Immortals are Not Men:
Maiakovskii, the Strugatskii Brothers, and the New Soviet Man

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A dissertation submitted to the faculty of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Department of Slavic Languages and Literatures.

Chapel Hill
2010

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Abstract

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(Under the direction of Ivana Vuletic)

This study seeks to “transcribe” the dialogue with various futures that is integral to the works of two Soviet writers: the poet Vladimir Maiakovskii and the co-author consisting of the brothers Arkadii and Boris Strugatskii. Dialogue with a variety of possible futures is a noteworthy feature of much science fiction. However, since Soviet Marxism dictated that the general terms of the future were known and inevitable, the contents of such a dialogue in Soviet science fiction are of special interest, particularly where they diverge from portrayals of utopia. The New Soviet Man—the “mythical” being who was understood to be the inhabitant of any Soviet future—should be viewed as a constant participant in this dialogue. A concrete definition of the New Soviet Man is elusive: this being is usually described by opposition to the given present human, conditionally labeled in this study as the “Old Soviet Man.” The New Soviet Man is, by definition, the superior of the Old Soviet Man physically, mentally, and morally.

Considering one author from the early Soviet period and one from the post-war period enables this study to cover much of the Soviet era. In fact, since science fiction can be conceptualized as a mapping not only from the present to a future, but also back to the present, this study will be an account of certain moments of the Soviet “present” of the twentieth century.
The discussion focuses on three central topics, each of which is a permutation of the set of themes surrounding the New Soviet Man: the machines of the future, the humans of the future, and the intersection between the two. These topics are the respective subjects of chapters one, three, and two. The conclusion considers these questions within a wider context, with specific reference to the influence of H. G. Wells. Ultimately, the study aims to draw conclusions about the writers’ attitudes regarding the New Soviet Man, and, more generally, about the idea that the human being can and should be “improved.”
To my son Henry, who was born when this dissertation was nearly complete.
Acknowledgements

This dissertation is the product of many months of collaboration and negotiation with my advisor, Dr. Ivana Vuletic. I am extremely grateful to her, and have enjoyed our work together immensely.

I would like to thank all those who have read drafts of or excerpts from the dissertation, including my wife Karin, and my friends and fellow graduate students John Wright and Elena Clark. Dr. Radislav Lapushin, in addition to serving on my committee, has been extremely helpful in helping me to fine-tune the numerous passages that were translated over the course of my research.

Additionally, I would like to express my thanks to the professors, at both Duke and UNC, with whom I have taken the numerous math classes over the course of my graduate career. These courses have given me insights into organized thinking and logical writing, and have been a rich supply of ideas and methodologies in my study of Russian literature. I would like to specifically thank Dr. Robert Proctor, with whom I took three math classes at UNC, and who has served as my unofficial mathematics advisor.

Finally, I would, once again, like to thank my wife Karin for her support, both moral and technical, over all seven of my years in graduate school.
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Chapter 1
Introduction

Созданье ли болезненной мечты
Иль дерзкого ума соображенье
Во глубине полночной темноты
Представшее очам моим виденье?
Не ведаю; но предо мной тогда
Раскрылись грядущие года…

Is it the creation of a morbid dream,
Or the thought of an audacious mind,
This vision that presented itself to my eyes
In the depths of midnight darkness?
I know not; but before me then
Unfolded the years to come…

E. A. Baratynskii, from “Posledniaia smert’” [The Last Death, 1827]

Поэзия — вся! — езда в незнаемое.

Poetry—the whole of it—is a journey into the unknown.

V. V. Maiakovskii, from “Razgovor s fininspektorom o poezii”
[A Conversation with the Tax Collector About Poetry, 1926]

Dialogues with Soviet Futures

While science fiction resists efforts to be reduced to a set of traits, one of the
essential elements of much science fiction is dialogue with a future. Here the indefinite
article is meant to emphasize that the future in question is never the future, but merely
one of many fictional mappings of the present onto the blank plane of the unknown. It is
arguable that this mapping is a bijection: the future portrayed in a given work of science
fiction maps directly back to the present from which it originated. The American writer Neil Gaiman makes this very argument in his introduction to the 1996 edition of Alfred Bester’s classic novel *The Stars My Destination* [1956]:

> You can tell when a Hollywood historical film was made by looking at the eye makeup of the leading ladies, and you can tell the date of an old science fiction novel by every word on the page. Nothing dates harder and faster and more strangely than the future. [...] SF is a difficult and transient literature at the best of times, ultimately problematic. It claims to treat of the future, all the what-ifs and the if-this-goes-ons; but the what-ifs and if-this-goes-ons are always founded here and hard in today. Whatever today is. (Gaiman vii, viii)

In the Soviet Union, a country perpetually dominated by the teleological goal of building Socialism, dialogue with the (or a) future was a fact of existence. The present study will examine Soviet science fiction and its approach to the future by considering selected works of two Soviet writers, one from the early Soviet period and one from the late:

Vladimir Maiakovskii and Boris and Arkadii Strugatskii. These two are arguably the key literary interlocutors with the future as it was understood in the Soviet era. While there are other mappers of the future in both Maiakovskii’s (Zamiatin, Platonov, Bulgakov, Bogdanov) and the Strugatskiis’ (Efremov, Gurevich, Varshavskii, Savchenko)

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1 Refer to Arkadii and Boris Strugatskii as one author because of numerous categorical statements on Boris Strugatskii’s part that, upon Arkadii Strugatskii’s death in 1991, the writer “the Strugatskii brothers” ceased to exist. In a 1995 interview with the journalist Boris Vishnevskii, when asked about the fact that the two brothers were “inseparable,” Boris Strugatskii replied: “That we were inseparable is what you would call a ‘medical fact’: two authors, Arkadii and Boris Strugatskii, writing in collaboration, did not exist; there was one author – the Strugatskii brothers” [— *Chto neotdelimy — eto, chto nazyvaetsia, “meditsinskii fakt”: ne sushchestvuet dvukh avtorov, Arkadiia i Borisa Strugatskikh, kotorye pisali vdvoem, est’ odin avtor — brat’ia Strugatskie] (Vishnevskii 30). Such was their conviction in this respect that, upon the death of his brother, Boris Strugatskii resolved to never attach their name to anything he wrote. This is an extension of an agreement between the two brothers that anything either wrote individually would be published under a pseudonym. Boris Strugatskii currently writes under the name S. Vititskii; Arkadii Strugatskii wrote under the pseudonym S. Iaroslavtsev.

2 In the initial stages of writing, my intention was to include Platonov as one of the central writers to be considered. This approach was abandoned when in became clear that maintaining contact between the works of more than two writers would be combinatorially untenable in a work of this scale. Nonetheless, Platonov will arise many times over the course of this study, and should be considered a key “shadow interlocutor” with the ideas to be presented.
respective times, these two represent the most significant intersection of belief and disillusionment, a combination that is instrumental to a critical evaluation of the future. There will be no attempt to argue that Maiakovskii and the Strugatskii brothers were engaged in futurology, or predicting possible futures, a task that is often mistakenly perceived as the goal of science fiction. It follows, in fact, from Gaiman’s argument, that this study will be concerned with two Soviet “presents”: the post-revolutionary era and the post-WWII era, presented through the function of Maiakovskii’s and the Strugatskiis’ dialogues with the future. The conversations with this hypothetical future are made up of three distinct themes: the machines of the future, the humans of the future, and the intersection between the two. These will be the respective topics of chapters one, three, and two of this study.

Since there are more than a few Soviet writers (listed partially above) who could be profitably examined in the present context, further justification for the choice of Maiakovskii and the Strugatskiis must be given. These writers in particular have been chosen because they can be understood not only as great writers, but as cultural phenomena: they each played a key role in defining the literature and culture of their respective times, rather than the other way around. Furthermore, while both Maiakovskii and the Strugatskiis made extensive use of the conventions of science fiction, neither can be said to be confined by the boundaries that characterize some of the less exemplary practitioners of the genre. In this sense, both Maiakovskii and the Strugatskii brothers have had many imitators, but no true successors. It is arguable that no other Soviet writers have engaged in a direct dialogue with the future as successfully and deeply as these two. The protagonist of the Strugatskiis’ 1967 novella Gadkie lebedi [The Ugly
Swans], Viktor Banev, expresses a fear of the future via the metaphor of a tentacle thrusting itself from the future into the present. Maiakovskii and the Strugatskiis can be said to do the opposite: thrusting a tentacle from the present into a future. It is because of their connection with a multiplicity of futures that these two are the ideal subjects to form the core of this study, which seeks to elucidate the way in which Soviet literature engages with these futures and those who will inhabit them.

From the early days of the Soviet Union, it was known just who this inhabitant of the future would be: the New Soviet Man. This “mythical being” emerged out of the axiom that the builders and inhabitants of the perfect Soviet state would themselves be perfect, or at least significantly better than the ordinary human, Soviet or otherwise. Direct portrayals of the New Soviet Man in Soviet literature are rare for a variety of reasons, many of which will be explored over the course of this discussion. One of the factors accounting for this fact follows from a corollary to the complaint that living in Utopia is boring: the inhabitants of Utopia are bores. A literary portrayal of internally conflict-free people living in a world without conflict does not make for stimulating reading. Thus the absence of a fully realized New Soviet Man in Soviet fiction is almost an artistic necessity. Instead, the New Soviet Man is defined via a kind of apophatic description: portraying those things that a New Soviet Man should not be leads to an

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3 This work will be examined at length in the third chapter.

4 For a thorough discussion of the history of the concept of the New Soviet Man, see Hellebust 2003, 57-72. While acknowledging the problems inherent in mapping the gender-neutral Russian version onto a gender-specific English translation, I will be following established convention in translating novyi sovetskii chelovek as “New Soviet Man.”
understanding of what he is, or should be. There will be numerous instances of dialogue with this ideal being in the works to be considered in this study. In fact, framing Maiakovskii and the Strugatskiis as interlocutors with various futures is inadequate, since a conversation requires a minimum of two: in these works, the New Soviet Man is the putative addressee, as well as the spokesperson for the future.

In many of the dialogues that will be considered in the following pages, the other interlocutor can be thought of not as the authors themselves, but as a stand-in for the putative reader, as the reader’s contemporary. This individual will be referred to as the Old Soviet Man, a term that chains this being to the reader’s present, whatever that present may be. As will be shown, even when a given “future” is located in the reader’s past (as has long been the case with Maiakovskii’s future Moscow of 1979 in Klop), the New Soviet Man always exists in the reader’s future. The concept of the New Soviet Man is constantly receding into the future: it is a horizon that can never be reached. The (Soviet) reader, approaching this horizon, is ever identified with the Old Soviet Man. The opposition between the Old Soviet Man and the New Soviet Man will prove crucial to the coming discussion, and will surface frequently throughout.

Preliminary Definitions

Literature on science fiction frequently begins with attempts to quantify the genre and to define the term “science fiction.” The delineation of the borders and the description of the topography of science fiction is the subject of much of the criticism of the genre, as even a cursory perusal of the works of science fiction criticism listed in the

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5 It is not accidental that the apophatic description of the New Soviet Man is related to similar strategies for describing God in Orthodox theology. As will be seen, moreover, there is a non-trivial intersection between the New Soviet Man and the Russian Orthodox hagiographic tradition.
While many of the definitions of science fiction are both well thought-out and thought-provoking, no single definition is adequate: the American science fiction writer Theodore Sturgeon has rightly observed that “no one has yet managed to define this genre in any way that does not leak” (Sturgeon 1979, vii). This study will not attempt to formulate a new definition, but will use the union of the two definitions that will prove most useful in the present context:

(1) The Strugatskiis define science fiction in their 1965 essay “Fantastika — literatura” [“Science Fiction is Literature”] in the following way:

Фантастика есть отрасль литературы, подчиняющаяся всем общелитературным законам и требованиям, рассматривающая общие литературные проблемы (типа: человек и мир, человек и общество, и т. д.), но характеризующаяся специфическим литературным приемом — введением элемента необычайного. (Strugatskii 11: 281).

[Science fiction is a branch of literature obeying all the general laws and requirements of literature, examining general problems of literature (for example: man and the world, man and society, etc.), but characterized by a special literary device: the introduction of an element of the extraordinary.]

(2) Darko Suvin, in his influential essay “Estrangement and Cognition,” defines science fiction as “a literary genre whose necessary and sufficient conditions are

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6 For example: Geller 10, Gunn 5-12, Roberts 1-3, Rose 1-23, and Searles 265. Also of interest is the entry (by John Clute, Peter Nicholls, and Brian Stableford) in the 1993 The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction on “Definitions of sf.” The article goes over the history of the origins of the term, and cites the most influential definitions of the genre.

7 Though there does exist an explicit Russian rendering of the term “science fiction” as nauchnaia fantastika, translating fantastika as “science fiction” is generally accepted. It would probably be more appropriate to translate fantastika as “literature of the fantastic,” since the term has a wider breadth of meaning in Russian than “science fiction” does in English. There is a Russian rendering of “fantasy” as fentezi, but this word made its way into the Russian vernacular comparatively recently.

8 In the original Russian, this entire quotation is capitalized, a favorite device that the Strugatskiis use to set an idea or statement apart from the rest of the text.

9 According to Suvin, the first version of this essay was a lecture given in the spring of 1968 “in J. M. Holquist’s seminar on fantastic literature in the Yale University Slavic Languages and Literatures Department” (Suvin 1979, 3). The essay opens Suvin’s Metamorphoses of Science Fiction [1979] and has
the presence and interaction of estrangement and cognition, and whose main
device is an imaginative framework alternative to the author’s empirical
environment” (Suvin 1979, 7-8). [The italics are Suvin’s.]

These definitions were chosen because they are both inherently inclusive and general. Too many definitions of science fiction rely on examples of elements found in works that are generally agreed to be science fiction, framing the definition in terms of physical (outer space) or temporal (the future) location, or by the presence of technology, aliens, fantastic voyages, and the like. These represent attempts to quantify science fiction by means of a kind of census of motifs: since the vast majority of works of science fiction contain these elements, then the same must be true for the whole of the genre. Most writers and critics of science fiction now reject this approach, using these narrow definitions as a collective negative example. For instance, in “Fantastika — literatura,” the Strugatskiis use as “straw men” the three definitions of science fiction that they felt had the most traction in Soviet society of the 1960s:

1. Фантастика есть литература научной мечты.
2. Фантастика есть литература о светлом будущем.
3. Фантастика есть специфически детская литература.

It would seem that Suvin’s definition allows for the categorization of various other “fantastic” genres as science fiction. Following his formulation of the definition above, he addresses these genres in kind, and explains how his framework explicitly excludes them: “[e]strangement differentiates SF from the ‘realistic’ literary mainstream extending from the eighteenth century into the twentieth. Cognition differentiates it not only from the myth, but also from the folk (fairy) tale and the fantasy” (Suvin 8). While the Russian formalist critics would certainly take issue with Suvin’s removal of estrangement from “mainstream” literature, his definition is one of the most useful and influential in the field of science fiction studies.

There are even more general definitions of science fiction. According to James Gunn, John W. Campbell, Jr., the editor of the American science and science fiction magazine Analog from 1937 to 1971, “used to say that science fiction encompassed mainstream literature, because science fiction covered everything from the origin of the universe to its end, and the mainstream literature covered only a small range and a tiny space within that larger and longer literature” (Gunn 83).
[1] Science fiction is the literature of the scientific imagination. (2) Science fiction is the literature about the bright future. (3) Science fiction is specifically a children’s literature.

The Strugatskiis give examples of many exemplary works that conform to one or two of the definitions above, but argue that the adopting of any one—or even the union of all three—will exclude many excellent works of science fiction, such as Wells’s *The Invisible Man*, or the stories of Ray Bradbury.

Choosing the most generalized definitions of science fiction is not only intellectually honest, but also has utility for the present study. Given Maiakovskii’s place in the literature and culture of the twentieth century—either as the most prominent member of the early Russian avant-garde or as the Poet of the Revolution—considering the poet within a science fiction context might be interpreted as a literary “demotion.” This is wrong for at least two reasons. Firstly, the respective authors of the definitions given above demand high literary standards for science fiction. In his preface to *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction*, Suvin acknowledges the low probability that “an average SF text is ‘good,’ that is, aesthetically significant.” He states that “90 or even 95 percent of SF production is strictly perishable stuff.” What Suvin regards as “non-perishable” are those works that he deems worthy of study, and therefore “aesthetically significant” (Suvin 1979, vii). The Strugatskiis, again in “Fantastika — literatura,” demand that science fiction not be excused from striving for artistic excellence. Citing works such as Wells’s *The Time Machine* and Efremov’s *Tummanost’ Andromedy* [The Andromeda Galaxy, 1957], they say that

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12 Suvin’s statement is related to an aphorism formulated by the American science fiction writer Theodore Sturgeon in defense of the artistic merit of science fiction. In an article in the March 1958 issue of the science fiction magazine *Venture*, he repeats (this idea had already been formulated orally at science fiction conventions) what he calls “Sturgeon’s Revelation”—forced out of him “after twenty years of wearying defense against the attacks of people who used the worse examples of the field for ammunition, and whose conclusion was that ninety percent of s f is crud”—that “[n]inety percent of everything is crud” (Sturgeon 1958, 66). This “revelation” is more commonly known as Sturgeon’s Law.
These are not simply works that captivate, that astound the imagination and stimulate thought, but are real literature, with no allowances whatever. Literature with a capital “L.”

Thus the framing of some of Maiakovskii’s works as a part of the science fiction tradition should not be interpreted as a comment on their literary value: as is implied by the Strugatskiis’ and Suvin’s definitions, the consideration of a work as science fiction does not necessarily carry with it implications of lesser “aesthetic significance.”

Secondly, a consideration of the themes that Maiakovskii explores across his career (the future, utopia, flight, the mutability of the human form) makes such a placement seem far from unjustified. These themes will be used and re-used in works of science fiction throughout the twentieth century, making Maiakovskii a significant producer of science fiction source material. In fact, many of Maiakovskii’s poems that will be considered in this study seem to fit squarely into the Strugatskiis’ second “straw man” category of the literature of the bright future. (Though, as will be shown, the polish of this future does not last to the end of the poet’s career.) In a word, there should be no hesitancy in considering Maiakovskii as a contributor to Russian science fiction literature.

Including the Strugatskii brothers in a study of Soviet science fiction is simply inescapable. What might require some justification is the placing of a science fiction writer within the canon of Russian literature, since science fiction is often considered to exist apart from, or even outside of, any national literary tradition. As will be shown, the Strugatskiis engage with Russian literature just as deeply as any canonical writer. It follows, then, that an understanding of their work is impossible without a knowledge of
the literary tradition from which they emerged. Ultimately, the intended result of considering Maiakovskii within science fiction and the Strugatskiis within Literature is to show that any dividing line between these two literatures is artificial. This fact could serve to partially explain the difficulties inherent in formulating a watertight definition of science fiction. Any definition must, at some point, erect a boundary between that which it defines and the rest of the set of concepts being considered. If there exists no fundamental difference between these concepts, then any boundary will be simply arbitrary.

Two Subtypes of Science Fiction

Running counter to attempts to formulate a final definition of science fiction is the phenomenon of distinct sub-genres within the tradition. A reader of science fiction criticism will find the literature divided up temporally (Victorian, Pre-War, Golden Age), thematically (space opera, alternative history, military) and stylistically (New-Wave, cyberpunk). There have also been numerous attempts to rename science fiction, examples being the resurrection of Wells’s preferred “scientific romance”\(^\text{13}\) and the more recent “speculative fiction.” This study will make frequent reference to two subtypes of science fiction, one a worldwide phenomenon, and one a particular product of Soviet Russia.

\(^{13}\) This term predates “science fiction,” which was developed by Hugo Gernsback—the American science fiction writer and editor for whom the Hugo (an annual science fiction award) is named—in the 1920s. He had previously attempted to label this kind of literature as “scientific fiction” and “scientification” (Westfahl 5).
Science fiction that strives to stay within the bounds of scientific plausibility is known as hard science fiction, the added adjective referring to the “hard” sciences. This subtype of science fiction emerged in the 1950s, apparently having resulted from two reactions, one negative, and one positive. Hard science fiction, particularly within the American context, was a negative reaction to the science fiction of the 1920s and 1930s, which is characterized by pseudo-scientific babble, gleeful ignorance of the laws of physics, and horrible aliens that are sexually attracted to human females. Practitioners of hard science fiction sought to bring rigor and discipline to a genre that had long lacked both. Hard science fiction was also a positive reaction to the explosion of scientific discoveries of the 1940s and 1950s, especially in nuclear physics and rocketry. The science fiction of this era is dominated by tales of space exploration, often made possible by nuclear engines, all a direct outgrowth of the then-contemporary science. This trope of space exploration is felt, if not explicitly stated, in the American science fiction writer Norman Spinrad’s discussion of hard science fiction in his article “Rubber Sciences,” included in the 1976 collection The Craft of Science Fiction:

[T]here is what can only be described as the hard science fiction “feel.” One has a sense of hard black vacuum and cold pinpoint stars, a universe filled with hard-edged metal artifacts and a reality whose rules are all of a piece, fixed, seamless, and invariant. [...] All hard science fiction stories seem to take place in the same essential reality, no matter the differences in superficial detail, and that reality is the hard-edged, materialistic, deterministic reality of a structured and filled-in scientific Weltanschauung which admits of no fuzziness in locus, no blank spots, no indeterminacy, no multiplexity—more Newtonian than Einsteinian. (Spinrad 65-6)

14 The term is the same in Russian: tverdaia nauchnaia fantastika.

15 While works that are now considered hard science fiction were being published from the early 1950s, the designation of “hard” did not appear until November 1957, in P. Schuyler Miller’s review of a republication of John W. Campbell Jr.’s 1931 novel Islands of Space in Astounding Science Fiction (Westfahl 17-18). That Miller had coined the term was long forgotten, and was rediscovered by Gary Westfahl after extensively combing book reviews and columns in the science fiction digests of that period.
Traditionally, the first work of true hard science fiction is regarded as Tom Godwin’s 1954 story “The Cold Equations.” This story concerns a young woman who has stowed away on a small spacecraft delivering medicine to a certain planet. The fuel allotment for the vessel allows for no “wiggle room”: the additional mass of the woman will cause it to crash. Therefore the woman must be ejected out of the airlock. The title refers to the “cold” laws of physics that cannot take into account the moral dilemma of the story. In “The Readers of Hard Science Fiction,” Gunn writes that

The intellectual point made by the story is that sentimentality divorced from knowledge and rationality is deadly. […] The girl is to blame for her own predicament, her innocence is irrelevant, the universe doesn’t care about her motives, and the others would be as guilty as she if they compounded her mistake by dying with her. The reader who does not understand this has not read the story correctly. The intellectual perception that the girl must die produces the emotional response the reader gets from the story. (Gunn 83, 84)

It is not the case that hard science fiction is devoid of human emotion. In fact, it is clear in Godwin’s narrative that the necessity of ejecting the woman into space is cruel: there is no perverse joy taken in her death. The emotional substratum of this story becomes more clear in light of the knowledge that Campbell rejected three drafts of the story in which Godwin found clever ways to avoid the grisly ending: the author wanted the woman to live (Green 13).

Hard science fiction, then, does not represent an ideology, but a devotion to the laws of nature. Within a genre that is defined by a lack of boundaries, hard science fiction thrives on the imposition of natural order on imaginative speculation. But adhering too closely to these strictures skirts the danger of writing a scientific manifesto disguised as fiction. Such was the case in the science fiction of the Stalinist period in Soviet literature.
A careful introduction to hard science fiction is particularly relevant in the Soviet context, because cultural conditions in the 1930s and 1940s produced what could be called the hardest hard science fiction in the history of the genre. The Russian literature of the first two decades of the twentieth century was characterized by bold experimentation and wild fantasy, but Stalin’s consolidation of power in the 1930s brought with it political, social, and cultural changes that made the existence of such literature impossible. While science fiction was technically allowed to exist, the strictures of Socialist Realism mutilated it into an almost unrecognizable form: the science fiction literature of this time burned dimly in a particularly un-fantastical socialist-realist version of science fiction that has come to be known as the fantastika blizhnego pritsela.\textsuperscript{16}

*Blizhnii pritsel* is an artillery term that refers to targets within close range, and so *fantastika blizhnego pritsela* can be translated as “the science fiction of that which is in our sights” or “science fiction of close firing range.” This was a science fiction that emphasized technology over all other literary concerns, with the added caveat that it should portray technological advances that could be envisioned on the near horizon, within the confines of the next Five-Year Plan. Most works that were written in the Soviet Union in the 1930s through the late 1950s that could charitably be labeled as science fiction belong to this category.\textsuperscript{17}

\textsuperscript{16} Another, lesser-used term for this phenomenon is fantastika na grani vozmozhnogo [science fiction on the edge of what is possible] (Geller 81). Other terms include blizhniaia fantastika [near science fiction] and fantastika blizhnego predela [science fiction of the near limit].

\textsuperscript{17} There are a few works published in this period of a more dal’nii pritsel [distant range]: Ivan Efremov’s *Zvezdnye korabli*, a novella concerning the discovery of evidence of alien visitors to Earth in the distant geological past, was published in the popular science journal *Znanie-Sila* in 1947. Efremov would go on to write, among other things, *Tumannost’ Andromedy* (1957), the watershed science fiction novel of the Thaw.
The concept of the *fantastika blizhnego pritsela*, while not named as such, is considered to have been codified by the literary critic Sergei Ivanov in his article, “Fantastika i deistvitel’nost’” [“Science Fiction and Reality”], which appeared in the January 1950 issue of *Oktiabr*. Ivanov insists that science fiction describe “the prospects of the most immediate (we emphasize: the most immediate) future” [perspektivy nashego blizhaishego (podcherkivaem, blizhaishego) budushchego] (Ivanov 161). He takes to task any science fiction writers who lose themselves in the too-distant future, and reserves praise for those who chain themselves to the then-present reality. His positive evaluation of the science fiction writer and engineer Vadim Okhotnikov is typical:

Автору чужды космические дали и сверхъестественные изобретения, в его рассказах живут и действуют обыкновенные советские ученые и изобретатели, местом действия обычно служит простая исследовательская лаборатория, мысли и действия героев направлены на изобретение практических вещей, сегодня еще не существующих, но завтра несомненно войдущих в повседневный обиход. (Ivanov 160)

[The far reaches of space, supernatural inventions, these are alien to the author; in his stories live and work regular Soviet scientists and inventors, whose place of work is a simple research laboratory, whose thoughts and actions are directed towards the invention of practical things which do not yet exist today, but tomorrow will undoubtedly be items that will be used on a daily basis.]

It is no accident that Okhotnikov today is known as one of the prime exemplars of the *fantastika blizhnego pritsela*: Gakov’s *Entsiklopediia fantastiki* states that Okhotnikov’s works “are a thinly fictionalized popularization of the author’s own engineering and technical ideas” [predstavliaet soboi slabo belletrizovannuiu populiarizatsiu]

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18 The term was coined only when the *fantastika blizhnego pritsela* was a fading phenomenon: it probably first appeared in *Literaturnaia gazeta* (11 February 1961), in Lazar’ Ladin’s article “Bez skidok na zhanr! Zametki o nauchno-fantasticheskoi literature” [No Allowances for Genre! Observations about Science Fiction Literature]. Ladin himself wrote some science fiction, and is known for his short work “Maior Vell End’iu” [1962], an account of Wells’s *The War of the Worlds* from the point of view of an English major who sees in the Martians protection from social upheaval. He chooses to serve the aliens, even going as far as drinking human blood (Geller 258).
sobstvennykh inzhenerno-tekh. idei avtora] (Gakov 434). Okhotnikov’s first collection was, in fact, entitled Na grani vozmozhnogo [On the Edge of What is Possible, 1947].

That Ivanov has a pool of writers to hold up as examples of the proper practice of the fantastika blizhnego pritsela indicates that he is merely describing a phenomenon that was already in existence. In fact, in his 1985 survey of Soviet science fiction Vseelennaia za predelom dogmy: razmyshleniia o sovetskoi fantastike [The Universe Beyond the Limits of Dogma: Reflections on Soviet Science Fiction], Leonid Geller argues that Ivanov’s prescriptions are merely a continuation of Gor’kii’s, placing the fantastika blizhnego pritsela firmly within Socialist Realism:

Сегодняшние критики говорят о таких выступлениях, как статья Иванова, представляя их в виде кратковременного, досадного, но быстро исправленного заблуждения. Однако, так ли сильно отличаются требования Иванова от предложений Горького развивать детское воображение, рассказывая о превращении картофеля в каучук? Иванов лишь открыто и развернуто формулировал то, что у Горького дано в форме краткого конспекта. Ровно двадцать лет разделяет публикации статей Горького и Иванова, между ними можно провести четкую прямую линию, — по этой линии, четко, логично, без отклонений, шло развитие советской НФ в течение двадцати лет. (Geller 82)

[Critics today discuss such statements as Ivanov's article by presenting them in the form of an ephemeral, embarrassing, but quickly corrected mistake. But do Ivanov's requirements differ that much from Gor'kii's propositions to develop children's imaginations by describing how a potato can be transformed into rubber? Ivanov simply formulated openly and expansively that which in Gor'kii's case was given as a short outline. Exactly twenty years separate the publications of Gor'kii's and Ivanov's articles, and between them you can construct a precise, straight line: it was along this line, precisely, logically, without deviation, that the development of Soviet SF proceeded for twenty years.]

One of the first critical assaults on the fantastika blizhnego pritsela is an article by Andrei Siniavskii (better known by his pen name and alter ego Abram Terts) entitled “Bez

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19 The article to which Geller refers is Gor’kii’s “O temakh” [On Themes], first published in 1933, simultaneously appearing in Pravda (no. 287), Izvestiia (no. 255) and Literaturnaia gazeta (no. 48) (Gor’kii 391). In the article, Gor’kii discusses a range of socially and politically appropriate themes for children’s books.
skidok: o sovremennom nauchno-fantasticheskom romane” [“No Allowances: Concerning the Modern Science Fiction Novel”]. This article, which appeared in the January 1960 issue of Voprosy literatury, is essentially a call for the reintroduction of imagination into Soviet science fiction. Siniavskii takes to task Ivanov and the writers that Ivanov praises for creating a literary landscape in which “a work of science fiction turns out to be less fantastic than our everyday life” [fantasticheskoe proizvedenie okazyvaetsia menee fantasticheskim, chem nasha deistvitel'nost’] (Siniavskii 47). He insists that Soviet science fiction be given the chance to говорить во весь голос,20 творчески развиваться и идти дальше по пути богатой выдумки, художественного многообразия. (Siniavskii 46)

[Siniavskii does find some works of Soviet science fiction—most notably Tummanost’ Andromedy—that are worthy of praise, and this is an indication that the fantastika blizhnego pritsela was crumbling even as the article went to press. Thus the rich and varied works of Soviet science fiction that emerged in the 1960s and 1970s cannot necessarily be cited as answers to Siniavskii’s call. That Siniavskii’s article was, however, influential as a framework for examining science fiction critically can be seen in explicit references to the title in other articles. For example, when touting the literary merit of the best science fiction in their article “Chto takoe fantastika?” (discussed above), the Strugatskiis refer to nastoiashchaia literatura, bez vsiakikh skidok [real literature, with no allowances whatever]. Such a reference can be also found in the title of Lagin’s article “Bez skidok na zhanr!,” cited earlier as the first appearance of the term fantastika blizhnego pritsela.

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20 Siniavskii’s reference to Maiakovskii’s poem of this name will be discussed momentarily.
The impact of the *fantastika blizhnego pritsela* on Soviet science fiction is neatly summed up by Erik Simon in his 2004 article “The Strugatskiis in Political Context.” He states that this phenomenon “banished the future, banished utopia, and, strictly speaking, banished the imagination itself from Soviet sf” (Simon 380). But Maiakovskii and the Strugatskiis were writing, respectively, *before* and *after* this idea held sway. Why, then, include a discussion of a literary phenomenon that was not dominant during the creative life of either author under consideration? Essentially, at least a brief outline of the *fantastika blizhnego pritsela* is key to this study because this phenomenon forms both a chasm that separates the two writers and a bridge that connects them to one another. Geller’s Euclidean line joins Maiakovskii to the Strugatskiis. As will become clear, the *fantastika blizhnego pritsela* is present in embryonic form in Maiakovskii’s work just as it can be found as a degenerate organism in the Strugatskiis’ work.

Maiakovskii is by no means defined by those proto-elements of the *fantastika blizhnego pritsela* that can be identified in his work. In fact, it is his example that is held up as a way out of Stalinist Socialist Realism by “both” Siniavskii and Terts. Terts famously closes his *Chto takoe sotsialisticheskii realizm* [*On Socialist Realism*] [1956] with a call for a “phantasmagoric art” [*iskusstvo fantasmagoricheskoe*], citing Maiakovskii as an example and guiding light (Terts 63). In “Bez skidok,” Siniavskii does not frivolously use the title of Maiakovskii’s last *poema* (see the quotation above) in his call for artistic freedom in science fiction: here, too, Maiakovskii is an example to follow. Later, while rejecting the call of Vladimir Nemtsov (another practitioner of the *fantastika blizhnego pritsela*) to “soberly understand” [*zdravo ponimat’*] romanticism, he quotes one line from Maiakovskii’s 1926 lyric “Pis’mo pisatelia Vladimira Vladimirovicha
Maiakovskogo pisateliu Alekseiu Maksimovichu Gor’komu" [A Letter from the Writer Vladimir Vladimirovich Maiakovskii to the Writer Aleksei Maksimovich Gor’kii]: my realisty, no ne na podnozhnom kormu [we are realists, but haven’t been put out to pasture] (Siniavskii 49). 21 Considering the context in which this line appears in the original poem, Siniavskii’s inclusion of this particular poem in his discussion of the brave imagining of the future seems particularly apt:

Приспособленность/ и ласковость дворовой,
деятельность/ блюдо-рубле- и тому подобных «лиз»
называют многие/ — «здоровый
реализм». —
И мы реалисты,/ но не на подножном
корму,/ не с мордой, упершейся вниз, —
мы в новом,/ грядущем быту,/ помноженном
на электричество/ и коммунизм. (Maiakovskii 4: 116-17)

[The fitness/ and fawning of a servant-girl/ the activity/ of those who lick plates, rubles, and the like/ is called by many/ a “healthy/ realism.”/ We, too, are realists,/ but haven’t been put out to pasture,/ not with our muzzles stuck facing downward:/ we are in the new,/ coming life,/ multiplied by/ electricity/ and communism.]

Later, Maiakovskii’s poetic persona refers to building “tomorrow’s world” [zavtrashnii mir] “according to blueprints, businesslike, and dryly” [po chertezham,/ delovito/ i sukho] (Maiakovskii 4: 117). Thus Siniavskii has chosen to confront the fantastika blizhnego pritsela by using a poem in which Maiakovskii is in direct dialogue with an imagined future.

Within Siniavskii’s context, then, Maiakovskii connects to the Strugatskiis not only via Geller’s Euclidean line, but via a more circuitous route: Maiakovskii is an example of the unfettered imagination that was stifled in the Stalinist years, re-emerging in the Thaw. The Strugatskiis, in writing literature that responds to Siniavskii’s call for

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21 Just prior to citing Maiakovskii, Siniavskii quotes from Gor’kii’s famous 1895 “Pesnia o sokole” [The Song of the Falcon]: Bezumstvo khrabrykh — vot mudrost’ zhizni! [The mindlessness of the brave: that is the wisdom of life!] (Siniavskii 49). Maiakovskii references this poem repeatedly in his “letter.”
high standards of literary excellence in science fiction, are also answering Maiakovskii’s more distant call. The poetic persona of *Vo ves’ golos* predicts that his verses will be rediscovered by his *uvazhaemye tovarishchi potomki* [respected comrade descendants] to whom the poem is addressed:

В курганах книг,/ похоронивших стих,
железки строк случайно обнаруживая,
вы/ с уважением/ ощупывайте их,
как старое,/ но грозное оружие. (Maiakovskii 6: 177)

[In the burial-mounds of books/ that inter verses,/ finding, by accident, the iron pieces of lines of poetry,/ you,/ with respect,/ touch them,/ like an old,/ but formidable weapon.]

If we accept Siniavskii’s characterization of Maiakovskii as a primogenitor of new forms of literature, then the genetic link between the poet and the Strugatskiis—and all post-war innovators in Soviet literature—is stronger than it had initially seemed.

Maiakovskii, the Strugatskiis, and “Hard” Science

Both hard science fiction and *fantastika blizhnego pritsela* are characterized by a devotion to scientific rigor. Maiakovskii can surely not be accused of such devotion.

That his dialogue with science was initially hostile is starkly apparent in his poem 1915 lyric “Gimn uchenomu” [Hymn to a Scholar] in which the poetic persona denigrates every aspect of the scholar’s life and work, even his physical appearance: “Not a man, but a two-legged feebleness” [*Ne chelovek, a dvunogoe bessilie*] (Maiakovskii 1: 104).

Yet there are many instances over the course of the poet’s career in which he uses science to serve artistic ends. In so doing, Maiakovskii links himself to the Cubist movement in painting from which he emerged as an artist. Meyer Schapiro devotes a chapter of his 2000 study *The Unity of Picasso’s Art* to the history of mathematical and scientific concepts used by the Cubist in manifestos and the paintings themselves. One of the key
conclusions of this chapter—entitled “Einstein and Cubism: Science and Art”—is that both the artists and the critics associated with the movement misinterpreted the ideas of relativity and non-Euclidean geometry and their relevance to art. For instance, much was written at the time of the presence of the “fourth dimension” of time in Cubist paintings that present an object simultaneously from multiple viewpoints. Schapiro debunks this notion:

One cannot disengage from the fractioning, intersections, and overlaps of the planes in the reconstruction of the object-planes represented on the canvas an unequivocal successiveness of points in time, that is, a time dimension, nor an observer’s changing position. Perceived together as a simultaneously present whole, the parts of the painting awaken in viewers nothing of the quality of felt time—duration—as a continuous succession, nor do they permit us to infer an ordered sequence of discernible, discrete instants, before and after, in the brushstrokes. (Schapiro 54)

That the philosophy of Cubism was a key factor of Maiakovskii’s poetic practice is the central thesis of Juliette R. Stapanian’s 1986 *Mayakovsky’s Cubo-Futurist Vision*, in which she examines ten early poems as Cubist paintings in verse. The Cubist tendency to use scientific discoveries as grist for the artistic mill can be observed in every period of his poetic practice. Like his Cubist predecessors, Maiakovskii bends science to fit his artistic vision: that science might be used improperly or inaccurately is immaterial.

