself was in his early thirties, with a failed marriage behind him, a new one begun, and many uncertainties ahead.³¹⁹ While he was in the Far East in 1926, a major scandal erupted over his “Povest’ nepogashennoi luny”³²⁰ and he was blacklisted from publication in the Soviet Union until early 1927. If we examine the almost twenty works³²¹ he wrote in those two years (1927-28), we can see a phenomenal range of focus in his fiction: autobiographically he looks back³²² and forward³²³ individually and culturally;³²⁴ he

“Authenticity,” an alternate definition of the Russian title which seems to me a more apt description of the theme.

³¹⁸ “Earth on Her Hands,” dated by the author 8 June 1928, first published the same year. I will be citing from “Zemlia na rukakh,” 6-vol. coll., vol. 4, 229-234. This story was reworked for inclusion in Volga vpadaet v Kaspiiskoe more (1929).

³¹⁹ As early as 1923, when turning twenty-nine, Pil’niak reported reflecting on old age when no one came to visit him on his birthday. Letter to I. M. Kasatkin, 14 Oct. 1923, No. 158 (238-9, and 101, n. 2). Ivan Mikhailovich Kasatkin was a peasant writer in the Pereval group, later to become a member of the editorial board of Novyi mir and president of the All-Russian Writers’ Union.

³²⁰ “Tale of the Unextinguished Moon,” completed in January 1926 and first published in April, same year; this work was interpreted as accusing Stalin of ordering the death of General Frunze during surgery in 1925.

³²¹ Some of these works deal with multiple themes; I am merely trying to ensure that all the relevant themes are mentioned.

³²² “Pookskii rasskaz,” written January 1927.

³²³ “Orudiia proizvodstva” (“Tools of Production”), written May 1927.

examines death in various cultures, Russian,³²⁵ Caucasian,³²⁶ Turkish;³²⁷ he lauds Soviet industrialization;³²⁸ he comments on cross-cultural encounters within Russia³²⁹ and man's struggle against the elements;³³⁰ he examines the child as a form of long-term cultural (as well as individual) continuity;³³¹ he comments on manifestations of various world cultures;³³² and he continues his examination of different forms of love.³³³ Love can be perceived as one of those major themes existing, according to Gofman's analogy, outside of Pil'niak's works and of which an individual work can be seen as a specific exploration: these works, like several others to be analyzed in Chapter IV, are among the explorations of that dominant theme.

In the realm of the biological *ethos* versus spiritual affinity, Pil'niak makes very explicit his views on the ideal relationships between man and woman in two very short stories, which I will examine below. I chose these two works because of the clarity with which he lays out his values and *ethos* in them. After these stories, the *ethos* itself does not undergo many significant changes, but Pil'niak will continue to explore the nature

³²⁴ "Nemetskaia istoriia" ("A German Story"), written September 1928.

³²⁵ "Delo smerti" ("A Matter of Death"), co-authored, dated June 1927.

³²⁶ "Gorod vetrov" ("City of Winds"), written July 1928 and "Shtoss v zhizn'," August 1928.

³²⁷ "Mogil'nye pamiati" ("Grave Memories"), written February 1928.

³²⁸ "Sias'skii kombinat" ("Sias'skii Complex"), written March 1928.

³²⁹ "Ivan Moskva," written March 1927 and "Telegrafnyi smotritel'," written February 1928.

³³⁰ "Sinee more" ("The Blue Sea"), written February 1928.

³³¹ "Mal'chik iz Trall," written December 1927.

³³² "Kitaiskaia povest'" ("A Chinese Story"), written February 1927; "Kafedzhi Abdula Khamida Vtoroi'" ("The Coffee-maker of Abdul Khamid II"), written March 1928.

³³³ Romantic love, "Vernost'," written December 1927; marital love, "Zemlia na rukakh," written June 1928; incest, "Nizhegorodskii otkos," written December 1927.

and manifestations of love for the remainder of his career (see below, Chapter IV: Investigatory Parameters).

Mating and Procreation --- Love, the Real Thing: “Vernost”

“Vernost” is a story “dedicated to love” (180),³³⁴ a story sprinkled with the repeated questions: “Kak prokhodit liubov’, kak ukhodit liubov’ [i chto dano cheloveku liubov’iu?]”³³⁵ The narrator mixes the narration of a simple story with his own observations on love, and the story itself confirms them and answers many of the questions.

The title of this story is deliberately ironic. “Vernost” can mean fidelity, faithfulness, loyalty, and allegiance, as well as authenticity, realness, and rightness. In relation to the text itself, the usual translation of this title as “Fidelity” or “Faithfulness” -- and its common Russian usage in that sense --- challenges the reader to consider the question of one’s greatest allegiance in life: Is it to the everyday reality in which one has been deposited by the winds of fate, or to an authentic higher ideal of love, personal identity and vocation experienced and established earlier in life? The word itself is derived from “vera,” “faith,” and conveys the sense of “keeping (the) faith.” I have chosen to translate the title as “Authenticity,” which in my opinion better conveys the author’s assessment of the characters’ behavior in this story --- their return to their essential selves as student-revolutionaries and to the authentic, real love that they had discovered together so long before.

³³⁴ “posviashchen liubvi”

³³⁵ “How does love come, how does love go, [and what is given to a person by love?]” (180, 182 in full; 187 without bracketed section).

The story itself is simple. It opens with a description of the heady atmosphere surrounding the Revolution of 1905, a time of imperial oppression, when meetings in graveyards were in fact about to give birth to a brave new world (again, out of death comes new life) via the Revolution. The protagonist, an unnamed youth of twenty, was caught up in the excitement of it all, the brave ideals of brotherhood, justice, equality and honesty for which he was willing to give his life. This was the time and activity that forged his essential identity as an idealistic student-revolutionary, as other Pil'niak characters' identities are forged by the sound of factory whistles or the smell of wormwood on the steppe.

In this exciting time, when he was constantly surrounded by the potential of imminent death, moving from safe house to safe house, a spectacular, too-good-to-be-true³³⁶ event occurred (181). In a one-night stay in an illegal apartment, he encountered a young woman whose name he never learned but who made him feel as though the world lay at his feet. Everything about her that one night --- her hair, her eyes, her words, their tea, their exchange of ideas and experiences --- “was transformed for him into ‘chudesnost’” --- a miracle, a marvel, a wonder, something magic (181). Something about this one girl was unique and made the already exhilarating world a whole new, wonderful experience for the young man. Today we might speak of “chemistry” between the two or say that the earth moved under his feet (but there is nothing to indicate that they had a sexual experience; he spent a sleepless night alone on the couch, ecstatically wondering if she too was awake, what she was thinking. . . . (181)). What he experienced in the proximity of this young woman was earth-shattering --- for him the world was transformed, and himself within it.

³³⁶ “prekrasnoe navazhdenie”

The next day life moved on, and so did they. Over time, she became a wonderful but somewhat painful memory of extreme but momentary joy. In the course of his revolutionary activities he was arrested and imprisoned. While in prison the young man met another girl, got engaged to her, then when out in exile a priest married them and they had a child within the year. (The narrator has not neglected to mention, with emphasis, immediately after introducing this second girl, that “everything in the cosmos is born in order to live, give birth and die,” and that “in human beings, love directs reproduction.”)³³⁷ Life went on, they were released from exile, he returned to university, and when completely rehabilitated he went through the professorial ranks at various universities, ending up as a professor in Saratov. World War I came and went, he and his wife produced a family, the children were developing appropriately, the parents settled into comfortable work and family routines --- he as a normal father and husband, she as a “not bad” mother and professor’s wife (183).³³⁸ Deep down he was aware that the magic feeling he had experienced that one night long ago was absent in his relationship with his wife. But life was good, they did all the right things socially, professionally, biologically, and they prospered, even though his family life seemed just “a tiny bit cold” (184).³³⁹

The October Revolution re-awakened his essential identity as a student-revolutionary, propelling him to the front lines; by 1922 he had become the rector of a new revolutionary higher educational establishment. In 1925 there was a special holiday celebrating the twentieth anniversary of the high point of the 1905 underground

³³⁷ “---vse v etom kosmose rodit'sia, chtoby zhit', rodit' i ---umeret'. Chelovek zhivet, rodivshis', chtoby zhit', rodit' i umeret'. Vse zhivushchee zhivet, chtoby rozhdat'sia. Rozhden'em u chelovechestva pravit liubov'” (182). This becomes a refrain; portions appear again, slightly abbreviated: “Vse v etom kosmose zhivet, chtoby rodit'sia, rodit' i umeret'” (183); “[. . .] chelovek prishel, rodivshis', rodit' i umeret'” (186).

³³⁸ “nedurnaia”

³³⁹ “chut'-chut' kholodnoi”

movements (“polovodnykh podpolii” (184)) of the 1905 Revolution, and the narrator spares no pains in describing the rector’s busy schedule for that dark December day. As the protagonist walked down the street, he heard a voice call him by his old student name: “Sergei!” (184). Immediately he recognized her voice and the whole experience of that magic night came flooding back to him. Now middle-aged and greying, both were long married, tired, set in their ways, with jobs and families. They were ecstatic to see each other. The twenty years of separation melted instantaneously away. For the first time he (and the reader) learned what that night had meant to her: it had brought her enough joy to last a lifetime, rendering further living virtually unnecessary (185). The wondrous sensations of twenty years ago returned, in full force, those feelings of being on top of a whole new world.

They left their families and married. His rectorship salary went to his family, so the re-united couple lived in a garret like poor students. The narrator reminds us again that love is procreation, “for man came, having been born, in order to give birth and to die” (186). So they had a baby together, the most wonderful baby in the world. Both had been married, both had had children before, but those experiences were as nothing in comparison to this union, to this baby who was all the more loved because he was created from the magical love of these two parents.

The narrator’s commentary, along with the emotions of these two people, presents the picture of the authenticity, the rightness of this relationship. He has told us that the story is about love, and he punctuates it with the questions about how love comes and goes, what love means to a person. The familiar refrain about being born, mating, propagating and dying is repeated, with the explicit addition that with human beings, love

governs reproduction. Thus it is made perfectly clear that human procreation is not just a seasonal biological cycle as with plants and animals, nor just an instinctual drive for sexual union or for motherhood, but a shared spiritual experience that includes the human experience of earthshaking romantic love, love that mysteriously transforms the world for the lovers. This love is the real thing. It is not limited to youth --- “oni byli uzhe stary dlia vesennei liubvi” (185),³⁴⁰ --- but exists with mature people as well, being in fact independent of age and season of life.

The narrator places love in various contexts. He asks philosophical questions before each girl enters the story: “How does love come, how does it go, what is given to man by love? Is a great burden given to man and mankind by love, or a great joy, when the weight of love is happiness? How is a person to bear love?” (180, 182)³⁴¹

For the biological context he cites the life cycles (birth, propagation, and death) of living things: but this time he adds explicitly that reproduction in human beings is directed by love (182). Semantically --- he provides numerous definitions of love: as the impulse that leads to procreation; as the love of a dog for a man, or that of a man for vodka; as an ideal that has sent (and still sends) people willingly to the stake or gallows; and what people “play at” in brothels (182). Sociologically viewed, it may be stated that each historical era has its own concept of love and of “the laws of reproduction” (182).³⁴²

³⁴⁰ “they were already too old for springtime love”

³⁴¹ “Kak prikhodit liubov’, kak ukhodit liubov’ i chto dano cheloveku liubov’iu? --- velikoe li bremia dano liubov’iu chelovechestvu i cheloveku --- ili velikaia radost’, kogda tiazhest’ liubvi --- est’ schast’e? --- kak nado cheloveku nesti liubov’?” (180) Worded slightly differently the next time: “Kak prikhodit liubov’, kak ukhodit liubov’, chto dano cheloveku liubov’iu? --- velikoe li bremia dano cheloveku v liubvi ili velikaia radost’, kogda bremia liubvi est’ schast’e?” (182)

³⁴² “zakony rozhdeniia.” “Kazhdaia istoricheskaia epokha sozdavala i sozdaet svoi poniatii liubvi, i kazhdaia istoricheskaia epokha imela svoi zakony rozhdeniia.” (“Every historical era created and creates its conceptions of love, and every historical era has had its laws of reproduction.”) This association of

Without making explicit judgments, the narrator provides a brief history of these reproductive laws in the Soviet revolutionary years, the “1920s and 1930s” (182). He characterizes the revolutionary era as a male epoch, in which classes dissolved and social groups were restructured. The men of the former classes disappeared, and the women fell into new hands. Life was chaotic and uncertain, with the ever-present potential for death and without reliable expectations for tomorrow, so most people were married several times and had many affairs. By thirty-five most women were widowed and felt themselves too unattractive to enter new relationships. Women produced children with various men; fathers were raising children who were not their own; and there was no moral condemnation for having multiple partners. Older men as a rule married women younger than their daughters, but few middle-aged women married men who were so much younger than themselves. The narrator concludes that social biology and history defined the rules of mating and reproduction in post-revolutionary Russian life (182-3).

With respect to the individual, the magic, once-in-a-lifetime soul-mate experience is to be valued above all other forms of romantic love. This is the authentic experience of true love --- the real thing --- between the sexes in humans. How is it recognized? It seems to change the very nature of reality. It provides a sense of uniqueness and joy that has an unforgettable impact on the rest of one’s life. It makes other relationships pale in comparison: in that one night, the heroine had experienced the ultimate that life could

historical period with mating practices is by no means an original concept on Pil’niak’s part but a well-accepted concept of the times and Communist revolutionary (Marxist) thought. Revolutionary feminist Aleksandra Kollontai wrote in 1921: “Each historical (and therefore economic) epoch in the development of society has its own ideal of marriage and its own sexual morality.” Kollontai, trans. Holt, “Theses on Communist Morality in the Sphere of Marital Relations,” 228; article is 225-231. Kollontai elaborates on these epochs and their concepts of love, marriage, and gender roles in numerous articles and speeches, as do other Russian writers and activists of the early twentieth century. However, Pil’niak’s interpretation (which I have very closely paraphrased from pages 182-83 of the story text) of the “laws” of the revolutionary and post-revolutionary time frame are not necessarily representative of prevailing contemporary interpretations.

give and the rest of life became almost superfluous in comparison; the hero was forever aware that this was missing in his relationship with his wife. For separated parties, authentic love can be picked up again in an instant and it dissolves all intervening events, taking decades off lovers' lives: at their second encounter,

[д]вадцатилетие было скинуто со счетов времени ---
именно потому, что нельзя бросаться временем перед
любовью и перед счастьем, ибо время уходит, и лучше
поздно, чем никогда. (185)
[t]wenty years were dropped from the accounts of time, namely
because time must not be squandered in the face of love and happiness,
for time goes away (forever), and better late than never.

Authentic love does not depend on youth but can occur at any time in life. And authentic love strengthens lovers sufficiently to do whatever has to be done to abandon the comfortable inertia of their previous lives and take possession of the newly presented one in all its glory.

But authentic love has real cost. In his early questions about love's meaning the narrator asks about the burdensome aspect of love and the potential identification of burden with happiness. He is clear about the cost of the love of the two protagonists. Not only do they lose the comfortable trappings of personal life and worldly success and have to live like poverty-stricken students, sharing a single knife to cut sausage in their garret, while sacrificing his entire salary to provide for his former family. There is also great cost to others. The narrator calls attention to the known difficulty and pain of breaking up a family, a twenty-year marriage with children ranging from four to seventeen, with its established ways of life and expectations. Insult is added to injury for the abandoned mate who is on the receiving end of all this: his or her best days are already in the past and now he or she is being consigned to a life in which the only expectations are of death, pain, or widowhood --- and it would be much easier to be the active party, the one

leaving, than the one left behind (185).³⁴³ In this lies the irony of the title: what is real “Fidelity”? To one’s real self and past, or to one’s current commitments?

The narrator calls this determination to regain the “magic” --- “vernost’,” “authenticity,” “being true.” To him the twenty-year love between these two people who met only once, totally by chance, and discovered the transformative power of true love, represents that authenticity which has given them the strength to start over from scratch at midlife, to start a new life made even more difficult by their age and habits. That love is “true love,” “the real thing.”

И надо главы писать о той любви, которая была пронесена через двадцатилетие, которая нашла силы все порвать, стать половодьем, чтобы строить наново, со студенчества, --- которая забыла о морщинах времени у глаз, остановила время: надо писать главы о *верности*, побеждающей время. (185-6, Pil’niak’s emphasis)

And one needs to write chapters about that love which was borne through twenty years, which found the strength to break off everything, to become the high-water mark, in order to build anew from student days --- which forgot about the wrinkles of time around the eyes and arrested time: one needs to write chapters about *authenticity*, which conquers time.

The couple is returning now to live out a life of that authentic love, becoming again their essential student-revolutionary selves and assuming the student lifestyle, starting over at mid-life exactly where they had left off. Here is a conquest over time that transcends even the bearing of offspring and continuity of generations by adding something indefinable.

³⁴³ “Люди знают, что значит разорвать семью, которой двадцатилетие, где старшему ребенку семнадцать, а младшему --- четыре, где быт уже зацементировался и где оставляемый --- жена, муж --- остается для умирания, для боли, для вдовства, ибо у него все позади, в величайшей несправедливости, --- ибо легче убить человека, чем пройти через смерть.” (“People know what it means to break up a family which is twenty years old, where the oldest child is seventeen and the youngest four, where the way of life is already solidified and where the abandoned person, wife or husband, is left (only) for death, for pain, for widowhood, for everything is already behind him, in the greatest injustice, since it is easier to kill a person than to go through death.”) Earlier it was said that they had their first child a year into the marriage; that the oldest child is seventeen shows that the marriage is not really twenty years old; it was twenty years ago that he met his one true love, then some time passed in revolutionary activities, prison, and exile before his marriage to the girl he met in prison took place.

It is perhaps the birth of the baby that reveals most about the meaning of this authentic love basis. After the above comments about the importance of authenticity, the narrator blocks off the final section of the story, which I will cite in its entirety.

Но это не конец рассказа.

Любовь есть рождение, ибо человек пришел, родившись, родить и умереть. Через год у них родился ребенок. --- И он, и она --- имели детей, родили детей, любили детей, растили детей; и --- вот тогда, когда родился этот новый ребенок, --- они вдруг узнали, что, в сущности, они не знали, -- - что такое --- рождение детей. У него были дети от женщины, которую, оказывается, он не любил; у нее были дети от мужчины, которого, оказывается, она не любила. Этот ребенок родился от любящих, и из всех детей этот единственный, рожденный в большие человеческие заповедни, был подлинным счастьем рождения. Он, профессор, пришел к ней в больницу. Около нее в корзинке лежал ребенок. В глазах у нее было счастье. В глазах у него было счастье. И оба они знали, что мир прекрасен, смерть в этом мире побеждена, все в этом мире оправдано, и, поистине, все надо отдать за будущее, то, в котором будет жить этот единственный, рожденный в заповедни, но рожденный в любви, любимый каждым мускулом и каждой кровинкой отца и матери, как солнце в молодости, --- сын, кусок их самих, их повторение, -- - новый человек! --- ибо мир есть --- верность.

Как приходит любовь, как уходит любовь? . . (186)

But that's not the end of the story.

Love is procreation, for man has come, having been born, to procreate and die. In a year a child was born to them. Both he and she had children, had given birth to children, had loved children, had raised children; and --- just then, when this new child was born, they suddenly realized that in essence they did not know what engendering children was. He had children by a woman whom, it turns out, he didn't love. She had children by a man whom, it turns out, she did not love. This child was born of people who did love each other, and out of all children this one alone, born in the long afternoon of their human lives, was the authentic happiness of procreation. He, the professor, came to her in the hospital. The baby was lying beside her in a basket. Happiness was in her eyes. Happiness was in his eyes. And they both knew that the world was wonderful, that death in that world had been conquered, that everything in that world was justified, and that, in truth, one must commit everything for the future, that future in which this unique son, born in the afternoon of life but born in love, beloved with every muscle and every drop of blood of his father and mother, like the sun in youth --- this son, a piece of their own selves, a repetition of them--- this new person! -- for the world is authenticity.

How does love come, how does love go?

This is Pil'niak's ideal for human love and mating. Real love, the love described in this story, is not something that occurs according to a calendar of months (May) or years (youth); it is not simply the instinctive mating drive that led each of these protagonists to marry; it is not the instinctive feminine drive for maternity, with or without a mate; it is not the desire of a middle-aged or older man for a beautiful young wife. This kind of love is a mystery not to be solved by human beings. It is a love that is magical and transformative, opening a new world and a new life of and for the lovers, as on that night of first meeting. Real love like this is the ultimate purpose of life; if one has a chance at a love like this, one needs to seize that chance, regardless of the cost to oneself or others, because this is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to partake of life's highest joy and purpose. Like the word "vernost" itself, this kind of love is associated with faith ("vera"), a belief in the rightness and authenticity of love and the world and its purposes for human beings.

The purpose is further realized with the birth of the child. A child born to a couple which shares this kind of love is not just the usual result of sperm meeting egg and exiting the womb when viability is assured. The birth of this child shows that the previous marriages of these people were not true love matches; they seemed to be right at the time and perhaps they were the best that could be attained under the operative circumstances, but those relationships were different, and the relationships with the children were different. A child born to people who share this kind of love is extraordinary. As the initial experience of authentic love opened a new level of experience for these lovers, so did the birth of their child open a new future, again transforming the world but now validating it anew, forcing the parents to look only

ahead. With the birth of their totally beloved child, they too are as though born again through that new piece of themselves, and all that they had given up for their own love relationship (“vse nado otdat’ za budushchee”) is more than justified. The baby is the incarnation of true love, in every sense.

Certainly Pil’niak recognizes that this kind of love cannot be a requirement for marriage and childbearing, but he asserts it as the ideal which all humanity should seek.³⁴⁴ The patterns are still there, the purpose of each living thing is still to live, mate, reproduce, and die, but the human dimension is directed by the transformative power of love, rather than by transient sexual attraction or even deliberate long-term devotion. The cycles go on in the background, where the magic of love is absent, as in the first marriages of the protagonists, which at least in the case of the male protagonist can be associated with the birth/life/mate/procreate/die cycle at the appropriate calendar time (youth). But with authentic love, world-changing love, the result of mating and procreation becomes far more than simple continuation of the species and enters the metaphysical realm.

This story can be interpreted on a sociological level as well. Pil’niak is writing in 1927 but his narrator is describing the “rules of mating and reproduction” in Soviet reality (as influenced by social biology and history, above) as prevailing in the 1920s and 1930s. This makes it clear that Pil’niak, at least at this time, does not expect these

³⁴⁴ It would be interesting to know what personal event, if any, motivated Pil’niak to write this story, which is dedicated to someone named Mark. I have not found any conjectures as to Mark’s identity or relationship to the story. More interesting are Pil’niak’s biographical data. He wrote this in 1927 and it was published in 1928. Most likely it is the articulation of his earliest dream of a good life with his first love, Nadia Pavlovich, a love which was not to be. This story seems almost prescient with respect to his relationship with third wife, Kira Georgievna Andronikashvili-Pil’niak, whom he did not meet until 1933. Their marriage and their baby son Boris are described in Pil’niak’s 1935 novel *Sozrevanie plodov*. In that same novel, his second wife, to whom he was married at the time he wrote “Vernost’,” is referred to repeatedly as a woman with whom one should not have children (and with whom Pil’niak, in life, did not have any).

conditions to change under the new Soviet regime, at least not in the near future. Along with other questions about what real “*vernost*” entails, a larger social question is posed: is one to be faithful to his universal life path as a human being (birth, love, mating, reproduction, death) or to the cycle defined by the epoch and its prevailing conditions and priorities, including those of the political establishment? Pil’niak is lamenting the loss of authentic love and family values in the prevailing culture, and this story can be read as a call to people to return to their most basic identities and eternal purpose as human beings rather than to devote their lives through misplaced priorities to a society-building effort which in the final analysis will be a transient phenomenon. The closing passage about the special child born of the “real” love relationship may convey a warning that people are perhaps producing “offspring” from life commitments that are in fact inappropriate, as from mates whom, it turns out in retrospect, “they did not love.” Devotion to ideological progress and its implementation (instead of to love and family) may in the long run be found to be inappropriate and inauthentic, like those early marriages that occurred at the right time in life but were based on imperfect love.

The Ideal Union --- Husband, Wife, and Sunny Mother-Earth: “*Zemlia na rukakh*”

This story blends two of the key themes we have been exploring in Pil’niak’s *oeuvre*: harmony with the earth and the appropriate male-female love relationship. As in “*Vernost*,” the characters are in the summer rather than the springtime of their lives. Mating and reproduction are essentially behind them (there is a single child under eight years old; of course they are still rearing him, but that is secondary in this work) and they

are in a state of continued marital union. Pil'niak continues to probe the mystery of love in this context, depicting an ideal marital union.

The physical setting is reminiscent of that in “God ikh zhizni” in that the house is permeated with nature; there is a terrace, the wind blows softly through open windows, the sunlight and grapevine shadows play inside and outside the dwelling. However, in contrast to “God ikh zhizni,” nature is not in the form of wild forests but a flower garden cultivated by man and wife, a manifestation of aesthetic culture and the collaboration of humans with nature. The people move freely from the interior of the home to the outdoors, the yard and terrace, and back again. Even when doing professional paperwork, Pavel, the husband, sits at a desk by an open window.

The action occurs on a June day such that “chelovek druzhen s zemleiu” (229).³⁴⁵ Anna and Pavel, husband and wife, began this day with the satisfying recreational chores of garden labor:

Есть сладостный отдых, утомляющий мышцы, ---
рыться в земле, рассаживать табаки и резеду по
грядкам и тащить из грядок всякие сорняки, --- чудесно
знать, склонившись над землей, что здесь, в этой земле,
возрастает тобою посаженное. (229)

There is a delightful relaxation which tires out the muscles --- to dig in the soil, to transplant tobacco plants and mignonettes in flowerbeds and pull all kinds of weeds out of them; it's wonderful to know, leaning over the earth, that here, in this ground, what you have planted is growing.

Pavel had then gone inside to do professional work, reading and writing at his desk, while Anna remained working with the flowering plants in the garden. She is related to Mother Earth in her gardening and maternal roles and by the earth that remains on her hands

³⁴⁵ “a person is in harmony with the earth.”

throughout the story.³⁴⁶ The wife, Anna, is really the key to this story, even though the perspective presented is primarily that of her husband. These are not peasants whose primary toil is agricultural but professional adults (she is an artist, he a sociologist-writer (229)); however, harmony with the earth, now primarily manifested in gardening and yardwork around their home, is still essential to their humanity and the rightness of their relationship and life:

Очень, очень редкое счастье --- быть в дружбе с землей.
Очень, очень редкое счастье --- счастье супружества,
любовь, доверие и верность. Это счастье было в этом
доме, доверия, дружбы, любви, соработы. (229)
It's a very very rare happiness to be in friendship with the earth. A very
very rare good fortune --- the happiness of marriage, (its) love, trust,
and fidelity. This happiness was in this home, the happiness of trust,
friendship, love, and working together.

A person must be in harmony with the earth in order to be in harmony with himself or with others. The emphasis on the rareness of such happiness and the resultant spiritual boons places this relationship in the realm of the ideal, the extraordinary, like the love shared between the protagonists of “Vernost’,” which was described against the background of essentially loveless, sociologically-influenced mating and procreation during the post-revolutionary years.

The married couple, Pavel and Anna, are more individualized than the unnamed couple in “Vernost’,”³⁴⁷ although their roles in the story are emphasized in their initial appellations only as “muzh” and “zhena” and those of their visitor as “prishedshii,”

³⁴⁶ The most positively presented women in Pil’niak’s *oeuvre* have three critical qualities: one is purity, another is a right desire for maternity, the third a close physical relationship with the earth, the dirt itself, as by some form of gardening, by nurturing culture through archeological digging, or by participation in some other outdoor activity. Anna exhibits all these traits.

³⁴⁷ The protagonist’s name “Sergei” is referred to as his “student name” (184), so it may have been a revolutionary code-name.

“neznakomyi chelovek,” or “neznakomets” (229-30).³⁴⁸ They, too, married later than usual, she in her early thirties and he perhaps five years older, eight years prior to the events of the story, and they have one son. Their work is important to them, as are the various manifestations of Mother Earth. Their relationship has the same magical, soul-mate quality that the couple in “Vernost” discovered; Pavel refers to his relationship with Anna as “samoe chudesnoe, chto bylo v moei zhizni” (233),³⁴⁹ even echoing the word “chudesnoe” used so many times to describe the couple’s first encounter in “Vernost’.”

Into their perfect Eden a complication must come, and it comes in the form of the totally unexpected arrival of Sergei,³⁵⁰ Anna’s first husband. They had parted thirteen years earlier when he left for the front as a soldier, subsequently to be reported killed in action; she still keeps his death certificate. All three of them are totally shocked: Anna and Pavel because they have believed him dead all these years, Sergei because he had no idea she was remarried. Their mutual shock and bewilderment are revealed to one another by their difficulty in finding words, their halting explanations, and the physical manifestations of their emotional and spiritual stress: shaking hands or lips, teary eyes, shoulder spasms, etc. Their common and total powerlessness in the face of their altered circumstances is emphasized by repetition of the words “bessilie,” “bessil’nye,” “bеспомощныи.”³⁵¹ Pavel’s internal reactions and thoughts are made known to the

³⁴⁸ “husband,” “wife,” “the one who had arrived,” “the stranger.”

³⁴⁹ “the most wondrous thing that ever happened in my life”

³⁵⁰ It is tempting to associate this Sergei with the one in “Vernost’,” but Anna and Sergei had no children, in contrast to the “Vernost’” couple.

³⁵¹ “powerlessness,” “powerless,” “helpless”

reader by the narrator. The three characters' responses to this totally unexpected turn of events comprise the rest of the story.

Anna and Sergei had had the same kind of magical relationship that Anna and Pavel now share.³⁵² The nature of these people, all three of them, is what the narrator stresses: just as harmony with Mother Earth is necessary for ideal love, so is nobility of character and soul, the inherent make-up of the individual. The rare happiness described above as shared by Anna and Pavel “mozhet byt' tol'ko u blagorodnykh po mysliam i pomyslam liudei, --- i eti liudi byli dostoinymi, prostymi, rabotiashchimi liud'mi” (229).³⁵³ Sergei, in Pavel's mind, was a worthy man who had once taught the girl Anna not only the art of painting but also the value of life. Pavel attributes the kindness exuded by Sergei's eyes to the presence of the one-and-only beloved woman in his, Sergei's, life and to Sergei's innate goodness. It is stressed that these are moral people, worthy people, characterized by intrinsic goodness (“dobrota”) (231). Their humility and lack of self-seeking motivation or behavior is evident through their words and actions.

The men agree that Anna cannot be guilty in any way of the situation that they find themselves in: she had loved each of them wholly, purely, and had never loved anyone else. As for themselves, the men both assert that they are not “thieves” (“vory”): Sergei is not here to steal Anna back from Pavel (230), and Pavel had never had, nor does he have now, any notion of stealing Anna from Sergei, who was married to her first.

They are not there as alpha males to fight over a mate, as in “Pozemka,” “Tselaiia zhizn' ,”

³⁵² The only potentially dissonant note in the quality of their relationship is that they did not produce a child, but this is not alluded to in any way. The length of time that Anna and Sergei were actually together is not specified, so perhaps there just wasn't time for conception to take place.

³⁵³ “can exist only in people who are noble in thought and intention --- and these people were virtuous, simple working people.”

or “God ikh zhizni,” or to abduct one as do the Sectarians in Golyi god. Anna is not a piece of property or a potential womb to be fought over or competed for; she is a beloved and respected person whose decision they await and will abide by (232, Sergei; 233, Pavel), whatever it may be. The men acknowledge that neither can consider her his wife, even in his thoughts, until she decides whom she will call her husband (232-3). Sergei has always been a sacred memory in the home of Pavel and Anna, respected and esteemed by both of them as one whom Anna had loved. They have always cherished Anna’s reminiscences about him, along with his photographs. Pavel reflects on the fact that he never asked Anna about her feelings toward Sergei, that he never set himself up as in competition with her first husband in any way. When he notices Anna’s recognition of Sergei’s gesture (extending arms with palms upward), he averts his eyes rather than to intrude on a habitual personal communication that should be private to Anna and her former husband.

These three people, whom one would expect to be very divided upon such an occasion, are instead entangled and unified by the mystery of love. Anna explicitly articulates the love she feels and has felt for each of them (232). The men seem to grow in unity as time passes.³⁵⁴ They are similar in age and appearance, united by their love of Anna and in turn by the love she has bestowed on them only. Each time she addresses one of them, Pavel senses that she is protecting the other. He almost immediately addresses Sergei, whom of course he had never met, as “Serezha,” the name by which he and Anna had always affectionately referred to him (232). Pavel corrects himself the first time he addresses Anna by Sergei’s pet name for her (Annushka) (232), but later lets the

³⁵⁴ This is demonstrated largely (but not exclusively) through Pavel’s thoughts and words.

name slide comfortably off his tongue, an expression of their mutual affection for her. Pavel acknowledges that the three of them are sharing a mystery, the mystery of that magic, “chudesnaia” love which each of the men has shared, in his time, with Anna (233).³⁵⁵ Pavel’s feeling of solidarity with Sergei leads him gradually to speak for both of them in terms of “you and I,” “we,” for example when he assures Anna that she knows that both men want only happiness for her (233). The three of them share a mutual embrace, and oblivion to the passage of time falls on all three in the mystic unity of genuine human love. The narrator informs us: “Samoe tainoe i samoe sviatoe, --- osobenno tainaia i osobenno sviataia, kogda ona chtitsia, --- liubov’, --- ona byla mezhdunimi troimi” (231).³⁵⁶ Love is sacred, the greatest mystery, and such love unites, it does not divide. What starts out as sexually based love between a man and a woman, if it is the authentic, transformative love experienced by the couple in “Vernost’” and by the two couples here, becomes an all-encompassing unifying force applied to the beloved’s beloveds, and so multiplies down the line.

Where is the vaunted Pil’niakian “instinct” in this story? There is no mention of the birth/mate/procreate/die cycle, no mention of activities appropriate to the meteorological seasons. These characters are not in the springtime of life, and a love much richer than procreative mating is directing them. Mother Earth is ever-present in the gardening dirt on Anna’s hands that she keeps planning to wash off but never does, but Mother Earth is not controlling events here with biological drives and seasonal cycles.

³⁵⁵ “Vot my troe, kak eto skazat’? --- samoe chudesnoe, chto bylo v moei zhizni, --- vy eto znali ran’she menia, Serezha, --- a ia uznal to, chto bylo sviashchennym dlia vas, chto bylo vasheiu edinstvennoi tainoi.” (“Here are the three of us, how do I say this? The most wondrous thing that’s ever been in my life --- you knew it before I did, Serezha ---- but I later experienced what had been sacred for you, what had been your unique private experience.”)

³⁵⁶ “Love, the most mysterious and the most holy thing--- especially mysterious and especially holy when it is esteemed --- love was among the three of them.”

There is no Darwinian choice of the stronger mate (the victorious male) or the better provider (chosen by the female). No one is competing for his personal survival or for possession of a mate. Predictably, maternal instinct is present and active in Anna's protestation of her reluctance to leave her child for Sergei (which leads Browning to conjecture that she will stay with Pavel, the father of her child (164)), since she does not expect to have any more children. Authentic maternity has a sacred aspect in Pil'niak's *oeuvre*, but here it is kept in perspective. A drive like Anna's, to nurture the child she has, is always essential in Pil'niak's view, and in this case the importance of the child seems secondary to that of choosing the mate. As in "Vernost'," love of mate is crucial to love of child and to the child's well-being. This maternal instinct is tied to the sunny, nurturing aspect of Mother Earth and the human harmony with her that is necessary for harmony among her children, the human race. "Da, da," says Pavel after kissing the earth on Anna's hands, "zemlia roditel'nitsa" (232).³⁵⁷

Except for this fundamentally maternal, nurturing drive, the biologically "instinctive" pressures are replaced in this story by inherent nobility of character and the unifying, sharing, protecting instinct of mature love. Pavel expresses this essential instinctive harmony with Mother Earth every time he kisses the dirt on Anna's soil-encrusted hands and when he expresses his gratitude that humanity has produced Anna. This is perhaps a spiritual instinct, a fundamental attitude of thankfulness to Mother Earth, the ultimate source of all sustenance, spiritual and physical ---- as that Great Mother of humanity. After assuring Anna that he and Sergei await her decision,

Павел потерял слова в великой, прекрасной, благостной
любви к Анне, в благодарности человечеству за
человеческое, за человеческое, создавшее Анну [. . .]

³⁵⁷ "Yes, yes, the earth is (the Great) Mother."

Вселенная --- всем своим благородством и горечью ---
била в его сердце. (233)

Pavel lost his words in his great, wonderful, serene love for Anna, in gratitude to humanity for the human, for the human element which had created Anna [. . .] The universe in all its nobility and bitterness was beating in his heart.

Unlike “Vernost’,” this story is open-ended. The reader is left in the same quandary as all three characters as to what Anna will do, what “vernost’” she will choose to follow. She, like Mother Earth whom she represents, is ultimately in control of the situation. As she goes indoors to finally wash her hands, her face is happy as she senses her harmony with the earth. As at the beginning of the story, the outdoors permeates the domestic area, resulting in a space mutually human and natural. She has just expressed the difficulty of her decision (“mne strashno” (233)), but her smile shows her faith that their harmony with the earth will ensure the rightness of whatever comes next, in another kind of “vernost’.” A more tumultuous day could hardly be imagined, but, because of the nature of the people and their love, it ends as it began: “V takie chasy chelovek druzhen s zemleiu” (234).³⁵⁸

The unity of Pavel and Anna is clearly based on their own transforming love, nobility of character, mutual respect for the earth, and strong work ethic. Sergei is less comprehensively presented, but he obviously has shared the same kind of transforming love with Anna, is a worthy and noble person, has a right view of life and the world, and has the strong work ethic necessary for a right union; his relationship with the earth is not as clearly drawn as that of Pavel and Anna, since the perspective is primarily through Pavel’s eyes.

³⁵⁸ “At such times a person is in harmony with the earth.”

Like “Vernost’,” this story illustrates the transformative power of love. In this case the love is drawn from the characters’ closeness to Mother Earth and associated with their innate good natures as opposed to any kind of procreative cycle. The “vernost’,” whether described as authenticity, fidelity, integrity, or being true to oneself and one’s purpose in life, is again basically related to a form of faith, an expectation that through love, all things work for good (and all things can be coped with) by and for those who are in tune with Mother Earth and her life-enhancing purposes. As Browning points out concerning “Zemlia na rukakh,” the picture here is dramatically different from the one in “Tselaia zhizn’” (164), and, I would add, from those in all the stories I examined in determining Pil’niak’s “Baseline” *ethos*, in assessing his early depiction of mating and family issues, and in the evolution of his concept of closeness to the earth. Love has become a transformative spiritual force that binds quite differently and with far more intensity than the mating call of springtime. Even the rational, slow-growing love that bound Arkhip Arkhipov and Natal’ia Ordynina through companionship, work, shared ideals, and the desire to procreate and raise children together pales in comparison to the love that binds these people who are past the procreative phase of life. To quote Browning again, “‘Earth on Her Hands’ illustrates the compassion and sensitivity that should characterize human relations. [. . .] [T]he theme is personal love and humanism in implicit contrast to ideology and barbarism” (164). This is human behavior far beyond the dictates of physiological instinct.

In these stories Pil’niak shows that authentic love and even mating and child-bearing are not limited to the springtime of life, but that entirely new forms of love may be experienced in the middle years. Mating and reproduction have spiritual, metaphysical

aspects well beyond biological instinct. Men and women are designed to work together in authentic love and mutual respect, and the love they share, if it is authentic, will spread to others they encounter. Each person has an authentic nature in terms of goodness or nobility of character (Pavel, Anna, Sergei) and vocation (the student-revolutionaries; Anna, Sergei, and Pavel have strong professional lives), and happiness is dependent on remaining true to that authentic nature. Right living and happiness require an outward-looking focus on and respect for others rather than egocentrism,³⁵⁹ and a drive for unity rather than competition. Closeness to the earth here takes a more abstract, individualized form, the attention of working *intelligently* to the surrounding natural environment (as opposed to peasants or other groups collectively working forest or field, their existence totally dependent on the natural cycles), and it is clear that humans are to be aligned with the sunny nurturing aspect of the earth rather than the chaotic nocturnal side. There is a providential benevolent order and purpose to life, represented in “Zemlia . . .” by the nurturing aspect of Mother Earth and in “Vernost” by the existence and experience of authenticity; human congruence with that order by means of love --- which may be painful or costly --- ultimately assures happiness and well-being. Sometimes one must recognize and seize the day before it flees³⁶⁰

It is possible that Pil’niak is here advocating for --- or at least suggesting the possibility of ---- a higher type of love, more *agape*-like than erotic, to resolve

³⁵⁹ Especially in his final novel, *Solianoj ambar*, but also in other works Pil’niak depicts that moment in a child’s development when he learns that he is not “the center” of all activity and existence.

³⁶⁰ These stories to me read as articles of faith. Kenneth Brostrom explores four of Pil’niak’s major works as allegories which reflect the author’s search for faith. While I am studying Pil’niak’s *oeuvre* with a different focus, my research supports his finding that Pil’niak ultimately finds faith not in deities or ideologies but in man’s ability to transcend his existential circumstances. See the brief discussion of this story in *Allegory* 291-293.

proprietary instincts in matters of love and mating. Discussion of such proprietary instincts (the sense of exclusive possession or ownership of one's mate) in the context of Communist social restructuring was common during at least the first thirty years of the twentieth century in Russia. The problem of overcoming jealousy was a major theme in Maiakovskii's poetry, for example, in Pro eto, Oblako v shtanakh, and Fleita pozvonochnik,³⁶¹ and other works. Aleksandra Kollontai was among those who proposed a new kind of love for the new Soviet man, in which the sense of ownership and exclusivity between mates would disappear (as would the family, in the long run) and love for one's romantic partner(s) would be subjugated to love for the collective; in fact one's devotion to the collective could grow if one had multiple liaisons within it.³⁶² There were a number of well-known "ménage a trois" arrangements at least among the elite (Maiakovskii and Lenin were members of such love triangles during this period, as was Turgenev --- as well as fictional characters in Chernyshevskii's Chto delat'? --- in the previous century). Such triangles were formed for various reasons, and on bases as diverse as religious-mystical and political-radical. The three-person collective in this story is clearly united by a non-sexual love, but the questions remain explicit: "Whose wife will she be? Who is her husband?" and the men expect a definitive answer from Anna. The open-ended quality of the story may in fact suggest that a collective love which transcends sexuality is possible, especially in this case, since Anna is supposedly beyond the age of child-bearing and the unifying influence of love is thematically strong.

³⁶¹ About That, A Cloud in Pants, and The Backbone Flute, respectively.

³⁶² Kollontai, "Make Way for Winged Eros: A Letter to Working Youth" (orig. pub. 1922-3), Holt translation 276-292. Kollontai mentions this elimination of the sense of ownership of one's mate, elimination of sexual jealousy, replacement of paired romantic love by love more broadly dispersed throughout the collective, and the pre-eminence of love for the collective over individual romantic partnerships, etc. in a number of speeches and writings.

However, I have yet to encounter a Pil'niak work that is not unilaterally opposed to a person's participation in multiple contemporaneous sexual liaisons, so I believe that he is exclusively a proponent of monogamy --- he stresses that men are designed to be "odnoliuby" (as are Pavel and Sergei in this story) and feminine purity and constancy are axiomatic; but this particular story could conceivably be one of his tentative explorations of non-traditional types of love, of which more will be described in Chapter IV.

The Final Statement: Motherhood and Love Ascendent: "Rozhdenie cheloveka"

Pil'niak wrote "Rozhdenie cheloveka," usually translated "The Birth of a Man" or "The Birth of a Human Being," in the three weeks immediately following the birth of his third child, Boris Borisovich, in late 1934.³⁶³ While his subsequent novels³⁶⁴ and stories³⁶⁵ certainly do not omit the theme of the biological *ethos* altogether, this is the last focused treatment of the theme in his shorter fiction, so it can be considered his "final word" on the subject. He was pleased with this story and included it in a 1935 anthology of his works, applying the story's title to the entire collection. The story itself, named after a 1912 story by Maksim Gor'kii, really portrays the double birth of two human beings: the literal birth of a baby boy, and the concomitant "birth" of the baby's mother, her transformation from a soulless modern (Communist) career woman into a complete "human being." This story, like "Mat' syra-zemlia," is complex, and I will limit my

³⁶³ Dated by the author November 18, 1934, first published January 1935. Young Boris was born to Pil'niak's third wife, Kira, on October 28; Pil'niak had her record her impressions during the pregnancy and birth (Letter to A. M. Zinger, 19 Nov. 1923, No. 252, 370-71 n. 3). I will be citing from "Rozhdenie cheloveka," 6-vol. coll., vol. 5, 65-90.

³⁶⁴ These include various versions of Two Twins not published in Russia in Pil'niak's lifetime; Sozrevanie plodov, written and published in 1935, and Solianoï ambar, written in 1937 but published only posthumously.

³⁶⁵ Pil'niak published only about eight new stories after this.

analysis to those aspects – and they are many --- which clearly apply to Pil’niak’s biological *ethos*.

The story itself is simple. A workaholic Soviet prosecutor, Comrade Antonova, finds herself pregnant from a casual liaison and because of professional travel obligations cannot get an abortion within the legal time limits. As she progresses through the stages of pregnancy, she observes dramatic and totally unexpected changes in herself, her feelings, her way of thinking, and her sense of life’s purpose. She is portrayed subjectively primarily through the letters she writes (at the resort where she spends the final couple of weeks before her delivery and in the hospital) and the journal she writes for her future child; more objective views of her are provided through the gossip of other resort guests, the presentation she makes to them about Soviet criminal justice, and through her interactions with Surovtsev, another guest.

At the resort, she spends her days walking through the woods (exercise, as directed by her doctor) and writing in the journal; she spends her largely sleepless nights reflecting on her life and reading up on pregnancy, childbirth, and child care. She becomes acquainted with Ivan Fedorovich Surovtsev, another loyal and hard-working Communist; their tentative friendship develops further through his care for her during her hospital stay. The baby’s birth is an exhilarating spiritual experience for her, the last in an experiential chain of events which completes her transformation into a fully human being, crowned by the formation of a new “family”: Antonova, Surovtsev, and the baby (and Surovtsev’s elderly mother).

Both Naiman (292) and Browning (180) point out that Surovtsev’s first two wives represent phases of early Soviet life: the first, a masculinized war Communism

revolutionary, and the second, a dissolute NEP musician. Antonova, at least before her pregnancy, must be considered the ideal Soviet woman of the thirties. Daughter of a worker who joined the October Revolution at the Kremlin, she was ten when the Revolution occurred and her life from that point on was consumed with building the new Soviet state. Her home was turned into a regional party office, and she joined Komsomol at twelve. Her father died in battle the next year and she began supporting herself as a nanny until she could get into a workers' school,³⁶⁶ after which the Party educated her for the prosecutor's office. Her earliest childhood excepted, she had no time for anything except studies, Party business, and work, which she took very seriously. According to those who participated in secret drinking and gossip sessions at the resort, she was a hard-as-nails prosecutor, unbiased, unmarried, young, and beautiful: but "[e]e i za zhenshchinu ne schitali" (70).³⁶⁷

An ideal Communist she might be, but a complete human being she was not. As Surovtsev, even before he knew her, pointed out to the others in the drinking group, something was amiss about her: had she had a family, a relative would have accompanied her to the resort; had she had a home, she would be back there preparing for her confinement, not at the resort. Indeed, she had no real home in the emotional sense of a personal refuge, and she had repudiated family ties, since the family, no longer an economic unit, had become irrelevant, and the ones she observed in literature and life were a sham, their morality stinking in decay (76).³⁶⁸ Why would she want "her own"

³⁶⁶ No mother is ever mentioned in her autobiographical reflections.

³⁶⁷ "[s]he was not even considered a woman."

³⁶⁸ "Moral' sem'i okazyvalas' ne tol'ko mertvoi, no smerdiashchei razlozheniem."

place, “her own” husband and clan when she already had the whole world, she wondered (76). Not only did she denigrate family ties for their own sake, but even empathy was lacking: the letter she wrote to her cousin justifying her refusal to help their terminally ill aunt get in-patient treatment³⁶⁹ was morally and rationally correct but totally devoid of compassion (67-68).

Only as a very young child did she ever have the typical female dreams of a perfect mate, a Mr. Right. She completely missed the adolescent stage characterized by such dreams (and the devastation wrought by disillusionment), virtually skipping the traditional “maidenhood” period of her life when the idea of “the right mate” becomes more fully articulated (88). As a young Communist woman, she felt herself (appropriately) genderless, a sort of unisex person just like any other man or woman doing a job (75).³⁷⁰ She “became a woman” later than her girlfriends, from whose descriptions of their love affairs she learned about sex (75). Her own sex drive awoke out of curiosity rather than romance, and she premeditated and arranged her first sexual encounter merely to see what it would be like; she drove the man away afterward because the experience was so repulsive. She understood sex rationally as a physiological, hygienic demand of the body and fit it into her busy schedule whenever her sex drive became overpowering, which was seldom. Her relationships were completely physical, without any mention of love or commitment, although she did mention liking her second paramour. She rejected the whole idea of marriage: she had no desire to be

³⁶⁹ In-patient care for the terminally ill aunt would deprive a curable person of a bed.

³⁷⁰ “*Ja nikak ne chuvstvovala kakoi-libo devich’ei ili zhenskoi spetsifiki, ia byla chelovekom, partiitsem, rabotnikom, ia komandovala, esli eto potrebovalos’ po delu, i muzhchinami, i zhenshchinami odinakovo [. . .].*” (“I never felt any kind of girlish or womanly identity, I was a person, a Party member, a worker, I gave orders if that was necessary for work, to both men and women the same [. . .]”)

“psychologically” dependent on a husband, relegate herself to his control, or cater to his idiosyncrasies as her married girlfriends seemed to do. The infidelities and other falseness she observed in marriages made her unreceptive to the whole idea. She rejected old-fashioned (false) family values in both her personal and “Communist” morality (76). Having a baby was out of the question; she did not have time to waste on that, so she had abortions when necessary, taking the routine three days off work each time.

Her life priorities were to live in a healthy body; to avoid lying and being put in a false position; to be independent and not to put anyone else in a dependent position; and of course to devote her main energies to her work, building a classless society --- she was proud to be a workaholic by nature and a team player who could always be counted on by the collective. Her education consisted of formal schooling, working, and reading Komsomol'skaia pravda from cover to cover; her work was to implement its precepts. Education gave her knowledge, not feelings, and she felt no need for the aesthetic, emotional, or spiritual senses she lacked. Her definition of being a real “person” was to be competent and in a leadership position at a job (77). She had no experience of true human emotional intimacy.

She barely noticed the pregnancy in its early stages (except to seek out an abortion upon her return to Moscow, which was too late), but about mid-way through it her first sensation of the baby's movements in her womb shook her universe and her every preconception (79).³⁷¹

Через месяц во мне задвигался ребенок. Это было взрывом инстинктов, таких инстинктов, которых я и не подозревала в себе. Я стала перепроверять всю мою жизнь. (79)

³⁷¹ Her surprise at her emotional response echoes Mironov's amazement at his sensations upon recognition of the reality of his (aborted) child in “Как obyknovenno.”

A month later the child inside me began to move. This was an explosion of instincts, such instincts as I had never even suspected in myself. I began to re-evaluate my entire life.

Her thoughts took new, unfamiliar directions. She recorded in her journal, there at the resort:

Моя жизнь прошла так, что, может быть, сейчас впервые я думаю, --- как сказать? --- о человеческих инстинктах и о моих собственных. Мне некогда было о них думать. [. . .] Как ни стыдно признаться, но и ребенок, для которого я пишу сейчас, у меня будет потому, что мне было некогда. Серьезно я задумалась о ребенке только тогда, когда он начал двигаться! . . . и это заставило меня думать именно об инстинктах, и эти мысли привели меня к воспоминаниям детства. (70-71)

My life had passed in such a way that perhaps now for the very first time I am thinking about human instincts and my own in particular. I never had time to think about them. [. . .] However shameful it is to admit it, I will have the child for whom I am now writing this precisely because I had no time. I began to think seriously about the baby only then, when it began to move! . . . and this made me think specifically of instincts, and these thoughts led me to recollections of my childhood.

Because she was experiencing completely unexpected “instincts,” --- which had been awakened by the pregnancy rather than *vice versa* --- she became newly aware of the instincts and motivations of others around her. True to her rational self, she went so far as to analyze War and Peace and some modern “Communist” novels to see what “instincts” motivated each human action: biological instincts, feudal ones, capitalistic, Communist, and so on (72).³⁷² The day after she first felt the baby’s movement --- a “vykhodnoi den’,”³⁷³ but typically she was working anyway --- she observed the family of one of her Communist co-workers, furious that their brand new homestead was being incessantly dug up by the pregnant family dog, who was trying to create a birthing den

³⁷² She noted that the main instincts operating in Tolstoi were biological ones, but masquerading as feudal ones. “Okazyvaetsia, Tolstoi operiroval glavnyim obrazom biologicheskimi instinktami, odetymi v feodal’nyi nariad” (72).

³⁷³ “day off from work”

for the puppies it would soon deliver. The family kept filling in each hole, and the dog kept digging new ones. She was amazed at the wave of fury this “human inhumanity” aroused in her toward the family (72).³⁷⁴ Not only compassion but also solidarity with another mother-to-be was inexplicably awakened in her, a new unexpected sense of harmony with the natural world, along with a new view of “instincts.” From this event and from her “instinct analysis” of novels, Antonova concluded that there were as yet very few “Communist” instincts, and that contemporary Soviet society, no matter how advanced, was still unable to distinguish false, transient instincts left over from previous eras from inherent, enduring ones, such as the one evidenced by the pregnant dog.

Her attitude and behavior toward the child’s father also changed dramatically after she began sensing the baby’s movement. She had not informed him of her pregnancy, since the liaison had been casual sex for its own sake, and she needed no material or moral support from him. That he was healthy, young, even handsome sufficed to assure her about the child’s condition --- by this time she had essentially relegated the father to sperm-donor status. Most telling with respect to her attitude toward sexual relationships is her journal observation: “On ne byl takim blizkim chelovekom, kotorogo ia posviashchala by v moi bytovye dela” (79).³⁷⁵ But after sensing the child’s movement she was so overwhelmed with joy that she began to feel unethical in withholding news of

³⁷⁴ “И вдруг я вознегодовала на человеческую бесчеловечность, вознегодовала самым серьезным образом, не понимала, откуда у меня такая самая настоящая злоба, --- и вот не забываю этой собаки до сих пор, до сих пор я помню ее глаза, и во мне поднимается злоба, когда я думаю об этих зарытых ямках.” (72). (“And suddenly I became indignant at human inhumanity, indignant in the most serious fashion, I didn’t understand where such very real anger in me came from --- and I haven’t forgotten that dog to this day, to this day I remember her eyes and anger arises in me when I think of those filled-in holes.”)

³⁷⁵ “He was not so close a person that I would let him in on my personal affairs.” The “personal affairs” here refer at least in part to her pregnancy.

the pregnancy from him. The sense of ownership she had repudiated in modern families hit her in full force --- “Ved’ eto *moi* rebenok! --- ved’ eto *ego* rebenok!” (79)³⁷⁶ --- and she felt sure the child’s father would share her joy. She was amazed and appalled at his response.³⁷⁷ When he proposed that some sort of uncertified medical friend of his perform an abortion at this late date, she understood that “nasha dvoinaia smert’ --- smert’ moego rebenka i moia --- emu udobnee, chem rozhdenie cheloveka” (80)³⁷⁸ and sent him packing with a force of hatred she had never before experienced. Her rhetorical comment recalls the young man’s situation in “Kak obyknovenno”: “Ne mozhnet byt’, chtoby dlia muzhchiny bylo bezrazlichno rozhdenie ego rebenka!” (80)³⁷⁹

Antonova came to recognize, on her own, the truth of what Surovtsev had observed (unbeknownst to her) to the drinkers and gossipers at the resort, that she had neither family nor “den” and had therefore come to this alien resort to be alone --- at this critical time --- yet also to be in the presence of comradely people. This awareness propelled her to recognize her total aloneness --- that she did indeed need and want a mate, not as a provider or defender or lover as it might have been in other epochs or cultures, or as the spouses she had assessed so negatively in her friends’ marriages, but as a spiritually and physically intimate man to share in the experience of creating a new human being:

³⁷⁶ “After all, it’s *my* child! and it’s *his* child!” Pil’niak’s emphasis.

³⁷⁷ This further attests to her naiveté. The words “I’m pregnant” from women not their wives have been striking fear into the hearts of human men for at least three thousand years: witness David and Bathsheba. Equally typical of “usual” male behavior in this situation, the “father” in the story questions whether Antonova is really pregnant and whether the child is really his . . . (80).

³⁷⁸ “a double death --- of my child and myself --- was more convenient for him than the birth of a human being.”

³⁷⁹ “It cannot be that for a man, the birth of his child is immaterial!”

но мне нужен мужчина, муж, отец моего ребенка, который поймет все то, что я чувствую, которому одному я могу об этом рассказать, пол которого для меня будет так же свят, как и мой для него. [. . .] Как нужен, как нужен мне сейчас близкий человек, --- как это сказать --- такой близкий, руку которого я могла бы положить на мой живот, без стыда и радостно, чтобы он ощутил, как двигается мой ребенок, и порадовался бы со мною, который любил бы этого будущего человечка вместе со мною. (80-81)

But I need a man, a husband, the father of my child, who would understand all this that I am feeling, to whom alone I can tell about this, whose sex for me will be just as holy as mine for him. [. . .] How much, how very much, I need an intimate person --- how do I say this -- - a person so close that I could place his hand on my abdomen without shame, and joyously, so that he would feel my child moving, and who would rejoice with me, who would love this future little person together with me.

Newly understanding why she had come to the resort just prior to giving birth, she experienced tremendous guilt over her previous attitudes and the way she had spent her life. She now saw life in a larger perspective than ever before, and, writing about herself for her child to read someday, she felt crushed by shame for her previous naiveté and superficiality. This is a woman who had had two abortions and had only now realized that the father of a baby must be a crucial participant in its life (or death). She was ashamed of her previous attitude toward sex as a purely physical, hygienic manifestation, having recognized that in fact her body had become much more than a body --- it had been made a shrine, a holy place, by the creation of a new human being taking place in it. She was ashamed to observe that her pregnant body was purer and wiser than her rational deeds, that the pleasure of sex lay not in the moment of copulation but in the creation of a new human being. She not only saw the error of her striving for total emotional independence from other people but also came to recognize a special and deeper need for community between people who share physical intimacy, a different kind of relationship from that of people who make up a collective, because the act of procreation is ultimately a holy one

involving a man and a woman, an act whose holiness in turn sanctifies its participants and their bodies. She perceived this time at the resort as a time for reflection, planning, and punishment: “Ia priekhala, chtoby produmat’ sebia, chtoby nakazat’ sebia . . .” (81)³⁸⁰ and saw that the time in the resort was “bol’she, chem nakazanie. Eto priroda mstit za sebia” (80),³⁸¹ for Antonova’s scorn for nature’s purposes in her life. Her guilt and pain were in the recognition that she had been so wrong about everything and the punishment, or vengeance, in the devastating but totally unexpected need she felt for true spiritual intimacy in preparation for that greatest of all activities, giving birth. Significantly, it was after she wrote this section about punishment that the sun reappeared after several days of rain and gloom, indicating her new illumination.

Antonova’s transformation to “chelovek” can be observed in part through her written communications from the resort and hospital. Her first letters were cold and professional-sounding letters, written at the beginning of her resort stay concerning her dying aunt (in which she disclosed her pregnancy to her cousin only to explain why she couldn’t continue to attend to the aunt’s affairs) and a capital murder case in prosecution (67-68). These were succeeded by more personally-oriented, even affectionate, letters to associates,³⁸² to whom Antonova reported her health, her activities at the resort, and with whom she consulted on preparations for the baby; she even mentioned her anticipation of labor and her already present love for the unborn baby. Her final notes to Surovtsev in the hospital concerned her very personal material needs (toiletries, paper), the nature of the

³⁸⁰ “I came here to think myself through, to punish myself.”

³⁸¹ “more than punishment. This is nature avenging itself.”

³⁸² The addressees are Katia and Tovarishch Iurisoiva; they are not identified any further than that.

baby and birth, and her desire to “go home” and see Surovtsev; these scribbled notes, too, expressed affection (85). This sequence of ever more “personal” letters tracks Antonova’s transformation from androgynous, independent Communist professional to a genuine woman, newly capable of human intimacy, who even has a name ---- Mariia, as we learn for the first time from a note to Surovtsev after the birth --- a name suggesting the highest calling of motherhood (85).