Related to Maiakovskii’s willful misuse of science is an aphorism of the late English science fiction writer Arthur C. Clarke, known as “Clarke’s Third Law,” that states: “any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic.” This statement, not surprisingly, is most easily understood in the context of science fiction, wherein some set of viewers, belonging either to the reading audience or the characters in the book, are confronted by some technology that cannot (yet) be explained by the empirical laws that their society has discovered. While Clarke’s law certainly has
applications for “first contact” scenarios both historical (Europeans encountering aboriginal communities) and hypothetical (human contact with alien civilizations), its main utility is artistic. It allows the science fiction writer to step out of the bounds of scientific rigor and describe technological achievements inconceivable by present standards. If a technology seems “magical,” it is only because the observer is ignorant of the science behind it. It is no accident that it is Clarke who formulated this law: many of his most successful works—such as *Childhood’s End* [1953] and *Rendezvous with Rama* [1973]—feature humans encountering aliens or works of alien “hands” that are beyond human understanding. Clarke, as a writer well versed in science, is ever aware of the boundary between science and fantasy, and his Third Law is a kind of apology for sometimes stepping out of science and into what many would regard as pseudo-science.

But not every writer who ventures into science fiction feels the need to make this kind of apology. In the present context, it can be observed that the Futurists, and the early twentieth-century avant-garde movements in general, regarded scientific facts and discoveries as means to an *artistic* end. For Maiakovskii, *all* technology is magic, and the scientific basis for flight, for instance, is merely another poetic permutation of flight that is powered by the will alone. As Renato Poggioli writes in his 1968 *The Theory of the Avant-garde*:

> Sometimes avant-garde scientificism is the naive and simple cult of the miracle, prodigy, and portent. Many moderns look at science almost with the eyes of savages or children, and reduce it to magic. (Poggioli 139)

This leads to a kind of avant-garde corollary to Clarke’s Third Law, whereby the blurring of the boundary between technology and magic is expected, even necessary. In other words, any sufficiently advanced technology *should* be indistinguishable from magic.
And, whether a work of science fiction embraces or rejects scientific laws, the basic fact of a dialogue with science is given.

It cannot be said that the Strugatskiis ever viewed science with the eyes of children. By the middle of the twentieth century, almost no one in the modern world regarded science and technology with the childlike wonder of the previous decades. When they began to write, the Strugatskiis attempted to engage science and technology rationally and rigorously, practicing a hard science fiction that, in the Soviet context, was a pushing of the borders of the fantastika blizhnego pritsela ever further into the future. Their first novel, Strana bagrovykh tuch [The Land of Crimson Clouds, 1957], to be discussed in the first chapter, is filled with scientific and technical details, and is characterized by an attempt to be as “real” as possible. But a devotion to scientific rigor is not characteristic of the Strugatskiis’ corpus as a whole. While it is not usually the case that they disregard scientific fact, it is only a central “character” in their earliest works. While the transition from hard science fiction to a literary practice in which science plays a diminished role is gradual, a key break occurred in 1962, when the Strugatskiis encountered the first significant writer’s block of their career, during their work on the novella Popytka k begstvu [Escape Attempt]. Efforts to logically account for all of the aspects of plot and character in the work had made the entire project complicated and potentially self-contradictory. Specifically, they could not rigorously explain the presence in the future of a man named Saul, a Soviet prisoner-of-war who has mysteriously appeared, transported from a German camp. The frustration they experienced trying to “explain” Saul was threatening to destroy the entire undertaking, when they hit upon a brilliant idea: that they would simply leave Saul’s “time travel”
unexplained, choosing not to resolve the mystery. In his commentary to *Popytka k begstvu*, Boris Strugatskii describes the principle that emerged from this crisis, which they labeled *otkaz ot ob’iasnenii* [a rejection of explanations]:

Можно нарушать любые законы — литературные и реальной жизни, — отказываться от всякой логики и разрушать достоверность, действовать наперекор всему и всем мыслимым-немыслимым предписаниям и правилам, если только в результате достигается главная цель: в читателе вспыхивает готовность к сопереживанию, – и чем сильнее эта готовность, тем большие нарушения и разрушения позволяет совершать автору. (Strugatskii 3: 682-83)

[You can break any rule, be it literary or from real life. You can renounce logic and destroy authenticity, you can work in defiance of everything, in defiance of all conceivable and inconceivable rules and regulations, just as long as in the end you reach the main goal: that in the reader flares up a readiness to empathize. The greater this readiness, the more violation and destruction is allowed the author.]

A similar device is instrumental in mystery literature, but there it is merely a *delay* of explanations, not an outright rejection. The application of this principle in science fiction, in a sense a rejection of scientific rationality, results in works that are defined by ideas that cannot be explained or clarified, and in concepts that thrive on contradiction.

Geller states that the only true science fiction is of this type: that built on paradox (Geller 136). While Geller’s opinion is shared by most modern critics of science fiction, paradox could not easily be integrated into a culture still struggling to separate itself from Socialist Realism and the *fantastika blizhnego pritsela*. The *otkaz* truly stood out in a genre that was expected to glorify science and to educate, one that was dominated by rational explanations and the scientific method. As this study will show, the principle of...

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22 The Strugatskiis use the conventions of the mystery and detective novels in their writing with some frequency. Both *Zhuk v muraveinike* [Beetle in an Anthill, 1979] and *Volny gasiat veter* [The Waves Still the Wind 1984] rely on the unraveling of mysteries that are never fully resolved. They have one novella—*Otel’ “U pogibshego alpinista* [The “Lost Mountaineer” Hotel, 1969]—that is explicitly constructed according to the rules of the hotel mystery novel. But even here, most of the fundamental questions that are raised by the narrative are only half-answered. Significantly, the novella bears the playful subtitle *esche odna otkhodnaia detektivnomu zhanru* [still another death knell for the detective genre].
the *otkaz* in the Strugatskiis’ writing led to a general doubt in the power of empirical facts, a doubt that is present in nearly all of their works. In fact, if there can be one unifying feature of all of the Strugatskiis’ works, it is a deep and abiding *skepticism*. So, while they do not reject science, they regard it only as one truth among many. And while the Strugatskiis do not disregard science to the same degree as Maiakovskii, there is a definite affinity between the respective approaches of the two writers to scientific fact. Both literature and science confront the limits of knowledge and reason, but there is a crucial distinction between their approaches to this question. A scientific exploration of the limits of knowledge assumes that such limits are a shortcoming, a blank space in the sum total of human knowledge that must be filled. Literature, particularly that composed according to some version of the *otkaz ot ob’iasnenii*, views these limits as an artistic opportunity.

**Maiakovskii’s Later Poetry**

Any study that chooses to concentrate on Maiakovskii’s middle and later work has to justify this choice in terms of artistic merit: many critics are of the opinion that the general quality of Maiakovskii’s verse declined in the decade leading up to his suicide in 1930. This is a valid argument, and it is no accident that Maiakovskii’s reputation as a great poet is due almost completely to the achievements of his four early *poems*: *Oblako v shtanakh* [A Cloud in Pants, 1915], *Fleita-pozvonochnik* [The Backbone Flute, 1916], *Voina i mir* [War and the World, 1917] and *Chelovek* [Man, 1918]. It is almost an axiom in the study of the poet that the verses he composed during the 1920s are vastly inferior to these early triumphs. Such an opinion is unambiguously expressed by Efim Etkind in
his study of early twentieth-century Russian poetry *Tam, vnutri* [There, On the Inside, 1995], where he refers to the “catastrophic decline of Maiakovskii’s talent and art” [*katastroficheskoe padenie talanta i iskusstva Maiakovskogo*] after 1917, but particularly after 1923 (Etkind 273). Such opinions are found in the writings of Pasternak and Jakobson, both of whom knew Maiakovskii and valued his poetry. It is true that the bulk of Maiakovskii’s poetry from the 1920s is inferior to his earlier efforts. At the same time, knowing that Maiakovskii spent some of this time writing propaganda poems and advertising jingles does not absolve the student of his poetry from writing off the last ten years of his life as a Soviet-corrupted afterthought, the province only of specialists and uncritical admirers. As will be shown in the chapters to follow, Maiakovskii did write poems in the 1920s, and even up to the very end of his life, that are worthy of being considered alongside those poems that are familiar to anyone who has studied Russian. Furthermore, the poems (and plays) from this period stand out from Maiakovskii’s body of work as the most relevant to the present inquiry: they represent Maiakovskii’s contribution to the ideas and anxieties that would come to characterize Soviet science fiction.

Furthermore, Maiakovskii’s later poetry, all of which was written in the context of the “poet of the Revolution,” contains an element that is absent from his early verse. The poetic personae of this period can be said to be involved in a struggle between the poet and his old and new selves, the new self being the “Soviet” poet Maiakovskii. Since the Maiakovskii of the 1920s cannot abandon the pre-Revolution Maiakovskii and cannot ignore the post-Revolution Maiakovskii, the resulting poetry represents a struggle for power between the two. That such a system would have more chaos in it could help
explain the general decrease in quality of Maiakovskii’s poetry, but does not exclude the possibility of his producing truly great works. The poetic persona that shouts from the lines of Oblako is still present even in the most propagandistic poem. For the most part, the poems in which the voices of the early poetic personae manage to make themselves heard are those that will be examined in this study.

The apparent affinities of Maiakovskii and the Strugatskiis do not immediately resolve one key difficulty in conducting this investigation: the problem of poetry versus prose. Any study that considers texts both in verse and prose must contend with the basic differences between these two forms of literature. While some prose works of Maiakovskii’s will be considered here (his plays and essays), the bulk of his works that are relevant to this discussion are in verse. That poetry and prose are fundamentally different forms of literature is an axiom in literary studies, and the combining of the two presents certain fundamental problems. For example, poetry and prose would seem to represent distinct literary categories, but the two cannot be said to have a null intersection: elements of each bleed into and influence the other. As Jakobson writes in “What is poetry?,” “[t]he borderline dividing what is a work of poetry from what is not is less stable than the frontiers of the Chinese empire’s territories” (Jakobson 1987, 369).

The present study aims to exploit the instability of this border, concentrating on those elements of poetry and prose that can be fruitfully examined in a common framework. Since it is difficult to analyze poetry and prose with the same set of formal tools, this study will focus on thematic analysis, as theme is one of the more noteworthy literary elements that can easily cross the porous barrier between poetry and prose. As will be
shown, there is a large thematic intersection between the science fiction poetry\textsuperscript{23} of Maiakovskii and science fiction prose of the Strugatskiis. This intersection has relevance for the connections between the early and postwar periods of Soviet literature.

A Time Machine to Fictional Futures

In the Strugatskiis’ beloved comic novel \textit{Ponedel’nik nachinaetsia v subbotu} [\textit{Monday Begins on Saturday}, 1965], there is a brief aside in which Sasha Privalov, the protagonist, takes a journey on a time machine that travels into fictional pasts and futures, i.e., those realities depicted in literature. This passage serves partially as a send-up of some of science fiction’s most common tropes and conventions. In the \textit{opisyvaemoe budushchee} [the described future] Privalov encounters boring utopias and horrific dystopias, separated from one another by a giant iron wall; these futures are inhabited by ghostly, half-real people, shining robots and rusted starships. The inventor of the machine is actually disappointed at Privalov’s desire to travel “into those various science-fiction novels and utopias” [\textit{vsiakie tam fantasticheskie romany i utopii}] of the future, rather than into the past, mostly due to the gaps that will no doubt appear in this “record.” He warns Privalov:

\begin{quote}
Только учитите, это будущее, наверное, дискретно, там должны быть огромные провалы времени, никакими авторами не заполненные.
\end{quote}

(Strugatskii 3: 575).

\textsuperscript{23} Maiakovskii is by no means the sole explorer of science fiction tropes in verse: science fiction poetry is actually a well-developed niche within the genre. Notable works include Frederick Turner’s \textit{Genesis} [1988], an epic poem about the terraforming of Mars, as well as the poetry of Ursula K. Le Guin and Joe Haldeman. The Rhysling Award, given each year since 1978 by the Science Fiction Poetry Association, recognizes the best long (fifty or more lines) and short (forty-nine or fewer lines) science fiction poems. The award is named for the radiation-blinded poet-protagonist of Robert Heinlein’s 1947 story “The Green Hills of Earth.”
While Privalov is actually traveling through the imagined future, these cavities for which no events have been imagined are filled with a “phosphorescing fog” [fosforetsiruiushchii tuman] (Strugatskii 3: 580). This study can be thought of as a more direct version of the Strugatskiis’ time machine, as it seeks to travel directly to the various futures mapped out by Maiakovskii and the Strugatskii brothers—bypassing the phosphorescing fog—to take a kind of census of the inhabitants of these futures. While many of these inhabitants will be strange and fantastic, they do not resemble the trivial fluff that Privalov encounters on his journey. They are, citing Gaiman’s bijection, maps to the then-present day. Thus, to reuse the metaphor of the “tentacle of the future” from Gadkie lebedi, it will become apparent that the futures that Maiakovskii and the Strugatskiis engage in dialogue do reach back into the present. This study aims to be a partial reconstruction of that dialogue.

An Explanation of the Title

The phrase “immortals are not men” is the contrapositive of “all men are mortal,” a statement often encountered in discussions of mathematical logic. Used as the title of this study, this phrase refers to the problem of the often immortal post-human—in this case the New Soviet Man—being perceived as non-human. Thus, while not all of the works that will be addressed in the coming pages are directly concerned with physical immortality, the argument could be made that all of the physical changes connected with

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[24] The fact that these two statements are logically equivalent is mentioned during a discussion of the Steiner-Lehmus Theorem in Geometry Revisited [1967], co-authored by the great geometer H. S. M. Coxeter and the Russian-American mathematician Samuel Greitzer (Coxeter 15).
the transformation from the Old Soviet Man into the New Soviet Man will lead eventually and inevitably to this state. Since, as will be shown, both Maiakovskii and the Strugatskiis ultimately see the evolutionary road to the New Soviet Man as one that leads away from humanity and humanness, this title seems apt.
Chapter 2
Machines Inhabiting Soviet Futures

Этою вот самою машиною динамою можно гору сдвинуть прочь горю нашему помочь.

With this very dynamo-machine a mountain can be moved out of the way our pain can be soothed.

“Dinamo” [The Dynamo, 1923], one of Maiakovskii’s poems written for the wrappers of “Nasha Industriia” caramels.

Maiakovskii and the Soviet “Fear of Not Flying”

Suvin, in “Estrangement and Cognition”—the article from which one of the definitions of science fiction used in the introduction was drawn—proposes the term novum to describe an element of science fiction that exists outside of “an exact recreation of the author’s empirical environment” (Suvin 1979, 4). In his 2006 The History of Science Fiction, Adam Roberts catalogs some of these nova, framing them as the four basic tropes to which science fiction returns repeatedly:

[T]aken conceptually, we find tools and machines at the core of most science fiction: such that spaceships, robots, time machines and virtual technology (computers and virtual realities) are the four most commonly occurring tropes of the field: which is to say, Suvin’s novum is almost always technological in form. (Roberts 9-10)

25 Photographs of these wrappers, designed by Aleksandr Rodchenko, can be seen in Dabrowski, et al (192).
Roberts’ observation about the technological nature of Suvin’s *novum* is particularly useful in understanding science fiction as it developed in the Soviet Union. Of countries whose cultures have made significant contributions to science fiction, Russia was arguably the most technologically undeveloped in the period—roughly the final decade of the nineteenth century—in which this new kind of literature was forming. This lack of technological sophistication led to a set of circumstances whereby machines were perceived in a disproportionately positive light. In his seminal 1989 study *Revolutionary Dreams*, Richard Stites provides some early examples of literature that sing the praises of technology:

In Russian, V. N. Chikolev’s *Electric Tale* (1895), A. Rodnykh’s *St. Petersburg-Moscow Self-Propelled Underground Railway* (1902) and V. Bakhmetov’s *Billionaire’s Legacy* (1904) all appeared in the decade of rapid industrial growth—the Witte period. Chikolev’s book was the most interesting. An engineer by training and a popularizer of science by avocation, he wrote of a future world transformed by electricity, which performed miracles of production and also graced everyday life with recorded concerts through hidden microphones and speakers. The main message was that technology abolishes war. Mars Field in St. Petersburg—the major parade ground of the Empire—was occupied in Chikolev’s fantasy by a gigantic Temple of Technology, a monument to peaceful economic growth. (Stites 30)

Thus pre-Soviet Russian science fiction, with technology as its narrative focus, fits easily into the framework Roberts establishes. Furthermore, the awe with which machines were perceived during this time had implications for the idea of the New Soviet Man, which was still being formed and shaped. The machines that are celebrated in early Soviet science fiction are, in fact, role models for this future human. The qualities and abilities of machines that will be discussed in this chapter will become the necessary and sufficient attributes of the ideal human: the New Soviet Man.
The tropes that Roberts lists do not appear in science fiction with equal frequency: spaceflight is far and away the dominant one, forming the basis of countless science fiction works written all over the world in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Occurrences of the remaining three appear almost always in the presence of the first. (For instance, five of the nine stories that make up Isaac Asimov’s *I, Robot* [1950] feature spaceflight as an essential plot element.\(^{26}\)) Spaceflight, and aviation in general, is a key touchstone in the cultural and technological history of the Soviet Union. One of the most influential theoreticians of human spaceflight and speculative rocketry, Konstantin Tsiolkovskii, was also one of the first “Bolshevik” scientists as well as one of the first modern Russian practitioners of science fiction. His importance in both these fields is demonstrated by the fact that neither histories of Soviet science fiction nor accounts of Soviet spaceflight can be written without considering his essential contributions. Asif A. Siddiqi begins the first volume of his history of the Soviet space program *Sputnik and the Soviet Space Challenge* [2003] with Tsiolkovskii, writing that “[t]he rocketry and space programs of the Soviet Union had their origins in the late 1800s with the farsighted and at times farfetched writings of a deaf, self-taught school teacher named Konstantin Eduardovich Tsiolkovskiy” (Siddiqi 1). Siddiqi’s opening sentence would need to be only slightly altered to describe Tsiolkovskii’s contribution as a founding father of Soviet science fiction. In fact, Suvin, in his *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction*, gives Tsiolokovskii equal credit in both his fields of inquiry, calling him a “great pioneer of both Russian astronautics and Soviet SF” (Suvin 259).

It is no accident that Tsiolkovskii is a contemporary of Jules Verne and H. G. Wells: his writings are a fine indication that the technologically-focused, engineered

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\(^{26}\) Namely, “Runaround,” “Reason,” “Catch that Rabbit,” “Little Lost Robot,” and “Escape!”
imaginings of Verne and the bold fantasies of Wells were emerging contemporaneously in Russia. And while there are Russian practitioners of what can now be called science fiction that predate Tsiolkovskii, this theorist and engineer should properly be understood as the first Russian writer to couch his fantasy in rigorous scientific reasoning. Strangely, though, this evaluation does not apply to the little fiction that Tsiolkovskii wrote (his Na Lune [On the Moon, 1893] is pure fantasy), but rather to his scientific articles. Siddiqi writes:

While some of his work was clearly in the realm of fantasy, the breadth of his contribution to astronautics is astounding. In his early work, he wrote eloquently on such topics as multistage rockets, high-energy liquid propellants such as liquid oxygen and liquid hydrogen, giant space stations in Earth’s orbit with food regeneration systems, and the dangers of high temperatures on an object returning to Earth. He even investigated the idea of a spacesuit for activity in open space. (Siddiqi 1)

Siddiqi crucially observes that Tsiolkovskii “apparently believed that few of his conceptions of the future would ever be brought to fruition” (Siddiqi 1). Thus the scientist himself regarded his work as belonging to the realm of “thought experiment,” close to the province of science fiction.

In light of the discussion above, it is no surprise that Tsiolkovskii’s ideas have been a key influence for writers and poets as well as scientists and engineers. To the latter group belongs Sergei Korolev—later the “Chief Designer” [Glavnyi konstruktor] of the Soviet space program—who was, in the late 1920s and early 1930s, involved in the founding of the first Soviet organization that explored rockets as a means towards human exploration of space, the amateur organization GIRD (Gruppa izuchenia reaktivnogo dvizheniia [Group for the Investigation of Reactive Engines and Reactive Flight27]). The visions that drove the group’s enthusiasm for spaceflight were largely due to

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27 Siddiqi’s translation of GIRD.
Tsiolkovskii, as well as to Robert Goddard, Hermann Oberth, and Iurii Kondratiuk, other visionaries profiled by Siddiqi. GIRD was founded by Fridrikh Tsander, who along with Kondratiuk, should be considered the successor of Tsiolkovskii as a rigorous dreamer, working to make space exploration a reality.

Evidence that Tsiolkovskii’s promotion of the idea of human habitation of space influenced Russian poets and writers can be found in numerous works from the early twentieth century. One of the first was Tsiolkovskii’s own Na Lune, mentioned above. Other prominent examples include Aleksandr Bogdanov’s novel Krasnaia zvezda [Red Star, 1908] and Aleksei Tolstoi’s Aelita [1923], both of which depict flights to Mars.

To catalog even a few of the portrayals of spaceflight in early Soviet fiction would be an overwhelming task, particularly when the boundary between flight and spaceflight—to use modern terminology, between aeronautics and astronautics—in this early period is somewhat blurred. In Maiakovskii’s work, for instance, there is often a lack of distinction between planes and spacecraft, as the poet was primarily interested in flight in and of itself. That he, like Tsiolkovskii, agitated for humanity to take to the skies is unambiguous. For instance, the following lines from the epilogue to Letaiushchii proletarii [The Flying Proletarian, 1925] demonstrate the poet’s enthusiasm and longing for what he called, as we will see, the letaiushchee budushchee:

Чтоб в будущем/ веке/ жизнь человечья
ракетой/ неслась в небеса —
и я,/ уставая/ из вечера в вечер,
вот эти/ строки/ писал. (Maiakovskii 3: 376-77)

[So that in the future/ century/ human life/ like a rocket/ will course through the heavens:/ so I,
 too,/ growing tired,/ from evening to evening,/ was writing/ these very lines.]

These examples support the claim that flight is the “parent” trope of early Soviet science fiction. In Revolutionary Dreams, Stites, during a discussion of futurology and science
fiction, draws particular attention to the importance of aviation in the Soviet science fiction of the 1920s: “Russian fascination with aeronautics has been immense in our time—a kind of fear of not flying, of remaining earthbound and thus immobile” (Stites 170). This witty reversal of the stock phrase—“fear of flying”—is an excellent characterization of Maiakovskii’s poetic practice. While Stites rightly places Maiakovskii in a list of figures who are “inconceivable without the airplane image” (Stites 170), flight in Maiakovskii’s poetry was not always inextricably linked with aeronautics. An early example comes from Fleita-pozvonochnik [The Backbone Flute, 1915], in which the poetic persona is dragged by God through the stars in a kind of cosmic torture:

Рот зажму./ Крик ни один им
не выпущу из искусанных губ я.
Привяжи меня к кометам, как к хвостам лошадиным,
и вымчи, рвя о звездные зубья. (Maiakovskii 1: 252)

[I will shut my mouth./ Not one shout to them/ will I let pass from my bitten-through lips./ You can tie me to comets, as to horses’ tails/ and take off, ripping me on the stars’ teeth.]

Flight—whether willed or forced—in Maiakovskii’s earlier poetry is somehow dependent on a higher power. This element is still present in the early revolutionary poem “Nash marsh” [Our March, 1917], in which the poetic persona demands that the revolutionary elect be taken into heaven alive:

Видите, скучно звезд небу!
Без него наши песни вьем.
Эй, Большая Медведица! требуй,
чтоб на небо нас взяли живьем. (Maiakovskii 1: 170)

[You see, the sky of stars is bored!/ We wind our song without it./ Hey, Big Dipper! Demand/ that they take us into the sky alive.]
In *Chelovek* [*Man*, 1917], a work written during the same period as “Nash Marsh,” Maiakovskii disconnects the human in flight from any cumbersome outside agency, heavenly or otherwise. This moment, in which the poetic persona begins his journey to visit heaven, provides a fine example of Maiakovskii’s regard for the limitations on human flight imposed by physical and technological realities:

> Студенты!/ Вздор/ все, что знаем и учим!  
> Физика, химия и астрономия — чушь.  
> Вот захотел/ и по тучам  
> лечу ж. (Maiakovskii 1: 302)

[Students!/ It’s rubbish,/ everything we know and learn!/ Physics, chemistry, and astronomy are nonsense./ I simply desired it/ and along the storm clouds/ I fly.]

*Chelovek* can be said to mark a midpoint in Maiakovskii’s portrayal of human flight: his Man flies without the aid of God, but also is propelled by no human technology. Flight is the Man’s *choice*. Flight by choice connects these lines unambiguously to the Faust legend. In Goethe’s version of this tale, the titular scholar begins the play by denigrating the knowledge that he has acquired by diligent study: he longs to “quit the wordy trade” (Goethe 17). Nonetheless, Faust’s desire for flight is a manifestation of his desire for knowledge. For Maiakovskii’s Man, flight is an end unto itself, an end achieved, significantly, with no immediate equivalent of the Faustian Bargain. The only power that enables the Man to fly is the Man himself: he does not need God or the Devil to suspend him in the air.

As Maiakovskii’s career progressed into the twenties and Soviet aviation became a reality, his portrayals of human flight began to reflect more closely the physics and

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28 Maiakovskii began to work on *Chelovek* in 1916. It was completed in late 1917 or early 1918, and was published in 1918 by Asis (Maiakovskii 1: 248). “Nash marsh” is allegedly the first poem Maiakovskii wrote after the October Revolution. He submitted it to O. V. Gzovskaia at the *Gazeta futuristov* in early 1918, apparently reciting the poem from memory, having never written it down. The poem was published in the 15 March 1918 edition. Thus the two works were being composed in the same period, and appeared in print relatively close together.
mechanics of flight, albeit always with the “phantasmagoric” overlay so aptly identified by Terts in *Chto takoe sotsialisticheskii realizm*. Over the course of the decade, the poet devotes numerous lyrics and longer poems to the glorification of human flight in general and to Soviet aviation in particular. Many of these poems are primarily propagandistic and panegyric, existing at the qualitative bottom of Maiakovskii’s total corpus. But a few are profoundly interesting and moving in the ways in which they combine the poet’s own “fear of not flying” with the proto-mechanization of the human form.

One poem—entitled “Razve u vas ne cheshutsia obe lopatki?” [Do Both of Your Shoulder-blades Not Itch?, 1923]—is of particular interest as a bridge between Maiakovskii’s transition from the magic of self-willed flight to the “magic” of aeronautics. Significantly, this lyric first appeared in a publication that combined literature and (popular) science: a special June 3rd “literary-scientific” supplement to the newspaper *Isvestviia Odesskogo gubispolkoma, gubkoma KPBU i gubprofsoveta.*29 The supplement was entitled “Letim” [We Fly]. The title of “Razve u vas …” refers to the poetic persona’s *physical yearning* to grow wings, the lack of which is presented almost as a physical defect:

Если/ с неба/ радуга/ свешивается
или/ синее/ без единой заплатки —
неужели/ у вас/ не чешутся
обе/ лопатки?! 
Неужели не хочется,/ чтоб из-под блуз,
где прежде/ горб был,
сбросив/ груз/ рубашек-обуз,
раскрылась/ пара крыл?! (Maiakovskii 2: 124)

[If/ from the sky/ a rainbow/ hangs down/ or/ it’s deep blue/ without a single patch of cloud:/ can it be/ that both of your/ shoulder blades/ do not itch?!/ Can it be that you do not want/ for, from

29 The title of this newspaper can be rendered in English as *The News of the Odessa Regional Executive Committee, the Regional Committee of the Ukraine Communist Party, and the Regional Council of Professional Unions.*
underneath your shirts,/ where before/ you were hump-backed,/ throwing off/ the weight/ of your shirt-burden/ a pair of wings/ to spread?]

Given the mention of the peasant blouse [bluza] and the images of burdens and backs bent in labor, this poem should be considered within the specific social context of Maiakovskii’s efforts as a propagandist to bring the Russian people into the mechanized modernity of the Soviet Union. That many of the poet’s poems about aviation contain this propagandistic element will be made apparent in subsequent paragraphs. For Maiakovskii, machines are frequently portrayed as a means of gaining freedom, and there is little evidence here of the typical dread that machines would become the new masters of humanity. Instead, they are partners with humanity in taking to the heavens without God’s help. Thus it is no surprise that Maiakovskii—while clearly admiring them—never presents machines as objects of reverence or worship. Unlike Platonov, who consistently shows the idolizing of machines to be a replacement for the fear of God, Maiakovskii sees these mechanical “beings” as partners for mankind.

God is certainly present in Maiakovskii’s poetry, but usually only as a straw man, a target for hurled abuses. That the poet is so concerned with beating a man-made path to the heavens is consistent with the observation that he consistently avoids making requests of God,30 or even attempting civil discourse. “Razve u vas …” can be seen as an avenue to a different heaven, an avenue made by human hands. As in Chelovek, the present poem shows humans attaining flight without any heavenly assistance, but, unlike in Chelovek, humans in this poem achieve flight that is subject—at least nominally—to the laws of physics. In “Razve u vas …,” the poetic persona’s wish for actual wings and the

30 One notable exception to this rule is the man in “Poslushiate!” [Listen!, 1914] who cannot bear the “starless torture” [bezzvezdnaia muka] and begs God for the stars to be lit. Significantly, Maiakovskii’s typical first-person poetic persona is absent from this lyric.
abilities that such wings would grant is a glance cast back to this earlier poem, among others. It is interesting to note that the poetic persona gazes at the same spaces through which Maiakovskii’s previous poetic personae flew freely, but finds himself bound to earth:

Или/ ночь когда/ в звездцах разночится
и Медведцы/ всякие/ лезут —
неужели не завидно?!/ Неужели не хочется?!
Хочется!/ до зарезу!
Тесно,/ а в небе/ простор —/ дыра!
Взлететь бы/ к богам в селения!
Предъявить бы/ Саваофу/ от ЦЖО/ ордера
на выселение! (Maiakovskii 2: 124-25)

[Or/ night, when/ darkness spreads in the huge stars/ and all kinds/ of Dippers/ crawl about:/ are you really not jealous?!/ Do you really not want?!/ You do want!/ urgently!/ It’s crowded here,/ but in the sky/ there is space:/ a hole!/ To fly/ to make settlements among the gods!/ To present/ to Sabaoth/ from the Moscow Housing Authority/ a notice/ of eviction!]

These lines are strongly reminiscent of the stanza from “Nash marsh” cited above, particularly in terms of humans making demands of the heavens. The notion that Sabaoth, the Lord of Hosts, would be subject to the decisions of the Tsentral’nyi zhilishchnyi otdel Mossoveta is very typical of Maiakovskii’s ability to undermine God’s authority through an almost joyful blasphemy.

After many lines describing the possibilities that the ability to fly would afford (flying over two hundred provinces, or to Rome to beat up a fascist), the poetic persona admits that humans are a “wingless people” [beskrylaia natsiia], and concludes that the invention of airplanes gives humans this missing ability. Moreover, the addition of a plane to a human results in the very transformation (growth of wings) that the poetic persona had desired in the first place:

Людей/ создали/ по дрянному плану:
спина — и никакого толка.
Купить/ по аэросплану —
одно остается/ только.
И вырастут/ хвост./ перья./ крылья.
Грудь/ заостри/ для любого лёта.
Срывайся с земли!/ Лети, эскадрилья!
Россия,/ взлетай развоздушенным флотом. (Maiakovskii 2: 126)

[Humans/ were created/ according to a rotten plan:/ the back, it has no use./ For each to buy/ an airplane:/ this is all/ that remains to be done./ And a tail,/ feathers,/ wings/ will sprout./ Sharpen/ the breast/ for any kind of flight./ Break away from the Earth!/ Fly, you squadron!/ Russia, fly up as a fleet of the air.]

Since the realized metaphor is so crucial in Maiakovskii’s poetry, it is key to point out that the metaphor of wings in this poem is emphatically not realized. Rather, the sprouting of wings from human shoulders is replaced by the metal wings of aircraft, effectively altering the metaphor from one of transformation to one of substitution. This transference underscores the fact that the growing of wings is just a poetic metaphor—however the poetic persona fleshes out its real-world consequences—while the flying machines that the poem celebrates in the end do truly exist.

Several of Maiakovskii’s other aviation poems from the summer of 1923 deserve at least brief mention. The poet’s contention that the building of planes and the expansion of Soviet aviation gives real wings to wingless humans is repeated in a variety of permutations, some of which carry over from poem to poem. All of these can be grouped under the heading of Maiakovskii’s agitation for moving into the technological future, a future impossible to imagine without machines. For instance, the final line of “Itog” [The Result]—“the proletariat/ has become winged” [proletarii/ stal krylat]—is repeated verbatim in “Aviadni” [Aviation Days]. Both poems can be described as part of an aviation call to arms. The poetic persona of “Itog” shouts: “Proletariat,/ get on the airplane!” [Proletarii,/ na aeroplan!] (Maiakovskii 2: 138). The poetic persona of “Aviadni” echoes:
Только что/ прогудело приказом
по рядам рабочих рот:
— Пролетарий,/ довольно/ пялиться наземь!
Пролетарий — на самолет! — (Maiakovskii 2: 145).

[Just now/ has boomed out the order/ through the ranks of the companies of workers:/ “Proletariat,/ enough/ staring bug-eyed at the ground!/ Proletariat: get on the plane!”]

These calls for the proletariat to climb aboard planes could be collectively considered an explicit version of the implicit exhortation in “Razve u vas…”: all are characterized by an aviation version of the early Soviet phrase iz griazi v kniazi [from filth to princehood, from rags to riches], whereby those who had been oppressed become rulers. That phrase is usually understood in terms of human, or class, relations. In these poems, Maiakovskii extends Soviet Power past the borders of human existence to conquer the natural world.

The poem “Aviachastushki” [Aviation Ditties] places a strong emphasis on the change in human existence that is brought by planes and the ability to fly, with only nominal attention paid to politics. The emphasis is on images of humans as joyful interlopers in the sky. Towards the end of the poem, a passenger on a plane refers to “wiping birds’ noses” [utiraet ptitsam nos] (Maiakovskii 144), an image that shows human superiority even in the birds’ natural element. The poem, in fact, begins with disdain for birds:

И ласточка и курица
на полеты хмурятся.
Как людьё поразлетится,
не догнать его и птице.
Был/ летун/ один Илья —
da и то/ в ненастье ж.
Всякий день летаю я.
Небо — двери настежь! (Maiakovskii 2: 143)

[Both the swallow and the chicken/ screw up their eyes at flying./ The way people take to wing,/ even a bird could not catch them./ There was/ a flier/ one Il'ia:/ he only flew/ in bad weather./ “I fly every day./ Sky—open your doors wide!”]
This Il’ia is a Soviet Everyman, one of the conventional characters of the chastushka genre from which the poem takes its name. He represents, in a single individual, the proletariat that Maiakovskii’s other poetic personae call to climb aboard planes, and his statements can be said to represent this entire group. Several of the subsequent lines of the poem are spoken by Il’ia, in which he claims to fly higher than a goose, and disdains the slowness of steam engines as compared to planes:

Паровоз,/ что тащца:
еле/ в рельсах/ тащится.
Мне ж/ любые дали — чушь:
в две минуты долечу ж! (Maiakovskii 2: 143)³¹

[The steam engine,/ it's a wheelbarrow:/ it barely/ drags itself/ along the rails./ As for me/ all distances—they are nothing:/ I'll fly there in two minutes!]

This moment is interesting in terms of the hierarchy of technology in Maiakovskii’s worldview. By comparing a steam engine unfavorably with a plane, the poet can be said to be breaking with the most recent past, since the steam engine is arguably the first machine of the modern age. For Maiakovskii, the plane is certainly the most thematically important machine in his works and worldview, as it is the only mechanism that makes human flight possible.

“Aviachastushki” also represents a key moment in Maiakovskii’s development of flying machines as more than airborne vehicles. Thus far Maiakovskii’s lines have emphasized human flight as freedom of: freedom of flight, freedom of unrestricted movement. Here is the idea that flight will also give humans freedom from: freedom from pests, parasites, filth, and byt. For the fastidious Maiakovskii, air is appealing as a sterile environment, and this fastidiousness carries over to his poetic persona:

Плачут горько клоп да вошь,—

³¹ Note the explicit connection of this poem to Chelovek via the rhyme of chush’ with (do)lechu zh.
человека не найдешь.
На воздушном на пути
их/ и тифу не найти. (Maiakovskii 2: 144)

[The bedbug and the tick cry bitterly:/ a human cannot be found./ On the aerial road/ even typhus cannot find them.]

Here the bedbug, the tick, and typhus represent the filthy present from which the poetic persona wishes to escape—into the future represented by flight. In this context, flight is not an end in itself, but a necessary first step towards building a boundary between the present and the future.

The poems examined thus far can be called early examples of the fantastika blizhnego pritsela, that science fiction subset of Socialist Realism that was discussed in the introduction. The planes and the nature of flight described in these lyrics can be imagined within the confines of the state of Soviet aeronautics of the time. But given his constant interest in the future, it is inevitable that Maiakovskii would extrapolate human existence beyond his own time. In fact, the freedom of movement (the growing of metaphorical wings) imparted by flying machines is a constant feature of Maiakovskii’s numerous “mini-utopias,” his poems that portray and celebrate various futures. One such lyric is “Dva maia” [Two Mays, 1925]—a description of a contemporary May Day celebration followed by one in the far future. The second section is introduced by the lines “[a]nd now/ a picture/ of the coming/ or, better yet/ flying/ future” [A teper’/ kartina/ idushchego,/ vernee,/ letiashchego/ griadushchego] (Maiakovskii 3: 107). This portion of the poem shows humanity having settled the planets of the Solar System, traveling faster than light, moving freely through time and space:

Давно/ пространств/ меж мирами Советы
слетаются/ со скоростью света.
Миллионами/ становятся в ряд
самолеты/ на первомайский парад. (Maiakovskii 3: 107-08)
This fixation on total freedom of movement—Stites’s “fear of not flying”—defines the mood of this poem, and many others in which flying and aviation is a central focus. Such an obsession is certainly present in what is probably Maiakovskii’s most complete picture of the letaiushchee griadushchee: the long poem Letaiushchii proletarii, mentioned briefly at the beginning of this chapter. The poem is divided into three parts, each part subdivided into numerous chapters. The first part describes an aerial battle between America and the Soviet Union, in which the former employs pilotless planes and death rays. The defeat of the Soviet Union is averted by a revolution in New York, which puts a stop to the invasion on Moscow’s door. The second part describes the byt of the year 2125 via a day in the life of an average Soviet citizen. The third part is a call [prizyv] to immediately take the necessary steps towards the realization of this particular future.

While the “battle of the air” described in the first section of the poem is entertaining, it is the second section that is of the greatest interest in terms of the present discussion. The aerial battles between the Soviet Union and America (reminiscent of Wells’s 1907 novel The War in the Air) are a mere projection of then-contemporary geopolitical realities into the future, where advanced technology makes possible new kinds of warfare. We are interested in the humans of the future who inhabit the second section of the poem.