Antonova’s developing relationship with Surovtsev³⁸³ proceeded concurrently with the other changes she underwent during the final stages of pregnancy. The narrator points out that even friendships arise in part because of “biological” affinity (73),³⁸⁴ but Antonova and Surovtsev had other elements in common as well. Both of them were devoted Communists, educated by the Party for their professions, and both were builders: she saw herself as a builder of a new society, whereas he was a machine builder (“stankostroitel”) (67). He would wax eloquent on industrial mechanization and his European experiences building skills to make Russia technologically independent of the West; however, he revealed little substantive information about himself. Their first conversation took place near sunset outdoors in the resort park where they would take long daily walks together, the liminal time suggesting the changes taking place in her (and to a lesser degree, in him, since he was already the more “human” one) and the setting indicating their mutual harmony with nature. These autumn walks were always

³⁸³ His name, Surovtsev, comes from the Russian adjective “surovyi,” meaning “stern” or “severe.”

³⁸⁴ “Krome vseh prochikh sluchaev, druzhby vznikaiut u liudei potomu, chto v podsoznanii eti dvoe, skhodiashchiesia v druzhbu, chuvstvuiut ne tol’ko sotsial’noe, no i biologicheskoe sootvetstvie.” (“Along with all other cases, friendships arise between people because in their subconscious, the two coming together in friendship feel not only social but also biological accord.”) He goes on to refer to personality theorists Kretschmer and Gannushkin.

accompanied by the rustle of “opavshie list’ia”³⁸⁵ underfoot, Surovtsev’s lifelong favorite sound and one which he always sought out (66, 67, and many more instances), suggesting both his affinity to nature and his reverence for sexuality and family life.³⁸⁶ His admiration of the “wisdom of the machine” (74)³⁸⁷ indicates that in him nature is also in harmony with the positive aspects of technology. Drawn to her initially by her pregnancy, which was to him a sign of her desire for a family, he inquired about both her confinement date and her marital status (67, 82). In contrast to naïve Antonova, life experience had already mellowed Surovtsev somewhat, having taught him the intrinsic human need for companionship, the value of art, music, and literature,³⁸⁸ the need to tear oneself away from work from time to time to revisit nature and through her, one’s childhood. From the very first he had an intuitive understanding of Antonova although he knew nothing about her. He recognized her alien qualities and inferred her lack of family and home, and his sensitivity and empathy³⁸⁹ led him to encourage his Communist fellow drinkers and gossipers to treat her affectionately.

³⁸⁵ “fallen leaves”

³⁸⁶ Through the refrain of “opavshie list’ia” (the title of a collection of essays by V. V. Rozanov), Rozanov’s philosophy concerning the sanctity of sex, sexuality, childbearing, nature, and the nuclear family becomes a significant subtext to this Pil’niak work. For an excellent summary treatment of Rozanov’s thought regarding religion and sexual morality, see George F. Putnam, “Vasilii V. Rozanov: Sex, Marriage and Christianity,” Canadian Slavic Studies V (3:1971): 301-326.

³⁸⁷ “‘mudrost’ stanka”

³⁸⁸ However, the arts seem secondary to nature, love, and family, since the rustle of fallen leaves was even more beautiful to him than Pasternak’s lyric poetry (66). Boris Pasternak was Pil’niak’s next-door neighbor in the Peredelkino writers’ community. This comment may be an oblique reference to Pasternak’s poetic cycle, “My Sister Life,” which was published in 1922 and “celebrates love and nature experience as the rapturous revelation of a creative life-force.” Christopher J. Barnes, “Pasternak, Boris Leonidovich,” Handbook of Russian Literature, ed. Victor Terras (New Haven: Yale UP, 1985) 332.

³⁸⁹ His sensitivity recalls Pavel from “Zemlia na rukakh.”

Despite the long hours they spent together daily, their developing friendship at the resort was barely evident even to the two of them, but he was invariably responsive to her mood. Immediately after she reached the point of recognizing her “punishment” by nature (or its “vengeance”) and wrote of her newly discovered loneliness and desire for a mate (there is no indication that she ever revealed any of her inner reflections to him), he spoke of the extreme sense of aloneness that men experienced --- his whole generation of Russian men --- when facing death in battle and asked her politely whether she was married. However, he cut off the description of his own unsuccessful marriages when she showed no interest.

When she went into labor four days early and (of course) the well-laid plans she had made for transport to the maternity hospital³⁹⁰ fell through,³⁹¹ Surovtsev actualized his heretofore unrevealed commitment to her. He ordered vehicles, packed up her things and accompanied her to the maternity hospital. She described the affectionate physical contact she shared with Surovtsev on the wild ride to the hospital and in the waiting room as her first experiences of a man’s “po-chelovecheski” affectionate touch (87).³⁹² He continued his personal support of her --- visiting, bringing toiletries and food, etc. --- throughout her hospital stay.

³⁹⁰ They went to the Clara Zetkin Maternity Hospital (67). Clara Zetkin (1857-1933) was a German Communist advocate of women’s rights and colleague of Aleksandra Kollontai who interviewed Lenin on “the woman question” in 1920; she died in 1933, the year before this story was written. The irony here is that the hospital would be the final locus of Antonova’s transformation from a woman close to Zetkin’s ideal to something else entirely.

³⁹¹ While the collapse of her meticulous plans may seem to indicate her Communistic expectation of controlling nature (legislating quotas of milk to be produced by cows, etc.), I tend to attribute her expectation of delivery’s “plannability” to her first-time experience as a mother. Even today, inexperienced mothers are amazed at the total lack of control people have over the timing and process of childbirth and subsequent life with children.

³⁹² “human, humane” as opposed to sexual.

And the night after the birth he wrote to her, conveying three main points about himself: his inability to express his feelings and experience in words; the mystery of why he had come to love her and to love her son as his own; and the most terrible (“strashno”) things in his experience of life: “odinochestvo” (aloneness) and lack of “vernost” (85-86). When with a woman, he wrote, a man is in the presence of immortality and should never feel himself alone. But his two marriages, because they lacked “vernost” in all the senses of the word, caused him to feel alone even with his wives. Neither woman wanted children, hence they were untrue to nature, to their essential sexual identity as women and as human beings, to procreation.³⁹³ The first wife, the war Communism revolutionary, was more like a man than a woman, hence unfaithful to biology. The second one was sexually promiscuous, hence unfaithful not only to him individually, but also to basic family honor. He confessed that he too was at fault; he was sexually unfaithful to the first, and treated the second inappropriately.

But he, too, evolved during his relationship with Antonova --- “to, chto ia pishu seichas, ia znaiu tol’ko teper” (86)³⁹⁴ --- he saw himself in her, one who wanted a child and in bearing it was true to his or her essential being, as opposed to his wives, who always had abortions.³⁹⁵ His love of Antonova had mellowed him further, especially in comparison with his previous marriage relationships, making him ever less “surovyi.” Recognizing --- for once not too late, as it was with the Zemstvo doctors in “Zemskoe delo” --- that man was not meant to live alone, and seeing the opportunity to seize love

³⁹³ Until the pregnancy, Antonova had been like these women.

³⁹⁴ “what I am writing now, I know only just now”

³⁹⁵ Antonova too had “always had abortions.” It was only in pregnancy, really after she began to physically sense the child, that she came into harmony with her sexual identity.

and “vernost’,” he invited her to live with him for a shared life, sharing values and goals as Communists, he loving her and her son as he loved her. Marriage is never mentioned. His intuition convinced him that he was right in proposing this to her and he moved forward confidently by preparing his apartment with its sunny nursery, although he withheld the letter for three days.

The birth experience itself consummated the changes in Antonova. In her letter to Comrade Iurisova she had mentioned her serenity toward the coming experience (82). It was only in childbirth that she experienced true existential aloneness (89),³⁹⁶ an aloneness that can only be compared with that of men under fire described by Surovtsev. She had several experiences which can only be described as mystical.³⁹⁷ The first was a sense of “doubling,” which is a major theme of the story: as the *foetus* in her womb developed into a viable human being, so did she develop into a more complete human adult. Upon entry to the labor room, she felt that she was splitting into two different human parts --- into two individuals, two people, two fates, one of which was she, herself --- and this person was conquering death (87-88). Ultimately in the throes of labor (or what she referred to as the empty phrase “v mukakh rozhdeniia”, “in labor pains” (88)) she underwent a second experience, not doubling this time but multiplying, combining her childbirth experience with those of all others who give birth, suggesting the Great Mother herself and participation in the great chain of being:

--- тогда ночами, в нескончаемых криках женщин,
путалось понятие времени, путалось понятие самой

³⁹⁶ “i uzhe kazalos’, chto ty odna vo vsem mire” (“and it already seemed that you were alone in the whole world”) when she remained in labor after most of the other women had been wheeled out after giving birth.

³⁹⁷ There is a “freemasonry subtext” to this story, initiated in the description of the resort in which masons used to meet and continued by Antonova’s dismissive reflections on passé masonic “mysteries,” rituals, superstitious beliefs, and the like. In fact Antonova exemplifies the masonic quest for illumination and ultimately recognizes that indeed there are mysteries in life that cannot be plumbed by rational cognition.

себя, и казалось, что все это я, и вчера, и сегодня, и завтра, всегда все я рожаю, кричу, --- все повторялось, повторяется и будет повторяться из века в век, всю жизнь человечества. И этот нечеловеческий крик --- не крик, а вой, визг, мычание, и боль и страх, --- и родившиеся маленькие, одинаковые, крикливые, --- мне казалось, что все это --- я. Я кормлю всех этих крикунов, мальчиков, девочек, черненьких, беленьких, и не уйти, не справиться, и не хватит сил. (89-90)
 --- then for nights, among the unending screams of women, my sense of time got confused, my sense of my very self, and it seemed that this was all me --- yesterday, today, and tomorrow, it was always I giving birth, I screaming --- everything was repeating, is repeating, and will always be repeating from century to century, for the entire life of humanity. And this inhuman cry --- not a scream, but a wail, a yelp, a bellow, and pain and terror --- and the identical little noisy ones who had just been born --- it seemed to me that it was all --- me. I am feeding all these little screamers, boys, girls, little dark ones, little light ones, and I can't leave, I can't cope, and my strength gives out.

In these experiences Antonova, having spent her entire previous life in *chronos*, apprehends *kairos* for the first time.

Antonova's whole concept of "woman" was transformed dramatically into a vision of one person giving birth to another person (90).³⁹⁸ Her delivery room experience led her to characterize the attending medical personnel as indifferent and unaware of their presence at a supernatural event, "at the destruction of death, at immortality, at the birth of a human being" (87).³⁹⁹ This attitude elicited in her a sense of grave injustice, that death was considered earth-shaking and war a significant societal event but the birth of a human being was considered either just a physiological phenomenon unworthy of attention or, "po opredeleniiu idiota, 'fiziologicheskaiia tragediia zhenshchiny'!" (90)⁴⁰⁰

³⁹⁸ "obraz zhenshchiny, cheloveka rozhdaishchego cheloveka"

³⁹⁹ "on prisutstvuet pri unichtozhenii smerti, pri bessmertii, pri rozhdenii cheloveka"

⁴⁰⁰ "according to the definition of an idiot, 'the physiological *tragedy* of woman.'" My emphasis. As Naiman (295) points out, this is a direct allusion to Anton Nemilov and his 1930 work, The Biological Tragedy of Woman, which asserts that women's mental capacities are (tragically but totally) under the control of biological hormones, making women intellectually inferior to men. (Biologicheskaiia tragediia zhenshchiny, 1930)

She now knew that birth was not a mere physical, physiological act of reproduction but in actuality a metaphysical mystery.

Part of Antonova's social training included historical assessments of the family. As mentioned above, she denigrated family ties because the family no longer served as an economic unit and because family morality was in the final stage of decomposition (76). She had virtually repudiated all of her own family ties,⁴⁰¹ failing to even inform her relatives of her pregnancy. She did involve herself in the diagnosis and prognosis for her aunt's terminal cancer and report her findings to the cousin, but her lack of support for the aunt's hospitalization (letter, 67-68) was not understood or appreciated. For this, "[m]enia ona sochla za vyrodka iz roda" (67),⁴⁰² a reaction which Antonova interpreted as the aunt's adherence to the outmoded medieval moral code of unquestioning support by and to blood relatives. Antonova, rejecting this moral code, also anticipated and countered the cousin's objections with regard to the aunt's death, suffering, and the blood relationship, asserting that she, Antonova, would do the same if it were a question of her own mother.⁴⁰³ This letter ended coldly with the news of Antonova's imminent delivery and advice to apply to other family members for help. During the later stages of pregnancy, as mentioned above, Antonova began to grasp the need for a husband figure

⁴⁰¹ Her own upbringing without a functional nuclear family undoubtedly contributed to her disregard of family relationships and her lack of capacity for intimacy.

⁴⁰² "She considered me a freak of nature" --- the Russian of course stresses the root "rod."

⁴⁰³ Interestingly, this is the only mention of Antonova's mother in the entire story. We know of her revolutionary father and his death in a 1920 battle in Crimea, but there is not another word about the mother. Perhaps having a mother as a feminine role model would have enabled Antonova's female development; but perhaps the mother was a masculinized *revoliutsionerka* like Surovtsev's first wife.

to share in the experience of the child's development; during delivery she wished that fathers could see and experience their children's birth as mothers did (89).⁴⁰⁴

The journal ends with Antonova's description of the new family form which she and her child were initiating. She reflected on the feudal sensibilities of clan, blood, and roots, with which she had struggled her entire life and which were by now eradicated, and claimed that she, unlike women in the age of feudalism, had not come (as a member of her own clan) to a husband's clan for reception and inclusion in it; and that she herself had no family or tribe whose roots would have made her a viable wife. The family she was creating was not based on dynasties, economic mergers, blood ties, parental arrangements, and the like, but was instead based on love and free choice (see below). Her own clan was not continuing but beginning; consisting, she wrote (presumably before receiving Surovtsev's proposal), only of herself and her son, without a (blood) father, this tiny clan had the advantage of looking forward, not back, thus defining a new type of family for the future.⁴⁰⁵

The final two brief scenes are of Antonova and Surovtsev visiting the vital statistics office to register "their" child, and of Antonova, at some later date, replacing the journal entries she had written at the resort with the ones she had written in the hospital, on the paper Surovtsev had brought her. The entire story has built up to her recognition of her need for a mate to make her family complete. In a sense, she did go to a "husband's" home --- after the birth of the offspring rather than before --- to be embraced by his family, personified by his mother --- but not in the traditional "feudalistic" sense. Her

⁴⁰⁴ "Esli by eto videl otets! --- esli by eto oshchushchali ottsy!" ("If only a father could see this! If only fathers could feel this!")

⁴⁰⁵ Various other family forms will be discussed in Chapter IV.

new family is indeed, as she projected, different. A nuclear family rather than an extended clan, the new unit consists of birth mother and son; a husband/father who has no genetic relationship to the child but has committed to loving both wife and child; plus a presumably doting grandmother who also lacks genetic ties to the child. Essentially this new family form is one without extended maternal roots and without genetic paternal ones. It is based on mutual love, “vernost” (mutual fidelity and honesty, including fidelity to their own authentic selves), and was initiated because of instinctive biological compatibility (79),⁴⁰⁶ a family based on opportunities for love and authenticity seized at the eleventh hour.

The imagery in this story supports the transition of focus from death to life, as once more out of death comes life. Both birth and death are themes in this story, spiritual as well as physical. Like most of Pil’niak’s works, it is temporally located in a meteorological season, in this case autumn, a time of dying. Antonova herself is initially associated with death; her work-related letter to her deputy and her presentation to the group about Soviet Criminal Justice indicate that she, as a prosecutor, deals with murderers and metes out death penalties; the letter about her aunt confirms a different kind of “death penalty” which Antonova directs hypothetically toward her own mother as well (67-68). Her first private encounter with Surovtsev, on the resort grounds, takes place “v mertvyi chas” (“during quiet time” at the resort but literally “at the dead hour”) right before sunset (66) --- a liminal time suggesting the continuing changes in her. The letters she writes to her cousin and the deputy prosecutor upon arrival at the resort are focused on murder, probable and imminent death; those written to Katia and Comrade Iurisova in mid-stay focus on practical preparations for the birth; the final hospital notes

⁴⁰⁶ See note 384 above, concerning biological basis for personal affinity.

and journals focus on her physical and metaphysical experience of giving birth, the sense of overcoming death. Surovtsev seeks to relieve the aloneness felt when facing death by achieving a sense of immortality in union with a woman, since such union is itself the promise of new life --- and he looks forward to such a union with Antonova, who is anticipating life in a new kind of family that is focused on future rather than past generations. Thus it is even a kind of “resurrection” story.

According to Naiman, this story is evidence of Pil’niak’s 1930s celebration of “his country’s general ‘prosperity’ and the new Stalinist order,” which indicates an extensive “transformation” of Pil’niak’s political attitude, including Pil’niak’s support of the new Stalinist family structure and emphasis on maternity (292-6). On the contrary, I find with Browning (178-81) that this work is a major indictment of the evolving Soviet social structure. As a child, Antonova’s instincts were right: “when she was still capable of falling in love” (88), she did indeed have vague dreams of a future mate; and her first job was as a nanny, caring for children. It was only later, when she had begun to devote her life to the Communist cause, that she abandoned the path necessary for full human development. Pre-pregnancy Antonova was “not a person” because she had been reared and educated in the Soviet system. That system and its social tenets taught her to disregard her gender identity,⁴⁰⁷ that sex was merely a physical craving, that appropriate

⁴⁰⁷ Pil’niak has been condemning the practice of educating women to function as men since pre-revolutionary days; the earliest example may be “S poslednim parokhodom,” first published 1918. It is unclear exactly when this story was written: Browning (221) dates it to “by 1916”; note 4 to Letter to A. M. Chernyshev, 25 Aug. 1917, No. 23, dates it to summer 1917 (45). I will refer to it as written “1916-17.”

sexual behavior required only technical honesty,⁴⁰⁸ that having children was a population-management issue and abortion a woman's matter, and that a father's primary contribution was good genes. The system had taught Antonova that collective work, the building of Communism, was the appropriate all-consuming life activity, in comparison with which personal elements --- a life course including family, mutually dependent intimate personal friendships, emotional, spiritual and aesthetic development, and especially love, mating, child-bearing and -rearing --- were time-consuming irrelevancies. This system educated her with "znaniia" ("knowledge") but omitted empathy, compassion, aesthetic values, and even intimate friendship. As a prosecutor and as a person, she pursued justice but had no concept of mercy. She sought total honesty and total personal independence (as opposed to empathy and intimacy). Pil'niak indicts the entire society along with pre-maternal Antonova: the unisex education; the terminally ill aunt trying to get a hospital bed through Antonova's connections, then planning to bribe a doctor; the doctors and nurses who see giving birth as a merely physical procedure; the society that makes a three-day absence from work for an abortion a routine matter; the resort staff (and Antonova's acquaintances) who are totally unavailable when she urgently needs to get to the hospital; the Communist family unable to recognize and honor maternal preparations in its own pet; and especially the valorization of social struggle and death over birth and life. This particular opposition categorizes "societal war," the Revolution and concomitant restructuring of society, as a form of death, opposing these phenomena to the supreme value of life- and spirit-affirming human procreation in all its aspects.

⁴⁰⁸ "Technical honesty" would require, for example, that a sexual partner be informed that a new liaison has been entered. She liked her third lover and could not understand his abandonment of her after her (appropriate, to her way of thinking) disclosure of having taken on an additional sexual partner (75-6).

The family Antonova ultimately described founding with such pride could, when taken out of context, be seen as Pil'niak's support of the 1930s "Stalinist" return to family values and encouragement of childbearing, but Pil'niak had valorized healthy nuclear families and motherhood from his earliest works on, so "Rozhdenie cheloveka" cannot be said to represent any kind of "transformation" of his views on these topics. Nor can this story be said to encourage an increase in the birthrate, as the families in Pil'niak's focus rarely have more than one or two children.

"Birth of a Human Being": The Gor'kii Subtext

As mentioned above, Pil'niak took the title of this story from one written in 1912 by Maksim Gor'kii. There are many correspondences between the two stories, as well as some significant contrasts. I will focus on the similarities and contrasts that contribute to the perception of Pil'niak's larger message rather than conduct a thorough comparative analysis of the stories.

The Gor'kii story⁴⁰⁹ is set in a famine period in 1892. The main event of the story is the birth of a baby to a peasant woman, a young widow from Orel who is in the Caucasus as part of a group of migrant workers seeking work and sustenance. As in the Pil'niak story, the event takes place in fall, a glorious golden fall as opposed to the gloom and rain so prevalent during Antonova's stay at the resort, but both settings are replete with natural beauty, trees, streams or bodies of water.⁴¹⁰ Like Antonova, the peasant

⁴⁰⁹ I will be citing from Maksim Gor'kii, "Rozhdenie cheloveka," Sobranie sochinenii v vosemnadtsati tomakh, t. 8 (Moskva: Gosudarstvennoe izdatel'stvo khudozhestvennoi literatury, 1961) 7-15.

⁴¹⁰ Pil'niak replaces the ever-present background sounds of sea and brook with the equally constant rustle of fallen leaves.

woman is facing birth alone; her husband has recently died and her group of workers has gone on, leaving her lagging behind. In both stories a sensitive man steps in to aid the woman in distress; in the Gor’kii tale the first person narrator performs this role.

Both stories glorify the birth event in its own sanctity⁴¹¹ and in that of the woman giving birth. Gor’kii’s unnamed peasant woman is repeatedly associated with the Bogoroditsa, and of course Antonova’s given name, Mariia, makes the same allusion. In both stories these associations are made only after the birth takes place, indicating that this particular sanctity is reserved for mothers rather than for all women. Both women undergo a transformation during the birth process: Pil’niak depicts a longer process, culminating in childbirth, in which Antonova herself gradually becomes a fuller “human being” in various ways in parallel with the development of the child in her womb, whereas the Gor’kii story focuses only on the birth itself and the time immediately surrounding it. The transformation of the peasant woman is depicted by the narrator, an outside observer, while we are privy to Antonova’s own perceptions of events and experiences, albeit in hindsight. The peasant woman’s transformation is marked by the change in description of her bestial aspects⁴¹² (as perceived by the narrator during the birth process) to her holy beauty as a mother and her association with the most pure

⁴¹¹ The birth takes place in a cathedral-like forest setting (8), and the baby lies upon an altar-like pile of colorful leaves (13). However, it is the production of God-like man that is most sacred and important to Gor’kii, rather than the woman’s experience of a holy, transformative event (besides the production of a child) that it is for Pil’niak, for whom the sacred locus is the woman’s body rather than nature’s cathedral or man’s hospital.

⁴¹² The change in imagery includes, for example, the woman’s “zheltye, volch’i zuby” (“yellow wolfish teeth”) (10); “kak mukha” (“like a fly”) (10); “zavyla” (“she began to howl”) (10, two occurrences); “tochno medveditsa, rycha, khripia, poshla na chetveren’kakh” (“as though a she-bear, growling, wheezing, she set off on all fours”) (10); “vyryvaia blekluiu travu, vse khotela zapikhat’ ee v rot sebe” (“ripping out withered grass, she kept wanting to cram it in her mouth”) (11), etc. prior to the birth; afterwards she is referred to as having a blinding smile (“ulybaetsia vse iarche; tak khorosho i iarko, chto ia pochti slepnu ot etoi ulybki”) (11) and the “holy eyes of a mother” (“sviatye glaza roditel’nitsy”) (12). Even after the heroic birth in the wilderness, the narrator comments on her “animal strength” (“silishcha zverinaia!”) (14).

Bogoroditsa, whom she repeatedly addresses. In Gor'kii the act of giving birth itself is bestial, possibly shameful, certainly private and hidden away, whereas in Pil'niak it is transcendent, an event which fathers as well as medical staff should attend with awe and reverence. Ultimately Gor'kii's emphasis is on the product, the already proud new man who has come into being, whereas to Pil'niak, the process of creation and the qualities of creator and created are as important as the product itself.

The women themselves could hardly be more different: the resemblance ends with their status as women alone giving birth for the first time. The peasant woman is a poor, starving physical laborer, ignorant, religious, socially powerless, and superstitious; Antonova is financially secure, educated, holds authority within the governing establishment, and is very independent --- but, at least initially, cold and apparently soulless. The peasant woman is part of a cultural group from a common region, she sings, loves, and weeps, behaving with both emotion and dignity, elements which Antonova either lacks or misunderstands.

Pil'niak uses the title of a story whose plot is limited to an actual childbirth event in order to invite comparison of the prevailing socio-political *milieux* and the people in them. In each story a baby boy comes into the world. Each story implicitly or explicitly draws attention to the world into which the child is born and what kind of future he may expect. Gor'kii, writing in the interim between the 1905 and 1917 revolutions, is describing a materially and intellectually impoverished level of society whose condition can be attributed to the imperial regime in power. Starving, minimally educated people must migrate to find food and work; women are abandoned to give birth alone without even shelter, much less medical or spiritual support. The peasant mother thanks the

narrator for the help he has afforded her in the childbirth process but wonders how life will be for the baby;⁴¹³ despite her obvious love for the newborn, the reader wonders whether she would have allowed the child to live, had she given birth alone. At the story's conclusion she is more sanguine, at least more hopeful: "Gospodi, bozhen'ka! Khorosho-to kak, khorosho! I tak by vse --- shla, vse by shla, do samogo azh do kraiu sveta, a on by, synok, --- ros, da vse by ros na privol'e, kolo maternei grudi, rodimushka moia . . ." (15).⁴¹⁴ The narrator repeatedly refers to the newborn as a man of Orel (12)⁴¹⁵ and describes him as "[n]ovyi zhitel' zemli russkoi, chelovek neizvestnoi sud'by" (15),⁴¹⁶ which celebrates his potential future ("orlovskii!") but also brings it into question, given the conditions (of tsarism) under which he has been born and will grow up. The implicit message is that only revolution will bring about the kind of environment that will enable this new man to live, thrive, and reach his full human potential --- becoming the eagle of Orel he is destined to be.

Antonova, on the other hand, is living in the Communist society created by the Revolution Gor'kii's peasants (and narrator) could only dream of. Devoted Communist that she is, she looks forward with no doubt to the future of her son, who will grow up in the classless society she has spent her lifetime working for, a society which has the advantage of looking to the future rather than to the past. He will live, she expects,

⁴¹³ "Pomog ty mne --- spasibo . . . a khorosho li eto dlia nego, i --- ne znaiu uzh. . ." (15)

⁴¹⁴ "Lord, dear God! It's good, how good it is. And I'd walk, just keep on walking like this, even to the very end of the earth, and he, my little son, would grow and grow in the wide open spaces, close to his mother's breast, my darling little one . . ."

⁴¹⁵ The baby is referred to as "orlovskii," "orlovets" --- from the place name "Orel" (the home of the migrant worker group), which also means "eagle."

⁴¹⁶ "new inhabitant of the Russian land, a person of unknown fate"

without the (false) demons of previous eras and “without fearing dogs” or (authentic, procreative) “canine instincts” (73).⁴¹⁷ The record weight of the baby at birth, at least among the nine women⁴¹⁸ in the maternity ward that night, is a positive omen, and Antonova enthusiastically describes the production, by those new women, of “new people of new eras and of new generations” (88) for the great Communist society. As in the Gor’kii story, the child is presented by the narrator in terms of citizenship, this time of the classless Soviet society (90). However, the depiction of pre-pregnancy Antonova, a product of that great new society, as a cold, soulless pragmatist in a society in which death is honored more highly than birth, and where “beschelovechnost” characterizes human treatment of animals and birthing mothers, gives one pause. How far has society really progressed? The material poverty of the imperial era has been replaced by spiritual, aesthetic, and cultural poverty. A human being may be born, but will he attain true humanity in this society? Pil’niak is suggesting that a drastic re-prioritization of social values in the direction of more traditional humanism must take place if Soviet society is to be made up of real “human” beings capable of reaching their potential in all aspects of life.

Pil’niak’s story could also be considered his personal rejoinder to Gor’kii, whose “cult of motherhood” is expressed in this work and many others, especially in his 1906 novel, Mat.⁴¹⁹ Gor’kii believed that the new revolutionary regime would usher in a new reverence for maternity and for mothers as the potential bearers of great social heroes.

⁴¹⁷ “Moi syn dolzhen budet zhit’ bez demonov i ne boias’ sobak, --- net, tochnee, --- sobach’ikh instinktov.”

⁴¹⁸ The nine women most likely represent the nine Muses, the sources of the various kinds of creative inspiration. This association is consistent with Pil’niak’s view of childbearing as a divine creative act.

⁴¹⁹ Mother, first published 1906.

The post-revolutionary society Pil'niak depicts is, on the contrary, one in which motherhood is completely de-valued: pregnancy is to be avoided, abortion is routine, biological fathers strive to destroy their offspring, and society (including the medical establishment) virtually ignores the births that do occur. It is unlikely that Pil'niak at this point expected a radical improvement in these spheres in Stalin's time,⁴²⁰ even though family policies were encouraging "hero-mothers" to increase the birth-rate.

The Biological *Ethos* of Boris Pil'niak

as Presented in His Works through "Rozhdenie Cheloveka"

In this story the word "instinct" ("instinkt") in singular or plural is used approximately twenty times. This continued focus on "biology," on the concerns of the individual human being rather than the larger social miracle being worked in the long-term progress toward Communism, led to intense criticism of this story, criticism that in fact could be considered Pil'niak's death knell. But the story lays out Pil'niak's beliefs about the role of instinct in the biological *ethos* and in human life very thoroughly and clearly, and there is much more spirit than biology to be found in his conception. As Browning asserts, Gor'kii was writing about creation, the glory of the natural world and of the creation of each human in it, Pil'niak about morality and ethics (178-9).⁴²¹

Some biological instincts, Pil'niak is asserting in this story, should be regarded as a consistent guide to life's purpose; these underlie some of the transient cultural "instincts" (we would probably use the word "sensibilities" today, at least in English)

⁴²⁰ More promising expectations of moral progress under the Communist regime were expressed by Pil'niak in the early 1920's, for example in "Staryi syr," discussed below in Chapter IV, but that time was well past in 1934.

⁴²¹ "Questions of morality and ethics dominate Pilniak's story; creation dominates Gor'kii's" (179).

associated with eras and cultures. Sometimes the more culture-related “instincts” (feudal, capitalist, Communist, etc.) are truly transient; others are aspects of lasting biological instincts clothed in transient cultural forms, as in Antonova’s assessment of the presentation of instincts in War and Peace.

The instinct for procreation is to Pil’niak a moral imperative, but it is much more than an unrestricted drive for physical copulation and childbirth. It is in fact holy, and is to be followed only by those who love and are committed to one another and who recognize that in sexual union they are uniting their most authentic selves and creating a new human being. Sex is enjoyment, yes, but the enjoyment comes in its expression of love and in its (pro-)creative function. This may be a doubly creative function, transforming the mated adults --- as in at least the case of Antonova, and ideally of a child’s father, too --- as well as engendering new human beings. This activity is holy and sacred; the woman’s body carrying a child is sanctified once it becomes the locus of the development of a new being. The sexual relationship leading to procreation is itself holy, involving each partner’s love and reverence for the other and for the child potentially resulting from the union. The sexual relation involves sharing of the entire procreative experience, including the progression of pregnancy and the actual birth.

As conception is more than sperm meeting egg, so birth is more than physiological reproduction. It is a transformative mystical experience, ideally to be appreciated and shared by both parents. The child being born is a replacement version of the parents, the incarnation of their love, and their guarantee of immortality. For parents, the birth of a child is a victory over death. This is the immortality that Surovtsev associates with sexual union, since each sexual union contains the potential for a child.

The partnership of the couple is a crucial element. A woman's maternal drive, however strong, is insufficient. Her mate is more than a sperm donor bringing good genes to the desired child; he is to be a loving, committed partner whose role is to love the mother, share the experience of pregnancy and birth, and be a devoted teacher and guide for the child. Antonova's maternal drive was triggered by her pregnancy rather than the other way around; Pil'niak's numerous earlier stories of women seeking temporary liaisons in order to satisfy maternal instincts end indeterminately if not downright badly, as do those in which men have methodically planned seductions or otherwise entered into casual liaisons for the sake of physical pleasure. "Rozhdenie cheloveka" stresses the fact that it is not good for man or woman to be alone; procreation, in fact life itself, is appropriate to loving, committed pairs (and others admitted to the circle through mutual love).

The partnership of the couple is to be based on love, a transformative love in which "vernost'" is the *sine qua non*. This "vernost'" includes the couple's exclusive sexual fidelity to one another, their authenticity with respect to their sexual identities and professional vocations, and their basic honesty and integrity in every aspect of their being and dealings with others. The couple must share basic values and goals and strive together to develop the larger communal culture. A connection with one's childhood is essential to this larger "vernost'," since it is in childhood that people are their most authentic selves.

Abortion was wrong to Pil'niak in 1915 and it was at least as wrong in 1934. It seems especially reprehensible (if typical) when initiated by the father of the child: the very thought that a man could "be indifferent" to his own offspring (80) was beyond

comprehension. Pil'niak's earlier stories in which the father was forced by circumstances to be the agent, directly or vicariously, of the abortion of his own child demonstrate the utterly despicable quality of this action, and his depiction and judgment of the biological father's actions in "Rozhdenie cheloveka" is consistent with those views. Antonova was not explicitly condemned for her previous abortions because (a) she eventually saw the light, and (b) she punished herself, recognizing and honoring nature's vengeance; likewise Surovtsev recognized and acknowledged that he had behaved badly in his marriages. Life can go on, righteousness and happiness can be achieved, after previous wrongs; redemption is always possible for the self-aware person who repents. Ideally sex follows love, and if a man loves a woman enough to have sex with her (or vice versa), he and she must love the child that results from their union.

Men and women are not the same. Each gender has its own roles, and the role of the woman is to love and nurture --- plants, animals, children, culture, health, life. Women such as Antonova (in her prosecutor phase), Arina in "Mat' syra-zemlia," Kseniia Ordynina in "Ivan-da-Mar'ia" (1921) and any others who serve as agents of death or violence are not showing "vernost'" to their natural ordained role, nor are women who avoid or reject the nurturing maternal role. The role of a man is to love, protect, provide, and teach; as regards children, he need not be a biological father to be a *vernyi* one, physically, morally, and spiritually. Because of the differences in their natural roles, men and women must be educated differently, with sensitivity to and appreciation for different aspects of life. All must be able to develop and improve the social and

spiritual culture, but women should not be educated to be masculine or androgynous.⁴²²

Women should want to be mothers; men should be attracted to women who do.

The nuclear family is of consummate importance but may take various forms. A family is made up of those who love each other and share in love's mysteries. In this story as in several others, the genetic relationship between parent and child is not necessary if the union of the adult mates is based on genuine love. The most important thing is the *vernost'* of the love between the mating, parenting man and woman and the love they each and both direct toward the child. The nuclear family is most important; an extended family related across generations is to be cherished if it exists, but it is not essential to human happiness, morality, or harmony with nature. A parent's rejection of his or her child --- even a non-genetically-related child who claims the parent in love --- damns the parent, as will be shown below.

Human beings are part of nature, hence should love nature and be in harmony with her orderly nurturing aspect. The early primitivism has been transformed to distinguish the "noble" primitive who supports nature's diurnal ordered aspect from the "barbaric" nocturnal one who is condemned as destructive and chaotic. Part of man's harmony with nature is his appreciation and expression of his sexual (biological) identity as described above. Externally, harmony with nature may take the form of recreation, represented by Antonova's and Surovtsev's walks in the woods, or Pavel's and Anna's gardening, as well as agricultural cultivation of the soil, forestry, animal husbandry and the like. Man-made technology, its construction and use, are not in themselves evil but

⁴²² Pil'niak focuses on the specific requirements and flaws of women's education rather than men's primarily because educational facilities were oriented toward educating men in general and the developing society tended to masculinize women rather than feminize men.

such equipment and installations must be designed, created, implemented, and used in harmony with, rather than in forced opposition to, nature. Man can enhance but not degrade or exploit nature and must always operate on her terms.

Ultimately human life, properly lived, transcends the physical and material, and is designed to do so. Its mysteries are beyond the ability of man to understand rationally or to articulate in words.⁴²³

Society must be engineered in such a way as to support these values, to recognize and support the birth of human beings and nurture their development, so that human beings are brought lovingly into the world and mature adults are full human beings with emotional, spiritual, aesthetic and moral strength as well as physical and rational. Their most appropriate activities include living, loving, propagating, and working to build a better culture, and ultimately to die in peace.

⁴²³ Words, to Pil'niak, "are like coins to a numismatist" . . . but, like Tolstoi, he is fully aware that there are dimensions to human experience that defy verbal articulation. Citation is from "Riazan'-iabloko," written 1921, first published 1922. "Slova mne, kak moneta numizmatu." "Riazan'-iabloko," Moskovskii al'manakh, kn. 1 (1922): 55-123; citation (105, 114)

Chapter III

Pil'niak Channeling Tolstoi? Yes and No

Introduction: The Tolstoian Subtext

Pil'niak freely alludes to other authors and their works throughout his *oeuvre*, by this means enriching his own fiction in a wide variety of ways. For example, by naming a heroine of “Tret'ia stolitsa” (1922) “Liza Kalitina” after Turgenev’s model of feminine chastity, the writer brings an entire complex of associations to the character and theme of his work. Mariia Antonova in “Rozhdenie cheloveka” (1934) analyzes Tolstoi’s War and Peace as a study in human instincts; her conclusions reached in dialogue with Tolstoi about universal vs. transient human impulses underscore the basic tenet of the story. “Rozhdenie cheloveka” also has a pointed Gor’kii subtext, as does “Rasskaz o s”ezde pisatelei” (1934),⁴²⁴ such subtexts inviting the reader’s deeper interpretation of both sets of works. “Telegrafnyi smotritel’” (1928) contains a clearly Pushkinian subtext (“Stantsionnyi smotritel’”) as well as allusions to Tolstoi and Turgenev. “Shtoss v zhizn’” (1928) is based on the closing period of Lermontov’s life (and his surviving family), and, of course, evokes his story “Shtoss.” From “Mogila A. P. Chekhova” (1925)⁴²⁵ through “Lord Bairon” (1927)⁴²⁶ to “Ten’ pisatelia Gogolia” (1934)⁴²⁷ a

⁴²⁴ “A Story about the Writers’ Congress,” written and first published 1934.

⁴²⁵ “The Grave of A. P. Chekhov,” written by 1925, first published 1925.

⁴²⁶ “Lord Byron,” written 1927, first published 1928, co-authored by Petr Pavlenko.

⁴²⁷ “Shade of the Writer Gogol’,” written and first published 1934.

pantheon of literary greats is paraded through Pil'niak's works, fulfilling various functions and to varying effect. Even Charles Dickens provides a subtext to "Staryi syr" (1923), usually translated as "The Old Cheshire Cheese" to clarify the allusion, in what could be called "A Tale of Three Cultures." There are numerous other intertexts.

Tolstoian "influences" --- which I would categorize more as "allusions" or "resonance" --- were noted by the publishers of Pil'niak's early story, "Kak obyknovenno" (1915) at its first publication in 1923. Little analysis, however, has come out concerning Tolstoian elements across Pil'niak's *oeuvre*.⁴²⁸ Pil'niak was "in dialogue" with Tolstoi on many ideas of shared concern to them, especially in the spheres of sexuality and family life. On the whole, this dialogue is of a harmonious, non-polemical, nature, since Pil'niak was in general agreement with many of Tolstoi's views on women's roles within the family and the place of sexuality, at least those views held by Tolstoi up through the writing of Anna Karenina. The two writers shared common ground on the primacy of family, on sexual morality, truth, authenticity, the value and role of work, women's education, the human being in relation to nature, death as a natural part of life,⁴²⁹ pacifism,⁴³⁰ and much more. And, most importantly, the works of both writers are characterized by an often moralistic authorial stance.

⁴²⁸ As mentioned above, Jensen noted certain Tolstoian tendencies in Pil'niak's early works, most notably the Polunin cycle which Jensen considered a moralistic "Tolstoian project." Bristol, Maguire, and Voronskii also considered Pil'niak's early nature stories influenced by Tolstoi.

⁴²⁹ Pil'niak's "Smerti" ("Deaths," written 1915, first published 1917) is often compared with Tolstoi's "Tri smerti" ("Three Deaths," written 1858, first published 1859). Issues of acceptance and rejection of natural death are also the main themes of Pil'niak's "Smert' starika Arkhipova" ("The Death of Old Man Arkhipov," written by 1918 and first published 1918, also reworked for inclusion in Golyi god) and "Delo smerti" ("A Matter of Death," written 1927, first published 1928, co-authored by V. Fedorovskii). The issue of human acceptance of death repeats thematically throughout Pil'niak's fiction. Kriuchkov examined this theme in both writers in "Epitsentr smerti v khudozhestvennoi proze L. N. Tolstogo i B. A. Pil'niaka," Voprosy filologii i knizhnogo dela (Ul'iansk: UIGGU, 2004) 65-79, and other studies have been done regarding individual texts, as mentioned above.

However, at least within the frame of biological ethics, there are differences as well. For example, Pil'niak never lost his appreciation of human sexuality: he remained firm on the inseparability of sexual union and procreation, and appeared to condone sexless marriages under certain limited circumstances only. He never expressed the extreme opinions against sexual expression that are suggested in Voskresenie and made explicit in the afterwords to "The Kreutzer Sonata." Both writers condemn birth control but Pil'niak never expressed favor for large families; those under his microscope usually have only one or two children, although peasant and factory families sometimes have more. Prostitution is a major social evil in both *oeuvres*, but for different reasons, as will be seen below. There are no Platon Karataevs in Pil'niak; by 1922-24 his early peasant-idealization had faded to the point where he viewed most peasants, close to the earth as they might be, as uncultured, destructive philistines if not barbarians (at least in their current condition), only a few of them able to dispense earthy wisdom.

Both Tolstoi and Pil'niak agree on the primacy of family: work is an important aspect of life and idleness a deadly trap, but attention to family comes before work, or at least before career, for both men and women. Of course in Tolstoi's day, women --- especially the aristocratic ones that dominate his pre-Confession family-oriented works -- did not have the public work roles outside the home that they took on during and after the revolutionary period. The education of the women of his circle, in Tolstoi's view, needed to focus on family, social, and cultural arenas, including dance, art, and music as

⁴³⁰ "O Sevke" ("About Sevka," written 1914, first published 1915) is characterized by Gary Browning as a "strong pacifist statement" about at least World War I (96). Pil'niak's anti-war sentiments are also a strong element in some of the "Prostye rasskazy," ("Simple Stories," a cycle written between 1915 and 1919, first published as a unit in 1921; also published as "Rasskazy o moriakh i gorakh" ("Tales of Seas and Mountains")).

well as more practical domestic skills. Pil'niak, although writing at a time when women's social and economic roles were more varied, rarely showed support for women working outside clearly defined "nurturing" and "culture-preserving" boundaries --- acceptable female careers included teaching, medicine, child-care, agronomy, art, archeology, and the like. Their education must differ from that of men, even for similar careers, to ensure that the female desire for maternity is not suppressed.⁴³¹ Women in violent or death-dealing occupations, such as tanning (Arina in "Mat' syra-zemlia" (1924)), political activism and revolutionary⁴³² work (Anna Agreueva in "Veter pered martom" (1919), Cheka and Zhenotdel leader Kseniia Ordynina in "Ivan-da-Mar'ia" (1921), the nameless female revolutionary/assassin in "Bez nazvan'ia" (1926)) or even criminal law (Antonova in "Rozhdenie cheloveka" (1934)) are usually doomed unless they are somehow converted to embrace more nurturing roles.

A device common to both Pil'niak and Tolstoi is the depiction of children as barometers of parental behavior. Tolstoi's equation of innocent Serezha (in Anna Karenina) to a compass revealing the extent of Anna's and Vronskii's wrongdoing (II, 22)⁴³³ can be applied across the board to the children in Pil'niak's adulterous or otherwise dysfunctional families. Little Asia⁴³⁴ in "Vsegda komandirovka" (1918)⁴³⁵ is

⁴³¹ Pil'niak's views on women's educational issues are made very clear in "S poslednim parokhodom" ("With the last steamship," (1916-17), first published 1918) and "Dva rasskaza" ("Two stories," written 1921, first published 1922; the second story contains a reworking of "S poslednim parokhodom" but both stories are illustrative in this context).

⁴³² The most significant exception to this rule is the positive revolutionary protagonist Anna Kolosova (and Vera Figner, who is also positively presented) in Pil'niak's final novel, Solianoj ambar.

⁴³³ General citations in Tolstoi's novels will be referred to as (Part, chapter), where (II, 22) means Part II, chapter 22.

⁴³⁴ Cyrillic "Ася."

the means by which her father learns that his extra-marital liaisons are known to his family. Young Sevka's mother's adultery with his tutor contributes to Sevka's confusion and devastation during his father's military absence.⁴³⁶ Alisa's idyllic childhood existence in her father's custody turns to a lifetime of neglect when she is abducted by her punitive, greedy mother, who is avenging herself on Alisa's father when he seeks their separation ("Oдно").⁴³⁷ Another Alisa is heartbroken by the departure of her playmate/father when he is forced to "do right" by his mistress (*Volga* (1929)); the list goes on and on. This "barometer effect" goes both ways: the maternally devoted if immoral mother in "Chelovecheskii veter" (1925) is redeemed by her sons' memories of her as blessed.

Both writers emphasize the necessity for man's harmony with nature. Correspondingly, they view cities as sources of corruption and artificiality in contrast to the countryside, where nature's rhythms dictate the flow of authentic human activity. This city-country theme is a commonplace in Pil'niak's early fiction and is particularly personalized and resonant in the Polunin-cycle stories "Snega" (1919) and "Lesnaia dacha,"⁴³⁸ in which city-engendered sophistication, rationalism, and decadent idleness is contrasted with pure, spontaneous, and honest country or forest life.⁴³⁹ Pil'niak's earliest

⁴³⁵ This story is one of the "Prostye rasskazy." It was published separately previously as "Pered komandirovkoii."

⁴³⁶ "O Sevke" ("About Sevka"), written 1914 (see below for details), first published 1915.

⁴³⁷ "The Only Thing," usually translated as "Alone," written in 1915, according to K. B. Andronikashvili-Pil'niak, "1915" 156; first published 1918.

⁴³⁸ "The Forest Manor," originally written as "Polovod'e" ("Spring Floods") in 1917 and published under that name in 1918; republished and anthologized as "Lesnaia dacha," 1923.

⁴³⁹ Even the countryside is corrupted, at least temporarily, during NEP, however, as evidenced in "Chernyi khleb" and other works.

works, at least through Golyi god, reflect Tolstoi's hope that, once a new land-distribution system was in place, cities would disappear altogether.⁴⁴⁰ In later works, as his opposition to urban life and technology diminished, Pil'niak continued to emphasize the importance of the individual's relationship to nature.

There are numerous allusions to Tolstoi and his works throughout Pil'niak's fiction. Dry, logic-bound anarchist leader Semen Ivanovich in Golyi god, rationalistically spouting brotherly love, suggests the impersonal intellectualizations of Levin's progressive-minded half-brother Sergei Ivanovich in Anna Karenina. Elena, experiencing increasing estrangement from her husband in "Chernyi khleb" (between old and new style Christmases, 1922-23) identifies with Pozdnyshev and the sham marriage he describes in "The Kreutzer Sonata." Gavrilov, the doomed commander in "Povest' nepogashennoi lunny" (1926) searches his Communist friend's library in vain for something simple and inspiring like Tolstoi's Detstvo, full of vitality, happiness and sunshine. That even the thoroughly despicable Poltorak in Volga was once a good, pure lad is illustrated by his youthful distress over Anatole Kuragin's attempt to seduce Natasha Rostova. Not all allusions to Tolstoi are positive, however. The foolish girls being seduced by smooth army pilots in "Telegrafnyi smotritel'" (1928) embrace Tolstoi's "resist not evil" philosophy, which is parodied in part through their rejection of the rescue efforts of their pro-active protector/hero, the telegraphist. Lecherous old

⁴⁴⁰ This expectation is clearly expressed in "Proselki," discussed above. As Hugh McLean points out, Tolstoi's expectation was that land would be voluntarily (bloodlessly) handed over to peasants by newly enlightened landowners, and everyone would engage in subsistence farming, which would in turn lead to the necessary demise of the cities ("Resurrection," The Cambridge Companion to Tolstoy (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP, 2002) 150). Pil'niak's initial interpretation of the Revolution was as a peasant-led return to pre-Petrine Russia, in which all land would revert to the peasantry, to the same effect. Pil'niak's view later went through several transformations, as he gradually recognized that the Revolution was inseparable from industrialization and that technology could lead to improvement in man's existential condition.

Skudrin in Volga, carrying a candle when he makes conjugal visits to his aged wife, as well as the older Polunin, an aristocrat seeking God and truth who sits over his books and speaks angry words about truth and goodness at the end of “Smertel’noe manit” (1918), can be read as parodies of the aged Tolstoi himself.

I will examine three of Pil’niak’s stories which demonstrate special relationships with Tolstoian themes relating to the biological ethics of both writers. The first is the very early pre-revolutionary work, “Kak obyknovenno” (1915), a moral tale which resonates with Tolstoi’s late novel Voskresenie. The second is the civil-war-period work, “Veter pered martom” (1919), interpreted as a confirmation of the ultimate moral in Anna Karenina. The third is “Tul’skaia literatura” (1936), one of Pil’niak’s final published works, an exploration of marital truth and fiction purportedly seen through the eyes of Tolstoi’s nephew.

(I am comparing and contrasting these stories with respect to the values expressed in them, not with respect to literary artistry or technique. Tolstoi, for example, is a master of highly nuanced, psychologically realistic character development. Pil’niak, on the other hand, writes allegorically and his characters are intentionally drawn without psychological depth. The two writers practice different types of literary art; such comparisons are beyond the scope of this dissertation.)

The Usual Thing is All Wrong: “Kak obyknovenno” and Voskresenie

There is a distinct Tolstoian streak in Pil’niak’s entire *oeuvre*, but the impact of his predecessor’s specific ideas is particularly noticeable in works written before the Revolution and before the international perspectives and issues motivated by his travels began to play such dominant roles in his thematics. “Kak obyknovenno” was discussed

earlier as representative of Pil'niak's earliest recorded sexual *ethos*. The publishers of this story pointed out the Tolstoian roots of young Pil'niak in this notice at the end of the printed story:

От редакции: Этот впервые появляющийся в печати рассказ Б. Пильняка относится к первоначальному периоду его литературной деятельности (1906 г.) и крайне показателен для определения влияния в этот период на молодого писателя Льва Толстого, --- влияния до сих пор совершенно не отмеченного нашей критикой. (3)⁴⁴¹

From the editors: This story by Boris Pil'niak, appearing here in print for the first time, relates to the initial period of his literary activity (1906) and is extremely significant for determination of the influence of Lev Tolstoi on the young writer during this period --- influence which until now has gone completely unnoted by our critics.

We will look at some of this “influence,” or rather, dialogue with Tolstoi. First of all, the story has a clearly moralistic intent --- that of inspiring, through emotional response, the audience to change its behavior for the better, characteristic especially of the later Tolstoi. The plot of Pil'niak's story has some measure of correspondence with the basic sexual core of Part I of Tolstoi's Voskresenie.⁴⁴² The title itself echoes the opening of Chapter 2 in Part I of the novel, which purports to be the “ochen'obyknovennaia istoriia” (6)⁴⁴³ of the defendant (Katiusha) Maslova, a story which emphasizes the long-term and widespread evil that can be perpetrated without evil intent or full awareness through conventional social conduct. Both works present a sort of moral

⁴⁴¹ Pil'niak wrote this story in 1914 and reworked it in 1915; however, he had been published, usually anonymously, since 1906. This story appeared in print for the first and only time here, in Ekho, 1 Feb. 1923, 1-3, from which I will be citing.

⁴⁴² Voskresenie (Resurrection) is one of Tolstoi's latest, most directly moralistic and didactic works. Written over the ten years between 1889 and 1899, first published 1899. General citations will be of the form (Part, chapter): that is, (I, 4) is (Part I, chapter 4). Specific citations are from Voskresenie, L. N. Tolstoi, Polnoe sobranie sochinenii v 90 tomakh, obshch. red. V. G. Chertkov, t. 32 (Moskva-Leningrad: Gosudarstvennoe izdatel'stvo “Khudozhestvennaia Literatura,” 1933).

⁴⁴³ “a very usual story,” “a very ordinary story” (I, 2). This title also harkens back to Ivan Goncharov's novel Obyknovennaia istoriia.

coming-of-age story of a privileged young man who suddenly recognizes the wrong he has inflicted through unthinking sexual behavior. Of course the novel allows much more detailed development of character and plot than does the three-page short story, but the core situations are quite similar although they are used in the two works to achieve differing moral emphases.

Pil'niak's frame story features an outsider, Mironov, who is an acquaintance but not a regular among a group of young men who gather in a restaurant on Thursday nights. Usually their discussions end in speaking of women --- they are single young men, after all ---- and each speaker perceives and presents himself as a hero to one or more women. Mironov asks permission to do the boasting ("pokhvastat'sia") on this particular occasion, and introduces his subject as the most memorable event in his life (2). His deliberate irony in requesting "to boast" lies in the fact that this event, the seduction of a servant girl and its aftermath, is something he deeply regrets, despite being the usual fodder for male bragging in his contemporary Russian social milieu.

Pil'niak's Mironov and Tolstoi's Nekhliudov differ slightly in class and social environment. Prince Nekhliudov, Tolstoi's young nineteenth-century aristocrat, is quite wealthy but entertains liberal views about land ownership despite his privileged status; he has even distributed some of his estate property among the peasant population, evidence that his heart, deep down inside, is fundamentally good despite the sexual corruption which hallmarks his class in general and him in particular. Nekhliudov has received the typical education of that class and, as a boy, was apparently kind and pure of heart, virtuous in every way. However, the narrator reveals that the privileges and peer pressure of his class, plus his military training, have corrupted him, transforming him into a

narcissistic, pleasure-seeking young man who has never actually “worked” beyond whatever his military career might have demanded. Pil’niak’s more modern Mironov, living in the early twentieth century, was formerly a physician and is now employed as a journalist; otherwise his background is not described. He is presented primarily through his own first person monologue, but generally he seems to be a normal, essentially responsible and benevolent young man of his time; explicit emphasis on external corrupting factors is present but minimal in comparison with Tolstoi’s scenario. The character of Nekhliudov as a young adult is painted in much darker colors than is that of Mironov; the prince has already been made into a predator by the particular society in which he lives.

Both young men are considering marriage. Nekhliudov is contemplating proposing to Missi Korchagin, a young woman of appropriately aristocratic (but depraved) family. From time to time he reflects on the pros and cons of such a marriage, to which he is not yet committed --- but in any case the proposal is temporarily obstructed by his ongoing affair with a married woman. He is interested in marriage in order to partake of the conveniences of the family hearth and to follow the life steps common to his class, not because of any deep devotion to Missi herself, who, in her turn, regards him as a good catch for worldly reasons. Mironov, on the other hand, is actually engaged to Ol’ga, a hard-working student of good family, whose kindly father is often Mironov’s chess partner. Mironov is totally committed to Ol’ga, whom he loves deeply for her purity, good soul, and fine thoughts, and he looks forward eagerly to their good life together.

Both young men seduce women of lower status than themselves, and the moral centers of the tales revolve around the effects of the seductions. Mironov's seduction is simpler than that of Nekhliudov, which has a number of phases. Engaged to Ol'ga, Mironov has no real interest in his servant Natasha⁴⁴⁴ at all; he is just prompted to thoughts of sex by the springtime sharpening of (mating) instincts and a view of her shapely calves⁴⁴⁵ while Ol'ga is away in Moscow. Regarding sex as a pleasurable activity that everyone participates in, one based on bodily needs, he seduces Natasha on a whim, without any real premeditation or reflection --- it is all natural and virtually spontaneous, a single hour separating the idea and the deed. Natasha herself is characterized not by her (unremarkable) beauty but by her extreme vitality and joyous bearing. Her perspective on the seduction itself is not presented, but it appears that both willingly enjoy a phenomenal night of passion.

Nekhliudov's seduction is more complex and sinister. He had met Katiusha Maslova, a girl of mixed status, part-servant/part-ward, one summer at his aunts' estate. A delightful young girl, she is characterized by an impartial loving nature⁴⁴⁶ that embraces all humanity, regardless of rank or caste, and, like Natasha, a joyous demeanor. That summer Nekhliudov and Katiusha had enjoyed a pure, spontaneous, playful

⁴⁴⁴ Pil'niak would name his own daughter Natal'ia, so he probably liked the name for its own sake. However, the name "Natasha" cannot but evoke the image of pure, vivacious, thoroughly Russian Natasha Rostova in War and Peace --- and further thoughts of her attempted seduction by Anatole Kuragin. There are many Natal'ia's in Pil'niak, and the name evokes various associations depending on the work; most are very positive characters, a potential exception being writer Troparov's former mistress in "Ivan-da-Mar'ia."

⁴⁴⁵ Both stories feature the onset or heightening of male lust while the girl is preparing a bed for sleep (Pil'niak, 2; Tolstoi I, 16). Shapely or sturdy feminine calves recur frequently in Tolstoi's works, as well.

⁴⁴⁶ At the time of writing this novel, Tolstoi had already decided that sexuality was totally evil, so Katiusha's early "right" nature, like her innocent summer relationship with Nekhliudov, is characterized by *agape* rather than any kind of carnality. Once Nekhliudov's social set and military service have transformed him into a sexual predator, his treatment of Katiusha transforms her into a sexual object, a role she comes to relish even up through their meeting in prison years later.

relationship, including an innocent kiss, without even realizing they were in love. Like Mironov, pre-seduction Nekhliudov does not notice the servant-girl as a woman --- in his uncorrupted youth he notices only those women who are potential wives. Three years later a changed Nekhliudov visits again, by now depraved through his military experience and social contacts. The relationship is resumed in its original pure state, including a chaste Easter morning kiss. However, that (dark) evening Nekhliudov's "animal" nature takes over (I, 16), his kiss takes on a different (sexual) nature, and seduction ultimately follows. He is not without an inner struggle, one between his own (original, authentic, right, pure) desires and his perception of what he "should" do (increase his seduction tally) as a young man of his station, but his sense that day of having omitted something that he "should" do --- plus his animal nature itself --- drive him on to the act. Katiusha notices the new sexual charge in his approach, different from the Easter morning kiss, and resists physical contact with him for the rest of the day. During the actual seduction that night, Katiusha's animal and spiritual natures are evidently in conflict; she sends mixed messages, her lips saying "no" but her body expressing eagerness (I,17).

Neither young man enters the sexual relationship maliciously, with a conscious desire to despoil or ruin. Both do so largely because everyone else does it --- this is the usual behavior of young men in their social *milieux*. They don't even consider the significance of what they are doing at the time of the sexual contact, although Nekhliudov does experience some inner dissonance about the deed itself (as opposed to its potential meanings, outcomes, or purposes). Nekhliudov is the more villainous, in that he consciously times the seduction to avoid interruption, seeks out Katiusha's solitude, and ignores her words of resistance. As Wasiolek points out, the unnatural quality of

Nekhliudov's seduction is emphasized by his "mechanical" movements and his sense of being in a dream; his actions are directed from outside himself, actually from the expectations of his male peers, not his own heart (193).⁴⁴⁷ The contrast between the spontaneity of Mironov's seduction and the programmed quality of Nekhliudov's reveals the views of the two authors concerning human sexuality: to Pil'niak, sexuality itself remains natural and positive although potentially subject to misuse and abuse, whereas (by now) to Tolstoi, any carnality diminishes the humanity and spiritual element in man.

Seduction in both works takes place in the springtime, actually on Easter in Tolstoi (to support the overall theme of the novel). Tolstoi's narrator presents the event as totally negative, a reversion to Nekhliudov's unmitigated "animal self" (I, 16). Mironov is influenced by the season as well, since it is a time when "osobenno obostriaiutsia instinkty" (2),⁴⁴⁸ a time usually designated (positively) for mating in Pil'niak's countryside. But this is a modern urban story, in a setting whose corrupting pressures are greater than those of the countryside, and where the unity of human and natural cycles is diminished, requiring men to control, rather than less reflectively accommodate, their instincts. Both men, in the final analysis, should have resisted "instinctive" behavior.

Both works point out the proliferation of negative outcomes from the one thoughtless sexual act. In the case of Nekhliudov, the girl becomes pregnant, is expelled from the aunts' home, and moves down the existential ladder to prostitution and prison; she is being taken from prison to her trial for murder when Nekhliudov encounters her anew and the plot continues. Tolstoi's narrator uses the original sexual scenario not only to explore the seduction's effects on the principal characters but also to expose a vast

⁴⁴⁷ Tolstoy's Major Fiction (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978).

⁴⁴⁸ "instincts become especially keen"

range of larger social ills, including the court and penal systems, land ownership, the Russian Orthodox church, and more. Although Mironov itemizes anticipated negative effects on an unmarried pregnant woman, the depiction of Natasha's post-seduction degradation is limited to her drunken street behavior --- she sees Mironov and tries to spit in his face. Pil'niak limits his explorations to the effects on the young couple themselves, the fiancée and her family, and merely mentions the larger social ills of prostitution and birth control (the latter is condemned for making childless homes into mini-brothels). He also makes it clear that prevailing Russian social values contribute to Mironov's negative behavior.