Of all of Maiakovskii’s long poems, Letaiushchii proletarii is probably the most descriptively focused on the future in the sense that it tries to depict a kind of post-byt byt, describing a day in the life of a future Moscow. This focus on the future is apparent from the very first lines of the poem, which take the form of an italicized predislovie:

В «Правде» пишется правда./ В «Известиях» — известия.
Факты./ Хоть возьми да положи на стол.
Here the poet seems to be uninterested in the future version of himself, or at least in his
direct descendants, and, in this sense, _Letaiushchii proletarii_ is, of Maiakovskii’s long
poems, the one least dominated by the presence of “Vladimir Maiakovskii.” Rather, the
primary focus of the poem is on the relationship between humans and machines, and their
co-creation of the future. The machines that humans create—mostly those that allow
them to fly—mark the key division between the Soviet present and the future.32 In
“Segodnia” [Today] (ii.1), the poetic persona declares that planes will liberate human
existence from its cramped _byt_:

> Вижу,/ в небесах —/ возня аэропланова.
> Приникаю/ к стеклам,/ в раму вбит.
> Вот ктo/ должен/ переделать наново
> Наш сардиночный/ унылый быт! (Maiakovskii 3: 357)

[I see,/ in the heavens:/ the bustle of airplanes./ I press myself/ to the window,/ I am fitted into a
frame./ There is the one who/ should/ remake anew/ our sardine-like/ despondent _byt_!]

The use of the pronoun _kto_ in this excerpt has at least two possible explanations. If it
refers to the airplanes that the poetic persona observes in the sky of the future, then _kto_
grants these planes a conditional animacy. This is fitting given the constant reminders
that machines are almost equal partners of humans in building the future. Another
possible explanation is a reference to the poetic persona as the one who would remake the

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32 Elsewhere, Maiakovskii draws a demarcation between the poetry of the present and the poetry of the
future. In his 1926 essay “Kak delat’ stikhi?” [How Are Verses Made?], he states that the best possible
work of poetry is one written not only according to social demand, but also delivered to the editor on an
airplane: “I insist that it be on an airplane, since poetic _byt_ is also one of the most important factors of our
production” [Ia nastaivaiu — na aeroplane, tak kak poeticheskii _byt_ eto tozhe Odin iz vazhneishikh faktorov
nashego proizvodstva] (Maiakovskii 11: 243).
future. In the context of the poem, the former explanation seems more plausible, particularly since it is emphasized that the poetic persona views the future with the eyes of one trapped in the present. As always, the negative aspects of the present that the poetic persona inhabits form an essential backdrop for the achievements of the future, as in the following implicit comparison from “Budet” [Will Be] (ii.2):

Год какой-то/ нолями разнулится.
Отремят последнее/ битвы-грома.
В Москве не будет/ ни переулка,/ ни улиц —
одни аэродормы/ да дома. (Майковский 3: 358)

[Some year/ with more zeros than you can count./ The final/ battle-thunders/ will roar out./ In Moscow/ there will be no/ alleys/ or streets:/ only aerodromes/ and houses.]

In the future described in this poem, every significant achievement of humanity is inseparable from the machines that make it possible, and there is almost no mention of those human creations—such as poetry—that can be brought into the world without mechanical assistance. Machines, in fact, seem to do everything for the people of the future, and the only role left to humans is that of titular overseer:

Фабрика./ Корпусом сорокарусным.
Слезли./ Сорок —— в рвении яростном.
Чисто-чисто./ Ни копотей,/ ни сажи.
Лифт/ развез по одному на этаж.
Ни гуда,/ ни люда!
Одна клавиатура —— вроде «Ундеруда».
Хорошо работать!/ Легко — и так,
а тут ещё/ по радио —/ музыка в такт.
Бей буквами,/ надо которыми,
а все/ остальное/ доделается моторами. (Майковский 3: 362-63)

[A factory./ Made up of a forty-tiered building./ They climbed down./ Forty of them,/ in fierce zeal./ Completely clean./ Neither lampblack/ nor soot./ An elevator/ has carried/ them each to a floor./ Neither buzzing,/ nor people!/ Just a keyboard:/ like that of an “Underwood.”/ It is good to work!/ That way it is easy,/ but this way is even easier:/ along to the radio,/ in time with the music,/ Beat the keys/ that you have to beat,/ and everything/ else/ is finished by the motors.]
Despite his admiration for machines, the fastidious Maiakovskii seems disinclined to acknowledge their dirtier aspects, always showing the machines of the future to be clean [ni kopotei, ni sazhi] and bright. Even in his earliest propagandistic poetry, the dirtiness of the worker—the human who actually works with machines—is presented negatively, as in the 1918 lyric “Prikaz po armii iskusstva” [An Order to the Army of Art]:

Это что — корпеть на заводах,
перемазать рожу в копоть
и на роскошь чужую/ в отдых
осовелыми глазками хлопать. (Maiakovskii 1: 177)

[What is this: sweating in factories/ smearing your mug with soot/ and on someone else’s luxury/ in your free time/ batting your dreamy eyes?]

These lines evoke a typically Dickensian world in which the soot-smeared poor envy the clean, beautiful life of the rich. Thus the passage from Letaiushchii proletarii suggests a post-Dickensian future in which no one is besmeared by labor.

While the quotation from “Prikaz …” can at least partially explain the poetic persona’s insistence on the cleanliness of machines in the future of Letaiushchii proletarii, the ability to fly, as is shown, for instance, in “Aviachastushki,” is the “cleanest” achievement of the future. In that poem, mechanized flight is a means of escape from filth and disease. It seems only fitting that this sterility be extended to all machines in a future defined by mechanized flight. The cleanliness and shininess that is characteristic of these various futures is all the more interesting when considered in the light of the Man’s negative reaction to the gleaming, “licked-clean expanse” [zalizannaia glad’) of heaven in Chelovek. However, the perfection of heaven in that case is not the work of human hands, and this fact could be the cause of the Man’s alienation.

The machines that allow humans to fly (every person has their own private airplane) are the central feature of the future of Letaiushchii proletarii. As in
“Aviachastushki,” there are lines denigrating ground-based transportation: “Well, tell me,/ are these really machines? [Nu, skazhite,/ eto mashiny razve?] (Maiakovskii 3: 371). Flying machines in Maiakovskii’s depictions of the future are so ubiquitous that they are almost never mentioned, the ability of every person to fly being taken for granted. It is this power of flight that motivates most of the memorable vignettes in the second section of the poem. Such moments are of particular interest because they show how flight will alter and improve human life in the future just as fundamentally as it has the life of Ivan in “Aviachastushki,” who is nonetheless an inhabitant of Maiakovskii’s putative present. It can be argued that the dreams of the poetic persona of “Razve u vas …” are realized in Letaiushchii proletarii: though humans have not grown wings, they possess them just the same. Two of the most interesting examples of the abilities that flight entails come from a pair of children—a brother and a sister—describing their respective days to their parents over dinner. The boy begins:

Кнопка. / Нажимает. / Стол чайный.
Сын рассказывает:/ — Сегодня/ случайно
крыло поломал. / Пересел к Петьке,
а то б/ опоздал/ на урок арифметики.
Освободились на час/ (урока нету),
полетели/ с Петькой/ ловить комету.
Б-о-о-ольшущая!/ С версту — рост.
Еле/ вдвоем/ удержали за хвост.
А потом/ выбросили —/ большая больно.
В школу/ кометы таскать/ не позволено. — (Maiakovskii 3: 368)

[A button./ It is pressed./ A table for tea./ The son tells his story:/ “Today, by chance/ I broke my wing./ I got a ride with Pet’ka,/ otherwise I would have/ been late/ to math class./ We had a free hour/ (there was no class)/ we flew/ Pet’ka and I/ to catch a comet./ Boy, was it big!/ A verst long./ The two of us/ could barely/ hold it by the tail./ But then/ we threw it away/ it was way too big./ Bringing comets/ to school/ is not allowed.]

Leaving aside the silly fantasy these lines convey, it is clear that the power that technology lends Maiakovskii’s humans of the future is tremendous. That even children
in the world of *Letaiushchii proletarii* can, in the space of an hour, travel to
interplanetary space and bring a comet under their control succinctly portrays the
technological prowess of the version of the future depicted in this poem. On the other
hand, given that the narrator of this mini-adventure is a young boy, we must allow for the
possibility that it is simply the child’s invention. In a non-science fiction work, this
would be the only reasonable explanation, but, in the context of the poem, both
explanations are equally plausible.

The boy’s sister follows with a story of “field trip” that her class took into space
to test empirically the existence of God:

«Сегодня/ в школе —/ практический урок.
Решали —/ нет/ или есть бог.
По-нашему —/ религия опиум.
Осматривали образ —/ богову копию.
А потом/ с учителем/ полетели по небесам.
Убеждайся — сам!
Небо осмотрели/ и внутри/ и наружно.
Никаких богов/ ни ангелов/ не обнаружено».33 (Maiakovskii 3: 369)

[“Today/ in school/ we had a practical lesson./ We were deciding/ does God exist/ or not./ Our
opinion was/ that religion is an opiate./ We had a look at an icon,/ a copy of God./ And then,/ with the
teacher/ we flew through the heavens./ See for yourself!/ We examined the sky/ inside/
and out./ No gods,/ no angels/ were to be found.”]

In both accounts, the child’s perspective is an effective means of presenting human
control of the natural world via technology, as well as the extent to which this technology
has penetrated civilization. Particularly in the case of the girl, one can see the
requirement that, in order to be regarded as existing, God must inhabit *this world*, the
human physical realm. The grouping of these two stories implicitly connects the
dethroning of God with the control of the heavenly bodies. As both of the children’s

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33 The girl’s field trip into the sky has a basis in fact. In *Revolutionary Dreams*, Stites mentions actual
aerial tours given to Siberian peasants in the 1920s to disprove the existence of God and angels (Stites 109).
journeys have taken them not only into the sky, but beyond the confines of Earth’s atmosphere, their actions take place in the same “space.” The fact that mechanized flight gets the children to this space makes it clear that flying machines are enlisted in Maiakovskii’s battle with God and the other inhabitants of the heavens. On the other hand, there is an ironic playfulness in these passages in which children conquer the sky, a playfulness that serves to undermine God more effectively than any concrete action: if children can dethrone God as part of a game, then He is not a particularly formidable opponent.

Whether in the hands of children or adults, these flying machines will not only enable humans to conquer the heavens, but will affect the way in which this conquering is carried out. Consider the final lines of “Razve u vas …,” which show Soviet aviation violently drilling into the sky:

Скорей! /
Чего, /
натянувшись жердью,
с земли/ любоваться/ небесною твердью?
Буравь ее,
авио. (Maiakovskii 2: 126)

[Quickly!/ For what/ are you bending like a pole/ from the Earth/ to admire/ the heavenly firmament?/ Drill it./ aviation.]

This image is relevant not only in terms of its destructive force, but also in the fact that the act of drilling evokes mining in particular and exploitation of natural resources in general. The implication here is that the heavens are in no way special, ethereal, or holy: they are merely another physical environment that humanity will eventually control and exploit. The subjugation of the natural world and the free use of its resources is a common feature of Maiakovskii’s utopian visions, which are most often found in the very same poems that celebrate Soviet aviation.

50
For instance, the poem “Nashe voskresenie” [Our Resurrection, 1923] is a futuristic portrayal of humanity changed by technological prowess. As the title suggests, the poetic persona puts forward this technologically empowered humanity as a replacement for God, whose position they will take by force: at one point in the poem, the poetic persona exclaims “Tear the reins from God’s hands!” [Vyryvai u boga vozhzhi!] (Maiakovskii 2: 92). And, like many of Platonov’s heroes, Maiakovskii’s poetic persona does not see machines as destroyers of religion, but as co-creators of a new religion, one centered around mankind. The poem begins:

Еще старухи молятся,
в богомольном изгорбясь иге,
но уже/ шаги комсомольцев
гренят о новой религии.
О религии,/ в которой
нам/ не бог начертал бег,
а, взгудев электромоторы,
миром правит сам/ человек. (Maiakovskii 2: 91)

[Old women still pray,/ bent over in a prayerful yoke,/ but already/ the steps of the Komsomols/thunder of a new religion./ Of a religion/ in which/ it is not God who planned our race,/ but, with a great buzzing of electric motors,/ man himself controls the world.]

The portrayal of technology as a new faith is at the core of the culture of electrification in the early years of the Soviet Union, and is present in numerous works of literature. For instance, while there are far too many examples in Platonov’s works of peasants trading their faith in God for faith in machines and electric power to name, there is a particularly good example in the novella Vprok [For Future Use, 1931], in which an old man promises to “liquidate God as his faith” [likvidirovat’ boga kak veru] once he sees an artificial sun illuminated: “He had promised to believe in electricity as in God” [On togda v elektrichestvo kak v boga obeshchal poverit’] (Platonov 2: 405).
Concerning the subjugation and replacement of the heavenly bodies, the poetic persona of “Nashe voskresenie” relegates the Moon and the stars to the jurisdiction of the Soviet utilities concern:

Не господу-богу/ сквозь воздух
разгонять/ солнечный скат.
Мы сдадим/ и луны,/ и звезды
в Главсиликат.
И не будут, уму в срам,
люди/ от неба зависеть —
мы ввинтим/ лампы «Осрам»
небу/ в звездные выси. (Maiakovskii 2: 91-2)

[It won’t be the job of the Lord God/ through the air/ to drive/ the wheel of the sun./ We will turn in the Moon/ and the Stars/ to the Glavsilikat./ And it will not happen/ as a shame to the mind/ that humans/ will depend on the sky:/ we will screw/ “Osram” lamps/ to the sky’s/ starry heights.]

The abbreviation Glavsilikat stands for Glavnoe upravlenie silikatnoi promyshlennosti
[Chief Administration of the Silicate Industry], an early Soviet administrative office overseeing building materials. The term silikatnaia promyshlennost’ encompasses the manufacture and processing of cement, glass and precious stones, as well as ceramics and silicon. This linking of the Sun, the Moon and the stars with the manufacture of glass, among other things, prefigures the subsequent lines in the above quotation, in which these heavenly bodies are completely replaced by light bulbs, as well as other poems.

For instance, a similar portrayal of the Sun can be found in “Dva Maia,” where the Sun and the Moon are likened to light bulbs that can be turned on and off at will:

Нет/ ни зим,/ ни осеней,/ ни шуб…
Май —/ сплюнь./ Ношу
к луне/ и к солнцу/ два ключа.
Хочешь —/ выключь./ Хочешь —/ включай.34 (Maiakovskii 3: 107)

34 There is an interesting permutation of the controlled Sun in the Strugatskiis’ 1974 novel Gradobrechennyi [The Doomed City]. In the universe in which the work takes place, the sun switches on and off at designated times, like a light bulb. But this world is not controlled by its inhabitants as are Maiakovskii’s utopias: the nature of that sun is a mystery to the protagonists of the novel.
[There are neither winters, nor autumns, nor fur coats... It’s May all around. I carry to the Moon and to the Sun two keys. If you want turn them on. If you want turn them off.]

Clearly, the idea that the Sun could, and should, be replaced was often present in Maiakovskii’s mind in the mid 1920s, as it appears again in Letaishchii proletarii:

Сегодня забыли сон и дрёму.
Солнце искусственное в миллиард свечей
включили и от аэродрома к аэродрому
сновали машины бессонных москвичей. (Maiakovskii 3: 335)

[Today sleep and drowsiness have been forgotten. A Sun artificial with the power of a billion candlewatts has been switched on and from aerodrome to aerodrome dashed about the machines of sleepless Muscovites.]

Both “Nashe voskresenie” and “Dva Maia” display an implied contempt for the Sun as something belonging to the realm of heaven. As is the case in many of the poems in Platonov’s Golubaia glubina [The Sky-blue Depths, 1922], the Sun is made material, and is stripped of its supernatural, godlike attributes. The idea of controlling the heavenly bodies is connected to the Cubist and Futurist desire to drag down great symbols, an ambition that is on full display in the title of the first (1913) poetry collection of the Hylaeans (the cubo-futurists) in which they referred to themselves officially as “futurists,” Dokhlaia luna [The Croaked Moon] (Markov 119). Also related is Aleksei Kruchenykh’s Futurist opera Podeda nad solntsem [Victory Over the Sun, 1913] (with music by Mikhail Matiushin), in which “strong men” [silachi] destroy the Sun. Some typical lines are “[w]e have ripped out the Sun with fresh roots […],” “We are free/ The Sun is broken…/ Long live the darkness!” [My vyrvali solntse so svezhimi korniami […], My volnye Razbitoe solntse Zdravstvuet t’ma!] (Kruchenykh 221).

35 Platonov’s poetry, while not well known, is a significant source of the themes and obsessions that dominate his prose. The desire to subjugate and destroy the universe dominates the first section of Golubaia glubina, and spills over into such early prose “utopias” as “Lunnaia bomba” [The Lunar Bomb, 1921], “Potomki solntsa” [Descendants of the Sun, 1922], and “Satana mysli” [The Satan of Thought, 1922]. For more on Platonov’s poetry, see Pronin and Taganov.
Maiakovskii’s poetic battle with the Sun and the other heavenly bodies goes back to the very beginning of his poetic career. For instance, consider the following lines from the prologue of his first poem, the 1913 play Vladimir Maiakovskii: Tragediia [Vladimir Maiakovskii: A Tragedy], which was performed on the same bill as Kruchenykh’s opera:

Пухлыми пальцами
солныце изласкало вас назойливостью овода —
в ваших душах выцелован раб.
Я, бесстрашный,
ненависть к дневным лучам понёс в веках;
с душой натянутой, как нервы провода,
я —/ царь ламп! (Maiakovskii 9: 6-7)

[With swollen fingers, covered in little red hairs/ the Sun has over-caressed you with the importunity of a gadfly:/ the slave in your souls has been decisively kissed./ I, fearless/ have in the ages brought hatred to the daytime rays:/ with soul stretched thin, like the nerves of a wire,/ I/ am the tsar of lamps!]

This excerpt contains a hint of what will manifest itself in later poems (among them those considered above) as the replacement of the Sun with electricity and the power of human technology, while the fusion of the poetic persona with wires and lamps points to the human-machine combinations that will be addressed in the next chapter. In fact, this desire for power over the natural world is a strong motivating force driving the urge to intermix human and mechanical elements.

Another poem worth considering in this context is “Krasnaia zavist’” [Red Envy, 1925]. As the title suggests, this lyric originates from the jealousy that the poetic persona feels at not being able to live to see the future that he describes:

Я/ ещё/ не лыс/ и не шамкаю,
все же/ дядя/ рослый с виду я.
В первый раз/ за жизнь/ мальшам-ка я
барабанящим/36 позавидую. (Maiakovskii 3: 115)

36 The participle barabaniashchii could be a reference back to the poet's younger days, when he was one of the barabanshchiki i poety to which “Prikaz po armii izkusstva” [1918] is addressed.
[I am not yet bald and do not mutter toothlessly, but just the same I’m an adult grown-up, by appearance. For the first time in my life I feel towards the boys, who are drummers, jealousy.]

The cause of the poetic persona’s jealousy is borne out in a series of comparisons between the mundane present byt of the poetic persona and the bright future that he imagines:

Нам — трамвай. Попробуйте, влезьте!
Полон. Как в арифметике — цифр.
Вы ж/ в работу/ будете/ ездить,
самолет/ выводя/ под уздцы. (Maiakovskii 3: 116)

[For us— the tram. Just try, get on! It’s full. Like arithmetic— is full of numbers. But you/ into work37/ will/ go,/ leading/ a plane/ by the reins.]

As before, the essential component of the future as Maiakovskii envisions it is the machine that makes that future possible. In all of the poet’s poetic portrayals of the future, machines are the partners of humans, lifting them out of and above the muck of byt. For instance, in the following passage the poetic persona uses one of the Soviet terms most identified with byt—zhilploshchad’ [housing allotment]—and transforms it into one of the best aspects of the future:

Мы живем/ только тем, что тоши, 
чуть полней бы —/ и в комнате/ душно.
Небо/ будет/ ваша жилплощадь —
не зажмет/ на шири/ воздушной. (Maiakovskii 3: 117)

[We/ live/ only by virtue of the fact/ that we are skinny,/ Were we a bit bigger/ in the room/ it would be stuffy./ The sky/ will be/ your housing allotment:/ you will not be squeezed/ in the airy/ expanse.]

The image of inhabiting the sky as if it were an infinitely vast apartment is an elegant projection of then-present Soviet anxieties (such as the kvartirnyi vopros) onto the bright future. The image conveys a desire for escape that is closely linked to the shame that

37 The poor grammar of “into work” reflects the Russian v rabotu, a deliberate mistake that reflects the implied “horsiness” of the plane led by reins.
Maiakovskii’s poetic personae often feel at the human dependence on nature, and, by extension, on God. Thus it is no accident that the human-machine partnership of the future will give rise to a conquering of time and space, as the poetic persona of “Krasnaia zavist’” implies:

Мы/ в камнях/ проживаем вёсны —
нет билета/ и денег нет.
Вам/ не будет/ пространств повёрстных —
сам/ себе/ проездной билет. (Maiakovskii 3: 118)

[We/ in stones/ live through springs:/ we have no ticket/ and no money./ For you/ there will be/ no spaces measured in versts:/ you/ are your own/ ticket.]

Whereas most of the poems analyzed previously depict the given future with joy, the tone of this poem is dominated by the poetic persona’s playful resentment of a future that he will not live to see. It follows that, of all of the poems considered thus far, “Krasnaia zavist’” is the most weighted towards the perspective of Maiakovskii’s present, and thus is a more direct example of Gaiman’s bijection, mentioned in the introduction. “Krasnaia zavist’” is similar to the other poems in that the future it depicts is a different world. This is not the case for all of Maiakovskii’s poems that are concerned with utopia: his late poem “Rasskaz Khrenova o Kuznetskstroie i o liudiakh Kuznetska” [“Khrenov’s Story about the Kuznetsk Building Project and the People of Kuznetsk,” 1929] describes a then-contemporary building project. This poem is of particular interest in that it can be viewed as a first, rudimentary step to the distant futures that have already been described.

Though the tone of the poem seems, upon first reading, to be sincere and serious, the presence of the word Khrenov casts a shadow of possible ironic intent over the whole work. Though the word khren does have the neutral meaning of “horseradish,” it is a common vulgar term for “penis.” Additionally, the adverb khrenovo—phonetically identical to the genitive singular Khrenova—is a vulgar adverb that can be translated as
“sucky,” “shitty,” etc. Any Russian reader would note the glaring disparity of this word, within what would seem to be a paean to the builders of Kuznetsk, the reverberation of which would be difficult to silence during the reading. However, Maiakovskii did not invent the name: Iulian Petrovich Khrenov was one of the organizers of the Kuznetsk building project. According to the artist Nikolai Denisovskii, Khrenov told stories of the heroism of the workers of Kuznetsk during a visit to Maiakovskii’s apartment, stories which formed the basis of the poem (Maiakovskii 6: 440). This fact, however, does not eliminate the potential irony of the title, and the poem must be examined both as a work of sincere celebration and as satire.

The epigraph to “Rasskaz Khrenova…” is cited as “from a conversation,” but sounds more typical of a hyperbolic piece in the Soviet press:

К этому месту будет подвезено в пятилетку 1 000 000 вагонов строительных материалов. Здесь будет гигант металлургии, угольный гигант и город в сотни тысяч людей. (Maiakovskii 6: 119)

[To this spot during the Five-Year Plan will be transported 1,000,000 truckloads of building materials. Here will be a giant of metallurgy, a coal giant, and a city of hundreds of thousands of people.]

The fact that Maiakovskii points to the epigraph as coming from a conversation alerts the reader to the fact that, as in Platonov’s stories and novels, the language of industry and technology should be seen as having entered the everyday lexicon. One doubts, furthermore, that this epigraph truly emerged from an actual conversation, given the gigantism in the images of the second sentence, so typical of Maiakovskii’s poetic world. What follows is not so much a description of the details of the construction, but of the physical difficulties involved and the tremendous mechanical power that will be brought to bear. Throughout the poem rings the teleological refrain: “In four years, here there
will be a garden city!” The portrayal of enthusiasm among the workers despite the
physical privations is a key trope of the poem:

Темно свинцовоночие,
и дождик/ толст, как жгут,
сидят/ в грязи/ рабочие,
сидят./ лучину жгут.
Сливеют/ губы/ с холода,
но губы/ шепчут в лад:
«Через четыре/ года
здесь будет город-сад!» (Maiakovskii 6: 119-20)

[The leaded night is dark/ and the rain/ is thick like a cable/ the workers/ sit/ in the mud./ they sit,/ and burn kindling. From the cold/ their lips/ are the color of plums,/ but the lips/ whisper in unison:/ “In four/ years/ here/ will be/ a garden city!”]

Many of the poems examined thus far portray machines as the essential element of some
clean, bright utopia. There the dirtiness of machines is absent, as in the lines describing
the factory in Letaiushchii proletarii as having ni kopotei, ni sazhi. Here, as if to
accentuate the present, filth and privation receive greater emphasis.

In keeping with the grim conditions of the poem, the machines described are
rougher and more earthy than Maiakovskii’s clean, shining machines of the future. They
are also inherently destructive, as opposed to the constructive machines of the future.
And while the machines are of a different quality than some of those that have been
examined thus far, the emphasis on humans and machines as co-creators (or co-
destroyers) remains:

«…Здесь/ взрывы закудахтают
в разгон/ медвежьих банд,
и взроет/ непра шахтю
стоугольный «Гигант».
Здесь/ встанут/ стройки/ стенами.
Гудками, пар,/ сипи.
Мы/ в сотню солнц/ мartenами
воспламеним/ Сибирь.
Здесь дом/ дадут/ хороший нам
и ситный/ без пайка,
“... Here/ explosions will cluck like chickens,/ driving out/ the bands of bears,/ and the depths/ will be ploughed/ into a mine shaft/ by the coal-fired “Giant.”/ Here/ construction sites/ will stand/ like walls./ With sirens,/ steam,/ shout hoarsely./ We/ with the power of a hundred suns/ with furnaces/ will ignite/ Siberia./ Here/ they will give us/ a good home/ and white bread/ without rationing/ and beyond Baikal,/ the abandoned taiga will back away.]

Though there is a great emphasis on the destructive power of machinery in this poem, the refrain hammers in the faith that the result of all of this destruction will be something beautiful. The poem concludes:

Рос/ шепоток рабочего
над темью/ тучных стад,
а дальше/ неразборчиво,
лишь слышно —/ «город-сад».
Я знаю —/ город будет,
я знаю — саду/ цвесть,
когда/ такие люди/
в стране/ в советской/ есть! (Maiakovskii 6: 121)

[The faint whisper of the worker/ grew/ above the darkness of herds of storm clouds,/ and further on,/ indecipherable,/ barely audible: “garden city.”/ I know/ that this city will be,/ I know/ that this garden must flower,/ when/ such people/ in this country/ the Soviet land/ exist!]

It is interesting that Maiakovskii, for much of the decade concerned only with the distant future, would, in this poem, written less than a year before his suicide, describe the laying of the foundation block (or pit) of utopia.

Not all of Maiakovskii’s portrayals of the machines of the future are unambiguously positive. Two years before writing “Rasskaz Khrenova…,” Maiakovskii was working on a film scenario called Pozabud’ pro kamin [Forget about the Hearth], much of which would later be reworked into the play Klop. Pozabud’..., like Klop, portrays the thawing out—in the age of the full flowering of communism—of a man frozen during the NEP years. When the protagonist of Pozabud’... goes off to seek his wife, he is lost and disoriented in a city that seems populated only by robots. Instead of a
police officer, he finds a rotating pillar with loudspeakers that summons a driverless taxi. Instead of the barbershop that his wife’s family had owned, he finds a so-called Elektrostrigobrei, a neologism that refers to electric hair cutting and shaving, a business that is staffed entirely by automata. Given that Maiakovskii’s scenario is written for a silent film, the format does not allow the protagonist to react verbally. His disorientation is nonetheless evident in the fact that he does not allow the robots to continue grooming him, but wrenches himself free, runs outside, and faints (Maiakovskii 10: 364). This reaction is due in part to the fact that the protagonist sees newsflashes about himself on every screen, screens that are part of the fully mechanized world in which the protagonist has awoken. The future shock experienced by Maiakovskii’s protagonist prefigures the reactions of Prisypkin in Klop, and the gleaming, polished future presented in Pozabud’... is a strong indication that Maiakovskii was perfectly capable of imagining a more sinister side to the machines that make utopia possible.

The Strugatskiiis and Post-cybernetics Machines

The tolerance of the Soviet authorities for utopian dreaming was to plummet catastrophically in the 1930s. That the bold utopias Maiakovskii had written over the course of the 1920s continued to be published after his death has little to do with their content, but rather can be ascribed almost exclusively to Maiakovskii’s posthumous “promotion” to the position of poet laureate of the Soviet Union. This canonization was due almost entirely to Stalin’s eulogistic remarks—partially formulated by Osip Brik (Brown 370)—that he “was and will remain the greatest, most talented poet of our Soviet era”, and that “indifference to his memory and his works is a crime,” which led to the
poet’s work being packaged and distributed—as Pasternak wrote in his 1959 autobiographical sketch *Liudi i polozheniia* [People and Circumstances]—“like potatoes under Catherine the Great” [*kak kartofel’ pri Ekaterine*] (Pasternak 3: 337).

New formulations of the bold human-machine hybrids and utopian dreaming of Maiakovskii and Platonov were mostly excluded from the aesthetic rubric of Socialist Realism, existing only in that shadow of science fiction, the *fantastika blizhnego pritsela* mentioned in the introduction. Interestingly, just as the American ideas of Taylorism and Fordism served as the catalyst for much of the human-machine fantasizing of the 1910s and 1920s, the death of Stalin in 1953 allowed the entrance into Soviet society of another American-made idea that would have significant literary and cultural repercussions: the science of cybernetics. Cybernetics—which under Stalin had officially been labeled as a Western pseudo-science—is essentially a way of understanding one biological, mechanical, or electrical system through the metaphor of another such system. Thus the brain can be envisioned as a computer and vice versa, with all such systems grouped together as processors of information.

Concurrent with the rise of cybernetics in the Soviet Union were the early, astounding successes of the Soviet space program, headed by Sergei Korolev. The launching of Sputnik on 4 October 1957 was a significant technological and cultural event for the whole world, but for Russia in particular. The combination of these two watershed moments in technology led to a worshipful reverence of machines and computers similar in many ways to that which has been documented in the early twentieth century. This is not to say that technology had not continued to occupy a

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38 Translated in 1983 by David Marshak under the title *I Remember: Sketch for an Autobiography* and published by Harvard University Press.
prominent place in the Soviet public mind in the 1930s and 1940s. The difference is that, in those years, technology was thought of in terms of limited, short-horizon goals such as the industrialization of the Russian continent. Though huge undertakings, industrialization and Five-Year Plans are not the stuff of utopian dreaming and science fiction. The late 1950s, then, mark the first indications of the reemergence of ideas and themes that had lain dormant since around the time of Maiakovskii’s death. It was the Soviet science fiction writers of the Thaw who would resurrect the problems of human flight and human existence fundamentally transformed by machines and technology. These writers are the logical successors of Maiakovskii, Platonov, Zamiatin and Gastev. Furthermore, since they were living in a time in which fantastic achievements of technology were more than just speculation, the Soviet science fiction writers of the Thaw were able to bring some verisimilitude and realism to their explorations, a feature absent or muted in much of the science fiction of the early Soviet period.

The Strugatskii brothers, like many of their contemporaries, began to write with depictions of spaceflight, and their earliest works are inseparable from the theme of conquering space. While this was the dominant theme of world science fiction in the 1950s, the Strugatskiis added a particularly Soviet dimension to this theme in their first novel, Strana bagrovykh tuch [The Land of Crimson Clouds, 1957]. This novel is an account of a Soviet mission to Venus, the primary motivation for which is the exploitation of the vast mineral wealth—uranium—of that planet. Here the Strugatskiis provide a concrete justification for storming the heavens, whereas the motivations furnished by Maiakovskii are much more nebulous.
The robotic exploration of Venus by the Soviet Union was fraught with failure throughout the 1960s. The Soviets made the first flyby attempt with the Sputnik 7, which launched on 4 February 1961 and failed to depart low Earth orbit. The Venera 1 flyby launched eight days later. The launch was successful, but there was a communications failure in interplanetary space, leaving the spacecraft in solar orbit. There were a few moderately successful atmospheric probes in the late 1960s, but the first soft landing on Venus was not accomplished until the Venera 7 lander, launched on 17 August 1970 (Lodders 116). Only then did the world get a close look at the nightmarish conditions on the planet’s surface. Though a close glimpse at Venus was impossible at the time that the Strugatskiis were working on *Strana bagrovykh tuch*, it had long been known that Venus had a permanent, dense cloud cover. This permanent veil prevented (and prevents to this day) Earth-based observations of the planet’s surface, and, thus, was for a long time a convenient blank slate for science fiction writers. For writers like the Strugatskiis, for whom scientific verisimilitude is key, it was important to form an accurate portrayal of the surface of Venus as it was then understood to be.\(^{39}\) Their Venus is an uninhabitable desert dominated by high winds and electric storms. Though there are threats from the Venusian flora and fauna, the dangers of exploring the planet are essentially geological and meteorological. The extreme conditions reigning on the actual planet’s surface are pithily catalogued by the famous English amateur astronomer Patrick Moore in his 1998 book *Patrick Moore on Mars*: “Anyone incautious enough to go to Venus and step

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\(^{39}\) Prior to the first robotic missions to Venus in the late 1960s, the convention was to portray Venus as a wet, tropical planet. See, for example, Robert Heinlein’s “Logic of Empire” [1941], which depicts Venus as a jungle, with only the polar regions inhabitable for humans. Ray Bradbury’s “The Long Rain” [1950] is a variation on the “wet Venus” theme, and shows the entire planet covered by oceans, with only a few islands. Georgii Martynov—one of the Strugatskiis’ immediate predecessors in the Soviet Union—in his 1955 novel *220 dnei na zvezdolete* [*220 Days on a Starship*] shows Venus as mostly covered by oceans, and with continents covered by dense, orange-red forests.
outside his space-craft would at once be fried, poisoned, squashed and corroded” (Moore 13).

The Strugatskiis’ adherence to the scientific facts goes so far as to include an encyclopedia entry on the planet in the first pages of *Strana bagrovykh tuch*, read by Aleksei Bykov, the protagonist of the novel. Bykov, a veteran of numerous expeditions into the Gobi desert, has been summoned by Nikolai Kraiukhin (the deputy director of the State Committee for Interplanetary Communication under the Soviet of Ministers [*Gosudarstvennyi komitet mezhplanetnykh soobshchenii*[^40] *pri Sovete Ministrov*]), who wishes to recruit him for a mission to Venus. Following their meeting, Bykov reads the entry on Venus in order to learn a little about a planet to which he had never really given a second thought. While most of the text on Venus consists of a spare portrait of the planet made up of then-current physical data (its distance from the Sun, orbital period, rotational period, atmospheric composition, etc.), the end of the entry ventures outside of the science of the time:

В настоящее время изучение В. производится с нескольких временных и постоянных искусственных спутников, два из которых принадлежат АН СССР. Ряд попыток высадиться на В. (Абросимов, Нисидзима, Соколовский, Ши Фэн-ю, и др.) и предприимать непосредственное исследование ее поверхности не увенчался успехом. (Strugatskii 1: 45)

[^40]: Siddiqi mentions in *Sputnik and the Soviet Space Challenge* that the term *mezhplanetnoe soobshchenie* was a coded term for “space exploration” in the 1920s, when rocketry enthusiasts were compelled to avoid direct mention of the desire to travel to other planets for fear of being accused of treason (Siddiqi 4).

Thus the encyclopedia entry that Bykov reads is mostly scientific fact, but with a “tail” of scientific fiction. This method of dovetailing science fiction with science fact—the *hard
science fiction described in the introduction—was the standard practice of most of the prominent science fiction writers across the world in the postwar era.

A prominent trait of hard science fiction—one that makes this type of literature inaccessible or boring for many readers—is a high proportion of scientific and technical exposition. The Strugatskiis certainly fit into this trend, as all of their early works contains detailed explanations of robotic systems and spacecraft propulsion. (For instance, their second published story, “Spontannyi refleks” [Spontaneous Reflex, 1958] is based entirely on a technical problem in robotics.) In Strana bagrovykh tuch, the central problems of the first half of the novel are technical in nature: the designing of a spacecraft (the Khius) capable of landing on and taking off from the surface of Venus and a mode of transportation (the Mal’chik) for exploring the planet itself.

These engineering and construction problems are discussed in great detail over the course of the novel. For instance, Bykov—whose status as a novice justifies the detailed explanations that make up a great deal of the novel⁴¹—is treated to a lecture on the principles behind the two technological breakthroughs that enable the Khius to fly: the photon rocket [fotonnaia raketa] and the “absolute reflector” [absoliutnyi otrazhatel’]. More than two pages are taken up by this particular lecture, which provides a history of the development of the technology of photon drive, a highly destructive force that can be contained and directed only by the absolute reflector. The potential for this technology is summed up by Kraiukhin’s aphorism: “The photon rocket means a subjugated Universe” [Fotonnaia raketa — pokoreennaia Vseelennaia] (Strugatskii 1: 61). Thus the heroes of the Strugatskiis’ early works are expressing the very same sentiment

⁴¹ It is no accident that Bykov’s status as an outsider also links him, according to Katerina Clark’s framework, to the hero of the production novel, particularly since it is his presence that makes possible the first successful mission to Venus following a slew of failures.
as did Maiakovskii and Platonov in the 1920s: their ideal is a universe conquered by human technology. Kraitukhin’s aphorism recalls any number of lines from Maiakovskii cited above, but also many moments from Platonov’s prose and poetry. A representative sample comes from the lyric “Vecher mira” [The Evening of the World], one of the many universe-destroying poems from the first section of Golubaia glubina:

Мы убьем машинами вселенную,
Под железом умерла земля,
В наших топках бьется солнце пленное,
И в бессмертной стали нет добра и зла. (Platonov 1: 38)

[We will kill the universe with machines./ The Earth has died under iron./ In our ovens beats the captive Sun./ And in deathless steel there is no good or evil.]

It would seem, then, that the early Soviet desire to conquer space reemerged almost unscathed in the post-Stalinist period, having been preserved in the socialist-realist struggle with Nature.

The Strugatskiis’ early obsession with spaceflight and the technology that makes it possible can be viewed as a subdued hymn to the human in flight. In this way, Strana bagrovykh tuch and the other Soviet novels of the early space age are certainly the scientifically rigorous successors of the dreams and utopias of Maiakovskii’s day. That the Strugatskiis aim for scientific verisimilitude is not a restriction of imagination, but merely reflects a different set of priorities. In fact, hard science fiction should not be viewed as a battle between facts and imagination, but rather as a synthesis of the two.

Perhaps Andrei Siniavskii puts it best in “Bez skidok,” his 1960 essay mentioned in the introduction:

Реализм в научно-фантастической литературе иногда понимают как сдержанность фантазии: чем менее роман fantastichen, тем он более реалистичен. Между тем здесь, очевидно, господствуют иные соотношения, и степень, количество фантастики еще ни о чем не говорят. Исторически этот жанр складывался и
развивался в значительной мере, как явление и проявление реализма. Рассказ о «чудесах», ничем не мотированных, кроме воли и желания автора, сменился рассказом о научно-обоснованном «генераторе чудес». Сверхъестественное получило естественную аргументацию, — так возникла научная фантастика, одна из разновидностей и форм реалистического искусства. (Siniavskii 50)

[Realism in science fiction literature is sometimes understood as a restraint of fantasy: the less a novel is fantastic, the more realistic it will be. Yet it is clear that, in this case, other forces are at work, and the level, the quantity of “science-fiction-ness” still tells us nothing. Historically, this genre to a significant degree took shape and developed both as a phenomenon and a manifestation of realism. The story about “miracles,” explained by nothing save the will and desire of the author, was replaced by the story about a scientifically grounded “miracle generator.” The supernatural acquired a natural argumentation: this is how science fiction, one of the varieties and forms of realistic art, came to be.]

Many of the examples of Maiakovskii’s poetry considered thus far could be seen as a quest for the generator chudes of which Siniavskii speaks. As was seen, the flight of the Man, driven only by the poet’s will, is replaced by scientifically based (at least for Maiakovskii) human flight in later works. While classifying Maiakovskii’s poetry as anything close to hard science fiction would be unreasonable, the seemingly endless permutations of machines and flight in his work can be said to be driven by the urge to ground dreams in scientific—or at least pseudo-scientific—fact.

If it is the case that one of the driving motivations for hard science fiction as a whole was to bring scientific rigor to a genre that had long ignored the laws of physics, then the specific Soviet context for this genre could be called an attempt to put the utopian dreams of the 1920s on a firm scientific and technical foundation. Thus it is not difficult to see the fundamental connection in Maiakovskii’s motivation to compose Letaiushchii proletarii—as well as the numerous other mini-utopias we have already examined—and the Strugatskiis’ own constructed utopia, called the Mir Poludnia. The

42 The phrase generator chudes refers to Iurii Dolgushin’s 1940 novel of the same name, for which Siniavskii, elsewhere in the article, expresses great admiration.
*Mir Poludnia* is a kind of Soviet future history named after the 1960 cycle of short stories collected as *Polden’, XXII vek*. The works by the Strugatskii brothers that make up this world span almost their entire writing career: the first work in the cycle was *Strana bagrovykh tuch* [1957], and the last *Volny gasiat veter* [*The Waves Still the Wind*, 1984]. These works make up almost fifty percent of the Strugatskii’s published output. To see the connection between those poems of Maiakovskii considered above and the Strugatskii’s early works, recall the lines from “Nashe vokresenie” which describe technological prowess as a new religion, by which humans control the world with motors:

… vzgudev elektromotory,/ mirom pravit sam chelovek. Maiakovskii’s images of destruction and subjugation of nature are reformulated in a letter from Iurkovskii (another member of the Venus mission) to Bykov in which he describes the “Great Assault on Golconda” [*Velikii Shturm Golkondy*] in terms that would have been familiar to Maiakovskii and his contemporaries:

С каждой минутой рука Человека все крепче сжимала черную глотку Голконды.

И Голконда пала. Голконда подняла лапки. Она ревет, ключет, пугает багровыми тучами и всяческой пиротехникой, но теперь это уже никого не трогает, кроме новичков. Даже Черные бури не страшны нам больше — наши метеорологии уничтожают их в зародыше водородной бомбардировкой. Там, где мы когда-то укладывали селеновые простыни, теперь раскинулся ракетодром высшего класса, весь утыканный "Хиусами". Он принимает и отправляет до ста кораблей в месяц. Зубов Венеры не найдешь и за триста километров в округе: все, к чертям, взорваны.

(Strugatskii 1: 330)

[With every minute the hand of Man squeezed Golconda’s black throat ever tighter. And Golconda fell. Golconda surrendered. She roars, boils, and threatens us with crimson clouds and all kinds of pyrotechnics, but no one is troubled by any of this except for the newbies. Even the Black Storms are no longer a threat: our meteorologists destroy them in their infancy with hydrogen bombs. There, where we once laid sheets of selenium, now a first-class spaceport has

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43 Venus’s preponderance of radioactive elements earn it the title *Uranovaia Golkonda* [The Uranium Golconda], after the ancient Indian city renowned for its diamonds (Strugatskii 1: 62).
spread out, all bristling with Khiuses. Up to one hundred ships take off and land there in the course of a month. The Teeth of Venus cannot be found for a hundred kilometers around: they’ve all been blown to hell.]

This war with Nature is, as was stated above, a theme inherited both from the dreamers of the 1920s and the hard-nosed socialist-realist writers of the 1930s and 1940s. This struggle can be summed up in the Soviet botanist Ivan Michurin’s oft-quoted statement: “We cannot wait for favors from nature. Our task is to take them from her” [My ne mozhem zhdat’ milostei ot prirody. Vziat’ ikh u nee — nasha zadacha.].\footnote{According to Ashukin (214), this phrase first appeared in Michurin’s forward to the third [1934] edition of his Itogi shestidesiatletnikh rabot [The Results of Sixty Years of Work], where he uses it as a word of advice for other fruit-growers [plodovody]. While this may be the phrase’s first official appearance in print, that Michurin places it in quotation marks and refers to it as his “constant rule” [postoiannoe pravilo] suggests that he had come up the phrase long before 1934 (Michurin 11).} That the “Nature” of Venus is an enemy to struggle against is a constant refrain in Strana bagrovykh tuch, particularly since the planet is the cause of the deaths of numerous mezhplanetniki,\footnote{The mezhplanetniki—from mezdu (between) and planeta (planet)—are the explorers of the Solar System in the Strugatskiis’ earliest works. The profession is an amalgam of the cosmonaut, the astronomer/planetologist and the engineer.} including, but not limited to, those named at the end of the encyclopedia article that Bykov reads at the beginning of the novel. In the Strugatskiis’ earliest works, both Venus and Jupiter garner particular attention as the enemies of humans in their conquering of the Solar System, the former because of its extreme meteorological conditions, the latter because of its massive gravitational pull. News of yet another colleague who has died in the struggle with the gas giant comes to the crew of the Khius early in the novel. Iurkovskii’s reaction to this is to refer to the planet as “cursed Jup” [prokliatyi Dzhup], calling it “worse than Venus, worse than anything in the world” (Strugatskii 1: 59). The threat of Jupiter is the focus of the second major work to take place in the Mir Poludnia, the novella Put’ na Amal’teiu [The Road to Amalthea,
1959], in which a re-supply mission to the Jovian moon of Amalthea is threatened by a too-close encounter with Jupiter’s gravitational well. The draft story out of which *Put’ na Amal’teiu* grew, entitled *Strashnaia bol’shaia planeta*, written by Arkadii Strugatskii alone in 1957, chronicles a similar disaster on a spaceship (also on a resupply mission) in the Jupiter system. This story opens in the aftermath of the meteorite impact, and the first few pages are a careful accounting of the injured and the dead. For instance, the ship's navigator lives for a while after the impact, but his death comes quickly thereafter:

Он больше не мог влиять на судьбу звездолета. Звездолет стал трупом, и Ван умер вместе с ним. Скрепленное тело штурмана висело у панели управления, и потребовалось немало усилий, чтобы разжать его пальцы, закостеневшие на рычагах. (Strugatskii 11: 126-27)

[He could no longer influence the fate of the starship. The ship had become a corpse, and Van had died with it. The navigator's twisted body floated at the control panel, and it was no small effort to unclench his fingers that had ossified on the levers.]

While the story ends with the steely decision of the remaining scientists and crew, beyond all hope of saving themselves, to continue the observations of Jupiter as long as they are alive, the mood is closer to the desolation of *Grad obrechennyi* and other late Strugatskii works than to the grim optimism of *Put’ na Amal’teiu*.46 This could be one reason why *Strashnaia bol’shaia planeta* remained unpublished until the first full collected works of the Strugatskiis was issued by the Donetsk publishing house, Stalker, in 2001.

46 Both *Put’ na Amal’teiu* and “Strashnaia bol’shaia planeta” temper the image of Jupiter as an enemy of humankind with admiration for its otherworldly splendor and majesty. *Put’ na Amal’teiu* in particular emphasizes the gas giant’s beauty in the prologue, a careful description of the rising of Jupiter beyond the short horizon of the tiny Amalthea. This prologue is a masterwork of hard science fiction, combining spare science with aesthetic wonder. It also provides an indication that the Strugatskiis’ relationship with the natural world is not at all as Michurian as it might at first seem.
That Soviet mezhplanetniki routinely die or are disfigured is emphasized from the very first words of Strana bagrovykh tuch, through Bykov’s encounter with a nameless secretary outside of Kraiukhin’s office:

Секретарь поднял на Быкова единственный глаз:
— Из Средней Азии?
— Да.
— Документы...
Он требовательно протянул через стол темную, похожую на клешню руку с непомерно длинным указательным пальцем; трех пальцев и половины ладони у секретаря не было. (Struga tskii 1: 35)

[The secretary raised his single eye to look at Bykov: “From Central Asia?” “Yes.” “Your documentation…” He demandingly stretched across the table his dark hand, resembling a lobster’s claw, with an excessively long index finger; the secretary’s hand lacked three fingers and half of a palm.]

Details of this type are legion in the Strugatskiis’ earliest works. For instance, in the 1958 story Ispytanie SKIBR” [The Testing of the SKIBR] the interstellar explorer Bykov (son of the hero of Strana) is described as having, “as do the majority of mezhplanetniki” a face “covered with a spotty brown sunburn” [pokryto piatnistym korichnevym zagarom], gained from frequent exposure to the Sun’s radiation outside of a protective atmosphere (Strugatskii 1: 466-67). Put’ na Amal’teiu, “Strashnaia bol’shaia planeta,” and the 1958 story “Chastnye predpolozheniiia” [Personal Suppositions] all describe the torture of living in a high-gravity environment, the first two in the grips of Jupiter’s gravity, the last as a result of sub-light-speed acceleration. Additionally, as was seen above in Strana bagrovykh tuch, an early death is a common end to the mezhplanetnik’s career. In the final work to chronicle the “first generation” of the citizens of the Mir Poludnia, the 1960 novel Stazyhry [The Apprentices], Iurkovskii and Krutikov, both crewmembers of the first successful mission to Venus, die in an accident while researching the rings of Saturn. While the danger of this profession is always
emphasized, in no work does the physical toll that being a *mezhplanetnik* entails receive more emphasis than in *Strana bagrovykh tuch*. It is only in this work that the death and disfigurement that go along with the exploration of space seem almost holy. Such a modern mortification of the flesh is related to, for instance, the amputation of Meres’ev’s lower legs in Boris Polevoi’s 1946 novel *Povest’ o nastoishchem cheloveke* [*The Story of a Real Man*], but has deeper roots in the Russian hagiographical tradition. But behind all the suffering portrayed in these early works can be heard the refrain of Maiakovskii’s “Rasskaz Khrenova…:” *zdes’ budet gorod-sad!* In other words, the privations of the Strugatskiis’ *mezhplanetniki* are teleological, and will certainly result in a better world, one made possible by the technology that enables humans to squeeze not only Venus’s throat, but the throat of the whole of nature.

In *Strana bagrovykh tuch*, the victory of human over nature is not presented with much nuance, and the result—Venus tamed—is unambiguously positive. Due in part to the novel’s monotonicity, the Strugatskiis later came to see this first work as something of an embarrassment. Though *Strana bagrovykh tuch* is much beloved among Strugatskii fans, the novel was never a favorite of the Strugatskiis themselves, but rather a reminder of blind, youthful enthusiasm. In his introduction to the second supplementary volume of the Strugatskiis’ first collected works, published by Tekst in the early 1990s, Boris Strugatskii explains how he and his brother had agreed to include the novel only under the pressure of public opinion. He refers to it as “our first-born, awkward, uncouth and unloved” [*nash pervenets, neukliuzhii, koriavyi i neliubimyi*] (Strugatskii 1993, 5). Hence it is no surprise that many of the defining elements of *Strana bagrovykh tuch* are muted or entirely absent in their subsequent literary efforts. Though technology and the
struggle against nature are present in later works, these elements are never again featured players. The place of technology and machines in the Strugatskiis’ future is consistent with Maiakovskii’s in the sense that they make the future possible. However, the machines that inhabit the Strugatskiis’ future are more of the type found in *Letaiushchie proletarii*: they are not destructive gods, but rather one tool that humanity uses to make life easier. In fact, the Strugatskiis begin to question the god-like powers of machines very soon after the completion of *Strana bagrovych tuch*, in their novella *Stazhery*, translated into English as *The Space Apprentice*.

*Stazhery* contains a moment that is important to consider as an evaluation of the Strugatskiis’ changing relationship with the machines of spaceflight that they so clearly admire in *Strana*. In early Socialist Realism, it was common for literature to evoke an almost mystical bond between man and machine, a metaphor that was extended to the relationship between man and society. According to Clark, “[t]he individual was conceived as ‘part’ of that greater whole, the machine, and the relationship between him and his society was seen as mechanical and regulative” (Clark 95). Zhilin, the engineer of the *Takhmasib*, the vessel on which much of the action in *Stazhery* takes place, is an extremely talented technician. His skills are apparent right out of school, and he is instrumental in saving the ship and crew in *Put’ na Amal’teiu*. *Stazhery* takes place over ten years after *Put’ na Amal’teiu*, and Zhilin’s technical skills have grown to the point of being able to smell when the “nonredundant phasocycler” [*nedublirovannyi fazotsikler*] is

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47 Consider, for instance, the famous passage in Gladkov’s *Tsement* [1925] in which Gleb first returns to the cement factory, sees the engine room as “stern temple of machines” [*strogi khram mashin*] and diesel engines standing in rows, and who, “like altars, demand sacrifice” [*kak altari — trebuiut zhertvy*] (Gladkov 27, 28). Brynza, the machinist who has remained in the abandoned factory to maintain the machines, is conveyed as something of a religious ascetic, living only for his machines; he says that “if I’m with a machine, then I myself am a machine” [*Raz ia — s mashinoi, ia — sam mashina*...] (Gladkov 29).
off line (Strugatskii 2: 377). Watching him make repairs, the young hero Iura is awestruck:

Он со звоном откидывал и снова захлопывал какие-то крышки, отодвигал полупрозрачные заслонки, за которыми кабалистически мерцала путаница печатных схем, включал маленькие экраны, на которых тотчас возникали яркие точки импульсов, прыгающие по координатной сетке, запускал крепкие ловкие пальцы во что-то невообразимо сложное, многоцветное, вспыхивающее, и делал он все это небрежно, легко, не задумываясь и до того ладно и вкусно, что Юре захотелось сейчас же сменить специальность и вот так же непринужденно повелевать поражающим воображение гигантским организмом фотонного чуда. (Strugatskii 2: 384)

[[Zhilin] threw open and slammed shut some sort of panels with a ringing sound, moved aside semi-transparent hatches, behind which a web of stamped circuitry flickered cabalistically, activated little screens, on which instantly appeared the bright points of impulses jumping on a coordinate grid, stuck his strong, nimble fingers into something hopelessly complicated, multicolored and flashing, and he did this all carelessly, easily, without thinking and so smoothly and artfully that Iura had the urge to immediately change his profession and, just like Zhilin, to nonchalantly control the mind-blowing, gigantic organism of the photon miracle.]

However, when he shares his desire to be the “master” of a photon-powered spaceship with Zhilin, Iura finds that Zhilin is not the happy cog in the machine that might be imagined: “You see, Iurochka, I’ve been a master for ten years,” he said with strange intonation” [Ja, Iurochka, uzhe desiat’ let khozhu v poveliiteliakh, — skazal on s kakoi-to strannoi intonatsiei] (Strugatskii 2: 385). Zhilin later makes his feelings more directly known: “It’s time for me to get out of here, Iura. As fast as I can, before I can’t stand it anymore” [Bezhat’ mne pora otsiuda, Iura. Bezhat’ so vsekh nog, poka ne nadelo] (Strugatskii 2: 418). Zhilin’s decision at the end of the novel to leave the Takhmasib and remain on Earth is reflected in the Strugatskiis’ works from then on. As Boris Strugatskii writes:
Having finished [Stazhery], the authors did not at the time suspect that their interest in the assimilation of the Solar System as the most important undertaking of the people of the near future was already completely exhausted, and that they would never return to this theme. 

Though humans continue to explore space in the works written after Stazhery, in every case there is a fundamental skepticism as to the value of this undertaking. The heroes of the Strugatskiis’ works cease to be content with merely being a cog in a machine and become more questioning and hesitant.

Like Maiakovskii in his sparkling clean utopias, the Strugatskiis came to see machines as a means of making human existence less brutal. It is through machines that the sacrifices of the heroes of Strana bagrovykh tuch become unnecessary. This is explicitly stated in the 1958 story “Spontannyi refleks,” mentioned earlier, centered around the initiative taken by an experimental robot. At the end of the story, it is revealed that the purpose of the “Urm” robots (Universal’naia rabochiaia mashina or “Universal Worker Machine”) is to explore hostile or dangerous alien environments:

Одним словом, первыми на неизведанных планетах и в неизведанных океанских глубинах будут все-таки Урмы. Людьми рисковать не придется...

In a word, those who will be first on unknown planets and in unknown ocean depths will, after all, be Urms. It will not be necessary to risk people…

48 The doubt here references the question of whether Stazhery is a novel or a novella. The former is masculine in Russian (roman), the latter feminine (povest’).

49 “Initiative” was the title of “Spontannyi refleks” when it first appeared in English in Amazing Science Fiction Stories, 33(5), May 1959. This story was, in fact, the very first of the Strugatskiis’ works to appear in English translation.
The idea that human life should not be endangered in the exploration of space is certainly the polar opposite of the ethos that drives Strana bagrovykh tuch. That “Spontannyi refleks” was written in 1958 is an indication that the enthusiasm for danger that Strana embodies began to fade even as the novel was being published. In the coming works of the Strugatskiis, the descendants of Urm are legion, but take on very different, non-humanoid forms. These are the kibery, the helper robots that make the Strugatskiis’ future possible. But, as will be demonstrated, the kibery do not make the future in the same sense as Maiakovskii’s imagined machines: they do not subjugate and control, but, rather, tend to carry out small tasks as the skilled labor force of the future. Furthermore, they are not central to the Strugatskiis’ future: whereas Maiakovskii places machines at the heart of his polished visions of the future, the Strugatskiis’ kibery scuttle about on the periphery.

The Strugatskii brothers were not engineers by training, and so an interest in engineering problems does not last far beyond their earliest works, many of which are concerned with the engineering and design problems that arose as a consequence of the introduction of cybernetics into Soviet science and society. A typical example is the story “Ispytanie SKIBR,” mentioned above. The premise of this story is relatively simple: two robotics engineers (the Strugatskiis refer to them as cyberneticists) Akimov and Sermus have been commissioned to complete the final programming on a robotic

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50 Derived from kibernetika, the Russian translation of “cybernetics.”

51 Arkadii Strugatskii began his career in the military—he was drafted immediately following his and his father’s evacuation from the Leningrad Blockade in January of 1942—where he served in the Far East as a Japanese interpreter and translator. Following his demobilization, he continued to work as a translator, Asian Studies expert, and as an editor in the Soviet publishing industry. Boris Strugatskii began, but did not complete graduate work in astronomy—late in the process of writing his dissertation it came to light that he was inadvertently duplicating the work of the great Indian astronomer Subrahmanyan Chandrasekhar—and worked for many years as a computer programmer at the Pulkovo observatory in Leningrad.
system – the SKIBR, or *Systema kiberneticheskikh razvedchikov* [Cybernetic Exploration System] – designed to aid in an interstellar expedition. The SKIBR consists of four units: three explorers and their “brain.” The explorer units are described as resembling both praying mantises and centaurs, while the brain, named Orang, is likened to “a cistern on wide tank tracks” (Strugatskii 1, 468). One interesting aspect of the SKIBR is that it is not wholly a human creation, as the reader learns from a conversation between Akimov and his fiancée Nina:

– Странная форма для машины, – заметила она. – Настоящий богомол.

Акимов сказал:
– По-моему, для эффекторного механизма очень рациональная. К тому же придумали ее не мы.
– Кто же?
– «Оранг». (Strugatskii 1: 469)

[“It’s a strange form for a machine,” she noted. “It looks just like a praying mantis.” Akimov said: “In my opinion it’s a very rational form for an actuator. And anyway, we didn’t think of it.” “Well who did, then?” “Orang.”]

The notion that a robot might participate in its own creation is certainly a logical extension of the cybernetic premise that a brain can be created “in the metal.” Such a brain would then be perfectly capable of designing a body for itself. Thus we have a machine capable of participating in the process of creating, a trend that can be observed many times in Platonov’s works. It must be noted, however, that the Strugatskis do not show Orang to be the equal of humans, as the robot is still capable of making very simple mistakes. During the actual testing of the SKIBR, Akimov explains to Bykov—the captain of the ship for which the SKIBR is intended—that the testing zone does not include a local highway because of an incident during a previous test in which the robotic system was instructed to bring back a tree with a diameter of thirteen inches, and returned with an electric communications pole. Besides being possibly influenced by Asimov’s
First Law of Robotics, this moment raises the problem that bare logic might bring a robot to an incorrect decision, leading to potentially disastrous results. Thus, even in this early story, the Strugatskiis take pains to portray machines as short of perfection. This hint at imperfection was seen in “Spontannyi refleks”—mentioned above—a story about a robot who decides to go exploring, and the scientists who attempt to contain him. While this story could be dismissed as a narrative about the mildly humorous adventures of an escaped robot named Urm, even in this work a critical eye is already evident. Lacking sensory experience as a result of having been confined to a basement room since the time of his construction, the robot is fascinated by objects and phenomena that the human eye would fail to notice out of lifelong familiarity, making the story a brief but elegant exercise in ostranenie. The best example of Urm’s essential failure to understand his environment is demonstrated by a passage in which he encounters a mirror for the first time, failing to understand the conflict in data between his visual range finder and his locator. In other words, he cannot reconcile the fact that the mirror, six meters from him, gives an illusion of a copy of himself standing at twice that distance, and walks directly into the wall, shattering the mirror. Through Urm’s numerous failures to properly interpret his environment, “Spontannyi refleks” introduces, at the very beginning of the Strugatskiis’ career, the idea that robots are not and cannot be superior to humans.

Interestingly, robots and machines seem to become decreasingly competent in the Strugatskiis’ later works. This devolving is connected with the particular kind of robot that came to populate the Mir Poludnia: the kiber mentioned above. The term kiber is considered to have been invented by the Strugatskii brothers, first appearing in their 1958 story “Zabytyi eksperiment” [The Forgotten Experiment] (Borisov 345). While some
describe *kiber* as a synonym for robot, a glance over the Strugatskiis’ works suggests a crucial difference. While robots—much rarer in the Strugatskiis’ works than *kibery*—are self-sufficient, universal machines of the type envisioned by early cybernetics proponents, *kibery* are severely limited machines with a comparatively narrow range of abilities. It might be convenient to think of *kibery* as the future descendants of modern pool-cleaning or vacuum-cleaner robots. Making a clear distinction between the *kiber* and the robot is crucial to illustrate the diminished expectations the Strugatskiis had in the capabilities of machines. It should be conceded that no such distinction is apparent in the definition that Boris Strugatskii gives for *kiber* in his commentary to “Zabytyi eksperiment”:

По-моему, именно в этом рассказе впервые у АБС и вообще в фантастике появляется термин «кибер» – для обозначения любой достаточно сложной многофункциональной «разумной» машины.

(Strugatskii 1: 660)

[I believe that it was in this story that the term *kiber* appeared for the first time in the Strugatskiis’ works, or in science fiction, for that matter. The term was used to designate any sufficiently complex, multifunctional, “intelligent” machine.]

With all due respect to Boris Strugatskii, the notion that *kibery* are multifunctional and intelligent is simply not borne out by example in the Strugatskiis’ works. Compared with the impressively powerful, almost unstoppable robotic systems discussed earlier—the SKIBR and Urm—the *kibery* are always functionally limited and fragile, and always completely dependent on humans for their existence. Furthermore, no *kiber* in the Strugatskiis’ works demonstrates a capacity for intelligence beyond elementary problem-solving. To be fair, none of the Strugatskiis’ works, save “Spontannyi refleks,” convey the point of view of a machine—robot or *kiber*—thus limiting our ability to comment conclusively on the extent of their intelligence. However, the most conclusive evidence
against Boris Strugatskii’s definition of kibery as intelligent is the fact that not one of them even remotely demonstrates the ability to pass the Turing test.\footnote{The so-called Turing test, proposed by Alan Turing in his 1950 article “Computing Machinery and Intelligence,” tests the intelligence of a hypothetical machine. If a machine hidden from the view of an interrogator is able, by answering a variety of written questions, to convince the interrogator that it is a human, then it has passed the test and is therefore “intelligent.”}

If we look back at the relationship of humans and machines portrayed by Maiakovskii, there can be found certain parallels with the Strugatskii’s depictions of humans and kibery. Like the machines in Maiakovskii’s poems, the kibery are tools, extensions of human hands and minds. The tasks they accomplish, however, are mostly mundane: they are not in the vanguard of the builders of utopia, but in the rear, or even on the home front. This is not to say that the Strugatskii have no depictions of the human struggle against nature made winnable by technology (recall Strana bagrovykh tuch), but the sounds of this clash are muted or entirely absent in their subsequent literary efforts.

In fact, the prominence of technology and the human-machine partnership in the Strugatskii’s works over the span of their career can be tracked by the depictions of the kibery that populate their fictional futures. In many cases, the kibery seem to fill the role of domesticated animals. For instance, the grasshopper-like kibery in the story “Zabytyi eksperiment”—mentioned above as the first story to use the term kiber—aid scientists in searching an abandoned experimental testing zone much like a pack of hounds. At one point, they are even shown as apparently afraid:

В нескольких метрах от танка стояли киберразведчики. Они жались к танку и были похожи на дворняжек, почуявших волка. Они не хотели идти в туман. Точнее, не могли. [...]

\footnote{52 The so-called Turing test, proposed by Alan Turing in his 1950 article “Computing Machinery and Intelligence,” tests the intelligence of a hypothetical machine. If a machine hidden from the view of an interrogator is able, by answering a variety of written questions, to convince the interrogator that it is a human, then it has passed the test and is therefore “intelligent.”}
– И ваши киберы! – продолжал Иван Иванович. – Трусят ваши киберы. В первый раз вижу киберов, которые трусят.

(Strugatskii 1: 494, 495)

[The cyber-searchers stood a few meters away from the tank. They huddled up to the tank, reminding one of mutts who smell a wolf. They did not want to go further into the fog. More accurately, they were not able. [...] “And your cybers!” continued Ivan Ivanovich. “They’re scared. I’ve never seen cybers get scared before.”]

This scene demonstrates the second trait of kibery that is consistently portrayed by the Strugatskii: their vulnerability and dependence on humans. There are many other scenes that implicitly equate the kibery with mechanical domesticated animals. For instance, in the 1960 story “Tomlenie dukha” [Languor of the Soul]—part of the Polden’, XXII vek cycle, a scene in which a damaged kiber is repaired reads very much like the tending-to of an injured calf. The kiber is described as “writhing in the grass” and even “squeals” (the verb is zavereshchat’) when one character begins to repair it (Strugatskii 2: 131).

The “field repairing” of this kiber reminds us that, however animal-like they may seem, kibery are still machines. Knowing that “Zabytyi eksperiment” was written in 1958, the same year as “Spontannyi refleks” and a year before “Ispytanie SKIBR,” we might conclude that the Strugatskii initially regarded kibery as only one possible, rudimentary, permutation of mechanical existence. The fact that kibery eventually became the dominant machine “life form” of the Strugatskii’s fiction could suggest that they came to regard systems like Urm or the SKIBR either as less realistic or less interesting than kibery. Actually, it seems that neither conclusion is valid: the Strugatskii in their fiction place increasing emphasis on human perspectives, and the consigning of mechanical beings to the small, pathetic kibery insures that there will be no “rise of the machines,” literary or otherwise. Kibery are relegated, by and large, to the far margins of the Strugatskii’s works, a state illustrated perfectly by the following offhand
detail in the 1979 novella Zhuk v muraveinike [Beetle in an Anthill], which takes place in front of a museum that has been unexpectedly closed:

Сумятицу усугубляли кибернетические уборщики, которых, видимо, забыли перепрограммировать, и теперь они бессмысленно блуждали в толпе, путаясь у всех под ногами, шарахаясь от раздраженных пинков и поминутно вызывая взрывы злорадного хохота своими бессмысленными попытками пройти сквозь закрытые двери. (Strugatskii 8: 47)

[The confusion was intensified by the cleaner cybers, who, it seemed, had not been reprogrammed and now were senselessly wandering through the crowd, getting underfoot, shying away from the annoyed kicks of the crowd and every minute evoking eruptions of cruel laughter by their senseless attempts to go through the closed doors of the museum.]

Even when kibery are described in a positive light, it is perfectly clear that they are completely subordinate to humans.

This perspective is present in the mid-career work Malysh [The Kid, 1970], in which kibery are elevated, if not to a major plot point, at least to an important narrative element. Malysh is told from the first-person viewpoint of Popov, a participant in Project Kovcheg [Ark], an effort to prepare an uninhabited planet for settlement by the Pantains, a primitive alien race whose planet will be destroyed when their sun goes supernova. While the project and its results are not relevant to this discussion, Popov’s profession is: he is the ship’s kibertekhnik, a kind of a roboticist. His relationship with the kibery under his charge—whom he refers to as “the guys” [rebiata]—resembles the interaction between a human with dogs. The kibery, in fact, have American names, as is common among dogs in Russia.

The lead kiber, Tom, has the most developed “personality” exemplified by his obsequious signaling of his light that communicates his desire for further orders from Popov:
They needed nothing else, even I was superfluous, at least until their program was exhausted. Nevertheless, the awkward, fat Tom, whenever I ended up in the field of vision of his visors, would flash his ruby-colored frontal signal. If one wanted, this could be taken as a greeting, a polite, absent-minded bow, but I myself knew that it simply meant “Everything is in order for me and for the others. We are carrying out our instructions. Do you have any further orders?”

Later, when conducting repairs on Tom, Popov talks to him in an intimate manner, clearly desiring for Tom to be more “life-like”:

“I’m going to make you brand new,” I repeated over and over. “You won’t run away from work any more. I’m going to make you better, my little old man, set you on your feet, and make you human. I think you’ll like being human. Of course! It’s great being human: people will love you, they’ll care for you, cherish you.”

As the story progresses, Tom becomes increasingly animate in Popov’s descriptions:

“The ship was hidden from us by the clouds of fog, but the landing strip could be seen clearly. The activity pad shone merrily and brightly in the sun, the abandoned ball showed as a lonely black spot in the middle, and the unwieldy Tom hesitantly marked time around it, clearly attempting to solve a problem beyond his abilities: should he remove this extraneous object from the strip or, if necessary, lay down his life for this thing forgotten by humans.”

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53 Popov uses the phrase vyvesti v liudi. While the literal translation of this phrase suggests transforming an animal or thing into a human, its idiomatic meaning is “to help someone on in life.” In the sense in which Popov uses it, the phrase has a dual meaning which is lost in translation.
Popov’s attribution of personality and animation to Tom is reminiscent of the qualities of life that Platonov’s engineers attribute to machines, such as Stryoko in *Vprok*, who listens to the special language of the engine of the car. But like that vehicle, Tom is neither intrinsically alive, nor is he capable of emotion. Popov’s attributing of lifelike qualities to the machine is especially noteworthy in light of the fact that he, as a kibertekhnik, is intimately aware of Tom’s systems and construction. In other words, he should know intellectually that a *kiber* cannot be anthropomorphized.

The primary implication of the numerous examples of the interactions between humans and machines in the works of Maiakovskii and the Strugatskii brothers is that machines are the essential tools of humans in constructing the future. Without machines, humans are tool-less, and, hence, powerless. But the machines described by these writers are much more than tools: they are the partners of humans, and the intimate relationships between those that were born and those that were made means more than the teleological goals of comfort and freedom from want. As Siniavskii writes in the context of literary portrayals of space exploration, the role that technology plays in literature and life is much more than that of a means to an end:

Возможно, например, в будущем искусственные спутники Земли и даже Луны помогут улучшить работу земных телевизионных центров так, чтобы московские телепередачи без помех походили, скажем, до Владивостока. Но ведь мы запускаем ракеты в космос не ради этой сравнительно частной, третьестепенной цели. Ведь раскрыть загадку Марса мы стремимся не только затем, чтобы засеять полуостров Таймыр марсианской морозоустойчивой репой. (Siniavskii 49)

[It is possible, for example, that in the future, artificial satellites of Earth and even of the Moon will help to improve the working of earthly television stations in such a way that television programs from Moscow can make it without interference to, say, Vladivostok. But we do not launch rockets into space, after all, in order to achieve this particular insignificant goal. We seek to uncover the mysteries of Mars, after all, not solely to sow the Taimyr Peninsula with some frost-resistant Martian turnip.]
The machines of Maiakovskii and the Strugatskii brothers do not exist solely to create the future, but to inhabit that future. To return to the beginning of this chapter, Suvin’s technological novum serves not just to highlight, as Roberts put it, “the difference between the world the reader inhabits and the fictional world of the SF text” (Roberts 1). By gradually establishing intimacy between the reader and the “fictional world” of the text, the nova cease to be “new.” Thus it should seem perfectly natural that the machines and humans that work shoulder-to-“shoulder” should become ever-closer, with the boundaries separating them blurring. Given the dual twentieth-century trends of anxiety over the weakness of the human body and admiration for the durability and (perceived) immutability of machines, the next natural creative step is to combine the two.
Chapter 3

Mechanized Flesh and the “Perfecting” of the Human Form

You, for instance, want to wean man from his old habits and correct his will in accordance with the requirements of science and common sense. But how do you know that man not only can, but needs to be remade? From what do you conclude that it is so imperative that human wants must be corrected? In a word, how do you know that such a correction will truly bring benefit to man?

F. M. Dostoevskii, from Zapiski iz podpol'ia [Notes from Underground, 1864]

Maiakovskii’s Vacillation between Flesh and Metal

Within the cultural context of the early Soviet Union, the efficiency and power of the machine were qualities towards which humans should aspire. Thus an ideal combination of the human and the machine would result not only in the mechanization of the human body, but of the human mind and soul. The crux of the philosophy of Aleksei Gastev—called by Stites “an industrial trainer of workers and a prophet of efficiency” (Stites 149)—is that, in imitating the qualities of machines, humans improve their own existence and bring themselves closer to the perfection represented by these machines.54

That the bringing of the human form closer to a mechanical ideal is a goal to be sought

54 For more on Gastev’s philosophy, see Stites, pp. 149-55.
after is the unambiguous message of Gastev’s most famous work, the prose poem “My rastem iz zheleza” [We grow out of iron, 1914]. According to Hellebust, this work was “acclaimed by the Proletkul’tists as embodying the ‘essence of the industrial proletariat’” (Hellebust 1997, 504). The poem begins with a loving description of the factory floor and the machines that “people” it, and transitions into the physical transformation of the poetic persona into a gigantic being of iron. Despite the fact that his poetic persona is surrounded by machines and outgrows the factory that contains him, it must be pointed out that the transformation described by Gastev is not really a mechanization of the human form, but rather a change of the human material from flesh to metal. Though his flesh is of metal, the poetic persona is no more a machine than a wooden prosthesis is a human limb. Gastev’s poetic persona is composed of the same stuff as a machine, but himself is not a machine. He still has blood, for instance, but it is “new iron blood.” For this reason, “My rastem iz zheleza” represents only a rudimentary, first metaphorical step towards the mechanization of the human form. It is only when parts of the human body are replaced with machines that real progress will be made towards bringing the human body in line with the mechanical ideal. This ideal will be accompanied not only by a change in state (metallization), but a change in form (mechanization).

Both metallization and mechanization can be observed in Maiakovskii’s poetry, the former being dominant in his earlier work, the latter coming to full fruition in the twenties. This comment might seem strange, since Maiakovskii’s early long poems are a testament to the interfering, all-pervasive influence of love, sexuality, and the demands of the flesh. It could be said that the whole of Oblako v shtanakh [A Cloud in Pants, 1915], for instance, is driven by the poetic persona’s sexual desire for the Maria to whom the

55 For a detailed discussion of this poem, see Hellebust 1997, and 2003, 43-57.
poem is dedicated. In much of Maiakovskii’s poetry, the tyranny of physical desire is the cause both of all the joy and all the suffering in the lives of his poetic personae. It is no surprise, then, that the poet might begin to desire to escape from his own tyrannical flesh, to jump out of his heart, as the poetic persona of Oblako wishes to do. In his later poetry, Maiakovskii portrays attempts to break free from the demands of the flesh as physical transformations, particularly as mechanizations of the human form. There is a moment early in Oblako that is an early example of such a trend:

Ведь для себя не важно/ и то, что бронзовый и то, что сердце — холодной железкою. Ночью хочется звон свой спрятать в мягкое,/ в женское. (Maiakovskii 1: 230)

[After all, it means nothing to me/ that I’m made of bronze/ that my heart is a cold piece of metal./ At night I want to hide my clanking/ in something soft,/ in something feminine.]

These lines combine the need for sexual, physical contact with an embryonic metallized flesh metaphor, thus showing, at least at first, that the metallization of the human form will not necessarily eliminate the desires of human flesh. Thus a Gastevian metallization is a change that allows for the preservation of human weaknesses. Maiakovskii, as a poet obsessed with the power of the demands of the flesh, would be attracted to the more disfiguring and fundamental transformation represented by mechanization.

Gastev’s factory-floor transformation is reflected in Maiakovskii’s 1918 lyric “Poet rabochii” [The Poet-Worker]. Though it begins as simple argument—one that will be expanded in the “Razgovor s fininspektorom o poezii” [Conversation with the Tax Man About Poetry, 1926]—that the profession of a poet is of equal value to the traditional “proletarian” professions of factory worker, engineer, etc., the poem goes on to envisage a transformation that parallels that of Gastev, adding to it an element of
violence. The poetic persona states that he, too, is involved in the process of production
(“I, too, am a factory” [la tozhe fabrika]), the production of the New Soviet Man:

Знаю — не любите праздных фраз вы.
Рубите дуб — работать дабы.
А мы/ не деревообработчики разве?
Голов людей обделяем дубы.
Конечно,/ почтенная вещь — рыбащий.
Вытащи сеть. В сетях осетры б!
Но труд поэтов — почтенный паче —
людей живых ловить, а не рыб. (Maiakovskii 1: 180)

[I know — you have no love for empty phrases./ You cut down oaks — in order to work./ But we/ are we not woodworkers?/ We work the oaks of human heads./ Of course/ it is an honorable thing — to fish./ You drag in the net. You hope to catch sturgeon!/ But the labor of poets, it is still more honorable./ we catch living people, and not fish.]