The sense of wrongdoing comes to the young men at different times, in different ways. It is only after a full decade has passed that Nekhliudov becomes aware of his role as the initial impetus that put her on the path to ruin. For Mironov, the moment of truth is much earlier --- one month after his union with Natasha, when he aborts his own child --- and the moral lessons differ in focus. Both young men have qualms the day after the seduction but manage to quell them. Nekhliudov at that point attempts to assuage his moral discomfort by inserting a one-hundred-ruble note in Katiusha's bodice before leaving to join his regiment. He stifles any other guilt feelings and, except for a visit to his aunts' after the war when he learns that Katiusha had "gone bad" and left, pregnant (I, 18), he forgets her entirely. His moral sense in regard to her is not reawakened until ten years after the seduction, when, totally by chance, he is called to serve on the jury for Katiusha's murder trial. Even then he continues to wrong her, his inattention guaranteeing her the harshest possible sentence by allowing finalization of the jury verdict without specifying mitigating factors. It is only upon realizing that there is no way

to resubmit the verdict accurately (thereby softening the sentence and making it more just) that he senses that he has done something irreparable.

Mironov, too, experiences the rumblings of conscience the next day, but succeeds in squelching them by rationalization: everyone does it, and the body has its demands --- then he, too, forgets all about it. But he is still in Natasha's proximity and gets a hint of what he has done when he observes her fervently praying; then when she announces her pregnancy one month after the seduction, he is driven by panic, trying to undo what he has done, and performs an abortion immediately. The irremediable quality of his actions is made clear to him by the sight of his own developing child (in embryonic state), dead at his own hand.

The pregnancy has a different level of significance in each work, primary in Pil'niak, secondary in Tolstoi.⁴⁴⁹ The pregnancy brings Natasha back to Mironov a month after the seduction. Her joyous demeanor gone, she is overwhelmed by guilt and fearful about what the future holds for her.⁴⁵⁰ She loves Mironov and she loves the baby, but the spiritual and social impact of her pregnancy (guilt before God and her parents, social ostracism, facing the future alone, etc.) is devastating. Mironov performs the abortion without consulting her --- she asks him what he is doing (3), the same question Katiusha asks Nekhliudov as he becomes more and more physical during the seduction (I, 17). The men's responses, if there are any, are not revealed to the reader. Nekhliudov leaves Katiusha the day after their sexual encounter, so he remains unaware of the pregnancy for

⁴⁴⁹ The seduction itself --- the predatory sexual act --- is the main trigger of guilt in both works. *Voskresenie*, however, uses it to condemn a wide range of personal and social manifestations, including sexuality itself. Pil'niak's point is all about reproduction, which in his view establishes the sole appropriate context for sexuality, hence the abortion becomes the focal point in his story.

⁴⁵⁰ Mironov presents Natasha's state of mind; we do not have it in her own words. Her concerns seem more spiritual --- the wrong she has committed --- than practical.

several years. Katiusha initially is not as burdened by the pregnancy as Natasha --- in fact she finds comfort in the early fetal movements (I, 37) --- but when she is unsuccessful in contacting Nekhliudov about half-way through the pregnancy, everything fundamentally changes for her. After contemplating suicide in a moment of panic, she who until now has so embraced life decides that there is nothing good in the world, including the pregnancy. Like Natasha, Katiusha loves her baby's father --- and in her case, the father had once loved her --- but his abuse and abandonment devastate her. For both girls, the pregnancy starts the real fall from grace --- we are given a full description of Katiusha's increasing impudence and slovenly work habits, her expulsion by Nekhliudov's aunts, her abuse as a "kept woman" and ultimate career as a prostitute, her smoking and drinking, until she is finally in prison and condemned by Nekhliudov's jury to penal servitude. Her moral, spiritual, and socio-economic fall is followed by her spiritual resurrection.⁴⁵¹ Natasha's fall is depicted only in Mironov's single graphic memory of their street encounter a couple of years after the seduction (when drunken Natasha tries to spit in his face). Her spiritual journey is not depicted, either for better or for worse --- but the Voskresenie subtext suggests her potential fates.

In the Pil'niak story, as mentioned above, the primary message is about the pregnancy. Natasha already loves her baby, and Katiusha initially finds solace in hers. Mironov's instantaneous response to the pregnancy, his attempt to "fix" things, is the abortion, which he undertakes on his own counsel. The aftermath of the abortion is what initiates his self-awareness and his moral journey --- he sees himself for what he is only after he has caused his own child's death. The Pil'niak story is ultimately about the

⁴⁵¹ Her "resurrection" begins at the end of Part I, when she refuses alcohol. The correspondence with the Pil'niak story is virtually complete in Part I itself.

unseverable connection between coitus and conception and the need to take one's sexual activities very seriously --- sexual expression without openness to conception is prostitution, whether in a brothel or in a marriage, and abortion is murder which will ultimately warrant vengeance.⁴⁵² Breaking the coitus-conception link is a total violation of natural and moral law. The baby in Tolstoi, however, is just one more complicating outcome of sexual expression which causes the woman's degradation. Katiusha's baby, initially a comfort, becomes an obstacle when she fails to make contact with its father during her pregnancy and is left completely on her own. It dies soon after birth, to her ultimate relief --- its continued life would merely comprise one more element in her downward spiral.⁴⁵³

Both men begin their spiritual journeys upon recognizing the destruction they have wrought on the women they seduced, consciously or subconsciously viewing these lower class women as "servants" rather than potential wives. These journeys and their purposes differ in the two works. The child itself, and its death, shock Mironov with very complex and totally unexpected emotions. He is amazed at the interrelated types of love he feels for the baby, Natasha, and Ol'ga and is appalled at his role in destroying or, at

⁴⁵² Both works have biblical epigraphs. The Pil'niak Old Testament citation is condemnatory, Tolstoi's New Testament ones full of promise and mercy, in thematic support of the moral messages of the respective works (Pil'niak: Gen. 9:6: "Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed; for God made man in his own image." Tolstoi: Matt. 18:21-22: "Then Peter came up and said to him, 'Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?' / Jesus said to him, 'I do not say to you seven times, but seventy times seven.'"; Matt. 7:3: "Why do you see the speck that is in your brother's eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye?"; John 8:7: "And as they continued to ask him, he stood up and said to them, 'Let him who is without sin among you be the first to cast a stone at her.'"; Luke 6:40: "A disciple is not above his teacher, but every one when he is fully taught will be like his teacher."")

⁴⁵³ Certainly Tolstoi, as well, would strongly oppose abortion. The point here is that the child's existence and destruction is devastating to the mother and serves as the trigger for male enlightenment and repentance in Pil'niak, whereas the life or death of Nekhliudov's child plays no direct role in his spiritual journey and but a comparatively minor one in Katiusha's. In other words, abortion plays the primary role in Pil'niak's story but none at all in Tolstoi's.

best, tainting them. These feelings and reflections lead him to recognize the extreme importance of sexual activity and the singularity of the context (procreation) in which it must be exercised. He recognizes the impact of his individual actions --- the seduction and the abortion --- on himself, the baby, Natasha, and Ol'ga and her family. He accepts the expected rejection by his beloved and respected fiancée after the seduction; her noble behavior upon his confirmation of the rumors exacerbates his humiliation. There is no evidence that he ever attempts to somehow make things right for Natasha, however. Within two months of the seduction Mironov, a changed man, has moved away to begin, humbly and penitently, a new career and a new life. He applies his own moral lesson to the culture as a whole, associating the lesson with professional prostitution and childless marriages. His critique of Russian society and its conventional morality is expressed in his reflections on his previous sexual relationships, including the one with Natasha --- which he indulged in for pleasure and because of his body's needs, considering these quite usual and normal ("obyknovennye") (3). This critique is further emphasized through the contrast of Mironov's "boast" to the "heroism" expressed by his companions and by the final exchange between one of the Russian youths (presumably Mironov's peers, whose behavior makes seduction and free expression of sex the norm) and the foreign restaurant-owner.⁴⁵⁴ After Mironov's story, young Luchitskii⁴⁵⁵ states that surely women are not just baby factories, and that pleasure for its own sake must have value. The Armenian host responds that in his homeland, the Caucasus, a woman who does not conceive is considered divinely cursed (3). The ensuing silence suggests that the lesson is

⁴⁵⁴ His wisdom is implied by his name, "Solomon."

⁴⁵⁵ The root of his name, "luch" ("ray," "beam"), ironically suggests "enlightenment."

at least under consideration by its listeners.

Nekhliudov, on the other hand, gradually recognizes not only his individual abuse of Katiusha --- including his fateful error as a juror --- and its devastating results for her, but also the corrupting qualities of his class and of the society which made him such a despicable person. His spiritual journey seems far more cerebral than Mironov's largely visceral experience, undoubtedly owing at least in part to the omniscient narration of a by now very didactic Tolstoi. Nekhliudov withdraws from the competition for Missi because his raised consciousness has exposed the extreme superficiality, destructiveness, and egotism of her family's values. He is motivated not just to start over like Mironov, but to make things up to Katiusha, somehow to fix what he has done.⁴⁵⁶ He proposes marriage to her (which, as Wasiolek points out, he should have done initially (196)). He works through the court system to appeal her sentence; during this process he becomes an advocate for various prisoners and is made aware of numerous social ills, which he works to remedy. His spiritual journey is long, complex, and comprehensive, involving numerous aspects of the larger society and prevailing culture. Katiusha makes a spiritual journey of her own, elevating herself from the smoking, drinking harlot she had become, transcending her experiences and ending up, presumably, in a sexless marriage to fellow-convict Simonov after rejecting Nekhliudov's proposal. Both Nekhliudov and Katiusha are morally and spiritually "resurrected" by novel's end.

Prostitution is an evil common to both works, but the evil seems to have somewhat different foundations. In Voskresenie, as in numerous other literary works, prostitution (Katiusha's post-seduction profession) is symbolic of the fall of an abused

⁴⁵⁶ Perhaps this is more feasible in Tolstoi's scenario, since Nekhliudov had not literally killed anyone.

girl, one who because of poverty, seduction, or other forms of mistreatment is reduced to supporting herself by means of selling her sexual services to men she does not love. This definition is extended to apply to anyone who sells himself, sexually or otherwise, rather than maintain moral integrity and personal authenticity. In this way Nekhliudov, too, can be considered a prostitute, as he considers “selling himself” to marry into Missi’s family for its various benefits without devotion to Missi herself (Wasiolek, 193). In his latest works Tolstoi presents marriage as prostitution because of the *quid pro quo* exchange of (female) sexual favors for (male) provision of material support. While fidelity to personal authenticity is very important to Pil’niak, in his *ethos* prostitution is wrong primarily because it breaks the naturally ordained link between coitus and conception; the whole idea of professional prostitution is sexual pleasure without procreation. He extends this concept to childless marriages, those homes in which birth control is practiced, which he equates to brothels in miniature, where sex is practiced with the specific goal of avoiding conception. His use of the “five-hundred-year-old brothel” in “Tret’ia stolitsa” (1922) as a symbol of decadent, dying Europe follows this principle --- pleasure without progeny.

In these works, Tolstoi’s characters end up redeemed and happy while a sadder but wiser Mironov is able to find joy in a beautiful new day. Key commonalities in the stories include the basic seduction scenario, prevailing conventions of sexual (im)morality and peer pressure to abide by them, and the moral lessons learned by men who have wronged others by their sexual behavior.

Anna Karenina nashego vremeni?:⁴⁵⁷ “Veter pered martom”

⁴⁵⁷ “Anna Karenina of Our Time?”

Like the pre-revolutionary “Kak obyknovenno,” at least one Civil War period story employs a Tolstoian subtext. The Agrenev subplot of “Veter pered martom” (1919), a story discussed above as typical of various marriage and courtship issues in Pil’niak’s early writing period, can be interpreted as a twist on Anna Karenina. Its intertextual relation to Tolstoi’s novel is hardly to be doubted, in fact. The plots themselves are similar --- families disintegrating because of the wife’s passion for someone or something different and more exciting --- but there are many other markers as well. The motives and reactions are updated to reflect early twentieth century revolutionary Russia and a somewhat different controlling dynamic, but the updating is done in dialogue with Tolstoi.

Pil’niak’s Aleksandr Alekseevich Agrenev plays the role of Aleksei Aleksandrovich Karenin; note the reversal of names and patronymics and the assonance of the surnames. The connection of the wives, both named Anna, is subtly underlined by Agreneva’s touching “doomed” quality (“obrechennost” (110)). Karenina’s son Serezha is balanced by Agreneva’s daughter, Ksenia. The role of “nevysokii” Aleksei Vronskii is played by “malen’kii” Andrei Troparov, and indeed Andrei seems in many ways a lesser Vronskii. There are no exemplary models of behavior comparable to Kiti and Levin; in some senses their roles too are assumed by the Agrenev couple, who are trying earnestly to live a right life and deal honestly with what life seems to bring. Amoral carnal influences are provided by the Troparov brothers Sergei and Andrei as partial analogues to the Oblonskiis (Anna and Stiva). Of course the larger form allows for many more subtleties and temporary reversals of attitude than does the short story, but except for Karenin’s generally less positive characterization, his extreme concern for appearances,

and his dramatic abdication of authenticity when he ultimately succumbs to Lidiia Ivanovna's authority, the main characterization and behavior patterns are comparable. The most significant difference in the works is the absence of a Levin-like character who lives in harmony with the earth in "Veter . . . ," but man's right relationship with nature is no less important in the Pil'niak story.

Pil'niak draws the reader's attention to Anna Karenina by simple oppositions. The existing child is a daughter, not a son. The heroine dies by murder rather than suicide. The straying wife, instead of being consumed by her passion, learns that sex as pleasure is overrated,⁴⁵⁸ ends the affair and returns home to her maternal role and marital bond despite her lack of passion for her husband. The unexciting husband, instead of being obsessed by outside social opinion (and ultimately destroyed by the absence of social support), dismisses social opinion as insignificant and devotes his energies to the active expression of loving authenticity within his family and to providing a home environment nurturing his child's proper development. Barren Ol'ga, married to charming philanderer Troparov, is opposed to prolific Dolli, who is married to the same type of man. Vronskii's worldly mother and her corrupting influence on her son is balanced by Andrei's "holy" mother, who, through his recollections of her, inspires him to resume a moral course. The moral values and right behavior Tolstoi shows primarily through Kiti, Levin, and Dolli, Pil'niak demonstrates through the trials of the Agrenev family. A self-disciplined view to what renders life's ultimate meaning trumps the stimulation-seeking pleasure principle in both works, but in different ways.

⁴⁵⁸ As did Tolstoi, according to Hugh McLean, "Resurrection" 101. "Sex, [Tolstoi] felt, is always a disappointment, the pleasure brief, the aftermath sad."

Both works employ a narratorial persona as well as subjective narration informed by the various individual psyches of the characters. The atmosphere of male-female crisis and passion is supported by the weather --- the final snowstorm of winter dominating events in *Pil'niak* recalls the snowstorm raging during Anna's restless train ride home from visiting Dolli and Stiva when Vronskii, unexpected, meets her at one of the stops (I, 30).⁴⁵⁹ The cement plant replaces Petersburg as a destructive spatial influence, but Petersburg's rationalistic corruption is still evident in this *Pil'niak* story and many others; here it is the "source" of hedonistic, communistic revolutionary Andrei (and spoiled, sophisticated Evgeniia).

Anna's aunt had manipulated Karenin into marriage by insinuating that he had dishonored Anna (V, 21),⁴⁶⁰ but the background of the Agrenevs' union is not revealed -- possibly neither marriage was initially based on romantic attraction. The departures of the two Annas are inverted and opposed in several ways. Karenina leaves her husband after having met and developed a passion for Vronskii; she attempts to hide the developing affair from her husband even when society's reactions alert him to it (II, 8), and she admits it to him only when she has become pregnant (II, 29). Agreneva, on the contrary, leaves openly and honestly, amicably, with minimal scandal, striving for the life of authenticity and honesty that Tolstoi (and *Pil'niak*) so valorized. Agreneva's actions

⁴⁵⁹ I will be citing *Anna Karenina* by part number and chapter, thus: (IV, 23), chapter 23 of part IV. Exact citations are from L. N. Tolstoi, *Anna Karenina, Polnoe sobranie sochinenii v 90 tomakh*, obshch. red. V. G. Chertkov, t.18-20 (M-L: Gosudarstvennoe izdatel'stvo "Khudozhestvennaia Literatura," 1934). Besides the snowstorm, there are several other minor motifs in the short story which are evocative of the novel: for example: Andrei's epiphany of his mother's sanctity (124) evokes Levin's image of his mother (I, 28); the mention of Andrei's slanting jaw (107) suggests Vronskii's jaw trembling after his seduction of Karenina (II, 11); both Karenin and Agrenev routinely do work-related reading (III, 14; 112).

⁴⁶⁰ Karenin is characterized as a good if limited husband, one who gave Anna as much feeling as he was capable of giving (V, 21). Agrenev is comparable to Karenin in many ways but appears to lack the numerous idiosyncrasies of the latter and is generally more positively presented.

are not dictated by passion but are instead related to her desire for a new, more honest life --- she is unable to tolerate the falseness of her loveless marriage, and the roles of wife and mother seem too limiting, so she goes to work as a schoolteacher. The exact timing of the beginning of her sexual relationship with Andrei is not clear; however, it is clear that she enters the relationship only when it has become obvious that her love for Agrenev has passed (108),⁴⁶¹ and that she is open and honest with both men at all times. The affair with Andrei begins with shared political ideals which turn, for Agreneva, into enjoyable companionship, as opposed to the animal magnetism dominating Karenina and Vronskii from the beginning. Karenina, on the other hand, develops dissatisfaction with respect to her husband and even her son only after her and Vronskii's mutual attraction has arisen (I, 30; I, 32). The Agrenev split is characterized by honesty and mutual respect, the Karenin one by deception.

The characters who are most similar in the two stories are the betrayed husbands, Karenin and Agrenev. Karenin⁴⁶² is a government official, Agrenev an engineer --- rule-bound people who expect (and try to maintain) structure in life and lack the (superficial) charm and social skills of a Vronskii, Stiva, or Troparov. They have become unexciting partners to their wives, sexually and otherwise, however passionate and interesting they may have been initially. Both show ascetic tendencies in their almost obsessive self-control and dependence on routine. Agrenev vehemently rejects the concept of sexual activity in any non-procreative context, perceiving marriage as a duty to oneself which

⁴⁶¹ “Anna zhila trudnoi zhizn’iu --- i teper’ i ran’ she ne mogla primirit’ sia s tem, chto bylo otpushcheno ei, Andrei ne byl vershitelem --- vstretilas’ s nim, kogda bylo uzhe neobkhodimo nachat’ snova.” (“Anna lived a hard life --- both now and earlier she could not come to terms with what had been allotted to her; Andrei was not the prime mover --- she encountered him when it had already become necessary to start over.”)

⁴⁶² I agree with the generally positive reading of Karenin as expressed by Gary Saul Morson in *Anna Karenina in Our Time: Seeing More Wisely* (New Haven: Yale UP, 2007).

does not require love; he stoically strives to eliminate all of his dependencies (smoking, sex) so as not to feel their absence; and he affirms the purifying effect of suffering. Karenin is not ascetic in the sense of denying himself pleasure --- he partakes of sex, food, entertainment, and the like --- but he seems to do these things only out of slavish devotion to the social duty of being “*comme il faut*” without receiving authentic enjoyment from them. If he has a “passion,” it is his work. Both men love their wives and try to understand their motivations for entering secondary liaisons (II, 8; 112), although this is particularly difficult for Karenin, who tends to hide from “real life.” Agrenev even accepts the lack of a universal abstract truth, acknowledging that truth varies with the individual and the situation (112). Karenin’s reflections on his wife’s motives when she summons him to her “deathbed” at Ani’s birth show his awareness, too, that his perceptions might not be valid, that Karenina’s motives might differ from those he has attributed to her (IV, 17). The two husbands are indulgent toward and forgiving of their unfaithful wives, Karenin undergoing a true Christian transformation via forgiveness at Anna’s “deathbed” (IV, 17, 19) and Agrenev forgiving his wife and inviting her to return home for their daughter’s sake (and because he still loves her and hopes for her spiritual redemption) (115).

Karenin is far more concerned about social opinion than Agrenev, who considers gossip, wounded ego, and emotional pain insignificant trifles (104, 115),⁴⁶³ but even Karenin both allows his wife to continue her affair as long as Vronskii does not meet her in their home (III, 23) and allows himself to become a social laughingstock in his

⁴⁶³ “pustiaki,” “nichtozhnoe” (“trifles,” “insignificant”)

forgiveness and devotion to his wife's children (IV, 19-20).⁴⁶⁴ Both husbands are willing to make great sacrifices for their straying wives. Upright, appearance-oriented Karenin is even willing to perjure himself in order to allow his wife to remarry AND have custody of both children, whom he loves;⁴⁶⁵ Agrenev is looking ahead to a sexless marriage to a woman he loves, sexless at least until Anna might love him and they became open to having more children. Both men are ultimately concerned with the fate of their wives' souls. Karenin agonizes over divorcing his wife because to him, divorce would mean severing her last supporting tie to right living and dispatching her soul to hell (IV, 22). Agrenev too is motivated by ensuring that "return paths" ("obratnye puti") for his wife's soul are available after her pleasure-seeking sexual liaison with Andrei (115).⁴⁶⁶

For both Tolstoi and Pil'niak, the ordained if prosaic role of parent, creating and rearing new generations of humanity, is what gives life its greatest purpose and meaning. Children are treasures deserving first of all of parental attention and of a secure role in a nuclear (secondarily an extended) family, an environment in which habits will be developed to support the child's lifetime right living. Agrenev is specifically concerned with the kind of person his daughter will become and his role in making her such a

⁴⁶⁴ He cannot tolerate this indefinitely, however, and ultimately crumbles morally, subjugating his life to hypocritical Lidiia Ivanovna, with her bizarre mystical "Christian" beliefs.

⁴⁶⁵ Morson explains the prevailing divorce laws thus (Seeing . . . 114): Karenina's two children are legally Karenin's, since he was her legal husband when they were born. Adultery constituted the only legal grounds for divorce, and the adulterous party could not remarry. For Karenina to be free to marry Vronskii and for baby Ani (and any subsequently born children) to bear Vronskii's name, Karenin would have to sue for divorce, claiming to be the adulterer himself --- hence committing perjury (IV, 22).

⁴⁶⁶ As Agrenev reflected to himself, his wife, in returning to him and Ksenia, "vstala *na edinstvennyi put'*, ibo inache --- merzost'" ("stepped onto the only path, for otherwise it's an abomination") (115). Compare to Karenin's reflections: "Soglasit'sia na razvod, dat' ei svobodu znachilo v ego poniatii otniat' [. . .] u nee --- posledniuiu oporu *na puti dobra* i vvergnut' ee v pogibel'" (454). ("To agree to a divorce, to give her freedom meant in his understanding to take away from himself [. . .] and from her --- the last support on the path of good and to cast her into perdition.") My emphasis in both quotations.

person: he is trying to build habits in her that will enable her to live authentically and find it easiest to do the right thing (112), as Karenina's highly valorized sister-in-law Dolli, in contrast to Karenina, is trying to do with her children. In the first half of the novel, Karenin is an exemplary parent, devoted first to his own, and later also to Anna's and Vronskii's child; however, his inability to cope with the total absence of social support causes his later degeneration and parental failure. Karenin cares for his own son in Karenina's absence and is even credited (by the narrator) with saving Vronskii's and Anna's baby, of whom Karenin grows very fond despite her paternity (IV, 19). Even Karenina points out that Karenin would not neglect to ensure Serezha was fed.⁴⁶⁷ Agrenev has custody of his beloved Ksenia, whose well-being is more important to him than his own and to whom he never criticizes his wife.

Irresponsible parental behavior takes its toll on the children of both families. Ksenia and Serezha are fortunate to remain in the hands of caring fathers during their mothers' absences, although Karenin does for a time take out his animosity toward Karenina on his child, which Agrenev does not. Confused and hurt by their mothers' departures, both Serezha and Ksenia ask many questions. Ksenia receives no satisfactory answers but is never exposed to condemnation of her mother; ultimately the girl claims to have figured out what has happened, forgives her mother, and is delighted to learn of Agreneva's imminent return (122). Serezha does not fare as well, being told by Lidiia Ivanovna that his mother is dead and his father a saint; Karenina's misguided name-day visit (V, 29-30), although desired by Serezha (V, 27), is of limited help to him, as it only enhances his confusion. Ultimately he, along with poor Ani, is permanently abandoned to

⁴⁶⁷ Tolstoi believed that as many sins were committed by omission as by commission, so neglect takes on extraordinarily negative qualities in his works. In a sort of Tolstoian double-watching sense, Agreneva noticed that Agrenev did not notice that Ksenia needed new toys (123).

the (dysfunctional) care of Karenin and Lidiia Ivanovna. The stories differ, but the message is the same: the sins of the parents are visited on the children.

Both Karenin and Agrenev are generally sensitive to their wives and children and, when it counts, are not motivated by self-seeking egotism despite the betrayals they experience by the women they love. However, Karenin ultimately loses his benevolent authenticity, which only attests further to the destructive nature of Karenina's quest for passion.⁴⁶⁸ Both men are praised by their estranged wives, Karenin even as saintly (IV, 17), and Agrenev as very good and honest (109, 115).

The two Annas are virtual opposites except that each at least temporarily seeks a life she expects to be in some way richer than the one she is leading. Karenina seeks passion and drama, Agreneva deeper satisfaction and more evident meaning and purpose to life. Agreneva, whose physical appearance is never described, seems quite dull in comparison to Karenina's extreme vitality. Whereas Karenina slips ever deeper into the web of deceit and falseness, justifying her passion for Vronskii and inventing ever more flaws in her husband and ultimately in Vronskii as well, Agreneva consistently exerts every effort to remain honest to herself and everyone else, ultimately judging her illicit affair to be without "justification" (115).

The difference in them as mothers is especially striking, even on a subconscious level, for example. Agreneva is haunted by dreams of Ksenia. Karenina's dreams, on the other hand, are sexually suggestive: of being caressed by both Karenin and Vronskii, and of a horrifying peasant beating iron. Karenina seems devoted to her son, sneaking home to see him on his name day, but ultimately she shows no interest at all in her daughter.

⁴⁶⁸ This loss of authenticity also attests to his own background as an orphan, without the appropriate moral shaping and strengthening of character provided by a functional nuclear family.

One might expect Karenina to favor Ani as the product of her greater love for Vronskii, but this is not the case. As Morson points out, she idealizes the (absent) son but is unaware of his real needs, and she ignores the (present) daughter; Ani's absence from Karenina's thoughts comprises a serious "negative evil" (67-8). Karenina not only neglects her existing children but uses birth control to keep from having more (VI, 23), actively defying her ordained maternal role. Both women have servants and nannies for their children, but Agreueva is nevertheless the "hands-on" everyday mother that Karenina could never be. Although Agreueva is never shown interacting with Ksenia, Agreueva's reflective enjoyment in examining the items in Ksenia's pack as she stands over her sleeping daughter speaks volumes. She is familiar enough with Ksenia's toys that she can reproach her husband for not supplementing them (123). She notices Ksenia and the trivial material things and habits associated with her. Karenina, too, visits her sleeping child Serezha (on his nameday), but she neglects to give him the toys she has brought. Her focus fails also with her daughter: she seems to be visiting a foreign country when she shows Dolli Ani's nursery, having failed even to notice Ani's new teeth (VI, 19).

Both Annas abandon their children, but it is the maternal love which "is not under human control" that incessantly torments Agreueva during her absence and ultimately brings her home, whereas maternal love is just one more of Karenina's self-deceptions. Morson points out that with Karenina, she is always the center --- Serezha exists for her sake, as her support; she worries not how her behavior is affecting him, but how he will view her in the future (67). To Agreueva, the sacrifice of living with a man she does not love is merited because she exists for her daughter's sake. Being subject to uncontrollable

maternal love is what makes a mother “right” to both Tolstoi and Pil’niak. Ultimately Karenina is quite satisfied with having replaced Serezha with Vronskii as her life’s love focus (as long as the new focus continues to satisfy her) (V, 30) --- for her, sexual passion is far stronger than maternal devotion. Agreueva, however, quickly learns that purely sexual love adds nothing to life and cannot be justified.

The women form further contrasts with respect to their lovers. Both are drawn to the lovers at least in part by the excitement of novelty, including sexual novelty. But as time passes, Karenina becomes more and more exclusively enmeshed in the passion she and Vronskii share and is unwilling to progress to the more mundane aspects of committed marriage and family (which Vronskii does, as time goes on, want to do). She wants the passion of courtship (typical too of very early marriage) to last forever. Her unwillingness to mature beyond this exhilarating phase of life --- or to include anything else in her life --- exacerbates her self-delusion and duplicity, and ultimately leads to her mental disintegration and suicide. She blames everyone --- now Vronskii, now Karenin, now herself, now something else ---- as she freely rationalizes to justify her own actions.⁴⁶⁹ Agreueva, on the other hand, is already used to more mature aspects of married love. Although she, too, is initially deluded into thinking that other pastures are indeed greener, that something could be more meaningful and satisfying than domestic life, she remains honest with herself and others as she discovers her errors. Agreuev asserts a Tolstoian tenet when he notes Agreueva’s failure to recognize that authentic (“podlinnaia”) life is necessarily mundane, prosaic (113). Although Agreueva does not love her husband romantically, she maintains deep respect for him and very quickly

⁴⁶⁹ See Gary Browning, “The Death of Anna Karenina: Anna’s Share of the Blame,” *SEEJ* 30.3 (1986): 327-339, for a detailed analysis of acceptance and attribution of blame in the novel.

discovers that passionate sex with someone else is no solution to her problems. Her “love” with Andrei brings her nothing, as is always the case with sexual love for her (109), and she is full of sorrow for all the pain she has caused her husband and child (115). Karenina expresses remorse for her actions toward her husband only twice: once in that isolated lucid period when she seems to be approaching death after Ani’s birth, the other time to Serezha on her name-day visit; and she rarely if ever looks at situations from another’s point of view, experiencing empathy for that other person.

The student Andrei Troparov, Agreueva’s lover, seems almost a caricature of Count Aleksei Vronskii, the wealthy, debonair officer. However, similarities do exist. Andrei is much younger, much cruder than Vronskii; he is a political organizer right out of school (worldly Petersburg)⁴⁷⁰ and is characterized by an unruly mop of hair (111, 125) (contrast with closely cropped (I, 14), later balding (V, 7), always well-groomed Vronskii; Andrei seems to have inherited Karenina’s unruly hair together with the symbolism: passion, vitality, inability to curb oneself). Both are good-natured, superficial, enjoy artistic culture (drama, etc.) and are essentially false. Andrei lacks the social skills so characteristic of Vronskii but is very sociable by nature and upset that he does not fit in with the local social *milieu* to which Agreueva serves as his connection (111). Vronskii’s behavior is largely governed by “appearances” and he, like Karenina, keeps reassuring himself that he hates falseness, although he is in many ways living a lie. Andrei, too, is prone to maintaining appearances --- leading to Ol’ga’s accusation that he has been conducting the affair with Agreueva only for show (“napokaz” (111)). He, however, recognizes and repents of his lying ways, if only in retrospect (124). Both Vronskii and Andrei take advantage of their freedom to make sexual conquests, going

⁴⁷⁰ His brother mentions that he is still cramming for exams (104), so he may not be quite finished.

from one woman to another for whatever pleasure they can derive from the relationships. They enter the relationships with their Annas for sexual gratification and indeed for enhancing their reputations as seducers, and their primary if not sole contribution to the relationships is sexual passion and excitement. Agreueva finds this insufficient and unjustifiable, hence repudiates the liaison; Karenina attempts to confine the relationship to sexual passion alone, but her inability to distill it to the concentration that she seeks drives her to suicide. Neither Vronskii nor Andrei is the prime mover in the relationship: each is at the will (or whim) of his respective Anna. And both men, over the course of their stories, driven by specific events, are developing into better, wiser people. The pain of Agreueva's rejection followed by the epiphany of his mother's sanctity awakens Andrei to a non-pleasure-based value system (124). Time spent in the long-term illicit relationship with Karenina makes Vronskii want to progress to commitment, with a focus on marriage and family; when forced by Karenin's generosity of spirit to re-evaluate his entire belief system, he even attempts suicide as a result (IV, 23). Each lover is ultimately abandoned by his Anna: Andrei when Agreueva can't justify continuing their relationship, Vronskii at Karenina's suicide.

Both women die at the end of their stories, Karenina by suicide, Agreueva by murder. Both were to see their lovers "for the last time" that day, but meet death instead. The novel's epigraph, "Vengeance is mine; I will repay,"⁴⁷¹ links the two works in yet another way, suggesting some sort of divine or cosmic retribution for human transgression. Agreuev refers to this verse as he earnestly hopes for merciful cosmic acceptance of Anna's repentance and return, despite the judgment she surely deserves.

⁴⁷¹ Romans 12:19, "Mne otmshchenie, i Az vozdam." Heb. 10:30 is close, as is Deut. 32:35, but Deut. has a different context. Tolstoi cites Romans, as does Agreuev in *Pil'niak*. That Agreuev utters this phrase further associates him with Bible-spouting Karenin.

Both women reject their ordained roles as mothers and enter into sexual liaisons which are not intended to produce offspring --- thus causing pain and harm to many people, including themselves. In her final scene, Karenina has discarded all attempts at personal authenticity and shows no lasting signs of penitence; if anything she is continuing to accumulate falsehood, delusion, and destructive anger. For this reason cosmic vengeance manifested in her self-destruction is quite plausible, although technically her suicide and its relationship to the epigraph may be interpreted variously.⁴⁷² But Agreueva is murdered just as she seems to be returning to the straight and narrow path, to her ordained maternal role, eschewing the pleasure-based sexual liaisons that drive Karenina. As noted above, I read Agreueva's death as a form of larger-scale cosmic vengeance for the collective human rape of Mother Earth via industry, as a concrete manifestation of the chaos exuded from the cement factory which poisons all of life. If Agreueva has been condemned to death on a personal basis (as was Karenina) for her own unreputed choices, it must be due to her political activity: political activity is not a family-based, nurture- or culture-oriented female activity, and in fact it was political affinity that first drew Agreueva to Andrei. Most importantly, this particular revolutionary movement was associated with a progressive social agenda (under way well before October 1917) that was working toward the elimination of the nuclear family unit.⁴⁷³ Agreueva's death can also be read as

⁴⁷² Possible interpretations include: God's vengeance for her wrongly lived life; society's vengeance for breaking its conventions; her own attempt to avenge Vronskii for his perceived betrayals; etc.

⁴⁷³ Women who are morally right in both Tolstoi and Pil'niak devote themselves first and foremost to family life, nurturing that most fundamental and essential unit of healthy human development. The progressive revolutionary movements in process, whether referred to as Socialist, Communist, Bolshevik, or otherwise, had as their goal the elimination of the family unit, whose function in rearing new generations would be assumed by the state. Pil'niak's view of the Revolution changed over time; he did welcome it in many ways but never its anti-family elements, and it was several years after 1919 that he came to accept its pro-industrialization aspects.

a manifestation of the “contingency” that always exists in Tolstoi’s view of the world. Life does not always make perfect sense --- much less does poetic justice reign --- and the threads of life’s narrative seldom end up neatly tied.

And both lovers join their paramours in death: Andrei is murdered by the same mob as Agreueva, probably as its primary target, and Vronskii is going to war to commit his own suicide by battle (VIII, 5). Why are they doomed? In the broader cosmic sense, Vronskii, like Karenina, devoted his life to sexual passion rather than right living (as exemplified by Levin). Although he came to see the error of his ways⁴⁷⁴ and was seeking a more comprehensive, authentic relationship (marriage, home, children), he failed to demand it of Anna (or to exit the relationship), continuing, by inertia, in the relationship defined solely by passion that he and Karenina shared. He also deserted daughter Ani to be raised by the by-then totally dysfunctional Karenin and Lidiia Ivanovna. Andrei’s death must be explained differently. He, like Agreueva, was cleaning up his life for a new beginning. He and she were guilty only briefly, although he more broadly than she, of participating in uncommitted animal passion outside the realm of reproduction --- and neither he nor his Anna lived solely for the passion, as Karenina did. I read his death as I do Agreueva’s: as the destructive outcome of human assault on Mother Earth and his involvement in an anti-family political movement.

Tolstoi is noted for not tying up all the loose ends Dickens-style at the end of his narratives, but in this case the future seems clearer in Anna Karenina than in “Veter pered martom.” The heroines are dead, and their lovers are doomed, if not already dead. Karenin has moved on to a presumably permanent dysfunctional existence with Lidiia

⁴⁷⁴ Vronskii’s upbringing limited his moral understanding, as Karenin’s limited his.

Ivanovna --- Serezha and Ani are condemned to share this existence. Dolli, Kiti, and Levin will presumably continue satisfactorily in their current lives; only Stiva's fate is beyond the scope of the novel (he is blind to his inexorable movement toward society's periphery, movement evidenced by the fact that he is beginning to bore people). As mentioned above, however, suffering is definitely in store for Pil'niak's remaining characters, but how they will emerge from the suffering and live out their lives is less clear. The lack of obvious "winners" in the Pil'niak story --- like Kiti and Levin, for example, in the novel --- can be explained by the fact that in "Veter . . ." no one was in harmony with the earth --- the entire setting was an enterprise devoted to exploitation of nature.

The dominant message in both stories is the condemnation of sexual activity for any purpose other than procreation --- a life devoted exclusively to passion destroys absolutely. The personal damage is more limited and reparable in Pil'niak's story⁴⁷⁵ because the exclusive pursuit of passion is not the driving force in Agreueva's relationship. Both stories emphasize that right unions have much more to do with mutual sensitivity and respect between the partners and the creation and rearing of children who are in harmony with nature⁴⁷⁶ and prepared for right living than they do with sexual bonding in itself. Right living is simple but challenging and is guarded by a balancing cosmic force that cannot be avoided.

⁴⁷⁵ It can be argued that this is not the case for the victims of Troparov, but at least pregnant Mariia, whom he seduced, has her brother to help her and Troparov's betrayed wife Ol'ga has departed from the situation.

⁴⁷⁶ This requirement is more evident in other Pil'niak works but is a strong theme in Tolstoi's, including Anna Karenina.

Love and/or Truth in Marriage: “Tul’skaia literatura”

As Tolstoi’s spirit pervades some of Pil’niak’s earliest works, so it remains to dominate one of his last. “Tul’skaia literatura”⁴⁷⁷ was written in very late 1935 or early 1936, probably prompted by the death of its supposed protagonist, Pavel Sergeevich Sukhotin, on 1 December 1935. It was published in March 1936, one of the last six works to be written and published in Pil’niak’s lifetime. The very title evokes thoughts of Tolstoi, as Tula Province was the location of Iasnaia Poliana, the writer’s estate. Pavel Sukhotin, the main character of the story, supposedly hails from the vicinity of this estate and we are told that he had read his first verses to his uncle, L. N. Tolstoi (3).⁴⁷⁸ Other Tula writers are mentioned in the persons of Gleb and Nikolai Uspenskii. The text itself is a morality study in Tolstoian themes of truth and love in the context of marriage and an exploration of what constitutes the “basis” of marriage. It is possible that “Sukhotin,” “Tula,” etc. only have the function of triggering the right Tolstoian associations and that factual details may be inaccurate because they are not important for the theme and message of the tale.⁴⁷⁹

⁴⁷⁷ “Tul’skaia literatura” (“Tula literature”), published for the first and only time in *Tritsatsat’ dnei* 3 (1936): 3-6, from which I am citing.

⁴⁷⁸ Pil’niak’s identification of P. S. Sukhotin as a blood relative of Tolstoi is suspect at best. Tolstoi’s daughter Tat’iana did marry a Mikhail Sergeevich Sukhotin (1850-1916), a landowner in the Tula area; conceivably, based on patronymic, Pavel Sergeevich was his brother. Pavel Sergeevich Sukhotin (1884-1935) was a real Russian writer from the Tula area, whose death on 1 December 1935 probably at least partially inspired this story. I have not been able to ascertain the cause of his death. Pil’niak’s use of recently-deceased Pavel as the interior narrator, on the eve of the character’s death, indicates that the story-telling persona must be about Pavel’s age at death, that is about fifty-one, no longer at the age of youthful passion. (Details of P. S. Sukhotin’s life are from V. I. Bot’, “Sukhotin Pavel Sergeevich: Poet, prozaik, dramaturg (k 125-letiiu so dnia rozhdeniia P. S. Sukhotina)” *Tul’skaia oblastnaia universal’naia nauchnaia biblioteka*, 2009, 23 Sept. 2010, <<http://www.tounb.ru>>, path: Биографические очерки, История края, С, Сутохин Павел Сергеевич.

⁴⁷⁹ This theory is supported by the interior narrator’s insistence that the superficial details of his story do not matter.

This story is constructed within two frames.⁴⁸⁰ The outer frame is dominated by the exterior narrator, who provides context at beginning and end (that Pavel is Tolstoi's nephew; that Pavel's death was like those of the Uspenskii cousins and unlike that of Tolstoi; that Iasnaia Poliana was in fact the site of a forgotten seventeenth century metallurgical plant, etc.). This narrator, host to a surprise midnight visit by a distraught, possibly ill, Pavel Sergeevich, describes the visitor's words and actions and a few of his own reactions. The inner frame is provided by an interior narrator, the visitor, Pavel Sergeevich himself, who explains his visit and also relates the story --- really a moral lesson reminiscent of Tolstoi's didactic later tales --- at hand.

Pavel's story, like many of Tolstoi's didactic works, must be taken as a parable rather than literal truth, as he introduces it with the condition --- which he repeats in mid-narration --- that the circumstantial details are unimportant; he also suggests that "we suppose" that the tale's protagonist is an engineer (3).

The Parable Itself

A married couple, good people, really love each other and have been together at least ten years.

The husband, presumably a metallurgical engineer, receives a two-year assignment seeking a gold vein in the Pamir mountains in Tadjikistan. Neither he nor his wife is enthused about the separation and the real hardships he will undergo, but they agree that their honor (as Soviet citizens and supporters of the state and its objectives)⁴⁸¹ requires acceptance of the mission regardless of their personal preferences. Soon after he

⁴⁸⁰ Formally this story presents a very interesting interplay of *fabula* and *siuzhet*.

⁴⁸¹ It is a matter of honor, "delo chesti," for them (3, 4).

arrives in the mountains, they begin a tender correspondence describing how lonely they are, how much they miss each other, and so on.

However, six months into the separation, the wife becomes involved with another engineer in Moscow, with whom she gradually comes to share a never-before-experienced love; this second man totally eclipses her husband in her heart. At each developing phase in the new relationship she remembers her lonely husband and writes to him, and as her intimacy with the new man increases, so does the feigned passion and longing for her husband that she expresses in her letters. When the new man has replaced her husband in her affections, she considers what to do and decides she cannot reveal her new love while her husband is so far away and suffering so deeply from their separation; she will wait until he returns to Moscow, when their situation will be normal again, and tell all, at which time she will move out, leaving him the home she has maintained for him.

Meanwhile, back in the Pamirs, the husband's team is separated by a July blizzard while out prospecting. He and a woman geologist survive snowstorm, floods, and extreme heat together. Their survival requires them to find shelter, make fire, and obtain and prepare food. Forced downhill by streams of melted snow, they find not only a gold-bearing vein but also a habitable cavity in the same split in the rock. High waters prevent their passage back to the base, so they set up primitive house-keeping --- he hunts, she cooks. The cold draws them together at night and they experience a level of passion new at least to him. Upon their return to base of course his wife's letters await and he responds with an account of his recent wilderness adventures as though he had been alone, emphasizing the comfort he derived from memories of her. Like his wife, he

cannot imagine writing of his new liaison when she is suffering so deeply in his absence; he will wait until they are together again and their relationship normalized on home turf.

Their letters flow back and forth as before, now focused on their happy reunion in Moscow at the end of his assignment.⁴⁸² (Sukhotin takes his first break here, dozing off; he continues his recitation with the same reminder of the insignificance of the detailed circumstances in his story. This detail links Sukhotin with Pozdnyshev of “The Kreutzer Sonata,” another narrator whose long confession is repeatedly interrupted because of his physical and spiritual exhaustion.)⁴⁸³

The regularity (“zakonomernost” (5)) of their correspondence is such that it is his turn to write just when he learns of his upcoming month-long stay in Stalinabad (to write reports, make presentations, and the like). She responds eagerly, proposing to spend the month with him there. As they set out from their respective home bases, each considers the “just” thing to do (“spravedlivost”) and each decides that the other spouse is suffering so much that revelations of infidelity must wait until their final reunion in Moscow (5-6). Because each is focusing entirely on the other rather than seeking self-gratification, and is straining every nerve to hide the lie, their love becomes self-sacrificing and the entire month they spend together so wondrous, so amorous, so passionate that it cannot even compete with the world-class spectacles of history and nature that surround them, including the rapids of the overwhelmingly beautiful river “Nevernyi” (6).⁴⁸⁴

⁴⁸² Ironically, the joy they look forward to at his return to Moscow is not feigned; only the reasons for the joy are fabrications. In some ways this entire story can be considered “a tragedy of errors.”

⁴⁸³ “Tul’skaia literatura,” like “The Kreutzer Sonata,” explores (among other things) the question “on what is marriage based?”

⁴⁸⁴ “Unfaithful,” “Untrue,” “Unreliable,” “Deceptive”

After the magical month in Stalinabad, the only reality that remained for them (as was natural, according to Sukhotin) was the reality expressed in the letters --- their paramours, from city and wilderness, just faded away. The husband and wife had never had a love like this before (6).⁴⁸⁵

(End of parable.)

The Rest of the Story (almost)

This parable is intriguing in itself, in that two loving spouses, at a time of separation, should enter other liaisons and come back together because of deception or mutual emotional protection (however one might construe their dissimulation).

However, the story is made more complex first by the confessing teller of the tale of mutual deception, then by his host. So distraught (or ill; actually he is probably showing the signs of incipient cardiac arrest caused by his emotional state) upon arrival that his host does not know whether to treat him as guest or invalid, Sukhotin begins his story coherently and objectively. Well into his narration, right before the first mention of the prospective Stalinabad assignment, he begins taking breaks, slumping over, seeming to drift off to sleep or reducing his voice to a whisper from time to time.⁴⁸⁶ The listener/host is concerned: what should he do, put his guest to bed, heat some wine? But Pavel resumes his story after a long pause, and now the narration takes on an increasingly emotional, self-revelatory, and interactive character as he begins to address his host

⁴⁸⁵ “[U] nikh nikogda ne bylo takoi liubvi.”

⁴⁸⁶ Mironov, in “Kak obyknovenno,” also reveals increasing but less dramatic agitation during his narration. Sukhotin’s distress is likely both physical and emotional, suggesting the progress of his heart attack.

intermittently.⁴⁸⁷ His apparent naps become more frequent and the narrative more fragmented, his outbursts more emotional, until the formerly impersonal parable becomes HIS OWN subjective narrative. After describing the magnificence of their love at Stalinabad, he shouts, “They were lying! they were lying!”⁴⁸⁸ explaining that their expertise at dissimulation united them ever more firmly, perhaps even making them more and more happy as well (6). After one more calm sentence --- that they had never before been so good at loving --- Pavel explodes at his interlocutor, aghast that the couple had been bound together more tightly by lies than they ever could have been by the truth (which would actually have unbound them), and that they were being “sacrificial” even as they lied (6). He relates the aftermath, that the reality of the letters displaced the extra-marital lovers, then excuses himself and reveals his bewilderment --- “Chort znaet chto eto takoe” (6)⁴⁸⁹ --- over his condition or his tale, it is unclear which.

Pavel departs for home in the wee hours of the rainy fall morning and his host completes the story. Excusing himself, Pavel indicated that he should leave, since he had a home of his own, but despite this assertion he took the path leading away from, not toward, his own home --- part of his crisis has come from the recognition that in fact he did not have a real “home of his own.” At the beginning of the story the host-narrator had informed the reader of Pavel Sukhotin’s death at someone else’s home (3).⁴⁹⁰ It becomes

⁴⁸⁷ Examples of such address include: “. . . you know how seldom that happens” (6); “Do you get it?” (6), etc. (My emphasis.)

⁴⁸⁸ “Oni lgali! oni lgali!” (6)

⁴⁸⁹ “Devil knows what this is/was.”

⁴⁹⁰ “[. . .] konchivshii svoe sushchestvovanie --- vspiat’ ot Tolstogo --- v traditsiakh brat’ev Uspenskikh, tak zhe tuliakov. On umer na lestnitse chuzhogo artisticheskogo doma, ot razryva serdtsa, po oseni 935-go goda.” (“[. . .] having ended his existence --- in contrast to Tolstoi --- in the tradition of the Uspenskii brothers, also men of Tula. He died on the staircase of someone else’s artistic home, of a heart attack, at the

clear that this story was Pavel's final testimony to his life and the explanation of the agitation leading to his demise.

Nevernost'

What drove him to his death? His parable seems to start well, have some complications, but finally end well with reunited loving spouses. As the story comes together, however, Sukhotin reveals himself as the wronged and wronging husband. He has apparently very recently learned⁴⁹¹ that the love his wife expressed in her letters and at least initially at Stalinabad was a sham (he already knows that his own was). His mind is apparently split by the paradox: (self-)sacrificial love is the epitome of love, and real love is based on truth; but in this case deception fostered sacrificial love, binding the couple closer together, whereas the truth would have sundered them. Apparently the Stalinabad experience, although it started out based on mutual duplicity, convinced both that their love was as true as their letters expressed, and they have been living in the security of that love all this time. Pavel's distress seems caused by an intellectualized logic and definition issue. But the life issues cannot be disregarded.

Pil'niak raises questions here that have no single right answer. A number of scenarios can be imagined. The husband, as well as the wife, practiced to deceive, and he is well aware that he did this; had he and she been open and honest immediately upon entering the new liaisons, each could have presumably joined his/her new lover and lived happily ever after. But would that really have happened? Would not learning of one's

end of autumn, 1935.") Possibly the "artistic" quality of this home reflects the couple's own "artistry" --- both in (creative) writing and (deceptive) acting.

⁴⁹¹ Assuming that the character Pavel is fifty-one, like his recently-deceased namesake; that he was approximately thirty-one when they married; and that the Pamir expedition was about ten years into the marriage, as stated in the text --- then by now they would be middle-aged, married for probably twenty years or more, at least eight and a half years of which passed after the Stalinabad rendezvous. If he was younger at his marriage, their post-Stalinabad life (living the lie) would be even longer.

spouse's betrayal still have been destructive, even with a new lover of one's own waiting in the wings? Or (scenario #2) perhaps they could have exchanged truths back in Moscow, after the Stalinabad experience, forgiven one another (and perhaps more importantly, themselves), and gone on to lead the rest of their lives in the love and happiness they had discovered at Stalinabad. Or would each then be haunted forever by the secret fear of continued (or re-initiated) unrecognized deceit perpetrated by the other spouse? (They were excellent actors . . .) Or it could be (scenario #3) that what they discovered in the Stalinabad duplicity was the real secret of love, that acting as though one loved totally and intensely, focusing exclusively on the other rather than on oneself, may ultimately be transformed into that greatest of all loves, sacrificial love, for real? (The "as if" theory . . . that behaving "as if" motivated by love or some other quality will ultimately make it true, a theory akin to the "elevating lie" that becomes truth)? Or, in yet another potential script, would it all have come out more tolerably if only one of them (in this case the husband, since he is the one we are shown) had deceived, and the other had been truly innocent? This condition of "my deception --- for the sake of your innocence" is undoubtedly what he was banking on, what each was counting on; it was the presumed "truth" each was happily living with all these years, ever since Stalinabad. But the fact that she was pretending just as much as he was made him the same object of manipulation he had made her. He must then suffer the humiliation of having been duped into believing her falsehoods, and perhaps even --- which would be harder to accept --- to recognize the scope of his own guilt in manipulating her. In my reading, this is what really breaks him --- having to look his own guilt in the eye as the recipient of the same

deception he himself meted out in the name of love. But . . . the potential scenarios go on and on

Questions also arise concerning the true nature of their marriage. “Oni byli khoroshimi liud’mi, oni na samom dele liubili drug druga” (3).⁴⁹² But a few months’ separation split them apart. Each new love was “greater than ever before” for each and both of them, and the references are to passionate rather than spiritual elements of love. There is no mention of children, although there has been time to produce them --- their courtship was ten years previous to the Pamir assignment. Had they been building a family instead of seeking sexual passion perhaps none of this would ever have taken place.⁴⁹³ In fact, perhaps their childless home was one of the “brothels in miniature” mentioned in “Kak obyknovenno,”⁴⁹⁴ which would indicate that they were not such “good people” and so much “really” in love as Pavel had characterized them at the outset. And in this case, their marriage must have been what Tolstoi ultimately concludes that all “ordinary” marriages are: deceptive unions based on false premises.

In more active terms, it was their separation that showed the fissure in their relationship, turning it into a real split. He was the one who departed, as a “matter of honor,” for the professional assignment. The description of the critical events during the mountain isolation is illustrative. He and his female colleague were driven downhill by

⁴⁹² “They were good people. They really loved each other.”

⁴⁹³ Pil’niak himself is in his early forties at this time. He has undoubtedly come to recognize that a time comes in life when sexual interest changes in nature and the husband and wife focus on one another; children may be naturally absent or old enough to require little parental involvement. However, his third marriage is but two or three years old and he himself has a toddler at home, and it seems highly unlikely that he would begin now to describe a childless marriage in positive terms without an explanation of the absence of children. It is also possible that Pil’niak is reflecting here on his second marriage, which was indeed childless, and according to him, thankfully so.

⁴⁹⁴ “Razve kazhdaia sem’ia, gde net detei --- ne publichnyi dom v miniatiure?” (3)

the watery runoff. “V *rasshcheline* skaly byl naiden zolotonosnyi plast. V *rasshcheline* skaly bylo sukho i pakhlo dymom zhil’ia” (4).⁴⁹⁵ The crack, or fissure, with the gold vein is one which invites cohabitation. This is where he and his geologist team-mate move in together, set up housekeeping, and cuddle up against the cold, initiating the affair --- and perhaps thinking they had discovered a different kind of “gold.” His assignment, accepted out of a sense of honor, led to his failure to “honor” his marriage vows and opened wide the way to adultery and deceit. In the larger social picture, this event echoes Pil’niak’s charges against the anti-human, anti-family progressive agenda promoted first through revolutionary programs (e.g., see discussions of “Veter pered martom”), and later by established Socialist institutions (e.g., “Rozhdenie cheloveka”). Here the Soviet regime continues to destroy families --- and the personal integrity of individuals --- by separating married couples via professional assignments, making the citizens honor-bound to the benefit of the state rather than to their marriage vows and families.

Earlier we examined Pil’niak’s exploration of *vernost’* --- but this time, in “Tul’skaia literatura” much as in *Anna Karenina*, the exploration is of *nevernost’*. The main Tolstoian thematic echo in this work has to do with the numerous aspects of deceit. As Morson points out in *Anna Karenina in Our Time: Seeing More Wisely*,⁴⁹⁶ much of what led to Karenina’s disintegration and suicide was her attitude toward and treatment of truth and reality. Her duplicity covered the range from outright fabrications and lies to herself and others, through the twisting of facts and interpretation, justifications and rationalizations, evasions, diversion of others’ attention, down to deliberate or negligent

⁴⁹⁵ “In a *fissure* of the rock face was found a gold-bearing layer. In the *fissure* of the rock face it was dry and smelled of the smoke of habitation.” (My emphasis.)

⁴⁹⁶ The novel is an exploration of truth and falsehood, as exemplified through the deception of adultery.

failure to see or recognize what was manifest before her. These behavioral expressions of untruthfulness contribute to Sukhotin's destruction as well. The first and most serious, in that it led to all the rest, act of untruth went apparently unnoticed by either partner: the failure to "honor" the marriage vow, the actual entry into the extra-marital relationship. The affairs just seem to have happened on their own as natural consequences of (the wife's) social life in the capital ("v mnogoche lovekoi [*sic*] Moskve" (4)) and (the husband's) professional responsibilities amid the natural elements in Pamir. The spouses did not seem to perceive this overt act as anything worthy of attention, important enough to warrant reflection and deliberation, possibly because they were under the influence of the new Soviet morality which did not emphasize the gravity of marriage vows. They actively considered what to write in their letters to conceal their new allegiances, and they wrote the letters accordingly; they consciously deliberated and decided to delay telling the truth until the two-year assignment ended. They justified their duplicity as protection of the "loving" other from hurt as they continued false declarations of love and even participated in its non-verbal expression, sexual and otherwise. The most essential betrayal --- the one that led to all the others --- was ignored, making it even more evil and reprehensible. Sukhotin continues to lie to himself --- to rationalize --- when he expresses his frustration at the co-existence of sacrificial love and falsehood --- this is merely an intellectual disparity, when the real blow to him, whose sins have been identical to hers, is the recognition of (a) his wife's duplicity; (b) his own gullibility in not perceiving it; (c) the nature of the lie they have been living, unaware, all these years; and (d) his own guilt, in both his manipulation of his wife and his part in building the house of cards which is collapsing around him now.

This story may be considered to enter the classical debate about the “life lie” question --- whether the revelation of truth is universally desirable and right. The answer here seems to be that one must live with the expectation that the truth itself (or its deliberate concealment --- the fact of the cover-up) will come out, and that this late revelation will be more destructive than the timely acknowledgement of truth would have been. No sham can be maintained indefinitely, and the knowledge that truth has been in some way subverted inevitably destroys love and life.

The exterior narrator concludes the story with an explanation of the metallurgical imagery⁴⁹⁷ in the tale. He mentions that Tolstoi’s estate, Iasnaia Poliana, was actually located on the site of the first Russian metallurgical plant, built in the seventeenth century but forgotten by Tolstoi’s day, and that Tolstoi himself was buried in the slag from this plant. Earlier the interior narrator had pointed out the “zakonomernost” of the couple’s correspondence in describing the apparently chance circumstance (the impact of contingency also common to Tolstoi’s fiction) that led to the Stalinabad reunion. In conclusion, the exterior narrator says that Sukhotin’s moral lesson of the lie is just as “zakonomerna” as the grave of the great Tolstoi actually being located in the slag of the first Russian metallurgical plant (6).⁴⁹⁸ Like the Stalinabad love, many situations accepted without full knowledge become repugnant when they come to light.

⁴⁹⁷ This imagery is expressed via the metallurgical engineer, prospecting for gold, magnetometer operator, water-pipes, etc. and provides the “circumstantial details” Sukhotin tells us to ignore.

⁴⁹⁸ “I poniatno, chto sukhotinskaia moral’ lzhi tak zhe zakonomerna, kak mogila Tolstogo --- klassika --- v shlake pervogo russkogo metallurgicheskogo zavoda.” (“And it is clear that the Sukhotin moral lesson of the lie is just as logical as the grave of Tolstoi, the classical writer, [being located] in the slag of the first Russian metallurgical plant.”) There is in fact a metallurgical plant (Kosogorskii/Kosogorovskii metzavod) close to Iasnaia Poliana but it was established in 1897 and is still operating. It is possible that a much older plant was discovered in the 1920s or 1930s and that Pil’niak at least was appalled that the great Tolstoi was actually buried in industrial refuse, but I have as yet found no concrete evidence of this. See Tsar’kov, V.V., Blokh, E. I., et al., “Izuchenie vozmoznogo vliianiia vybrosov Kosogorovskogo metallurgicheskogo

We will examine some of Pil'niak's other explorations of the unfathomable questions of love and truth in the next chapter.

zavoda na territorii muzeia-usad'by 'Iasnaia Poliana'" Gigiena i sanitaria 6 (1977): 88-90; QAO
"Kosogorskii metallurgicheskii zavod: o zavode" 2010, 23 Sept. 2010, <<http://www.kmz-tula.ru/index1.html>>.

Chapter IV

Investigatory Parameters

In this chapter I will present some of Pil'niak's other "explorations" of his biological *ethos* and meditations on love. These include his views on virginity and male and female differences in sexual relationships, the incest temptation, and parent-child relationships.

Mating, First Love, and Expectations: "Ivan-da-Mar'ia"

"Ivan-da-Mar'ia," written in early 1921⁴⁹⁹ in the ornamental style of Golyi god, gained notoriety early on due to the heroine's comment that "the revolution smells of sexual organs." Indeed, sexuality is a major theme of this very liminal story which depicts rough transitions in many arenas as old imperial Russia becomes a new Soviet state.⁵⁰⁰ Within Pil'niak's biologically-oriented works, this story falls more into the

⁴⁹⁹ Text is dated Feb.-Mar. 1921; first published 1922. It was revised mainly to eliminate some of the explicit sexual content and soften references to the Cheka for re-publication as "Chertopolokh" ("Thistle") in 1929-30. See Jensen 181, n. 34 for a general description of the changes. I am citing from "Ivan-da-Mar'ia," 6-vol. coll., vol. 1, 208-265. This is the second story Pil'niak wrote by this name. The first, associated with the Polunin cycle, was written in May 1920 but was never published separately; it was reworked for inclusion in Golyi god. As Jensen points out, the title "Ivan-da-Mar'ia" has several meanings, all of which indicate commonness, typicality, representativeness. It is the name of a common European wildflower known in English as "cow-wheat," and "Ivan" and "Mar'ia," the two combined "Christian names [. . .] have stood for the typical Russian youth and maiden since the days of folk poetry" (156). The wildflower is *melampyrum nemorosum*.