Thus the metaphorical process of shaping human minds is given a literal manifestation: the working of human heads as one carves blocks of wood. Furthermore, the image of the poet as a “fisher of men” connects to the tendency of Platonov and others to use the trappings of Christianity in the creation of a post-Christian world. Maiakovskii realizes the “tooling” metaphor further, showing poetry to be a literal shaping of the human brain:

Огромный труд — гореть над горном,
железа шипящие класть в закал.
Но кто же/ в безделие бросит укор нам?
Мозги шлифуем рашпилем языка. (Maiakovskii 1: 180)

[It is a huge undertaking, to burn above a furnace,/ putting hot hissing pieces of iron to be cast./ But who, then/ will cast reproach at us for idleness?/ We grind brains with the rasp of language.]

It is important to note that the final line of this section has more than one possible translation, the choice of any one of which removes the multiple facets of the original. Firstly, the verb shlifovat’ has the technical meaning “to polish, to burnish, to grind,” but also has the figurative meaning “to polish” in the sense of “to perfect.” Thus this verb can imply that the process of grinding the human brain is an improvement in the sense that it is a step towards some semblance of engineered perfection. Also, the fact that the
Russian *iazyk* is the common word both for “language” and for “tongue” gives two possibilities for the interpretation of the “rasp” that grinds the brain into the desired form. While the metaphorical translation used above (“the rasp of language”) would seem the most obvious, the overwhelming physicality in this poem—and in Maiakovskii’s poetry in general—strongly suggests the image of the *tongue* of the poetic persona physically rasping at the human brain, carving it into the perfect shape. Thus the process by which poets are shown to manufacture the New Soviet Man is both directly physical and fundamentally *invasive*.

In the next lines, Maiakovskii’s poetic persona goes on to evoke some more typical human-machine metaphors in his desire to bring the work of the poet up to the level of the work of the technician:

Кто выше — поэт/ или техник, который
Ведет людей к вещественной выгоде?
Оба./ Сердца — такие ж моторы.
Душа — такой же хитрый двигатель. (Maiakovskii 180-81)

[Who is higher: the poet/ or the technician who leads people to material gain?/ Both./ Hearts are also motors./ The soul is also a cunning engine.]

The image of the heart as a motor is probably the most common human-machine metaphor of the early Soviet period, and is one that Maiakovskii employs repeatedly. This is, in fact, a founding image of the cult of aviation in the Soviet Union, as evidenced in the 1920 song “Vse vyshe” [Ever Higher] by Pavel German, which was adopted as the official march of the Soviet aviators in 1933 (Hellebust 1997, 517):

Мы рождены, чтоб сказку сделать былью,
Преодолеть пространство и простор,
Нам разум дал стальные руки — крылья,
А вместо сердца — пламенный мотор.

[We were born to make fairy tale fact./ To conquer space and expanse./ Reason gave us steel arms—our wings./ And instead of a heart, a flaming motor.] (Hellebust 1997, 517)
Like German, Maiakovskii, at this stage at least, is not replacing human body parts with mechanical components, but is merely drawing equivalencies between the biological and the mechanical. Both examples show the addition of the machine element to the human; so far, there is no subtraction. The fact that the heart and the soul are “also” motors and engines implies that they can be engineered just as the head can be carved or the brain can be ground. All of these images come together to portray the human body as raw material to be shaped, and it is important to note that, when Maiakovskii’s poetic persona talks about the brain or the heart, he is emphasizing the fact that they can be physically manipulated or shaped. But the result of this change is not so much one of physical state or appearance, but of outlook, of the mind. This manipulation of the intangible qualities of the mind through the physical transformation of the body is relevant in terms of the final image of the quotation from “Poet rabochii.” This image—the soul as an engine—is less typical, and, hence, more interesting. It is particularly interesting when taken together with the image of the heart as a motor that precedes it, since it implies the presence of two sources of power in the human form. On the one hand, this image is absurd, justified only by the fact that Maiakovskii required for his poem two technological props. On the other hand, the idea of the heart and the soul having equal technological relevance is intriguing. Firstly, it imparts a physicality to the soul, an “incarnation” that Maiakovskii repeats in the poem “Piatyi internatsional” [The Fifth International, 1922], where the poetic persona’s soul is metallized. Secondly, it connects this poem with the wider tradition of replacing religion with technology, as in Platonov’s lyric “Vselelnoi” [1922], in which humans are given souls of iron. Finally, given the poem’s extended metaphor of the poet as a technician on par with any factory worker, we
have the image of the poet as a true “engineer of human souls,” i.e., as a technician who can shape and improve any physical or non-physical part of the human body using the non-physical tools of words. Thus, while the poetic persona argues for the equality of the technician and the poet, the poet, clearly, is capable of more.

We can already observe a basic conflict in Maiakovskii between the weakness of human flesh and the cold perfection of machines. We find in Maiakovskii’s poetry celebrations of the flesh in almost equal proportions to the desire to be mechanized and freed from the demands of the flesh. This would seem to be a fundamental conflict, one that cannot be reconciled. Examining both sides of this conflict will have implications for Maiakovskii’s struggle with the desire for individual freedom versus the yearning to dissolve oneself into some kind of collective will. Maiakovskii clearly felt drawn to the mechanization of human flesh even as he reveled in the demands of the flesh that mechanization would essentially eradicate. The interplay of these two directions in the poet’s work is on bright display in the 1924 lyric “Protestuiu!” [I Must Protest!], a poem whose intensity is powered by this basic paradox in the poet’s worldview.

The motivating force behind this poem seems to be contempt for the human form. The initial hatred for the human body is based on aesthetic considerations, or, more specifically, on design principles:

Я/ ненавижу/ человечье устройство,
ненавижу организацию,/ вид/ и рост его. (Maiakovskii 3: 17)

[I hate the human mechanism,/ I hate his organization, appearance, and stature.]

The use of the term ustroistvo needs to be examined closely, since this term serves both to uphold and undermine the ideal of human mechanization that the poem seems to trumpet. Both ustroistvo and organizatsiia can be translated as “organization,” but
ustoistvo is a more technical term, translatable not only as “mechanism,” but also as “system,” or “appliance.” Thus the poetic persona, in declaring his hatred for the “human mechanism,” judges the human body in mechanistic terms, a dichotomy that will reverberate throughout the poem.

This comparison of the human and the mechanical informs the basic structure of the poem. While holding up machines as an example for humans, the poetic persona presents humans themselves as an anatomical embarrassment:

На что похожи/ руки наши?..  
Разве так/ машина/ уважаемая/ машет?.. (Maiakovskii 3: 17)

[What are/ these hands of ours?.. / Really, does/ a respectable/ machine/ flap around like that?..]

The key problem for the poetic persona is the fleshy impermanence of the human body, as opposed to the functional immortality of machines. In some of the most telling lines of the poem, the poetic persona expresses a sincere preference for the body of an armored car over the mind of a Pushkin or a Shakespeare:

Я вот/ хожу/ весел и высок.  
Прострелят, и конец —/ не вставишь высок.  
Не завидую/ ни Пушкину/ ни Шекспиру Биллю.  
Завидую/ только/ блиндиованному автомобилю. (Maiakovskii 3: 17)

[So I/ go about/ cheerful and tall./ Spray me with bullets/ and that’s it:/ you can’t replace my temple./ I envy/ neither Pushkin,/ nor Bill Shakespeare./ I envy/ only/ the armored automobile.]

That the weakness of the human body is symbolized by the irreplaceable temple is significant not only because a bullet through the temple will destroy the brain, but also because the temple is one of the traditional entry points for a bullet when committing suicide. Thus the hypothetical death of the poetic persona of this poem is connected to the longing for suicide. But the third-person perfective prostreliat suggests an

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56 Ozhegov gives the fourth definition, labeled as “bookish” [knizhn.], “a technical structure, mechanism, machine, device” [tekhnicheskoe sooruzhdenie, mekhanism, mashina, pribor] (Ozhegov 773).
impersonal agent—an executioner—pulling the trigger. And while these two facts together could be said to evoke the image of a staged suicide (a common occurrence in the early Soviet period), it would be overreaching to make a final conclusion as to the nature of this ambiguous image. Suffice it to say that this temple shattered by a bullet brings to mind several possible permutations of death.

But the brain (poorly) protected by the temple is also significant in terms of the examples of humanity given: Pushkin and Shakespeare. These are two poets who, supposedly, possessed exemplary brains, brains that did not protect them from death and disintegration in the end. The ideal of the armored automobile is thus significant not only in terms of its durability, but also in its brainlessness: there is no brain to be destroyed, and, hence, nothing to lose. So the example of Pushkin here is not as closely related to Maiakovskii’s denigration of that poet and the other “generals of the classics” [generaly klassiki] (as he calls them in the 1918 lyric “Radovat’sia rano” [It’s Too Early to Rejoice]), going all the way back to the 1912 manifesto “Poshchechina obshchestvennomu vkusu” [A Slap in the Face of Public Taste], as it might at first seem.

In other words, the poetic persona is at least as concerned with the physical impermanence of a Pushkin or a Shakespeare than with their status as great poets. It would seem that the thick dividing line in this poem is between the humans whose bodies are “breakable” and the machines whose mechanical perfection and physical permanence are an ideal towards which to strive. It should be pointed out that the “armored car” of this poem is not the sleek, shining vehicle that these words evoke in the modern reader: Evgenii Peremyshlev’s commentary to Protestuiu! in the 2006 small collection of
Maiakovskii’s verse in the series *Vsemirnaia biblioteka poeta*, describes in detail how such a *blindirovannyi* car was protected:

«Блиндированный» значит «специально защищенный», как правило, делалось это при помощи дополнительной деревянной обшивки и песка. (Maiakovskii 2006, 443)

*[Blindirovannyi* means “specially protected;” as a rule, this was done with the aid of added wood paneling and sand.]

Thus the poetic persona expresses admiration for what can only be called a primitive and inelegant means of achieving durability and protection from harm, one that is both brainless and crudely made.

Immediately following these lines comes another celebration of freedom from the burden of cognition. Here the poetic persona expresses impatience with the fact that even the mind is subject to the weaknesses of the flesh of which it is made:

Мозг/ нагрузишь/ до крохотной нагрузки,  
и уже/ захотелось/ поэзии…/ музыки…  
Если б в понедельник/ паровозы/ не вылезли, болея  
с перепоя,/ в честь/ поэтического юбилея… (Maiakovskii 3: 17-18)

*[You load/ the brain/ just a little bit,/ and already/ you want/ poetry…/ music…/ If on Monday/ the locomotives/ did not emerge, sick/ from drinking,/ in honor/ of the poet’s anniversary…]*

It is almost beyond doubt that the *poeticheskii iubelei* in question is Pushkin’s. 1924 was the year that the one hundred and twenty-fifth anniversary of Pushkin’s birth was celebrated in the Soviet Union, solidifying his status as an ideologically acceptable poet.

Both “Protestuiu!” and that famous conversation with Pushkin—“Iubileinoe”—were published in early 1924,57 and it seems highly probable that Maiakovskii is referring to Pushkin in this instance. These four lines construct an opposition—humans versus machines—similar to that in the four that precede them, but the comparison is of a

57 “Protestuiu!” appeared in the third issue (20 January) of the journal *Krasnaia niva* [*Red Virgin Soil*], “Iubileinoe” in the second issue of *Lef.*
different nature. Whereas machines were shown before to be superior to humans in their physical durability, here they are shown to be mentally “invulnerable.” The poetic persona sets up an impossible scenario in which locomotives are hung over from celebrating Pushkin’s birth, and while it is difficult to imagine how a locomotive could be drunk, the cause of the drunkenness is more important, since machines are “immune” to poetry. In both instances, the key advantage of the machine is absence of mind. The presence of Pushkin is necessary in both scenarios, since no human Russian can be emotionally unresponsive to his poetry, and it is only humans who suffer from the undignified weakness of emotion.

All of the lines quoted thus far are couplet rhymes. In fact, the first fourteen lines of this forty-line poem are of this rhyme scheme. This long sequence of couplets gives an impression of successive declarations or pronouncements. Line fifteen represents the beginning of an ABAB rhyme scheme, one that continues, with the exception of lines twenty-three and twenty-four, for the remainder of the poem. This section is more contemplative, or at least less declarative, and allows the reader to rest from the staccato rhythm that has dominated up to this point. That lines twenty-three and twenty-four are set off as a rhymed couplet imbedded in the ABAB section is logical, since they represent the most significant declaration in the whole work, demanding the mechanization of the human body:

Дово́льно! —/ зевать нечего:
переиначьте/ конструкцию/ рода человечьего!
Тот человек,/ в котором
цистерной энергия —/ не стопкой,
который/ сердце/ заменил мотором,
который/ заменит/ легкие — топкой. (Maiakovskii 3:18-19)
[Enough!/ There’s no time to stand around:/ alter/ the construction/ of the human race!/ He is human,/ in whom/ the energy tank/ is not a little shot glass,/ who/ has replaced his heart/ with a motor,/ who will replace/ his lungs with a furnace.]

The phrase tot chelovek should be examined in detail, since it has implications for the poetic persona’s new definition of humanity. The meaning here, as the translation attempts to convey, is not “that human,” but, rather, “he is human” in the sense of “he deserves to be called human.” The qualifications for being worthy of this title are given as mechanized alterations, thus forcing the conclusion that, within this poem, the essential criteria for humanness are themselves non-human. As in the opening lines, mechanical perfection is the standard by which humans must be measured.

In terms of the transformation and enhancement of the human body, this poem is part of a heritage going back to Pushkin’s “Prorok”: both poems feature the replacement of imperfect human body parts with perfect upgrades. One key difference is that, unlike Pushkin’s protagonist, Maiakovskii’s hypothetical subject is being transformed not by a higher power, but by himself. Though this project of remaking the human race rings out like a pronouncement from on high (like the voice of God in Pushkin’s poem), here the transformation is self-inflicted. Note that the hypothetical human is both subject and object. Thus there is a complete lack of the ethical dative in this section: the subordinate clauses begin kotoryi, not kotoromu.

The replacement of the heart with a motor is a transformation to be expected. Besides being an almost direct borrowing of the flaming coal that replaces the heart of Pushkin’s prophet, the heart-as-motor is, as we have seen, the key human-machine metaphor of the early twentieth century. The second and final replacement—lungs for a furnace—is noteworthy for two reasons. Firstly, the presence of both the heart-as-motor and lungs-as-furnace gives rise to the situation seen already in “Poet rabochii,” where the
body contained two engines, two “power sources” in one body. Secondly, the furnace has not yet been “installed.” The verb *zamenit’* in this second case is future perfective, forcing the conclusion that this portion of the transformation has not yet taken place. The significance of this could be in the fact that the lungs are the source of the voice, thus linking the lungs-as-furnace to the prophet’s serpent tongue in Pushkin’s poem: the mechanization of the lungs will lead to a mechanization of the voice. Note that the transformation of the voice is the final one in both poems. Given the fiery contents of a furnace, we can extrapolate that Maiakovskii’s transformed human will indeed breathe fire! This might be the reason for placing this particular upgrade in the future: the mechanization of the voice will be a kind of “stepping on the throat” of one’s song, to use the famous phrase from *Vo ves’ golos* [At the Top of My Voice, 1930]. This particular interpretation is given weight by the fact that the poem’s transformed human can be identified with Maiakovskii’s ubiquitous poetic “I,” as will be evident in the concluding lines of the poem.

Immediately following the lines describing the transformation, the poetic persona begins to backtrack, allowing for some body parts to remain flesh:

Пусть сердце,/ даже душа,
но такая,
чтоб жила, паровозом дыша,
никакой/ весне/ никак не потакая. (Maiakovskii 3: 19)

[Let there be a heart,/ even a soul,/ but such a one/ as would live, breathing like a locomotive/ never indulging in/ any kind of/ spring.]

It would not be an exaggeration to suggest that making exceptions for the heart and the soul threatens the whole “alteration” command given above. Furthermore, the image of “breathing like a locomotive” links directly back to the replacing of the lungs with a furnace, since the word *topka* can refer specifically to the firebox that powers a
locomotive, as well as to the earlier statement that a locomotive cannot tire. It would
seem, then, that a human that breathes like a steam engine has in fact undergone some
degree of transformation. It is the poetic persona’s *pust’* that makes the transformation
incomplete, permitting the heart to remain simply a heart, as well as allowing for a soul.
To return to *Chelovek*, this allowance for the presence of a heart of flesh is an echo of the
Man’s unhappiness among the fleshless (hence, heartless) inhabitants of heaven. He
mourns, “I am for the heart,/ and where can bodiless ones have a heart?” [*Ia dlia serdtsa,/ a gde u bestelykh serdtsa?*?] (Maiakovskii 1: 305). The echo, however, of the full-
blooded, emotional Man is faint. Though the poetic persona of “Protestuiu!” allows for
some preservation of the flesh, this flesh is subject to harsh restrictions, albeit restrictions
that are presented as a strange kind of freedom:

Чтоб утром/ весело/ стряхнуть сон.
Не о чем мечтать,/ гордиться нечего.
Зубчиком/ вхожу/ в зубчатое колесо
и пошел заверчивать. (Maiakovskii 3: 19)

[One that would, in the morning/ cheerfully/ shake off sleep./ Nothing to dream about,/ no reason
to put on airs./ Like a cog-tooth/ I go in/ to the cogwheel/ and I’m off turning.]

With the first-person verb *vkhozhu*, the poetic persona inserts himself not only into the
workings of the unnamed machine, but also into the action of the poem. Previous direct
appearances of the first person were mostly expressions of opinion, such as the contempt
for the human body that opens the poem, or the jealousy of the armored car. There is
another first-person verb that includes the poetic persona in the action of the poem: in the
section, quoted above, that begins “So I/ go about...” [*Ia vot/ khozhu…*], we find the verb
*khodit’*. Just as the separation between the first verb, a multidirectional verb of motion,
and the second, an imperfective prefixed verb of motion, is tiny—the prefix *v*—so these
two scenarios are closely linked. Here is a classical before-and-after presentation: the
fleshy, temporary, weak human, followed by the mechanized, permanent, powerful cyborg. But there is another connection between these two sections, both of which contain the adjective veselyi [cheerful], in the first case as a short-form adjective, in the second as an adverb. These grammatical distinctions aside, the fact remains that this adjective describes a joyful emotional state. Thus, if we allow the connection through the first-person verbs to present the poetic persona as that human who is mechanized, then we observe a preservation of emotion from the pre-mechanized to the post-mechanized state. Thus the transformation described in the poem seems to fail on both counts. By allowing for a heart, it fails to strip away completely human flesh; by allowing “cheerfulness” it fails to strip away completely human emotions. Still, the fact that the cheer seems to come from being a cog-tooth in a cogwheel would seem to indicate that some progress has been made, since it implies that some level of brainlessness has been achieved.

The poem concludes by suggesting that a mechanized human would seek recreation in a way fundamentally different from a non-mechanized human:

Оттрудясь,
развлекаться/ не чаплинской лентой,
не в горелках резвясь,/ натыкаясь на грабли, —
отдыхать,/ в небеса вбегая ракетой.
Сам начертил/ и вертись в параболе. (Maiakovskii 3: 19)

[After work,/ to divert oneself,/ not with a Chaplin reel,/ not running around playing catch,/ stumbling over rakes:/ to relax:/ running into the heavens like a rocket:/ Turn in the parabola/ that you yourself have sketched.]

The freedom of the individual to fly is, as has been seen in Letaiushchii proletarii and the shorter lyrics considered in the previous chapter, a fundamental aspect of Maiakovskii’s conception of utopia. “Protestuiu!,” written in the same period, is clearly a part of this trend, though it does not use flight as a fundamental principle, but, rather, a logical
consequence of the mechanization of the human body. Also, Maiakovskii’s other poems from this period that revolve around human flight and machines are not necessarily characterized by a stripping-away of the emotional underpinnings of human existence, the central tenet of this poem. It could be argued in this particular case that the physical freedom of flight can be seen as a substitute for other emotional freedoms that have been lost. But even the flight described in this particular instance is not free. In that first place, this flight is motivated by the command _vertis_. Furthermore, the flight is described as occurring along a parabola, the natural path of an object thrown or launched from the Earth’s surface that does not succeed in escaping into space. The image of a parabola brings to mind a graph on the Cartesian plane.58 If we assign the value of time to the x-axis (as is traditionally done), then we should have a parabola that intersects the x-axis at the origin and at some positive point on the x-axis. Since no parabola can escape intersecting the x-axis twice, the flight described cannot conquer time, an enemy that the poetic persona names in the middle of the poem:

Я против времени,/ убийцы вороватого.
Сколькие/ в землю/ часами вогнаны. (Maiakovskii 3: 18)

[I am against time,/ that furtive murderer./ So many/ have been driven by the clock/ into/ the ground.]

The implication, then, is that even the mechanized human will be driven into the ground, the only possible protection being the absence of emotion that will lessen the blow of death. While the deafening tone of the poem might serve to mask these morose conclusions, it is a poor disguise, and one that grows increasingly tattered upon multiple readings.

58 The image of the parabola and its symbolism within this poem was suggested to me by my friend and fellow graduate student John Wright, of Columbia University.
What is the driving force behind this conception, whereby an absence of emotion is a desirable state? It might come as no surprise that Maiakovskii, often a prisoner of his own physical and emotional excesses, might look upon a mechanization of the human form as a kind of liberation. But the key to the hatred for the human form expressed in “Protestuiu!” can be best explained by a consideration of the earlier, unpublished version of the poem. Though the two versions of the poem have much in common, each can be rightly regarded as poems in their own right. The draft version is much more personal: absent is the “poetic megaphone”—so aptly characterized by Etkind (268)—through which the poems of Maiakovskii shout from the page. The tone of the draft is almost Lermontovian in its ruthless introspection, and is reminiscent in particular of that poet’s famous lyric “I skuchno i grustno” [It’s Both Boring and Sad, 1840].

As in the final version of “Protestuiu!,” the poetic persona of the draft version is obsessed with the pathetic fragility of the flesh, and is overwhelmed with the futility of the whole endeavor of life. It begins with lines that are similar to those found near the beginning of the final version of the poem:

Ходим расхлябанно, ручками нашем.
Мне не нравятся движения наши.
Чуть весною солнце выжжется,
Человек расхлябался и еле движется. (Maiakovskii 3: 380)

[We go about unstably, we wave our arms./ I don’t like our movements./ In the spring, the sun will barely fire itself up./ And man has fallen apart and will barely move.]

This is the same sentiment—here with an emphasis on human existence being subject to the whims of nature and to the hated sun—that begins the published version, absent the bombastic, confrontational tone. In keeping with this mildness, the draft is a poem that raises questions without supplying answers. This contention is supported by the rhyme scheme, which is couplet throughout. Based on the conclusions reached in analyzing the
rhyme scheme of the final version, it can be seen that the draft is merely a series of statements: there is no attempt to find solutions.

The ultimate answer to human problems—the mechanization of their bodies—is present in the draft only weakly. Some mechanical metaphors are used, paradoxically, to describe the *impermanence* of the human form:

Наткнешься на лицо и некрасивое, и рябое —
Мотор испорчен, в сердце перебои. (Maiakovskii 3: 380)

[You run into a face both ugly and pockmarked:/ the motor is ruined, there are misfires in the heart.]

The mechanical metaphor continues in the next lines, in which can be recognized—in embryonic form—the key conception of the published version of the poem: that the human body should be changed in such a way that the forehead *can* be repaired, that the temple *can* be replaced:

Или пуля просверлит лба кусок —
Не починишь лоб, не вставишь висок. (Maiakovskii 3: 380)

[Or a bullet drills through a piece of your forehead:/ You can’t repair a forehead, or replace a temple.]

It could be said, then, that there is a correspondence, however approximate, between the two versions of the poem up to this point. That they diverge significantly after these lines is crucial. In the published version, as we have seen, the realization that the human body cannot be repaired (or protect itself like an armored car) begins the chain of reasoning that brings the poetic persona to the radical reconstruction of the human form. In the draft version, this realization takes that poetic persona on a downward spiral, through neurasthenia and mania, concluding in death. But before getting to death, the poetic persona continues with a series of snapshots that portray a person at the height of physical health and power suddenly finding his way blocked by barriers both physical
and mental. One of the first instances appears more or less intact in the final version of the poem:

Нагрузишь мозг до предельной нагрузки,  
И уже захочется поэзии да музыки.  (Maiakovskii 3: 380)

[You load your brain to its limit,/ And you already want poetry and music.]

The poetic persona describes people being stopped in their tracks by “the barriers of high psychologies” [bar’ery vysokikh psikhologii], falling in a “a pit of worries” [v iamu perezhivanii], legs “chained by depression” [stsepeneny khandroi]. The use of a technical term in this last image sets up the next mechanical metaphor:

Дышишь паровозом в сто колес,  
И вдруг закручивает вздох туберкулеz.  (Maiakovskii 3: 380)

[You breathe like a steam engine with a hundred wheels,/ And suddenly tuberculosis twists your breath.]

It seems crucial that the final image in this series—one that contrasts the superhuman power of a hundred-wheeled steam engine with a slow, ragged death by tuberculosis—is also one that survives in the final version of the poem, albeit in a completely different context. In the published version of “Protestuiu!,” the image of “breathing like a steam engine” is the one that ushers in the final images of the powerful, mechanized human seamlessly integrated into the machinery of production like a cog-tooth in a cogwheel. Here the same image is used to show how far a human can fall and how vulnerable the human body truly is.

This hyperawareness of the fragility of the human body is at the heart of both versions. If we regard the draft and the published versions of “Protestuiu!” as respectively private and public, then they are easily seen as two approaches to the same problem: that of the mortality of the flesh. Clearly, only the published version was
appropriate for Maiakovskii’s public persona and for the nature of the times in which he
lived. Knowledge of both versions allows us to consider the published “Protestuiu!” not
so much as a bold statement of contempt for the human body and the weakness of flesh,
but as the result of a long obsession and despair over the fragility of the human mortal
coil. Behind the megaphone of “Protestuiu!” lies the quiet despair of its primogenitor.
This is revealed most clearly in a comparison of the final lines of the respective versions.
As has been shown, the final lines of the published “Protestuiu!” undermine the human-
as-flying-machine metaphor that is so integral to Maiakovskii’s conception of utopia.
The final lines of the draft version are, if possible, more bleak than the final lines of the
Lermontov poem to which it was compared above:

Изобретаешь великое, передумаешь начисто.
И вот/ ослабел,/ и вот маньчество.
Работаешь, и вот тише и тише
Лег и кончился глупейшей из смертишек. (Maiakovskii 3: 380)

[You invent something great, think it over completely./ And then,/ you become weak,/ and then
mania./ You work, and then slower and slower/ you’ve lain down and died the stupidest of little
deaths.]

The tone of this poem, together with the couplet rhyme scheme, resounds like the
drumbeat of a death sentence, and it would seem that the deafening tone of “Protestuiu!”
is an attempt to drown out this overwhelming fear of mortality. The treatment of human-
machine metaphors across the two versions is arguably one of the most interesting
aspects of the pair, certainly the most relevant to the present discussion. The mechanical
metaphors in the draft version are used only as markers by which can be evaluated the
durability of the human body. The strong, healthy human is likened to a hundred-
wheeled steam engine, an apex of physical strength from which descent is rapid and
catastrophic. A weak, ugly human is likened to a broken-down motor with a misfiring
heart. While it is unusual in Maiakovskii’s works to find a machine used as a metaphor for sickness, it must be remembered that this broken-down machine of a human is presented in a poem suffused by an awareness that a machine can be repaired, while a human cannot be. As we saw previously, the crucial point for both poems is the realization by the poetic persona that the flesh, once broken, cannot be repaired: ne vstawish’ visok. Since the draft contains no true transformation, no mechanization of the flesh, there can be no possibility of repair, and, hence, no hope of functional immortality.

Lawrence Stahlberger closes *The Symbolic System of Majakovskij* [1964] with a brief discussion of “Protestuiu!” Citing the couplet in which the poetic persona expresses admiration for the armored car, Stahlberger calls this lyric one of Maiakovskii’s “most despairing poems,” and goes on to say that

Maiakovskij’s attempt to create a significant myth ended in failure. The poet as cultural hero had to yield to the superiority of the armoured car. The poet was neither the one who achieved a victory over the human condition, over time and death, nor even a witness to that victory. I Protest is Majakovskij’s recognition that his creative endeavor has not succeeded in overcoming time or the human condition. (Stahlberger 145)

In light of the draft version of the poem and Stahlberger’s comments the meaning of the published “Protestuiu!” seems more clear. The poetic persona cannot be said to protest at the weakness of the flesh and to celebrate the machine: his despair, rather, could be driven by his knowledge that neither choice is ideal. Stalhberger’s choice to conclude his study with “Protestuiu!” implies that there was no progression of ideas in Maiakovskii’s work after this poem. This is not the case, and the remaining six years of the poet’s life were spent struggling with and reevaluating the problems that this poem represents.

The despair that the shouts of “Protestuiu!” aim to drown out is partially driven by the awareness that humans are not sufficiently like machines. This statement is backed
up by evidence from Maiakovskii’s other poems from the same period, in which machines, and the humans that fall short of their example, continue to play a central role. The lyric “Domoi!” [Homeward!, 1926]—written as Maiakovskii returned from his sole trip to America—is closely related to “Protestuiu!” in this sense. In both poems, the poetic persona sees a kind of freedom in being transformed into a piece of machinery, one that could be used in a factory. It is fitting, then, that “Domoi!” would begin with the poetic persona issuing a command to himself: “Thoughts, leave for home” [Ukhodite, mysli, vo-svoiasli] (Maiakovskii 3: 250). Like the commands the poetic persona issues to his body in the 1925 lyric “Proshchanie”—“come/ to my eyes, liquid of separation,/ heart,/ bludgeon me/ with sentimentality!” [Podstupai/ k glazam,/ razluki zhizha,/ serdtse/ mne/ sentimental’nost’iu raskvas’!] (Maiakovskii 3: 168)—this command signals an attempt on the part of the poetic persona to control the uncontrollable, both within and without. (In the next lines, he commands the depths of the sea and sky to embrace.) This desire to control and quantify the unquantifiable inner world of the human mind is one of the key motivations for this poem, which Jakobson characterizes as a poem dedicated to “the contradiction between the rational and the irrational” [antinomii mezhdu ratsional’nym i irratsional’nym] and as a “dream about the fusion of the two elements, a kind of rationalization of the irrational” [mechta o sliianii oboikh elementov, o svoego roda ratsionalizatsii irratsional’nogo] (Jakobson 1987, 281; 1975, 16).

Like “Melkaia filosofiia na glubokikh mestakh” [Shallow Philosophy in Deep Places, 1925], written on the voyage to America, this poem is built on thoughts inspired by what the poetic persona sees and experiences on the ship. Here, inspired by the
dancing of his fellow passengers to a popular song, he remarks on his place in the
community of communism and its emotional relevance for him:

Пролетарии/ приходят к коммунизму/ низом —
низом шахт,/ серпов/ и вил, —
я ж/ с небес поэзии/ бросаюсь в коммунизм,
потому что/ нет мне/ без него любви. (Маиловский 3: 251)

[The proletarians/ come to communism/ from the bottom:/ from the bottom of mines,/ sickles/
and pitchforks;/ I, on the other hand,/ from the heavens of poetry/ throw myself into communism,/ because/ for me there is no/ love without it.]

These lines set up one of the key oppositions of the poem: ideology versus emotion. It is
not for nothing that ideological purity is intimately connected to human-machine
metaphors. In “Protestuiu!,” a stripping of flesh and emotion allows the poetic persona to
become an integral part of a machine or manufacturing process. In “Domoi!,” the poetic
persona again imagines himself as a machine, not as a cog-tooth in a cogwheel, but as the
entire factory.

Все равно —/ сослался сам я/ или послан к маме —
слов ржавеет сталь,/ чернеет баса медь.
Почему/ под иностранными дождями
вымокать мне,/ гнить мне/ и ржаветь?
Вот лежу,/ уехавший за воды,
ленью/ еле двигаю/ мои машины части.
Я себя/ советским чувствую/ заводом,
вырабатывающим счастье. (Маиловский 3: 251)

[It’s all the same,/ whether I exiled myself/ or whether I am sent to mom:/ the steel of words
rusts,/ the copper of my bass voice blackens./ Why/ under foreign rains/ should I get soaked,/ rot/
and rust?/ So I’m lying,/ having gone to the other side of the pond,/ out of laziness/ I barely
move/ my machine parts./ I feel I am/ a Soviet/ factory,/ manufacturing happiness.]

Having first set up the mechanical metaphor by portraying himself as an unused machine,
the poetic persona manufactures a use for himself, as a factory whose product is
happiness, or, more specifically, poetry. The idea of poetry as the product of industrial
manufacture is by no means isolated to this poem. Маиловский’s essay “Kak delat’
stikhi?” [How are Verses Made?] ends with a list of twelve “sort of conclusions” [vrode vyvodov], the first of which states that “Poetry is production. The most difficult, the most complicated, but production nonetheless” [Poeziiia — proizvodstvo. Trudneishee, slozhneishee, no proizvodstvo] (Maiakovskii 11: 269). The subsequent conclusions present poetry not as a product of inspiration, but as a result of constant work and study, a kind of trade apprenticeship. In conclusion number six, Maiakovskii even goes so far as to use the factory metaphor:

Не надо пускать в ход большой поэтический завод для выделки поэтических зажигалок. Надо отворачиваться от такой нерациональной поэтической мелочи. Надо браться за перо только тогда, когда нет иного способа говорить, кроме стиха. (Maiakovskii 11: 269)

[You should not fire up a large poetic factory for the manufacture of poetic cigarette lighters. You should turn away from such irrational poetic trifles. You should take pen in hand only when there is not other means of speaking than verses.]

He adds that “you should manufacture finished products only when you feel a clear social demand” [Nado vyrabatyvat’ gotovye veshchi tol’ko togda, kogda chuvstvuesh’ iasnyi sotsial’nyi zakaz] (Maiakovskii 11: 269). Here the production of poetry is taken, to a degree, out of the hands of the poet. Thus the poet-as-factory metaphor does not imply mass production as much as it demands that the creative process be controlled by a force beyond the poet. The sotsial’nyi zakaz that Maiakovskii mentions above implies that there are some needs that only poetry can fulfill, and that verses should be manufactured to meet these needs. In the poem, the timing of production is entirely taken out of the hands—or mouth—of the poetic persona:

Не хочу,/ чтобы меня, как цветочек с полян,
Instances of the image of lips in Maiakovskii’s poetry should never be passed over without comment, since, from the very beginning of his poetic career, lips are the most common metaphor for love and sex. Here, then, the locking of the poetic persona’s lips by the factory committee has implications not just for his ability to speak, but for his ability to love. As in “Protestuiul,” we can observe some allowance for “fleshiness” but a fleshiness subject to harsh strictures. But the presence of lips in the poem is not the only indication of the “fleshy” emotion that the poetic persona seemingly seeks to eradicate by placing himself under committee control. Even more important is the love that, though factory-produced, will be delivered to the heart. This moment is closely related to the crucial allowance (pust’ serdtse) made by the poetic persona of “Protestuiul!”: in each case, the heart of flesh is given a place in new, mechanized order that is being created in the poem.

There is, in fact, a great deal of emotion in this poem. This can be seen not only in the images of the body parts, lips and heart, but also in the repetition of the phrase khochu, chtoby that punctuates the latter half of the lyric. This repetition is of particular relevance given that the poetic persona expresses the wish that he, and his desires, be
mechanized and controlled. If the poet becomes part of the planned Soviet economy, there will be no place for his *khochu, chtoby*. While it is true that this emotional content does not necessarily undermine the sincerity of the poetic persona’s expressed desire, it is sufficient to introduce doubts into the mind of the reader. In other words, it is clear to the reader that, though the poetic persona certainly does want to be controlled, the fulfillment of this wish will destroy him. Thus the emotional content of the poem serves to expose this misplaced desire.

The final lines of “Domoi” suggest a possible explanation for this conflict. In them the poetic persona expresses the desire that the production of poetry be considered equal to the manufacture of bayonets and steel:

Я хочу, чтобы к штыку приравняли перо.
С чугуном чтоб и с выделкой стали
о работе стихов от Политбюро,
чтобы делал доклады Сталин.
«Так, мол, и так… И до самых верхов
прошли из рабочих нор мы:
в Союзе Республики пониманье стихов
выше до военной нормы…» (Maiakovskii 3: 252)

[I want/ for the pen/ to be equated with the bayonet./ For, along with cast iron/ with the production of steel/ Stalin to give reports/ from the Politburo/ about the work of verses./ “This, he says,/ and that…/ And to the very heights/ we’ve come/ out of the worker’s holes:/ in the Union/ of Republics/ the understanding of verses/ is higher than the prewar norm.”]

The wish that poetry be considered the equal of manufactured goods has been seen before, in “Poet rabochii,” for instance. In this poem, there is an acknowledgment of the fact that, in the rapidly and violently industrializing Soviet Union, manufactured goods are the most valued creations of Soviet society. Thus “Domoi!” can be seen as another attempt on Maiakovskii’s part to have a poem be considered the equal of a bar of steel. As the poem would seem to indicate, the exchanging of creative freedom for a higher status for poetry is a fair one. But the poetic persona has a more ambitious goal than the
mere production of poetry to be brought to an industrial scale: he wishes to see the
understanding of poetry in the Soviet Union brought above pre-war norms. This desire
for understanding is repeated in the final lines of the poem, included in the first
publications of the poem but later excised:60

Я хочу/ быть понят моей страной,
а не буду понят, —/ что ж,
по родной стране/ пройду стороной,
как проходит/ косой дождь. (Maiakovskii 3: 399)

[I want/ to be understood by my country,/ but if I am not understood,/ then so be it,/ through my
native country/ I will pass by/ like a slanting rain/ passes.]

In a 1928 letter to the poet and sketch writer Leonid Ravich, Maiakovskii gave these final
lines as an example of the “moaning words” [noiushchie slova] that a poet should avoid.
He says that, “in spite of all this romance-ish tenderness (the public is grabbing for
handkerchiefs), I ripped these beautiful, rain-soaked little feathers out” [nesmotria na
vsiu romansovuiu chuvstvitel’nost’ (publika khvataetsia za platki), ia eti krasivye,
podmochennye dozhdem peryshki vyrval] (Maiakovskii 11: 381). In gauging the
sincerity of Maiakovskii’s evaluation of these lines, it must be noted that his letter to
Ravich (in response to a story in verse that the twenty-year-old poet had sent) was public,
appearing in the June 1928 issue of Novyi Lef. Thus, the inclusion of the excised lines of
“Domoi!” served a dual purpose. On the surface, these lines are simply an illustration for
Ravich of how not to write. This purpose could have been accomplished in a private
letter. The fact that the letter—containing the deleted lines—was published in a public
forum means that the missing lines are, once again, brought into the light of day. That
Maiakovskii does not name “Domoi!” in his letter, calling it only one of his “awkward

60 Jakobson writes in “O pokolenii…” that Maiakovskii removed these final lines at the behest of Osip Brik
(Jakobson 293).
hippo-poems” [nevkluzhie begemoty-stikhi] is of minor significance, since the connection could be made by anyone who had seen the poem when it had first appeared in Molodaia gvardiiia.

That these lines were deleted from the authorial version of “Domoi!” means they must be given special consideration, particularly given their relevance to the present discussion. The connection of the understanding of poetry as a measure of the Soviet economy to the understanding of the poetic persona by his native country bridges the gap between last lines of the final version and the deleted ending. To those who know the excised lines, the final version ends abruptly. But there is another connection, pointing to a place further back in the poem. When the poetic persona first begins to portray himself as a factory or a piece of machinery in a factory, he asks, “[w]hy/ under foreign rains/ should I get soaked/ rot/ and rust?” (Maiakovskii 3: 251). By connecting himself, as a slanting rain, to the very element that had previously caused him to rust and rot, the poetic persona creates an interesting contrast. On the one hand, he is a mechanized cog in the Soviet economy, and, on the other, an elemental force of nature. Thus the conflict between these two images adds greater weight to the possibility, mentioned above, that the poetic persona is not fully committed to his own mechanization. Or, more specifically, that his mechanization is conditioned on this ambiguous desire for being understood. The removal of the final lines deletes this condition, making the poem more simplistic and more in line with the trends in the Soviet literature of the late 1920s. It is fortunate that most modern publications of “Domoi!” include these final lines, usually in an appendix, since the complexity that these lines add to the poem is, as we have seen, essential.
These detailed examinations of “Protestuiu!” and “Domoi!” reveal a non-trivial connection between the two: both are characterized by a “fleshy” emotional interior seeping out through a mechanized exterior. In each case, this mechanized exterior gives a strong first impression, so strong that the underlying fleshiness is revealed only upon a closer reading. In both poems, there are two forces at work, often at cross-purposes. While Maiakovskii’s admiration for the example of machines is certainly sincere, it is not sufficiently loud to drown out the voice of the flesh. The interaction between these two forces is present in all of Maiakovskii’s mechanized poetry: there is no example in Maiakovskii’s writings of a poem that employs human-machine metaphors and transformations to the total exclusion of the human element. Even a portrayal of total transformation of a human into a mechanical object still maintains a deep connection with the human body. This is best demonstrated by the 1926 lyric “Tovarishchu Nette — parokhodu i cheloveku” [To Comrade Nette: Steamship and Human].

The title of this poem displays the essential dichotomy of the human that has become a machine while still retaining an essential link to his fleshy past, a connection that, in a sense, is based in reality. Teodor Ivanovich Nette was a Soviet diplomatic courier who was shot to death on 5 February 1926 while on a train from Latvia to Germany. Maiakovskii had been acquainted with Nette, since the two had traveled abroad more than once in the same train compartment. According to Pavel Lavut, the organizer of Maiakovskii’s public readings, the poet would preface his reading of this poem by describing his acquaintance with Nette, and relating his two posthumous meetings with the fallen courier. The first meeting was when, in Rostov on the day of Nette’s murder, Maiakovskii heard the paperboys shouting the news. The second such
meeting came on 28 June 1926, when, while setting out from Odessa to Yalta, Maiakovskii’s ship passed by the steamship “Teodor Nette.” As Maiakovskii described it, “[t]his was my second meeting with Nette, now not with the man, but with the steamship” [Eto byla moia vtoraya vstrecha s Nette, no uzhe ne s chelovekom, a s parokhodom] (Maiakovskii 4: 444-45). Thus, prior to his reading of the poem, Maiakovskii sets up the essential equivalency of the work: that the steamship bearing Nette’s name is Nette.

This equivalency is carried consistently throughout the poem. In the opening lines, for instance, the steamship Nette is described as Nette himself. It is through “Nette’s” actions (skewing, entering the harbor) and his appearance (smoke-stacks, hawsers, hooks) that the reader quickly makes the conclusion that the poetic persona is addressing a steamship as a person. There are no lines that describe the ship bearing his name, or being a tribute to him. The one suggestion of a division between the man and the ship are the quotation marks around “Teodor Nette” at the end of the second couplet:

Я недаром вздрогнул./ Не загробный вздор.
В порт,/ горящий,/ как расплывшее лето,
разворачивался/ и входил/ товарищ «Теодор Нетте». (Maiakovskii 4: 68)

[I gave a start with good reason./ This is no nonsense from beyond the grave./ Into the port,/ burning,/ like a melting summer,/ skewed/ and entered/ comrade Teodor/ Nette.]

Though Maiakovskii’s “preface” to the poem refers to his two posthumous meetings with Nette, the opening lines make it clear that this encounter is not meant to be understood as a conversation with someone from beyond the grave. Nette has experienced a change of state, or of physical vessel. The possibility that the ship bearing Nette’s name is somehow not at the same time Nette-the-human is rapidly eroded, starting with the
following lines, which refer to Nette as “living” [zhivoi], albeit existing in a new, transformed state:

Это — он./ Я узнаю его.
В блюдечках-очках спасательных кругов.
— Здравствуй, Нетте!/ Как я рад, что ты живой
dымной жизнью труб,/ канатов/ и крюков. (Maiakovskii 4: 68)

[It is he./ I recognize him./ In the saucer-glasses of life-savers./ “Hello Nette!/ I’m so glad you’re alive:/ the smoky life of smoke-stacks,/ hawsers/ and hooks.”]

The poetic persona’s perception of Nette’s change of state is depicted further in the following lines, which demonstrate his awareness of the physical realities of inhabiting the form of a steamship:

Подойди сюда!/ Тебе не мелко?
От Батума,/ чай, котлами покипел…
Помнишь, Нетте, —/ в бытность человеком
ты пивал чай/ со мною в дип-купе? (Maiakovskii 4: 68)

[Come over here!/ It’s not too shallow for you?/ On the way from Batum/ you likely worked your boilers…/ Do you remember, Nette/ in your human existence/ you drank tea/ with me in the diplomatic compartment?]

This question serves to transition to a depiction of a moment in Nette’s former life as a human, one in which the poetic persona had participated. (It also sidesteps, for the time being, the fact of Nette’s death.) This incident is relevant particularly in terms of its emphasis—in symmetry with the lines quoted above—on the physical realities of inhabiting Nette’s former, human body:

Медлил ты./ Захрапывали сони.
Глаз/ коса/ в печати сургуча,
напролет/ болтал о Ромке Якобсоне
и смело потел,/ стихи уча.
Засыпал к утру./ Курок/ аж палец свел…
Суньтесь —/ кому охота!
Думал ли, что через год всего
встречешь я/ с тобою —/ с пароходом. (Maiakovskii 4: 68-9)
Reading these lines gives an overall impression of struggling against the physical weakness of the human flesh, particularly sleep. The poetic persona and Nette are surrounded by people sleeping, but Nette fights against sleep, ever aware of the importance of the papers he is carrying. The description of Nette sweating as he tries to learn poetry is related to this, since it is a physical symptom of the deficiencies of the fleshy human brain. That Nette does fall asleep, albeit with his thumb on the hammer of his sidearm, is a final demonstration that the human body is weak.

The final lines of this section once again equate the steamship bearing Nette’s name with the man himself, but the fleshy past of the human that the courier had been makes its presence felt, specifically in the details of his death, which appears explicitly here for the first time in the poem:

За кормой луница./ Ну и здорово!  
Залегла,/ просторы на двое порвав.  
Будто навек/ за собой/ из битвы коридоровой  
тянешь след героя,/ светел и кровав.  (Maiakovskii 4: 69)

[Beyond your stern is the huge moon./ Wonderful!/ In setting,/ it rips the expanses in half./ As if forever/ behind you/ from that battle in the corridor/ you drag the mark of a hero,/ bright and bloody.]

Thus the steamship Nette drags behind himself a bloody trail of the flesh that had once clothed him. But this flesh is fundamentally different from the weak flesh that could not resist sleep on the train: this flesh is associated with glory in death, and is therefore worthy to be connected with the more perfect physical form of the steamship Nette.

Starting with these lines, the motif of flesh starts to become more prominent in the poem, but, as the implicit combination of the steamship Nette and the blood that had been shed
by the human Nette make apparent, this is not the flesh that was described in the bytnost’ chelovekom portion of the poem. The flesh with which this poem is concerned is the flesh we have seen in “Protestuiu!” and “Domoi!”: changed, mechanized flesh.

The image of flesh appears throughout the poem in a variety of guises, such as the image of the “essence and flesh” [estestvo i plot’] of communism, but the central image remains that of Nette’s “permanent” flesh, his ultimate reward:

В наших жилах —/ кровь, а не водица.
Мы идем/ сквозь револьверный лай,
чтобы,/ умирая,/ воплотиться
в пароходы, в строчки,/ и в другие долгие дела. (Maiakovskii 4: 70)

[In our veins/ is blood, and not holy water./ We go/ through the barking of revolvers./ so as/ in dying/ to be made incarnate/ in steamships,/ in verses,/ and in other long-lived things.]

The desire to also become a “long-lived thing” informs the entire poem, and establishes the viewpoint from which the poetic persona evaluates Nette. It is telling that the final section of the poem begins with a direct wish for immortality:

Мне бы жить и жить,/ сквозь годы мчась.
Но в конце хочу —/ других желаний нету —
встретить я хочу/ мой смертный час
так, как встретил смерть/ товарищ Нетте. (Maiakovskii 4: 70)

[I would like to live and live,/ coursing through the years./ But in the end I want—/ I have no other desires—/ I want to meet/ my hour of death/ just/ as Comrade Nette/ met his death.]

The very last lines can be read in two ways. They can suggest that the poetic persona wishes to meet his own death as bravely as did Nette. Another interpretation, and one more typical of Maiakovskii, is that the poetic persona wants to “die” in the same way that Nette “died”: to be transformed into a steamship or some other dolgoe delo. The way in which Nette “died” is also important, given Maiakovskii’s obsession with death by a bullet—best exemplified by the “period of a bullet” [tochka puli] that will end the poetic persona’s sentence in Fleita—already encountered in “Protestuiu!” In the current
poem, the bullet appears twice, in the former Nette’s revolver and in the revol’vernyi lai that represents the suffering that humans endure in order to become immortal. Also, though the poetic persona does not state it explicitly, the contemporary reader would have known that Nette’s life ended at gunpoint.

Thus the last two couplets are hemmed in by two expressions of a wish for immortality, the first direct, the second indirect. And though he mentions Nette and death in the same sentence only in the final lines, it is clear that he is not speaking of death in any permanent sense. There are kinds of immortality, though, that Maiakovskii dreaded, dolgie dela in which he did not wish to be incarnated. In her chapter on Maiakovskii (“Maiakovskii and the Myth of Immortality”) in Jakobsonian Poetics and Slavic Narrative [1992], Krystyna Pomorska draws links between “Tovarishchu Nette…” and two other poems addressed to dead men: “Jubileinoe” [The Jubilee Poem, 1924] and “Sergeiu Eseninu” [To Sergei Esenin, 1926]. The interaction between “Tovarishchu Nette…” and “Jubileinoe” is particularly interesting, since both are dialogues with former humans now contained in objects, Pushkin in a monument, and Nette in his steamship.

Unlike the steamship, “a thing indestructible and useful, an object about which we do not think in temporal terms” (Pomorska 182), Pushkin’s monument is, in Maiakovskii’s conception, an affront to the living being it contains. Pomorska writes:

Maiakovskii’s overall attitude toward monuments was one of resentment. He considered them a particular form of antienergy, a “deathliness” harmful to life. Monuments, which represent the hostile past, render not only passive matter but also the duration of death, frozen into a human shape. In concert with the entire avant-garde group, Maiakovskii attacked monuments, both old ones and those erected after the Revolution. (Pomorska 179)

Thus the “immortality” of a monument not only is not immortality, but serves rather to amplify death. In “Jubileinoe,” the poetic persona refers to monuments as “dead meat”
[mertvechina], and in Pro Eto as “marble slime” [mramornaia sliz’]. The steamship Nette, on the other hand, is “living” [zhivoi]. Permanence alone is not sufficient for Maiakovskii. Rather, the immortality he covets is subject to certain conditions; there are versions of immortality that are worse than death itself.

The Strugatskiis and the Death Hidden in Functional Immortality

Together with “Protestuiu” and, to a lesser extent, “Domoi,” “Tovarishchu Nette” raises the problem of the functional immortality entailed by the mechanization of the human flesh. These poems are directly related to some key works by the Strugatskiis, whose explorations of mechanized flesh are all concerned with the moral and emotional consequences of functional immortality. Making connections between these two sets of works should suggest an outline of how attitudes towards artificial immortality evolved in the decades between Maiakovskii’s heyday and that of the Strugatskiis.

“Svechi pered pul’tom” [Candles Before the Control Board]—one of the stories in Polden’: XXII vek, is a short account of an attempt to ensure one man’s immortality by encoding the contents of his brain and storing them in a “biomass” medium. In this story, the Strugatskiis take the analogical similarities between machines and the human mind to a logical extreme, in this case using a machine as a storage medium for human consciousness. The title of the story refers to one aspect of the procedure: in the interests of eliminating all possible electrical interference in the vicinity of the so-called Great Encoding [Velikoe kodirovanie], no electricity or electronic devices are permitted near the fictional Novosibirsk Institute for Biological Encoding at which the project is taking place. This technical consideration is used to great artistic effect by the Strugatskiis:
these people of the future are forced to work by candlelight and to light their paths by torchlight, drenched with the rain from clouds specially provided to protect the site from direct solar radiation. The sole futuristic detail of the story is the dress of the researchers: silvery lab coats with hoods meant to mask the wearer’s own biological interference.

Adding to the mystery of the story is the point of view from which it is told, i.e. that of Nikolai Zvantsev, an oceanographer who arrives at the site of the project with only a dim idea of what is going on. His goal is to convey some final message to his colleague, the academician Okada, who is the object of the Great Encoding. Both the dim, candlelit hall of the institute and the confused atmosphere of exhausted researchers working or sleeping wherever they fall draw parallels with the atmosphere surrounding the slow death of an important figure. Zvantsev claims to have information that Okada has been seeking his entire life, but neither Okada, nor the reader, ever learns the nature of this information. Zvantsev never gets to see Okada, but rather wanders through the halls of the institute, understanding nothing.

The fact that the actual procedure carried out on Okada’s person is kept hidden from the reader leaves a great deal open to the imagination, a pre-Попытка к бегству permutation of the Strugatskiis’ отказ от обяснении, mentioned in the introduction. While there is little in the story to allow the reader to draw conclusions about the procedure, there is a striking connection between Zvantsev’s mental image of the procedure and the following passage from Wiener’s61 The Human Use of Human Beings: Cybernetics and Society (1950):

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61 This is not meant to suggest that the Strugatskiis read Wiener, though they doubtless would have been familiar with his works through secondary sources, but merely to demonstrate how widespread the ideas of this founder of cybernetics had become in the Soviet Union.
Any scanning of the human organism must be a probe going through all parts, and must have a greater or less tendency to destroy tissue on its way. To hold an organism stable while part of it is being slowly destroyed, with the intention of recreating it out of other material elsewhere, involves a lowering of its degree of activity, which in most cases we should consider to prevent life in the tissue. (Wiener 110)

Zvantsev’s mental picture of the procedure is strangely similar to Wiener’s description:

Званцев почти ничего не знал о кодировании нервных связей, и ему представлялось, что Окада лежит на странном столе под белым смертным светом, тонкая игла медленно ползет по извилинам его обнаженного мозга, и на длинную ленту знак за знаком ложатся сигналы импульсов. Званцев отлично понимал, что в действительности это происходит совсем иначе, но воображение рисовало ему именно такую картину: блестящая игла ползет по мозгу, а на бесконечную ленту таинственными значками записываются память, привычки, ассоциации, опыт... А откуда-то наползает смерть, разрушая клетку за клеткой, связь за связью. И нужно ее обогнать. (Strugatskii 2: 219)

We might be able to derive the success or failure of the Great Encoding from the fact that it is not mentioned again in subsequent works that take place in the Mir Poludnia universe. In the end, Okada dies with two percent of his brain remaining to be encoded, and whether the project was a success or a failure is not immediately clear. As Zvantsev, following the conclusion of the project, looks around at the researchers sleeping and eating voraciously, he thinks to himself:

«На похороны это не похоже!» – подумал Званцев. Он знал, что Окада умер, но в это не верилось. Казалось, что академик просто заснул, только никто пока не знает, как его разбудить. Ничего, узнают. «Девяносто восемь процентов, – подумал он. – Совсем не плохо». (Strugatskii 2: 221)
[“This certainly doesn’t look like a funeral!” thought Zvantsev. He knew that Okada was dead, but he did not believe it. It seemed that the academician had simply fallen asleep and that no one yet knew how to wake him. But that was fine: they would figure a way out. “Ninety-eight percent,” he thought. “That’s not bad at all.”]

As Zvantsev and Mikhailov, one of the researchers at the institute, emerge from the building, the courtyard is being cleaned by the ubiquitous kibery, apparently reactivated following the conclusion of the project. It is a strange, perhaps deliberate contrast between the feeble, limited kibery and the twenty buildings with six floors extending beneath the ground that “contain” Okada’s mind. These could be meant to represent the opposite extremes of the possibilities of cybernetics, with machine-made human immortality dwarfing the tiny robotic servants.

In the end, the message of “Svechi pered pul’tom” is mixed. Post-war Russian science fiction stories in which man and machine are hybridized consistently have ambiguous or tragic results.62 In “Svechi pered pul’tom,” the fact that Zvantsev’s mission is to bring some final missive to the dying Okada would seem to convey some inherent doubt in the success of the project. After all, if Okada is to become immortal, he could receive any necessary information following his “resurrection.” On the other hand, the story ends with a brief exchange between Zvantsev and San’ka (a truck driver) that seems to suggest hope for the possibilities of biological encoding:

И весь мир вскоре узнает, что человек совсем скоро станет вечным. Не человечество, а человек, каждый отдельный человек, каждая личность. Ну, положим, сначала это будут лучшие... Званцев посмотрел на водителя.
– Товарищ, – сказал он, улыбаясь. – Хотите жить вечно?
– Хочу, – ответил водитель, тоже улыбаясь. – Да я и буду жить вечно.
– И я тоже буду. (Strugatskii 2: 223)

[And the whole world would soon learn that the human being would soon become eternal. Not humanity, but every individual human, every personality. Of course, at first it will only be the best among us… Zvantsev looked at the driver. “Comrade,” he said, smiling. “Do you want to live forever?” “Sure I do,” the driver answered, also smiling. “And I will.” “So will I,” said Zvantsev.]

At the heart of “Svechi pered pul’tom” is the idea that an individual is not defined by the body that contains him, but by his mind. As Zvantsev thinks to himself:

Великое Кодирование – это дорога к бессмертию человеческого «я», потому что человек – это не руки и ноги. Человек – это память, привычки, ассоциации, мозг. МОЗГ. (Strugatskii 2: 219)

[The Great Encoding is the road to this immortality of the human “I,” because a human is not arms and legs. A human is memory, habits, associations, the brain. The brain.]

Wiener also writes in his earlier-cited The Human Use of Human Beings that “the physical identity of an individual does not consist in the matter of which it is made” (Wiener 108). All of this is simply an alternative way of discussing the nature of the human soul. To suggest that the Strugatskiis sought to discuss religious ideas in their works might strike some as too extreme, but there are many examples of scientists in the Strugatskiis’ novels and stories following a line of scientific inquiry based largely on faith.63 The faith driving the scientists at the Novosibirsk Institute for Biological Encoding is as much a quest for knowledge and an understanding of the human mind as it is a desire to find a recipe for immortality. The buildings that contain Okada’s brain are a more technologically sophisticated version of the dolgoe delo of which the poetic persona of Maiakovskii’s “Tovarishchu Nette…” speaks.

It is important to reiterate that the immortality that the Great Encoding represents is not certain: even the fact of the achievement remains an open question at the end of the story. Also ambiguous is the question of whether or not the project is worth doing.

63 See, for example, the story “Estestvoznanie v mire dukhov” [Natural Science in the World of Spirits, 1960], in which scientists use the abilities of individuals with extra-sensory perceptions to search for proof of the existence of parallel universes.
Zvantsev’s evaluation of the project as he sees it hovers between admiration and confusion, leaving the reader with a muddled picture at the very least. However, the final exchange between Zvantsev and the driver seems to make it clear that being uploaded into immortality is desirable. There is an implication that Okada, in his new state of being, is no longer accessible to ordinary humans. As in “Tovarishchu Nette…,” the reader gets no glimpse into the perspective of the immortal “in the metal,” whose point of view might well be terrifying. At any rate, these immortals are fundamentally different from the humans from which they have emerged. This problem of the benefit of mechanized flesh and mind and the separation from the rest of humanity that this entails is confronted by the Strugatskiis again—this time with considerably less ambiguity—in \textit{Dalekaia Raduga [Distant Rainbow, 1962]}. 

This novella takes place on Raduga, a planet devoted entirely to physics research, a sort of Akademgorodok on a grander scale. All research on the planet revolves around the problem of instant-matter transportation (\textit{nul’-transportirovka}). Associated with the matter transport experiments is a side effect: highly destructive waves of energy that originate from the destination of transport and destroy everything in their path before dissipating. The largest experiment yet, conducted at the beginning of the novel, creates waves of unprecedented size that threaten to wipe out all life on the planet. Most of the action of the novel proceeds against the backdrop of this impending disaster. When the scope of the catastrophe becomes clear, all of the characters of the novel are focused on questions of who can be saved and how. It may come as no surprise to find out that \textit{Dalekaia Raduga} was inspired by the nuclear brinkmanship of the early 1960s, but
particularly by Stanley Kramer’s 1959 film *On the Beach*, which the Strugatskiis saw at a secret screening in Moscow in 1962 during a conference of writers and critics working in science fiction (Strugatskii 3: 683).

It might seem hard to believe that a place could be found for the moral and ethical problems associated with the mechanization of the flesh and functional immortality amidst the chaos of a planetwide disaster. Yet the Strugatskiis manage to do just this in one of their most memorable characters, the cyborg Kamill. Though his true nature is not revealed until late in the novel, hints that Kamill is, in fact, “more than human” accompany the cyborg from his very first appearance at the observation post of the young physicist Robert Skliarov. Skliarov is enjoying the company of his girlfriend Tatiana, a teacher, when she notices Kamill standing in the shadows. Kamill claims that he was not violating their privacy, because he was not looking at them and not listening to what they were saying *[ia ne smotrel na vas i ne slyshal, chto vy govorite]* (Strugatskii 3: 1313). It is perfectly reasonable to conclude that he was telling the truth, since he would be able to disable any of his senses at will.

For the present discussion, and for the Strugatskiis, the central question of Kamill is not that he represents a successful mechanization of the human body, but, as with the

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64 The film *On the Beach* was adapted from Nevil Shute’s 1957 novel of the same name.

65 This was not the Strugatskiis’ first exploration of the problems of nuclear weapons: the first published work of either of the brothers was “Pepel Bikini” [Ash of the Bikini Atoll, 1954] written by Arkadii Strugatskii and Lev Petrov, with whom Strugatskii was then serving in the Far East. The story was a reaction to the Bikini Atoll tests (Strugatskii 2003, 14), and first appeared in issue 5, 1956 of the journal *Dal’ni Vostok [The Far East]* (Borisov 2: 460).

66 It is perhaps not accidental that Skliarov, ultimately one of the most flawed and human characters in the novella, would be given a name that is associated with robots in early post-war science fiction. Robbie was the title character in the first story in Asimov’s *I, Robot*, a book which enjoyed consistent popularity in the Soviet Union. Varshavskii appears to have borrowed this name for his 1962 story “Robi,” about a robot who is more of a nuisance than a “universal machine.” Finally, it should be noted that Kamill refers to Skliarov only as “Robbie” [Robi]. Tania calls him mostly “Rob” and “Robik,” though she does refer to him as Robi once (Strugatskii 3: 129).
encoding of Okada’s brain, whether Kamill’s transition from human to cyborg was worth doing. The exploration of this question forms a dialogue with Maiakovskii and his conflicted desire to improve the human form and make it more permanent. Beyond allowing for the existence of emotions (pust’ serdtse, dazhe dusha), one of the areas of inquiry that Maiakovskii does not explore extensively is the inner life of the mechanized human. (Recall that the steamship Teodor Nette is mute, and therefore cannot share his inner life with the poetic persona of that poem.) This is the very question the Strugatskiis aim to explore in the person of Kamill: what is the nature of the inner life of a human who has had his humanity excised and replaced by metal and circuits?

Given that Kamill appears in a limited number of scenes in Dalekaia Raduga, the Strugatskiis must operate under certain time constraints in getting at the “heart” of the cyborg’s existence. They make optimal use of their time in two ways. The first, and perhaps more obvious, method that they employ is to present physical descriptions of the cyborg that are suggestive of his inner existence. The second method is to have other characters talk about Kamill as a third party, thus explicitly confronting questions that might arise in the reader.

Suggestive physical descriptions of Kamill accompany the cyborg from his very first appearance at Skliarov’s observation post. He is shown to be awkward, and “put together” in a way that is strongly indicative of his non-human nature:

Камилл, как всегда, сидел в очень неудобной, удивительно неприятной для глаз позе. Как всегда, на нем была белая пластмассовая каска, закрывающая лоб и уши, и, как всегда, лицо его выражало снисходительную скуку, и ни любопытства, ни смущения не было в его круглых немигающих глазах. (Strugatskii 3: 131)

[Kamill, as always, sat in a very uncomfortable position, which was unpleasant to look at. As always, he wore his white plastic helmet that covered his forehead and ears. As always, his face
expressed a condescending boredom, and there was neither curiosity nor confusion in his round, unblinking eyes.]

Besides hinting that Kamill is not completely human, the cyborg’s awkward position places in the reader’s mind the suggestion that Kamill’s life as an “improved” human is not to be envied. Further details are also revealing. The lack of curiosity and confusion in the cyborg’s eyes is a better indication of his non-humanness than any mechanical metaphor, but the physical attributes (the ever-present white plastic helmet, the unblinking eyes) are also very telling. Though there are no descriptions of Kamill in the novella as mechanical or “metal,” the aggregate of hints that builds up over the course of the narrative is, in a way, more effective than directly confronting the cyborg’s mechanical “innards.” This is particularly true given the cultural context in which Soviet science fiction writers worked, one in which metallic attributes were long associated with heroism and Socialist Realist vyderzhka. By refusing to describe Kamill in terms of steel and iron, the Strugatskiis effectively cut him off from this heroic tradition, rendering any instinctive admiration for him on the part of the Soviet reader all the more difficult. In this way, Kamill’s pitiful status as a less-than-human cyborg is built into the language of the novella itself. Another telling moment within this constellation of descriptions occurs when Skliarov mentally compares Kamill to a Jung meter [schetchik Iunga], a device used by the physicists on Raduga. When Kamill attempts to smile, Skliarov thinks to himself that “a Jung meter could smile that way” [Tak mog by ulybat’sia schetchik Iunga]. A few sentences later, Kamill is looking at the readout of the Jung meter itself, and it strikes Skliarov that Kamill seems to be “looking into a mirror” [Sloveno v zerkalo gliadelsia] (Strugatskii 3: 132). Comparison to a glorified calculator is no way to paint an admirable picture of a mechanized being. Furthermore, Kamill’s distance from
humanity has been explicitly emphasized by Boris Strugatskii in answer to a question on the on-going “off-line” interview conducted on the website “Russkaia fantastika,” where he refers to Kamill as a sushchestvo [being, creature], and adds parenthetically “(I do not say human)” [Ia ne govoriu — cheloveka].

Within the text itself, it is mainly through the second method—conversations about Kamill—that the Strugatskiis make unambiguous the novella’s stance on mechanized humans. Before discussing these conversations, it will be necessary to supply some additional background information about the novella. Study of the wave phenomenon had resulted in two physics camps on Raduga: those who study matter transportation (the nuleviki) and those who study the Wave (the volnoviki). The two groups vie not for funding but for energy: all of the experiments conducted on Raduga require enormous amounts of energy, supplied for the most part by so-called ul’motrny, relatively small devices with an extremely high energy output. All this information is important to provide the backdrop before which a rambling conversation about science and human existence takes place in the third chapter of the novel. This discussion is held among various researchers who have flown from all of the corners of Raduga in order to wait in line for the distribution of the most recent shipment of ul’motrny, brought from Earth by Leonid Gorbovskii (perhaps the Strugatskiis’ most ubiquitous character) and his crew on their ship, the Tariel’-2. Gorbovskii himself participates in the conversation because he is unable to gain access to his ship: prior to his arrival at the landing pad

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67 Boris Strugatskii is describing Kamill’s fate, hence the genitive case.

several of the researchers attempt to gain access by claiming to be members of the ship’s crew, and the true captain of the ship is taken for another pretender.

The conversation touches on a wide range of topics relevant to Soviet science, but two moments are particularly relevant to the present discussion. In the first, Gorbovskii recalls the so-called “Massachusetts Machine” experiment, during which a computer, once activated, “began to control itself” [nachala vesti sebia] (Strugatskii 3: 176). Following this story, the conversation moves on to the Devil’s Dozen, i.e., Kamill and his colleagues:

Альпа проворчал:
— Каждому времени свои злые волшебники и привидения.
— Кстати, о злых волшебниках, — подхватил Горбовский. — Я немедленно вспоминаю о казузе Чертовой Дюжины.
У Ганса горели глаза.
— Казус Чертовой Дюжины — как же! — сказал Банин. — Тринадцать фанатиков... Кстати, где они сейчас?
— Позвольте, позвольте, — сказал Альпа. — Это те самые ученые, которые сращивали себя с машинами? Но ведь они же погибли.
— Говорят, да, — сказал Горбовский, — но ведь не в этом дело. Прецедент создан.
— А что, — сказал Банин. — Их называют фанатиками, но в них, по-моему, есть что-то притягательное. Избавиться от всех этих слабостей, страстей, вспышек эмоций... Голый разум плюс неограниченные возможности совершенствования организма. Исследователь, которому не нужны приборы, который сам себе прибор и сам себе транспорт. И никаких очередей за ультратронами... Я это себе прекрасно представляю. Человек-флаер, человек-реактор, человек-лаборатория. Неуязвимый, бессмертный...
— Прошу прощения, но это не человек, — проворчал Альпа. — Это Массачусетская машина.
— А как же они погибли, если они бессмертны? — спросил Ганс.
— Разрушили сами себя, — сказал Горбовский. — Видимо, не сладко быть человеком-лабораторией. (Strugatskii 3: 176-177)
of all of those weaknesses, passions, emotional outbursts... Bare intellect, plus unbounded possibilities for physical perfection. A researcher who has no need for instruments, who is his own instrument and his own means of transport. And no waiting in line for ulmotrons... I can imagine it perfectly. A human plane, a human reactor, a human laboratory. Invulnerable, immortal...” “Forgive me, but that’s not a human,” muttered Al’pa. “That’s a Massachusetts Machine.” “So how did they die if they were immortal?” asked Hans. “They destroyed themselves,” said Gorbovskii. “It seems that being a human laboratory is not all it’s cracked up to be.”]

This passage raises a host of issues, each of which merits individual attention. In the first place is the young (he is described as a iunosha [3: 170]) scientist Banin’s unambiguous admiration for the Devil’s Dozen in particular, and the idea of mechanized human flesh in general. It is not at all a stretch to draw a direct link from Banin to the poetic persona of “Protestuiu!” Banin’s evaluation of the quest of these failed cyborgs to rid themselves of fleshy weaknesses is of one piece with the yearning of the poetic personae both of “Protestuiu!” and its draft version. In both “Protestuiu!” and the present passage can be seen the twin desires of physical immortality and flight, Maiakovskii’s constant poetic companions. Furthermore, both selections confront the desire to be rid of the emotions that are associated with the flesh, not with the mind. But just as Maiakovskii’s poetic persona backtracks, allowing pust’ serdtse, so does Banin.

Having just expressed admiration for the idea of stripping the mind of emotion and weakness, Banin confesses that science and logic do not in fact fill the whole of his existence:

А кто я? Да, я научный работник. Да, три четверти моего времени и три четверти моих нервов принадлежат науке. Но без искусства я тоже не могу! Вот у кого-то здесь играет проигрыватель, и мне очень хорошо. Я бы обошёлся и без проигрывателя, но с ним мне гораздо лучше... Так вот, как же я, спрашивается, расколюсь? (Strugatskii 3: 178)

[And who am I? Yes, I am a scientist. Yes, three quarters of my time and three quarters of my nerves belong to science. But I also can’t do without art! Someone here has a radio playing, and it makes me feel good. I could get by without the radio, but with it I feel much better... So, then, the question is, how will I split in two?]
Banin’s admission, and his question about splitting himself, comes as the conversation turns to Kamill—he is known by all the members of the planet’s relatively small community—and his predictions for humanity. That the issue of Kamill comes up immediately after the discussion of the Devil’s Dozen is another not-so-subtle hint of the cyborg’s true nature. Al’pa mentions Kamill’s opinion of the Wave as a phenomenon of a planetary scale (as it is already proving to be despite the ignorance of those participating the present discussion), adding that “he is very difficult to work with.”

Hans replies:

[Do you know Kamill’s take on the future? He thinks that the current enthusiasm for science is a kind of thankfullness for plenty, inertia left over from the time when a logical perception of the world was the only hope for humankind. He said: “Humankind is on the eve of a schism. Emotionalists and logicians—apparently he means art people and science people—are becoming alien to one another, are ceasing to understand one another and are ceasing to need one another. A person is born either an emotionalist or a logician. This lies in the very nature of humans. And at some point humankind will split into two societies, just as alien to one another as we are to the Leonids.”

Kamill’s evaluation of humanity’s future could be called an application of the science-fiction jumping-off point “if this goes on…” to C. P. Snow’s famous 1959 “The Two

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69 The Leonids are a non-humanoid alien race who live in an advanced, non-industrial culture that is completely integrated and in harmony with the planet’s biosphere. They are first encountered in the 1960 story “Blagoustroennaia planeta” [A Planet with All the Conveniences] and are mentioned at various points throughout the Mir Poludnia cycle.
Cultures” speech, in which it is posited that the sciences and the humanities move ever further from the intellectual common ground they used to share. Snow writes:

A good many times I have been present at gatherings of people who, by the standards of the traditional culture, are thought highly educated and who have with considerable gusto been expressing their incredulity at the illiteracy of scientists. Once or twice I have been provoked and have asked the company how many of them could describe the Second Law of Thermodynamics, the law of entropy. The response was cold: it was also negative. Yet I was asking something which is about the scientific equivalent of: Have you read a work of Shakespeare’s?

I now believe that if I had asked an even simpler question—such as, What do you mean by mass, or acceleration, which is the scientific equivalent of saying, Can you read?—not more than one in ten of the highly educated would have felt that I was speaking the same language. So the great edifice of modern physics goes up, and the majority of the cleverest people in the western world have about as much insight into it as their Neolithic ancestors would have had. (Snow 15)

The discussion of this raskol in the novella is not necessarily motivated by Snow’s speech, but is much more likely to be a result of the home-grown equivalent, sparked by Boris Slutskii’s poem “Fiziki i liriki” [Physicists and Lyricists], written the same year as “The Two Cultures.” The poem begins: “It seems that physicists are held in high esteem./ It seems that lyricists are being kept down” [Chto-to fiziki v pochete,/ Chto-to liriki v zagone] (Slutskii 1991, 1: 351). Its publication caused a significant stir in Russian society, as it was—at least at first—perceived as adding fuel to the fire that was then raging between the early proponent of cybernetics Igor Poletaev and Aleksei Liapunov and the writer Il’ia Ehrenburg. Ehrenburg had published, in the 2 September 1959 issue of Komsomol’skaia pravda, an article entitled “Otvet na odno pis’mo” [A Response to a Letter] in which he responded to a female student in Leningrad who was concerned for

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70 A translation of Snow’s speech was published by Progress in 1973 under the title Dve kul’turny. Even if this is the first Russian translation of the speech, Arkadii Strugatskii’s knowledge of English makes it at least plausible that the Strugatskiis were aware of Snow’s ideas while writing Dalekaia Raduga.

71 “Fiziki i liriki” was first published in Literaturnaia gazeta, 13 October 1959.
her friend, Iurii, who considered literature to be outdated and out of place in modern Soviet society. Ehrenburg shared the young woman’s concerns and took Iurii to task for “having developed one-sidedly” [razvivalsia odnostoronne] (Erenburg 3). The following month, on 11 October, Komosomol’skaia pravda devoted a page to the reader responses to Erenburg’s article. Among them was a letter from Poletaev submitted entitled “V zashchitu Iuriia” [In Iurii’s defense]. He asks:

Можно ли утверждать, что современная жизнь все больше следует за художниками и поэтами? Нет. Наука и техника создают мир сегодняшней эпохи, все больше влияют на вкусы, нравы, поведение человека. [...] Мы живем творчеством разума, а не чувств, поэзий идей, теорий, экспериментов, строительства. Это наша эпоха. Она требует всего человека без остатка, и некогда нам восклицать: ах Бах! ах Блок! Конечно же, они устарели и стали не в рост с нашей жизнью. Хотим мы этого или нет, они стали досугом, развлечением, а не жизнью. (Poletaev 4)

[Can it be claimed that, more and more, modern life follows artists and poets? No. Science and technology are creating the world of the present epoch, and, more and more, influence tastes, mores, human behavior. [...] We live by the creations of the mind, not of the senses, by the poetry of ideas, theories, experiments, construction. This is our epoch. [Science] requires our all, and there is no time for us to exclaim, ‘Ah, Bach! Ah, Blok!’ Of course they are outmoded and have no place in our life. Whether we like it or not, they have become a leisure activity, a diversion, and not life.]

The phrase “fiziki i liriki” became a common shorthand for the complicated relationship between science and art, and was even honored by being added to the krylatye slova dictionary (Slutskii 1989, 196). Thus an informed Soviet reader of 1962 could not read Kamill’s predictions for humanity without thinking of this issue in general, and of Slutskii’s poem in particular.

The Strugatskii return to the question of a raskol within humanity several times, most notably in Gadkie lebedi [The Ugly Swans, 1967] and Volny gasiat veter [The
The former work takes place outside of the *Mir Poludnia* universe, the latter within it. In both cases, humankind is seen in the process of splitting into two groups, but not along the *fiziki-liriki* lines that Kamill proposes. In the present work, Banin’s admission that his life would be poorer for a lack of art is the strongest possible rejection of Kamill’s prediction.

It follows, then, that Kamill’s powerful intellect is far from infallible. It will become clear over the course of this discussion that Kamill’s pronouncements say more about the cyborg himself than humanity as a whole. Skliarov’s observation that Kamill looks at the Jung meter as if looking into a mirror is telling: whatever Kamill sees is tinted by his mechanized, unblinking eyes. In the present case, Kamill’s vision of the future of humanity entails cutting along a line that runs down the center of every human being. As we shall see, the future he describes is really his own past, since the goal of the Devil’s Dozen project was to eliminate the emotional component of the human animal, leaving only pure logic. The presentation of Kamill is a step towards confronting the question of the necessity and validity of such an undertaking: what is the “quality of life” of a human whose emotional life has been cut out?