⁵⁰⁰ This story can be viewed from much larger perspectives with respect to the Revolution and its effects, industrialization, and other themes beyond the sexual and biological aspects. In my opinion, its most comprehensive meaning is in its articulation of the chaos of social change. Change is everywhere, in people's roles, the conditions in which they live, spelling, food, geographic labels, language; every aspect of life seems to be changing as the nation becomes a proletarian dictatorship. To me, the single most striking aspect of this story (in this larger sense) is that the sole unchanged element is the daily life, impoverished in every way, of the mine-worker's family described near the beginning (220-221) and at the end (264-5) of the story. Despite the glorification of the worker and his power at the Workers' Meeting and

“death” category than into his “birth --- mating --- procreation” *oeuvre*. However, it is of interest here because of the exploration of the social transition especially in women’s roles and the perspective presented on the nature of “first love” and the importance of virginity. As always, I will be striving to limit the analysis to the biological *ethos* arena.

Sexual morality issues are presented primarily, but not exclusively, through the three main characters: Kseniia Evgrafovna Ordynina, Dmitrii Gavrilovich Troparov, and militia leader Cherep.⁵⁰¹ Kseniia is the center, with the men representing competing components of Kseniia’s psyche which she must strive to reconcile. Troparov represents her romantic, creative nature, her coming of age under empire, and the spiritual side of life; and Cherep, her contemporary physical and material orientation to sex, life, and death, developed under the conditions of war and dramatic social change. Troparov is anchored in the past, Cherep in the (unstable) present. However, as Jensen points out, numerous minor characters, incidents, subplots, and narrative digressions which appear as fragments in the text cohere to support and expand the sexual and gender role theme (182).

The basic plot can be summarized as follows: Beautiful Cheka officer and Zhenotdel leader Kseniia Ordynina bares her soul in anonymous letters to writer Troparov, whom she believes she loves, despite the fact that they are not personally

elsewhere, and the chaotic change rampant in all other facets of existence, there is no alteration in his plight.

⁵⁰¹ Names: Kseniia is not explicitly connected with the children of Evgraf Ordynin of Golyi god, nor is Troparov apparently connected with engineer Troparov in “Veter pered martom.” Her surname, Ordynina, may serve to put her into opposition with Natal’ia Evgrafovna Ordynina of Golyi god, since both women believed that they could separate soul from body in sexual relationships; Natal’ia, as shown above, recognized her error in time to avoid disaster, but Kseniia did not. Kseniia’s patronymic “Evgrafovna” is linguistically derived from a term for “beautiful writing,” which in this story associates her thematically with writing and writers. “Cherep” means “skull” in Russian, which suggests Cherep’s connection with both death and physicality.

acquainted. Thinking that she can divorce carnal from emotional love, she is concurrently engaged in a passionate, sex-only affair with incredibly handsome and sexually skilled Cherep, chief of the militia. Having received her letters, Troparov becomes acquainted with Kseniia only after his trip to Moscow, where he has visited a former wife and a former mistress (primarily to acquire fodder for his writing) and sought out the burial place of his beloved sister Mariia. When Cherep is implicated in a plot, Chekistka Ordynina recognizes that he has been “plundering” her emotionally and she enjoys executing him personally as vengeance. News of his death at her hand panics Troparov, who hides his notes and flees. Kseniia is killed by a grieving, vengeful wolf on her way from the writer’s house.⁵⁰²

Kseniia Evgrafovna Ordynina

Kseniia Ordynina is a conundrum, a puzzling hybrid representation of the past and present Russian woman, presumably a transitional figure in the developing Soviet woman.

Kseniia’s “*curriculum vitae*” shows her “imperial Russia” pedigree (214). A princess by birth, she spent her childhood *en famille* and was educated at the Moscow Institute for Aristocratic Young Ladies, graduating in 1917 with a gold medal. The school narrative about her character reports that she was inclined toward romanticism, had some eccentricities, and was boldly honest. Her romanticism inspires her anonymous letters to Troparov, her lyrical nature descriptions, her tendency to hysteria, and her expectation that her heart would break upon meeting with him. The origins of her fixation on him are

⁵⁰² We have already encountered this wolf in “Poziemka.” In this updated version, it is Troparov’s son who kills the wolf’s trapped mate, and Kseniia who is the object of the wolf’s vengeance. This wolf story is one of the subthemes whose moral statements supplement those in the main plot.

not made explicit; apparently his writings have caught her interest and she is responding to them via the anonymous letters. Her romanticism and love of interesting stories have given rise to a desire to be his creative partner in writing --- her letters contain brief sketches⁵⁰³ which could be developed into literary plots. Her “love” for him is based totally on her imagination at least until they become acquainted in mid-story.

However, the times and social conditions being what they are, Kseniia has become a leader in the local Cheka and head of the Zhenotdel (Women’s Department) in the unnamed mining town that serves as the story’s setting. She both represents and is contrasted to the modern Soviet woman being produced by these Zhenotdely:

В Женотделе женщины, --- высоколобые и низколобые, узколицы и скуластые, стриженные и нет, в кожаных штанах, в защитных штанах и в юбках, с револьверами на ремне, --- спорили, анкетировали, командировались, культурно-просветительствовали, ибо женщины теперь просыпаются. И все они, ---

анкетированные, командирующиеся, безбровые и с бровями как подобает, с взглядом не аберрерующим, устремленным параллелью взоров в психостению, и с взглядом как подобает, --- в комнате с револьверами на столе, в махорочном дыме, в плакатах и лозунгах, с истерикой, конденсированной в пузырьки жидкостей (ибо женщины просыпаются теперь)

--- все это (удивительно даже!)

конденсировалось в ней, --- *в ней*. Но была она покойна очень, как дама, в черном платье, как дама, в прическе черной, как дама, красива очень, с бровями черными, изломанными и с взглядом покойным, медленным, как подобает, высока, гибка, даже с сережками в ушах под пушистыми волосами, --- и лишь бровь пра-вая --- черная, изломанная --- поднималась у нее на бледный -- - очень высокий и бледный под пушистыми волосами -- - лоб. Даже сережки, и белый платок в левой руке и у губ, в черном платье, как дама, --- и все же ---

⁵⁰³ “Zhil-byt odin chelovek . . . ,” etc. (“Once there was a man . . . ,” etc.) (208-9, 257-8).

заанкеченная, закомандированная, замитингованная, в Женотделе, из Чека. (212-3) (Pil'niak's emphasis)

In the Women's Department women --- with foreheads high and low, narrow-faced and high-cheekboned, hair cropped and not, in leather trousers, in protective trousers and in skirts, with revolvers on their belts --- [these women] argued, took surveys, ordered one another about, enlightened each other culturally, for women now are awakening. And all of them ---

[who were] questionnaired, commanded, without brows and with brows as became them, with a look never varying, a look aimed in parallel in psychological disorder and with a look as appropriate, in a room with revolvers on the table, amid tobacco smoke, amid posters and slogans, with hysterics condensed in little bubbles of liquid (for women are awakening now) ---

--- all this (surprisingly even!) was condensing in her --- *in her*. But she was very serene, like a lady, in a black dress, like a lady, in a dark coiffure, like a lady, very beautiful, with black eyebrows, crooked and with a calm look, slow, as behooved her, tall, lithe, with even earrings in her ears under her fluffy hair, and only her right brow, black, crooked, rose up onto her forehead, pale, very high and pale under her fluffy hair. Even earrings, and a white handkerchief in her left hand and at her lips, in a black dress, like a lady --- and all the same ---

[one who was] questionnaired, commanded, and meetinged, in the Women's Department, from the Cheka.

This contrast between Ordynina, Zhenotdel leader, and the motley defeminized, smoke-laden, revolver-toting ranks of its “awakening” membership suggests Aleksandra Kollontai as the inspiration behind Pil'niak's female protagonist. Kollontai, champion of women's equality, free love, and the elimination of the traditional family, was serving as head of the national Zhenotdel at the time of this story's writing. Like Ordynina, Kollontai was of aristocratic upbringing, well-educated, and a paragon of feminine beauty, class, and style, hence able to operate successfully in virtually all social *milieux*.⁵⁰⁴ Both women were interested in writing. Kollontai published a number of

⁵⁰⁴ This ability to function well in all social circles was instrumental in making Kollontai the first Russian/Soviet woman to serve as a foreign ambassador (to Norway, appointed 1924). According to Alix Holt, “Her knowledge of the ways of high society and of the languages and literature of the world enabled her to tread diplomatic carpets with ease. Her sex might have proved a handicap, for diplomacy had always been a male preserve; but she displayed such a mastery of protocol and carried herself so well in her furs (she had always been noted for dressing well, sometimes to the chagrin of her comrades)” that she was soon treated with respect by the Western press. Holt, *Kollontai* 21.

fictional love and futuristic stories as well as her better-known Socialist-life treatises. Romantic Kseniia reveals that her love for unusual stories dates from her days as a silly college girl, hence the plots she provides Troparov for his creative efforts. The Ordynina-Kollontai connection is made explicit very early in the story by Cherep, who associates Kseniia's professed ability to enter sex-only relationships with Kollontai's "human breeding" theories (214).⁵⁰⁵ Kseniia's support for purely physical sexual relationships further resonates with Kollontai's free love ideas which condone sexual activity based solely on bodily need (when not destructive to the well-being of the larger collective); the Chekistka's penchant for stylish black clothing and her shimmering "peacock-feather" eyes recall Kollontai's appearance.

Kseniia is the main character and is presented to the reader subjectively through her own written letters and journals, her one-sided conversations with Troparov and Cherep, and her waking dreams. A somewhat more objective picture of her emerges through her actions and the observations and descriptions of others, including the narrator. Her inner conflict between traditional womanhood (old, romantic, spiritual, domestic: her "Troparov aspect") and masculine social leadership (new, material, physical, political: "Cherep aspect") becomes more and more evident as the story progresses.

The Cherep Aspect: New, Material, Physical, Political

Cherep is part of Kseniia's love triangle. According to her theory of sexual relationships, he gets her body, Troparov her soul. He is her modern revolutionary

⁵⁰⁵ "Chto zhe, Kolontai [*sic*] o tebe pisala, proektiruiia chelovekovodstvo i chelovecheskie plemennye rassadniki?" ("What, was Kollontai writing about you, designing human husbandry and human ethnic breeding grounds?") Her answer, "No, not about me," is illustrative, rejecting not only the Kollontai association but also that of procreation, at least in the relationship at hand.

component, secular, military, living in the moment, sending people to life at home or to death at the front. He has no past, shares the present with Troparov and Kseniia, and is only a potential picture of the future --- hence he has no background, no given name, no patronymic. He represents the purely physical elements of life and death as indicated by his name (“Skull”), his professional position, and his almost metonymous association with lips ---- his lips which speak to Kseniia of the secrets of sex, and from whose kisses she cannot tear herself away. He epitomizes the physical passion of sex and his fate ultimately represents the destruction wrought by a life devoted to the physical and material (and devoid of the spiritual).

His function as an aspect of her psyche --- in alternation with the Troparov aspect --- is indicated by the subtlety of his introduction into the story and into relationship with her. He is brought in almost as an assumed additional component of Ordynina; only the plural verb and pronoun indicate that she is accompanied when she leaves headquarters (212).⁵⁰⁶ His description is first presented, without his name, in an opposition to the absent older writer Troparov:

Ведь писатель Тропаров, почти старик, --- был где-то, а вот здесь в штабе, за пустыми окнами в сумерки, стоял другой, в кожаной куртке, стройный как черт, --- конечно, молодой черт, отрицающий и черта и Бога, чтобы зарыться в ее коленях. И этот молодой черт без черта и Бога, губами, от которых нет возможности оторваться, --- одними губами, --- здесь в штабе и у забора, говорил о самом тайном --- о половых органах, о том, как больно целовать женские половые органы [*sic*] --- только об этом говорил он, весь в Памире, окурьюренный днями в бумажный смерчь --- [. . .]
Одними губами --- о самом тайном. (213)

⁵⁰⁶ The refrain “V shtab ona prishla k sumerkam” (“She arrived at headquarters toward evening”) occurs three times (209, 209, 213), the third time continuing with “i seichas zhe vmeste oni vyshli iz shtaba [. . . .]” (“and just now together they exited headquarters [. . . .]”) (213).

You see, the writer Troparov, practically an old man, was off somewhere [else], and right here at headquarters, behind empty windows in the twilight, stood another, in a leather jacket, built like a devil --- of course, a youthful devil, denying both the devil and God in order to bury himself in her lap. And this young devil without the devil or God, by means of his lips, from which it was impossible to tear herself away --- solely by his lips ---- here at headquarters and by the fence, was speaking of the most secret thing, about sexual organs, about how painful it is to kiss female sexual organs --- he spoke only of this, all in Pamir, courier-besieged for days in a whirlwind of paper [. . .] With only his lips, of the most secret thing.

This conversation takes place by the graveyard, intensifying their mutual association with death. At the end of this discussion of sex (including her virginity theories, below), they are explicitly identified as two of a kind⁵⁰⁷ and go their separate ways. Only now do we learn that he is the militia chief,⁵⁰⁸ Comrade Cherep, and she his colleague as head of the Women's Department, both from "the Pamirs."⁵⁰⁹ It is here that Kseniia denies any association with Kollontai's breeding projects. She tells Cherep to come to her that night . . . and goes home to await him and those irresistible kisses.

⁵⁰⁷ "[. . .] two devils without the devil or God" (214). His categorization as "devil" ("chert") connects Communist Cherep with the "cherti loshchinnykh del" ("devils of valley doings") (220 and elsewhere) and "chert chernoi industrii" ("the devil of black industry") (243), i.e., the devil of industrialization, in another theme of this story involving the local coal mine and factory. Cherep is penetrating and defiling the womb of Mother Earth just as he is Kseniia's, exploiting both. Industrialization is still a negative to nature-loving Pil'niak at this point, so this association makes Cherep still more negative. The opposition of nature to industry also occurs in "Veter pered martom" and other early stories; "Chernyi khleb" and *Mashiny i volki*, written between 1922 and 1924, reveal Pil'niak's growing ambivalence toward industrialization.

⁵⁰⁸ The work at the headquarters under his command involves the exhaustive filling out of forms with names, addresses, assigned weapons, etc., so many forms that the workers are miserable from writer's cramp. On that single day enough paperwork had been completed to send five thousand tattered men to the front and bring two thousand well-fed ones home (212); these figures provide subtle foreshadowing for Cherep's ultimate fate.

⁵⁰⁹ The Pamir mountains of central Asia are a complex motif in this work, as in several others. Here Pil'niak refers to them both as (a) an aboriginal place, in which man lives in his most primitive state, a reference which suggests promise of greatness but also extreme primitivity, and as (b) a destination, the summit of human achievement (the lofty goals of Communism) reached as an act of exclusively human will, rationalism, and labor; hence the Pamirs become also a metaphor for the Revolution itself, which started this momentous movement. In closing, the narrator/author draws attention to the "unemphasized" motif of trains running through the work (263), a motif he uses to point out that sights and experiences during a journey obscure the length of the trip, implying that coping with the Revolution itself and its immediate effects renders unnoticeable the great length of time, tens of thousands of days, necessary to reach Pamir's volcanoes and the achievement of Communism (209, 249, 263). The costs of reaching Pamir are great, including the local population drop of fourteen thousand people (seventy percent lost) (210).

The narrator informs us that Cherep talks to Kseniia of sex (above), but only Cherep's question about Kollontai is actually cited. His actual views on sex are revealed later in what the narrator identifies as a continuation of Kseniia's interrupted explanation to Troparov, showing that Cherep and Kseniia are in accord about the role of sex in life. According to Cherep, death may come at any moment, in any form, so the point of life is to enjoy sex --- although Cherep blames sex-partner Kseniia for his imminent arrest (255).⁵¹⁰ Left unsaid is that he finds other ways to enjoy the sensual and material aspects of life and to share the enjoyment, taking bribes to bring the healthy men home (to enjoy parties at the well-stocked bathhouse of a nationalized estate) while mobilizing the unfit ones, all through falsification of the blizzard of forms processed in his headquarters.

This "Cherep side" of Kseniia is shown largely through her spoken words, events which affect her, and others' reactions to her. While her "c.v." represents her Troparov side, Ordynina's work in the Cheka and Zhenotdel are of course part of her Cherep aspect. She is said to spend her days at party headquarters (*shtab*), Zhenotdel, Cheka, and Politprosvet, but she is seldom actually portrayed there; when she is, she seems right at home ("kak doma") (256). As Cheka leader, she is associated with arrests, interrogations, and executions, and through her Zhenotdel leadership, with the masculinization and militarization of women. Locals give her (Cheka) and Cherep (militia) a wide berth when the two stand conversing by the factory fence. Urgent telephone summonses to the Cheka for executions and interrogations terminate her reveries while she is awaiting Cherep's amorous visits; her evening with Troparov is similarly interrupted by the discovery of a plot (Cherep's corrupt schemes). These interruptions keep bringing her back to the most

⁵¹⁰ "a znaesh', kto vse podstroil? Ksiushka Ordynina!" ("and you know who played this dirty trick? Ksiushka Ordynina!").

violent, destructive locus of the Cherep-related world, and ultimately Cherep's arrest warrant bears her signature. But her classy feminine beauty is never overlooked and seems to be her dominant characteristic. When she calls a halt to a (very bourgeois) ball/beauty pageant in the Professional Workers' Club, her name passes through the crowd "like the sound of a whip" as her approach becomes known (219) --- but the male narrator points out that she is the only real "beauty" there. Her speech on world Communism at the Worker's Meeting provokes the attendees' comment on her beauty and fierceness, not on the speech itself.

At the fence near the graveyard Ordynina describes some of her sexual views to Cherep, ladylike with her handkerchief at her lips and her crooked right eyebrow raised high.

--- Я думала . . . Тех мужчин, которые раньше сходились с женщинами, но женившись мучатся, если жена не девушка, --- я оправдываю и понимаю. Вот почему. Женщина в девяносто девяти случаях из ста, отдаваясь впервые, несет душу и тело --- всю душу и все тело отдает она другому, мужчине. Мужчина же до жены идет к женщине стыдясь, воруя, чувствуя, что творит мерзкое и грязное, несет этой женщине только тело и презрение, запрятав глубоко душу, и, уходя от нее, мучится воровством и моется. И только к жене он идет и с душой и с телом, и, как чаще бывает, с жаждой создать святое, целомудренное, искупить старое. И ему нестерпимо, если он узнает, что всю душу, всю святость женщина отдала уже другому, --- не могла не отдать, сошедшись . . . Я не попала в число этих девяносто девяти. (214)⁵¹¹

"I was thinking . . . I understand and excuse those men who've had sex with women beforehand, but who are tormented after marriage if their wives weren't virgins. Here's why. A woman in ninety-nine cases out of a hundred, having had sex for the first time, brings soul

⁵¹¹ According to K. B. Andronikashvili-Pil'niak, "1915," Pil'niak believed this assessment of male and female sexual mentality and recorded it in his notebook. Nadia Pavlovich, his first fiancée, was not a virgin when they came together, and he in retrospect blamed her non-virginity --- on this basis --- for some of their subsequent difficulties; he was so devastated by their ultimate breakup that he attempted suicide.

and body --- she gives her whole soul and her whole body to that other one, the man. A man, though, before his wife, goes to women shamefully, like a thief, feeling that he is doing something loathsome and dirty; he brings that woman only his body and his contempt, having hidden his soul deeply away, and, upon departing from the woman is tormented by his theft and washes himself. And only to his wife does he go with both soul and body, and, as it often happens, with the desire to create something holy, something chaste, to redeem the old. And it's intolerable to him if he finds out that her whole soul, her whole sanctity, his wife has already given to someone else --- she can't not have given it, having had sex . . . I don't fall among those ninety-nine.

Kseniia believes that she, unlike the vast majority of women, is able to keep body and soul separate, to enjoy totally physical sex without risking the irretrievable loss of some aspect of herself and/or later marital rejection --- in other words, to experience sex without a spiritual/emotional tie, as a man can. She is blind to the fact that Cherep is probably representative of the males in her theory, plundering female sex-partners who are not their wives.

The Troparov Aspect: Old, Romantic, Spiritual, Domestic

Excerpts from one of Kseniia's letters to Troparov open the story and a window into her mental state. The letter is repeatedly mentioned as lying on the table in her bedroom in the never-locked nationalized mansion she lives in, underlining its importance in her psychological make-up. Although she has not met Troparov personally, she treats him as a confidant, apparently feeling she knows him from his writings. Opening in mid-letter, this epistle shares some of her views about the (overrated) importance usually attributed to sincerity and about the emptiness of life, perhaps a response to the specifics of something he has written. Life to many, she says, seems an inescapable wilderness without a single cherished place ("zavetnyi ugolok" (208)) for one's eyes, and leads to endless boredom; such a condition cheapens every aspect of life. Her internal death-orientation is suggested in the *ennui* she describes in the letter as well

as in the first iteration of what will become her refrain: “Dazhe, esli b my umerli!” (209),⁵¹² a reminder that death is an ever-present reality in their current life conditions.⁵¹³ The letter goes on to propose two mini-plots, one about a sleepless poet who writes for himself and his beloved but chastises this beloved for not coming to him as she had promised, the second about a middle-class girl who had a cute face, lots of energy, many suitors and a good female friend --- but Kseniia’s “hand is tired” (209)⁵¹⁴ so she does not finish that outline. The first mini-plot depicts her romantic vision of an ideal male suitor (perhaps Troparov himself) and the second, herself. The mental state depicted here is of a woman whose very romantic view of life and love (Troparov aspect) is threatened by the sterile, destructive, material reality (Cherep aspect) in which she lives day-to-day.

Troparov himself is tied to the past, to old Russia, hence to Kseniia’s earlier self (as well as to her creativity and romanticism). He is first introduced as the addressee of Kseniia’s opening letter, suggesting again his elemental presence in her mind. The letter opens the story, and only when Cherep (another facet of Kseniia’s mind) is about to be introduced is Troparov named as the person to whom Kseniia was writing at dawn, the letter still by her bed. Troparov, however, is much more fully developed as a character than is Cherep, and has a real, even historical, past. Associated in his most authentically sincere moments with a bear,⁵¹⁵ he represents old Russian values, the ones Kseniia

⁵¹² “Even if we were to die!”

⁵¹³ Famine, wolves, the proximity of the Whites, and other death-dealing conditions are story motifs.

⁵¹⁴ Probably she suffers from the same writer’s cramp as the headquarters workers, but hers would result from signing death warrants and interrogation documents.

⁵¹⁵ The bear is the traditional Russian totem. The bear association is invoked while Troparov is praying for Mariia (232, 234) and when visiting Egorovich (235).

probably grew up with.⁵¹⁶ He is already grey, but not quite the “old man” he seems in comparison to Cherep. Three years previously, before the Revolution, he left Moscow for his impoverished family estate in the countryside, wanting to work in peace and nature as God ordained. He lives in the forest in a little house close to a peasant village, his family representing the sole remaining local landowners, whose holdings had by 1917 diminished to the point that they were not worth nationalizing. A combination of “natural man” and intellectual, Troparov lives according to the rhythms of nature, going to bed early in order to greet the dawn with chores or writing after a solid night of sleep. He and his “strong, healthy, stupid” peasant wife (227),⁵¹⁷ Arina, and their numerous children⁵¹⁸ subsist in these hard times by eating vegetable matter in winter and fall, birds and their eggs plus weeds in the springtime, with the occasional fresh frog for Troparov and teenaged son Volod’ka. The Troparov family shares the house with the livestock --- and a room brimming with leather-bound books --- and live in a Buninesque “Sukhodol idyll,” with even the horse running away as in Bunin’s story (241). However, Sukhodol’s status as a space of horrendous crimes --- many against women --- reinforces the ambiguity of Troparov’s character, as does his apparently empty relationship with his peasant “wife.”

⁵¹⁶ Troparov must be considered in some ways to represent Pil’niak, who left the hustle-bustle of Moscow for the countryside (Kolomna) in 1914 (K. B. Andronikashvili-Pil’niak, “1915” 154). He and his early fiancée, Nadia Pavlovich, wrote poetry to each other as suggested in Kseniia’s schematic plots. Like Troparov, Pil’niak was an unfaithful husband, at least to his first wife, to whom he was still married when writing this story. His letters indicate that he seemed to struggle with guilt over his dalliances, guilt suggested in this particular story by Kuz’ma Egorovich’s comments about ruining women pointlessly. Troparov’s question to Egorovich about vocation also suggests Pil’niak’s ongoing moral concerns about using his acquaintances and loved ones as material for his writings. Most of his material did indeed come from his own life and from real-life experiences of others. (See especially K. B. Andronikashvili-Pil’niak, “1915” and “Iz tvorcheskoi istorii”; and letter No. 157, which suggests at least one dalliance.)

⁵¹⁷ “kreпкаia, zdorovaia, glupaia zhena”; possibly this is a common-law marriage, as ex-wife Anna claimed that he did not tell her about his “baba” (“peasant woman”), Arina (228).

⁵¹⁸ This is the rare (fictional) Pil’niakian family, other than those of peasants and workers, with more than two children. The sleeping children are described as “gidra spiashchikh golov” (“a hydra of sleeping heads”) (242).

In many ways Troparov's Moscow visit is a visit to his past, in the form of his ex-wife, his ex-mistress, his (dead) sister, and an old friend. The Moscow sojourn also emphasizes the fragmented jumble of historical periods, ways of life, and cultures --- and the barrenness of life ---- that governs contemporary Russia and which Kseniia partly personifies. The trip, motivated by melancholy and the disturbing incursion of industry into the countryside,⁵¹⁹ seems to have two basic personal goals: to acquire fresh materials for writing (Troparov is constantly jotting down events and impressions on his notepad, which also serve to enlighten the reader about contemporary Moscow conditions) and to locate the final resting place of his beloved sister Mariia. His adventures and encounters in Moscow serve to further substantiate the bifurcation personified in Kseniia on a larger social level.

Troparov's interactions with ex-wife Anna and mistress Nataliia support Kseniia's virginity theories. Troparov had originally met Anna during a visit to Nataliia's estate, then married her; Nataliia then followed the pair to Moscow to continue her relationship with Troparov.⁵²⁰ Both women are now single and react in different ways to the loss of Troparov, to whom they remain devoted. References to Troparov's and Anna's passionate sex life suggest that of Cherep and Ordynina, implying that at least from Troparov's side, it is a body-only relationship. That Troparov, already married, took Anna's virginity is supported by Anna's accusation that Troparov had taken all that she had, then abandoned her without revealing he had a farm and the peasant woman Arina.

⁵¹⁹ "Troparov priekhal [v Moskvu] ot toski i ot [zavodskikh] zaborov, torchashchikh v tosku" ("Troparov arrived [in Moscow] from melancholy and from the [factory] fences, sticking up into the melancholy") (225).

⁵²⁰ Nataliia's chronic address to Troparov as "cousin" ("kuzen," "kuzenik") --- at least nine literal references in a single long paragraph (229-30) --- suggests the possibility of incest in their relationship.

This dishonesty recalls the opening comments about sincerity and hypocrisy in Kseniia's first letter. No longer the pure woman who met him initially, Anna feels dirtied by her various affairs since their marriage ended. But now here he is again, and she is all his, in full knowledge that he will leave her again the next day --- further validating Ordynina's theory of the permanence of a woman's first love. Nataliia, like Kseniia, is divided between worlds, simultaneously studying iconography (old) and Karl Marx (new), but Nataliia is unable to consider herself a Communist. Nataliia has expressed her maternal instincts not by mating permanently and having children but by adopting two baby rabbits which she was unable to keep alive; she also assumes a motherly attitude toward her student boarders, who will ultimately go home, be mobilized, and perhaps marry. The rabbits' death has prompted her general mourning over her own pitiful life. Troparov is deceiving both these women (not to mention his "wife" at home). Anna calls him at Nataliia's at dawn to get assurances of his love so she can go to sleep⁵²¹ in peace, then he lies to Nataliia about who had called. Nataliia sees through him, insults Anna, and questions the purpose of her own continuing devotion to him. He promises Anna that he won't leave her, but she knows he is lying and will write about her in his writer's notebook, as before --- she is correct in assuming that their time together is just writing material for him. He moves on, since they have provided him with plenty of new subject matter

The search for his sister Mariia reveals a more profound aspect of Troparov but also the extreme perversion of life and its purposes rampant in contemporary Moscow.

⁵²¹ This suggests the sleeplessness motif in the romantic plots Kseniia suggests --- perhaps it is a device in Troparov's fiction or a statement of prevalent mental health conditions.

Troparov's quest for a dead person⁵²² highlights the ubiquity of death in the city,⁵²³ an atmosphere predicted by Anna's accusation that Troparov considers Muscovites to be "feasting in the time of the plague" (228).⁵²⁴ Mariia is (unfortunately) a typical Russian woman "like thirty-two percent of all Russian Ivans from the epic Ivan-da-Mar'ia" (231), a variant of her name even appearing in the story title. Troparov's search takes him to numerous hospitals and clinics (all lacking in medical supplies) to find her medical records. The obsession with sexual pleasure shared by Kseniia and Cherep dominates Moscow as well, evidenced by the numerous lines of abortion-seeking women which Troparov must circumnavigate. The narrator's description of an abortion presents women as objects of violence and the miracle of conception as totally degraded: "abort, kogda zhenshchinu sviazyvaiut, raspinauiut, i --- prekrasneishaia radost', prekrasneishaia taina zachatii! --- skobliat metallichesкими lozhechkami [. . .]" (232).⁵²⁵

Finally in an obscure hospital Troparov obtains a ripped piece of paper from a tired caregiver, with an advertisement on one side and Mariia's death certificate on the other. According to the certificate, Mariia Gavrilovna "Trupareva" died of meningitis⁵²⁶ at age twenty-two and was buried in the Donskoi cemetery (233).⁵²⁷ The narrator points

⁵²² The refrain "Vechnaia pamiat'" ("Eternal memory") accompanies most allusions to Mariia in the text.

⁵²³ Death is as ubiquitous in the countryside, according to the repeated statistics of the drop in the local population from 20,000 to 6,000.

⁵²⁴ Pil'niak's prediction of the "death of the cities" in "Proselki" seems very abstract and sanitized in comparison to the graphic descriptions in this tale.

⁵²⁵ "Abortion, when the woman is tied up, crucified, and --- most wonderful of joys, most wonderful mystery of conception! --- scraped with little metallic spoons [. . .]" Perhaps this is another way in which "the Revolution smells of sexual organs."

⁵²⁶ Her death was attributed to "vospalenie mozgov" (inflammation of the brain).

⁵²⁷ This was still the "old" Donskoi Monastery cemetery; it was separated into distinct "old" and "new" sections in 1927, when a crematorium was added to accommodate large numbers of dead but also as an

out the importance of Troparov's learning that she did not die of a "contemporary disease" --- typhus, abortion complications, revolution-related disorders --- but from one more readily associated with previous, more normal, times. Mariia/Mar'ia, so representative of traditionally "normal" Russian women, personifies a dying breed in these abnormal times. The misspelling of her surname renders its first syllable the Russian word for "corpse," underlining the dominance of death in the contemporary environment and noting her death in particular as that of a specific "type" of person. The irony of her names and age --- Mariia, daughter of Gabriel,⁵²⁸ dead at prime child-bearing age --- further emphasizes her failure to live out her ordained maternal role.

Once at the cemetery, Troparov must find his sister's grave not by her name but by her assigned number within the crowded plots of a poor monastery graveyard. With effort he locates it, his subconscious resisting the impersonal numbering scheme by echoing her affectionate nicknames in his mind as he fights off tears. He returns to the Palace of Arts and stands in the quiet church, possibly praying, possibly not, to honor his sister.⁵²⁹ The feeling of death's prevalence is intensified by the incessant ringing of the church bells, and the senselessness of it all by the cries from the insane asylum near the

expression of the anti-religious Communist creed. The old section contained mainly aristocrats, including some famous writers, but by the time of this story it was probably also overflowing with revolutionary dead as Pil'niak describes. Numerous victims of Stalin's purges were interred in the "new" section, ultimately including Pil'niak himself, whose ashes were buried in "Common Grave No. 1" of three mass graves dedicated to purge victims. (M. D. Artamonov, "Donskoe kladbishche," accessed 23 Sept. 2010, <<http://www.ratin.ru/kdon.shtml>> ; Robert Edwards, "Boris Pilnyak," 2004, accessed 23 Sept. 2010, <<http://www.findagrave.com>>, Path: Famous Grave Search; Boris Pilnyak.)

⁵²⁸ Archangel Gabriel is the angel of the annunciation to Mary Bogoroditsa.

⁵²⁹ In an inner dialogue he claims not to believe in God, but only to be seeking solitude in the church (234), a bow either to the author's own professed rejection of Christianity or a statement of Troparov's own struggle with present (atheism) and past (religiosity). See letter to A. A. Al'vig, 21 March 1915, No. 3, 16-17 for Pil'niak's early religious beliefs, which he claimed were more pagan than Christian. See Brostrom, *Allegory*, for an exploration of Pil'niak's fiction interpreted as his search for faith.

cemetery, leaving Troparov with a sense of total confusion (234). Mariia, universalized by her association with the story's title and motherhood, represents the normalcy and rightness of the human life cycle, including youth, parenthood, and promise --- not only must such normalcy be sought out with great effort in these times, but what was once normal, right and representative is found dead, buried, nameless, suitable only as an object of mourning.

Having honored his sister, Troparov makes a final visit to honor the past⁵³⁰ and its values in the person of his old friend, archivist Kuz'ma Egorovich, in his basement home with its Voltairean armchair. Reminiscent of Tolstoi's Platon Karataev in his peasant-like name and wisdom, Kuz'ma Egorovich is in fact highly literate and intellectually discerning. In his role as history's judge, he gathers and preserves manuscripts and documents, ensuring that such artifacts, in Bulgakov's later metaphor, do not burn. Troparov addresses to him his most fundamental life question: "What kind of economic principle⁵³¹ determined that I should be a writer and love nothing except writing and to follow corpses around all the time?" (236) Egorovich judges Troparov a "vernyi sochinitel'" (235-6),⁵³² cautioning him only against continuing to pointlessly ruin women (238).⁵³³ In parting, Troparov assures Egorovich that his services will not be needed to

⁵³⁰ Long-term Russian cultural history and contemporary change comprise a major non-biological theme of Troparov's Moscow visit.

⁵³¹ Here Troparov is suggesting, as will Kseniia, an error on the part of Karl Marx in relegating all causation to economics and material conditions.

⁵³² "a faithful, true writer"

⁵³³ "bab bez tolku portish"

rescue his, Troparov's, materials.⁵³⁴

Upon Troparov's return from Moscow, the narrative connects him with Kseniia in anticipation of their first meeting. The return train takes him to the "lands of Comrade Kseniia Ordynina" (239), whose lyrical passage about walking through the woods in a wild "train" of blizzard and wind further associates their journeys (239), and calls to mind the prevailing revolutionary conditions. She is walking past Troparov's stone house, failing to see a wolfpack nearby,⁵³⁵ as his train is arriving at the little station. As Troparov's son drives him home from the station through the blowing snow, the "person" emerging from the woods requests a ride, repeatedly claiming to have lost her way ("Ia sbilas' s dorogi" (241)). Kseniia, who has orchestrated the encounter, says she wants to go to town but will go wherever they are going. When Volod'ka very casually, even rudely, tells her to get out of the sleigh at their home and directs her to the village, she asks Troparov if he is the writer; upon his affirmative response, she introduces herself and admits she really doesn't need to go to the village. Troparov, of course, recognizes her name as that of the Cheka leader, and politely introduces his son.

Collision

Now that Kseniia has met Troparov, to whom her soul belongs, conditions are ripe for the ultimate collision of her personas and expectations.

⁵³⁴ Troparov's confidence is unjustified, as things turn out. This is much too early --- 1921 --- for Pil'niak to have any inkling at all of his own ultimate fate, but in hindsight it is difficult not to see irony in this exchange. The earlier mention of the Donskoi Monastery cemetery also seems almost prescient.

⁵³⁵ The title of this chapter, "Tropa v rov" ("Path into a Ditch," a play on "Troparov"), the waiting wolfpack Kseniia fails to notice, and the refrain "Dazhe esli b my umerli" foreshadow doom for the three main characters. Kseniia's failure to see the wolfpack here and the lone wolf later on illustrate her figurative as well as literal blindness.

After Kseniia contrives to make Troparov's acquaintance, he expresses a desire to meet with her and, ever the writer, to ask her questions "about the Revolution, of course" (252). A blizzard of Revolution and emotion is raging the evening of his visit. Beautiful by the hearth in her black dress, her eyes like peacock feathers,⁵³⁶ Kseniia awaits her guest as a gracious hostess, having made extra effort to acquire the rationed jam and bake the pastries herself --- after all, she is preparing to receive her beloved, and she fully expects her heart to explode as a result of his visit. The narrator points out her contrast with the Zhenotdel women --- at this moment, anyway, she is "sovsem ne zaankechennaia, ne zakomandirovannaia, ne zamitingovannaia" (253).⁵³⁷ Since both men represent aspects of Kseniia's psyche, Cherep must now be associated with Troparov's arrival just as mention of Troparov accompanied the introduction of Cherep earlier, and Troparov enters the oft-used door "two heads taller than Cherep" (253). Kseniia's personas, showing her bifurcation, alternate between formal lecturer and gracious, sexy hostess as her interpretive speeches about sex and the Revolution alternate with her offers of pastries and tea.⁵³⁸ Her conclusions: Karl Marx was wrong. It is not just physical hunger that makes the world go around but sexual hunger, more precisely "love" and reproduction of one's kind as well. Humanity was correct in deifying sex. To Ordynina, every animate, inanimate, and abstract object in the world is permeated not with just sex,

⁵³⁶ The peacock-feather eyes constitute an iconic motif indicating not only her beauty but a state of stimulation, including sexual arousal, due at least in part to the exercise of power.

⁵³⁷ "absolutely not questioned, commanded, or meetinged."

⁵³⁸ This constant focus on the food offered has several implications. On one hand, it connects the sexual and physical hunger Ordynina is comparing. It also provides another allusion to Aleksandra Kollontai and the "glass of water" theory attributed to her in support of casual sex. Third, the offering of food she herself has prepared is part of Kseniia's traditional (Troparov) aspect, the domestic woman preparing food for her loved one, comparable to the more typical women (undoubtedly part of the ninety-nine percent) who prepare food for and participate in the ball/beauty pageant.

but with sexual organs. In fact, sometimes she feels that “vsia revoliutsiia --- vsia revoliutsiia --- pakhnet polovymi organami,”⁵³⁹ making her head spin (253).⁵⁴⁰ Even the cultures of (polygamous) East and (monogamous) West are ultimately based, in their own ways, on carnal sexuality (254). She reiterates that Karl Marx erred in his attempt to bracket all of life in material allotments, cards and posters, but she too is talking only about physical needs, not spiritual ones, as is made clear by her emphasis on sexual organs, rather than sex or love or a desire for children. Her views are presented primarily as a monologue delivered by her two *alter egos* --- the Cherep aspect lecturing on sex, the Troparov side graciously offering refreshments --- with no response from her guest⁵⁴¹ until she has received a summons to the Cheka (a “plot” has been discovered). Troparov speaks then only to ascertain in parting that it is indeed she who has been sending him anonymous letters. Her traditional feminine side responds softly, hesitantly confirming this and noting that she prepared the jam pastries for him as well.

Her internal conflict, having reached its peak after Cherep’s arrest, is reflected in her final letter to Troparov. Both her romantic expectation and her liberated expectation have been proven wrong. This letter opens with an almost verbatim repetition of Kseniia’s “virginity speech” as previously delivered to Cherep, followed by a statement of her astonishment that when her beloved visited her the night before, her heart did not break --- indicating the failure of her romantic orientation to life despite the “grandiose”

⁵³⁹ “the whole revolution, the whole revolution, smells of sex organs.”

⁵⁴⁰ All this sexuality makes her head spin; earlier all that death (in Moscow) affected Troparov the same way (234).

⁵⁴¹ The one-sided quality of Kseniia’s conversations with these men is further evidence that they function more as elements controlled by her imagination than as autonomous multi-dimensional human beings with whom she interacts authentically. This also substantiates the “deepest absence of interest” in other human beings (208) that she describes in the opening letter to Troparov.

quality of romantic love (257). Then she presents a “plot outline” recounting her execution of Cherep as an anonymous encounter between a man and a woman. She characterizes the “man” in this story as one who neither loved nor wrote poetry but was incredibly handsome and infinitely adept at love-making, able to get whatever he wanted from his slave-like sex-partner, because she was possessed by a “grandiose” dream (not of “love” this time but of her own sexual nature as equivalent to that of men) (257). When this exceptional woman, not one of the vast majority of women described above, was approached by a true beloved, one “izbrannyi navsegda,” the whole sexual relationship flashed before her eyes and she recognized that she too “had been plundered” like the unmarried women in her theory (257).⁵⁴² Fate ordained that the woman and her “plunderer” be face-to-face with a revolver readily available to her. Feeling now that her heart would break from pain and from the enjoyment of revenge, she shrieked hysterically and then shot him twice in the head, feeling a physical sensation of pleasure as she “shot through two skulls,” the second of which left splatters on the wall (257).

Obviously the woman in the “story” is Kseniia herself, the sex-mate Cherep, and the one “chosen forever” Troparov, whom Kseniia has long worshipped from afar and only recently met personally. Her pre-revolutionary legacy of romantic reading and expectation collides explosively with the progressive sexual morality and masculinization of women characteristic of the revolutionary days. Her own theory should have told her that Cherep, in their uncommitted liaison, was approaching her with the scorn-and-ravage mentality of the man outside of marriage, but it did not --- or else it didn’t matter to her, because she was so convinced that she, like a man, could preserve her soul to bestow on

⁵⁴² “[. . .] ibo k nei prikholodil drugoi, izbrannyi navsegda . . . [. . .] I vdruk zhenshchina vspomnila vse, chto bylo, *kak ee ograbili*.” (“[. . .] for another came to her, one chosen forever . . . [. . .] And suddenly the woman remembered everything that had happened, *how she had been plundered*.”) Pil’niak’s emphasis.

another later on. She saw herself as different from those women who could not separate love from the first sexual encounter, and in a sense she became one of those men (married to non-virgins) who couldn't tolerate the partner they chose even when they had known exactly what they were getting. The physical (sexual?) enjoyment she experiences from exacting violent vengeance is a major perversion of the physical and holy pleasure that she knew should come with a loving, procreational union. Even more than in "Kak obyknovenno," sex here has been removed from the spiritual and procreative context to one of materiality, depersonalization, pleasure for its own sake, and death. Ordynina's professional roles in Zhenotdel and Cheka, corporate agents of defeminization, terror, and death, have taken their toll on her; she truly "sbilas' s dorogi."

Fates

Cherep is the first to die, at the hand of Kseniia, who has also signed the arrest warrant delivered to him as he sits drinking (and discussing sex) with a friend. A jail attendant singing ditties about sex warns Cherep that he is in very serious trouble, but Cherep's response is unspecified; his execution is described only in Kseniia's letter. For Cherep the Revolution serves as an opportunity for self-gratification, via sex and in other ways. Always aware, as is Kseniia ("dazhe esli b my umerli!"), that death could come any time in any way, he exploits the time he has for all the personal pleasure he can get. For him, the Revolution smells of sexual organs and opportunistically acquired pleasures. Living for the present, the physical and material, with no regard for other people or for life's larger purposes, he has no future. Kseniia's shrieks just prior to his execution recall her earlier hysteria when a stray dog's strange bony steps and cold tongue interrupted her waking dreams as she awaited Cherep. The dream revealed that Cherep, rather than being

a predatory but noble (and, we will see, moral) wolf, was really just a dog.

Troparov's fate is ambiguous. The following morning, upon learning of Cherep's death, he springs into action and prepares to flee. His exact motivation is unclear --- is he expecting arrest as a beneficiary of Cherep's corrupt operation? Or, having read Kseniia's letter, does he recognize that he, too, might be subject to Cherep's fate, since he also was associated with a failed "grandiose" dream ("why did her heart not break?")? He buries his notebooks and other writing materials in the basement and prepares to escape to the Whites, having no obvious alternative refuge. His ultimate fate is not specified, but Kuz'ma Egorovich arrives that evening to smuggle out the books and notes of the "vernii sochinitel'," Dmitrii Troparov, leaving hope that the writer's works will be preserved and that he will live to write another day. Although Troparov, too, has strayed from life's plan through his infidelities, possible incest and other "Sukhodol" crimes and through his exploitation of women as sex objects and of everyone as writing material, his basic values (truth, authenticity, harmony with nature, procreation, love for his sister) remain sound.

Kseniia, after executing Cherep, is in turn an object of vengeance, trapped by a wolf avenging his mate's death at human hands.⁵⁴³ The reason for her visit to Troparov's house at sunset the day after Cherep's execution is unclear. Did "the two skulls" she shot represent the two men who personified the failures of her dreams (Troparov's skull, in absentia, and Cherep's, which splattered the wall)? Is she coming to execute Troparov, "two heads taller than Cherep," in the flesh? In any case, the house is dead as a tomb, and she does not go in. She stops, stands by the illuminated windows of the "coffin-like"

⁵⁴³ See analysis of "Pozemka," above. In this restructuring, the wolf's mate is referred to as his wife ("zhena") (248).

house (262),⁵⁴⁴ then continues on toward the village, (again) oblivious to a nearby wolf. The wolf forces her from the path (again one could say, “ona sbilas’ s dorogi . . .”) and attacks her as she walks on through the forest. This wolf, like Kseniia herself, is seeking revenge, but he has lived according to nature’s intent. He has mated for life, produced and raised offspring, led his pack, and now avenges the death of his mate at the expense of his leadership position and life. Kseniia, on the other hand, mated without commitment and without intent to procreate, and used the power of her position to avenge behavior that she had welcomed, transferring the blame to Cherep (and perhaps to Troparov as well) for the error of her own “dream.”⁵⁴⁵ She diverged from the right path of life when she renounced traditional womanhood, breaking life’s rules in the expectation that she could rewrite the laws of female roles, and investing her energies in destructive behavior (Cheka, Zhenotdel) and fruitless sexuality (the pleasure-oriented, body-only relationship with Cherep). The wolf forces her from the path for the final time, leading to her doom -- - nature, whose guidance she has consciously rejected, destroys her.

(As Cherep dies (unexpectedly) through Kseniia’s vengeance, and Kseniia (unexpectedly) through the wolf’s, so the wolf dies, expectedly and with acceptance, through the vengeance of the pack he has betrayed in his mate’s favor. But there is hope in his death; he is replaced by a new leader, one with a promising mate, and the wolfpack will live on and multiply.)

⁵⁴⁴ “dom, kak grob”

⁵⁴⁵ In a broader interpretation, Eric Naiman is correct to associate her with the Cheka as “an organ of Revolutionary control” that “can no longer control itself” (61).

Digressions and Fragments

Several narrative fragments support the theme of sexual roles and gender characteristics, the most significant concerning a local engineer whom Troparov first encounters on the train to Moscow. This engineer provides illustrations of the negative outcomes of uncommitted, promiscuous sex and marriage to a non-virginal bride. He himself takes advantage of the sexual freedom brought by the progressive morality associated with the Revolution, having sex with a different woman each night, but he hates meeting the dismal grey dawns with these partners, dawns which make everything, especially the women, look dirty and fill him with regret for the previous night. This experience points up the spiritual emptiness of sex-only relationships between uncommitted partners who seek only the pleasure of the moment (characteristic of men in Kseniia's theory and of the apparently universal escape-into-sex mentality of the day). The physical consequences make the dawns even more dismal for him when a planned tryst is prevented by complications from the woman's abortion. This engineer also gives anecdotal evidence to support Kseniia's view of a man's need to marry a virgin, a woman who will devote body and soul to him: he relates the tale of a doctor who marries a non-virgin and lives with her for over thirty years, loving and torturing her all this time. He ultimately murders her, unable to tolerate the consequences of her non-virginal state.⁵⁴⁶

The coachmen's story of the hysterical barren fillies comprises another background element supporting the sexual theme. This fragment occurs in the text immediately after Ordynina disbands the ball/beauty pageant in the Professional Club. These fillies sense stallions at a great distance, inviting them loudly and obviously to

⁵⁴⁶ Pil'niak wrote a similar story in late 1915, while reflecting on his breakup with Nadia Pavlovich. That story was reworked for inclusion in this one. K. B. Andronikashvili-Pil'niak, "1915" 164-65.

mate long after rutting season is over, but they never produce issue. The narrator follows the story with a quote he attributes to Rozanov, about an old maids' cult in which male and female lust ferments in its own juice rather than producing a vine. The narrator specifically notes that this digression is not about Ordynina (who is also sexually inviting but ultimately barren, even poisonous) but about the (*bourgeois*) townspeople she had dispersed from the ball/beauty pageant. This story reinforces the theme about the socially prevalent shallow, exhibitionist preoccupation with loveless sexuality that does not lead to procreation.

Conclusions

This story reveals Pil'niak's view of a chaotic, transitional time in the formation of the new Soviet state. Men and women are trying to understand the changes in their lives and world and to find ways to cope with them. A major emphasis in this story, with respect to the sexual *ethos*, is the change in women's roles. Women, as exemplified by Kseniia Ordynina, are seeking ways to reconcile old sensibilities with the new structure and its values. Kseniia's final letter (not to mention her actions!) indicates that she has not succeeded. The old romantic values fail her: her heart does not break, as she had anticipated, at the high point of her love experience, her meeting with Troparov. The new equality of women with men fails her as well; she is unable to preserve her soul in purity for a true beloved while giving her body to a temporary lover, and she expresses her frustration in lethal, masculine vengeance. It is not clear that she really ever understands that her theories do not work; the final "plot" she suggests to Troparov is virtually identical to the first one, with only genders reversed --- now it is a woman instead of a man complaining of sleeplessness and that her beloved, who had promised to come, has

failed her --- with the addition that she cannot bear it. This “story” may indicate that at least in the world of romance, her “grandiose dreams” of heartbreaking love side-by-side with gender equality and sameness still prevail; or, perhaps, that her inability to bear the failure of her expectations is forcing her to seek Troparov’s death as she did Cherep’s, that Troparov’s head has been shot through but not yet splattered the walls.⁵⁴⁷ Kseniia’s struggle is universalized through the Zhenotdel: women are being defeminized, moving from traditional, nurturing maternal roles to smoke-permeated, violent masculine ones.

Russians are indeed feasting amid the plague. Everywhere, in the countryside and in the city, people are turning to the sensual joys of sex to avoid the death that surrounds them --- death from war, disease, starvation, wolves. Mating and sexual union should promise new life, as with the wolves, but immersion in sexual activity when motivated by death rather than (pro-)creation of life leads to more death, not renewed life. Sensual escape, when not treated as a holy creative act, is blasphemous, and is at best barren like the coachmen’s alluring fillies. In most cases such escape engenders more death, filling the Moscow streets with women seeking abortions, the ultimate form of societal suicide. The death of Mariia, the archetypal mother figure, and the obscurity of her grave can be read as the death of motherhood itself and its value. Poor, lonely Nataliia cannot even get baby rabbits to survive. In a sense, the Revolution is presented as a sexual climax, a release expressed as lethal violence⁵⁴⁸ rather than as love and progeny.

⁵⁴⁷ She blames the two men for her own mistaken perceptions as articulated in her “grandiose dreams.” In a broader political interpretation, hindsight suggests that the lofty Pamirs of Communist achievement remain an unattainable dream, whose inaccessibility will be avenged through violence perpetrated by the organs of Communism itself, as suggested in Naiman (61).

⁵⁴⁸ Naiman 60-61.

In this sex-permeated story, the only birth mentioned is associated with the new nation --- “Moria i ploskogoriia peremestilis’! Ibo v Rossii prekrasnye muki rozhdeniia! Ibo Rossiia --- ozoniruetsia!” (263).⁵⁴⁹ But this is not the description of a new being but of labor pains, purification, and reorganization. There is only the hope that something good will come out of all this restructuring, which is metaphorically the creation of a new world.

Pil’niak’s position is clear. The purpose of all life is to be born, live, love, mate, reproduce, and die. The loving and reproducing have dropped out of the human life sequence in the historical period described here. What is the real sexual nature of man and woman? As Kseniia describes, a woman gives her whole self to her first lover, hence she must preserve herself for that one special beloved, “izbrannyi navsegda,” her mate chosen for life. Men give themselves totally to their wives, approaching them with the intent of holy (pro-)creation --- but approaching other women to despoil and plunder them, albeit perhaps with a touch of guilt. Women who marry as non-virgins will never be able to give their full souls to their husbands; this results in a permanent inequity between husband and wife, which will ultimately destroy their relationship. Kseniia’s belief in her own difference from this female typology --- her adherence to the progressive views of women as liberated from their traditional roles and mentality --- is proven wrong, but not before it leads her to personal torment and to the violent perversion of her life’s purpose. To Pil’niak, the old way still seems best, with men out in the world, protecting and providing, and women nurturing, with a taste of the romantic, human joys of life for all. He suggests to the Soviet women workers of the day:

⁵⁴⁹ “The seas and dry land have shifted! For Russia is having wonderful labor pains! For Russia is being purified!”

Вот, советской работнице, совершенно
ответственно необычайной, сказать бы:

--- Товарищ, вместо квартхоза --- не хотите ли
свадьбы и тихой прозы --- с любимым прекрасным,
нежным, в этакой квартирке с хризантемами, с
самоварчиком неизбежным, со старыми темами ---
целомудрия, верности, чадородия, Тургенева? --- Ну-
ка! Где же любовные муки --- на карточках?! (237)

Look here, to the Soviet worker-girl, a quite responsibly
exceptional one, one might say:

--- Comrade, instead of a landlord --- don't you want a
wedding and soft prose --- with a wonderful beloved, a tender one, in a
little apartment just so, with chrysanthemums, and the obligatory little
samovar, and the old themes --- chastity, fidelity, childbearing,
Turgenev? Ah well! Where are the torments of love --- on [ration]
cards?!

Love's Boundaries: The Incest Temptation

At least three stories involve, in increasing degree, an exploration of the incest taboo and its effects. While the earliest story, "Smertel' noe manit,"⁵⁵⁰ is really part of Pil'niak's "death" *oeuvre*, it reflects the potential ramifications of the incest taboo. The second story, "Pookskii rasskaz,"⁵⁵¹ is a coming-of-age story which involves a one-sided recognition of the incest temptation and sublimation of the desire, ultimately resulting in a sort of "spiritual" incest after circumstances change to remove the carnal temptation. In the third, "Nizhegorodskii otkos,"⁵⁵² mother-son incest is temporarily resisted but ultimately occurs in an Oedipal triangle.

These appear to be three independent tales, but surprisingly the third can be viewed both as a rewrite of "Pookskii" as well as a combination of the latter with

⁵⁵⁰ Usually translated "Death Beckons." Dated by the author March 1918, first published the same year. I will be citing from "Smertel' noe manit," 6-vol. coll., vol. 1, 322-27.

⁵⁵¹ "An Oka Story," dated by the author 14 January 1927, first published the same year. I will be citing from "Pookskii rasskaz," 6-vol. coll., vol. 4, 147-163.

⁵⁵² "The Nizhnii Novgorod Slope," written December 1927, first published 1928. See analysis below for publication data, as there are multiple versions.

“Smertel’noe manit.” Ultimately “Smertel’noe . . .” and “Otkos” are “death” stories, while “Pookskii” presents an especially powerful affirmation of life. Although naturally there are male and female protagonists in all three works, these stories center primarily on the experience of women. Only “Otkos” can be said to have incest as the main theme. All three stories are sensitively drawn sketches of human beings in imperfect circumstances which leave the reader with a measure of ambiguity about the absolute validity of the incest taboo and other questions concerning how human life is best lived.

I will continue to mention additional minor themes in these works which shed light on Pil’niak’s larger biological *ethos*; some of the other major themes in these stories will be covered later in this chapter.

Incest Avoided, Life Evaded: “Smertel’noe manit”

“Smertel’noe manit” is part of Pil’niak’s early Polunin cycle,⁵⁵³ along with “Polovod’e”/“Lesnaia dacha”⁵⁵⁴ and “Snega.”⁵⁵⁵ In this cycle, which does not fit together seamlessly,⁵⁵⁶ simple, nature-loving landowner Polunin has an unsuccessful marriage with sophisticated urbanite Lidiia. He later falls in love with Alena, a simple forest girl, who moves in with him; they have a child Natasha and live happily for a spell. This particular story reveals Alena’s background and the ultimate unhappy ending of their relationship. As mentioned above, this is a “death” story, one in which the characters

⁵⁵³ Themes dominant in this cycle include the corrupting, unnatural influence of the city versus the pure, natural ones of the countryside; spontaneous, sincere versus debauched “love”; and the strong maternal drive which leads a mature woman to seek an uncommitted sexual encounter with a former partner in hopes of producing a child she will raise alone.

⁵⁵⁴ Usually translated “Spring Floods,” written April 1917 and first published 1918. It was re-written and republished as “The Forest Dacha” in 1923. I have access only to “Lesnaia dacha.”

⁵⁵⁵ “The Snows,” dated by the author March, 1917, first published 1919.

⁵⁵⁶ Some names vary from story to story, as do plot and storyline aspects.

spend much of their lives in that liminal state which lacks full commitment either to abundant life (the procreation trajectory of Pil'niak's birth-life-mate-procreate-death cycle) or to death (the end of the fading trajectory after the launching of offspring, which closes in the acceptance of death).

In "Smertel'noe manit," Alena's June birth endows her with blooming, spring-like (fecund) qualities and moods for life. She grows up in a forester's lodge with her parents, learning the ways of nature and medical uses of the local herbs she and her mother gather and preserve. In harmony with nature, her life and character are significantly more complex than those of Marina in "God ikh zhizni" (1915), and in this story it is the local human culture, rather than nature, that dictates life's scheduled stages, making the human condition itself more complex.

Alena's happy childhood is marked by a significant incident one Eastertide. A charming, laughing young student-landowner, full of *joie-de-vivre*, passes through the forest and asks Alena's mother if he can safely cross the railroad bridge above the swollen river. She tells him it is safe but cautions him against looking down at the swirling waters below. He does look down from his liminal stance in the middle of the bridge and hurls himself into the current --- only by a miracle does he survive. At this time Alena, still a child, does not understand her mother's explanation that the path of death is alluring ("smertel'noe manit"), that people sometimes feel drawn from precarious locations to the lethal ground or water below. Part of life's challenge consists of appropriately timed resistance (or acquiescence) to the lure of death, be it from earth, water, trains, or God. Later on, after her own life takes a bad turn over which she has no control, the young woman Alena comes to understand this sensation as she too looks

down at the river from this bridge.

The “rules” of the society in which Alena lives are said to be “strict” and “simple”: “Everyone born should marry in springtime, reproduce, and then die,” but those who do not fit into this sequence are not condemned or ostracized (325). They are allowed to arrange their lives as they see fit, in view of the fact that all plants and animals mate and reproduce one way or another. As it turns out, there is no need for human condemnation; life itself seems to bring any necessary punishment --- or at least suffering --- for non-observance of the rules.

Alena is a “right person,” already in harmony with nature’s procreative, life-enhancing aspect, with her very personality and her association with healing herbs. She is on the prescribed schedule, singing and dancing the circle dances (“khorovody”) with the other maidens, falling in love and becoming betrothed to the youth Aleksei at the right time. However, she is forced from this procreative trajectory by her mother’s confession that in fact Aleksei is Alena’s biological half-brother, the product of an adulterous affair during Alena’s father’s military service. The laws of the community (and nature) dictate that Alena marry and mate with her beloved; however, at the same time, she is presented with the incest taboo, and marriage to her “forever chosen one” becomes impossible. At this point experience confirms her mother’s previous lesson about the lure of mortality, as both “sin” and “the sacred” draw her (324) --- in her situation it is doom either way. Although she is surrounded by nature and its ways, the incest taboo prevents her from obeying --- or forces her to resist --- the call to mate and reproduce with her beloved.

There is some good news here, according to the narrator, who observes that each person has one unfortunate love experience in order to become an authentic human being

--- “the suffering purifies” him (324).⁵⁵⁷ Alena’s heart and body continue to yearn for her forbidden beloved, especially in June, the mating season so native to her own essence. She sublimates her forbidden love, first at home with her family as a *vekovushka*,⁵⁵⁸ then in religion at twenty-four, since, according to the narrator, “the religious is always connected with the carnal” (324).⁵⁵⁹

Life has gone off course also for the vibrant, laughing young man who had almost died that day fifteen years before. He, Polunin, returns to his forest estate seeking a quiet, sensible life after years wasted touring Europe with an unsuitable wife. Now a sad, mature man with a full beard,⁵⁶⁰ he like all his class had previously been uprooted by the Revolution; after that he had personally spent his inheritance on his divorce in order to

⁵⁵⁷ The “requirement” for the first love to be an unhappy one is not universal in Pil’niak, but it is quite common. For example, both Nataliia Ordynina and Arkhip Arkhipov had had unfortunate love experiences before finding one another (*Golyi god*), and the “perfect love match” in “Vernost” was delayed for both partners; in *Volga*, partners Liubov’ and Sadykov come together only after romantic failures on both sides, and the “right” match of Ol’ga and Poletika is interrupted and resumed after much suffering. In my opinion, these examples are among the many expressions of Pil’niak’s long-term struggle to cope with the devastating failure of his own first-love relationship with the more worldly, sophisticated and sexually experienced Nadia Pavlovich, after which he attempted suicide. “Snega” and “Lesnaia dacha” can be viewed as coping fantasies on the part of the man (Polunin/Pil’niak) availing himself of the opportunity to reject a more sophisticated and sexually experienced woman who has hurt or wronged him, as can Aleksei’s relationship with Shura in “Pookskii rasskaz,” below.