Related to this question of quality of life is the fact that Kamill is the only living member of the Devil’s Dozen: as was noted by Gorbovskii, all the others committed suicide. As a reminder of their mechanized flesh, Gorbovskii does not use any of the standard Russian terms or phrases for suicide: he says “[t]hey destroyed themselves” [*Razrushili sami sebia*] (Strugatskii 3: 177). This phrase is suggestive of the nature of the functional immortality—specifically in terms of *durability*—that is entailed by the mechanization of the flesh. Namely, it is not sufficient to kill oneself; other, more

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73 These works will be discussed at length in chapter three.
destructive means must be employed. No further details are given by Gorbovskii, and additional information on the Devil’s Dozen is not forthcoming; Kamill must serve as a representative for the entire group. Clearly, the fact that Kamill did not destroy himself along with his colleagues shows him to be an exception. But recall that it was shown above how Kamill is consistently portrayed in, if not a negative, then an unflattering light. Banin’s (qualified) comments aside, there is no character who expresses a wish to follow in the cyborg’s footsteps: the mechanization of the flesh is not presented as a desirable transformation.

Even Kamill’s functional immortality—explicitly displayed by the fact that, in the chaos of the storm driven in front of the Wave as it squeezes the planet’s populations from both poles, Skliarov sees Kamill “killed,” crushed to death by a pterokar—74—is presented in a highly ambiguous manner. Kamill does appear temporarily dead, and apparently suffered before his “death.” As Skliarov observes:

Камилл лежал под опрокинутым птерокаром, широко раскрыв круглые стеклянные глаза, и тонкие длинные пальцы его вцепились в землю, словно он пытался вытащить себя из-под разбитой машины, а может быть, ему было очень больно перед смертью. Пыль покрывала его белую куртку, пыль лежала на щеках и открытых глазах. (Strugatskii 3: 158)

[Kamill lay under the overturned pterokar, with glassy eyes opened wide and his slender fingers digging into the ground, as if he had tried to drag himself out from under the broken machine, and perhaps he had been in a great deal of pain before he died. Dust covered his white jacket, dust lay on his cheeks and on his open eyes.]

After Skliarov escapes to a temporarily safe position at the Greenfield research center, a transmission is received from Kamill warning about the approach of a second, stronger Wave. This transmission establishes, at least for Skliarov and the reader, Kamill’s

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74 A term invented by the Strugatskiis: a winged flying car.
durability. In the rush of evacuation, however, Skliarov has little time to reflect on the meaning of Kamill’s apparent deathlessness.

Kamill himself makes no attempt to show his position as enviable. The opposite, rather, is true. In the final scene of the novella, when the children of the planet have been evacuated on the single available spaceship and the rest of the inhabitants of the planet try to distract themselves as the Waves approach from two horizons, Kamill explicitly states, in a conversation with Gorbovskii, what has been implicit throughout, that he is the only remaining living member of the Devil’s Dozen. When Gorbovskii—who has heard of Kamill’s mysterious resurrection—asks, “How are things in the other world?” [Kak dela na tom svete?], Kamill replies:

— Там темно, — сказал Камилл. Он помолчал. — Сегодня я умирал и воскресал трижды. Каждый раз было очень больно. (Strugatskiî 3: 242)

[“It’s dark there,” said Kamill. He was silent for a moment. “Today I have died and been resurrected three times. And each time it was very painful.”]

These lines confirm Skliarov’s observation that Kamill was in a great deal of pain before his first “death” of the day. Of course, Skliarov could not have guessed that Kamill’s functional immortality would enable him to experience the pain of death repeatedly.

Gorbovskii’s conversation with Kamill takes place in the last pages of the novella, and, had Kamill’s last lines been his answer to Gorbovskii’s question above, the aggregate of the cyborg’s statements and the theories of those around him would give a very good body of circumstantial evidence against the mechanization of the flesh. But Kamill makes his unhappy position manifestly explicit in a monologue:

Вы любите мечтать иногда о мудрости патриархов, у которых нет ни желаний, ни чувств, ни даже ощущений. Бесплотный разум. Мозг-дальтоник. Великий Логик. Логические методы требуют абсолютной сосредоточенности. Для того чтобы что-нибудь сделать в науке, приходится днем и ночью думать об одном и том же, читать об одном и том же,
говорить об одном и том же… А куда уйдешь от своей психической призмы? От врожденной способности чувствовать… Ведь нужно любить, нужно читать о любви, нужны зеленые холмы, музыка, картины, неудовлетворенность, страх, зависть… Вы пытаетесь ограничить себя — и теряете огромный кусок счастья. И вы прекрасно сознаете, что вы его теряете. И тогда, чтобы вытравить в себе это сознание и прекратить мучительную раздвоенность, вы оскопляете себя. Вы отрываете от себя всю эмоциональную половину человеческого и оставляете только одну реакцию на окружающий мир — сомнение. «Подвергай сомнению!» — Камилль помолчал. — И тогда вас ожидает одиночество. [...] — Одиночество… — повторил он. — Вы всегда уходили от меня, люди. Я всегда был лишним, назойливым и непонятным чудаком. И сейчас вы тоже уйдете. А я останусь один. Сегодня ночью я воскресну в четвертый раз, один, на мертвой планете, заваленной пеплом и снегом… (Strugatskii 3: 243)

[“You love to dream sometimes about the wisdom of patriarchs who have no desires, no feelings, no senses even. Fleshless reason. A colorblind mind. Great Logic. Logical methods require absolute concentration. In order to do something in science, one must night and day think about the same thing, read about the same thing, talk about the same thing… But how do you step out of your psychological prism? Out of your inborn ability to feel… After all, you have to love, to read about love, you need green hills, music, paintings, dissatisfaction, fear, envy… You try to limit yourselves, and you lose an enormous piece of happiness. You are perfectly conscious of the fact that you are losing it. And then, so as to exterminate in yourselves that consciousness and to put a stop to that torturous dichotomy, you castrate yourselves. You rip out of yourselves the whole emotional half of your humanness and are left with only one reaction to the outside world: doubt. ‘Doubt everything!’” Kamill was silent. “And then what awaits you is solitude. […] Solitude…,” he repeated. “You have always gone away from me, humans. I was always a superfluous, importunate, and incomprehensible eccentric. And now you, too, will go away. And I will be left alone. Tonight I will be resurrected for the fourth time, alone, on a dead planet, buried in ash and snow…”]

This speech can be considered an expansion of a statement Kamill makes at the beginning of the conversation. In response to Gorbovskii’s comment that it must be boring to know everything, Kamill replies, “[t]here are things more boring than that. […] I am sick of everything. It was a huge mistake” [Est’ veshchi poskuchnee. […] Mne vse nadoelo. Eto bylo ogromnaia oshibka] (Strugatskii 3: 242). Kamill’s speech—really a description of himself—is an elucidation of this mistake, as well as a counterexample to Zvantsev’s statement in “Svechi pered pul’tom” that a human being consists of the mind alone. Significantly, Gorbovskii has no rejoinder to Kamill’s monologue, and, besides the words of a song sung by some other characters in the background, the cyborg’s are
the last words of the novella. There is a clear dialogue, moreover, between Kamill’s speech and the song, the lyrics of which are a 1959 poem⁷⁵ by the Soviet poet Samuil Marshak:

Когда, как темная вода,
Лихая, лютая беда
Была тебе по грудь,
Ты, не склоняя головы,
Смотрела в прорезь синевы
И продолжала путь. (Marshak 5: 115; quoted in Strugatskii 3: 243)

[When, like dark water,/ Evil, cruel misfortune/ came up to your chest,/ You, not bowing your head,/ Looked into the opening of azure/ and continued on your way.]

It is conceivable that the Strugatskiis chose this poem for the remarkable intersection of imagery between Marshak’s prorez’ sinevy and the terrible picture of the two black walls of the Wave closing in from two horizons, framing what is left of Raduga’s sky. As if to emphasize exactly this connection, the final descriptive lines of the novella mention the “narrow, deep blue opening of sky” [uzkaia, temno-siniaia prorez’ neba] hemmed in by the two black walls (Strugatskii 3: 244). This being said, the context in which the poem was written provides further justification for including this particular lyric. Marshak wrote this poem upon the death of his friend, the writer and one-time editor of the children’s literature section of the Leningrad office of Detgiz, Tamara Gabbe.⁷⁶ Marshak’s poem is engraved on Gabbe’s gravestone (Marshak 5: 648). With knowledge of the context in which the poem was written, it is impossible not to see these lines as a gravestone inscription for all the inhabitants of Raduga who are facing certain death. The poem, moreover, is sung by a group of the “zero test pilots” [nul’-pereletchiki] who

⁷⁵ This poem first appeared in Znamia, book 12, 1959, as part of the cycle Iz liricheskoi tetradi [From the Lyric Notebook] (Marshak 5: 648).

⁷⁶ Born in 1903, Gabbe died in 1960, her health having been broken by living under the Leningrad Blockade (Chukovskaia 130).
would have been the first living, human test subjects of the instant-matter transportation 
technology, one of whom has been blinded in an attempt to fly over the Wave. These 
humans, then, have been confronting their own mortality for many months. So the 
contrast between Kamill’s bleak description of his own inescapable immortality and the 
humans’ calm acceptance of the mortality that is literally racing to meet them could not 
be more stark. One is reminded of Chekhov’s observation in his 17 December 1890 letter 
to his friend, the journalist Aleksei Suvorin:

Мне кажется, что жить вечно было бы так же трудно, как всю жизнь не спать. (Chekhov letters 4: 146) [It seems to me that to live forever would be just as difficult as not sleeping for one's whole life.]

Thus the Strugatskiis’ presentation of Kamill reflects some older truths.

One of the central ideas of Kamill’s speech is that the removal of the emotional 
content of the human being is a terrible mistake. It is for this reason that he is cut off 
from the emotion that is enabling the other inhabitants of Raduga to cope with their 
impending deaths. In light of the fact that his resurrections were painful, Kamill’s 
expectation of loneliness on a dead planet reveals a longing for death and, consequently, 
an envy for the mortal humans to whose numbers he no longer belongs. Thus it is clear 
that Kamill’s functional immortality is a curse, and the very traits that Banin claimed to 
admire in the putative mechanized human (neuiazvymi, bessmertyi...) are what make 
his existence unbearable. Since Kamill has been shown to survive three encounters with 
the destructive power of the Wave, it is unclear just what can kill him. However, from

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77 Perhaps as a nod to Strel’ka, Belka, Laika, and the other dogs who were the test subjects of the early Soviet space program, the Strugatskiis mention that the first living test subjects of nul’-tranzportiroka were dogs. Like Laika, these dogs do not survive: they emerge at the other end of the process as “lumps of organic shellac” [kom’iami organicheskogo shlaka] (Strugatskii 3: 134).

78 I am indebted to Dr. Radislav Lapushin—one of my readers—for bring Chekhov’s observation to my attention.
the example of the other members of the Devil’s Dozen, it is known that their experiment
did not create fully immortal beings. The example of Kamill’s destroyed colleagues,
together with the cyborg’s demonstrated durability lead to an unambiguous conclusion:
for Kamill, the only escape from functional immortality is suicide.

Significantly, Kamill does choose this way out, but only much later. During a
conversation in the 1984 novella *Volny gasiat veter*, it is revealed that Kamill has, at
last, ended his existence:

> Ну, сам факт самоубийства, а точнее сказать — саморазрушения этого несчастного Камилла, никаких сомнений не вызывал. Но непонятно было: почему? То есть понятно было, что жилось ему несладко, последние сто лет своей жизни он был совершенно один… Мы с тобой такого одиночества и представить себе не способны… Но я не об этом. (Strugatskii 8: 618)

[Well, the simple fact of the suicide, or, to be more accurate, the self-demolition of that unhappy Kamill raised no doubts. But what was incomprehensible was why? Of course it was understood that he had been through a lot, and that he had been completely alone for the last hundred years of his life… You and I are simply not capable of imagining such loneliness… But that’s not what I’m here to talk about.]

Besides the “person” of Kamill and the memory of the suicides of the Devil’s Dozen,
there are two additional direct links in this excerpt to *Dalekaia Raduga*. Firstly, the
means by which Kamill ends his “life” is described as *samorazrushenie*, an echo of
Gorbovskii’s description of the other suicides: *razrushili sami sebia*. Additionally, there
is a link in the evaluation of the quality of life of the cyborgs in aggregate. Recall that
Gorbovskii gives, as the reason for their suicides, that *vidimo, nesladko byt’ chelovekom-
laboratoriei*. Here the speaker says about Kamill *zhilos’ emu nesladko*. These links
strongly suggest that Kamill could not escape the fate of his colleagues, and that his more
than a century of existence following the initial experiment was merely an aberration that

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79 The conversation in question is between Toivo Glumov, the protagonist of the novella, and Grisha Serosovin, his coworker. This work will be discussed in great detail in chapter three.
delayed the inevitable. Finally, the mere fact of the suicides of Kamill and the rest should be considered in the greater context of the Strugatskiis’ works. Though they often confront difficult moral questions, the works of the Mir Poludnia are the Strugatskiis’ most positive and optimistic. There are suicides in darker works such as the 1971 novella Piknik na obochine [Roadside Picnic], the novel Grad obrechennyi [The Doomed City], or the novella Za milliard let do kontsa sveta [A Billion Years Until the End of the World] (both written in 1974), but the suicides of Kamill and his colleagues are the only such in the entire Polden’ cycle. Certainly the question of whether or not a machine can commit suicide could be used to argue that these were not technically suicides. The response to this challenge might be that the members of the Devil’s Dozen had already committed suicide when they undertook to combine themselves with machines. But whenever the suicides can be said to have occurred, the fact of their having happened makes a very strong and final statement about the Strugatskiis’ opinions of the improvement of humans by combination with machines.

This negative evaluation of mechanized immortality was not lost on the Strugatskiis’ contemporaries. Georgii Gurevich (1917 – 1998), author of the utopian novel My – iz Solnechnoi sistemy [We are from the Solar System, 1965] and other classics of Soviet science fiction, wrote in his 1967 study of science fiction Karta strany fantazii [A Map of the Land of Fantasy]:

Всего за четыре года до «Далекой Радуги» я потратил, наверное, тысячу литературно-лошадиных сил, стараясь доказать, что мечта об удлинении жизни, в принципе неограниченном — до ста, пятисот, тысячи

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80 Gurevich is almost certainly referring to his article “Skol’ko my budem zhiti?” This piece of popular-science theorizing—published in Znanie — sila, (9) 1959—questions that there exists an upper limit for human longevity. The idea of defeating old age, or even death, is one of Gurevich’s favorite themes, one to which he returns in My — iz Solnechnoi sistemy, as well as in the story “Igra v ‘nichego ne vyidet’” [A Game of “Nothing Will Come of It,” 1964].
лет, не противоречит биологической науке. Прошло всего четыре года, и
оказалось, что через все мои трудности можно просто переступить,
нарисовать Камилла, бессмертного, как Христос, и обсуждать, что хорошего
dаст ему бессмертие. У Стругацких — ничего хорошего… (Gurevich 117)

[Only four years before Dalekaia Raduga I wasted, probably, a thousand units of literary
horsepower in an attempt to prove that the dream of extending life—in principle unbounded—to
one hundred, five hundred, a thousand years is not in conflict with biological science. Only four
years went by, and it turned out that one could simply step over all of my obstacles by painting
Kamill, deathless like Christ, and to consider what good immortality will give him. According to
the Strugatskiis, nothing good…]

Since Gurevich is not considering the means by which Kamill was made immortal, but
rather the implications of this transformation, his reaction demonstrates that the
presentation of Kamill’s existence as bleak and pointless is unambiguous. Gurevich
wrote Karta strany fantazii long before the “news” of Kamill’s suicide in Volny gasiat
vetra, but his reaction is just as predictive of this end as the logic established in Dalekaia
Raduga. Hence, no long-time reader of the Strugatskiis could have read of the cyborg’s
suicide in 1984 without a nod of recognition and understanding.

It would seem that the central purpose of the Devil’s Dozen in the Strugatskiis’
works is to examine the problem of immortality. The interplay between suicide and
functional immortality that this problem confronts brings together two themes that played
long and crucial roles in Maiakovskii’s poetry. Whether it is intentional or not, the
problem of the Devil’s Dozen is directly relevant to analogous problems in Maiakovskii’s
works. A catalogue of the poet’s repeated returns to the theme of suicide could be the
subject of a separate dissertation. It should suffice to quote Roman Jakobson, who, in his
1931 article “O pokolenii rastrativshem svoikh poetov” [On a Generation That
Squandered Its Poets], countered those who expressed disbelief and amazement that
Maiakovskii could have committed suicide by asking the question: “[c]ould these men of
letters have forgotten or so misunderstood All That Majakovskij Composed?” [Neuzheli
Suicide and immortality are certainly in direct conflict with one another, a conflict that can only be resolved by functional immortality, i.e. an immortality that depends solely on the “immortal” being. The result, as can be seen in the thought experiment of Kamill, is a version of Kirillov’s philosophy of suicide in Dostoevskii’s *Besy* [*Demons*, 1871] that the existence of God depends on the human fear of death, and that the elimination of this fear would be equivalent to the destruction of God. In this way, humans become God, and, as Kirillov says in a conversation with Anton, Dostoevskii’s narrator, “[a]ll freedom will be when it is a matter of indifference, to live or to die. This is the goal of everything” [*Vsia svoboda budet togda, kogda budet vse ravno, zhit’ ili ne zhit’. Vot vsemu tsel’*] (Dostoevskii 7: 123). Kirillov even goes so far as to make a prediction that is directly relevant to Kamill’s altered physical state:

**Будет Богом человек и переменится физически. И мир переменится, и дела переменятся, и мысли, и все чувства.** (Dostoevskii 7: 124)

[Man will be God and will change physically. And the world will change, and all concerns will change, and thought, and all feelings.]

The linking of an absence of fear before death and the altering of the human physical state brings the conversation directly back to Maiakovskii. For Maiakovskii, the fear of death would be abolished by eliminating death entirely. Nonetheless, to return to the poet’s most effective and beautiful exploration of functional immortality, “Tovarishchu Nette, parokhodu i cheloveku,” it can be shown that the lack of fear before death and the lack of death itself are not necessarily mutually contradictory states. As was demonstrated above, Nette’s facing down of death is rewarded by an elimination of death, by immortality in this world. So, the Christian reward of life everlasting for a life
properly lived is not done away with, but merely transferred, as in the lines “We go/
through the barking of revolvers,/ so as/ in dying/ to be made incarnate/ in steamships,/ in
verses, and in other long-lived things” [My idem/ skvoz’ revol’vernyi lai,/ chtoby,/ umiraia,/ voplotit’sia/ v parokhody,/ v strochki,/ i v drugie dolgie dela] (Maiakovskii 4:
70). For the Strugatskiis, or at least for Kamill, it is perfectly clear that becoming a
dolgoe delo is a prison sentence. From this perspective, the image of Teodor Nette
permanently incarnated in a steamship is horrible to contemplate, akin to Pushkin trapped
in his monument in “Jubileinoe” or Peter the Great imprisoned in his own city in the
earlier “Posledniaia peterburgskaia skazka” [The Final Petersburg Tale, 1916]. Perhaps
this observation begins to explain why Maiakovskii, at least subconsciously, chose not to
depict the point of view of Nette-the-steamship, lest the lyric come to resemble Peter’s
imprisonment.

It is arguable that all explorations of the problems of immortality—in the
twentieth-century Russian context at least—can be traced back to the ideas of the
underground Christian philosopher Nikolai Fedorov and his Filosofiia obshchego dela
[Philosophy of the Common Task], a collection of writings that was published just after
his death in 1903. In this book, the philosopher argues for the need to use technology to
resurrect all those who have ever died. Brown writes that Maiakovskii’s personal desire
for immortality of the flesh—most famously expressed by his poetic persona’s appeal to
the chemist of the future in his 1923 poem Pro Eto—was closely linked with his
understanding of Fedorov’s ideas (Brown 256). The concept and possibility of functional
immortality was in the air in 1920, as recounted by Irene Masing-Delic in the opening

During his lecture tours of Russia in the early 1920’s, Ilya Erenburg was often asked whether communism would overcome death. [...] Nikolai Berdyayev reports that at a meeting of an anarchist club he attended in 1919, a biochemist stated that “since the maximum social programme had already been put into practice, ‘the cosmic resurrection of the dead’” would occur at any moment. [...] This statement was greeted with “an uproar of laughter” but apparently not with the incredulity an audience would display if it was hearing this sort of thing for the first time. (Masing-Delic 1)

Masing-Delic has covered this topic thoroughly, and there is no need to repeat the details here, except perhaps to restate her observation that, in Soviet culture, the Christian afterlife was not abolished, just secularized. It should suffice to observe that the depiction of immortality in the early Soviet period, Maiakovskii’s among them, were very much in the utopian mode, usually considering only the positive implications of living forever. The Strugatskiis consider the problem much more dispassionately, and it would seem that their depiction of Kamill is the more rigorous thought experiment. Had the poetic persona of “Tovarishchu Nette…” allowed the man-as-steamship to speak, then his words might have prefigured Kamill’s.

Thus far, we have considered two points of view regarding Kamill’s existence as a cyborg: humans’ attempts to understand him, and his attempts to understand himself. The question left open concerns Kamill’s relationship and his set of responsibilities to the humanity to which he is still tenuously connected. To once again frame the issue in terms of “Tovarishchu Nette…,” we must attempt to find Kamill’s equivalent—if it exists—to Nette’s continued service to humanity as a mode of transport. Thus it is necessary to mention the abilities that Kamill’s status as a cyborg give him *beyond* functional immortality. These abilities, never explicitly demonstrated, potentially come
under the heading of those listed by Banin: “a human plane, a human reactor, a human laboratory.” When he admits his strange provenance to Gorbovskii, Kamill gives an explicit explanation for why he does not use his super-human abilities:

— Камилл, скажите мне правду. Я никак не могу понять. Вы человек? Не стесняйтесь. Я уже никому не успею рассказать.
Камилл подумал.
— Не знаю, — сказал он. — Я последний из Чертовой Дюжины. Опыт не удался, Леонид. Вместо состояния «хочешь, но не можешь» состояние «можешь, но не хочешь». Это невыносимо тоскливо — мочь и не хотеть.
Горбовский слушал, закрыв глаза.
— Да, я понимаю, — проговорил он. — Мочь и не хотеть, это от машины. А тоскливо — это от человека.
— Вы ничего не понимаете, — сказал Камилл. (Strugatskii 3: 242-43)

[“Tell me the truth, Kamill. I can’t understand it. Are you a human? Don’t be shy. I won’t have time to tell anyone anyway.” Kamill thought for a moment. “I don’t know,” he said. “I am the last of the Devil’s Dozen. The experiment failed, Leonid. Instead of the condition of wanting something, but not being able to do it, you have the condition of being able to do something, but not wanting to. It’s unbearably depressing to be able but not to want.” Gorbovskii listened, his eyes closed. “Yes, I understand,” he said. “To be able and to not want, that’s from the machine. But the depression, that’s from the human.” “You don’t understand anything,” said Kamill...]”

Thus Kamill presents himself as a being to whom great abilities have been given, but who cannot summon the will or desire to use those abilities. In his essay about the Strugatskiis’ works, “Ot zvezd – k ternovomu venku” [From the Stars to a Crown of Thorns, 2001], Leonid Filippov compares Kamill to the “anti-moral” [vnemoral’nyi] God of the Old Testament, “incapable of sympathy, thinking only in terms of expediency” [ne sposobnyi sochuvstvovat’, mysliashchii lish’ v kategoriakh tselesoobraznosti] (Filippov 11: 657). 81 At the same time, he forms an interesting

81 Filippov’s observation is consistent with a statement by Boris Strugatskii in answer to another question on the “off-line” interview, where he describes Kamill as having “the lot of a god, forced to live among humans, with whom he is bored, but without whom he is somehow miserable” [sud’ba boga, vynuzhennogo zhit’ sredi liudei, s kotorymi emu ne interesno, a bez kotorykh emu pochemu-to toskliv] (Strugatskii 2009, 158).
opposition by framing Gorbovskii as the loving God of the New Testament, characterized by limitless kindness [dobra]. Filippov’s evaluation of Kamill is in many ways the perfect summation of the cyborg, all-powerful, but distant. At the same time, the fact that Kamill’s life can be ended by Kamill alone makes the cyborg God according to Kirillov’s rubric, but only partially. Recall that Kamill describes each of his resurrections as ochen’ bol’no, and compare this fact to Kirillov’s description of the hypothetical novyi chelovek:

Кому будет все равно, жить или не жить, тот будет новый человек. Кто победит боль и страх, тот сам бог будет. (Dostoevskii 7: 123)

[He who does not care whether he lives or dies will be the new man. He who conquers pain and fear, he himself will be God.]

Thus Kamill is trapped between these two torturous problems, free from fear, but prisoner to pain. He is not Kirillov’s man-God, but merely a powerful, indestructible cripple. This split existence is a key source of the cyborg’s indifference towards life, both his own and that of others.

The best expression of Kamill’s indifference can be found in what Matvei Viazanitsyn, the “director” of the planet, calls his “mania” [mania] for making predictions. Kamill’s predictions are such that humans seem unable to understand them. But, knowing how the novella ends, it is clear upon a second reading that Kamill is constantly dropping hints about the doom that awaits the planet. For instance, at the end of the first chapter, before anything is known of the latest Wave, Kamill significantly inquires about the whereabouts of the Strela, the starship that has just left Raduga:

— Роби, вы не знаете, они отправили «Стрелу»?
— Позвавчера, — сказал Роберт.
— Позвавчера... Это плохо.
— А зачем вам «Стрела», Камилл?
Камилл сказал равнодушно:
— Мне «Стрела» не нужна. (Strugatskii 3: 136)
“Robbie, do you know if the Strela has already left?” “The day before yesterday,” said Robert. “The day before yesterday … That’s bad.” “What do you care about the Strela, Kamill?” Kamill replied indifferently: “I have no use for the Strela.”]  

This is an explicit example of what Kamill had described as *mozhesh’, no ne khoches’*: he has knowledge of the oncoming catastrophe, but cannot manage to summon the energy or will to warn Skliarov. Given the skeptical reception that the cyborg’s predictions have apparently received in the past, there might be something of a Cassandra paradox at work. But, while it is physics that dooms the planet, cybernetics, in the person of Kamill, fails to rescue Raduga. While we are never told outright that Kamill would be capable of achieving such a feat, his comment about capability in the absence of desire suggests that he is capable of much more than giving cryptic speeches and putting forth paradoxes.

It will not be possible to consider fully the problem of Kamill’s functional godhood without returning to the issue—raised by Filippov above—of Gorbovskii as the other “God” of the novella. Towards this end, it might be helpful to note that the exchange between Gorbovskii and Kamill at the end of *Dalekaia Raduga* seems to be a continuation of an earlier conversation during which Gorbovskii first guesses at Kamill’s secret. Gorbovskii references this exchange during a conversation with Viazanitsyn, when the latter is quizzing him about Kamill:

— Между прочим, Леонид, что ты знаешь о Камилле?
— Что он никогда не снимает шлема, — сказал Горбовский. — Я его однажды прямо об этом спросил, когда мы купались. И он мне прямо ответил.
— И что ты думаешь о нем?
Горбовский подумал.
— Я думаю, что это его право.
Горбовскому не хотелось говорить на эту тему. Некоторое время он слушал тамтам,82 затем сказал:

82 Gorbovskii’s radio is with him for the first several chapters of the novella. The music to which Banin refers in the conversation among the scientists discussed earlier comes from this same source.
— Понимаешь, Матюша, как-то получилось, что меня считают чуть ли не другом Камиллы. И все меня спрашивают, что да как. А я этой темы не люблю. Если у тебя какие-нибудь конкретные вопросы, пожалуйста.
— Есть,— сказал Матвей. — Камилл не сумашедший?
— Не-ет, ну что ты! Он просто обыкновенный гений. (Strugatskii 3: 151-52)

[“By the way, Leonid, what do you know about Kamill?” “That he never takes his helmet off,” said Gorbovskii. “I once directly asked him about it, while we were swimming. And he answered me directly.” “What do you think about him?” Gorbovskii thought for a moment. “I think that it is his right.” Gorbovskii did not really want to talk on this subject. For a little while he listened to the tom-tom, and then said: “Understand, Matiusha, it has somehow turned out that people regard me as Kamill’s close friend or something. And everyone asks me what and how. But I don’t like this subject. If you have any concrete questions, then please ask them. “I do,” said Matvei. “Kamill isn’t crazy, is he?” “No-o, what are you talking about? He is simply an ordinary genius.”]}

Just like the reader of Dalekaia Raduga who cannot have missed the plethora of hints that Kamill is a cyborg, it seems that Gorbovskii must know Kamill’s obvious “secret.” This hypothesis is supported by the fact that, at the end of the novella, Gorbovskii seems to express no surprise at Kamill’s account of his resurrections, and calmly asks “are you human?” Thus, in the conversation with Viazanitsyn, it would seem that Gorbovskii is either pretending not to know Kamill’s secret, or, for some reason, is concealing it, perhaps even from himself.

There are some, somewhat speculative, reasons why Gorbovskii might find conversations about Kamill’s special nature to be disturbing. One of these reasons is also a partial justification as to why the two are somehow linked in the public mind of the Mir Poludnia. Firstly, it is possible that Gorbovskii is something of a cyborg himself. In the story “O stranstvuishchikh i puteshestvuishchikh” [Of Those Who Wander and Those Who Travel], part of the Polden’, XXII vek cycle, Gorbovskii, relaxing after having just returned from a mission in deep space, has a brief conversation with a man and his daughter who are scuba-diving in a lake. When the girl’s radio receiver begins to pick up
some strange transmissions, Gorbovskii says that he himself is their source, that since
returning from their last mission, he, his crewmates, and their ship, all emit radio waves:

Нас исследовали врачи. Нас исследовали физики. […] Все пришли к
единственному выводу: это невозможно. Можно было умереть от смеха,
глядя на их удивленные лица. Но нам было, честное слово, не до смеху.
(Strugatskii 2: 244)

[“Doctors studied us. Physicists studied us. […] Everyone came to the same conclusion: it is
impossible. You could have died from laughter, looking at their surprised faces. We ourselves,
honestly, did not feel like laughing.”]

Thus Gorbovskii has been altered as well, and is not unconnected to Kamill in this
respect. There are numerous hypotheses about the nature of Gorbovskii’s transmitting,
which is not mentioned again in the Strugatskii’s works. The most likely explanation is
that Gorbovskii and his crewmates have been tagged, like migrating birds, with radio
beacons. This is the explanation provided by the story: the protagonist and his daughter
are tagging septopody, a fictional species of cephalopod that can live in fresh water and
move over land. Gorbovskii’s parting words to the man and his daughter are to be kind
with the septopody, because “you tag, you tag, but for him, the one who is tagged, there is
nothing but unpleasantness” [metish’, metish’, a emu, mechenomu, odni nepriiatnosti]
(Strugatskii 2: 245). The possible reason for Gorbovskii and his crewmates having been
marked sheds no light on the nature of the marking, which the doctors and physicists
claim is impossible.

The other link between Gorbovskii and Kamill concerns immortality, albeit not
the functional immortality from which the cyborg suffers. Within the Mir Poludnia
world, Gorbovskii is granted a kind of literary “immortality: he lives beyond the end of
Dalekaia Raduga, somehow surviving the planetwide catastrophe. This is despite the
fact that the end of the novella itself is unambiguous. The miracle awaited by the readers
and the inhabitants of Raduga alike does not occur. And yet, in subsequent works taking place in this universe, Gorbovskii is very much alive. While fans of the Strugatskiis’ works have crafted explanations for the fact that Gorbovskii does not die on Raduga, the Strugatskiis themselves have attempted no direct justification. Boris Strugatskii suggests that the key to understanding Gorbovskii’s “death” on Raduga is to remember that the Strugatskiis intended for Dalekaia Raduga to be their final work about the communism of the future, i.e., their final work that can be said to have openly utopian tendencies. While other works take place in the physical universe of the Mir Poludnia, it is no longer the same world.

Another possible explanation involves invoking the Strugatskiis’ otkaz ot ob”iasnenii: while many fans of the Strugatskiis have invented tortured but rational explanations for the fact that Gorbovskii did not perish on Raduga, they themselves have expressed no interest in justifying the fact of their character’s failure to die. Gorbovskii’s survival goes without explanation, possibly because the Strugatskiis felt that no explanation was necessary. It is more likely that they felt that any justification would be artistically unsound.

Gorbovskii’s functional “literary” immortality is particularly relevant considering his connection to the physically immortal Kamill. In Volny gasiat veter, the final work of the Strugatskiis to take place in the Mir Poludnia, Gorbovskii is on his deathbed, being visited by all of his old friends and associates. The central issue of this novella, one that will be explored in depth in chapter three, is the so-called “Great Revelation” [Bol’shoe...

83 Many readers were so displeased with the ending that they wrote to the Strugatskii brothers requesting that it be changed so that the inhabitants of Raduga would not perish. Boris Strugatskii quotes the submission of one schoolboy (Slava Rybakov, later the science fiction writer Viacheslav Rybakov) who even provides a sample paragraph depicting the last-minute arrival of the Strela (Strugatskii 3: 685).
The two main characters of the work, Maksim Kammerer and Toivo Glumov are investigating a series of unexplained phenomena that may have a common origin in alien interference in human affairs. The putative alien race is the Stranniki, whose presence in the works of the Mir Poludnia ranges from passing mention to central plot element. In the end, though, it turns out that the Stranniki are not involved, and all of the mysteries can be explained by the activities of a post-human raskol—the Liudeny—who are seeking to expand their numbers by identifying members of the populace who possess the so-called “third impulse” [tret’ia impul’snaja], which means that they can be made into a Liuden. This revelation is the Bol’shoe Otkrovenie, and, when Gorbovskii is made aware of it, he has an unexpected reaction: he decides not to die in order to witness this transformation of the human race. His decision not to die is related to the supposed cause of his decline, a “lack of will to live” [nezhelanie zhit’]. This is a stock psychological phrase, and would be insignificant were it not for the fact that Gorbovskii is able to negate his condition. As Kammerer puts it, Gorbovskii “changed his mind about dying” [razdumal umirat’] (Strugatskii 8: 666). Thus, in the very work in which Kamill finally manages—as a footnote—to become mortal, Gorbovskii continues to live by force of will alone. Note that both individuals, though, are the agents of their own mortality. Furthermore, since Volny is the final work of the Mir Poludnia universe, Gorbovskii, in a literary sense at least, will never die.

One final explanation for Gorbovskii’s continued existence after Dalekaia Raduga can be summed up by observing that the Mir Poludnia cannot continue to exist in Gorbovskii’s absence. While he is not present in the earliest works of the universe that were discussed in the previous chapter, he is one of the central characters of Polden’,
*XXII vek*, the work from which the universe derived its name. Thus he belongs to the second generation of the *Mir Poludnia*, to the builders—as opposed to the founders—of the future. His voice holds the greatest moral weight of all the characters in the universe, and his kindness is a pillar of the universe that these works populate. This kindness is described by Kammerer as he imagines the thought of Glumov before Gorbovskii decides not to die:

Там, за дверью, умирал Горбовский — умирала эпоха, умирала живая легенда. Звездолетчик. Десантник.84 Открыватель цивилизаций. Создатель Большого КОМКОНа.85 Член Всемирного совета. Дедушка Горбовский... Прежде всего — дедушка Горбовский. Именно — дедушка Горбовский. Он был как из сказки: всегда добр и поэтому всегда прав. Такая была его эпоха, что доброта всегда побеждала. «Из всех возможных решений выбирай самое доброе». Не самое обещающее, не самое рациональное, не самое прогрессивное и, уж конечно, не самое эффективное — самое доброе! Он никогда не произносил этих слов, и он очень ехидно прохоживался насчет тех своих биографов, которые приписывали ему эти слова, и он наверняка никогда не думал этими словами, однако вся суть его жизни — именно в этих словах. И конечно же, слова эти — не рецепт, не каждому дано быть добрым, это такой же талант, как музыкальный слух или ясновидение, только еще более редкий. И плакать хотелось, потому что умирал самый добрый из людей. И на камне будет высечено: «Он был самый добрый...»

(Strugatskii 8: 665)

[There, on the other side of the door, Gorbovskii was dying: an epoch was dying, a living legend was dying. A space pilot. A “paratrooper.” A discoverer of civilizations. The founder of the big COMCON. Member of the World Soviet. Grandfather Gorbovskii... First of all: grandfather Gorbovskii. Namely: grandfather Gorbovskii. He was as if from a fairy tale: always kind and therefore always right. Such was his epoch, that kindness always triumphed. “Of all possible decisions, choose the kindest one.” Not the most promising, not the most rational, not the most progressive, and, of course, not the most effective: the kindest! He never said these words, and he spitefully mocked those of his biographers who ascribed these words to him, and he probably never thought in terms of these words, but, at the same time, the essence of his life was in these]

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84 In the *Mir Poludnia*, a *desantnik* was not a paratrooper in the military sense. The term is used figuratively to describe explorers of planets with complex atmospheric and tectonic conditions. One of the stories in the *Polden’, XXII vek* cycle describes one mission, headed by Gorbovskii, in detail. It is called simply “Desantniki.”

85 There are two organizations with the acronym COMCON. COMCON-1, the organization to which Kammerer refers, is the “Commission on Contact” [*Komissiia po kontaktu*], the umbrella organization that regulates human contact with alien civilizations. COMCON-2, the organization for which Kammerer works, is the “Commission for Control” [*Komissiia po kontroliu*], which seeks to limit (usually hypothetical) alien interference in human affairs.
very words. And, of course, these words were not a recipe, not to each is it given to be kind, it is the same kind of talent as an ear for music or clairvoyance, only still more rare. And you wanted to cry, because the kindest of men was dying. And on his gravestone will be carved: “he was the kindest…”

If we recall that the Strugatskiis define Kamill in opposition to Gorbovskii, then it becomes even more apparent how the reader is meant to understand the cyborg and the notion of artificial immortality. By giving Gorbovskii extended life while simultaneously ending Kamill’s existence, the conclusion is inevitable that mechanized immortality is a dead choice.

Returning to Maiakovskii, it would do to consider again the case of Teodor Nette, and the fact that the courier’s immortality is not only of the mechanized, functional type embodied by Kamill. The poetic persona, as quoted above, names three avenues for immortality: v parokhody, v strochki, i v drugie dolgie dela. The first avenue, the steamship, is Kamill’s version of immortality. But the second, in verses, or, more generally, in literature, is Gorbovskii’s. Thus the kind of immortality that Maiakovskii envisions for Nette is not just the prison inhabited by Kamill, but the freedom embodied by Gorbovskii. Maiakovskii’s poetic persona implicitly equates the two avenues by grouping them both under the category of dolgie dela. The Strugatskiis’ contribution to this discussion is to separate these two avenues, and to show that not all dolgie dela are created equal. We return again to the fundamental question of this chapter: will the mechanization of the human body result in a positive transformation, an improvement? The answer seems to be a dividing line between Maiakovskii’s era and the Strugatskiis’. As has been shown, while Maiakovskii cannot come to a conclusive answer, the Strugatskiis firmly answer in the negative.
Chapter 4

The Intergenerational Relationship of New and Old Soviet Men

Если бы таких обстоятельств не встречалось, мы бы никогда не устроили человечества и не почувствовали человечности, ибо нам смешон новый человек, как Робинзон для обезьяны; нам кажутся наивными его занятия, и мы втайне хотим, чтобы он не покинул умирать нас одних и возвратился к нам. Но он не вернется, и всякий душенный бедняк, единственное имущество которого — сомнение, погибнет в выморочной стране прошлого.