⁵⁵⁸ She remained with her family after the age of twenty, the age after which girls are rarely chosen as brides. A *vekovushka* is a woman who does not mate at her proper time, becoming an “old maid.”

⁵⁵⁹ There is a subtle Rozanov subtext in this story which associates spring and Easter not with birth and fleshly manifestations of life but with the more ethereal forms of life in association with death. This accords with Rozanov’s interpretation of Orthodoxy as a death-oriented force; he felt that Orthodoxy emphasized Easter (death/spirituality) too much while not celebrating Christmas (birth/carnality) sufficiently. The name Nataliia is said to be from the late Latin term “natale domini,” “birth of the Lord” or “Christmas day,” so the birth (and death) of Nataliia in this story serves as a counterbalance and contrast to the Easter events. Nataliia herself is a temporary, liminal presence in their liminal life state, her birth directing them toward the life trajectory, her death reversing the direction. Source for the meaning of “Nataliia/Natal’ia”: *Behind the Name: The Etymology and History of First Names*, ed. Mike Campgell, 2010, accessed 23 Sept. 2010, <<http://www.behindthename.com/name/natalie>>.

⁵⁶⁰ Polunin has certain commonalities with some Tolstoian heroes such as Levin and Nekhliudov, hence with Tolstoi himself. As stated above, Jensen refers to Pil’niak’s Polunin/Arkhipov cycles as part of a projected “Tolstoian” larger work, perhaps a novel, which never came to fruition (110-120).

return now to his forest home and bury himself in books. According to “Smertel’noe manit,”⁵⁶¹ he has now fallen in love with Alena and wants to create with her a full, natural life. However, he also views her as something of an object which he will refine, perhaps as some intellectuals of former days sought to refine the peasantry. He is seeking God, righteousness, and essential Russianness and hoping to find the true and natural in Alena, a nature child of a lower social class. He teaches her to read and write and reads hagiography with her in a harsh, remote, isolated lifestyle in which their only social activity is going to church. In short, he is seeking an ascetic life, and Alena seems an appropriate partner for him at least partly because she has turned toward religion after her lost love. Ultimately theirs is not a spontaneous love-based union (as it appears in the other stories of this cycle) but one between people who have been forced from life’s preordained natural sequence and seek a kind of substitute happiness.

About three months pregnant by Polunin, Alena leaves her parental home and moves in with him, simply and directly. Baby Natasha is born in a few months, apparently proving the validity of the match. But this life in harmony with God and nature does not work out as one might expect. Polunin reads and chops wood, his words about truth and goodness becoming “callous and angry” as he ages (326), and Alena devotes her entire being to Natasha’s care for the next five years, bound to life exclusively through her maternal role. Both Polunin and Alena are in a sort of liminal state introduced by their mating and pregnancy, in which they embrace neither life nor death with abandon, but still cling at least temporarily to the life-promoting aspect.

⁵⁶¹ These details are not completely consistent with the other Polunin works, in which their romance and unequal but happy marriage, as well as some details of Polunin’s earlier life, are described.

The death of daughter Natasha one April leaves Alena spiritually empty and propels her trajectory further into its deathward orientation, away from Polunin and his (toxic?) books. Their stop together on the bridge over the turbulent floodwaters on their way home from Natasha's funeral recalls to them their mutual and separate youth experiences and suggests that death's allure has now overcome that of life for both of them. In June --- her special month --- Alena leaves Polunin's home for religious wandering as abruptly as she had arrived. Her past is over and dead to her --- the heady air of June herbs, her fiancé Aleksei, her daughter, even Polunin himself, and her mother's secret --- and ahead of her there remain only the prospects of her own mortality, God and wandering (326). She roams from monastery to monastery, in the open air, "sinning" (sexually) only once, "close to God" in a monastery hostel (327).

What went wrong that Alena, a happy child of nature, health, and fecundity, would turn her orientation from vibrant life to isolation and death? This 1918 story indicates Pil'niak's growing recognition that simply following nature's cycles in the "proper" way, as in "God ikh zhizni," does not guarantee existential fulfillment, especially as the environment gains in its orientation toward culture and away from pure nature. Alena's mother's adultery (resulting in Aleksei's birth) was visited on Alena, who had grown up appropriately, courting and preparing to mate at the proper time. Alena lived the life supposedly required in this story less by the rules of nature than of human society, "nash narod" (325), but the potential for incest prevented her from mating and procreation with her "izbrannyi navsegda" beloved. Faced with an impossible choice, nature having caused her love of a taboo other, she was forced onto a secondary path

which led first to sublimation of her physical and spiritual mating drives and changed her scheduled orientation prematurely from the procreational cycle to the deathward one. She first emulated her parents during her withdrawal time, gathering herbs with her mother, inspecting the railroad tracks with her father, and then, since she would apparently never fulfill a parental role of her own, she withdrew still further into the mortality-related mysteries of religion. But because she was torn from life's path by external forces, by the incest revelation which precluded her proper mating, she was able to maintain sufficient energy to re-enter the life-procreation trajectory when invited by Polunin.

Like Alena, Polunin too was derailed from his right and natural path at least in part by circumstances beyond his control --- the Revolution. His boyhood plunge into the river either indicated or caused his early proclivity toward death,⁵⁶² a tendency he repressed for a time but which eventually prevailed. His unwise mating, perhaps an expression of too much inclination toward civilization and westernized culture, further soured his originally joyous nature and he, too, withdrew to the quiet of forest, books, religion and philosophy as the deathward orientation of his life cycle became prematurely dominant. The man who returned to his estate was not the fun-loving youth who had had a narrow escape from death --- a resurrection of sorts but an event that drew him permanently into death's current --- before the Revolution and his marriage. His motives for marrying Alena included love but also a sort of lust for control, a desire to re-create her through education and to live a certain type of (nature-based but ascetic) life.

However, Polunin (like the author) had to learn that even children of nature accumulate

⁵⁶² It is possible that Polunin's original dive from the bridge indicates some other earlier event or condition that oriented him toward death rather than toward life and procreation even at that early time. Or, as Alena's mother warned him, perhaps the sight of the swirling waters simply made him dizzy (323).

emotional and experiential baggage. Society did not condemn their match, and initially nature blessed it with a daughter in their first year together (although not in Alena's own "right time"), showing that the procreative aspect of their life cycle had not completely faded. However, both were still retreating in their own ways from what life had already dealt them: Alena sublimating her sorrows in motherhood, Polunin in his books and asceticism. Their physically demanding life and its social isolation drove them further toward the joyless, lethal aspects of life; the lack of authenticity in their love for one another and Polunin's apparent lack of parental interest in Natasha ultimately punished them as they withdrew even from one another; and somehow their essential human vitality was lost before its time. Polunin's early-established dominant death drive finally mastered all three of them.

Unlike Polunin's early mishap, Natasha's April death⁵⁶³ was not followed by "resurrection" but served to remove Alena's only connection to life, thus solidifying the allure of the death cycle for Alena. She departed to wander among religious "homes" for the rest of her days, her one sin the final expression of the procreation-oriented trajectory of her life, the final flare of her life force.

The reader can only speculate as to how Alena's life would have been different had she not been told of Aleksei's relation to her.⁵⁶⁴ Perhaps she would have remained (as

⁵⁶³ The death of a child, while rare in Pil'niak, usually spells doom for the mother, and it is often a sign of the mother's wrong living. This is made especially clear in "Pervyi rasskaz," the first of "Dva rasskaza," written "by 1921" and first published 1922. In this story, possibly a response to Artsybashev's Sanin, a liberated woman tries to "have it all." She gets married in order to experience motherhood, essentially orchestrating a younger, lower-class man's proposal to her, and ends up devoting her life to her education and career rather than family. Her children die; she miscarries, divorces, and returns to her childhood home to live out her life caring for her difficult and eccentric aging father. (This story is also a social commentary and is equally critical of the husband.)

⁵⁶⁴ One will wonder, also, if Alena could have been better served by creation of a "sustaining dream" somehow associating her beloved Aleksei with her husband Polunin (see "Pookskii rasskaz," below).

prescribed) on the abundant life trajectory for a joyous and fulfilling life, with only her mother suffering secret anxiety and guilt. The potential disaster, an abnormal child in the next generation or beyond --- might or might not have resulted from the union.⁵⁶⁵ As it was, baby Nataliia died prematurely, so the procreative aspect of the “substitute” match was not a success. Nataliia seemed a “bridge” to life, but she too proved only transitional, ultimately redirecting Alena’s existential orientation from life to death.

Incestus interruptus?: “Pookskii rasskaz”

In “Pookskii rasskaz,”⁵⁶⁶ the possibility of incest is an indirect theme. The consummation is first averted by the circumstantial separation of those who might be tempted and later permanently rejected by one of the attracted parties. However, the incestuous attraction is ultimately revealed to be even more complex than it initially appears. This is a rich story which contains strong themes of positive motherhood and the value of individual integrity (authenticity) and a sustaining dream.

The story covers intermittent periods between autumn 1911 and early 1927. In part it is a coming-of-age story of the young Aleksei Bitner, finishing high school (*real’noe uchilishche*) at the home of his paternal uncle, Gotfrid Gotfridovich Bitner, a russified (questionably so) German, in the Russian provinces. Aleksei’s coming of age

⁵⁶⁵ However, it must be pointed out that Pil’niak’s sole “story” in which true biological incest actually occurs (“Nizhegorodskii otkos” and its variations) is one in which the woman, it is made clear, is biologically incapable of producing (additional) children. In Pil’niak’s other explorations of which I am aware, the incest is (a) totally averted; or (b) between people related by marriage but not genetically, and is still averted; or (c) ultimately manifested in an intimate spiritual but not carnal relationship. This conservatism may be due to censorship issues or to a true resistance to biological incest on the part of the writer.

⁵⁶⁶ There are slight textual variants in the published versions of this story. I will be citing from “Pookskii rasskaz,” 6-vol. coll., vol. 4, 147-163, which matches the version first published in *Novyi mir* 3 (1927): 64-76. I will point out the few but meaningful variations where relevant.

involves sexual experimentation with a college student, Aleksandra (“Shura”) Belozerskaia, a few years older than he. In the introductory section of the story, the narrator dismisses her role and impact as insignificant, but the reader wonders if he protests too much: “And this same first chapter speaks of a girl-student, Shura Belozerskaia: Shura Belozerskaia is in no way an episode of this story” (149).⁵⁶⁷ Aleksei is the primary subjective persona behind the first chapter, in which the incest suggestion is the strongest,⁵⁶⁸ but the main object of the story as a whole is his uncle’s wife, Frau Leontina Bitner.

In fact, this tale is at least doubly autobiographical, since it reflects not only the senior year of high school Pil’niak spent with the family of his paternal uncle in Nizhnii Novgorod,⁵⁶⁹ but also probably the realization of an older Pil’niak, writing at the age of thirty-three (the age of Frau Bitner, the female protagonist), that sexuality is still a potent force in people beyond the early maturity and usual childbearing age of their twenties.⁵⁷⁰

⁵⁶⁷ In the first chapter of this story, centered on Aleksei’s adolescence, Shura is in part another negative manifestation of Nadia Pavlovich, with her non-virginal state, poetry-writing, and generally inappropriate (to Pil’niak’s view) value structure. See K.B. Andronikashvili-Pil’niak, “1915,” for Pil’niak’s notebook jottings about Nadia, her personality and values, aspects of their breakup, and Pil’niak’s various reflections and fantasies concerning Nadia and their relationship. In especially the later (“adult”) chapters, in which Andrei is absent or plays a minor role, her names (Aleksandra, Shura) and views also associate this character with the ideas of social progressive Aleksandra (also “Shura”) Kollontai. The narrator’s denigration of her role in this story indicates that her attitudes and influence ultimately do not prevail.

⁵⁶⁸ Aleksei is not involved in the events of the second chapter and learns of them later, if at all.

⁵⁶⁹ The author himself asserts the story’s autobiographical nature within the story text that he, the author, once saw Herr Bitner using a blue and red pencil as described in the story to mark passages positively and negatively as he read (148). K. B. Andronikashvili-Pil’niak comments on this, Pil’niak’s final high school year spent with his paternal uncle’s family in Nizhnii Novgorod, and describes his personality, behavior, and the impact of this experience on his writings in “Detskie gody” and “Iz tvorcheskoi istorii.”

⁵⁷⁰ Pil’niak’s 1923 letters to D.A. Lutokhin and I. M. Kasatkin, October 10 (No. 157) and October 14 (No. 158) respectively, 238-39, reveal his concerns about aging past his “high water mark” as he turns twenty-nine that month. Of course there is a jocular tone to the letters, but they show that he is already attuned to his own aging process.

Like Ol'ga in "Veter pered martom" (1919), the barren heroine experiences confusion between maternal and sexual roles involving her nephew. In the most technical sense, biological incest is not at issue, since Frau Bitner, the aunt, is related to Aleksei only by marriage. Her role confusion is mirrored by that of her nephew, who at eighteen is coming of age sexually and is attracted both to the young student Shura, only slightly older than he, and to his aunt, fifteen years his senior. It is only years later, however, that Aleksei realizes that he and Frau Bitner had "a romance" (162). As in "Smertel'noe manit" (1918), the incestuous desires on the part of the woman are sublimated in child-rearing, but in this case also in a sort of sustaining fantasy involving the children's paternity.

Aleksei's story in the first chapter of this tale is a typical young man's maturational story. He is culturally Russian, not German, and has difficulties adjusting to the rigorous household regime of his uncle and aunt ("(the scythe of) German organization comes up against (the stone of) Russian disorder" (150)⁵⁷¹). He is sociable, makes friends easily, falls in love with a different girl every week, reads with friends and to girlfriends, gets essentially "grounded" by Frau Bitner for poor grades, and is generally full of dreams and excitement about the world like any other eighteen-year-old having all life ahead of him ("kogda vse vpered" (149)). His academic interests and abilities lean more toward the humanities than to the natural sciences, which must have been disappointing to his uncle, a zoologist/agronomist. However, in mid-winter Aleksei enters a serious depression ("neurasthenia") and becomes totally lethargic, unable to get up in the mornings or to sleep at night. In this condition he vacillates between highly emotional behavior and lethargy.

⁵⁷¹ "nakhodit kosa organizovannosti nemetskoj na kamen' rossijskikh bezalaberstv"

What concerns us here is Aleksei's developing sexuality, which is expressed primarily through his relationships with his aunt and the winter houseguest, Shura.

Aleksei's uncle is rarely available (and also completely uninterested in Aleksei), and except for occasional insults directed at the boy, leaves Aleksei to the ministrations of his wife (149);⁵⁷² she is always referred to as Frau Leontina or Frau Bitner, never as Aleksei's aunt. She is thirty-three years old and childless. At the beginning of his stay, before he has had a chance to make many friends, he spends most of his "at home" time with her, and she remains a spiritual refuge for him throughout his stay. The narrator draws particular attention to her complex character and to the ambiguities of the strong physical aspect of their relationship, suggesting that it is both maternal/filial and incipiently sexual on both sides.

Ласков ли был юноша, или в нем говорил пол, запутанный родством, --- этого не знал он сам, --- и он, конечно, не умел разбираться в бытском и духовном мире фрау Леонтины. [. . .] В досуги он приходил к фрау Леонтине, ластился к ней, звал ее на диван, и на диване, положив голову свою к ней на колени, на белое ее платье, читал вслух ей [. . .] Читая, ее рукою гладил он свои щеки, --- и, отрываясь от чтения, целовал белую ее руку. Прощаясь, они целовались. Все это отступало от немецких правил, --- быть может, ей казалось, что он, юноша, оторванный от матери, от русской матери, нуждается просто в материнской ласке? --- быть может, он восполнял отсутствующую у нее заботу матери к ребенку, потому что своего сына у нее не было? --- ей тогда было тридцать три года, --- быть может ей --- женщине --- нужна была человеческая ласка? (149)

Was the youth affectionate, or was sexuality speaking in him, confused by the family relationship? He himself didn't know --- and he, of course, couldn't possibly figure out the everyday and spiritual worlds of Frau Leontina. [. . .] At leisure he would come to Frau Leontina, show affection to her, call her to the couch, and on the couch, with his head in her lap, on her white dress, he would read to her aloud [. . .]

⁵⁷² "Gotfrid Gotfridovich ne tratil na nego vremeni, predostaviv ego frau Leontine." ("Gotfrid Gotfridovich did not waste time on him, relegating him to Frau Leontina.")

Reading, he would caress his cheeks with her hand, and, tearing himself away from reading, kiss her white hand. On parting, they would kiss each other. All this digressed from German rules: perhaps it seemed to her that he, torn away from his mother, from his Russian mother, simply needed motherly affection? or maybe he was fulfilling her need to care for a child, since she had no son of her own? She was then thirty-three, perhaps she, a woman, needed human affection?

The narrator repeatedly mentions Leontina's childless marriage. The reader wonders why there are no children, since the marriage seemed to start out well and Frau Leontina is clearly capable both of warm affection and of mothering; later it becomes clear that there is no fertility problem on the husband's side. Is she in fact infertile? Has the husband's rigidity and frequent unavailability called a halt to their sexual relationship? or perhaps his lack of spontaneity made her frigid toward him? Why does she, a beautiful married woman, "need human affection" at thirty-three? That Gotfrid Gotfridovich would reject her sexually on the grounds of her barrenness seems unlikely, in view of his lack of interest in children (see below). Clearly she does not rebuff Aleksei's sexually suggestive displays of affection, his kisses to her eyes and neck, etc., but neither does she appear to respond to them, leading him on.⁵⁷³

The most elaborately described aspect of Aleksei's maturation is his peer-related sexual development and experimentation, which also serves to point up his emotionally confused state, more obviously manifested than Leontina's. During the winter holidays and his deep depression, his uncle's former student, Shura Belozerskaia, comes from Moscow to visit the household. She is physically unattractive ("nekrasivaia" (150)) and several years Aleksei's senior. Having lost her virginity in high school, she approaches Aleksei boldly with unsolicited kisses; he is responsive but claims that he does not have

⁵⁷³ There is a shadowy Oedipal triangle here, in Aleksei's intimacy with his aunt and recurring conflict with his uncle, primarily manifested in his uncle's insults toward him rather than overtly hostile interactions.

the strength to love her, although he wants to (he is so depressed at this time that he lies on the couch all day with his face in his pillow). He cuts off their conversation immediately upon learning of her non-virginal state,⁵⁷⁴ claiming he is uninterested and that he doesn't love her anyway (152). Aleksei alternately seeks her out and rejects her, and his repetitive claims of not loving her seem exaggerated. He drills a hole in the wall between their bedrooms so they can talk late at night, and occasionally they share nighttime visits, since they are liberal, modern people, "not *petit bourgeois*" (151), and certainly "devoid of all prejudices" ("bez predrassudkov" (152)). He scientifically examines her bare shoulder, the first (female one) he has ever seen, kissing it (with her permission) as though he were a wine-taster evaluating wines. They both wish to kiss each other sexually (as a learning experience for him, of course) on the eve of her departure, but they can't agree on who should come to whose room --- and he knows that if he goes to her, he will be hopelessly in love --- so nothing further comes of their physical relationship, neither then nor later, the narrator assures us (152).

Shura, like Frau Bitner, serves as an outlet to whom Aleksei can express his evolving ideas and sensations. Shura joins him in bed at least twice to listen to the jumble of his thoughts and feelings. He talks to her about Hamsun's stories of unfulfilled love, then claims to be restructuring all his ideas of the world, and all his "instincts" (151-2).⁵⁷⁵

⁵⁷⁴ As was seen in "Ivan-da-Mar'ia," a woman's non-virginal state prior to marriage is decidedly negative, indicating that the woman's body may be available to a suitor/husband but her soul has been irretrievably awarded to another. Clearly the young protagonist is not reflecting on Shura's sexual experience at this depth, but his intuitive negative reaction here expresses the author's view.

⁵⁷⁵ Aleksei is undergoing something similar --- but at a different life stage --- to what little Sevka underwent in very early childhood, learning that he is not "the center of life" but is instead a mere "pawn in life's paws" (152); Sevka, according to the narrator, was a "slave of life." "O Sevke" (1914), to be discussed below, is one of Pil'niak's earliest published stories and one of the very few demonstrating the point of view of a child. It portrays the shock of a young child's expulsion from the glorious world of fantasy by the

Much of his angst, including the depression, is related to his sexual development and his conflicting attraction to both Frau Leontina and Shura, and it is indeed forcing him to “restructure his instincts.”

In January (after Shura’s departure) Aleksei’s bizarre behavior escalates, along with his depression. The chronology of events is not entirely clear, but he is dismissed from school (to recover) after kissing the math teacher’s bald head and tearfully telling him how dear and unfortunate he, the teacher, is. Aleksei also visits a brothel for the first time with friends, but his sense of cleanliness (“instinkt chistoplotnosti”⁵⁷⁶) precludes his participation and seems to trigger another reaction; this time he shouts that the world, himself included, has become infected with syphilis and everyone should remain at a distance from him (153). After the brothel experience he starts going to Frau Leontina (according to the narrator, despite his “syphilis”) in profound melancholy, cuddling up with her and confiding that she is “his only person” (“edinstvennyi ego chelovek” (153)). At this point he spends his days by the stove, his evenings kissing Frau Leontina, and his sleepless nights pouring out his thoughts and feelings in letters to Shura (153).

The final critical experience in Aleksei’s school year is one of total and incomprehensible betrayal. His letters full of muddled thoughts and feelings⁵⁷⁷ never receive answers from Shura. In February his uncle returns from a trip to Moscow with the

incursion of World War I and his mother’s infidelity. This maturational point of a child’s recognition that he is “not the center” of the universe is further explored in Pil’niak’s final novel, *Solianoï ambar* (1937).

⁵⁷⁶ *Chistoplotnost’* can imply both physical cleanliness and a more spiritual sense of purity. Moral or sexual purity, manifested either as virginity or chastity, is important thematically and highly valorized throughout Pil’niak’s biological *oeuvre*.

⁵⁷⁷ These do not seem to be love letters per se but rather expressions of Aleksei’s evolving feelings and ideas about life; they probably do refer to their mutual experiences, leading Frau Leontina to refer to them later as “compromising” Shura (159).

unsealed letters in hand, claiming to be returning them at Shura's request, and he mocks Aleksei for writing such rubbish to girls. Aleksei is devastated and bewildered by the actions of both Shura⁵⁷⁸ and his uncle. He takes the letters to his place of comfort, to Frau Leontina, to read them to her, when his uncle, "uncharacteristically angry for a German," grabs them and throws them into the fire (153). This is the first time Aleksei has ever seen Frau Leontina weep. It will come to light years later, through Frau Leontina's questioning of the mature Shura, that it was on this Moscow visit that Herr Bitner and Shura first slept together,⁵⁷⁹ but Frau Leontina is still totally ignorant of this. Neither her tears nor Gotfrid Gotfridovich's rage are explained, but these emotions must have their source in the letters, which probably revealed both the intimacies of Aleksei and Shura and also about his feelings, maybe even actions, concerning Leontina. This would evoke Gotfrid's outrage with respect to Aleksei and Leontina and/or jealousy concerning his nephew and Shura and again perhaps his wife. The letters may have informed him about many happenings under his own roof about which his inattention and insensitivity had kept him ignorant. Frau Leontina's tears must result at least in part from the combination of her maternal and sexual feelings toward Aleksei: maternal pain at the degrading betrayal of her temporary "son" at the hands of her husband and Shura; and romantic pain (jealousy and desire) experienced upon learning about Aleksei's feelings and behavior concerning Shura and herself. She must also be disturbed that her husband would treat

⁵⁷⁸ Friendship and loyalty among peers and siblings is an important aspect of Pil'niak's larger ethic. A few of these intimate friendly or brotherly relationships will be examined below. Shura in this story never indicates regret for betraying Aleksei's confidences and expectations --- another negative reflection on her character.

⁵⁷⁹ It is interesting that Shura attributes Gotfrid Gotfridovich's philandering and irresponsibility in part to his age, a sort of midlife crisis which she characterizes thus: "Gotfrid perezhivaet tot period, kogda muzhchiny vdrug poloshatsia pered starost'iu" (158) ("Gotfrid is going through that period when men suddenly take alarm before old age").

Aleksei in such a way and wonder what Gotfrid's access to such letters means with respect to her own relationship with him.

In May Aleksei leaves his uncle's home permanently to enter real adult life, cutting off the possibility for consummation of the incipient incestuous relationship, the true nature of which is still completely unrecognized by Aleksei.

The story continues, however, to follow Frau Leontina. Briefly told, Leontina later learns of Shura's affair with her husband, Herr Bitner, which has produced the two daughters, the younger one blind.⁵⁸⁰ Even with the shock of discovering her husband's betrayal, Leontina is more appalled at the living conditions, material and spiritual, in which Shura is raising them than at her husband's infidelity. Leontina demands to take in the children to raise as her own, in German cleanliness and order, additionally providing for Shura's education, which had been terminated at her first pregnancy. Frau Leontina's behavior during these events demonstrate her powerful will, personal integrity, self-control, and "rightness" with respect to her proper position on life's ordained path, qualities which will be discussed further in a later chapter.

Five years after his departure, now a military officer, Aleksei visits the remote snowbound estate where his aunt and uncle are riding out anti-German sentiment during and following World War I. Only now is Aleksei's striking physical resemblance to his uncle revealed --- perhaps it was not so obvious when he was younger, but it must have played a role, albeit an unconscious one, in Frau Leontina's earlier behavior toward her

⁵⁸⁰ Children born with disabilities in Pil'niak usually indicate an inappropriate parental match, which is clearly the case here.

nephew.⁵⁸¹ The uncle, ruined financially by the Revolution and morally destitute at least from the beginning of this story, hides in his study. Aleksei and Frau Bitner spend the afternoon with the children and only after the girls' bedtime do they talk, now as adults. As for Alena in "Smertel'noe manit," the past for Leontina is past, and she is sublimating her personal desires in childcare, but she remains fully on the procreational, life-embracing trajectory. Looking back on the year they spent together long before, Frau Leontina says "Everything is in the past. But I have children --- that means that everything is in the future, because I am making worthy people" (162). These children are not her biological future --- genetically they are not hers --- but her cultural and spiritual future and her immortality. Her love and nurture, not her genetics, are making worthy human beings.⁵⁸²

At this time Aleksei makes several revelations: that he already knows about the children (from Shura on a chance encounter); that he only now recognizes that there was a romance between himself and Frau Bitner that winter so long ago; and that the girls could have been his children (162).⁵⁸³ However, the narrator has made it clear that Aleksei and Shura had never and would never come together, so Aleksei's assertion of potential paternity is totally theoretical. The children might have been his had he

⁵⁸¹ There are textual variants in this part of the story. In the work as published originally in *Novyi mir* and in (at least) the six-volume anthology from which I am citing, the arriving Aleksei is the exact image of the young Gotfrid Gotfridovich as he had appeared twenty years before, fresh from his college years, "jaunty and masculine" (161); the two men are repeatedly distinguished as "Gotfrid Gotfridovich Aleksei" and "podlinnyi Gotfrid Gotfridovich" or "nastoiashchii Gotfrid Gotfridovich" (161-3). In at least the 1976 Soviet anthology, the first published in the USSR after Pil'niak's arrest in 1937, the arriving Aleksei is described as "neizvestnyi," a stranger with clearly German looks (356) but no explicit connection with Gotfrid's appearance, and the two men are referred to thereafter only by name. "Pookskii rasskaz," Boris Pil'niak, *Izbrannye proizvedeniia* (Moskva: Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1976) 343-358.

⁵⁸² It is clear that the "worthy people" she is making have nothing to do with revolutionary values, new Soviet men, and the like; the narrator has emphasized that on the remote estate, which was too small to be nationalized, the Revolution seems worlds away.

⁵⁸³ "Eti deti mogli by byt' moimi det'mi."

succumbed to Shura's advances, but he did not. However, Frau Leontina acknowledges her own awareness that the children "might be his," and, putting her head on his chest, that there had indeed been a romance between them. He kisses her on the lips; hers tremble in response, but her will dominates and she rises, rearranges her white dress, and gets ready to join the children in the nursery, apparently rejecting his advance.

Why does she reject him? She has loved Aleksei and loves him still: as a temporary surrogate son; as a man; and as a renewed manifestation of the man she married but who has somehow metamorphosed into a lifeless, corrupt shade of his former promising vitality. Her earlier confusion about her relationship with Aleksei is explained by his mature appearance so identical to that of his (younger) uncle, the man she first loved, who received her soul with her virginity and whose original being she has never stopped loving. Certainly as a childless woman whose values associate marriage with childbearing, she has a surfeit of maternal instinct to devote to the little girls, but her perception of the possibility that the little girls are Aleksei's children has also made it emotionally impossible for her to dismiss them --- they are in fact the children of her lawful husband, but in her vision, suggested by Aleksei's letters to Shura and by his physical appearance --- they are the children too of the vital man her husband once was, now personified by Aleksei. Those specific children, although they are not genetically her own, were conceived by "men" she loved, hence they can restore her to the right path of life (birth, love, mating, procreation) from which her barrenness has derailed her. When she demands custody of the children, arguing to Gotfrid Gotfridovich that she will raise the children to be "worthy of their father" (158), she is referring to her husband not

as he is, in fact no longer worthy in any way, but rather to the original husband she gave herself to and the father she imagines they have, as manifested by Aleksei.⁵⁸⁴

Upon receiving custody of the girls, biologically childless Frau Leontina has become totally focused on the future, her own and that of the children. Undeterred by the blindness of one of her “daughters” and questions of Gotfrid’s future marital fidelity (or his punishment for past transgressions), she devotes her full attention to the positive future of the two little girls, a future which she is determined to provide. Her ability to maintain this life-affirming orientation toward the future is enhanced by her sustaining dream that her younger, beloved husband, effectively re-incarnated in Aleksei, is the spiritual and in some sense biological father of the children. She remains in the ascendant current of life as she raises the little girls, provides medical care to cure the younger one’s blindness, and finances Shura’s education. In the end she rejects Aleksei’s advances, continuing to maintain her personal integrity at every turn. Spirit, in this story, certainly rules the flesh.

This story ends with an upbeat comment: that “every new day brings new life” (163). Aleksei has survived the traumas of adolescence and become a fine young man, even a leader of men. The little girls have a loving mother and the formerly blind can now see. Barren Frau Leontina, through love and imagination, has taken control of life’s and nature’s reins and is rearing children --- though not genetically tied to her --- to become worthy people; she is not escaping passively into the maternal role, as Alena did, but embracing it in every sense. Children, including Shura and Aleksei, have given a future to Frau Leontina, and she contributes positively to their futures in turn.

⁵⁸⁴ This puts her in a category similar to that of “Mariia the mother” in “Grego-Trimuntan” (to be discussed below) whose love altered her perception and presentation of paternal relationships. “Grego-Trimuntan,” dated by author 3 November 1925, first published 1925 (6-vol. coll., vol. 2, 525).

As in “Smertel’noe manit,” life’s plan has gone awry for Frau and Herr Bitner: what turned him from the “bodryi, muzhestvennyi” youth she married is not specified (161); her life was put off course by the negative transformation of her “izbrannyi navsegda” mate and her (resulting?) barrenness. However, she at least received the opportunity to express her maternal instincts toward her visiting nephew, who also served as a sort of surrogate for her originally beloved mate. The attraction that initially seemed incestuous can be seen as almost legitimate when one perceives Aleksei as her husband’s original self. Her devotion to the children and their “father(s)” leads to a much higher level of fulfillment than that experienced by Alena with baby Natasha. Like Polunin, Gotfrid Gotfridovich faded from his original ebullient self, ultimately ending up in a reclusive lifestyle like Polunin’s but at a much lower moral level, due to adultery, cowardice, and generally base behavior. An “incestuous” relationship with Aleksei is ultimately rejected by Leontina less because of its taboo quality than because, with maternal and marital fulfillment supported by her dream, she no longer needs the sexual fulfillment which is probably all Aleksei could offer her.⁵⁸⁵ She has transcended reality by an act of loving and imaginative will, asserting “creativity” above the “laws of nature.”

Maternal Instinct Run Amok: “Nizhegorodskii otkos”

“Nizhegorodskii otkos” is the most direct, complex, and explicit of Pil’niak’s incest studies. In this story the confrontation of sexual desire between biological son and mother is the thematic focus of the work.

⁵⁸⁵ That having a loving mate, just any loving mate for the sake of having one, is insufficient for Leontina is emphasized by her deliberate refusal to acknowledge and consummate the thirty-year love borne her by her Tatar servant, of which she is fully aware. She is married; therefore her appropriate role is as a mother.

The “story” exists in three versions, two dated by the author in December 1927 and one reworked for inclusion in his final novel, Solianoj ambar (1937). I have yet to find explanatory documentation for the two self-contained 1927 versions of this story under the same title. All citations from anthologies to which I have had access cite its first publication in Zvezda, No. 2, 1928, 38-52 as their source; the Zvezda version is dated by the author December 29, 1927. However, there is a different version, dated by Pil’niak December 22 of the same year, which has been published in at least two anthologies citing the Zvezda source.⁵⁸⁶ The only conclusion I can draw from this is that the censors rejected the Dec. 22 variant and the author changed the story sufficiently to allow its publication. I have not been able to ascertain why it has been repeatedly anthologized in an earlier, different text version erroneously identified as the one published in Zvezda.⁵⁸⁷ I view the December 22 version as the more authentically Pil’niakian, the later one a modification to ensure via political correctness that it would be passed by the censors. The essentials of the story are the same in all three variants (including the reworking into Solianoj ambar); however, the incest is more explicit in the December 22 and 1937 (novel) variants. I will be discussing the two texts written in 1927 for immediate publication rather than the version included in the novel because the two short stories provide more focused treatment of the incest issue; the main alterations

⁵⁸⁶ “Nizhegorodskii otkos,” Tret’ia stolitsa: Povesti i rasskazy Borisa Pil’niaka, sost. B. B. Andronikashvili-Pil’niak (Moscow: Russkaia kniga, 1992) 357-71, and “Nizhegorodskii otkos,” Sobranie sochinenii v shesti tomakh, t. 4 (Moskva: Terra-Knizhnyi klub, 2003) 187-202. I am citing from the Zvezda version (Dec. 29) and the anthologized (6-volume) version (Dec. 22), which I will refer to as t. 4 for specific citations and “unpublished” in the text.

⁵⁸⁷ The two Dec. 22 exemplars that I have located (there may be more) are in editions prepared by members of Pil’niak’s family; perhaps this version, rather than the edited Zvezda text, was the only one found in the family archives.

found in the novel serve to dilute this subplot (and necessarily so) by tying it to other elements in the larger structure rather than to vary the essentials of the story.

Again partly autobiographically based, “Nizhegorodskii otkos” has similarities to “Pookskii rasskaz,”⁵⁸⁸ which was written and published earlier the same year. Like the latter story, “Otkos” deals with a boy’s coming of age, especially sexually, and the fluid boundaries between maternal/filial love and sexual love (Oedipal fixation). Depression, maternal loneliness, and loyalty among peers again play strong thematic roles. The main characters comprise a pre-revolutionary Russian intelligentsia family, this time a true nuclear biological family, with a teenaged son and his adolescent peer, male rather than female.⁵⁸⁹ The son, Dmitrii Klestov, differs from Aleksei Bitner of “Pookskii” in character and temperament; with the exception of sexual experience, the more ebullient aspects of Aleksei’s (Pil’niak’s) personality are bestowed on Sergei Berezin, the bosom friend. The son-protagonist is described as sensitive, effeminate, transparently honest, and physically resembling Aleksandr Blok, his poet-hero.⁵⁹⁰

“Otkos,” like “Smertel’noe manit,”⁵⁹¹ is ultimately a “death” story. The taboo

⁵⁸⁸ “V rasskaze, v opisaniĭ gimnazicheskikh budnei glavnykh geroev, ispol’zuiutsia vpechatleniia Pil’niaka o poslednem gimnazicheskom gode prebyvaniia v Nizhnem Novgorode, gde on zhil v sem’e nemetskogo diadi. Etot god bolee podrobno opisan v “Pookskom rasskaze” (1926) [*sic*].” Note to “Nizhegorodskii otkos” in 6-vol. coll., vol. 4, 476. “Pookskii rasskaz” is dated by the author 14 January 1927.

⁵⁸⁹ The pre-revolutionary setting ensured that the critics, who strongly disparaged this story anyway, could not associate the morality presented with the Soviet structure. The *Zvezda* publication contains more class-related characterization and more overt reference to the Revolution.

⁵⁹⁰ There is a minor Blokian subtext to this story, more pronounced in the unpublished version. The allusions of course suggest the Revolution, the poetic temperament, and Blok’s own very intimate relationship with his mother. The Blok allusions also bring to mind Pil’niak’s former fiancée, the poetess Nadia Pavlovich, suggested by Shura in “Pookskii”; after the breakup with Pil’niak, Pavlovich spent several years as a Blok devotee and disciple.

⁵⁹¹ All references to “Alena” in the analysis of “Nizhegorodskii otkos” refer to the character by that name in “Smertel’noe manit.”

desire and its ramifications apparently lead to a universally negative situation, inspiring the suicidal thoughts of Dmitrii and, in the published Zvezda version, of Sergei as well. Even the mother Natal'ia, depressed from the start but apparently experiencing happiness and a measure of liberation in the incestuous relationship, at best becomes forced to lead a secret secondary life, necessitating an additional degree of withdrawal and inhibition of personality. In the unpublished version, the mother, in the absence of her son/lover, virtually entombs herself alone in her home, cutting herself off from nature, society, and current events. Both stories could be considered explorations of the human unconscious -- the death wish in "Smertel'noe manit," Oedipal desires in "Nizhegorodskii otkos."⁵⁹²

This story is thematically more complex than the other two incest-related works. Themes include the extreme maternal experience, the Oedipal impulse, issues of trust and loyalty in friendship, Nietzschean concepts of superiority, the influence of the irrational and unconscious, and the necessary individuality of experience and decision-making. Explorations of the human will (also a strong theme in "Pookskii") and the nature of love (filial/parental, sexual, and brotherly) are present as well.

Like "Ivan-da-Mar'ia," "Pookskii rasskaz," and "Smertel'noe manit," this story involves mental states. The title refers to a public location in Nizhnii Novgorod, the setting of the tale. The Nizhegorodskii "otkos," or slope, is a precipice-like area at the edge of town where townspeople go to walk and contemplate. Its purpose, according to the narrator, is to remove people from the everyday quality of their lives, purifying and saddening them by plunging them into the infinite realms of the unconscious, irrational, and incomprehensible where they come in contact with the overarching purposes and

⁵⁹² These concepts beg for Freudian interpretations. I have not found concrete evidence of Pil'niak's familiarity with Freud's work, although it was commonly known in Russia by Pil'niak's time.

modes of human existence. The *Otkos*, which presents aspects of both the cosmic order of the universe and the chaos of the human unconscious, is where major existential issues are confronted in the context of those immense, inapprehensible aspects of life which are beyond rationality and materiality.

Откос в городе Нижнем-Новгороде существует к тому, чтобы очищать и печалить человеческие существа и чтобы выкидывать людей в неосознанное и/,в непонятное. (*Zvezda* 38-39/t. 4 187, 202 with insignificant alterations)
The slope in the town of Nizhnii Novgorod exists in order to cleanse and sadden human beings and in order to plunge people into the unfathomable and/,into the incomprehensible.

[. . .] эти заволжские и волжские пространства выкидывают человеческое существо в то нереальное, что берedit человека и --- успокаивает большим покойствием. (*Zvezda* 39; t. 4 187-8 is very similar)
[. . .] those expanses of the Volga and beyond plunge a human being into that unreality which agitates a person --- and calms him with great serenity.

Нижегородский Откос! --- он существует к тому, чтобы ломать человеческую обыденность: огромное человеческое счастье бывает иной раз мерзостью, мерзость бывает счастьем, --- и каждый человек, подобно эпохам, пьет по-своему свою чашу жизни, так, как дана она человеку. (*Zvezda* 40; repeated with minor differences 51; not in t. 4)
Nizhegorodskii Otkos! It exists in order to interrupt the ordinary routine of human activity: it sometimes happens that the greatest human happiness is an abomination, sometimes an abomination is happiness --- and every person, like the epochs, drinks his cup of life in his own way, as it is allowed him.⁵⁹³

Those who seek out the *Otkos* are exceptional, sensitive people who strive to understand their purpose as human beings in the universe --- in Pil'niak's world, they have an

⁵⁹³ This "one man's happiness is another's abomination" theme is articulated only in the published *Zvezda* version; both versions contain the related theme of each person's experience of life requiring him to make his own decisions and the significance of the *Otkos*.

appropriately serious attitude toward life.⁵⁹⁴ They are open to both *Otkos* aspects, chaotic and orderly. Most of the main characters seek out this place at various times. Natal'ia Dmitrievna, the mother in this tale, enjoys the sadness she feels there and chooses to go there for walks; in the unpublished version, she identifies the bittersweet feelings it evokes with her love of her son (190). Her lack of self-awareness, however, in regarding herself as “happy,” shows that she has not successfully made connection with what the *Otkos* offers. It is at the *Otkos* that Dmitrii, under the influence of emotional chaos and the desire to live “right,” first announces his suicide plans. Sergei visits the *Otkos* when he is struggling with a decision or bewildered by the incomprehensible. Dmitrii's father Kirill is never explicitly or implicitly associated with this special place; the absence of such a tie identifies him as ultimately banal and superficial, one of the philistines unable to separate himself from the commonplaces of daily life (*byt*).

The delicate, youthful-looking mother, Natal'ia Dmitrievna, age thirty-five, is clearly depressed, as demonstrated by her behavior and body language, although she has always thought of herself as happy. In the reader's initial view of her, she is interrupted as she stands alone in the dining room, encased in a sadness which, according to the narrator, would be apparent to every third person who saw her, a sadness of which she herself is perhaps completely unaware (Zvezda 38; t. 4 195). Unable to have more children after the birth of her son Dmitrii (in the first year of her marriage, which implies an initially solid match), she has devoted virtually every iota of her time and energy to his

⁵⁹⁴ These are real people, striving for a right relationship with life, as opposed to the philistines (“obyvateli”) so denigrated in much of Pil'niak's *oeuvre*.

care and well-being.⁵⁹⁵ The forty-year-old father, Kirill, is a railway engineer and family man,⁵⁹⁶ very concerned with Dmitrii's formal education and upbringing; nevertheless, he seems to play a minor role in the story. Dmitrii, sixteen, is intelligent but effeminate, with "his mother's [weak] health and his father's character" (*Zvezda* 42; t. 4 190). His best (sole, in the unpublished version) friend, Sergei, is a mischievous, creative, outgoing youth, full of ideas for adventure and already with an active sex life.⁵⁹⁷ Sergei considers the bond of friendship a holy vow, and one theme of the story involves his struggle with the question of what constitutes "betrayal" of the trust implicit in friendship.⁵⁹⁸

In "Smertel'noe manit," lives deviated from the social/natural plan of birth, mating, procreating, and dying; these deviations were not judged or considered sinful by society. In "Otkos" these expected rules of life are not specified in the same way, but the narrator again emphasizes the necessity for individual structuring of one's own life,

⁵⁹⁵ The amount of time on her hands is emphasized more in the *Zvezda* version, which may suggest the "excess" leisure available to intelligentsia women in pre-revolutionary days and surely emphasizes her depressed state. In that version, Dmitrii expresses extreme sympathy for her because of all the time she has on her hands, time she must "kill" as she makes her own way toward death (38). Her depression is a significant element in both versions, but her overt behavior is more "normal," her adult social conduct more extraverted, in the initial unpublished variant.

⁵⁹⁶ Kirill becomes less attentive to his wife as the variants progress: in the earliest variant, he has his card-playing hours but comes home every night, and he and his wife seem to have a normal social life together and with friends; in the *Zvezda* (published) version, he is insensitive to his depressed wife's complaint of a bad day and she tends to stay home, wrapped in her shawl, rather than socialize with him; in the novel, he has many affairs. The initial unpublished variant seems to depict a much more typical, healthier-seeming marriage than the later ones.

⁵⁹⁷ In the *Zvezda* version, Sergei is from a lower social class than Dmitrii: his relatives are Old Believers in a rural setting beyond the Volga. Sergei's uneducated father makes a lewd comment about female sexual organs, misconstruing the boys' discussion of Liza Kalitina, the heroine of Turgenev's novel *Dvorianskoe gnezdo*. Sergei lives in an attic room in town. His family and class background are not specified in the unpublished version.

⁵⁹⁸ This conflict becomes more central to the plot of the *Zvezda* version and remains an issue in the reworking in the novel. The reader recalls that peer betrayal did not seem to be a concern for Shura in "Pookskii rasskaz."

especially in the face of life's major existential forces, inevitable death as well as those other life phases which death comprehends:

. . . есть и в мужской и в женской --- вообще в человеческих судьбах такие дела, которые должен пережить, продумать и решить каждый живущий человек --- только для себя, ибо только его одного, этого каждого, касаются эти дела, по-своему решить свою любовь, свою честь, свое время [,свою старость -- и молодость свою]: этими делами человек определяет свое место *к человеку и* в мире, не только пред лицом людей, но и пред безразличием того страшного, иль только безразличного, лица, имя которому --- смерть, имена которым --- рождение, время, [любовь,] смерть. И тогда, в решениях этих дел, пред лицом решенья их, в совершеннейшее безразличие *падают для человека -- его страдания, его завтра, мелкие его дела и вещи, и люди, которые вокруг него.* (*Zvezda* 47; t. 4 195 includes minor punctuation differences, bracketed additions, italicized omissions, and replacement of the final italicized portion with “падают для человека -- его сегодня, завтра, его комната, вещи, быт, даже весь город Нижний Новгород, обрывающийся Откосом, --- но Откос тогда становится реальностью.”)

. . . there are in both male and female --- generally in human --- fates such matters, which each living person must experience, think through and decide --- only for himself, for these matters concern only that one person, that Everyman; in his own way he must resolve his love, his honor, his time [, his old age --- and his youth]: by means of these things a person defines his place *with respect to man and* in the world, not only before the face of people but also before the indifference of that horrible, or only indifferent, being, whose name is death, whose names are birth, time, [love,] and death. And then, in deciding these matters, in the face of their deciding, --- *the person's sufferings, his tomorrow, his trivial affairs and things, and the people who are around him [all] fall* into the most utter insignificance *for the person.* [the person's today, his tomorrow, his room, belongings, daily life, even the whole city of Nizhnii Novgorod which is breaking off into the Otkos, fall (into the most utter insignificance) for the person --- but the Otkos then becomes reality.]

Each of the three main characters, Natal'ia, Dmitrii, and Sergei, must make critical decisions in this story, decisions which require stepping out of trivial daily life concerns in search of a much larger, universal perspective. This segment of text is placed differently to emphasize the current decision-maker in each story and the criticality of the decision to him or her. In the first, unpublished version it is placed after Dmitrii's

approach to his obviously depressed mother in the dining room and before his refusal to play a role in the Shrovetide play and his termination of the independent study group that meets in his home, both of which actions infuriate his father. This version stresses Dmitrii's intimate harmony with his mother and growing independence from and conflict with his father (the Oedipal pattern) and the influence of the *Otkos*. In the Zvezda version, the text is placed relative to Natal'ia Dmitrievna, after she has told Sergei to find out at all costs why Dmitrii is contemplating suicide, and before she goes to Dmitrii's room to confront him (seduction scene, below). This narrative philosophy asserts the power and obligation of the individual to make his own life-determining decisions in the vast, inapprehensible expanse of existence, whose only landmarks are birth, time, love, and death. In the unpublished version, this philosophy clearly articulates that the individuals in question are under the irrational influence of the *Otkos*, which connects them to the unconscious and to what is beyond human comprehension.

Adolescent development is a critical rite of passage in this story, as in "Pookskii rasskaz." Whereas Aleksei struggles with "re-arranging his instincts," Dmitrii does not seem to notice his. In both "Otkos" versions it is pointed out that characteristically calm Dmitrii experiences the development of mature instincts with a minimum of angst and disruption:

Его друг Сергей больше матери, а мать больше отца --- знали, что пробуждение человеческих инстинктов, столь мучительное у юношей, --- инстинкта смерти, инстинкта права на жизнь, полового инстинкта, --- у него прошли почти незаметно, совершенно безболезненно. (Zvezda 42; t. 4 191 replaces "Его друг Сергей" with "товарищ" and has minor punctuation and grammatical differences.)

His friend Sergei more than his mother, and his mother more than his father, knew that the awakening of human instincts, so excruciating for a youth --- the instinct of death, the instinct of the right to life, the

sexual instinct --- in him passed by almost unnoticed, completely painlessly.

Both parents are concerned about Dmitrii's sexual development, as they have not seen signs of sexual awakening even in his seventeenth year. Sergei, however, knows that Dmitrii has quite willingly visited a brothel with friends, but without participation in the main attraction, an activity cheerfully labeled by Dmitrii as "rubbish, an abomination, not interesting" (*Zvezda* 42; t.4 191).⁵⁹⁹ Kirill interprets Dmitrii's recent rebellious actions⁶⁰⁰ as a sign of sexual maturation and the consequent need for sexual release. Although Natal'ia is appalled and outraged at his suggestion that a new maid be hired to aid in Dmitrii's sexual education, Kirill insists, since his parents educated him the same way.⁶⁰¹

Other coming-of-age "instincts" given significance in this story are the "rudimentary instincts of conscience" whose elimination is associated with the Nietzschean concept of true human freedom (*Zvezda* 45; t. 4 193). It is Sergei who is the more fascinated by Nietzsche, but Dmitrii goes right along with the (fortunately unsuccessful) attempt to eradicate their own consciences by committing an armed robbery without subsequent guilt feelings, even somehow becoming the leader in executing the crime plan. Pil'niak, usually considered such a biological, physiological

⁵⁹⁹ "Erunda. Merzost'. Ne interesno." This reaction contrasts with Aleksei's visit, which has a similar result but much more angst, in "Pookskii." Both "Otkos" versions indicate the correctness of Dmitrii's assessment, pointing out that the other adolescent participants left the brothel feeling that they had stolen something wonderful from themselves (*Zvezda* 42; t. 4 191). Such an introduction to sexuality, devoid of love and the potential for procreation, is especially inappropriate to Pil'niak.

⁶⁰⁰ Dmitrii withdraws from a self-study group with his fellow-students and refuses a role in the Lenten play.

⁶⁰¹ In the unpublished version, Kirill expects to hire the new maid himself, as it was his father who fulfilled this role in his own youth. In *Zvezda*, he proposes that Natal'ia hire the maid so that the change will seem more natural, and his mother had been the one to do this in his own life.

writer, has made it clear from his very first works that conscience is, and should be, as much a determinant of human behavior as any biological impulse.⁶⁰²

The action of the story is prefaced by indications, slightly different in each version, of Dmitrii's recognition of and compassion for his mother's depression.⁶⁰³ As in "Smertel'noe manit," desire to break the incest taboo initiates a death orientation. The story's true action is initiated by Dmitrii's revelation --- at the *Otkos* --- to Sergei of his intent to commit suicide. Although the boys have heretofore shared every thought, Dmitrii is reticent about his reasons for this plan. Immensely upset, Sergei skips class to report this very disturbing plan to Dmitrii's mother. She is of course horrified --- but perhaps not totally surprised --- and begs Sergei to find out whatever he can about Dmitrii's reasons.

The narrative sequence differs in the two stories, and the earlier unpublished story is more explicit; otherwise the events, except for elements of shading and emphasis, are generally consistent. After learning of Dmitrii's suicide plan, Natal'ia goes to him upon his arrival home from school. In what seems a sort of seduction scene, she embraces him, and he returns the embrace. His lips seek hers, he utters endearments, then pushes her away as he tells her to leave. She remains, and "like any mother," she draws him protectively to her breast, irrevocably promising to do anything he wants, in order to relieve whatever is wrong with him (Zvezda 47-48; t. 4 198). Dmitrii extracts his head

⁶⁰² This event, like several other teenage adventures in this story, occurs also in Solianoj ambar. It is interesting that the "Nietzsche escapade," where adolescent boys set out to commit a crime as a means of annihilating their consciences, seems to occur only in the stories which also deal with incest, one of the greatest human taboos. The incident as described in the "Otkos" versions reaffirms the death orientation of the story, in that the boys' proposed victim has recently been abandoned by his wife and hangs himself within two weeks of the aborted robbery.

⁶⁰³ Forms of depression manifested at least in withdrawal from society occur in Alena and Polunin, Aleksei in "Pookskii," mother Natal'ia, and Dmitrii.

from her embrace and persuades her to promise to say nothing to his father. He cannot tell her anything now (the father's arrival is imminent) but promises to do nothing against her will. He sends her away, and she leaves, for the one time in the story having lost her ever-present shawl ("pled") (*Zvezda* 48; t. 4 198).⁶⁰⁴ The normal evening family rituals take place as usual.

Later that evening Sergei pushes for answers from Dmitrii about his reasons to commit suicide.⁶⁰⁵ In a painful conversation Dmitrii confesses that, unlike Sergei who is already sexually active and interested in girls his own age, Dmitrii's own desire is for his mother, whom he worships like a divinity, as the most beautiful being in the world. In good Oedipal fashion, he confesses to intense jealousy of his father whenever he hears his parents in the sex act. He can't love his mother, he can't kill his father --- as in "Smertel'noe manit," there seems no way out. Both boys are horrified, and Sergei, not knowing how to process this rationally, extracts a promise that Dmitrii will take no (suicidal) action for a week.

Sergei is overwrought, in a state of total revulsion at this unnatural state of affairs, and goes to the *Otkos* to try and sort things out. After further reflection about where his obligation to Dmitrii lies, in secrecy or in suicide prevention, he decides to "betray" his friend and reveals Dmitrii's confession to Natal'ia. She reacts in total shock to the news of Dmitrii's incestuous desire for her and the lack of alternatives which leaves him suicidal. She is at first stunned, then resolute --- her body language reveals that she knows what she must do; but there is a shade of joy in her reaction, her smile reminiscent

⁶⁰⁴ The shawl is her covering and armor; by promising to do "anything" he wants, she has made herself "naked" and totally vulnerable.

⁶⁰⁵ In the unpublished story, Sergei's questioning of Dmitrii seems motivated by Sergei's promise to Natal'ia; in *Zvezda*, the "rights of friendship" (candor) are invoked as well (48).

of one in a dream; the reader senses her awakening and relief, a positive response more clear in the unpublished version, one more subtle and wavering in *Zvezda*. She now knows what she must do to preserve her son. Her whispered words plead with the already absent Sergei never to tell . . .

The relationship between the two boys is over, owing to Sergei's revulsion at Dmitrii's incestuous desires and his own acknowledged betrayal of Dmitrii's confidence (hence, of their friendship), as well as Sergei's sense of somehow being a participant in a terrible, secret abomination.

The stories end differently. The earlier, unpublished version is explicit. In its final chapter the reader is allowed to read an old fragment of Natal'ia's letter to an unknown friend, written during a blizzard (contemporaneous with the February 1917 Revolution), in which she revealed the unsurpassed joy she had experienced in becoming a "lover" to her beloved son when she had to "save him." Even as she wrote she stood at the frost-encrusted window, awaiting her "lover, son, lord and master" (t. 4 201).⁶⁰⁶ Having just learned of her husband's battle death in Constantinople, she wrote that father and son were on opposing sides of the war (living out the Oedipal struggle). Some years later,⁶⁰⁷ as an "old woman," she explicitly reconfirms the nature of the relationship to Sergei when he visits the still-shuttered winterized old house one May well after the Revolution (t. 4 202). Dmitrii has never returned from the front and Natal'ia fears he is dead. She has the same drooping posture as when Dmitrii first interrupted her in the dining room, signifying the deep sadness of which now, in contrast to her first appearance in the story,

⁶⁰⁶ "[I]a zhdu liubovnika, syna, povelitel'ia."

⁶⁰⁷ Probably a decade to make it contemporaneous with Pil'niak's writing and as suggested in the mention of a decade as both long and short in duration in the introduction to the unpublished version (t. 4 187).

she has become perpetually aware. She reminds Sergei that he is the only one who knows that Dmitrii was her “husband,” and he spends long hours walking the *Otkos* (plunging himself into the incomprehensible) after their conversation (t. 4 202).

In the Zvezda version (no doubt revised for the censors), Sergei’s emotional and mental state at Dmitrii’s confession is detailed and emphasized, accentuating on the one hand his sense of the horror of death (Dmitrii’s potential suicide) and, on the other, his physical revulsion at the thought of his beloved friend’s unnatural desires, as he vicariously experiences his beloved friend’s dilemma. The final depiction of Natal’ia is on the night of the presumed consummation of their union: during a terrible February blizzard (again with Revolutionary associations) her husband is out overseeing the clearing of railroad tracks, and she, having prayed at the icons, is going door by door through the dark house, dressed in a nightgown and carrying a candle, steeling herself at each doorway (presumably in her liminal progression through the transformation from mother to lover). The ambiguity in this description allows Natal’ia to be perceived as a willing sacrificial victim rather than one anticipating joy. However, repetition of the earlier refrain suggests that to her, the abomination she has chosen is experienced as happiness:

[. . .] огромнейшее человеческое счастье бывает иной раз мерзостью, как мерзость бывает счастьем, --- и каждый человек, как эпохи, пьет по-своему свою чашу жизни, так, как дана она человеку и эпохе. (Zvezda, 51 and, worded very slightly differently, 40, cited above. Not a citation in “t. 4” version.)

[. . .] the greatest human happiness is sometimes an abomination, as an abomination is sometimes happiness --- and every person, like the epochs, drinks his glass of life in his own way, just as it is given the person and the epoch.

The narrator goes on to compare this individualizing phenomenon to the fall of the Russian empire during exactly those three days, followed by the Revolution, events which were for some “the greatest human joy” and “for others the greatest horror” (*Zvezda* 51). The story closes with Sergei sitting on his bed, having fallen asleep with a revolver in his hands, the abomination of life having mired him in thoughts of death. *Smertel’noe i ego manit.*

What does all this have to tell us? Does this story, as Browning would have it, “subtly [defend] sexual love between a mother and her sixteen-year-old son”? (37)

This is one of the mature Pil’niak’s stories about the imponderables of life --- the influence of those many things which, in the words of Shakespeare, “are not dreamt of in your philosophy.”⁶⁰⁸ Those mysterious imponderables with which humans make connection from time to time, and which perhaps underlie all human behavior, are symbolized by the infinite vistas of the *Otkos*, its chaotic and cosmic aspects and the moods they instill. However, in the unpublished version Pil’niak’s narrator prepares the reader for the incomprehensible twists and turns of life in his opening paragraph:

Десять лет человеческой жизни --- громадный срок, и десять лет человеческой жизни --- оглянуться назад на десятилетие --- все это было вчера [. . .] --- Всегда можно сказать о людях, что они просты, --- и никогда нельзя сказать, что просты люди. (t. 4 187)

Ten years of human life is a huge term, and ten years of human life --- to glance back at a decade --- it was all just yesterday [. . .] One can always say of people that they are simple, but one can never say that people are simple.⁶⁰⁹

⁶⁰⁸ *Hamlet* (I, 166) This story could be interpreted, at least with respect to the *Otkos* symbolism, as a statement in opposition to (contemporary Soviet) philosophies based on rationalism and materialism.

⁶⁰⁹ The ten years refers to the decade that has passed since the Revolution. The “people can’t be said to be simple” phrase also occurs in “Grego-Trimuntan” (1925), another remarkable story exploring life’s imponderables, which will be discussed below.

Pil'niak has come a long way since writing his simple animal stories and “God ikh zhizni,” which suggest that human behavior need only follow the natural rhythms of life to work out well. “Smertel'noe manit” contains early indications that it may not be possible to follow these normal rhythms and that alternate life patterns are not to be judged by humans. In the present story Pil'niak examines the realization of the taboo which was averted in that previous story.

Natal'ia Dmitrievna seemed to proceed further along the right path than Alena by marrying, apparently in a timely fashion, and then producing a child within the first year. She was apparently knocked off the roadway when the difficult birth resulted in her subsequent barrenness and the limitation of her maternity to a single son, effectively removing the reason behind the incest taboo. Her extraordinary closeness to her only son is described as only natural, under the circumstances of her acquired barrenness:

Каждый живущий знает материнскую любовь, ибо у каждого [живущего] была мать, --- и каждый живущий, каждая живущая должны любить детей, ибо [Ч]еловеку дано рождением [детей] сохранить [сохранять] себя перед вечностью. Должно быть, это верно, что каждая мать, отдавая себя своему сыну [/сыну своему], любит в сыне самое себя, свое тело, свою боль, свою кровь, [свою жизнь,] свое бессмертие, отданное сыну. Если у женщины один ребенок и не может быть других детей, вся любовь отдана этому единственному, [совершенно понятно, --- этому единственному,] который возник предвестиями мечтаний о нем, первым движением там, под сердцем, болью рождения и стыдом рождения, *тем стыдом, которого не чувствуют родящие матери*, --- этому единственному, который возник из ее крови и пил молоко ее груди, вся чудесность жизни которого прошла на ее руках. (*Zvezda* 40-41, including italics; t. 4 189-190, excluding italics and with bracketed additions and /alternates, and with slight differences in punctuation.)
 Every living being knows maternal love, for every living being had a mother, *and every living man and woman should love children, for* [.A] person is allowed by means of procreation to preserve himself before

eternity. Therefore it is likely that every mother, devoting herself to her son, loves in her son her own self, her own body, *her own pain*, her own blood, [her own life,] her own immortality, given over to her son. If a woman has an only son and there can't be other children, all the love is rendered to that only child [completely understandably, to that only child] who materialized by means of portents in daydreaming about him, in his first movement there under her heart, in the pain of childbirth and the shame of childbirth, *that shame which mothers giving birth do not feel*, to that only son, who materialized out of her blood and drank the milk of her breasts, the whole wonder of whose life went by in her arms.

This concentrated love which Natal'ia experiences toward Dmitrii is explained as the natural expression of a mother's love toward her child as the symbol of every aspect of herself and her own continuity.⁶¹⁰ The tie to immortality Natal'ia experiences through her son includes a tie to the past, not just the future, as her father is also a Dmitrii. Only in the unpublished version do we learn her own openly expressed views of their ongoing sexual relationship.

[. . .] --- всю жизнь, мне казалось, что я счастлива жизнью! --- но настоящее, громадное счастье, необъяснимое счастье было у меня только однажды, оно пришло ко мне, когда я должна была спасти сына. Я не боюсь слов --- я стала любовницей сына, и мне выпало такое счастье, которое редко выпадает людям, потому-что вечность, все, что дает человеческая любовь и человеческая жизнь, все замкнулось в моем сыне, ставшем моим любовником. Это нестерпимое счастье. (t. 4 201)

[. . .] all my life it seemed to me that I was happy in life! but only once did I have real, immense happiness, inexplicable happiness; it came to me when I had to save my son. I don't fear (the) words --- I became my son's lover, and such happiness befell me as seldom happens to people,

⁶¹⁰ Part of this idea is consistent with the theories of Otto Weininger in *Sex and Character*, that women are exclusively sexual beings whose whole existence "is always and absolutely sexual. W[oman]'s existence revolves entirely around her sexual life, the sphere of copulation and reproduction, i.e., in her relationship with a man and with children, and her existence is totally absorbed by these things [, . . .]" (79), Weininger's emphasis. But, in contrast to Pil'niak, Weininger asserts that "women entirely lack a desire for immortality" (114), Weininger's emphasis. Weininger's book was widely circulated in Europe in the early twentieth century, and it is possible that some of Pil'niak's emphasis on maternal instinct was influenced by these theories (which are stated as absolute fact by Weininger); however, Pil'niak's respect for women dramatically exceeds Weininger's.

because eternity, everything that human love and human life give was all encapsulated in my son, who had become my lover. It is an unbearable happiness.

While the narrator describes her extreme focus of maternal love as the natural outcome of her inability to have more than the one child, he also describes it as a love of herself, of her own continuity, and Natal'ia's words too depict her son as a form of her own self and eternity.⁶¹¹ However, most women in Pil'niak experience their biological children less as ongoing manifestations of their own selves than as the continuity of their union with the *izbrannyi navsegda* beloved, the husband, or even perhaps just the continuity of the beloved alone, as with Frau Leontina in "Pookskii."⁶¹² The mate may be temporarily or even ultimately secondary to the woman's child, but the mate and shared parenthood are essential parts of a right life.

Again Pil'niak is raising questions for the reader to contemplate, in this case concerning the coincidence of mate with parent or child.

As for Natal'ia, in the unpublished version, she equates her love for her son with the bittersweet feeling she receives at the *Otkos*, essentially equating him with life's meaning for her. In both versions, she is apparently an example of extreme maternal love, maternal love which breaks the incest taboo to "save" her son when he threatens to commit suicide over his carnal feelings toward her. In the *Zvezda* version, as mentioned above, her sexual submission to her son is suggested with a certain degree of ambiguity, enabling it to be interpreted as a true sacrifice, her own altruistic act purely for the benefit of her son. However, in the earlier (unpublished) version, she acknowledges that the sexual relationship with Dmitrii brought her the greatest happiness she had ever known,

⁶¹¹ That children represent the immortality of their parents is a commonplace in Pil'niak's *ethos*.

⁶¹² "Grego-Trimuntan" presents another striking depiction of a woman seeking the immortality of her beloved through her child.

and in both versions her spontaneous response to Sergei's description of Dmitrii's desire for her reveals at least some measure of happiness. This leads the reader to wonder if her existing depression has been caused, perhaps completely unconsciously, by her own unrequited desire for her son --- her resistance to incest with the beloved has moved her, like Alena, prematurely to the deathward trajectory (manifested in her depression). Knowledge of Dmitrii's desire for her awakens new possibilities in her heart. At least part of her new happiness stems from her belief that she is exceeding, transcending, and epitomizing maternal love through sacrificing herself to the forbidden relationship with her son, but in this she has misread the *Otkos's* counsel, just as she has misread her own "happiness in life" all these years.⁶¹³

But, when she makes her "sacrifice" to "save" him, what is she saving him from? From imminent death through suicide? Or from his own autonomous life, his own immortality achieved through appropriate mating and procreation? She will not be producing any children for him. He is her connection to eternity; she lives on through him, but as her mate he will not live on through progeny. Just as avoidance of incest put Alena on the death-seeking trajectory, so here the act of incest removes Dmitrii from the life/procreation trajectory. Does Natal'ia think she will enable him to "live" more abundantly by satisfying his sexual craving, hence making him "happy"? Or is she doing

⁶¹³ "Ona vsiu svoiu nizhegorodskuiu zhizn' dumala, chto ona schastliva --- domom, muzhem, rebenkom, svoimi dniami i zobotami, --- i togda ona ne zadumyvalas' o pechali Otkosa, kotorym mozžno, kak gorodu Nizhnemu Novgorodu, sryvat'sia k liudiam" (t. 4 190, not in *Zvezda*). ("All her Nizhnii Novgorod life she had thought she was happy --- with her home, her husband, her child, her days and cares --- and in those days she did not ponder the melancholy of the Otkos, by which it is possible, as for the city of Nizhnii Novgorod, to break off [like a landslide or avalanche] toward people.") This again shows her detachment from reality; thinking herself happy, she is oblivious to the potential for total destruction around her, the possibility of being torn off and falling into an abyss, both in her own individual life and in the subculture (pre-revolutionary provincial intelligentsia) she represents. She can be viewed in a larger socio-historical sense as the epoch that formed her, one that was in the process of total collapse, leaving no issue, just as her marriage had limited issue and surely her inbred relationship with her son would leave none.

this on some level only to keep her own self alive, to maintain her sole connection with eternity while severing his (therefore ultimately hers as well)? Wanting and deciding what is best for one's child is a tricky issue . . .

Whereas Natal'ia knows immediately "what she must do," Sergei is haunted by the question of what he should do, deciding whether to (at least temporarily) preserve his friend's life by betraying his confidences or to honor his friend's secrets, possibly allowing the suicide to take place but with terms of friendship unbroken. Both Sergei and Natal'ia choose to prevent the suicide of their loved one. Natal'ia reaps joy from this at least initially; Sergei sacrifices his closest, most valued friendship. Did they both do the right thing? How does one tell? Does motive count, or just result --- avoidance of Dmitrii's suicide? Is there anything that young Sergei could have done to prevent both the suicide and the realization of the taboo behavior? As a teenager, his wisdom and options are limited by inexperience, however strong his desire to act rightly out of love for his friend and in honor of their friendship.

Another area of contemplation, as in "Tul'skaia literatura," must be the marriage. Nothing is said of the parental couple's initial attraction or courtship, but producing a child in the first year is validation of the original match. The loss of child-bearing ability on Natal'ia's part, however, is negative, something that should not occur, and it drove her "off the path" into an unusually intense relationship with her son, supplanting the more diffused maternal focus usually directed toward child(ren) and husband. The fact that the parents and the marriage seem more "normal" and healthy in the earliest, unpublished version --- she more social, Kirill somewhat more directly involved in Dmitrii's life and

hers⁶¹⁴ --- indicates that the extreme intensity of the mother-child bond is a natural outcome of her ability to have only the one child. It may be no one's "fault," but it must be dealt with. Child-rearing in Pil'niak clearly comes first, as we saw in "Veter pered martom," but maintaining the quality of the marital union and the father's relationship with the child are very important as well. Where is the husband/father? I mentioned above that he "seemed" to be a minor player, but perhaps his nature and virtual absence are key influences. Like Gotfrid Gotfridovich and Polunin, he left the child-rearing primarily in his wife's domain.⁶¹⁵ Women and their children are not to be left on their own in Pil'niak. For Natal'ia as for Alena, the female experience of life exclusively as a mother to her child proves insufficient.

The reader also suspects that Kirill, like Polunin, is not a truly *izbrannyi navsegda* husband, or that, like Gotfrid Gotfridovich, he is no longer the man he was when chosen. Unlike the other characters, morally exceptional in their attention to right living, he is not tuned in to the ultimate values and purposes of life, as he is never mentioned in relationship to the *Otkos* --- he does not live as intensely nor take life as seriously, nor is he as tormented by the goal of "doing the right thing," as the other three characters. Kirill and Natal'ia are still having a sexual relationship, routinely overheard by Dmitrii. By now Pil'niak has recognized that sexual relationships continue into middle age, after the early years of passion and pregnancy; but any sexual relationship must still be based on mutual love and *vernost'* to oneself and to the mate. There is no sign of Kirill's

⁶¹⁴ In *Zvezda*, the father's conversations with Dmitrii are related in third person through Kirill's and Natal'ia's conversation; Kirill is insensitive to Natal'ia's complaint of "a bad day"; Natal'ia promises to come join Kirill at cards but remains in the dark parlor wrapped in her shawl instead; the time on Natal'ia's hands is described as burdensome, potentially the cause of her depression, etc.

⁶¹⁵ His involvement was apparently exclusively associated with Dmitrii's formal education and sexual development. Good fathers in Pil'niak play with their children and enjoy their companionship.

passionate love for Natal'ia; in fact his suggestion about getting a new maid for Dmitrii's sexual education indicates that he objectifies sex, considering it just a part of normal everyday life without a spiritual or emotional component. By now it would be just a habit, at most a physical release, for him. Had it become purely "sex," devoid of higher aspects, leaving Natal'ia, like Frau Leontina, in need of sincere human affection, thus leading her to turn her greater love toward their son? Initially she may have given Kirill her soul along with her virginity, but by now her world, sexual and otherwise, has come to center on her son; in contrast to Leontina's focus on her children, there is no evidence that Natal'ia is so drawn to Dmitrii because of any association with his father, supposedly her beloved. All the characteristics of Pil'niakian "good sex" are absent: genuine love and investment in the relationship have passed and procreation is impossible.

One wonders further about Kirill's fatherly role. Like Polunin and Gotfrid Gotfridovich, he leaves most of the direct child-rearing activities to his wife. As a father, he concerns himself with Dmitrii's formal and sexual education and his social future, but he does not seek out Dmitrii's companionship, show him affection, or appear to exert any effort to develop Dmitrii's masculinity or moderate his effeminate qualities. Perhaps a father who invested himself more deeply in his existentially ordained roles (as husband and father) would have enabled a very different outcome.

Dmitrii in some ways plays a passive role. He is a virtual pawn of the events set in motion by his own difficult birth and his mother's reaction to it.⁶¹⁶ Introverted, effeminate, and sensitive, he has grown up in the atmosphere of his mother's all-encompassing love and obsession and in intense individual harmony with her personality.

⁶¹⁶ This characterization is supported by the description of Natal'ia, in both versions, as a "chess queen" upon learning of Dmitrii's desire for her (*Zvezda* 51; t. 4 200).

However, he is introverted and private, not timid and passive, and he is well-liked although not intimately known by his schoolmates. He and Sergei participate in a variety of typical schoolboy escapades, and the narrator points out that Dmitrii has always had “a sense of his right to life” (*Zvezda* 42; t. 4 190-91); that is, he has appropriate self-confidence and respect for the rights of others. He is in many ways wise beyond his years and sensitive to the needs and moods of others, not just his own. Even-tempered, honest and clean in thought and deed, intelligent and precocious, he recognizes the false values associated with his peers’ brothel visit and appreciates the incest taboo; he is genuinely appalled at his own Oedipal desires and perceives their fulfillment as impossible. His own terrible dilemma is caused by his (moral) inability to insult his mother by revealing his feelings for her, to “infringe on” her by realizing them, and to kill Kirill, “whom,” at least in Dmitrii’s perception, “she loves” and who is his own father (*Zvezda* 49; t. 4 199). His incestuous love for a forbidden partner is far more complex than Alena’s and his course change toward death more direct in his threat of physical suicide.⁶¹⁷ We learn of his desire for his mother and antipathy toward his father only prior to the consummation of the incestuous relationship; his reaction to the realized relationship is left unarticulated, but his shame is evident in his future silence in the presence of Sergei. His spiritual concord with his mother suggests that perhaps his desire for her is in fact a response to hers for him and that his hatred of his father is an unconscious reflection of her weakened or extinct love for Kirill. What would have happened if his mother had forced herself to diversify her life? if his father had played his roles as husband and father differently? if Sergei had not told of the suicide threat --- or of the reason behind it?

⁶¹⁷ His suicide means is masculine and sexual, a threat to shoot himself, in contrast to Alena’s (and his mother’s) simple withdrawal into depression.

Would Dmitrii have had the courage to actually commit suicide? Or would he have withdrawn more and more deeply into his own depression? Would he even have developed the erotic feelings toward his mother? Was he “saved” or destroyed by his mother’s actions? And who was ultimately the prime mover in their relationship?

That both Kirill and Dmitrii perish and Natal’ia can only be said to exist entombed in a living death indicate that nothing positive came of this situation. Only Sergei emerged to lead a potentially “normal” life, but one cannot consider him unscathed. The emphasis, especially in the unpublished version, on the normal, even superior qualities of the mother and son implies that this situation is not due to moral flaws or irregularities in the two lovers; nature has, in a sense, created this situation through Natal’ia’s post-natal barrenness, just as nature ordained the love of Alena and half-brother Aleksei. But the relationship is clearly wrong, at least in its requisite concealment and its denial of procreative potential. The necessary secrecy precludes authenticity. Pil’niak has made it clear in “Tret’ia stolitsa” (1923) that an appropriate match is between an “odnoliub” man who is “izbrannyi navsegda” by a pure maiden, and that she goes to him openly, in broad daylight. Clearly the mother-son relationship would not tolerate the light of day. As to the non-procreative quality, Natal’ia is already incapable of bearing children, and the taboo itself is intended to eliminate the potential for defective offspring issuing from incestuous relationships.

The narrative stance seems to hint that the tragedy could somehow have been overcome, transcended, as Frau Leontina transcended her own barrenness and loveless union, but the players were just not up to it. Attribution of guilt, if guilt exists, is difficult, and, as in “Smertel’noe manit,” beyond human purview.

Is this story, as Browning says, a subtle defense of incest? A sensitive examination, yes, a tragic description of life gone terribly awry, yes, but not a defense, in my estimation. In a historical, rather than individual, interpretation, it could perhaps be seen as a symbolic or allegorical story of an epoch or culture that has lost its vitality and turned in on itself, as through intermarriage, resulting in sterile or degenerate offspring rather than robust issue. The degenerate, aristocratic Ordynin family in Golyi god is similarly representative.

Conclusions about Incest in Pil'niak's *Oeuvre*

It is clear from these stories that incestuous desires exist and are intensely problematic. Life is not simple, nor are the human beings who try to live it well. In the larger sense, these stories illustrate potential outcomes when lives are, for one reason or another, not permitted to follow the pre-ordained birth-love-mating-procreation-death cycle. Once humans have left the more truly instinct-programmed animal world, most fully depicted in "God ikh zhizni," to live in a world of culture and civilization, the right life path becomes much more obscure and snare-infested. Men and women are called to ennoble and transcend the "natural" life in this more complex environment; some people manage to do so, but many must make compromises or detours which lead at best to suffering and at worst to destruction. Even adherence to nature's plan, necessarily modified by the rules of culture, will lead to disaster if tainted with self-indulgence or unworthy motivation.

These particular stories indicate that forbidden sexual desires generally create an ultimately negative, if not downright destructive, situation. Those who fall in love with their biological relatives cannot follow nature's dictates to love and mate with the

eternally chosen beloved because of the incest taboo, but abandoning the pre-ordained natural track causes problems of its own. Passive Alena ultimately yields to her fate; Leontina reshapes hers, transcending it; and Natal'ia treads the forbidden path to a living death.

The focus in these stories is primarily on adult women and coming-of-age men. Father and husband figures exist but somehow fail to take their roles seriously as mates and parents. I interpret these failures as Pil'niak's assertion that such family-role negligence, on the part of males or females, is significantly contributory to the problems exposed in these stories (and others). As one goes through the birth-love-mate-procreate-death cycles, one must be true and committed to one's ordained role(s) in each phase.

Motherhood, as always in Pil'niak's *oeuvre*, plays a major role in these women's psyches and behavior. Other life problems can be sublimated in maternal devotion. However, even this has its limits. Alena used child-rearing as a connection to life which proved, in the long run, tenuous and fallacious. When the child died, for all intents and purposes so did Alena --- her devotion to the child was essentially a substitute for a fuller life-orientation in the absence of an involved mate. Natal'ia Klestova's love for her only child also became a substitute for a fuller life as her son literally replaced her husband in the deepest sense; her maternal instinct, for whatever reason uninhibited by the callings of other contemporaneous life roles, supplanted them and ran amok, knowing no bounds.

Frau Leontina also ended up "replacing" a husband who proved inadequate, in her case with her husband's nephew who physically resembled her husband's "better" former self. However, the replacement was, if incestuous at all, spiritually rather than physically so. Aleksei became first her surrogate son, toward whom she, like Natal'ia Klestova, had

mixed maternal and sexual feelings, but the relationship was never consummated because of Aleksei's own youth and more generalized sexual confusion, not to mention Leontina's character and self-control. Shades of the Oedipal triangle exist in this story, too, in Aleksei's closeness to his aunt and conflict with his uncle (his temporary parents). But Frau Leontina was a woman of far stronger mettle than Alena or Natal'ia. She developed for herself a sustaining dream which allowed her to view her husband and his surrogate, Aleksei, as the father(s) of her adopted daughters. Her marital commitment made her "right" role at her time of life a maternal one, and her focus moved from sublimation of her own needs, which were unmet in her marriage, to the children themselves, whom she was raising to be "worthy people." Whereas Alena and Natal'ia remained self-oriented in their relationships with their children, Leontina focused on the little girls as separate, autonomous people and their future as healthy human beings. Not only adopting her husband's illegitimate children, but making something of them --- educating them, rearing them to be proper *Mädchens*, teaching them to ski, curing the blindness --- kept her on the appropriate life-enhancing trajectory much longer than Alena and Natal'ia. Of course these children, too, like little Natashka, could have died --- but in that event I would expect Leontina to emulate Ol'ga of "Veter pered martom" and find others to serve and nurture in their stead. This is what healthy maternal devotion, in Pil'niak, is all about. Leontina, knocked somehow from life's ordained path, managed through will, integrity, devotion, and imagination to find purchase on a parallel track on the life-enhancement trajectory.⁶¹⁸

⁶¹⁸ Frau Leontina Bitner is possibly the most morally strong woman in all of Pil'niak's *oeuvre*. The fact that she is not Russian is probably explained by her "autobiographical" source.

Ultimately these stories are not so much studies of potential incest as explorations of the wide-ranging manifestations of human love and character as they relate to life's overarching patterns, which do not always materialize as expected. Like so many of Pil'niak's works, such stories trigger the reader's consideration of "what if" questions and the greater imponderables of human existence.

Parents and Children

Children in Pil'niak incarnate the love of their parents, serving as their parents' *raison d'être* and their confirmation as worthy human beings. They are, so to speak, "validators" of their parents' love and "guarantors" of their immortality. A good father is a good man, and a good mother, a good woman, and their children allow them to exist in the Future. In Pil'niak's ideal world, a man and woman worthy of each other do not become parents by accident: they actively want to be parents and are committed to their offspring from even before the moment of conception. Desire for conception is what makes sexual union sacred --- making love represents the desire for children, not just physical pleasure. A good man is attracted to women who want to have children. A good father takes an interest in his children from the moment he learns of their existence or even of their conception. He follows the woman's pregnancy and birth, plays with his children and seeks out their companionship; he provides their moral guidance and education. A good woman wants to be a mother, and barrenness is her supreme curse. She loves the man with whom she experiences sexual union and he is an important aspect of her maternity. Women who squander their best procreative years in other pursuits only to be driven, belatedly, solely by the biological clock or frustrated maternal instinct to

bear children without a beloved mate usually do not end well. A good mother loves and nurtures her children from the time she is aware of their existence in the womb. Parents work together to rear worthy people, putting their own relationship and other concerns in the background if necessary for the child's well-being and nurture.

Of course parenthood does not always occur according to these ideals, and Pil'niak explores several "off the path" variations to parenthood. We have already seen the moral enlightenment of a young man seized by remorse after aborting his own child because of the pregnancy's inconvenience in "Kak obyknovenno," and that of a woman forced into having her child because she missed the abortion window in "Rozhdenie cheloveka." Below we will consider problem parents, motherhood as the result of rape, the importance of the biological tie between parent and child, adoption of a mate's illegitimate children, absolution of immoral sexual conduct through redemptive maternal behavior, and other non-normative parenting situations.

Good Father, Bad Mother: "O Sevke" and "Oдно"

Most rejecting mothers appear in the very early Pil'niak, in what I consider his early misogynistic phase, possibly caused by his disillusionment over the Nadia Pavlovich relationship. In the two family-centered stories named in the title above, written in 1914 and 1915 respectively, the women tend to be "all bad" and the men, "all good," with little character shading. "O Sevke" presents the effects of parental behavior and outside events on the child; "Oдно," the effects of spousal and child's behavior and events on the father. In a stylistic sense, Alisa in "Oдно" is more typical than protagonist Sevka of the role usually played by children in Pil'niak's works; she appears little and her

primary purpose is to shed light on the adult characters and the larger worldview being presented.

Pil'niak wrote his early story "O Sevke" in 1914,⁶¹⁹ and was very pleased with it: "[. . .] ia udivliaius' dazhe sam, kak eto vdruk mne udalos' napisat' onogo 'Sevku.'"⁶²⁰ The issues of family structure, pressures of marital discord and spousal absence, childhood mentality, the role of imagination, and gender-based marital and parental behavior portrayed in this story recur throughout Pil'niak's works, as do its politico-philosophical ideas. The World War I temporal setting emphasizes the impact of historical events on daily life which would come to play such a major role in Pil'niak's *oeuvre*. Sexual desire and sexuality as a source of pure pleasure as well as martial instincts as a part of male behavior have their role in this story, but the emphasis is on controlling these instincts by means of character development, conscience, discipline, and love, rather than submitting to them. On the other hand, the maternal instinct, unlike the martial one, is positive but is woefully undeveloped, as it becomes subordinated to the female libido.

⁶¹⁹ Dated by K. B. Andronikashvili-Pil'niak, "Detskie gody" 124. Story was first published in 1915. Like most of Pil'niak's works, this story has an autobiographical base. K. B. Andronikashvili-Pil'niak describes the author's early upbringing, very reminiscent of Sevka's: heroic tales read to him by the hour by his mother; imaginative heroic play, and the loss of the ability to control his world by means of his imagination. Like Sevka, he loved to play the role of Ruslan ("Iz tvorcheskoi istorii" 19-20, 15). A small portion of "O Sevke" was published separately as "Iura" (1915). The main event of that briefer story is the story-loving child's discovery of his mother's infidelity, which is a subplot of "O Sevke." I am citing from "O Sevke," Boris Pil'niak: Povesti i rasskazy: 1915-1929 (Moskva: Sovremennik, 1991) 54-73.

⁶²⁰ Letter to A. A. Al'vig, 21 May 1915, No.7, 20. ("[. . .] even I myself am surprised at how quickly I managed to write this 'Sevka.'") The stylistics in this story are especially interesting; this is probably Pil'niak's only work written in second person narration. As pointed out by T. I. Kondratova, the second person narration provides a sort of dual point of view: the adult narrator is constantly describing and explaining the child (to the child himself and to the reader). T. I. Kondratova, "Tema detstva v rasskaze Borisa Pil'niaka 'O Sevke,'" B. A. Pil'niak: Issledovaniia i materialy: Sbornik nauchnykh trudov, Vyp. V (Kolomna: Kolomenskii Gosudarstvennyi Pedagogicheskii Institut, 2007) 38.

Pil'niak wrote that the story is "o tom, kak prelomilas' voina v psikhike rebenka."⁶²¹ It is perhaps Pil'niak's only story in which a child's viewpoint is extensively portrayed. Foregrounded in "O Sevke" is a child's difficult, necessary, but perhaps regrettable passage from the world of heroic fairy tales into an adult reality, an early step in one boy's coming of age. Associated with the realm of childhood imagination is the impact of art, especially literature, on the human psyche. While the main point of this particular story is Sevka's painful transition from fairytale (play) reality into objective (life) reality, the influence of literature and books on a person is a sort of barometer for mental and spiritual health in Pil'niak's characters. His spiritually healthy children by definition enjoy a heyday of literary life, where, like Sevka, they take on the roles of their storybook heroes at least occasionally, and adults are usually marked by their inability to subject reality so totally to the power of imagination or even to see clearly what is right before them. However, adults who take books so seriously that they do not "live" outside them are defective; characters such as Razin in "Tret'ia stolitsa" (1922), Militsa in Mashiny i volki (1924), and the characters in the immortality lab in "Delo smerti" ("by 1928"), fall into this category. Even the child Sevka, the narrator notes, has a life outside his dream-world, playing with his friends, eating purloined cucumbers, and the like. It is a fundamental element of Pil'niak's aesthetic that art and life ideally interact, with art "ennobling" life. This story's two significant thematic subtexts are the conflicted family in which the child lives and the impact of war. I will be focusing on the parental/marital depictions in this story, with occasional comments about other important recurrent themes.

⁶²¹ Letter to V.S. Mirolubov, 23 July 1915, No.14, 30 ("about how war was refracted in the psyche of a child.")

Sevka is a typical energetic boy, with a full range of emotional capability and an active social life outdoors with his peers. He is too young to be able to pronounce the letter “k” correctly, but old enough to have his run of the neighborhood with his friends. At home, he enthusiastically lives the life of his (and others’) imagination, playing the roles of various heroes depicted in the stories he loves. Sevka’s perception of life and the world has been formed primarily by the heroic stories told him by his nurse and read to him by his father. His imagination molds the reality he experiences. When his father Dmitrii is conscripted for World War I, Sevka finds himself the only one rejoicing at his father’s opportunity to become a battle hero like a *bogatyr*’; as his father understands, he believes the war to be a fairytale region where Good and Evil do battle. Deprived of the counsel of his beloved, sympathetic father, the little boy must slowly and painfully come to grips with the contrasts between the adult war, with its real wounded and dying people, and the glorified battle stories of his fairy tales. As his sustaining dream world crumbles, a state of war seems also to enter his social world and his family as he tries to cope with many events on his own: his mother’s affair with the tutor she hires for him; the disappointing outcome (real wounds, parental disapproval, even a beating by his mother) of the street war orchestrated by neighborhood children in emulation of the world war raging on the political scene of adults; the loss of his sympathetic nanny; competition in his relationship with playmate Ton’ka (the “enemy leader” in the street war); the development of hateful feelings toward his mother and her lover, etc. Ultimately his wounded father returns, now bald and in obvious pain. He is still the same person, though, and Sevka can finally release his long-contained emotion: about his own mistreatment by his mother and tutor, about the love affair, about how “war” was not

what he had thought. This conclusion is existentially hopeful, if not exactly happy: his father is alive and at home, and presumably Sevka will have the grounded emotional support he needs from now on in a life that has become much more complex than childhood paradise and fairytale land.

The courtship and union of the parents, Glafira Borisovna and Dmitrii, are not described, nor is the timing of Sevka's birth relative to their marriage. However, the father's sad eyes and voice hint at some underlying tension between the parents. Also, ethnic undertones of conflict in the relationship are suggested in the swarthy appearance and unruly dark hair of father and son in contrast to the mother's, and especially her lover's, more typically Russian appearance. When Sevka, acting out his beloved fairy tales, assumes the role of Russian hero Ruslan, his mother calls him "Farlaf," the name of Ruslan's cowardly oriental competitor, instead. These ethnic allusions resonate with the war theme, since war is always about "us" and the evil "other" and contribute to the sense of war even within the household.

Sevka's mother is an early prototype of the cold wives and unnatural mothers who recur throughout Pil'niak's novels and stories but are particularly common in the early works. She is portrayed totally negatively: hypocritical, self-centered, manipulative, and focused on external appearances (physical and social). A sort of "concerned society lady," she imitates the Tsarina's family in supporting hospitals and other charitable institutions and events for military personnel. Active in volunteer circles and in charge of various committees, Glafira is very conscious of her public image but hardly driven by charitable impulses. Rude and insulting to her son, his nanny, and even to her lover, she is polite to those who have social standing. She does not understand Sevka's childish

dream world or its importance to him, and she mocks it, making every effort to remove him (and his fantasy play) from her presence, even when her husband is still at home. Sexually immoral, she seeks illicit sexual contact rather than love and true intimacy; the day after her husband leaves for the front, she begins receiving a “gentleman caller,” the teacher Evgenii Nikolaevich, whom she hires as Sevka’s tutor and with whom she immediately commences an affair. Her theatrical responses to political and other events are designed to make her the center of attention; she even presents herself as the sufferer when her husband is conscripted. She resents having to make such sacrifices for others, for example the additional responsibilities she will have to assume during her husband’s absence (although she will avail herself of the sexual freedom his absence allows). She is completely insensitive to the needs and sensibilities of other people, including her husband and son. Maternally flawed, she rejects her own child, scolding him with insulting names and repeatedly banishing him to the nursery, where, once Evgenii Nikolaevich has entered the picture, Sevka must spend most of his time. She encourages her lover to “smoke Sevka out” of the dining room by blowing smoke up the boy’s nose (69). She directs no physical affection to her son; on the contrary, she gives him his first beating ever for his part in the “street war” from which he arrived home beaten and bleeding. When his nanny tries to intervene, Glafira fires her after an exchange of insults. Her lack of moral grounding is further revealed in her alternating, unreasoned support of now Evgenii, now Sevka in the rocky relationship between the two males. Her discipline is ineffectual because it is not based on any educational considerations but is instead entirely self-centered, inspiring Sevka’s icy stubbornness and impertinent (but sincere and factually true) responses. Wrapped up in her volunteer duties and distracted by

Evgenii's unexpected appearance at the train station, she is totally oblivious to Sevka's profound emotional distress in the presence of the first wave of returning wounded soldiers; she further devastates her son by breaking her promise that her lover Evgenii would not participate in their trip to the train station to welcome the wounded. She does attempt reconciliation after beating Sevka, but her quick anger at his rejection invalidates this as a positive action.

Her underlying conflict with her husband Dmitrii is confirmed by her attitude toward their son. She uses Sevka as an emotional weapon against him, equating Sevka's joy at his father's conscription to Sevka's lack of love for him; possibly she doesn't understand Sevka's vision of war as a heroic fairytale venture. Seeking center stage with her husband on the eve of his departure, she uses sex to divert his attention from his defense of Sevka, only to initiate her affair with tutor Evgenii the next day. Upon news of her wounded husband's imminent return, she mocks Evgenii's suggestion that they must explain their relationship to Dmitrii --- her position in society is far too important to allow such a scandal! In the final scene, when Sevka rushes in to see his newly arrived father, she first reacts to his hysterical accusations about Evgenii with assertions that Sevka is lying, only secondarily with pleas for forgiveness.

Sevka's father, on the other hand, is representative of the "good men, good fathers" that populate the Pil'niak *oeuvre*. Almost the polar opposite of his wife, Dmitrii is honest, sensitive, loyal, compassionate, and unflinchingly morally upright, loving others and willing to make sacrifices for them. His sad eyes and voice, rather than complaints and actions, reveal his inner discontent. Sevka resembles him and often seeks his companionship. Dmitrii loves Sevka passionately and enjoys his company, talking

with the boy and reading him stories of his fairytale heroes, and showing him physical affection. He defends Sevka to his wife, trying to convince her that their son is a “slavnyi, zhivoi mal’chik” (60)⁶²² rather than the wicked nuisance she perceives. Dmitrii understands Sevka’s childish joy that his own father is going to the front in a fancy uniform, and rejects Glafira’s assessment that this joy shows Sevka doesn’t love him --- he acknowledges that his departure to the front is a sad event, but, especially difficult, he says, is “to, chto ty ne liubish’ syna” (60).⁶²³ He is honest and direct with his wife about her lack of love for Sevka and with his son about the war, making clear the real possibility of his own death while appreciating Sevka’s enthusiasm about the glories of war. Parting with Sevka, he unashamedly cries real tears, eliciting Sevka’s response in kind, and upon return home from the war his attention is focused on the real value of human life (the soldiers) and the needs of his son; he recognizes that his unfaithful wife’s self-contradictory behavior and his own pain and marriage issues are secondary at this moment. It is his father’s physical departure for war that immediately precipitates Sevka’s maturation crisis; his absent father’s honest, moral image reinforces Sevka’s feelings of guilt with respect to the street war he himself participated in and the violent treatment of his opponent Ton’ka; and it is to his father that Sevka consciously needs to express his spiritual experiences, pain, and bewilderment as he tries to cope. Dmitrii presents the valid moral image on which Sevka is already modeled.

The qualities of the parents can be read in Sevka’s behavior and psychological responses. Raised in his parents’ Russian upper middle class home, in a cold if not failing

⁶²² “a splendid, lively boy”

⁶²³ “that you don’t love [our] son.”

marriage, he is largely cared for by loving Russian servants. He is the spiritual child of one parent and alien to the other. Sevka is at least subliminally aware of his mother's adulterous sexual liaison in his father's absence and instinctively knows it is wrong. During the domestic uproar surrounding his father's conscription, he is left to his own devices and ultimately gets into significant mischief (street war). He has bestial battle instincts but he also has a conscience, a reflection of his sympathetic father's moral codex. Retaliation is his spontaneous reaction to perceived injustice, but unjust violence to his person and invasion of his family (Evgenii as sexual intruder) evoke his cold hatred. His mother's insulting comments, anger and violence beget impudence, hatred, and rebellion. Sevka's exile to his nursery motivates him to exile his tutor, the primary cause of his exile, from the nursery. However, his father's love has inculcated sensitivity and empathy in Sevka, enabling him to learn and grow spiritually. His father's companionship, encouragement, and honesty elicit Sevka's love, respect, desire for his father's presence and counsel, and a sense of guilt for the injuries inflicted on Ton'ka in the street war. Sevka's experience as a recipient of (parental) violence enables him to understand Ton'ka's feelings and his own guilt in that affair. He is able to repent, change his ways, and initiate peace with a former "enemy." Strongly affected by the sight of suffering, he resolves to dissociate himself from its cause (war/fighting), just as his father argues against the war upon return home.

The children in this story are also part of a larger community; the narrator, speaking in second person, sometimes addresses only Sevka, but also sometimes the children as a group, revealing additional parameters of Pil'niak's view of appropriate child-rearing in and by the collective community. Sevka's peers think and act as children,

having what Ton'ka's father refers to as "bestial instincts" (67), and they need supervision and discipline. Their local world is still sufficiently controlled, as it should be, to keep them safe. Their street war is universally condemned by the parental community; motivated by common values, community members interact among themselves and punish the battle participants. Whereas the children Sevka and Ton'ka acquire precocious wisdom about the uselessness of war, international world leaders of mature age do not show signs of such discernment.

Variants of the type of unnatural, rejecting wife and mother depicted in "O Sevke" recur in a number (but by no means all) of Pil'niak's stories, especially in his early "domestic" fiction;⁶²⁴ later the portraits of both men and women become more nuanced and balanced. One can deduce his vision of a good, natural wife and mother only negatively from this particular prototype: a good woman is faithful to her husband; understands and empathizes with her child's developmental phases; is affectionate, loving, nurturing, and honest; and values substance more than appearance, family more than society. This husband/father type, too, reverberates through Pil'niak's *oeuvre* as a positive model if often a suffering one: the honest but unloved husband who seeks his child's companionship, enters into his child's world, attempts to speak even difficult truths sensitively to everyone, operates from a base of love and compassion, and serves as the moral educator of the next generation.⁶²⁵ Like that of the negative wife/mother, the

⁶²⁴ Negative images of wives and mothers dominate in Pil'niak's works between about 1915 and 1920; I attribute some of this to Pil'niak's painful first-love experience with Nadia Pavlovich, where key issues surrounding their breakup evidently centered on a conflict of basic values and the role of child-bearing. This story, while it does present a very negative wife and mother, is really focused more on (1) a child's painful maturation as he moves from fantasy world to reality and (2) the destructive impact of war.

⁶²⁵ Glafira seems to expect her husband to take a major role in Sevka's upbringing, as she hires Evgenii to tutor her son now that the burden of his "vospitanie" (education, upbringing) has fallen on her in Dmitrii's absence; however, this hire could be merely a ploy to give Evgenii access to the household.

portrait of the positive husband/father becomes more complex as Pil'niak's works evolve. The most negative paternal examples are those who reject, ignore, or withdraw from their fatherly and marital roles.

Another crucial theme introduced in this story which reverberates throughout Pil'niak's *oeuvre* is the role of imagination. Regarding Sevka's ultimately painful transition from the world of fantasy to adult reality, the narrator describes the power of the sustaining dream:

Есть могучая мечта, объединенная с фантазией. Она осталась сегодня только в царстве детей, она ушла уже из жизни, от людей, точно так же, как и человек сегодня ушел от нее. Эта мечта может покорять все --- я говорю: все, ибо не знаю границ для нее. (55)
There exists a powerful dream united with fantasy. It remains today only in the kingdom of children; it has already departed from life, from men, exactly as man today has departed from it. This dream can conquer everything --- I say, everything: for I know no limit for it.

Sevka's narrator is convinced that the all-powerful ability to compose one's life based on fantasy disappears with childhood, and his final comments⁶²⁶ indicate that he finds this very sad. It is possible, as Browning suggests, that the vestiges of childish imaginative powers enable children to visualize a world without war, which older (and more powerful) people do not (96); this perspective might explain this pacifist story's assertion that the dream's power is limited to childhood. However, Pil'niak knew (or subsequently recognized) that adults too could in fact muster an effective sustaining dream, that an adult of strong will, imagination, and vitality could still conform reality to his fantasy, as

⁶²⁶ "Moia dusha skorbit pechal'no. Ved' ty --- uzhe v zhizni. I tvoe skazki razbity. /No v zhizni --- est' tol'ko raby. / I ty --- uzhe rab, ty, milyi-milyi Sevka, tak pokhodivshii na stepnye tiul'pany, rastsvetaiushchie rannei vesnoi." ("My soul mourns sadly. You see you are already in real life. And your fairy tales are shattered. / But in life there are only slaves. / And you are already a slave, dear dear Sevka, who so resembled the steppe tulips blooming in early spring.") (73).

we have seen with Frau Leontina in “Pookskii rasskaz” and will examine below in “Grego-Trimuntan.” Will and imagination together can create the dream that can “conquer everything,” that has “no limit” and can allow all vicissitudes of life to be transcended.

Childhood itself, to the narrator, should be a magic time, a part of everyone’s sustaining dream. Pil’niak himself believed a healthy childhood to be a wonderful irrecoverable time and mentality, one which established the measure by which life would be evaluated⁶²⁷ and memories of which should comfort a person his whole life long; many of his positive characters avail themselves of this solace.⁶²⁸ In “O Sevke,” the narrator asks Sevka:

Знал ли ты, что твоя жизнь --- была: как в сказке? Да-
да! Как в сказке! в прекрасной голубой сказке
прекрасного детства.

Но --- сказкам нет места. Сказки бьются. И
разбились сказки у тебя. . . (57)

Did you know that your life was as though in a fairy tale? Oh, yes! As
though in a fairy tale! in the wonderful sky-blue fairy tale of wonderful
childhood!

But --- there’s no place for fairy tales. Fairy tales get
destroyed. And with you, too, the fairy tales were shattered . . .

⁶²⁷ Pil’niak wrote: “Detskie gody, kak, dolzhno byt’, u vsekh, ostavliaiut na vsiu zhizn’ otpechatki, ibo v detstve vse beretsia za absoliut i za normu, koei podsoznatel’no podchas, meritsia vse, chto proiskhodit v dal’neishei zhizni: moim arshinom iavliaetsia brevenchatyi dom so smoloi v pazakh i byt zemskogo intelligenta, s grechnevoi kashei na vtoroe i s tverdym pravilom togo, chto ‘chastnaia praktika’ est’ pozornoe delo.” (“Childhood years, as it must be with everyone, leave an imprint on one’s whole life, for in childhood everything is taken for an absolute and for the norm, by which, sometimes subconsciously, everything is measured that happens in later life: my *arshin* turns out to be a log house with pitch in the cracks, and the daily life of a *zemstvo* *intelligent*, with buckwheat porridge for the second course and with a firm role that ‘private practice’ is a shameful affair.”) From questionnaire (*anketa*) in GAKhN, to the Office of Revolutionary Literature; cited by K. B. Andronikashvili-Pil’niak, “Iz tvorcheskoi istorii” 15 and n.3.

⁶²⁸ This is why Surovtsev, for example, took time every year or so to get back in touch with his childhood and it was part of Mariia Antonova’s personal deficiency that she had no childhood to get in contact with (“Rozhdenie cheloveka”).

So upon exit from childhood we all learn that our wonderful dreams and expectations can never be quite what we imagined, nor can mere imagination realize them for us. But for Pil'niak, childhood by definition should be a fairy tale reality. This term, "skazka," for a temporary state of belief in fantasy, recurs in Pil'niak's works, not only to refer to the lost bliss of childhood faith and the reign of imagination, but for a state of pure hope and dream sometimes experienced by adults --- such as the dream of the Revolution itself, at least in the time of Pil'niak's early revolutionary writings such as Golyi god. Perhaps the Revolution would ultimately become the "skazka" that those --- typically poets and artists --- who succeed in preserving the child within themselves will realize.

For a less *skazochnoe* childhood we turn to "Oдно."⁶²⁹ Like "O Sevke," this story depicts issues in a nuclear family consisting of a mother, father, and young child, this time a daughter. Events take place on the ancestral estate of the father, Vasili Davydovich Turchaninov, where he lives with Stefaniia Antonovna Litvinets, an actress, and their daughter Alisa. Other characters include a houseguest, the effete writer Luchitskii; Alia's German governess; and various other minor characters, especially local civil servants.⁶³⁰ The story centers on separation proceedings between the (apparently

⁶²⁹ "Oдно" (usually translated "Alone"; better translated, in my opinion, as "The Only Thing," in view of the content) was written in 1915, per K. B. Andronikashvili-Pil'niak, "1915" 156; first published 1918. This story was reworked by 1923 into "Afrikantsy" ("The Africans"), first published 1924. The basic story, including essential dialogue, is unchanged between the two stories, although some names differ. The landowner and estate of the pre-revolutionary story are updated to feature an engineer in a foreign land pining for and planning to return to his Russian homeland, where the Revolution has changed everything and his skills are needed. In that later version, his plans for rearing his daughter include raising her to be a worker. The core situation and behavior of the principal characters are consistent between the stories, so I will cite only "Oдно," Ezhemesiachnyi zhurnal 1 (1918): 11-26.

⁶³⁰ As in "O Sevke," this story contains a subtextual opposition of Russianness and foreignness; however, here the foreign qualities are usually negative European qualities associated with superficiality and decadence.

married) parents, and it strikes the twenty-first century American reader as quite modern, with stormy financial and custody negotiations and even a child abduction.

The union was wrong from the start, and after five years Turchaninov recognized this as a fact; he has silently tolerated the situation for the past two years and now seeks an amicable termination to the relationship. As with Sevka's father, Turchaninov's suffering shows in his appearance: dark bags under his eyes and a heavy posture and gait. Everything about the parental relationship indicates the wrongness of the match, except for Turchaninov's sincere love at the beginning of the relationship before he recognized Stefaniia's true nature. Seven years prior to the events at hand, Stefaniia⁶³¹ was married to another. Turchaninov fell in love with her, probably because of her great beauty, seduced her and begged her to leave her husband. At that time the pair moved to his family estate at no small sacrifice to him: he abandoned his work and career prospects, broke with his family, and lost at least one long-term friend because of the liaison. Ultimately Stefaniia's husband rejected her as well. However, the official status of their current relationship is ambiguous: it is unclear whether her previous husband divorced her or just sent her away, and Stefaniia and Turchaninov are never referred to as husband and/or wife or as the Turchaninovs. The imbalance --- or estrangement --- in their relationship is also suggested by their salutation: he addresses her "na ty," and she him "na vy."⁶³² Any love they might have previously shared is dead; by now he finds it physically repulsive even to kiss her hand, and she enjoys liaisons with others, apparently

⁶³¹ Her surname, like Alia's patronymic, is not revealed until the very end of the story, when Stefaniia has abducted Alisa and received official custody.

⁶³² They are not of the same class, he being an aristocrat and she an actress, but such socially unequal unions are not consistently negative in *Pil'niak*. Their address in this story may also indicate that he wishes an amicable resolution to their situation and she wishes to maintain distance, considering herself the "wronged" party.

staying with Turchaninov solely in order to maintain the social life his wealth and status afford her.

Alisa is the product of their union and another symptom of its wrongness lies in the ambiguity of her status. Born two years after the move to Turchaninov's estate, five-year-old Alia is referred to by her mother as Turchaninov's child ("[rebenok] ot vas" (15)); the narrator consistently refers to Turchaninov and Alia as father and daughter, and calculations based on dates given in the text supports this relationship. For whatever reason, however, Alisa was not registered at birth as Turchaninov's child, and her patronymic Eduardovna, rather than Vasil'evna, indicates a different father, probably Stefaniia's former husband.

The formal termination of the parental union and its aftereffects takes place over the course of the story. Bestial imagery applied to both Turchaninov and Stefaniia confirms that neither party is completely guiltless, but only the behavior of long-suffering Turchaninov is largely honest and honorable, as he makes the first humble moves toward dissolution of the hypocritical relationship and attempts to terminate it as civilly as possible. He is most often characterized as a wounded or angry beast, she a predatory, rapacious one, often baring her large teeth ("skalia zuby" (16, 23, etc.)).

Among Pil'niak's fictional characters in family-oriented works, Stefaniia Antonovna is perhaps the most essentially and completely evil. She resembles Sevka's mother in her total indifference to her child, always sending her off to be with her German governess and objecting when Turchaninov wants to play with his daughter; and in her imperious, demanding attitude toward servants and rudeness to those she considers beneath her. A party girl, Stefaniia flirts with every man available, manipulating all who

come within her sights; her midnight walks with house-guest (hanger-on) Luchitskii are suggestive of more than flirtation, as is her promise to the local aristocracy leader, at his desire for a single kiss, that he will receive “more than half the kingdom” if he does as she asks (19). She flaunts her beauty, showing off her legs in high-slit skirts and hiking up her dress in conversation with men. She appreciates Turchaninov’s historic estate not for its natural beauty or history but only for the luxurious social life it provides --- the old trees and ponds weigh on her, and Luchitskii seconds the sentiment, remarking that the “old skins” would be still more beautiful with “new wine” in them (13).⁶³³ The piano she plays is her metaphoric icon, with its own ivory “teeth.” Like Sevka’s mother a *prima donna*, as the oily notary calls her, Stefaniia has the acting skills to be convincing to those who lack discernment.

Turchaninov, on the other hand, is honest, direct, self-aware, and long-suffering. A typical Pil’niak hero, he is a basically good man trying to make his way honorably through life despite past mistakes. An unhappy, solitary man who prefigures the Polunin of “Smertel’noe manit” (1918), he tends to retreat to his office or to the estate park where he finds peace in the natural setting. Extremely honest himself, he prefers integrity and straightforwardness in others, hence his dislike of the unctuous notary and the shallow, hypocritical local officials with whom Stefaniia likes to socialize. Having recognized his error in selecting Stefaniia, he has developed an instinctive understanding of other people and assesses Luchitskii as one who makes so free with other people’s things that he might ultimately “crawl into [one’s] pocket” (13). Turchaninov is glad to observe that Stefaniia is wearing eye make-up, as it indicates that her beauty --- undoubtedly the source of her

⁶³³ A scent of Chekhov’s Cherry Orchard wafts through this story, as the *nouveau riche* lower classes supplant the old aristocracy financially and socially.

fatal attraction for and power over men --- has begun to fade. This relief on his part suggests that he has in the past been somehow victimized, or at least manipulated, through the power she has wielded through other men.

Their five-year-old daughter, Alisa or “Alia,” is a delightful child, attractive, neat, obedient, polite, playful, affectionate, subject to joy and sorrow . . . a parent’s dream and a living promise of a fine human being. Like most children in Pil’niak’s *oeuvre*, she is wise and generous beyond her years. It is she who motivates the action of the story, when she tells Turchaninov of her morning prayer to the Holy Virgin --- for happiness to be sent to mama, papa, herself, and all people. When pressed by her father, she even defines “happiness”:

Аля делает удивленными свои голубые,
недетские глаза и отвечает:
--- Как вы не понимаете? Счастье --- это то,
когда все живут хорошо, не ссорятся, не обижают друг-
друга, не лгут, не делают дурного . . . Тогда Святая
Дева пошлет счастье. . . (12)
Alia makes her blue, unchildlike eyes look surprised, and
responds: “How do you not understand? Happiness is when everyone is
good to each other, when no one quarrels, offends each other, lies or
does bad things . . . Then the Holy Virgin will send happiness . . .”

Her logic is provocative and wise. She has prayed for the Holy Virgin to send happiness, but she clearly defines happiness as something that will be sent in response to honest, loving human behavior. Happiness is when we all get along, but it won’t be sent until we achieve it --- or perhaps live in a way receptive to it --- ourselves.

Alisa is not a central figure like Sevka. Instead she is a catalyst: it is her prayer for happiness and its implications that awakens Turchaninov and motivates him to terminate the false relationship in which they are living, propose a break with Stefaniia, taking the blame onto himself and treating everyone as decently as possible in the process. He will

now try to establish the kind of life that the Holy Virgin would reward with happiness.

Turchaninov approaches Stefaniia quietly at the piano, calling her by her cherished nickname for the first time in years, and humbly proposes that they acknowledge that their relationship is dead and separate amicably. She responds angrily, accusing him of seeing her as just a kept woman whom he wants to replace with another.⁶³⁴ He pleads for a calm, humane discussion, but she sarcastically recites their history together, accusing him of breaking up her marriage with his proclamations of eternal love, and now that her husband has discarded her and her beauty has faded, of wanting to get rid of her. She wields the weapon of class difference, identifying his behavior as typical for a landowner/aristocrat toward a lowly actress. He assumes any and all blame, claiming to have loved her passionately and thrown away everything for her, not knowing what she really was --- but now he does know and has only himself to blame. He just wants it to be over with, just wants her to leave so they can both get on with better lives. She seizes upon his mention of a financial settlement to demand child support as well --- and her predatory nature is betrayed by the look on her face (“khishchnost” (16)) when she realizes that Turchaninov’s love for Alia is, for her purposes, his Achilles’ heel. He implores her for custody, promising to educate and rear Alisa well, and further justifying his request with the unrefuted charge that Stefaniia doesn’t love Alisa anyway (16).⁶³⁵ Stefaniia clinches the deal with his reluctant promise to pay her the forty thousand rubles remaining from the sale of his other properties and to put this, his ancestral estate, in Alisa’s name. She will leave quietly when those matters

⁶³⁴ There is no evidence of his interest in any other woman; Stefaniia is the one with all the flirtations, presumably active affairs.

⁶³⁵ “Ved’ ty [rebenka] ne liubish’!” (16).

have been set in stone, since otherwise, she is sure, he will someday drive Alia away as he is doing to her now. He seriously laments her lack of trust toward him --- this whole scene is very painful for him --- but she laughs, mocking him for playing a role out of a romance novel.

The characters of Stefaniia and Turchaninov are further developed in their trip to the notary to execute the financial agreements, which Stefaniia turns into a social occasion, and at a party in which blatant, innuendo-laden flirtations and superficial chatter drive Turchaninov to the park for peace and quiet. Stefaniia's party conversations with the notary, the local head of the aristocracy, and the police chief make it clear that she is creating some sort of agenda in which her (sexual) favors will reward those who help her. Only the thought that it will all be over soon, and he will be alone with beloved daughter Alia, enables honest, transparent Turchaninov to tolerate these events with Stefaniia's repulsively superficial and corrupt social circle.

Once Stefaniia is gone and the inappropriate match eliminated, happiness arrives for both Turchaninov and Alia. His daughter's prayer has motivated Turchaninov to purge his life of hypocrisy and negative elements; now his life with her revives him, physically and spiritually, returning him to the right path of life and restoring his future orientation. Both father and daughter are rejuvenated; they both look more vital and healthy, and he even looks younger. Turchaninov, the good father, delights in the laughing hours of play he and Alia spend together. His room is right next to her nursery; they take their meals together and he structures his adult life around her periods of sleep. He sees the park of his estate with new eyes, reflecting on what the park had meant to him in his own childhood; these memories had left him during Stefaniia's sojourn but are

now joyously reignited by this new life with Alia. Turchaninov can now re-unite with the healthy aspects of his authentic self and his past, especially his own childhood and heritage and the satisfying role that nature (the estate park) played in these. Contact with a childhood friend, Khrushchev, is reestablished; their friendship had been dormant during the Stefaniia years due to Khrushchev's dislike of her. He now has time and perspective to reflect on his poorly lived past life and he looks forward to a positive future, focused on Alia as the single most valuable thing in his life. As will Agrenev in "Veter pered martom" (1919), he looks forward to his fatherly role, intending to convey to Alia his own life experience and make her feel deeply that life is not just a "merry adventure" but a complicated, "thorny path" which one needs know-how to navigate (20-21).⁶³⁶ His response to his beloved daughter's prayer has returned him to a right and satisfying life.

Unfortunately evil triumphs. One day after a glorious summer tanned, relaxed Turchaninov is interrupted by the panicked estate steward who informs him that Stefaniia has abducted "Alisa Eduardovna" (22).⁶³⁷ Furious, Turchaninov rides off to the train station where Stefaniia and Alisa prepare to depart for destinations unknown. Stefaniia is protected by her minions, those local men in authority with whom she has flirted and exchanged promises on earlier occasions. Relying on her beauty, feminine wiles, and histrionic skills, she plays her damsel-in-distress role to the hilt, avoiding the private *tête-*

⁶³⁶ Agrenev, too, wants to advise his daughter in such a way as to enable her to avoid the mistakes he has made --- in his case, to avoid pain by not becoming dependent on anything. Turchaninov's planned advice to Alia is highly ironic, since in fact his ultimate loss of everything suggests that he really does not "umet' proiti" ("know how to make one's way along") life's challenging path; he gets inextricably caught in the thorns.

⁶³⁷ It is only here that the reader learns that Alisa's patronymic does not show her relationship to (Vasilii) Turchaninov.

à-tête Turchaninov demands by feigning fear of him. Her machinations have borne fruit, as she and the local police chief both reject Turchaninov's claims with assertions that "the child is not yours" (23-24). Stefaniia has acquired official custody of Alisa, therefore also of Turchaninov's estates registered in Alisa's name, which have been assigned to the trusteeship of Luchitskii. This assignment vindicates Turchaninov's earlier suspicions of Luchitskii's potential thievery and realizes the latter's proposal that "the old skins" be infused with "new wine" (13); Turchaninov himself later remarks on the "new wine" being poured into the skins of his ancestral home, which dates back to the days of Catherine II (25). Perhaps Stefaniia and Luchitskii have orchestrated this takeover from the beginning . . . When Turchaninov finally recognizes and concedes his defeat, he sarcastically reminds Alia, who is tearfully cowering behind the harsh German governess, to keep praying for happiness. Throughout the entire interview, Stefaniia laughs at Turchaninov's pain and frustration.

Turchaninov has literally lost everything: his ancestral estates (his personal and familial past), his present home and income, and his future, personified by his daughter Alia. Without his loyal friend Khrushchev to take him in and support him, Turchaninov would be homeless. Turchaninov's final words to his daughter evoke the reader's image of her most unhappy future, but her perspective is not revealed; it is he who remains the main character, leaving the reader to infer that Alia will long be suffering from the sins of her parents.

What went wrong in this story? As with the incest stories, life has been derailed from the appropriate pattern for protagonist Turchaninov. He mated on time, but, as he later learned, improperly. He and his daughter both suffered immensely from that

mistake, which Turchaninov recognized, acknowledged, and tried to remedy. Alisa's innocent prayer for happiness, for a life where people get along lovingly, honestly and without lies, quarrels, or offenses, motivated him to get back on track, to reinstate an honest life in which he could be true to himself and others and in which happiness and well-being were likely to flourish. He did that, restoring the integrity of his own life and maintaining custody of his beloved daughter at great material cost. While they were together, living interdependently, their lives were enriched and bettered in every way. He was a devoted, loving father, providing for her needs materially and spiritually; they both became physically healthier and happier; he restored his connections to his heritage, his childhood, nature, and his honorable, faithful childhood friend. How could things then go so wrong? Is evil really stronger than good? Stefaniia seems self-oriented to the point of evil, but ultimately the morally self-aware Turchaninov must draw greater blame. He characterizes his child as the most important thing, the most valuable thing he has. His unthinking, inappropriate match certainly caused problems, but they are secondary to his failure to publicly and officially claim paternity of his daughter, his own genetic and spiritual progeny (by registering her as his). Because she did not bear his names, wily Stefaniia could take her with impunity, and Turchaninov lost the one thing that turned out to be everything.

Conclusions

Both of these stories provide totally negative maternal models and very positive paternal ones. An inappropriate match is shown to be destructive to parents and children; the resolution of the match is not depicted in "O Sevke," but a humane attempt to resolve

the issues openly, honestly, and with as little suffering as possible is made in “Oдно.”⁶³⁸

The parental relationship determines the quality of the child’s life in both stories, and the child impacts the individual parents as well: a beloved daughter unconsciously motivates her father to make positive changes in their lives, and both children are used as pawns by their (unnatural) mothers to further their own selfish purposes and to hurt their mates. Good fathers are good men, and *vice versa*: they are honest, honorable, loyal, direct, loving people who seek out the companionship of their children, play and laugh with them, and enjoy serving as their children’s moral guides as they strive to protect their children from the mistakes they themselves have made in life. Bad mothers are bad women, and *vice versa*: they are dishonest, hypocritical, focused on externals, selfish, unfaithful, vain, and do not love their children or, apparently, their mates. *Vernost’* within oneself and between mates, family and friends is established in these stories as a key to right living. These stories also show, in different ways, the importance of a person’s connection with his heritage and childhood as well as with his mate and child, a connection valorized almost twenty years later in “Rozhdenie cheloveka.” Turchaninov lost and re-found his connection with nature; this aspect of life is not foregrounded in “O Sevke,” but that story gives us the potential power of the imagination instead. “Oдно” also presents the value of the long-term faithful friendship that begins in childhood, a value we also saw in the “Otkos” stories and which we see epitomized in “Grego-Trimuntan.” The resounding message for everyone in these stories is that life is to be taken seriously, that what one values one must protect: whether by sheer inattention or by

⁶³⁸ Such an attempt is made in “Veter pered martom” as well. However, the husband in “Pervyi sneg” (1916) never summons the courage to broach the discussion with his wife. “First Snow,” one of the early domestic stories, first published 1917. K. B. Andronikashvili-Pil’niak, “1915,” dates the writing of “Pervyi sneg” to October 1916, citing it as a variant of “Kak obyknovenno” (157).

moral cowardice, Turchaninov sacrificed his Alia almost as much as the young man in “Kak obyknovenno” sacrificed his own child in the abortion --- a parent must recognize and claim his beloved child from its conception and birth, or else he will lose “the only thing” that is important.

Maternal Transcendence, Paternal Rejection and Acceptance

In “O Sevke” and “Oдно,” the mothers were cold and rejecting, the fathers loving and striving to fulfill their parental roles. In the following stories Pil’niak examines aspects of maternal love in situations of violence, poverty, spousal rejection, and extramarital love, as well as paternal attitudes toward biological and “spiritual” or potentially adoptive offspring.

Maternal Transcendence (Rape): “Staryi syr”

Perhaps one of Pil’niak’s starkest explorations of the nature and power of the maternal instinct is found in “Staryi syr” (1923).⁶³⁹ The most immediate inspiration behind this work,⁶⁴⁰ as its title suggests, was Pil’niak’s first trip to England in late spring and summer 1923. Written immediately upon his return to Kolomna in August 1923, the story is one of Pil’niak’s “Angliiskie rasskazy,” anthologized under that title with “Speranza” (1923) and “Otryvki iz ‘Povesti v pis’makh,’ kotoruiu skuchno konchit” (1923) in 1924.

⁶³⁹ Usually translated “Ye Olde Cheshire Cheese,” sometimes “The Old Cheese.” Dated by the author 16 September 1923, first published 1923. I am citing from “Staryi syr,” 6-vol. coll., vol. 3, 265-279.

⁶⁴⁰ Despite Pil’niak’s claim cited by the compilers of the recent six-volume anthology associating the origin of this story with a 1922 visit to film actor and director Aleksei Denisovich Dikii and the smell of tobacco --- and there is indeed a reference to the smell of foreign tobacco in the story (276) --- the main inspiration must be the recent English journey. Publication notes, 6-vol. coll., vol. 3, 571.

Artistically superb and thematically rich, this story explores the oppositions between civilization and savagery, Europe and the East, city and country, as well as cultural transmission, man's relationship with nature, the measurement of human progress, and maternal instinct. The title derives from the name of one of Charles Dickens's favorite London haunts and thus suggests the Dickensian subtext --- the story can be viewed as a sort of "Tale of Three Cultures":⁶⁴¹ English (or European, including pre-revolutionary Russian), Kirgiz, and revolutionary Soviet culture. While Pil'niak's tale must be read on multiple levels, I will focus on the personal, individual aspect concerning reproductive biology and related values.

The story is skillfully told from a variety of viewpoints, from the most lyrical and personal in the women's letter and diary entries, through official military and party reports, the almost cinematic perceptions of a Kirgiz horseman on guard during the attack, the psychological experiences and reflections of an anglicized Russian émigré, and traditional third person narration. There are two parallel stories, the one a series of external events befalling a Russian family homesteading in the trans-Volga steppe, the other the internal spiritual journey of the elderly Russian expatriate in London.

The steppe story takes place in 1918 concurrently with raging Civil War. A Russian intelligentsia family practices subsistence farming, primarily through apple production, on their isolated farmstead. There are five people: the widowed matriarch, an entomologist continuing her research; her two sons, the artist Nikolai (and pregnant wife Ol'ga), and the inventor Andrei (with wife Mariia, who has spent time in London and greatly admires its civilization and culture). As pioneers, they have carved out a

⁶⁴¹ The pub is depicted as a place Dickens describes in [A Tale of Two Cities](#) (266).

farmstead in a steppe ravine, virtually invisible in the distance, with a primitive house, some storage buildings, and a large orchard along the slopes of the ravine which they irrigate by means of a pond and water distribution system they have devised. They live an idyllic life of daytime labor and “cheerful, harmonious” evening fellowship,⁶⁴² remote from the Revolution/Civil War and from all social and societal events. Their lifestyle suggests elements of those of the Sectarians (in “Arina” (1919) and reworked into Golyi god) and the anarchist commune (in “U Nikoly, chto na Belykh Kolodeziakh” (1919) and “Polyn” (1919), both also reworked into Golyi god). Like the anarchists, they are members of the intelligentsia, naïvely idealistic in many ways; they practice gender equality. Like the Sectarians, they are a (although only slightly extended) biological family, deliberately isolated from the outside world, and committed to agricultural pursuits. In contrast to the Sectarians, they lack a specific creed, hierarchy, or membership in a larger community structure. However, if there is any “creed” at all, it is of a populist “going to the people” variety. In their naïve expectation of bringing “culture” to the steppe savages they are idealistic reformers who really have no idea how to go about reforming anyone or anything (and have seriously underestimated the challenges of altering alien cultures). One night they are attacked by Kirgiz marauders, who kill the men, rape the women, eat the horse, and burn down the outbuildings. Ol’ga loses her baby and Mariia is impregnated but does not know until the child is born whether it is her husband’s or the issue of the Kirgiz rapists.

The parallel story concerns the nameless Russian expatriate living in London, the addressee of Mariia’s opening letter. She had visited him some time ago and was

⁶⁴² “Bodry, druzhny” are repeated epithets characterizing their life (268, 270).

enamored, as was he, of the monuments to human culture and achievement she encountered there. The émigré himself had moved to London years ago in search of a culture more advanced, industrialized and progressive than that of his antiquated homeland, a place in which the sounds of industrial progress would replace the constant ringing of Russian church bells. By now virtually completely anglicized, he can no longer speak Russian and has assimilated all the superficial English trappings: top hat and umbrella, breakfast of porridge and bacon, evening at the club, whiskey and soda nightcaps, etc. By all appearances a native Londoner, he is distinguished only by his emotional tie to land rather than city and by the expression of his eyes, which reflects the melancholy of remembered Oka valley backwater debilitation (276).⁶⁴³ One year the annual fog that encapsulates London right before spring is so heavy that all work ceases and instead of the usual mechanical sounds he hears church bells tolling, the very sound he has come to England to escape, turning his thoughts to his native land. “Like every Russian,” he measures human history in terms of his motherland (275). His visit to the British Museum that day and his conversation with another elderly Russian émigré in the Dickensian pub about Mariia and her family on the steppe contribute to a developing epiphany in which he suddenly recognizes the error in his value system and sees how he must change his life.⁶⁴⁴

The evaluation of cultural advancement is crucial to the story. It is demonstrated through the gradual confrontation between the European-based culture of the steppe

⁶⁴³ “[I] tol’ko v glazakh ostalas’ eshche ot russkoi pechali polei i pochinok, i ot pookskoi russkoi driakhlosti.”

⁶⁴⁴ The émigré is associated, in contrast to the steppe family, with the word “driakhlyi” (“feeble,” “decrepit,” “antiquated,” “debilitated,” “deteriorated”).

family and the local “savage” Kirgiz tribal culture. The steppe family naively believes itself cultural ambassadors to the more primitive local peoples. Its values, self-image, and attitude toward the Kirgiz are shown through Mariia’s letter to the émigré friend in London and through entries in Ol’ga’s steppe diaries. The family maintains a peaceful, labor-intensive lifestyle at one with nature. Seasonal sights, smells, and activities are lyrically described; one recalls Pil’niak’s early peasants, operating as harmonious elements within nature’s cycles. Like the Russian émigré, the family valorizes European civilization and culture and its transmission. Mariia’s final accolade to London is to the pub barkeep who shares historical information as a colleague of culture. Ol’ga describes the family as “colonizers, bringing culture to the lands of savages” (268). The family, according to Ol’ga, welcomes the Revolution, which will “awaken feudal Russia” (269) and presumably advance its culture. Mariia’s London correspondent, the émigré, describes the family’s activities as “upholding civilization” (“kul’turtregerstvovali” (277)) to his fellow expatriate in London. However, their idealistic self-perception as active culture-bearers is belied by their way of life. They themselves live “on the bottom rung of culture,” without even legal tender (267), as opposed to London’s cultural heights as extolled in Mariia’s letter. They visit no one, and no one visits them; in fact, visiting other human abodes is so complex an operation that they have done it only twice this year. Mariia reports that they “know nothing of what is happening in the world” (267); there’s a revolution going on, she says, so “all the roads are deserted,” and the only human they ever see is the occasional lone Kirgiz horseman appearing and disappearing on the horizon (267). This family is comprised neither of revolutionaries nor of effective cultural emissaries; their transmission of “culture” is entirely passive, expressed only

through the example they set. Their naiveté in this regard is an aspect they share with the anarchists in Golyi god who were a group of intellectuals playing at agricultural self-sustenance --- certain Chekhovian *intelligenty* also come to mind. The members of the steppe family continue their artwork, inventing, writing, and entomological research in this private new geographical arena, even creating perfume with the scent of “Our Life” (269), while continuing their previous Russian lifestyle in every detail. They are intellectual escapists who treasure the isolation and the cheerful concord of family intimacy they enjoy and the lack of incursion of the outside world in any form; changes and visits “ruin [their] solitude” (“narush[aiut] nashe bezliud’e” (269)). Their interest in the ongoing war, its costs and achievements, is at best theoretical. The only active aspect of their “culture-spreading” occurs in their resettlement, to the steppe, where they introduce a moribund, even fossilized European civilization. Their “culture” is represented first by London, whose parliament has met for eight centuries in the same building and whose streets look as they did four centuries ago; and secondly by the old, pre-revolutionary Europeanized Russia whose defining sounds were the tolling of bells rather than the hum of machinery.

A picture of the opposing, surrounding Kirgiz “culture” is developed throughout the story, through the perceptions of the family, the narrator, the revolutionary authorities and the émigré and through the behavior of the Kirgiz men. Initially Mariia describes them neutrally as lone horsemen, the sole representatives of human society since the Revolution had emptied all the roads, but after that their primitivity and savagery are emphasized. Ol’ga presents them as scary, smelly personages who use their teeth to tear off scraps of the dried rotted meat they carry under their saddles; she even has an

ominous dream of Mongolians invading London. At first timid and obsequious, the Kirgiz have become assertive, even aggressive, boldly entering the steppe compound as an armed group, helping themselves to hay for their mounts and moving into the dining room where they sit in chairs, “like Europeans” (269). They refuse offers of hospitality, even the alcoholic cider.⁶⁴⁵ Their uniformity is stressed, both in the settlers’ compound and on the steppe, as is the uniformity of London life (and life within the steppe family homestead); this sameness marks both the European and Kirgiz ways --- however opposite they might be in other regards --- as petrified, rigid “cultures” or “civilizations.” The Kirgiz visiting the compound all behave identically, positioning their bodies just so, “as though thinking a very major thought” (269). They are identical in appearance as well, having narrow slanted eyes, wearing louse-eaten pointed fur hats, leaving behind unpleasant smells of sewage, sweat, and sour milk. Repetitive, uniform behavior even characterizes their nighttime rest stops across the steppe; at each stop the men look and behave the same way, as do their horses, which invariably wander off unless spooked by wolves.

Kirgiz culture is alien to the Russian-European family, whose members read the assertive Kirgiz “visit” variously: Ol’ga as an encroachment on their solitude, Andrei and Nikolai with unexplained displeasure, but the matriarch (who strongly evokes the “enlightened matriarch” in Chekhov’s Uncle Vania) as a sign of the Kirgiz men’s new-found rightful self-confidence as “citizens” --- in other words, as a form of their appropriate assimilation into the Euro-Russian culture. The Russian family is united, however, in its view of the Kirgiz as inferior, as barbarians, the mother commenting that with savages one cannot expect civility.

⁶⁴⁵ Rejection of proffered hospitality in many cultures is considered a hostile act.

The narrator describes the natives in less emotionally-charged terms than did Ol'ga, as their group makes its way across the steppe, but his descriptions still arouse a negative response in the reader. Their posture on the hillside creates “a wild, ancient picture of Asiatic nomadism” (272).

[В]округ костра сидели дикари, в мехах, в остроконечных шапках, с лицами унылыми и омертвевшими, как их степь и полынная степная культура. Эти люди были безмолвны, как степь. (272)
[A]round the campfire sat the savages, in furs and pointed hats, with downcast and numbed faces, like their steppe and their wormwood steppe culture. These people were silent, like the steppe.

He goes on to describe the human litter they spread around the campsite, the dung they use as fuel for the fire, weapons and riding equipment, their eating roasted horse meat with their hands, the (naturally) dung-based odor of the fire itself, presenting a negative picture even without value-laden terms. The narrator acknowledges the existence of this “culture” in the men’s psychological stance and social status, but in the picture he paints, their natural, steppe-based culture can be seen to be as stagnant and petrified (“silent”; “numbed”) as that of tradition-laden urbanized western Europe.

Contact between the Kirgiz and European (family) cultures is gradual but ominous and decisive, both psychologically and physically. Mariia’s letter is totally positive about their primitive life in the steppe, but irrational negative feelings creep into Ol’ga’s diary entries. After hearing entertaining reminiscences from Mariia about London and from her mother-in-law about Mongolia (no doubt during a “cultural evening” at home in the compound), Ol’ga dreams of a crumbling London overrun by Mongolians. Her first response is to equate the dream with reality, as she feels trapped and oppressed by the smelly Kirgiz horsemen pausing to chew rotten meat near her ravine abode, by the endless steppe, and by the social isolation. But on daytime reflection --- although she

even describes the day as “dead” (“mertvyi”) --- she changes her mind, irrationally cheered both by the daily work routine and by the movement of her baby in the womb, rationally by the (“arrogant,” in Jensen’s view (227)) recollection that of course “we are the colonizers, bearing culture to the lands of savages” (268). In the next couple of days the settlers see a mysterious nighttime fire in the distance, which upsets the men as a possible sign of the proximity of the Revolution and peasant revolts (their welcome of the Revolution apparently does not extend to their back yard). The following day the five armed Kirgiz horsemen visit, helping themselves to the hay, sitting silently European-style on the chairs, arousing conflicting responses in the family members. The emotional murk increases that night with the rain, impenetrable darkness, terror-inspiring empty steppe, and eerie rustling in the orchards. The family assembles as usual in the evening, but this time each with his or her own individual occupation rather than the usual paired or communal games and activities enacted in a joking atmosphere. Dogs bark, wolves howl, a shot rings out, Andrei goes to check on the situation As we learn later, Ol’ga will not get to the sewing for her baby that night, or ever. Life as they have known it ends that very night with exactly the type of incursion of Mongols that Ol’ga’s dream foreshadowed.

Although the Kirgiz are characterized as savages, the attack on the Russian homestead is not entirely unmotivated. The Kirgiz target farms according to the existence of haystacks “of the type in which Russians have buried and burned Kirgiz horse thieves”; the light emanating from the windows of the Russian homestead is “strange and alien to the Kirgiz,” and an ominous wind blows from below, in the ravine where the

farm is located (273). The European intellectual lifestyle is as alien and threatening to the Kirgiz as is theirs to the Euro-Russians.

The Kirgiz attack, leaving one horseman on guard above the ravine to signal as necessary --- it is his gunshot into the air that initiates the attack and which Andrei goes to investigate --- and to cover the backs of his men should they become endangered; this man also shoots one of the Russian husbands who, wounded and disfigured from the attack, heroically tries to shoot the women's violators.⁶⁴⁶ In a chaotic, fire-illuminated scene described with aural and visual effects, the Kirgiz kill the men and rape the women, whose screams for mercy, particularly from Ol'ga trying to protect her pregnancy, are heard. The Kirgiz burn parts of the farmstead and consume a cask of beverage. The narrator brings closure to this section with a description of the subsequent cheerless dawn in which the Kirgiz band itself is shot to pieces by the local revolutionary authorities and left as food for scavenging animals, and the ensuing visit of a Red Army contingent to bury the dead at the farm and report the incident.

In this story, Pil'niak's biological *ethos* on the personal (as opposed to cultural) level is presented primarily through Mariia's letter, Ol'ga's diary, and the later experiences and reflections of Mariia's Russian émigré friend in London. The family is presented as generally in accord with Pil'niak's ethical system. The agricultural lifestyle shows its alliance with nature's sunny, nurturing aspect. The marriages of Ol'ga and Nikolai, Mariia and Andrei are validated by their happiness in the steppe compound, their enjoyment of natural labor, their happy companionship and playful times together near the beehives and in the hayloft. Ol'ga's match (and her rightness as a woman) is further validated by her pregnancy and her positive attitude toward the child's movements, her

⁶⁴⁶ There is irony in the fact that he is killed with an English rifle.

desire to share these movements with her husband (and his responsive enthusiasm), and her sewing for the anticipated newborn. The women are equal in status to the men yet are playing appropriate female roles, the entomologist matriarch studying nature, Mariia observing human culture, and Ol'ga as an expectant mother. The men are professionally creative (writer, inventor); and the wounded husband's (or son's) doomed attempt to preserve the women demonstrates that he is playing the role, appropriately, of family protector. They have come as a family, rather than an unrelated group of individuals, to represent the "culture" they wish to transmit, the nuclear family being the most basic building block of culture. However, the family's fatal shortcoming lies in its ultimate passivity and its misconceptions of what culture-bearing really entails, both with respect to the Revolution and to its own "culture-bearing, colonizing" activity. In this story, culture-changing is indeed taking place, but it is being done by revolutionary forces, as will become clear as the story develops. In effect the family is building culture only within its own family sphere and transmitting it passively, if at all, by example alone and without any concession to the surrounding culture.

The most important message of this tale involves the aftermath of the rape, first of all in the report by the Red Army officer counting Ol'ga's stillborn son as one of the dead, acknowledging his status as a "man" killed (274). The story's conclusion is revealed by the London émigré, relating the history of the ill-fated settlement to a fellow expatriate in London, again at Ye Olde Cheshire Cheese pub which he and Mariia had visited years before. The men died, Ol'ga miscarried the next day as a result of having been raped, and Mariia conceived. The émigré asks his companion to think about

Mariia,⁶⁴⁷

о хорошей русской женщине, которая любила мужа,
мужа которой убили ее насильники, которая до самого
рождения ребенка не знала --- кто отец ее ребенка ---
муж, который никогда не вернется, и его сын ---
единственная о нем память, или насильники,
загавившие ее душу и тело? (277)

about the good Russian woman who loved her husband, whose husband
her rapists killed, who did not know until the moment of her child's
birth who was his father --- her husband, who would never return and
whose son was the only memory of him, or the rapists, who had
desecrated her soul and body?

The universal human experience becomes the focus of his tale. The old Russian, who is in the process of re-structuring his values, shifting them from maintenance of tradition to its revitalization, goes on to point out that the “little slant-eyed Kirgiz baby” was red, “like all newborns”; he cried after the birth spanking, “like [all] newborns” (277). And although the others feared to give Mariia the baby at her request, when they did so she took him and pressed him to her breast, beaming “like all mothers who took their own children into their arms for the first time,” still awed by the mystery of birth (277). Even Ol’ga, who had been raped and had lost both her husband and their already beloved and anticipated baby to the unknown savage tribe of this child, would sneak in to Mariia to love and caress this obviously alien baby, a child of violence and destruction. This was not a desired child of love and promise but one of rape, violence and total degradation who came at the price of personal pain, extreme personal humiliation, and the life of beloved mates, for Ol’ga at the cost also of her own unborn baby, the product of her loving union. Nevertheless, maternal instinct brought these women to love this baby as their own. According to the émigré, Mariia’s wondrous acceptance of the baby “is life,” and Ol’ga’s gravitation toward it also is “life,” “life [which is] a terrible tragedy!” but

⁶⁴⁷ The symbolism behind her name is obvious.

human life which is so much “more ancient, more meaningful, more terrible” than any cultural achievement (277).⁶⁴⁸ For Pil’niak, the maternal instinct exhibited by Mariia and Ol’ga is at its finest, its most transcendent, even at the terrible price they had to pay.

In the larger scheme of things, as Jensen comments, “Pilnjak has once more attempted to show that culture and civilization are surface phenomena in comparison with life as such” (228). This theme of the relative importance of the phases of individual life, and the family circle, is further underlined by the drunken Irishman in the pub, showing photographs of “the most important thing,” his daughter and her sweetheart (275). That culture and civilization come and go does not mean, however, that they are not important, since they do give form and structure to human life processes and allow healthy human development and expression (as opposed to barbarism). Ultimately culture is the larger expression of the individual family units which make it up, and the importance of those family units is often insufficiently appreciated by Pil’niak researchers.

The émigré’s epiphany that day continues. The murky fog having effectively silenced the sounds of commerce and industry, he has been awakened that morning by the sounds of church bells, reminding him of his homeland. An intellectual himself, he measures mankind’s history by his own country, Russia; he had come to England cursing his homeland’s backwardness, seeking a more enlightened culture of technological

⁶⁴⁸ “[к]ак все матери, впервые взявшие в свои руки своего ребенка, в прекрасной радости бытия, еще не свыкшаяся с тайной рождения . . . Это --- жизнь. У Ольги убили тогда неродившегося ребенка, -- и --- знаете --- она приходила потихоньку, тайком, к Марии, чтоб приласкаться к нему . . . это --- жизнь, жизнь --- страшная трагедия! . . . С Марией мы бродили по Лондону [. . .] тогда вот здесь она говорила о величии человеческой культуры; [. . .] она [. . .] целовала камни парламента, как святыню человеческой культуры! . . . Насколько древнее, значимей, --- страшнее --- человеческая жизнь . . .” (“[I]ike all mothers having taken their child into their arms for the first time, in the wonderful joy of existence, not yet used to the mystery of birth . . . This is life. Ol’ga’s unborn child had been killed then, and, you know, she would come quietly, in secret, to Mariia, in order to cuddle him . . . this is life, life is a terrible tragedy! I wandered around London with Mariia [. . .] at that time right here she would speak of the greatness of human culture; [. . .] she [. . .] kissed the stones of parliament, like a holy place of human culture! . . . How much more ancient, more meaningful --- more terrible --- is human life . . .”)

advancement. However, the books in the museum that morning speak to him no longer of humanity's achievements, as they had earlier to him and to Mariia as well, but of its debilitation ("driakhlost" (275)). His retelling of the Russian settlers' story makes him recognize that his priorities have been misplaced in seeking the advanced technology of Europe and that the true measure of "cultural" progress is spiritual advancement. The loving reactions of Mariia and Ol'ga to the half-breed child of rape have shown him that (newly revolutionary) Russia, not Europe, is the locus of spiritual progress that will lead to a cultural renaissance as well. The narrator's agreement with respect to revolutionary Russia's leadership in cultural achievement is signified by his description of the Red Army officer helping to bury the dead at the farmstead, correcting his report to show three, not two, men killed by the Kirgiz raid, thus acknowledging Ol'ga's stillborn baby as a "man killed" in a mark of respect for the individual that was unlikely to be shown by either the English or the Kirgiz culture.

After the talk with his friend, the old and feeble (now he too is specifically described as "driakhl") émigré returns to his flat, reflecting on the day and on his homeland (278). He executes his English evening rituals and, upon retiring, hears the church bells again. He has come to realize that ultimately regional cultures, civilizations, social movements, inventions, and scientific discoveries are superficial and transient, coming and going like Londoners in the fog and horsemen on the steppe; but the most important thing remains --- how the phases of individual human life as child, as lover, as parent are lived out. . . and then how one's life is justified in the face of death. The transcendent example of Ol'ga and Mariia in their loving maternal embrace of this alien, slant-eyed child of rape has convinced the anglophile Russian, almost completely

assimilated as he is into English culture, that to justify his own life, ill-spent seeking human advancement in all the wrong forms and places, he must “take his bones” to his motherland to die (278).

The steppe story ends in hope. Spring has arrived, nature is in a hurry to get on with the bloom of life, and the three women work all night to make sure the dam will hold the irrigation pond as the water flow intensifies. The steppe is at peace, the women at work, cheerful and gay, and life, having taken new forms, is again full of promise. They have been very wrong --- in their own life goals, in their self-image as ambassadors of advanced culture, in their valorization of one culture (Euro-Russian) that has become obsolescent and their apathy toward another (Soviet revolutionary) that is vital and constructive. They have paid dearly for their errors, but in their loving welcome of Mariia’s baby, they have ultimately made the most fundamental decision of life, nature, and love correctly, and for that the rewards are great.

It is significant that of all the participants in the attack, only women survive. This provides further commentary on Pil’niak’s view of gender roles. Three women remain, the matriarch, a natural scientist, who has raised two sons; Mariia, a student of world cultures, who is raising the mixed-race but beloved baby; and Ol’ga, who delivered a stillborn but will act now as a surrogate mother. They will nurture the baby, bearing to him the cultural values (from the larger human artistic and intellectual culture and from the individual moral culture of right living) that they never brought to the local “savages.” Women are not only biological nurturers but are ultimately the bearers of culture, in every sense.

Cultural Observations

As mentioned above, this is really a “Tale of Three Cultures,” European, Asiatic, and revolutionary Soviet. The European culture is represented by London, the Russian émigré, and the homesteaders who sought to realize it, albeit dramatically differently, on the steppe. It is an old culture, by now obsolescent and petrified in its forms and habits, its energy devoted to self-preservation. The Asiatic culture is represented by the savage Kirgiz tribesmen and their “wormwood steppe culture” which is also ancient, ossified, and basically self-preserving, although, in contrast to the European-based one it lacks any sign of the production of “cultural monuments.” Distinguishing these two larger cultures is their orientation to nature: the European-based civilization, while urbanized in its London manifestation, retains its orientation to nature’s diurnal, sunny, nurturing aspect in the steppe family and in the Russian émigré, while the Asiatic culture is presented as chaotic, destructive, and nocturnal. Unifying the two larger cultures is the sense of inertness and rigidity, the strong tendency to uniformity in clothing, daily routines, eating patterns, and the like,⁶⁴⁹ as well as the death motif: the Kirgiz horsemen carry English rifles. The third culture is that of the Soviet Revolution, a revolution allegedly waged for the benefit of all cultures, which seems, deceptively, to be only a background element in the story. This revolutionary culture is marked by extreme, almost frenzied activity, in striking contrast to the stagnant qualities exhibited by East and West. The steppe family is oblivious to the danger presented by the Kirgiz horsemen, but the revolutionary authorities are not; in the constant flurry of communiqués, marches, retreats, orders, heroic and unheroic acts, withdrawals, advances, insomnia, deaths, phone calls, muddy

⁶⁴⁹ Pil’niak did indeed lament the “sameness” of English housing and other aspects of life; see “Otryvki iz ‘Povesti v pismakh’, kotoruiu skuchno konchit” for some of his impressions of London life. One can only be thankful he did not live to see Soviet residential architecture as immortalized in the film S legkim parom.

marches, shouts, and so forth, a full range of human experience is in progress in the revolutionary community, and from one of its innumerable military and regional reports we learn that a band of a hundred Kirgiz has been burning, looting, and plundering Russian settlements. Resolution of this problem by the army's subsequent annihilation of this Kirgiz gang is attested by another report, almost insignificant among the myriad urgent communiqués and telephone calls. The Revolution is the locus of action, and the settlers' and the émigré's failure is their devotion to stagnant Western culture instead of to the active, constructive, communicative Soviet one. The Kirgiz also reject the Revolution, actively in their case, and if they are to survive they must be "domesticated" or "acculturated" into the newly prevailing Soviet culture. While the elimination of the marauding Kirgiz band has come too late for the steppe family, the revolutionary "culture" is making the steppe safe for the remnant which remains, and in fact represents the vitality which is needed by both the Western and Eastern cultures, a domesticating vitality with respect to the Kirgiz and an activating one for the Euro-Russians.

Despite this larger cultural view, Pil'niak's primary message is biased toward the universals of human life. Ultimately cultures and civilizations come and go, as the Englishmen disappear into and emerge from the impenetrable fog and the Kirgiz horsemen appear and disappear on the steppe. The settlers neither appear nor disappear, since they virtually never leave their compound, further demonstrating their ineffectuality as "culture bearers." Ultimately, the Revolution too is only a link in the chain of history, one which is currently performing a moderating role among cultures. It is the life pattern of the individual, and the family unit, shared by men and women in all times and cultures, that is the true measure of humanity and history.

Pil'niak, the Revolution, and Primitivism

Pil'niak's view of the Revolution, as well as his Slavophilism and primitivist beliefs, was in a state of evolution at this time. His visits to Germany and Estonia the previous year and to England this year (1923) had confirmed his long-held Slavophile belief that the West was a moribund, corrupting influence but had also made him aware of the liberating potential of the technology, as yet absent in Russia, which he saw there. At home the rapid progress of the Soviet "ordering" of society made it clear that the Revolution was not, as he had thought, a spontaneous emergence of Russia's aboriginal roots presaging a return to pre-Petrine culture; the Soviet movement toward such things as universal literacy and industrialization now seemed to hold out promise for a new level of spiritual culture. Pil'niak was also gradually becoming aware that primitivity, measured as a degree of man's aboriginality or proximity to the natural state, had two aspects: one the "noble" (diurnal, nurturing) savage, the other the "barbaric" (nocturnal, destructive) one, a distinction he would further clarify the following year in "Mat'-syr zemlia." Nomadic groups seemed especially suspect, since their cultures were not supportive of genuinely intimate, constructive family life.

In this particular story, the Western culture is disparaged as moribund and lacking right spiritual values, but the Eastern (Asiatic) one is not valorized. It is sympathetically presented, in the acknowledgment of its cultural status ("wormwood steppe culture") and in the motivations given for the attack (previous Russian immolation of Kirgiz; fear of the interior home lights, etc.), but it is not presented as a paradigm for emulation or as a source of creative energy (as in the typical presentation of chaotic Asian elements in Slavophile and Eurasianist type philosophies). The specific active group of Kirgiz men is

doomed to total destruction, while a female remnant of the Euro-Russians survives and, although at great cost, at least appears to enter a new period of prosperity. Both cultures are presented as stagnant and in need of rejuvenation; it is the revolutionary forces that form the locus of revitalizing energy. The Euro-Russian group professes support of the Revolution, but in its isolationist behavior shows ambivalence toward it; the Kirgiz group resists both the colonizing action of the family group and the organizing pressures of Soviet revolutionary action. Potential rejuvenation of both groups comes about through violent contact which is afterward cut short by the intervention of revolutionary forces, resulting in the total destruction of the Kirgiz bandit group. The product of cultural contact, the baby born to Mariia of elements of two stagnant cultures, will grow up in the European-based culture moderated and synthesized by the Revolution, which has made evident its own individualistic humanist values (e.g., in its counting of the stillborn baby as a “man” killed).

This story reveals Pil’niak’s hope, at this particular time, that the new regime will result in a valid new culture promoting spiritual as well as technological and other forms of social progress,⁶⁵⁰ and his growing recognition that primitivity can be as lethal as can those decrepit forms of civilization which have ceased to nurture man’s spirit.

Other Interpretations

There are other views of this tale as well. Eric Naiman, for example, also interprets it on the socio-political level, but, following his analysis of “Ivan-da-Mar’ia,” in which he depicts the Revolution, and especially the Cheka, as out-of-control sexual climax (61-2), he asserts that Pil’niak constructs the Revolution as a “paganistic fertility rite that overpowers the consciousness of the subject, who, violated, is forced to bear and

⁶⁵⁰ He will have abandoned this hope by the time of “Rozhdenie cheloveka” (1934).

bring forth a future that has been inflicted upon --- rather than chosen by --- her” (62). Naiman goes on to say that the Revolution, to Pil’niak, “is akin to a rape of the West --- and of Civilization --- by the ‘life of the species,’” forcing the West “to bring a strange being into the world and to love it” (62). As mentioned above, I interpret the Kirgiz here not as a force of vitality (“the life of the species”) but as ultimately a stagnant, if also actively destructive, element. I have further difficulty seeing Mariia, admittedly a westward-leaning *intelligent*, as raped by representatives of “the Revolution.” Her Kirgiz rapists were in fact anti-revolutionary forces. It is also not clear how the Russian settlers, another manifestation of the West and of the *intelligentsia*, could be said to be raped “by the Revolution.” It seems to me that such settlers in the steppe would be vulnerable to raids of the type described even under Tsarist rule. In this particular text, it is the Revolution that restores “law and order.”

Naiman’s interpretation, of this story at least, is further flawed in its assumption that maternal love in Pil’niak is always accepting and loving of its progeny; maternal devotion is by no means automatic in Pil’niak, and there are plenty of flawed mothers who reject or mistreat their children in various ways. In this particular fictional instance, nothing could have been simpler than disposing of an unwanted child in the isolation of the steppe. Maternal devotion in Pil’niak is glorious and beatific because it is not automatic; perhaps it should be, but it is not. While Pil’niak devotes a lot of space to the Revolution and its impact in his *oeuvre*, his views of the Revolution change dramatically over time --- and it seems clear that from the start Pil’niak’s most essential and enduring message is that the Revolution (and its issue) is ultimately only one of many links in the chain of history, whereas it is the eternal and universal elements of individual human life

and experience that truly matter.

Maternal Transcendence, Paternal Rejection: “Chelovecheskii veter”

Pil’niak continues his exploration of various aspects of family relationships in the mid-1920s. In April 1924 he left his first wife and his children in Kolomna for the actress Ol’ga Sergeevna Shcherbinovskaia, who would become his second wife the following year. His non-travel-oriented writings in 1924 and 1925 are particularly rich in reflections on family life, marriage, divorce, and parent-child relationships in both nuclear and extended families.

The 1925 story “Chelovecheskii veter”⁶⁵¹ contains many biological and family-related thematics. A major theme is a parent’s claim on a child, reminiscent of “Oдно” and its 1924 republication as “Afrikantsy,” and foreshadowing “Grego-Trimuntan,” soon to be written in November 1925 during Pil’niak’s Mediterranean journey. Additional *ethos*-related explorations in this story concern marital relationships, maternal and paternal roles, transcendence of circumstances, forgiveness, (non-)ethical decision-making, the sustaining dream, and conscience. “Oдно” is also recalled in the toxic marital breakup, but in “Chelovecheskii veter” it is the woman who is ultimately upright and the man who lacks any redeeming qualities. As in “Oдно,” the informing persona is predominantly the male protagonist.

The reader knows little about the background of the couple in “Chelovecheskii veter” or how they initially came together, since the storyline begins with their

⁶⁵¹ “The Human Wind,” written September 1925 in Moscow immediately before his Aegean/Mediterranean trip; first published 1925. I will be citing from “Chelovecheskii veter,” 6-vol. coll., vol. 2, 499-507. One chapter heading is missing from this version; Chapter II begins on page 502, immediately previous to the description of the mother and her life.

separation. The protagonist, Ivan Ivanovich Ivanov, represents a sort of Russian Everyman; as the narrator points out:

Не важно, кем был и мог быть Иван Иванович,
преподавателем ли гимназии или земским статистиком:
над его жизнью продул тот ветер, что пахнет
человеческим жильем. (503)
It's not important, who Ivan Ivanovich was or might have been,
a gymnasium teacher or a Zemstvo statistician: over his life
blew that wind which smells of human living quarters.

That “wind,” and the squalor of the quarters described when he lives alone in them, paint him as an “obyvatel’”--- a philistine, virtually devoid of spiritual qualities. The fact that he smells of human abodes signifies his physical and social isolation and inertia: he is an indoors person, completely out of touch with nature and the normal course of human events. His wife’s name is mentioned only twice, an affectionate diminutive of Elena, when he is calling for her to return: “Alenushka!” (501, 504)

It is clear that their marriage had started out well, with love and promises of eternal love and great joy. His wife was his substitute for nature and outside life --- it was she “who filled the whole earth and sun” for him (500).⁶⁵² Their original love and happiness was crowned with a son, a new Ivan Ivanovich. At his birth, Alena’s eyes shone with all the wonder of motherhood, and Ivanov entered into this joy, going in “to kiss her pale hand” (500). However, things somehow have gone wrong in their married life, and their flawed personalities are at least partly to blame.

Neither partner is perfect. Ivanov’s stagnant inner self (“obyvatel’stvo”) is reflected throughout the story by the description of his squalid domicile, whose “human wind” characterizes him, and its growing piles of cigarette butts behind the couch, the

⁶⁵² “zapolnivshaia mir i solntse.”

ever dustier tablecloth that is never changed, the weed-filled yard, and the wooden fence and gate allowing or barring access to and by the outside world. Alena, according to the narrator, is one of those women who understand love as total involvement in her husband's life, so that she lives only through him, having given up her own self, including her dignity. This over-involvement prevents the husband from living, working, and thinking, and leads the relationship to inevitable collapse, since "even the servitude of love is servitude, and in such loves there is nothing being built" (502).⁶⁵³ It is probable that Ivanov suffers from the same affliction, since she was so all-encompassing for him. Neither spouse has an external sense of direction or calling in life --- devotion to intellectual pursuits, work, revolutionary activism, religion, etc., i.e., any of the cultural aspects of life that make the family a culture-building unit of society.

This story, like so many others in Pil'niak's *oeuvre*, valorizes personal life experiences over larger historical affairs. The narrator even introduces the story by pointing out how much more real and meaningful are individual life events than those of the epoch (499).⁶⁵⁴ As in "Otkos," there is a strong emphasis on people's decisions along the way. Alena and Polunin in "Smertel'noe manit" were to some extent pushed off life's track by circumstances beyond their control. This is not the case with the protagonists of "Chelovecheskii veter," whose problems are largely of their own making. The decisions they make are crucial to the course of events. Pil'niak emphasizes the sense of critical

⁶⁵³ "dazhe liubovnoe rabstvo est' rabstvo, i v takikh liuboviakh net stroitel'stva."

⁶⁵⁴ The Revolution, for example, gets minimal print; it is mentioned literally only twice, to explain the delay between the boys' correspondence with Ivanov and their visit to him. It is first described parenthetically, thus (503): "(Nado v skobkakh skazat' tut, chto eti dni bytia Ivana i Nikolaia priveli ikh v velikuiu russkuiu revoliutsiiu.)" ("(It must be mentioned in parentheses here that these days of the lives of Ivan and Nikolai brought them into the great Russian Revolution.)") The visit is said to be made when war "has quieted down" ("otgromykhala" (504)). Otherwise the Revolution is suggested only in Ivan's military attire when he and Nikolai depart from the train station at the end of the story.

decisions that have the potential of exploiting (or losing forever) momentary opportunities by staging key events at liminal times and places.⁶⁵⁵ It is usually Ivanov, the informing psyche, who makes key decisions and whose resultant suffering is highlighted. Clearly his actions affect others, but the internal perspectives of those characters are less frequently depicted.

The seminal critical event, one which haunts Ivanov forever, occurs when he expels Alena from their home for infidelity. Obsessively re-reading a note in which his wife was setting up a tryst with a lover, Nikolai, he confronts her.⁶⁵⁶ The life-altering quality of the occasion is clear: they talk at midnight, she standing by the door. She pleads for forgiveness, contrasting the superficial, unreal quality of the affair (“navazhdenie” (500)) with the real love she and Ivanov once shared. He keeps reading the assignation note slowly aloud, tells her coldly that there’s no point in forgiveness, that infatuations (the “navazhdeniia”) are invalidating patterns of behavior; the simple fact remains that she made love with another man in his bed, and he orders her out of the house. When next she pleads for their union on behalf of their son, he mocks her, playing with her words to indicate the child is just a little animal (501).⁶⁵⁷ Effectively rejecting both his wife and their child and questioning the baby’s paternity, he claims to need no offspring of hers, and orders her out again, into the pouring autumn rain. At this point she momentarily responds in kind, calling him a scoundrel (“negodiai”),⁶⁵⁸ retorting that

⁶⁵⁵ Similarly, the *Otkos* is a liminal place, with decision-making associations, in “Nizhegorodskii otkos”; critical junctures in “Grego-Trimuntan” are marked by nature’s darkness and silence, times when no hints of life’s meaning are offered.

⁶⁵⁶ His verbal cruelty is reminiscent of Stefaniia’s in “Oдно.”

⁶⁵⁷ “U nas zhe rebenok” (“but we have a child”) becomes “U nas zherebenok” (“we have a foal”).

⁶⁵⁸ The word “scoundrel” (“negodiai”) reverberates throughout the story.

indeed she does love him, the lover, not Ivanov (501).

She leaves, taking the baby with her. He sits for fifteen minutes, then runs out, standing at the open gate pitifully calling her, to no avail. It is too late. The next day she sends someone for her things, he writes a long letter and ingratiatingly asks the messenger⁶⁵⁹ to bring him a response, but he never hears from her again. It is clear that he deeply regrets sending her away and that he yearns for her return. He does remain alert for news of her whereabouts, learning soon that she has left town, a year later that she is living in Moscow, and three years later that she has had a new son, Nikolai, who bears the first name of the lover (in the note) and his own surname, Ivanov.

The reader really does not know whom Alena loves and how valid her protestations are, but she is not the subject here. Whatever the situation, Ivanov shows himself to be self-righteous, cold, arrogant, rejecting and stagnant. His calls and his letter are too late. He could have been kinder and still sent her away; he could have chosen to forgive her this once and try again; he could have followed the person who had come for Alena's belongings; he could have sought his wife in Moscow. He chooses none of these options. His lethargy is materialized in the ever-growing pile of cigarette butts behind his couch.

This event, Ivanov's expulsion of his wife and son from their home, triggers the remainder of the story. In short, Alena lives a dissipated life in Moscow, sending son Ivan to her sister's in the country and young Nikolai to an orphanage, where at the age of seven he develops epilepsy. Alena dies of typhus, and the boys, who have never met, become acquainted, then intimate, through letters. At fourteen, Ivan learns from his aunt

⁶⁵⁹ The messenger responds as cavalierly to his entreaty as he had responded to his wife's.

that he has a father, and he begins a correspondence with Ivanov, who is thrilled to hear from him. Nikolai in turn is delighted to learn from his (half-)brother that he has a father, but his letters to Ivanov go unanswered. The Revolution intervenes, and afterwards both boys, now men, decide to visit “their” father, Ivanov, at which time they will also meet each other face to face for the first time. Ivanov’s reception of their visit is the climax to the events he put in motion over a decade earlier.

Ivanov’s dilemma is depicted through his response to his sons’ letters. Just as his new life with daughter Alisa rejuvenated Turchaninov, the initial letter from his lost son Ivan jolts morose, sluggish Ivanov out of his habitual stagnation and rejuvenates him, potentially re-orienting him from his deathly torpor into a vital, life-directed trajectory and presenting him with a potentially positive future. The letter seems to almost crowd out the memory of that terrible night shouting for his wife to come back, and it gives birth to a wish to shout again, equally loud but now in an all-forgiving and joyous way. It is as though a relationship with his son could in some way restore his ruined marriage and undo his terrible mistake of that life-altering night. He responds with a long, tender letter to Ivan. Ivan then forwards Ivanov’s letter to Nikolai, who now develops a sustaining dream, a daydream of the father he has never had, and he writes a letter of his own. However, the letter from Nikolai, opening just like Ivan’s with “Hello, my dear papa,” recalls to Ivanov only the horror of that dank night (504). It generates new waves of hatred and a desire to repeat the insulting shouts with which he had sent his wife away.

When it comes time for the visit, Nikolai arrives at the hotel first and goes on, with loving anticipation, to meet “his father” Ivanov. This is Ivanov’s second chance to choose life, his opportunity for redemption, as the resounding echoes of the initial

disastrous night make clear. The situation, except for time of day, duplicates that terrible night of Ivanov's fateful act: it is again autumn, twilight instead of midnight, and the candle burns on the table as before. Nikolai arrives at a liminal time for a critical, life-determining event. Ivanov hears the approach of a visitor, a polite voice asking if this is the right house. When Nikolai greets him from the threshold, Ivanov is standing at the table, by that same faded tablecloth, their stances mirroring those of Alena and Ivanov so long ago at the expulsion of this youth's mother and Ivanov's own son. The arrival of clearly defective Nikolai, pale, weak, crippled, and addressing him as "Papa," brings back that night in force --- Ivanov even feels that the long-ago night "has stepped into the room" (504).⁶⁶⁰ He rebuffs Nikolai's eager greeting and self-introduction as coldly and mockingly as he had rebuffed Alena's entreaties. The repeated dropping and return of Nikolai's cane emphasize the physically "defective" quality of the young man himself and provide sound effects to support the hammer blows of Ivanov's repeated references to Nikolai's unknown patronymic. Ivanov sits opposite Nikolai claiming to want to clear up the misunderstanding through which Nikolai bears his surname, with ever more agitation repeating that he does "not have the honor of knowing" who Nikolai's father is, nor with whom his mother was sleeping to beget him (505), in another echo of Ivanov's insults to Alena so long ago. Nikolai leaves in total confusion but silently and decisively. Again Ivanov waits all night at the gate, this time calling in vain for son Ivanushka.

The next day Ivanov sees the two from a distance at the train station, the weaker being led by the stronger, the stronger a son any father would be proud of: tall, blond, strong, in full regimental uniform with saber and revolver. The sight of Ivan's eyes, impossibly like his mother's, those same deep pools in which Ivanov "could once sink

⁶⁶⁰ "vstupila v komnatu"

the world and the sun” (507),⁶⁶¹ reveals his vestigial love and internal wish to restore the unrestorable. The narrator makes it clear that this is the first, last, and only time Ivanov will see his sons. “Father” Ivanov, frail and grey, makes his way home to the house surrounded by weeds and filled with ashes and cigarette butts. Having blasphemed against the mother of his son(s), he has cut off his only path to a happier future, losing them forever as a result.

What does this story tell us?

We will look first at Alena. As Ivanov is associated with the stuffy odor of human lodgings, Alena’s post-marriage icon is a “multi-colored gypsy shawl,” an image suggesting her aimless life whirling around Moscow (502). Because of her essential lack of self-respect and her mistaken understanding of love, her life in Moscow seems to resemble that of the Golutvin engineer in “Ivan-da-Mar’ia” who wakes up each grey dawn with a different lover. She ends up unraveled in a sort of human garbage heap in a Moscow suburb (502).⁶⁶² However, despite the personal traits or misconceptions that make her unsuitable as a wife, her maternal qualities are heroic. She strives to care for her children, placing Ivan in the provinces with her sister, and keeping baby Nikolai with her as long as possible. Ultimately she has to put him in an orphanage, where he later develops epilepsy. The reader knows no more than does Ivanov about her relationship with Nikolai’s father; it is just clear that she neither understands how committed relationships work nor chooses mates wisely. She condemns this man as a scoundrel only

⁶⁶¹ “”nekoгда on mog topit’ mir i solntse”

⁶⁶² “Potom eta shal’ razvilas’, upala --- i upala ona v ochen’ musornyi moskovskii prigorod, v ochen’ udushlivyi chelovecheskii musor.”

when the epilepsy comes to light, and on two counts: first, that he did not claim Nikolai by giving the child his name, and secondly “because only scoundrels can dare to engender sick children” (502).⁶⁶³ In contrast to “Oдно,” however, Alena here is the more conscientious in her unions: she has long considered herself, too, a scoundrel for just daring to have a child (502)⁶⁶⁴ --- since, as the narrator emphasizes in one of the tale’s refrains, a person must always be his own harshest judge.⁶⁶⁵

She is not, however, judged a scoundrel in Pil’niak’s court of life. Whatever her other flaws and sins, Alena transcends them via her performance as a mother. The life of this mother, her own strictest critic and indeed one whose behavior is quite questionable, is totally vindicated by the narrator despite her flaws and mistakes. Both children show trusting, respectful, loving natures and generosity of spirit, for which their mother’s love and care (if haphazard) is explicitly credited. From their mother they learned filial love, which they experienced and preserved toward her and also sought to express toward their only father-figure. She dies a worthy person, because she has managed to imbue both of her children, one distant and one local, with love and respect toward her as their mother. She has achieved the immortality that parenthood affords: her sons’ epistolary relationship focused on their cherished memories of her which continued to unite them when they met on the occasion of the disastrous visit to Ivanov, even though by then only one of them, Nikolai, had real memories. Ultimately her sons rise up and call her blessed;

⁶⁶³ “kotoryi ne dal dazhe imeni synu, --- prosto negodiai, potomu chto tol’ko negodiai mogut osmelivat’ sia rodit’ bol’nykh detei.”

⁶⁶⁴ “negodiaikoi, posmevshei rodit’ rebenka”

⁶⁶⁵ “chelovecheskii sud ne dolzhen, ne mozhет byt’ stol’ strogim, kak sud cheloveka nad samim soboi” (502, 507), literally “human judgment should not and cannot be as severe as a person’s judgment on himself.”

their memory of her has taken on an appropriately holy aspect. But to them, as to her, Ivanov has become that most reprehensible of characters, the *negodiai*, not because of his treatment of them but because he profaned the memory of their mother (506).⁶⁶⁶ The narrator assesses the larger sense of her death in that she lived out all that she had been presented in life (502).⁶⁶⁷ If Pil'niak was ever truly a misogynist, this assessment shows that that phase has clearly passed by this time. Alena is commended for maternal transcendence, high expectations (and judgment) of herself, and for doing the very best she can in the circumstances in which she finds herself.

The two children in this story serve, as usual, to bring out qualities found in the more central adult characters (parents Ivan Ivanovich Ivanov and wife Alena), and to show archetypal traits and roles Pil'niak attributes to children. The welcomed birth of Ivan, plus his later physical beauty, health, strength, and worldly success, suggest the original love-based “rightness” of the parental match, however many bad decisions might have been made in their ongoing relationship. On the other hand, the numerous strikes against Nikolai (born outside of a committed relationship, named for his mother’s extra-marital lover, unacknowledged by his biological father, epileptic) are signs of the inappropriateness of Alena’s match with his unnamed father. Each son is named for one of the mother’s two “lovers” mentioned in the initial rejection scene: Ivan, for his father (Ivan Ivanovich Ivanov), born within a promising marriage; and Nikolai, for the addressee of the fateful tryst note that destroyed the marriage. Fathered by an unnamed

⁶⁶⁶ “I dlia togo cheloveka, kotoryi zhil v etom zhe gorode, k kotoromu oni priekhali, u nikh bylo sukhoie slovo --- *negodiai*, --- *negodiai*, kotoryi osmelilsia posiagnut’ na pamiat’ materi --- ---” (“And for the man living in this town, whom they had come to visit, they had only the cold word ‘scoundrel,’ a scoundrel, who dared to besmirch their mother’s memory.”) Pil’niak’s emphasis.

⁶⁶⁷ “[. . .] bol’shoi smysl smerti byl v tom, chto vse, polozhennoe ei na zhizn’, ona otzhila.” One is reminded here of the words of St. Paul: “I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.” 2 Tim. 4:7.

sex partner in Alena's later dissipated Moscow life, he bears the same surname as Ivan, a result of his mother's previous (and apparently still nominally extant) marriage. The boys, growing up separately, have no childhood contact but eagerly "restore their brotherly rights" (503) when the opportunity arises, and they build mutual trust and love through this correspondence. Having had a loving mother, they are eager to build a relationship with their father as well, once they learn of his existence. Nikolai is accidentally misdirected in the search for biological paternal identity, with his older brother communicating his belief that they were full brothers, since they shared both mother and surname, but Nikolai's search for identity is happily satisfied by the very notion of a real father, the sustaining dream. He keeps his dreams and tender feelings about his father private in the orphanage environment; he never questions and it never occurs to him that Ivan's father might not be his own until the devastating encounter, which he manages to resolve afterward by means of his brother's loving support. These brothers show unity and mutual assistance, the strong supporting the weak, rather than competition. Their mother is the subject of their most cherished memories. They are truly brothers, despite differences in paternity, physical condition, and location; in a sense, they have chosen to be brothers and to enter the loving partnership that relationship implies. Unlike their parents, the sons do have a strong sense of direction, at least a moral sense; it takes them no time at all to withdraw in solidarity from the life of a man who has insulted their beloved mother (and rejected one of them). Nikolai, in fact, has been rejected by two fathers: the biological one who did not give him a name, and the father-figure, or chosen father, who resents having given him one. By abandoning his biological son, Nikolai's father, in effect, left him as a potential "gift" for another father, such as

Ivanov, to freely pick up; both “fathers” lose out. Ivanov’s rejection is additionally tragic, since, as shown by the repeated references to the candle burning on the table surrounded by cigarette butts (506) that only Nikolai could have placed in the hotel room, Nikolai and Ivanov are in some way kindred spirits. With all his trials, Nikolai still responds to people and events with love rather than embitterment, transcending his condition and experiences. Although this story is really Ivanov’s, and not Ivan’s and Nikolai’s, like him they have been presented by life with a series of decision points: whether to honor their mother, whether to initiate/maintain their relationship, whether to build trust and intimacy, whether to seek out their father. And unlike Ivanov, they have chosen love, future, and life at every fork of the road.

All the adult characters in this story are flawed, and the men, both unredeemable *negodiai*. Their common sin is rejection of their children. Alena (along with the narrator) considers both of them, and herself as well, scoundrels. She is her own harshest critic, but neither father of her children evidences any kind of self-awareness or moral striving. This is important, as the entire last chapter consists of only this one refrain, heretofore connected only to Alena: “[H]uman judgment should not and cannot be more severe than a person’s judgment of himself” (507, 502).

Nikolai’s father is branded a failure through his actions as well as through Alena’s assessment, although he is never presented directly anywhere in the story. He is not criticized for his implied treatment of Alena, but his sins against his son are damning enough. His failure to claim his child through his surname is a rejection surpassable only by elimination of the child by abortion. To Pil’niak, the whole point of life is to love and procreate, and failure to claim one’s child is a crime against nature and rejection of one’s

own immortality.⁶⁶⁸ Alena's perception of a father who engenders ill children as a scoundrel may be due to ignorance (there is no evidence of high education levels among these characters --- they are *obyvateli*), but symbolically within Pil'niak's *ethos* this criterion is born out. Ill children are born to spiritually flawed or badly matched parents, and Nikolai was begotten through a clearly inappropriate union. Such children are incarnations of their parents' moral flaws.

Ivanov is universally considered a scoundrel. His sole potentially redeeming event is that brief moment of joy, of forgiveness, of anticipating a potentially new and positive future that he experiences upon receiving Ivan's letter --- but as always, he chooses the inertial negativity of the past over a change-laden hope for the future, death over life. The potential relationship with son Ivan seems to offer Ivanov a "do-over" which would redeem his fateful mistake and jumpstart life again in hope and vitality; but Nikolai's very name, much less his physical condition, would be a constant double reminder of (a) his wife's other lover and the degradation of being cuckolded, factors which led to his termination of their marriage, and (b) the fact that she had other lovers. These are conditions which Ivanov lacked the capacity to transcend. Pil'niak has begun to expect people to outgrow this type of spiritual miserliness, as he goes on to demonstrate further in "Pookskii rasskaz," "Grego-Trimuntan," and "Zemlia na rukakh." However, Ivanov's "Everyman" characterization suggests Pil'niak's awareness that his expectations are unrealistic. Transcendence is achieved only by spiritually imaginative people, by what might be considered "artists of the soul."

The verdict on Ivanov is totally negative. He is a failure as a husband and as a

⁶⁶⁸ Turchaninov's failure to claim Alisa is unexplained, but it is clear that both he and Alisa were punished for it.

father, a *negodiai* on both counts. At every step, he makes the wrong choice, and acts too late, if at all, to reverse his decision. He chooses to reject his wife, despite the needs of their infant son and her request for forgiveness, although he long regrets his hastiness --- but not intensely enough to actively seek restoration of the relationship. He chooses to reject a son who, though not his biological offspring, has come to him with a heart full of love, eagerness, and dreams of having Ivanov in his life. This choice, to reject a potential spiritual son who is biologically alien and physically flawed, combined with Ivanov's insults toward the boys' mother, results in the loss both of his own tall, handsome, successful and beloved son, and of a happier future for himself. Choosing differently at any step along the way would have liberated Ivanov from the stagnant spiritual squalor in which he lives, by opening his heart to love and life. This man consistently chooses immobility over action, a form of living death over vital, active life; and hatred over love. The squalor in which he chooses to live indicates that this man is ultimately, in Pil'niak's terms, an *obyvatel'* (philistine), totally devoid of self-awareness, sensitivity, love, and a sense of beauty. Ivanov's glimpse of the amazing but probably unexpected similarity between Ivan's eyes and Alena's at the very end indicates that a vestige of Ivanov's love of her has in some way lived on and will continue to torment him.

Ivanov loses two opportunities to have everything that matters in life: a spouse and progeny. He rejects his wife presumably over her first betrayal of him, and his son with her; on his second opportunity (not everyone gets those in Pil'niak), he rejects his living son again primarily through his rejection of the son's mother, secondarily through rejection of the son's brother. Biology, Pil'niak says here, need not be destiny. Loving motherhood is holy and transcendent, and insulting it, especially its incarnation in a

concrete, loving mother, is blasphemy. A non-biological son approaching a father-figure with love is to be embraced as a son, no matter what his provenance or physical condition. As we have seen in “Pookskii rasskaz” and will now examine in “Grego-Trimuntan,” completed about two months after this story, the scientific “truth” about biological parenthood is not the main thing in life; there is another kind of relational truth, born of love, that is more important every time.

Maternal Transcendence, Paternal Acceptance: “Grego-Trimuntan”

Pil’niak dated this story, “Grego-Trimuntan,”⁶⁶⁹ 3 November 1925, Aegean Sea.⁶⁷⁰ At that time he was traveling in the Greek archipelago, having departed Moscow in October soon after writing “Chelovecheskii veter.” He would also see Palestine, Constantinople, and other locales on this voyage. This was his third significant trip this year, after journeys to the Crimea in late spring and by seaplane around northern and central Russia in summer. He was then separated from his first wife and children from that marriage, who remained in Kolomna with their mother, Masha, and he was preparing to marry second wife Ol’ga Shcherbinovskaia (if he was not already married to her). This period’s thematic focus shifts from the Revolution to issues inspired by travel, personal life, the value and basis of relationships,⁶⁷¹ and struggles with the elements.

⁶⁶⁹ First published 1925, according to the publication notes in 6-vol. coll, vol. 2, 525. I will be citing from “Grego-Trimuntan,” 6-vol. coll., vol. 2, 487-498.

⁶⁷⁰ On this day he also wrote an enthusiastic letter to the All-Russia Writer’s Union, describing the celebrations of the October Revolution taking place on board the ship. V Pravlenie Vserossiiskogo Soiuza Pisatelei, 3 Nov. 1925, No. 200, 298-300.

⁶⁷¹ “Chelovecheskii veter” was written immediately before this trip. “Zhuliki” (written and first published 1925) concerned divorce; and the more clearly autobiographically-based “Staryi dom” (written 1924, first published 1926) concerned the generations of a merchant family who had lived in (or visited) their old family home.

The main theme of “Grego-Trimuntan” is the imponderables of life, supported by the refrains (paraphrased) “There are simple people, but people aren’t simple” (487, 497);⁶⁷² “There are simple lives, but life isn’t simple” (488, 495, 497);⁶⁷³ “Winds blow from the sea. Winds blow into the sea” (487, 492, 497).⁶⁷⁴ Critical events occur on impenetrably dark and unnaturally quiet nights, when dogs don’t howl and even the sea is silent, thus even nature refuses to provide clues to the mysteries of life. Ultimately a meditation on the nature of love, this story also explores the bonds of human relationships (blood and spirit) and the nature of truth.

The title refers to seafarers’ appellations of winds blowing from sea to land: as the reader is reminded by one of the story’s refrains, “Winds blow from the sea. Winds blow into the sea” (487, 497). This particular wind is named after two landward winds, “Grego” and “Trimuntan,” out of the many other wind names listed (497). In a village where the men invariably go to sea, the most critical events in these men’s lives nevertheless take place on land, usually at home, and sometimes they seem to have ended up on land miraculously, as if blown by a landward wind. The Grego-Trimuntan wind is most significant, because it raises the December storm in which Nikolai and Andrei become “sworn brothers” after facing death together; their ship is miraculously blown ashore, and their lives are preserved (488). It is this “brotherhood” that determines their responses to the life events they face, enabling them to transcend threatening challenges rather than be destroyed by them. “Trimuntan” is mentioned several times in the story,

⁶⁷² Slight variants of “Vsegda možno skazat’ o liudiakh, chto oni prosty, --- i nikogda nel’zia govorit’, chto prosty liudi.”

⁶⁷³ Slight variants of “Vsgda o zhizni kazhdogo možno skazat’, chto ona prosta, --- i nikogda nel’zia govorit’ tak.”

⁶⁷⁴ Slight variants of “Vetry duiut s moria. Vetry duiut v more.”

but “Grego” only with respect to that decisive storm which established the path the two men would follow. Mariia, Andrei’s wife, who is the prime mover in this tale, is said to be “unfettered” (“vol’naia”) like the sea and like her seagoing forefathers, and “weathered by all the trimuntans” (“obvetrennaia vsemi trimiuntanami” (489)). Nikolai, after losing his family, is ultimately “blown” home to finish out his days in undreamed-of happiness of almost miraculous provenance. Ultimately, the blowing of the wind is not controllable or foreseeable by men; hence it can be considered one of the incomprehensible forces of fate, one of the imponderables which form the basic thematic of the story. In a sense, “Grego-Trimuntan” is an almost religious story in that critical events in human life can be seen as strongly influenced by mysterious, often providential, powers that transcend the rational, but also a story in which human beings can avail themselves of the power to transcend the life situations in which they find themselves.

There are three main characters and two secondary ones: Nikolai Evgrafovich, the character whose perspective informs the work; Andrei Ivanovich, Nikolai’s bosom friend from childhood; Andrei’s wife, Mariia; Mariia (“Mania,” for clarity), the daughter of Andrei and Mariia; and Nikolai’s wife, who is never named. Nikolai and Andrei have identical life paths and have sworn spiritual brotherhood in their youth, sealing the oath with an exchange of crosses. Mariia-mother and Mariia-daughter form a second pairing; they are united by relationship, name, and appearance (and ultimately by their love for Nikolai). They are also associated with Mariia Bogoroditsa: the *mother* Mariia, who delivers a miraculously parented child; and the *daughter* Mariia, who joyously accepts the life role she is given (as in the Magnificat). Daughter Mariia continues the loving,

nurturing Mariia role; although she comes of a sort of miraculous birth, and can be perceived as “giving up” her adult life for another, she is not a true Christ-figure.

The setting is a merchant marine village⁶⁷⁵ somewhere on a seacoast, possibly the Black or Mediterranean Sea; it could be a Greek island or village along the Levant, or somewhere else entirely. Its shoreline “of the same type” as the great Russian plain where it breaks off into the sea (487), along with the Russian names of the characters, suggests an area which was at one time or still is geographically Russian. Although probably of mixed ethnic origins, the main characters are culturally Russian and adhere to Russian customs, such as the exchange of crosses. All the people in this seafaring locale live in harmony with nature; they are bronzed by the sun, salted by the sea, windblown by the sea breezes. They know life on the sea as intimately as in childhood they knew their mothers. The men never choose land-bound careers but go only to sea, which is usually equivalent to going ultimately to death, but this is accepted as the natural order of things, and the women and children await their men at home. Human time is measured “in births, weddings, and deaths” (493, 494). This locale has from ancient times served as a crossroads of nations, rendering it by now impossible to determine the ethnicity of anyone there (487, 498).⁶⁷⁶

The common experiences of childhood made Andrei and Nikolai extremely close friends. Intimacy grew as they went to sea together, rose successfully through the seagoing ranks, and came to trust each other implicitly. As mentioned above, they

⁶⁷⁵ This story is reminiscent of the tales of A.S. Grin (1880-1932) in its seacoast locale, atmosphere, and fairy-tale qualities. However, Pil’niak’s story is clearly directed to a Russian readership and culture, as evidenced by the Russian names of the characters, Russian customs evoked, etc.

⁶⁷⁶ “Po toi zemli [, . . .] proshli mnogie narody, i nikto ne znal, ch’ia krov’ ostalas’ zdes’”

became “krestovye brat’ia” (sworn brothers) when, facing and miraculously escaping death at sea, they exchanged crosses to represent their exchange of lives one for the other (488).⁶⁷⁷ Such an “exchange of lives” usually indicates willingness to die for one another; in this story the exchange becomes more literal, an exchange of life roles rather than deaths.

The two men became equally successful, where success is measured in the respect of their comrades, the quality of their sailing brigs, the beauty of their wives and goodness of their children, their good fortune (“udacha”), and their physical and mental strength (488). Each couple has two good children, a boy and a girl, but only Mania, the daughter of Andrei and Mariia, is named and developed as a character. The others, nameless and ageless, merely indicate the naturalness of the families’ lives, that they have mated and procreated properly and that they therefore have an eternal future, a path to immortality.

Irrationality enters this well-ordered pattern, bringing life’s incomprehensibility to the fore. This is demonstrated through the behavior of Andrei’s wife, Mariia, and its effects on others, particularly on the protagonist, Nikolai. Andrei and beautiful Mariia, both of seafaring ancestry, marry and have a son. Nikolai and Andrei both go to sea, but unmarried Nikolai returns home first. He performs the normal returning-sailor social rituals around the village and then begins to visit Mariia in the evenings so she will not be lonely. One night she professes love to Nikolai, claiming to love not her husband but him, and she tries to persuade him to spend the night with her. Nikolai refuses out of loyalty to Andrei, who is his closest friend and sworn brother, even though he might in fact want to

⁶⁷⁷ The chronology of this particular episode is ambiguous. However, the logic of the story indicates that the description of the event must be a flashback to a near-death experience occurring in their youthful seafaring days.

take up her offer (490).⁶⁷⁸ She threatens to “lie” and “slander” Nikolai by telling Andrei that Nikolai dishonored her, unless Nikolai does what she wants (490). He asks her not to do this, assuring her that although he does love her both as a beautiful woman and as the good and virtuous wife of his friend Andrei, she would only be ruining her own life, since Andrei would believe him rather than her. Nikolai begs her not to hurt Andrei, who loves her. He suggests that they pretend this night never happened and resume the innocent visits until Andrei comes home, which apparently they do. When it comes time for Andrei to return, Nikolai reminds Mariia that “there is no need to ruin people’s happiness” (490).

Andrei returns, the next day Mariia shows signs of having had a passionate night, and nine months later a daughter is born to her. Nikolai is asked to be godfather to baby Mariia, and at the christening he sees his wife-to-be, also a godparent. Nikolai (and perhaps his newly found beloved as well) becomes intoxicated from all the celebration, and when he takes her home the further intoxication of their physical proximity leads them to a passionate, “priestless” consummation of their relationship on the shore in July (491-2) (which demonstrates that Nikolai is by no means immune to feminine attractions, as well as fixing the time of their true “marriage”). Their formal wedding is scheduled for October. On the day of the wedding, apparently sometime between wedding and reception, Mariia tells Nikolai’s bride that baby Mania is really Nikolai’s daughter, causing the outraged and furious bride, now refusing to go to the reception, to demand the truth from Nikolai. Nikolai, completely bewildered by Mariia’s behavior on his wedding day, swears his innocence. He relates the whole truth about his platonic

⁶⁷⁸ “[N]o s toboi ia nikogda ne sogreshu protiv moego druga, khotia byt’ mozhet, i khotel by sogreshit’.” (“[B]ut with you I will never sin against my friend, although perhaps I might want to (sin).”)

relationship with Mariia as he drives their horse-drawn carriage all over the steppe trying to restore concord with his new wife. When they finally arrive at the reception, they are given their celebratory wine goblets by their closest friends, Andrei and Mariia, Mariia handing one to Nikolai, Andrei to the bride, and Andrei whispers to Nikolai an affirmation of their brotherly status.

Ten years pass after Mania's birth, and Mariia, Andrei's wife, dies. After the funeral and other activities, the two men awkwardly manage the children's bedtime rituals, Andrei directing Nikolai to attend to ten-year-old Mania. When the children are asleep, the men talk. For the first time, Andrei opens the subject of the alleged infidelity a decade previously, a discussion he has long wanted to have but has delayed because Nikolai never opened it. He reveals that after his return from the sea that time Mariia had told him that Mania was Nikolai's daughter. Asserting his total trust that Nikolai would never wrong him, he asks what happened ten years before and reveals his own reaction upon learning the news about Mania's actual paternity from his wife: that what was lost could not be recovered and that he forgave both Nikolai and Mariia. He should have killed Nikolai, he says, but he couldn't do that and has maintained silence about the issue all this time. Nikolai responds heatedly with the entire truth about the events and relationship, promising that there was never anything between himself and Mariia and that he has sinned against neither her nor Andrei. On this totally dark, totally silent night when even the sea is silent, the two friends sit and speak "about the peculiarities of existence, about human love, about things beyond retrieval" and "about the wonderful woman [, . . .] who was buried in the earth today" (494).

They have a remarkable dialogue:

Andrei: "It must be that she loved you."

Nikolai: "From that time on I never ever spoke with her again about it. The last time I mentioned it was the day of my wedding, because she told my wife the same thing she told you, on the day of our wedding. What does that mean?"

Andrei: "It must be that she loved you."

Nikolai: "Then, on that night [eleven years ago], she told me that she would never forget me and would make it so that I would never forget that night either --- but from that time on she never spoke to me about love."

Andrei: "She loved you!" (494)

They continue to sit on the porch, drinking wine and talking about the incomprehensible in life.

Another decade passes after Mariia's death. The two friends become old men in appearance and behavior, while Mania becomes the image of her mother physically and in temperament. As it happens, Nikolai's entire family succumbs to cholera while he is away at sea. He takes his time sailing home, trying to reconcile himself to the idea of an empty future in a cold house with none of the spiritual or physical comforts of family life: no children meeting him at the shore, no wife waving from the cliff, no hot bath before bed. When he arrives, having steeled himself against returning alone to a dark, empty house, twenty-year-old Mania, now the physical image of her mother at the same age, unexpectedly awaits "Uncle Kolia" on the stone path to the sea. She conducts him to his old house, which has again become a home, with dinner on the stove, a hot bath waiting, a bed made and clean clothes laid out --- everything whose loss kept him from speeding home --- and even an old woman as housekeeper. Nikolai thinks that perhaps her father has sent her, but she denies this, saying that she came on her own and that she plans to live there with him. It seems to him that twenty years have fallen away, that Mariia is again right there before him. He bathes, they dine on his favorite foods, she updates him

on local news, and he, newly oriented toward the future, speaks animatedly of things that need to be done here at home. They sit on the porch with the imponderability of the moment emphasized by the silence of the sea. They go to bed, she in the former nursery, he in his bedroom, but she visits him late at night, now addressing him for the first time as “Papa,” to reveal her mother’s deathbed identification of her paternity and her own promise to love him and care for him forever.

---Дядя Коля, папа, --- мама мне говорила перед своею смертью, что ты мой папа и просила у меня прощения, и взяла с меня клятву, что я никому не расскажу об этом, кроме тебя, --- и взяла с меня клятву, что я никогда не перестану тебя любить и всю жизнь буду заботиться о тебе. И я всю жизнь люблю тебя, папа. Мне было десять лет, когда я узнала, и я всю жизнь готовилась сказать тебе об этом. (497)

Uncle Kolia, Papa, Mama told me before her death that you were my father and she asked my forgiveness, and extracted from me a vow that I would not tell anyone about it but you, and she took from me a vow that I would never stop loving you and that I would take care of you my whole life. And I have loved you my whole life, Papa. I was ten years old when I found this out, and I’ve been preparing to tell you about it my whole life.

Nikolai, who has been very “rigorous” and exact with the truth all his life, knows for a fact that he has never been intimate with this girl’s mother; she could not possibly be his biological child. But the emotional effect of returning to a home “from which death had carried away all those close to him” makes him doubt what he knew so well to be fact. He begins to understand, somehow, that truth and fact may not be the same, that perhaps there is another kind of truth that is not supported by fact (497).⁶⁷⁹ He embraces

⁶⁷⁹ “И вдруг, вот тут, этой ночью, когда он пришел в свой дом, из которого смерть унесла всех его близких, сейчас, когда он твердо знал, что там в двадцатилетиях у него ничего не было с матерью Марии, --- сейчас он усомнился в правде того, что было за двадцатилетием, усомнился в истинности фактов, точно факты могут быть неправдоподобны, как ложь --- и неправда может быть фактом.” (“And suddenly, right then, that night, when he arrived in his home, from which death had swept away all his loved ones, now, when he knew solidly that there in his twenties there had been nothing between him and Mariia’s mother, --- now he was in doubt about the truth of what had happened twenty years before, in

his new-found “daughter” and begins to weep --- from tenderness and loneliness, thinking that Maria is now the only person left to him in this life (497);⁶⁸⁰ from amazement at the incomprehensibility of what human life has brought; from love toward his “daughter” and cares about her, and from age, and from mourning what has passed on. For Nikolai, although she is not technically his own daughter (and he does know this), she has appeared as a miraculous offspring, providing him with a future he could not have imagined, fulfilling the ultimate purpose of children in Pil’niak’s *ethos*.

When the two men sat discussing Mariia’s claim that Nikolai was Mania’s father, Andrei kept repeating, “She must have loved you.” In Mania’s infancy the only people whom Mariia told about the girl’s supposed parentage were her husband Andrei and Nikolai’s bride, people who would be hurt by this. Surely it was not “love” that impelled her to tell her husband that her child was not his, but in fact was fathered by his best friend, and to tell a bride on her wedding day that one’s own baby, the bride’s godchild, was actually the offspring of the new husband. Such falsehoods seem calculated, as perhaps they were, to ruin Mariia’s own marriage and that of Nikolai. Nikolai’s rephrasing of Mariia’s words of that fateful night (when he rejected her advances) that she “would make it so that I [Nikolai] too would never forget that night” (494)⁶⁸¹ surely indicates a threat, and her early revelations to Andrei and the bride seem to fulfill that threat. Such actions suggest the fury of a woman scorned.

doubt about the veracity of facts, as though facts might be inaccurate, like a lie --- and untruth might be fact.”)

⁶⁸⁰ Or so it must seem to him; Andrei is presumably still living.

⁶⁸¹ “sdelael tak, chto ia [Nikolai] tozhe nikogda ne zabudu toi nochi”

Why then does Andrei, after her funeral ten years later, characterize her lies as an expression of her love for Nikolai? (At this time, Mariia had only recently told Mania the lie, and the two men had no knowledge of this.) Andrei, with the wisdom and selfless love later to be expressed by Pavel in “Zemlia na rukakh,” seemed to recognize Mariia’s lies as an expression of her love-dream --- perhaps a mixture of factual falsity and essential truth that strong emotion can produce. In this case the “love” perhaps amounted to a youthful sexual desire for procreative union with Nikolai, a desire which Mariia attempted to realize in her failed seduction and then, since that did not work, in asserting it as a truth, again perhaps with the practical goal of destroying the marriages so that she could marry Nikolai and her dream would come true.

But the marriages did not fail, because of the higher spiritual principles that directed Andrei (what’s past is past, trust and forgive) and because of the factual truth that Nikolai knew and successfully conveyed when necessary. Time went on, and Mariia’s love for Nikolai was apparently transformed from something sexual and possessive to something that manifested concern for his potential well-being rather than for her own desire. Her originally vengeful message to Andrei and to Nikolai’s bride, when delivered to Mania a decade later, became a message of love for her daughter to fulfill in Mariia’s absence. When facing death, as Pil’niak has made clear in other works, one must validate and justify one’s life as it has been lived, or else recognize its insubstantiality. Mariia’s continued but transformed “lie” recast Mania to be, in Mariia’s lifetime, a spiritual incarnation of her love for Nikolai, and after her death, a replacement

or continuation of herself, one who would actually live out the love Mariia felt toward Nikolai, a love whose reality the narrator conjectures (490).⁶⁸²

The two men had already faced what seemed to be imminent death years before and as a result swore eternal brotherhood. Perhaps that moment, in which life must be justified in face of death (as with the aging émigré in “Staryi syr”) enabled them to identify and keep to the right moral path for the rest of their days --- making it possible for Nikolai to reject Mariia’s advances out of love for his “brother,” and Andrei to understand Mariia’s apparently malicious lies as a fantasy which expressed her love for Nikolai but bore no threat to Andrei. This higher spiritual plane of existence enabled the two men to follow the guidance of instinct with respect to life patterns (birth, love, mating, procreation with the once-and-forever-chosen mate, death), which they indeed celebrated and experienced as brothers attending weddings, christenings, and funerals, but also to transcend the call of biological instinct at critical moral decision points.

This is one of the stories in the 1932 anthology reviewed by Marxist critic B. Brainina (Chapter I), probably the very one she cited as measuring time in “births, weddings, and deaths” instead of in linear historical progress. Indeed biological instinct is important in this story; that the seacoast people are in harmony with the earth and sea, that generations follow generations in the natural sequence of events (birth, mating, reproducing, dying . . .) attests to the fact that the community, as well as the individual characters, is rightly following instinct as a guide to the ordered phases of life. But a main point of this story is that the people are in control of their (biologically-related) behavior and act in accordance with spiritual law in opposition to biological instinct. Purely

⁶⁸² The narrator refers to Nikolai’s and Mariia’s “conversation about that --- it must be --- real love of Mariia, when she firmly told Nikolai that, if he didn’t do what she wanted, she would lie [. . ..]”

biological instinct would have driven young Nikolai into Mariia's arms when she made advances to him (as it did that July evening with his wife-to-be) --- but love, honor, and respect for his "brother," her husband, restrained him. Purely biological instinct would have driven Andrei to kill Nikolai (and conceivably Mariia as well) for purportedly encroaching on his marriage, but love, respect, the brotherly oath and the forgiveness in his heart made such vengeance impossible. Purely biological and genetic instinct might have led Andrei to reject the daughter he thought was another man's and Nikolai to reject the daughter he knew was another man's, but neither did. In fact both understood that Mania was the physical manifestation of a woman's desire to fulfill her love against the laws of nature and custom.

The setting for all these events, the village in which it is no longer possible to determine whose blood remains in whom,⁶⁸³ indicates that the biological relationship is far less significant than the emotional, spiritual bond binding members of more artificially but intentionally constructed families. Unrelated Andrei and Nikolai chose to be brothers, and they lived out their roles, supporting one another in all the critical moments of life: weddings, christenings, and funerals, as well as transmission of bad news. Mariia created a "blood" relationship out of her love, deciding by an act of will her child's paternity, thus determining her daughter's role as a manifestation of Mariia's love for and desired union with Nikolai. He, knowing the relationship had not been "real," accepted the loving daughter it miraculously brought him. Mania, Mariia the daughter, joyously accepted the (factually false) daughterly identity imposed on her by her mother,

⁶⁸³ Additional stylistic elements support the cultural blending of this community: the motifs of the multi-lingual argot spoken on board ship and the mixture of international currencies used locally as legal tender, plus the linguistic blend of words used to narrate the story ("briz" ("breeze"), "bot" ("boat") (491), etc.).

and with it a sense of identity and purpose. Spiritually she directed her life toward loving and caring for her “father” Nikolai from the moment she was told of this relationship to him. She joyously accepted this filial role and began, at her first opportunity, to fulfill it. A physical manifestation of her mother’s love for Nikolai, she enabled her mother’s dream to live on, providing love and a little more “future” to her “father” as he lived out the closing days of his life.

While we are not privy to Andrei’s reaction to Mania’s assumption of a new “father,” his recognition of Mariia’s hurtful lies as proof of her love for Nikolai and other elements of his character suggest that he would be more than willing to share his daughter to facilitate a happy old age for his sworn brother. (He does have a son to provide for him in his old age.) The two men are “krestovye brat’ia,” and they have exchanged their crosses to indicate the exchange of their lives, one for the other: “Eto byli dva druga, obmeniavshiesia krestami v gibeli, chtoby obmeniat’ zhizn’ odnogo za zhizn’ drugogo” (488).⁶⁸⁴ Andrei was the husband, but Nikolai the beloved, and the beloved took on Andrei’s role as Mania’s father. Andrei, like the biblical Joseph, merely stood by, faithfully accepting the wonders that life brought and, seeing them as manifestations of love, he found no any personal threat in them.

Where there is love and loyalty, blood is unnecessary as a prerequisite for a family relationship, whether fraternal, parental, or filial. The relationships that people intentionally forge and honorably maintain are stronger and more important than those forged by biology. Ultimately, love is thicker than blood (or should be), and chosen relationships founded on love are more valid than biological ones. “Grego-Trimuntan”

⁶⁸⁴ “This was two friends who had exchanged crosses in death in order to exchange their lives, one for the other.”

offers an excellent counter-example to the prevalent notion of Pil'niak as a "glorifier of the voice of instinct." A clearer demonstration of spirit ruling flesh, will overcoming laws and whims of nature, and ethics triumphing over biology would be hard to find.

Maternal Transcendence, Paternal Withdrawal: "Pookskii rasskaz"

"Pookskii rasskaz" (1927) was examined above as an exploration of the incest potential, but at that time the perspective of young Aleksei was dominant. Now it is time to take an adult perspective on Frau Leontina's acquired maternity, as presented in the second chapter of the story and in its denouement. This will provide a more complete picture of her character and those of her husband, Gotfrid Gotfridovich, and his mistress, Shura, as Leontina's adoption of Shura's children is examined.

This part of the story begins five years after Aleksei's departure for "real life." World War I is being fought and Russia is edging toward revolution. Gotfrid Gotfridovich is doing all in his power to blend into the Russian populace to avoid becoming the target of anti-German sentiment: he has purchased a small, remote riverside estate, where he has settled Frau Leontina with Tatar servants while he continues to work in town. He has changed his name to Fedor Fedorovich and is working to perfect his Russian and lose his German accent. His life is not open but surreptitious; he comes "home" to Frau Leontina only at night, only unexpectedly, and when he does he speaks about world events only in whispers, checks the grounds with a flashlight, and sleeps with a revolver under the pillow. Frau Leontina, dignified, reticent, always dressed in white, is left there in virtual solitude, unable to speak Russian well, and she spends her days keeping order and cleanliness in the house, the barns, and the livestock areas as she

manages the estate. She spends her nights reading, her ears always pricked up for sounds of Gotfrid Gotfridovich's approach or, worse, signs of an attack on her property. She is very careful to lock and bolt everything at night. Somehow she and the Tatar servants, especially the steward Sadderdinov, find a way to communicate, although none of them is proficient in Russian.

There is no news of Aleksei, who is serving at the front as an artillery officer. Gotfrid has casually reported that Shura, having dropped out of school in Moscow, is working at a dairy somewhere in their province, and has produced ("with someone") two little daughters, the younger of whom is blind; Shura has not visited them in all this time (155).

Unexpectedly Frau Leontina receives an urgent letter from Shura, requesting her to come as soon as possible. Having set the date of the visit, Frau Leontina dresses up for the all-day journey and sets out, white gloves, umbrella, and all, with her Tatar steward driving. Upon learning her destination, he warns her several times not to go, but her dignity constrains her from asking his reasons. No one meets them that late afternoon at Shura's village, and when she finds Shura's squalid attic abode, no hospitality awaits; she is greeted by sounds of a child crying, smells of baked bread and diapers, and a rushed Shura who continues doing chores. During this and all their interviews, Leontina's formal dignity is contrasted with the casual behavior of Shura, or, as Leontina always calls her, "Aleksandra."

Shura seems to be trying to build solidarity with Frau Leontina, pointing out that the Revolution, which "is destroying all prejudices," has brought hardships to them both (156). Claiming to hate the lie in which she is living, she announces that the two of them

must talk, that her children are in fact Gotfrid's, and that she is therefore more worthy of the name of "wife" than is Leontina (156). Such words, recalling pregnant Hagar's look of contempt toward her barren mistress Sarah⁶⁸⁵ several millennia before, cannot but inflame the heart of any woman who has been unable to conceive. Undoubtedly they --- along with the entire situation --- find their mark with Leontina, who cuts Shura off with a gesture. She responds, in excellent Russian for once, that indeed they will talk, but only after she discusses this with Gotfrid --- Leontina will await Shura's visit at her home. Leontina returns to the conveyance, to which the horses are still harnessed (either because of the brevity of the visit or, more probably, because Sadderdinov knew what Leontina would find here), and they set out for home.

Halfway home, in the dark, they hear the hoofbeats of Gotfrid's horse approaching. Leontina does not countenance his prostrating himself in the dusty road, telling him in German to get up, not to humiliate himself in front of Sadderdinov.

At home alone, she sits silent and immobile all night, never extinguishing the lights. The next day she follows her usual chore routine. Gotfrid arrives unexpectedly in the daylight hours, but again Leontina does not tolerate his kneeling, weeping, and protestations of her great value to him. She is ready with her demands, which do not concern his infidelity but only the children's welfare. Since the children are his, his rights to them are as valid as Aleksandra's, and although she (Leontina) and Gotfrid are adults facing mortality, the children must live and become the adults' primary object of attention. Like Andrei in "Grego-Trimuntan," she puts all their "misfortunes" ("neschast'ia") behind them, in this case to focus on the (children's) future (157). She builds her case. Aleksandra lacks aptitude for child-rearing: her home smells of dirty

⁶⁸⁵ Gen. 16:4.

diapers and her kitchen is unhygienic. Leontina demands custody of the children, who will never learn the identity of their biological mother, and whom Leontina will rear to be “worthy of their father” (158). Gotfrid is to convey this message to Aleksandra and is not to return to Leontina without the children. The narrator points out that Leontina’s only distortion in this speech is in referring to Aleksandra as “Fraülein” rather than “Frau” (158).

After several weeks of silence Shura brings the children, “cheery little Anna and blind little Mariia” (158). Leontina greets the little girls with kisses and Shura with a very “un-Russian” extended hand (158). After the women feed and bathe the children and put them to bed for their naps, Frau Leontina controls the interview with an invitation to Shura to speak. Shura has excuses and modern, “politically correct” class-oriented finger-pointing: Gotfrid Gotfridovich is really just a German *petit bourgeois*, going through that period of life “when men suddenly become alarmed before imminent old age” (158). She herself would never submit to Leontina’s “cruel” demands except that now Gotfrid has abandoned her, Shura, for a landowning woman, and, having lost her job, Shura will be reduced to begging on the streets. Shura’s insensitivity and immaturity are emphasized by her claim to have given Gotfrid “her best years” (158); surely, one would think, he has squandered even more of Leontina’s prime of life. Shura asserts her confidence that she and Leontina, as “discarded women,” will be able to treat one another fairly and graciously (158). Leontina again states her terms: The children will remain with her forever; Shura will forget about them; Leontina will be their mother. However, Leontina and Gotfrid will help Shura resume and complete her abandoned education in Moscow.

As earlier she would not allow Gotfrid to humiliate himself, Leontina now cuts off Shura's insults toward him. Revealing her inner conviction that the two women truly are united, both to one another and to their mutual mate Gotfrid, Leontina tells Shura that Gotfrid is "my and your husband. In condemning him, you condemn yourself" (159).

As the two women stroll around the grounds, Shura identifies a beautiful, well-dressed --- but no longer young --- woman going by in a carriage as the female landowner for whom Gotfrid has left "them." Leontina asks Shura to explain the incident with Andrei's letters so long ago, exactly how it happened that Gotfrid was in a position to read letters "compromising" Shura, and she learns that the sexual relationship between Gotfrid and Shura was initiated during that very Moscow trip (159). Upon return to the house, Leontina confirms the two women's relationship: "Fate has made us comrades, Aleksandra. But you must leave tomorrow, forever" (159).

Another silent night passes for Leontina, but Russian Shura sobs and chants endearments to her children all night. The next day Leontina again confirms their comradeship as Shura departs, never to return.

In September, when the muddy roads have become impassable, Gotfrid returns to Leontina, this time to stay forever. He arrives as always, at night, unexpectedly, but this time on foot, covered with mud. He is distraught, weeping, his landowner mistress having been killed by peasants and her estate burned down. He buries himself in pre-revolutionary thoughts and lifestyles, hating the new politics, the new orthography, all the changes brought by the Revolution, and he never even exits the house again. The narrator wonders: "[D]id the Revolution break him, or something else as well?" (160)⁶⁸⁶ Perhaps this other element that has "broken" Gotfrid is his rejection of the fatherhood role which

⁶⁸⁶ "[R]evoliutsiia ego slomala --- ili eshche chto?"

Shura afforded him. Unlike Leontina, he did not understand sexual union to constitute marriage, and thus to be inseparably tied to parenthood. He availed himself of the “pleasure-only” aspect of his relationship with Shura, and has now lost to “barren” Leontina his paternal privileges with the children he engendered but chose not to foster. They will be hers entirely, since only she inherently understands their value and her own appropriate role. By now Gotfrid’s weak, cowardly, self-centered, deceitful, rigid, and duplicitous character has been fully revealed, without any redeeming qualities being found.

Revolutionary conditions are difficult, with disease, famine, and poverty even in their remote location. All the servants leave except Sadderdinov; he and Leontina manage the estate together. The little girls grow, they speak Tatar, Russian and German equally poorly, and Frau Leontina is rearing them to become proper Mädhens. At this time a second set of ski tracks appears beside Leontina’s on the hillsides, signifying that the older girl, Anna, is now skiing with Leontina, entering into Leontina’s favorite (nature-loving and healthful) outdoor activities and growing up in Leontina’s mold.

The adult Aleksei visits (as covered in the “Incest” section, above), and Leontina rejects his advances (her husband is still permanently ensconced in his study, totally divorced from the life of the household), expressing her relinquishment of the past life which Aleksei had experienced with her and her new, future-oriented maternal joy at creating “worthy people” (162). At his news about Shura’s life in Moscow as an educator within the new Soviet culture in which he characterizes her as “a very, very unfortunate person,” Leontina confides to Aleksei that despite being comrades with Shura, she does not want to see her (163).

Perhaps the most significant and symbolic effects of her mothering are realized after this visit. In 1925-26 Leontina sells livestock to take Mariia, blind from birth, to Moscow for eye surgery. After the surgery, at the age of ten, Mariia sees “the faces of life and her mother” for the first time, her mother’s face showing “little wrinkles of age and happiness” (163). This is the first time Leontina, who has been repeatedly characterized as childless (“bezdetna”) is referred to as “mother.” “Mother and daughter” return to the estate, and now the snow shows three sets of ski tracks, straight as arrows, as Mariia now joins sister and mother in the pastime used by the narrator to characterize Leontina at the very opening of the tale.

Leontina is a barren woman unfortunately mated to a man who, whatever he may have been in youth, has turned out to be worthless in every way. Upon learning, suddenly, that he has children by a mistress, despite the distress that revelation must cause her --- and one can only speculate as to what other sufferings she has been subjected to on his account during their marriage --- she chooses to take those children in and raise them as her own, an act which could be seen as unnatural. As a married woman, her predominant but heretofore unrealized self-image is that of a mother. Her unfulfilled maternal instinct and her sustaining dream identifying young Aleksei (whom she views, inaccurately, as the girls’ potential father) with the husband she fell in love with (but who exists no more) are part of her motivation to adopt these particular children. This dream -- - that children are the offspring of a beloved mate --- resembles that of Mariia in “Grego-Trimuntan.” Both Mariia and Leontina transcend their unhappy --- or at least unsatisfactory --- situations by such an imposition of imagination on objective reality.

Was Leontina also responding to Shura's insult --- that Shura, having produced children, was more of a "wife" to Gotfrid than was she --- maliciously by taking Shura's children from her, permanently cutting off Shura's parental rights? Leontina's reflections and inner struggles are never described; they can only be deduced from her outward behavior, which she has firmly under control. The narrator supports the fact that Shura's statement affected Leontina deeply in his observation that Leontina did not refer to Shura as a married woman but as a single one. This is an expression of Pil'niak's belief, shared by the narrator and Leontina, that sexual union in itself constitutes marriage (as in the "priestless" wedding on the beach of Nikolai and his bride in "Grego-Trimuntan" before the official nuptials in October). Leontina is very aware that the two women are in some sense peers as Gotfrid's mates, whether or not priority is earned for being fruitful; otherwise Leontina would not assert the fact of her "comradeship" with Shura so many times. The fact that this comradeship is emotionally very costly to her is revealed in her final statement to Aleksei --- that she doesn't want to see Shura, despite their comradely status. "Fate" has created this sort of uncomfortable "family" relationship, as opposed to the deliberately chosen and "sworn" brotherhood of Andrei and Nikolai in "Grego-Trimuntan." Both women acknowledge a sort of "sisterhood," but it has not been chosen by them nor is it characterized by devotion, mutual desire for companionship, and general sharing of lives as is that of the men in the other story. It is a forced relationship which is based on biological coincidence (mating with the same man, producing or rearing his children) rather than the shared spiritual values and mutual love and affection of the women themselves.

A critical issue in this story is the function of the nuclear family unit ---- and especially the mother's role in it --- as the foundation of a healthy society and culture. This story is also a cautionary tale against bigamy (and infidelity); women, at least, who mate with the same man become tied to one another in a way that causes pain and other problems, such as child custody issues. Ultimately the troubles of both Leontina and Shura may be traced back to the lack of character of Gotfrid, who somehow abandoned his wife emotionally and seduced Shura, at least temporarily costing Shura her education, economic independence, and a promising future, and putting not only Shura but also his (and her) own children at risk. Presumably Gotfrid is acting according to biological instinct here, scattering his seed in short-term relationships outside his marriage. However, in doing so he does not care about the consequences of his actions and neglects his paternal duties. As we see from this story and others, child-rearing is crucial in Pil'niak's *ethos*. Only because of Leontina's strength and nobility of character and highly developed self-control do these children end up in a stable, loving home.

What makes a wife? This question has been answered: the act of sexual union transforms an individual man and woman into husband and wife. But what makes a mother? Is it the biological act of giving birth (Shura) that makes a mother, or is it something else? And if so, then what is it?

Growing up in the *fin-de-siècle* atmosphere of sexual permissiveness prevalent in early twentieth-century Russia, Shura succumbed to the decadence of the times and also to the progressive social agenda of various leftist groups which were treating men and women identically, providing "unisexual" education which minimized the role of family in women's life roles (hence her "Kollontai" names). In Pil'niak's story "S poslednim

parokhodom” (1916-17), unisex education is seen as a factor which caused women, specifically those being educated in Moscow and Petersburg, to be directed away from family values and pursuits. It also emphasizes the “immoral” lifestyles of the students, especially as manifested in common-law marriages and couples living together without commitment. This lack of family values in modern education would seem to have been a factor in Shura’s unprincipled lifestyle also, a lifestyle that became public policy and accepted norm with the Revolution. This value system, along with Shura’s early uncommitted sexual experiences, turned her into another of those women who seek sex for its own sake rather than as a prelude to parenthood and child-rearing. Ultimately she devoted “the best years of her life” not only to Gotfrid Gotfridovich, but to wrong pursuits in general, investing in the wrong kind of men and relationships. As a result, she lost her children and the potential for a fulfilling family life with a better man and more appropriate family values and skills. Like Kseniia Ordynina, she left the “ordained” path and although, unlike Kseniia, Shura has not perished, she shows no signs of returning to the path. It is presumably to protect Shura’s children from a similar unprincipled life in large urban centers that Leontina cuts off the children’s communication with their biological mother.

Leontina, in contrast, clearly relates her role as “wife” to her role as “mother,” maternity being designed to follow mating. She longs for children, and sees her role as providing for them spiritually, intellectually, physically, and emotionally to enable them to be “worthy people.” This is what, to Pil’niak, a real mother does. Leontina immediately notices Shura’s inadequacies in child-rearing, pointing to the unhygienic environment she provides. At first meeting, Leontina kisses the little girls, carries blind

Mariia into the house, and addresses their physical needs (hygiene, feeding, and rest). She rears them, she educates them, she devotes her life to all aspects of their development, because her vision of her maternal role is to “make worthy people,” thereby making the world a better place, generation by generation. She receives satisfaction and fulfillment through maternity, but she gives at least as much as she receives, enabling the blind to see and even furthering Shura’s education. The suspicion that she “avenges herself” on Shura by depriving her of all contact with her children seems negated by the fact that Leontina enables Shura to follow the path that this “progressive” young woman always wanted to pursue: she is furthering Shura’s education.

It is not, then, biology that makes a mother, but character and the maternal drive to better the world through building the next generation, a job best done within the nuclear family.

With respect to gender roles, Gotfrid is presented totally negatively. He must have had some positive qualities in his youth to win the hand of Leontina, but these have long ago disappeared. That she must bear all the burdens of family responsibility without a true helpmeet is not a Pil’niakian ideal. However, Leontina rises to the occasion. She herself is fulfilling a critical parental role for the next generation --- providing emotional shelter for the youth Aleksei, a second chance in life for the young woman Shura, and a cluster of opportunities for the little girls that approximates rebirth. She is not merely a parental caregiver but in fact a transmitter of character and culture to the next generation, a role which Pil’niak expects women to fulfill at home and in their professions. The woman characterized as “navsegda [. . .] bezdetna” (“forever [. . .] childless” (147)) ultimately epitomizes a motherhood that transcends the biological act of giving birth.

Whatever Leontina's original motive for demanding the children --- and I read it as her very real commitment to their well-being, a commitment she was totally capable of fulfilling, especially in comparison to immature, misguided Shura --- Leontina, through acts of will along with maternal instinct, sublimated her forbidden sexual attraction to Aleksei and her spiritual needs for a mate (since Gotfrid was totally inadequate in this role) in her maternity. She promised to raise children "worthy of their father" --- that is, worthy of the man Gotfrid once showed promise of being, and the man Aleksei showed every sign of becoming. She loved the girls, she taught them, even enabling the blind to see, along the way. Through her love of another woman's children by her unfaithful husband, and a sustaining dream that enabled her to see them as fruit of a worthy, loving union, she transcended her life situation and indeed, made worthy people. The human being is clearly not biologically predetermined and unable to escape the "laws of nature" in Pil'niak's world; creation transcends procreation.

Parents and Children: Conclusions

This selection of stories has allowed us to examine a number of aspects of family life as portrayed by Pil'niak. Human beings are imperfect; both men and women are fallible as human beings and in their roles as spouses and parents. Some women in Pil'niak's early writings are totally negative, for example Sevka's mother Glafira and Alisa's mother Stefaniia, but the scale is balanced later with unredeemable Ivanov and Gotfrid Gotfridovich.

The limitations of poverty and unwise, even immoral, behavior can be redeemed by maternal devotion accompanied by self-awareness and humility, as exemplified by

mother Alena in “Chelovecheskii veter.” Alena was perhaps most handicapped by the lack of personal dignity that caused her to live her life through her lovers rather than through her own sense of self; although her children rose up and called her blessed, and her estranged husband’s greatest sin was in blaspheming against her maternal sanctity, her life was an unfortunate one, passively lived (except with respect to her maternal devotion), and concluded in an early death. Frau Leontina was made of sterner stuff; it was largely her dignity, her sense of her own (and everyone else’s) personal worth, which enabled her to transcend her own barrenness and provide another example of “right” motherhood. Through her iconic symbol, arrow-straight ski tracks cutting through fresh snow (147, 163), Leontina is a direct contrast in character and will to Alena, whose iconic symbol is a “multi-colored gypsy shawl” seeming to be blown about by the winds of fate (502). Both women found themselves in failed marriages, but Alena was in a union “in which nothing was being built,” while Leontina understood correctly that marital love was the cornerstone of family-building, and that her maternal role was to create “worthy people,” hence contributing a foundation block to the larger culture. Both of these women knew the value of reflection and expectations of themselves, Alena as “her own harshest judge,” and Leontina putting her own personal frustrations (barrenness, her husband’s infidelity) aside to provide (and receive back from them) a future for the two little girls born to her husband’s mistress. Building blocks of culture are chiseled out through love and the embrace of one’s children, including those “sent to one” by life and fate, even those conceived in violence, as in “Staryi syr.” These examples show that spiritual progress, generation by generation, matters more than the more concrete monuments erected by great civilizations.

Children are treasures and indeed promises of the future. Loving one's child is not enough, as Turchaninov found; one must claim one's biological offspring if one wants to maintain the relationship and participate in the blessings of the future. Fathers who do not do this risk losing the only important thing in their lives, as in "Oдно," or they show themselves to be scoundrels, as with Nikolai's biological father in "Chelovecheskii veter." Rejection of a child on the basis of genetics may cost one one's own child as well, as Ivanov learned. Nikolai Evgrafovich was wiser, accepting love doubly, his peer Mariia's love and her daughter's filial love. He could see what Ivanov could not: that spiritual kinship and love, regardless of biological "truth," bind more than genetics and blood ever could. Brotherhood and sisterhood are of great value as well, and siblings exist to help one another navigate the pathways of life, strong leading weak as in "Chelovecheskii veter," the sighted leading the blind, as in "Pookskii rasskaz," and brothers Nikolai and Andrei, unrelated by blood but forging a relationship stronger than biological kinship could provide in "Grego-Trimuntan."

These examples show that for Pil'niak, it is less instinctive drives than spiritual qualities of character, love, and self-awareness that should be the guiding principles of human life and the benchmarks of "progress."

Role of Genetic Tie to Progeny: How Important?

In their rush to categorize Pil'niak as exclusively a "biological" writer, critics have traditionally imputed to Pil'niak a bias toward genetic (biological) relationships: Dobranov (1935) for the writer's glorification of "sperm and blood"⁶⁸⁷ in "Rozhdenie cheloveka" (1934), Brainina (1933) for his emphasis on family and clan in "Staryi dom"

⁶⁸⁷ Cited in Browning, 66 and 205, n. 54.

(1924) (17-18), even Brown in 1982 for his “insistence on blood and genes” (80), going so far as to suggest that ethnic superiority issues form part of Pil’niak’s value structure.

In fact, from his earliest writings Pil’niak emphasizes that genetics are not the fundamental basis of “family.” He promotes child-bearing, to be sure, declaring from the very start that the production and rearing of offspring is both nature’s purpose and what, in the final analysis, gives fulfillment and meaning to the individual life, making it worth living from the human point of view. The two Zemstvo professionals in “Zemskoe delo” (1915), written in Pil’niak’s first year as a “professional” writer, found only emptiness in their lives after their careers were over, specifically because they had not married and built families. In general his characters, especially women, go to great lengths to bear children, and childbirth in the first year crowns any union with potential “rightness.” He expects men and women to feel a natural connection to their own biological offspring, although, in contrast to Browning’s perception of “the innate irresistibility of blood relationships” (129) in Pil’niak, as we have seen, the writer recognizes that this does not always occur. In fact, the devotion of Mariia and Ol’ga to the child of rape in “Staryi syr” is striking only because it seems to be a manifestation of a loving spirit overcoming a perhaps more justifiable “natural” and spontaneous reaction of rejection.

However, Pil’niak never suggests that a “family,” to be valid, must be based on a biological relationship. As early as “Proselki” (1919) he described the peasants named Kononovy as “ne rodnia,” not related by blood, “no szhilis’ krepche rodnogo” (66).⁶⁸⁸

Ivan Ivanovich Ivanov, the philistine protagonist in “Chelovecheskii veter” (1925), found his life irredeemably ruined by his refusal to accept his wife’s son Nikolai, who

⁶⁸⁸ “not family” “but grew closer than family.”

bore Ivanov's surname but not his genes. Even the setting of "Grego-Trimuntan" (1925), a village in which blood lines were so mixed as to be untraceable, supports the valorization of "chosen" versus genetically determined relationships; such non-biological relationships include "sworn brotherhood," godparents and godchild, and the spiritual assignment of paternity. Nikolai, the protagonist, found new, unexpected joy in his life by accepting a "daughter," who he knew for a fact was not genetically related to him but represented the love borne him by her mother Mariia, the wife of his "sworn brother," Andrei. Mania could be considered, in a sense, Nikolai's "spiritual" offspring, since she was also his goddaughter; reversing the traditional godchild-godparent relationship in which the parent provides spiritual and other support to the child, she welcomed her filial role in caring for him in his fading years (although she believed that she was truly his biological daughter). In "Povest' nepogashennoi lunyi" (1926), the commandant Gavrilov, expecting to die in surgery, wrote to his wife and to his divorced friend Popov, suggesting that the two marry (after Gavrilov's death) so that Gavrilova could be a mother to the divorced Popov's daughter, two-year-old Natasha, creating another non-genetically based family.⁶⁸⁹ Gavrilov's own children were grown and launched, but his qualifications as a "good father" are made clear by the description of his playful interactions with Natasha, who can possibly be regarded as Gavrilov's spiritual heir. Here, too, relationships take on both biological and spiritual aspects. Leontina of "Pookskii rasskaz" (1927) becomes a quintessential mother to her husband's children by his mistress. And of course Surovtsev of "Rozhdenie cheloveka" (1934), promising to

⁶⁸⁹ It is not clear whether the Popov-Gavrilova union took place; however, her status as Gavrilov's eternal beloved suggests that she would be amenable to the proposal.

love Antonova's son as he loves her, provides another example of a love-based, "created" non-biological family.

These examples, and others in Pil'niak's works, make it abundantly clear that in his *ethos*, love is a more powerful, and perhaps more lasting and genuine, family bond than genetics.

Chapter V

Conclusion

Mind over Matter

Critics observe diminishing visibility in the demarcation of fact and fiction, truth and falsehood, over the course of Pil'niak's writing career, until in the latest works fact becomes indistinguishable from fiction, both in form and in content. Bristol considers this merely part of Pil'niak's art, asserting that, in his later evolution away from modernism, "his refusal to distinguish categorically between fiction and non-fiction is proof that he considered the creative reflection of one mind sufficient to be called art" (511). Erlich, on the other hand, finds it a disturbing manifestation of Pil'niak's personal inability (or reluctance) to distinguish between truth and falsehood which would explain the writer's tendency to alternate between the two in attempts to avoid political jeopardy. Erlich examines Pil'niak's glorification of "the will not to see" in "Tret'ia stolitsa." In this novella, Pil'niak characterizes the avoidance of stark realities as enabling the Communists to achieve the impossible. However, the writer denigrated this same "will" in his personal statements⁶⁹⁰ as a refusal to recognize and acknowledge ugly realities of revolutionary *byt*; in this context he perceived a danger in presenting, in literature and elsewhere, what one wished to see instead of what really existed. Erlich is uncomfortable

⁶⁹⁰ That is, in letters, official statements, etc. outside of literary texts. Erlich (165-6) cites Pil'niak's "Excerpts from a Diary" (with respect to "the will not to see") as cited in Reck (103). These "Excerpts" can also be found as part of the "Avtobiograficheskie zametki" introducing Boris Pil'niak: Romany (Moskva: Sovremennik, 1999) 30-38, "will not to see" (33).

about what he sees as Pil'niak's valorization of lying (the "will not to see") when it enables great social [Communist] achievement (165-167), a valorization that contradicts the writer's private ethics which emphasize the need to "see." Erlich seems to think that Pil'niak shared the well-known Gor'kian notion of the "elevating lie," which helps to usher in success by encouraging mankind to see the "inevitability" of ultimate success by (prematurely) asserting problem-free completion of the task at hand. Pil'niak's early descriptions of the Bol'shevik "leather-jackets" who could do the impossible in rejuvenating plants and factories, "resurrecting" a dead industry in heroic reconstruction labors despite warnings of potential failure,⁶⁹¹ might be interpreted in this vein.

I agree that this demarcation between "truth" and "fiction" tends to melt away in Pil'niak's works where fictitious documents and such devices are used. However, I see not one but two dichotomies operating in Pil'niak's case: the one of objective fact versus objective falsehood, the other of essential spiritual truth versus essential falsehood. In other words, objective "fact" is not the only measure of "truth," especially in individual human existence. Pil'niak's personal statements about refusing "not to see" have to do with objective reality: that one may see benefits of the Soviet regime but still recognize its contemporary inadequacies, for example, that in the presence of positive social change it is still impossible to get one's shoes repaired.⁶⁹² In late September 1923, after his trip to England, Pil'niak wrote to Voronskii⁶⁹³ that Communists were like the general population in that there existed both good Communists and bad Communists, and that every honest

⁶⁹¹ Golyi god (157)

⁶⁹² "Ivan-da-Mar'ia" (248-49). On the train, a Persian Communist glorifies all that is taking place in Russia as a result of the Revolution but the local engineer points out that despite the grandeur of social change, he is unable to get his broken shoe repaired.

⁶⁹³ Letter No. 156, 233-37.

writer had an obligation “to write the truth, without suffering from ‘the will not to see’” and to abide by some sort of statistical accuracy (235-6). Pil’niak cited as an example (of statistical accuracy) that the existence of a fully equipped hydroelectric station in the Soviet Union did not indicate that every hut had electricity (236). From the very beginning, even when he mistakenly perceived the Revolution as a positive return to authentic ancient Rus’, Pil’niak recognized that the gains expected from the Revolution would come only at great cost. He illustrated this cost in the oft-cited Mar-Junction episode in Golyi god and in his projections of the length of time it would take to reach the peaks of Communist achievement in “Ivan-da-Mar’ia,” both very early revolutionary works written in or by 1921. At the end of October, again in 1923, he wrote to the editor of Izvestiia⁶⁹⁴ who had published (and was in this case refusing to publish) some of his English sketches:

Я уже говорил, что цель моих очерков была --- просто рассказать о том, что есть --- я думаю, что совсем неверно, что у врагов должно быть все плохо. Повторяю, что я был бы рад, если бы русские крестьяне жили так же, как английские . . . да и были б так культурны. (242)
I have already said that the goal of my sketches was simply to tell about things as they were --- I think that it is completely untrue that everything in an enemy country must be bad. I repeat that I would be glad if Russian peasants lived as English ones do . . . and if they were as cultured.

Pil’niak continued throughout his career to publish the bad as well as the good about the Revolution and its effects on life in the Soviet Union; this is one reason why “Mahogany” received so much criticism in 1929. Pil’niak never supported the dissemination of any idea that denied the existence of negative, undesirable aspects of reality, especially such dissemination on a collective level.

⁶⁹⁴ Letter to the Editor of Izvestiia, No. 159, 240-244. It is unknown whether the letter was published.

Pil'niak did have a tendency, in the early stages of his career and of the Soviet experiment, to create grandiose myths and to see them loom larger than "petty facts." These myths primarily concerned Russia and her magnificent destiny in a neo-Slavophile vein, and in this sphere he seemed, early on, willing to believe that "nevozmozhnoe vozmozhno" (Blok).⁶⁹⁵ These myths represented his dream or vision, but as I mentioned above, he never ignored or misrepresented the potential cost, in human terms, of the vision when leaving the realm of myth. As time passed, as he recognized that his first interpretations of the Revolution were incorrect and that implementation of the more realistic vision (the hope of Russia's world leadership in spiritual progress aided by technological advancement) was being thwarted by political forces, the scope of his mythic dreams gradually shrank to an individual, humanistic scale. This evolution away from mythic (representation) to the personal and individual had taken place by the mid-1920s.

This second, individual-level kind of (spiritual) truth has to do with the individual person's ability (and perhaps obligation to at least make the attempt) to use his or her imagination and will to transcend challenging realities of the human condition, allowing a person, for example as Pil'niak suggests, to accept as one's child a person coming to one in love, claiming to be one's offspring, regardless of the realities of genetic facts, or to accept the children of one's husband's mistress as representing one's own loving union.

One can see this distinction between the two truth/falsehood dichotomies in a

⁶⁹⁵ "the impossible is possible," from Blok's 1908 poem "Rossiia."

number of Pil'niak's works. In "O Sevke,"⁶⁹⁶ the little boy is depicted as reaching a (tragic) point in which the world of his imagination must give way to the sober, grey realities of real life. Little Sevka's fairytale dreamworld, specifically his idea of the glory of battle, is demolished when he is exposed to the casualties of real war. Pil'niak represents this loss of the imagination's ability to mold reality, to suspend disbelief or even not experience it at all, as a regrettably necessary step in coming of age in which Sevka becomes "a slave to life" (73). Pil'niak himself recorded three of his own steps in the disillusionment of maturation: learning that life was not bright and clearly defined as he had anticipated but formless and unstable; that he was not the center of all things, as it seemed to him as a child; that the perfect girl he had imagined and even named ("Tella") did not exist.⁶⁹⁷

However he might have lamented this sad disillusionment that is a necessary part of maturation, as early as 1914 in "O Sevke" he noted, and I quote again:

Есть могучая мечта, объединенная с фантазией. Она осталась сегодня только в царстве детей, она ушла уже из жизни, от людей, точно так же, как и человек сегодня ушел от нее. Эта мечта может покорять все --- я говорю: все, ибо не знаю границ для нее. (55)
There exists a powerful dream united with fantasy. It remains today only in the kingdom of children; it has already departed from life, from men, exactly as man today has departed from it. This dream can conquer everything --- I say, everything: for I know no limit for it.

Sevka's loss is the disillusionment of learning factual error: the world is not as he had perceived it. But Pil'niak later comes to understand that even adults can harness the powers of imagination, not to create a fairytale realm or ideal world as in childhood,

⁶⁹⁶ Such disillusionments also occur to little Alisa in Volga, when play becomes life and she must come to terms with her father's departure and death; and as a universal childhood realization in Soliano ambar that every child must realize one day that he or she is not the center of the universe.

⁶⁹⁷ K. B. Andronikashvili-Pil'niak, "Detskie gody" 124-125.

but to transcend the realities of life and the challenges inherent in the human condition.

Not all adult individuals can do this. It is easier to create and be sustained by a dream in youth than in adulthood: the boy Nikolai in “Chelovecheskii veter” built a dream of his unknown, previously non-existent father from the words and letters sent and forwarded by his half-brother, Ivan. This dream, like Sevka’s, was shattered; his “father” rejected him and blasphemed against his mother’s memory, but the dream had sustained him throughout his youth by giving him an identity and his own “place” within a family. The dream, when crushed, was replaced by a positive new constellation in which his half-brother provided the identity and anchor he had sought. Ivanov, a stickler for “truth” and bitterly oriented to the past, was unwilling to disregard the objective truth of Nikolai’s paternity and, unable to visualize Nikolai as a spiritual --- or even adoptive --- son, refused to enter into the “fiction” of their blood relationship. It was Ivanov’s tragedy that he could not find a way to accept the spiritual truth of the dream; in rejecting this *spiritual adoptive* son, Ivanov cut off his own future.

Young Mania, in “Grego-Trimuntan,” had her mother’s dream imposed upon her but accepted it with joy, finding in it both identity and purpose. Andrei, the husband, accepted the dream as an expression Mariia’s genuine love for Nikolai; Andrei’s character, his trust in “sworn brother” Nikolai, and his love for both his wife and for Nikolai enabled him to question but live in concord with the (fictional) dream. Nikolai, on the other hand, did not understand the fiction and long argued against it, knowing for a fact that he had never been intimate with Mariia. However, despite being like Ivanov a

stickler for truth, when greeted by “daughter” Mania after the loss of his entire family, Nikolai somehow grasped the existence of another kind of truth that was not supported by fact.

И вдруг, вот тут, этой ночью, когда он пришел в свой дом, из которого смерть унесла всех его близких, сейчас, когда он твердо знал, что там в двадцатилетиях у него ничего не было с матерью Марии, --- сейчас он усомнился в правде того, что было за двадцатилетием, усомнился в истинности фактов, точно факты могут быть неправдоподобны, как ложь --- и неправда может быть фактом. (497)

And suddenly, right then, that night, when he arrived in his home, from which death had swept away all his loved ones, now, when he knew solidly that there in his twenties there had been nothing between him and Mariia’s mother, --- now he was in doubt about the truth of what had happened twenty years before, in doubt about the veracity of facts, as though facts might be inaccurate, like a lie --- and falsehood might be fact.

Over time a malicious threat and lie about Mania’s paternity was transformed into a loving spiritual “truth,” and it was the better part of wisdom and love for Nikolai to accept that “truth” offered with so much love from both Mariias, a “truth” which even provided a resurrection of sorts for him.

These stories explore the potential impacts of such alternative realities. In this story, acceptance of the alternate, non-factual truth led to happiness for Nikolai Evgrafovich (and a fulfillment of nature’s plan, granting a new future and immortality through his “child”). The fantasy’s rejection in favor of “objective truth” destroyed Ivanov’s future; he would live on only as a *negodiai* in his children’s minds, and he would never see them again. For mother Mariia, the alternate truth provided a coping mechanism, one that she initially misused to hurt others, but one whose ultimate acceptance provided a future for her beloved, a purpose and identity for her daughter, and left her husband unharmed. For youthful Nikolai Ivanov, his own sustaining dream was

destroyed (like Sevka's illusions) but replaced with a better reality. By means of a similar "falsehood" wearing the garb of truth, Frau Leontina was able to remain true to her husband, to her marriage vows, and to the previously unrealized maternal role which should necessarily follow mating in a rightly lived life, not to mention her exertion of transformative influence on the lives of her daughters and Shura.

In other tales fiction replaces truth without the positive outcomes of the previously presented stories. Kseniia Ordynina in "Ivan-da-Mar'ia" also had what could be called "fantasies" of the nature of her romantic love for Troparov and the nature of her masculine, uncommitted modern love for Cherep. Both of her "dreams" or visions failed her, because she herself was bifurcated, split into two psychic components, hence she lacked the authenticity that must inform a transcendent fantasy. Furthermore, she was "off the path" of life, having rejected the birth-mate-procreate-die cycle for her own life. Any compromise with baser visions of life renders the victory of the transcendent dream over "facts" impossible.

The protagonist of "Tul'skaia literatura" also seemed to be living a "fantasy," the dream of great love that dominated his relationship with his wife after their sacrificial behavior during the Islamabad sojourn. But far from transcending the reality of his and his wife's early betrayals of their marriage, the falsity of the "love" on which his marriage was based literally caused his heart to fail. Like Chekistka Ordynina, he and his wife had apparently rejected the right path or ordained sequence of life events; they met, mated, but did not procreate. They evaluated sexual union by a scale of passion rather than child-bearing and gave their professional and Socialist lives higher priority than their "human life." The basis of their fantasy, that their love for each other was truer and

stronger than their love for their new paramours, was born of an attempt to deceive one another to hide their infidelities. Both man and wife lacked authenticity, the inner prompting to be true to oneself and others and to their biological identities.

Concomitantly the protagonist, at least, lacked character; recognition that he had been deceived (as well as being a deceiver himself) devastated his pride (in contrast to Andrei, the “deceived” husband in “Grego-Trimuntan”).

Not everyone is capable of transcending one’s circumstances by means of a sustaining fantasy or alternative spiritual reality. Passive characters such as Alena in “Smertel’noe manit,” for example, are too weak to succeed at this. In order to transcend reality in this way, one must appreciate and be committed to the prescribed life path of birth, love, mating, procreation, and death. One must have strength of character, will, and authenticity, faithfulness to oneself and to others. One must be, in a sense, an artist, having imagination informed by love, along with discernment to recognize that there are indeed different kinds of “truth.”

The Tolstoian Dialogue

The Tolstoian resonance in Pil’niak’s works is not solely manifested in Pil’niak’s nature stories and his views on death as a natural phase of life to be accepted with serenity, aspects which have been pointed out by others. The two writers share a fundamental basis to their moral visions, believing that nature, if correctly understood, impels man to moral action. Tolstoi’s impact is expressed throughout Pil’niak’s *oeuvre* in his authorial role as moralist, especially within the context of family morality.

Pil’niak’s Voice in the Sexual Morality Debate

The ultimate “message” of Pil’niak’s biological *ethos* is that the primary goal of

each human being must be to be fully human and humane. Even the earliest animal stories were about animals who, albeit on a lower level of consciousness, were very like moral people: animals who mated for life, who took pride in their family roles, who shared in the upbringing of their offspring, and remained faithful to one another as long as their union was viable for further reproduction. The wolves were also part of a sophisticated social organization, and the wolf-protagonist himself a responsible, effective leader by human standards. Even Pil'niak's early valorization of the most "primitive" individual or human group, the "noble savage" or "noble peasant," introduced a certain amount of spirituality and culture into a family or clan unit in which love was a prominent feature. Pil'niak's fascination with the "simple man" in the cult of the *narod* so traditional among Russian writers and intellectuals soon gave way to a value system in which non-biological qualities were crucial in moderating instincts and nature's apparent demands. The human experience is most right, full, and healthy for those individuals who examine themselves and their actions from an ethical perspective, who live consciously and deliberately, exercising self-control and allowing love and imagination to transcend the material factors which inevitably influence the human condition one way or another. The human purpose is always to create rather than destroy; to procreate rather than kill; to build culture rather than to allow (or contribute to) its deterioration.

The human life has seasons as does the year, spring for birth and mating, summer for procreation, autumn for the launching of offspring, and winter for natural death. Following this natural progression is right but is not automatic. People are easily led or forced astray by historical events (e.g., war, revolution), by unfortunate choices (e.g., of

mates or priorities), by the lure of pleasure-based sexuality instead of a desire for loving commitment and family, or even by perverted understandings of love (e.g. incest or controlling types of love).

Human beings have resources for physically healthy and spiritually sound living far beyond those of animals, but each individual must find and develop these resources for himself, with the help of his family, friends, and, it is to be hoped, the prevailing culture. These resources include character, authenticity and honesty, self-control, self-awareness, high expectations of oneself, imagination, and above all, love. Those who do not seek to develop and operate in accordance with these qualities become barbarians, hedonists, or philistines; all types are perversions of what man and woman can and should be. In the final analysis, Pil'niak valorizes not mankind's closeness to the natural, animal state but proximity to the divine, the ability to participate in the spiritual mysteries of existence. Parenthood in particular is a divine creative experience involving mystery far beyond the physical, material, and rational.

Pil'niak's moral instruction for human life would be for each person to harness his or her spiritual strengths at every crossroads, always choosing love and life: mating, rearing children, and, at the proper time, greeting death with calm acceptance. It is spiritual more than biological capacities that enable man to transcend his condition and to imbue his children with the ability to transcend their own condition, bringing him, their parent, immortality in this process --- and so on through succeeding generations.

The analysis of Pil'niak's *oeuvre* dealing with his biological *ethos* reveals him as an archetypal romantic whose primary focus is man and the human experience of life with love as its central, most essential component. His fundamental values are well

summarized in the closing chapter to his story “Chernyi khleb,”⁶⁹⁸ where he describes the contemporary Moscow presentation of Gadybuk, a mystical play performed in ancient Hebrew but with modern color scheme elements, costuming, choreography, and the like.⁶⁹⁹ The drama presents a young woman mystically speaking in the voice of her dead beloved, her only chosen one, who, like her, had “measured life in two dimensions, by love and by death” (201). The story’s narrator asks about the essentials of the play and of life itself:

И не самое ли главное --- единственное --- то, что мать плакала об умирающем ребенке, как все матери, что Лия и Ханам любили любовною любовью, сильной, как смерть, как все любящие впервые, --- что отец Сендер любил Лию отцовской любовью, сильной, как род, как должно всем отцам, --- не единственное ли --- че-ло-век? --- человечность, мистика че-ло-ве-ка? --- (201)
 And isn’t the main thing --- the only thing --- the fact that the mother was weeping about her dying child, like all mothers; that Liia and Khanam loved each other with a lovers’ love, powerful, like death, like all who love for the first time; that the father, Sender, loved Liia with a paternal love, powerful, like the family clan, as befits all fathers; isn’t the only thing m-a-n? humanity, the mysticism of m-a-n?

Indeed, to Pil’niak, the human being in a loving stance is the main thing, the only thing, along with the universal roles he or she plays, first of all within the family. Man is indeed a biological entity, like plants and animals: he is born, he procreates, and he dies, in that order. But as opposed to animals and plants, man’s every action and experience is to be permeated with love: sexual, parental, brotherly, neighborly, comradely and any other positive manifestation of this emotion. Pil’niak never wavered from his assertion of the absolute and sacrosanct value of the individual human being and the human experience as

⁶⁹⁸ “Black Bread,” dated by the author “in the interim between Christmas of the old calendar and the new one” in 1922-23, and first published 1923. I am citing from Boris Pil’niak, Treti’a stolitsa: Povesti i rasskazy (Moskva: Russkaia kniga, 1922) 165-204.

⁶⁹⁹ This play of course ties in with some of the other themes to this particular story, which is a reprise of Golvi god, featuring that novel’s character Arkhip Arkhipov in the year 1922 (the earlier novel purported to describe 1919), and serving, in retrospect, as a transitional vision on the way to Mashiny i volki.

such.

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