If such circumstances were never encountered, then we never would have built humankind and never would have felt humanness, for the new man seems silly to us, as Robinson Crusoe seems silly to a monkey. His activities seem naïve to us, but we secretly want for him to not abandon us to die alone, to return to us. But he will not return, and every spiritual pauper, whose sole possession is doubt, will perish in the escheated country of the past.

A. P. Platonov, from Vprok [For Future Use, 1931]

Maiakovskii’s Klop

The previous chapter was concerned with the idea that human beings can be controlled, molded, and artificially improved. This set of ideas can be gathered under the concept of the New Soviet Man, that mythical being who was introduced in the introduction. Many writers and thinkers in the early Soviet period assumed that such a being would inevitably populate the Soviet future. Trotsky says as much in the final pages of his 1923 Literatura i revoliutsiia [Literature and Revolution], where, in imagining human control of the world of the future, Trotsky predicts that the human being will “harmonize himself” [garmonizirovat’ sebia samogo] and create from the raw material given by nature a new and better being:
Человек поставит себе целью овладеть собственными чувствами, поднять инстинкты на вершину сознательности, сделать их прозрачными, протянуть провода воли на подспудное и подпольное и тем самым поднять себя на новую ступень — создать более высокий общественно-биологический тип, если угодно — сверхчеловека. (Trotsky 196, 197)

[Man will set as a goal for himself to control his own emotions, to lift the instincts to the vertex of consciousness, to stretch the conduits of will to that which is hidden and that which is underground, and thereby to raise himself to a new phase, to create a higher social-biological type, if you please, a superman.]

These ideas bleed into early Soviet literature, forming the central theme of two of the most significant works of this period: Mikhail Bulgakov’s “Sobach’e serdtse” [Heart of a Dog, 1925] and Evgenii Zamiatin’s My [We, 1920]. In the first work, a dog is surgically combined with the corpse of a criminal,\(^\text{86}\) resulting in the “man” Sharikov, a both horrible and sympathetic embodiment of the New Soviet Man. In the second work, inhabitants of the futuristic, glass city of the “One State” [Edinoe gosudarstvo] live in a society that is a strange amalgam of Chernyshevskii’s utopian imaginings, Dostoevskii’s savage critique of these imaginings, and Zamiatin’s own engineer’s vision, filtered through the concept of universal Pavlovian conditioning. In a sense, Zamiatin is exploring what a society of New Soviet Men would look like. These are key works of the Russian literature of the twentieth century, and there are numerous studies devoted to them. Therefore, there will not be a detailed discussion of these two excellent literary creations here. In the present context, rather, they will serve as an essential background and context for Maiakovskii’s and the Strugatskiis’ own explorations of this problem.

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\(^{86}\) Bulgakov was inspired, both scientifically and literarily, by H. G. Wells’s 1896 “scientific romance” The Island of Dr. Moreau, in which the eponymous scientist surgically alters animals in order to transform them into “humans.” For more on Wells’s influence on Bulgakov see Rydel 1976 and Russell 2000. Furthermore, Bulgakov borrowed some of the methods by which Sharikov was “vivisected into life” from the famous Pavlov, whose work was also followed with interest by Trotsky, who hoped to apply the scientist’s results to the creation of the New Soviet Man.
Much of Maiakovskii’s poetry is related to the then-emerging concept of the New Soviet Man. The desire of many of Maiakovskii’s poetic personae to see the human body reshaped, improved, and modernized has a non-trivial intersection with Trotsky’s ideas. Wherever Maiakovskii writes about the future, it is clear that the human being of the future is not us. Thus all of the utopian mechanizations of human flesh—from the granting of wings in “Razve u vas ne cheshutsia obe lopatki?” to the removal of emotions in “Protestuiu!”—can be considered as permutations of the New Soviet Man. Yet the mechanization of the flesh is simply a special case of the transformation of the human form in general. Thus, the questions to be considered in this chapter are generalizations of those addressed in the preceding chapters.

Maiakovskii’s prose play Klop [The Bedbug, 1929] is arguably the poet’s key exploration of the problem of the New Soviet Man, an exploration accomplished by direct juxtaposition of the Old Soviet Man with the New. It is the story of Prisypkin, who renames himself Skripkin, a working-class product of NEP-era materialism who is accidentally frozen in an ice-filled basement and thawed out fifty years in the future, in 1979. The Moscow of the future is inhabited by “ideal” Soviet citizens: they are efficient, (seemingly) without emotion, and free from vice.

The means by which Prisypkin finds himself in the future can be called a kind of rudimentary time travel, one that is used in Wells’s 1899 novel When the Sleeper Awakes, the first-person account of a man who inexplicably sleeps for three hundred years, waking up in the London of the future as a time traveler. Thus the freezing of Prisypkin can be said, if not to conquer time, at least to stay its hand. Maiakovskii’s perspective on

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87 Both of the protagonist’s names are derived from words that are suggestive of his origins and his aspirations: prisypat’: to sprinkle (on), and skripka: violin.
the implications of conquering time fluctuated throughout his career, one constant being
that a control of time is always linked to the banishment of death. But, in his later works,
there is an implication that immortality (or at least extended life) brought about by
technology is not the unambiguously positive development that it had been in earlier
works. The best comparison is provided, conveniently, by the poet himself: both Pro Eto
and Klop contain portrayals of scientific institutions devoted to resurrecting the dead. By
examining how the depiction of this enterprise changed in the six years from 1923 to
1929, it should be possible to extrapolate the poet’s own changing opinions.

The final section of Pro Eto is famous as one of Maiakovskii’s most explicit
addresses to the people of the future. In the section that is titled as a request for a chemist
of the future (with a blank in which the chemist can fill in his name), the poetic persona
imagines the institution that will make resurrection possible, and then turns all of his
persuasive powers on this chemist, his putative future reader:

Вижу,/ вижу ясно, до деталей.
Воздух в воздух,/ будто камень в камень,
недоступная для тленов и крошений,
рассиявшись,/ высится веками
мастерская человеческих воскрешений.
Вот он,/ большелобый/ тихий химик,
перед опытом наморщил лоб.
Книга —/ «Вся земля», —/ выискивает имя.
Век двадцатый,/ Воскресить кого б?
— Маяковский вот…/ Поищем ярче лица —
недостаточно поэт красив.—
Крикну я/ вот с этой,/ с нынешней страницы:
— Не листай страницы!/ Воскреси! (Maiakovskii 2: 297-98)

[I see,/ I see clearly, in detail./ Air in air,/ like stone in stone,/ beyond the reach of decay and
crumbling,/ shining forth,/ rising above the ages/ the workshop of human resurrections./ There he
is,/ a great-browed,/ quiet chemist,/ wrinkling his brow before an experiment./ A book—/ “All of
the Earth”—/ he looks for a name./ The twentieth century./ Whom to resurrect?/ “Here’s this
Maiakovskii…/ Let’s look for brighter faces:/ the poet is not sufficiently beautiful.”/ I scream/
from this/ from the present page:/ “Don’t turn the page!/ Resurrect me!”]
Following his initial shouted entreaty, the poetic persona goes on to describe the process in more detail, and the imagined reconstitution of his physical body sounds very much like the reassembly of a machine that has been taken apart for storage:

Сердце мне вложи!
Кровищу —/ до последних жил.
В череп мысль вдолби! (Maiakovskii 2: 298)

[Insert my heart in me!/  My big blood:/ to the last vein./  Pound thought into my skull!]

Thus the poetic persona’s letter to the chemist of the future is a request for a change of state: to be freed from a chemical suspension and re-clothed in flesh, to live again. In this letter there is a palpable confidence that such a miracle is possible, and this confidence gives rise to the respect that the poetic persona feels for the chemist, a far cry from the disdainful tone of “Gimn uchenomu,” for instance.

In Klop, the organization analogous to masterskaia chelovech’ikh voskresenii is the Institute of Human Resurrections [Institut chelovecheskich voskreshenii]. The names of the respective institutions themselves are revealing. Firstly, the chemist of Pro Eto works in a masterskaia, a workshop, not an institute. The former word is suggestive of both mental and manual dexterity, while the latter evokes the specter of Maiakovskii’s hated bureaucracy. Secondly, in the names of the two institutions Maiakovskii uses two similar but distinct adjectives that both translate into English roughly as “human”: chelovechii and chelovecheskii. Chelovechii is the adjective derived directly from chelovek [human], and has a more physical, fleshy connotation than chelovecheskii, which is more conceptual, and can also mean “humane.” Again, chelovecheskii is the more high-flown word, one that would be used by an institution wishing to sound important. It seems clear, then, that the title Institut chelovecheskich vokreshenii is intended to undermine this institution’s respectability in the eyes of the reader or viewer.
Thus we can conclude that the poet’s view of the “science” of resurrection has undergone some key changes in the six years between the composition of *Pro Eto* and the writing of *Klop*: where it had been a noble, dispassionate enterprise, it is now simply another redundancy in the bureaucratic apparatus of the future.

In the future of Maiakovskii’s play, *every* aspect of society is soaked in irony: there is essentially nothing in it that can be called intrinsically positive. Coming from the pen of the germ-obsessed poet,\(^{88}\) it would seem that a universal cleanliness would be positive. Instead, this antiseptic existence is a key indication that humanity has shed much of what it means to be human. That something is amiss in the human condition is clear in the first true conversation that takes place in the future, between the Professor at the Institute of Human Resurrections and his aged lab assistant (who is Prisypkin’s jilted lover from 1929) Zoia Berezkina. Zoia asks that the Professor not thaw Prisypkin out, saying that “there will be another row” \(["opiat’ poïdet buza"]\(^{89}\) (Maiakovskii 10: 39). The Professor does not understand the term, and has to consult the “Dictionary of Deceased Words” \(["Slovar umershikh slov"]\). Furthermore, when Zoia mentions that she attempted suicide as a result of being rejected by Prisypkin, the Professor again must search the dictionary for the unfamiliar term *samoubiïstvo*. Yet, even when he finds an explanation of the term, he fails to understand:

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\(^{88}\) It is well known that Maiakovskii’s fear of catching a disease led him, for instance, to develop a hand-washing compulsion and to drink coffee through a straw (Brown 331). Related are the texts of Maiakovskii’s posters for sanitary education, particularly “Moi ruki” \([Wash Your Hands, 1928]\).

\(^{89}\) It is not clear within the context of the play just what other rows Zoia is referencing, since Prisypkin seems to be the only human from the past living in the Moscow of the future. It is possible that this detail comes from Maiakovskii’s 1927 screenplay *Pozabud’ pro kamin* \([Forget about the Hearth]\), considered “an early variant” of *Klop* (Brown 325). In that work, the director of a zoo objects to the resurrection of the proto-Prisypkin—known only as the *rabochii* [worker]—on the grounds that the cages containing the zoo’s collection of *neptanus naturalis* are already overfilled (Maiakovskii 10: 361). Another possible interpretation is that Zoia is referencing the “row” that took place in the past, whereby Prisypkin rejected her and she attempted suicide.
Профессор: Нашел «самоубийство». (Удивленно.) Вы стреляли в себя?
Приговор? Суд? Ревтрибунал?
Зоя Березкина: Нет… Я сама.
Профессор: Сама? От неосторожности?
Зоя Березкина: Нет… От любви.
Профессор: Чушь… От любви надо мосты строить и детей рожать…
(Maiakovskii 10: 40)


In general, it could hardly be argued that a world where suicide is unknown even as a term is a negative development. The world of Klop, however, is not a general world, but Maiakovskii’s, and given the constant presence in and influence on Maiakovskii’s work that this mode of death provides, it can at least be concluded that the future the poet describes is fundamentally alien. In fact, given that the absence of suicide represents a limiting of choice—through the removal of one major exit out of the mortal world—it is hardly unreasonable to state that this future is not simply alien, but terrifyingly so. Add to this the fact that love is, if not unknown, understood only in a collective, teleological sense. Maiakovskii portrays a world in which two of his most central obsessions have ceased to exist, or have at least been suppressed and sterilized.

The Professor’s further questions to Zoia make the year 1979 more alien still. Knowing that the old woman knew Prisypkin in her youth, the Professor is certain that she will be able to supply information on the flexibility of his eyelashes and the holding capacity of his stomach and liver. In aggregate, these questions, together with a host of other details, give a picture of a future in which human emotion has, much like in Zamiatin’s My, ceased to play a central role in human affairs.
In *Klop*, as it turns out, human emotions have merely atrophied, and are not dead.

Once established in the society of the future Moscow, Prisypkin quickly becomes the epicenter of the twin epidemics of alcoholism and love. Of note is the fact that the people of the future understand these phenomena as infectious diseases. This is apparent in the first scene to take place in the future, when all of the world votes on whether or not to resurrect the frozen Prisypkin. One contingent, from the “epidemics department” [*epidemicheskaia sektsiia*], objects on the grounds that Prisypkin’s thawing poses a threat “of the spreading of the bacteria that filled the former creatures of former Russia” [*rasprostraneniiia bakterii, napoliavshikh byvshie sushchestva byvshei Rossii*] (Maiakovskii 10: 35). When love begins to “infect” the populace of Moscow, one girl, hearing of the love epidemic from the Reporter, covers her eyes and exclaims:

Я лучше не буду смотреть, я чувствую, как по воздуху разносятся эти ужасные влюбленные микробы. (Maiakovskii 10: 48)

[I had best not look; I can feel how those terrible amorous microbes are spreading through the air.]

Her reaction should come as no surprise, since the Reporter had described love as a purely medical phenomenon:

Профессора говорят, что это приступы острой «влюбленности», — так называется древняя болезнь, когда человечья половая энергия, разумо распределяемая на всю жизнь, вдруг скоротечно конденсируется в неделю в одном воспалительном процессе, ведя к безрассудным и невероятным поступкам. (Maiakovskii 10: 48)

[The professors say that his is an acute attack of “being in love”: this is the name of an ancient disease, whereby human sexual energy, judiciously allocated for one’s entire lifetime, is suddenly and fulminantly condensed into a single week, in one inflammation, leading to reckless and improbable actions.]

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90 Note Maiakovskii’s nuanced use of the loaded adjective *byvshii*, which, in the early Soviet period was used (in the phrase *byvshie liudi* [former people]) to denigrate anyone who was perceived as having been part of the former order. Here, from Maiakovskii’s imagining of 1979, the Soviet Union of the 1920s is lumped together with the tsarist regime.
The equating of love with an infectious disease is probably the most crucial element in
the theme of sterility and cleanliness that is so important to the play’s structure. As
Brown points out:

The petty-bourgeois ambience in the first part of the play smells of hair- tonic, as
Ripellino\textsuperscript{91} has pointed out, but the principal odor of Mayakovsky’s world of the
future is that of disinfectant. It is a painfully disinfected world, clean not only of
emotion, but of germs. (Brown 331)

As with the removal of suicide from the world of the future, the barren cleanliness of the
Moscow of 1979 is highly ambiguous. Again, a seemingly positive achievement
becomes negative in the sense that it removes yet another facet of the human condition
from the “humanity” of the future. The ambiguity of the play as a whole is aptly
contained in Brown’s observation that Klop is “an extremely complex satiric system, so
complex that at times it does not hold together” (Brown 331).

The people of 1979—with the exception of Zoia—see none of the ambiguity of
the world they inhabit. Interpreting the mores of the past that Prisypkin has brought to
the future as infectious diseases explains why the scientists and technicians responsible
for him refer to Prisypkin as “the patient” [bol’noi]. This lack of an intuitive
understanding of human emotion places in doubt the humanity of the humans of
Maiakovskii’s 1979. Probably the best precedent for this situation is the Man’s stay in
heaven in Chelovek, where he is alienated in the land of the heartless and the fleshless
angels. In Klop, the heart and the flesh are metaphorically absent in the people of the
future Moscow. Their situations are sufficiently similar to elicit parallel reactions. The
Man exclaims: “I am for the heart,/ but where do the fleshless ones have hearts?!” [Ia
dlia serdtsa, a gde u bestelykh serdtsa?!] (Maiakovskii 1: 305). Similarly, when Zoia

\textsuperscript{91} Brown is referring to E. M. Ripellino’s 1959 Majakovskij e il teatro russo d’avanguardia.
brings Prisypkin a stack of books from his time (a biography of Herbert Hoover and the
letters of Mussolini), he rejects them with phrases that echo the Man’s lines: “No, this is
not for the heart, I need to read the kind of book that makes the heart stop... [...] No, this
is not for the soul” [Net, eto ne dlia serdtsa, nado takuiu, chtob zamiralo... [...] Net, eto
ne dlia dushi] (Maiakovskii 10: 53). When, in an attempt to comfort him, Zoia offers to
take Prisypkin to witness a mass workers' dance that she describes as what will be “a
cheerful rehearsal of a new system of field work” [veselaia repetitsia novoi sistemy
polevykh rabot], he exclaims:

Товарищи, я протестую!!! Я ж не для того размерз, чтобы вы меня теперь
засушили. (Maiakovskii 10: 54)

[Comrades, I must protest!!! I did not thaw out so that you could now dry me out.]

But “drying out” Prisypkin is exactly what the people of the future are attempting to do,
in that they are trying to mold him into the form that they all share. In this context, an
echange between the Professor and Prisypkin earlier in that same scene is instructive:

Профессор: Общество надеется развить тебя до человеческой степени.
Присыпкин: Черт с вами и с вашим обществом! Я вас не просил меня
воскрешать. Заморозьте меня обратно! Вон!!! (Maiakovskii 10: 52)

[Professor: Society hopes to develop you to a human level. Prisypkin: To hell with you and
your society. I didn’t ask you to resurrect me. Freeze me back! There!!!]

If the goal of the Professor and his colleagues is to make Prisypkin human, then it follows
that, at least from their perspective, he is not human. To Maiakovskii’s audience—and to
the present-day audience as well—Prisypkin seems far more human than any other
human living in the future. More importantly, he is arguably the most sympathetic
character of the second half of the play. The only other contender for this title is Zoia,
this only because she still bears the emotional memories of the time in which Prisypkin
was frozen, when true humans walked the Earth. Note also that none of the people of the
future—save Zoia—have names: they are known only by their professions (Professor, Director) or by their age or sex (Girl, Child, Old Man). Thus the people of 1979 are not humans so much as cardboard cutouts of humans.

Prisypkin's status as the most “human” human remaining in the world is particularly interesting given the fact that he is a parodistic amalgam of many of the aspects of Soviet society in the late 1920s that Maiakovskii despised. Prisypkin’s very first line in the play—when he is shopping with his future mother-in-law—makes unambiguous his shallow devotion to NEP-era materialism: “[w]hat aristocratic little caps!” [Kakie aristokraticheskie chepchiki!] (Maiakovskii 10: 9). This is followed by one of his most famous lines, his demand that his house be a “full cup” [Dom u menia dolzhen byt' polnoi chashei] (Maiakovskii 10: 9). Later, Prisypkin is described by one of his dorm-mates as defined exclusively by his possessions: “his tie is not tied to him, but, rather, he is tied to the tie” [ne galstuk k nemu, a on k galstuku priviazan] (Maiakovskii 10: 17). In short, Prisypkin is the worst possible example of a Soviet citizen of the late 1920s. What implications for the problem of the New Soviet Man in Maiakovskii’s work arise from the fact that the worst exemplar of Soviet society comes across—in Maiakovskii’s future—as more sympathetic than the New Soviet Men of Moscow, 1979?

There will be no attempt here to argue that Prisypkin is better than the people of the future: judging the characters of the play on a moral or intellectual scale will lead nowhere. Rather, from the fact that Prisypkin is made to evoke the reader’s or viewer’s sympathy against the backdrop of the sterile future, it follows that the human race of 1979 is simply no longer human. There is a precedent for this kind of treatment of time travel, in which the time traveler finds himself among a human race to which he does not
belong. In fact, Prisypkin’s alienation from the humans of the future, supposedly of the same species as himself, is a common trope in time-travel stories. That the humans of the future would be physiologically different from those of the present comes again from Wells, who imagined, in *The Time Machine*, the human race splitting in two: into the idle, pampered Eloi and the cave-dwelling, monstrous Morlocks. The Strugatskiis portray an alienation closer to that of Maiakovskii in their story “Dvoe s Taimyra” [The Two from the Taimyr]—one of the early stories in the *Polden’, XXII vek* cycle—in which an interstellar spaceship that embarked on its mission in 2017 returns to Earth in 2119, though for the crew the journey lasted only a few years. The two surviving members, Zhenia Slavin and Sergei Kondrat’ev, discuss the world into which they have emerged in the hospital, where the latter is still recovering from injuries suffered on the mission:

— Слушай, Женя, откуда у тебя эта трасса через физиономию?
— Еще как! — сказал Кондратьев. — Красным по белому.
— Это меня тогда же, когда и тебя. Но мне обещали, что это скоро пройдет. И исчезнет без следа. И я верю, потому что они все могут.
— Кто это — они? — тяжело спросил Кондратьев.
— Как это — кто? Люди… Земляне.
— То есть — мы?
— Женя заморгал.
— Конечно, — сказал он неуверенно. — В некотором смысле… мы.
(Strugatskii 2: 75-6)

[“Listen, Zhenia, where did you get that line across your face?” “This one?” Zhenia felt the scar with his fingers. “Can you really still see it?” he said disappointedly. “You sure can!” said Kondrat’ev. “It’s red on white.” “Well, I was hurt at the same time as you were. But they have promised me that it will quickly pass. It will disappear without a trace. And I believe them, because they can do anything.” “Who is this ‘they’?” asked Kondrat’ev heavily. “What do you mean, who? People… Earthlings.” “You mean us?” Zhenia blinked. “Of course,” he said unsurely. “In a sense… us.”]

In a later story, Kondrat’ev grumbles to himself upon hearing a robot working in the garden outside his house, resentful that mechanized workers take from human beings the
pleasure of manual labor. A similar negative reaction to the mechanized future was seen in the protagonist of Pozabud’ pro kamin, discussed in the first chapter. Moreover, the fear that machines might take away work from humans could be a motivating factor for the poetic persona of Pro Eto to be concerned about his post-resurrection employment. He nervously asks the anonymous chemist whether there are doormen and zoos in the future: “do you have doormen?” [shveitsary u vas est’?]; “do you have zoos?” [u vas zvernitsy est’?] (Maiakovskii 2: 298, 299).

In Klop, Maiakovskii takes this alienation between the Old and New Soviet Men to more Wellsian extremes when he has the people of the future classify Prisypkin as a humanoid subspecies, or possibly not even human at all. As was noted before, futile attempts were made to “develop” Prisypkin to the point that he will become human. Furthermore, in the scene (vii) that relates the implications of Prisypkin’s resurrection, the Reporter refers to the unfrozen man as “the resurrected mammal” [voskresshee mleko pitaiushchee] (Maiakovskii 10: 47). In the final scene of the play, when Prisypkin is confined as an exhibit at the zoo, the zoo Director allows that “his appearance is nearly human… Well, like you and I” [Ego vneshnost’ pochti chelovecheskaia… Nu, vot kak my s vami] (Maiakovskii 10: 60). Nonetheless, they conclude that he is a specimen of obyvatelius vul’garis—a pseudo-Latin species designation from the Russian obyvatel’ [philistine, exister] and “vulgar”—a parasite just like the bedbug.

The equating of Prisypkin to the bedbug is further evidence for the non-human status of the people of the future: by classifying the defrosted man as closer to an insect than to themselves, they make themselves less human in the eyes of the reader or viewer. Prisypkin, in fact, is regarded as even lower than the bedbug, since he is housed in the
zoo mostly as a source of nourishment for the insect. Before the two parasites are exhibited to the public for the first time the Director gives a speech in which he lays out the “scientific” argument for his classification of Prisypkin:

Их двое — разных размеров, но одинаковых по существу: это знаменитые «клюпс нормалис» и… «обывателиус вульгарис». Оба водятся в затхлых матрацах времени.

«Клюпс нормалис», разжирев и упившись на теле одного человека, падает под кровать.

«Обывателиус вульгарис», разжирев и упившись на теле всего человечества, падает на кровать. Вся разница. (Maiakovskii 10: 60-1)

[There are two of them, of different sizes, but, in essence, the same: they are the famous klopus normalis and… the obyvatelius vulgaris. They both inhabit the musty mattresses of time. The klopus normalis, having grown fat and intoxicated on the body of a single human, falls under the bed. The obyvatelius vulgaris, having grown fat and intoxicated on the body of all of humanity, falls on the bed. This is the entire difference.]

Here again, Maiakovskii uses the conflict between the disgust that a good Soviet citizen should feel for a freeloader like Prisypkin and the natural horror one should feel at the inhuman treatment he experiences as his place in the evolutionary hierarchy grows ever lower. Thus Maiakovskii creates a kind of reductio ad absurdum, or proof by contradiction. Here, Maiakovskii uses the standard Soviet assumption that the bourgeois is less than human and deserving of every contempt. Following this chain of reasoning to its logical conclusion, he reaches the conclusion that Prisypkin must be caged like an animal. The sight of this human confined and on display is the so-called contradiction. The reader or viewer who sees it as such is forced to conclude that Prisypkin and his ilk are, in fact, human.92

92 The method of proof by contradiction is used repeatedly by Dostoevskii’s Underground Man, who takes the statements of Rational Egoism to logical extremes, resulting in ridiculousness. Liza Knapp’s study The Annihilation of Inertia: Dostoevsky and Metaphysics supports this claim. She refers to the reductio ad absurdum as “a specific model for the underground man’s technique of carrying ideas to ‘their most repulsive conclusions’” (Knapp 26).
The Director takes this logic to the furthest extremes, referring to Prisypkin with the neuter pronoun *ono*, calming the crowd by assuring them that “it is tame” [*ono ruchnoe*]. He then treats Prisypkin just as one would a tamed animal, asking him to imitate human speech:

А ну, скажите что-нибудь коротенькое, подражая человечьему выражению, голосу и языку. (Maiakovskii 10: 62)

[Now, say a little something, imitating human expression, voice, and language.]

The Director’s command forges another link between the play and *Pro Eto*, since the poetic persona of that poem seeks to convince the chemist to resurrect him by offering to be a kind of jester of the future:

Мало ль что бывает —/ тяжесть/ или горе…
Позвоните!/ Пригодится шутка дурья.
Я шарадами гипербол,/ аллегорий
буду развлекать,/ стихами балагурия. (Maiakovskii 2: 299)

[Anything can happen:/ heaviness/ or grief…/ Call me up!/ A stupid joke will prove useful./ I, with charades of hyperboles,/ allegories,/ will entertain you/ jesting with verses.]

Here can be seen another example of Maiakovskii’s progression of ideas from *Pro Eto* to *Klop*. Whereas the poetic persona of *Pro Eto* is so desperate to live in flesh again that he would be willing to stoop to the level of a circus clown, Prisypkin—a character who is far from dignified—demands to be refrozen rather than live and “perform” in the future Moscow, the equivalent of going back into the chemist's book.

That this final scene reduces Prisypkin to the lowest possible level is supported by one additional detail. Just before the Director brings the captive man out of the cage, he entreats him to finish his drink, addressing him not as Prisypkin, but by the name that Prisypkin had invented for himself: “Skripkin: bottoms up!” [*Skripkin — oprokin ’te!*] (Maiakovskii 10: 62). This transformation from Prisypkin to Skripkin is reflected in the
text, as the lines that Prisypkin/Skripkin speaks are now labeled as Skripkin’s, and the name Skripkin appears in the stage directions. This occurs at only one other point in the play, at the beginning of the third scene, during the only direct interaction Prisypkin/Skripkin has with his fiancée Elizaveta Renaissance, a moment to which the statement ono ruchnoe might also apply. There, too, lines are attributed to Skripkin, and Skripkin appears in the stage directions. But, as the wedding party grows more rowdy and the fire that will result in Prisypkin/Skripkin’s accidental preservation breaks out, Skripkin reverts to Prisypkin. So the reappearance and reassertion of the name Skripkin at the end of the play could be interpreted to mean that, where Prisypkin had failed to develop [razvit’] himself in his own time, the people of the future have managed to make the transformation permanent. He is now a performing animal, a role consistent with the meaning of the name Skripkin, the name he still has in the final lines of the play. That Prisypkin/ Skripkin is utterly alone and cut off from the humanity in which he has found himself is made explicit in his famous final lines, in which the fourth wall is broken, enabling him to address the audience of his contemporaries:


[Citizens! Brothers! My own people! My kin! Where have you come from? How many of you are there?! When did they thaw you out? Why am I the only one in the cage? Dear ones, brothers, come visit me! For what am I suffering? Citizens!...]

That even the present-day reader will identify with Prisypkin against the people of the future is an indication that, even more than thirty years after the Moscow of the future that Maiakovskii portrays, this putative reader is still Prisypkin’s contemporary. The play’s immediacy is partially a result of Maiakovskii’s efforts during that period to
exploit the contemporary, journalistic idiom in his poetry. As Jakobson recounts in “O pokolenii…”

Были поэтическими заготовками, опытами по выделке нового поэтического материала, по разработке неиспробованных жанров. На скептические замечания об этих стихах М. ответил мне: после поймешь и их. И когда последовали пьесы «Клоп» и «Баня», стало действительно понятно, какой громадной лабораторной работой над словом и темой были стихи М-го последних лет, как мастерски использована эта работа в его первых опытах на поприще театральной прозы, и какие неисчерпаемые возможности развития в них заложены. (Jakobson 1975, 28)

[His journalistic verse was a search for something new; it was an experiment in the production of new materials and in untested genres. To my skeptical comments about these poems Majakovskij replied: “Later on you’ll understand them.” And when The Bedbug and The Bathhouse appeared it became clear that his most recent poems had been a huge laboratory experiment in language and theme, a labor masterfully exploited in his first efforts in the area of prose drama and offering rich potential for future growth. (Jakobson 1987, 293-4)]

That the play is still fresh confirms the success of Maiakovskii’s experiment.

According to Brown, it was Maiakovskii’s original intention that Prisypkin’s final speech remind the audience that “[y]ou all have a bit of Prisypkin in you,” making this short monologue a descendant of the famous Чему смеется? Чему смеется? [Why are you laughing? You are laughing at yourselves!] spoken by the mayor at the end of Gogol’s Revizor [The Inspector General, 1835] (Brown 329). But the fact that there is much of Maiakovskii in Prisypkin undermines that play’s ability to teach through laughter, as Gogol wanted Revizor to do. Brown concludes:

Into a play that was planned as a simple propaganda exercise Mayakovsky, characteristically, injected a moment of his own pain, and a muffled cry for help. (Brown 332)
As has been shown, the sympathy that the reader or viewer feels for Prisypkin is due not only to the pain of which Brown speaks, but also to the fact that the New Soviet Man of the future Moscow seems so distant from actual humanity.

The Strugatskis’s *Volny gasiat veter* and *Gadkie lebedi*

It follows from the assumption that the citizen of the future will be the New Soviet Man that any address to the future will be a kind of dialogue with this “mythical” being. This dialogue is often in danger of devolving into a monologue, since the willingness of the New Soviet Man to actively participate cannot be assumed. For example, many instances in Maiakovskii’s career-spanning dialogue with the future suggest doubt as to whether the people of the future will be willing to listen to a voice from the past. The poetic persona of *Pro Eto* is plagued by this doubt, and the ultimate conclusion of *Klop* is that the people of the future are incapable of comprehending their predecessors. The outsized confidence of the poetic persona of *Vo ves' golos* is motivated in part by the doubt that there will be ears to hear his voice, which, after all, emanates from the “shit” [govno] of the past. The Strugatskis, as will be demonstrated, argue that the New Soviet Man will have *no* interest or investment in the Old Soviet Man. But they posit a corollary question: should the Old Soviet Man be so keen to establish communication with the New Soviet Man? The examination of this undefined “intergenerational” relationship will be the focus of the remainder of this chapter, which will concentrate on two works by the Strugatskis: *Volny gasiat veter* [*Waves Still the Wind*, 1984] and *Gadkie lebedi* [*The Ugly Swans*, 1967].
The novella *Volny gasiat veter* has an interesting narrative structure: it consists largely of documents and recordings. These are all stitched together by Maksim Kammerer, now eighty-nine years of age, having appeared, in his younger days, in the novel *Obitaemyi ostrov* [*The Inhabited Island*, 1967] and the novella *Zhuk v muraveinike* [*Beetle in an Anthill*, 1979]. Kammerer is formally the narrator of the work, but its composition makes the designations of editor or compiler more appropriate. The protagonist of the novella is Toivo Glumov, a young man working for the so-called COMCON-2. Glumov is obsessed with the idea that an alien civilization—called “the Wanderers [*Stranniki*]”—could be interfering in Earth affairs. This atmosphere of paranoia and suspicion lends these later works of the *Mir Poludnia* an atmosphere of *decline* that is distinctly non-utopian, a fact that displeased many critics. For instance, in his review of *Volny gasiat veter*—entitled “Dlia chego vse eto napisano?” [For What is This All Written?] (*Zaria molodezhi*, 5 July, 1986)—one B. Aleksandrov writes:

Кстати, о будущем. Когда-то Стругацкие написали светлую утопию «Полдень, XXII век». А во что этот «полдень» превратился? Зачем же переносить в грядущие века наши сегодняшние сложности и проблемы, тем самым убивая для широких слоев читателей возвышенную мечту о прекрасном? (Strugatskii 8: 703)

Furthermore, about the future. The Strugatskis once wrote the radiant utopia *Noon, 22nd Century*. And what has this “noon” become? Why carry over into the coming centuries our present-day problems and complications, at the same time killing in large sections of the readership the sublime dream of the beautiful?

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94 See footnote 82.

95 This paranoid outlook is at least partially justified: throughout the *Mir Poludnia* cycle, the Strugatskis’ characters find ample evidence of the activities of the *Stranniki*. That the *Stranniki* have meddled in the affairs of numerous alien races is beyond doubt, and the plots of more than one work hinge on the invisible presence of the *Stranniki*, particularly *Popytka k begstvu, Malyshe, and Zhuk v muraveinike*. This last work is of particular importance, since it is the novella in which it is explicitly shown that the *Stranniki* have touched the human race as well, storing human embryos in an underground incubator on a distant planet.
It is clear that paranoia and dread are key elements of the final works to take place in the *Mir Poludnia*. As will be seen, this dread is connected to the end of the Old Soviet Man.

In the end, Glumov’s fears, while justified, are misdirected, since the activities of the *Stranniki* are all very much contained in the past: in all of the works of the *Mir Poludnia*, there is never any evidence of *Strannik* activities in the present that this literary world occupies. It is the fear and suspicion of what such a near-omnipotent civilization could do to humanity that drives the paranoia that is at the heart of *Volny gasiat veter*.

The Strugatskiis, in fact, had intended for this work to be the one that finally addressed the role that the *Stranniki* played in the fate of the human race, as is evidenced in this entry in their notebook:

Странники прогрессируют Землю. Идея: человечество при коммунизме умирает в эволюционном тупике. Чтобы идти дальше, надо синтезироваться с другими расами. (Strugatskii 8: 722)

[The *Stranniki* progress Earth. Idea: humankind in communism is dying in an evolutionary dead end. In order to go further, it is necessary to synthesize with other races.]

This avenue of inquiry was abandoned early on, but the fact that this idea was the initial impetus for the work lends some credence to Glumov’s ideas. Boris Strugatskii writes that the second idea became the focus of the work:

Что касается замысла «Странники прогрессируют Землю», то мы отказались от него, как от центрального и сюжетообразующего, довольно быстро. Гораздо интереснее оказалось использовать его в качестве обманного, отвлекающего приема, тем более, что идея человечества, нечувствительно и постепенно порождающего внутри себя Человека Нового (хомо супер, хомо новус, хомо луденс) волновала и привлекала нас издавна, еще со времен «Гадких лебедей», которые изначально как раз и задумывались, как встреча поручика пограничных войск Виктора Банева с первыми сверхчеловеками — мокрецами» (8: 733). (Strugatskii 8: 722)

[As concerns the idea “the *Stranniki* progress Earth,” we rejected it as a central plot-building element relatively quickly. It turned out to be far more interesting to use this idea in the capacity of a deceptive, distracting device, particularly since the idea of humankind imperceptibly and gradually giving birth within itself to the New Human (*homo super, homo novus, homo ludens*)]
had worried and attracted us for a long time, all the way back to *Gadkie lebedi*, a work that, it so
happens, was first thought up as the meeting of lieutenant Viktor Banev of the border patrol with
the first super-humans: the *mokrets*.*]

The interplay between the present work and *Gadkie lebedi* is certainly non-trivial, and
that work will be the focus of the last part of this chapter. For the time being, it will be
necessary to examine *Volny gasiat veter* precisely within the framework that Boris
Strugatskii provides: as an exploration of the emergence of the New Human within the
Old Human. This framework will be instantly relevant to the previous discussion of
Maiakovskii’s *Klop*.

As Boris Strugatskii indicates above, Glumov’s investigations into a series of
unexplained phenomena follow the line of reasoning that the author had originally
intended: that the *Stranniki* are interfering in human affairs. Glumov posits that a series
of events that bear the mark of experiments on the human race are geared towards one
goal: the sorting out from the human populace those individuals who have certain
qualities of interest to the aliens. To cite only one of numerous examples, there is an
incident in which a *dacha* village called Malaia Pesha is overrun by a host of cartoonishly
grotesque creatures, multi-eyed, horned blobs the size of cows. The majority of the
inhabitants of the village are frightened beyond reason and pile into flyers and the zero-T
booths, shoving each other and abandoning loved ones in order to escape. Two
inhabitants of the village are found to have had anomalous reactions: a little boy named
Kir sees them as cute, harmless, like pets; a ballerina, Al’bina, sees the creatures as
dying, in distress, seeking help from the villagers. She is ashamed of the others’ behavior,
emphasizing that the key difference that separates humans from animals is mercy
*[miloserdie]*. Glumov interprets this event as a *Strannik* “test” for xenophobia.

Glumov’s certainty that the *Stranniki* are involved borders on the fanatical, and at one
point he states that “[e]verything that we cannot explain could be related to the Stranniki” [
_Vse, chto my ne umeem ob’iasnit’, mozhet imet’ otnoshenie k Strannikam_] (Strugatskii 8: 619).

In the end, it turns out that these phenomena are related, but have nothing to do with the Stranniki. Rather, they are the result of the activities of a human raskol: the so-called Liudeny. These beings are an evolutionary offshoot of the human race who are in the process of emerging and discovering one another. In the opening pages of the novella, Kammerer refers to a so-called Bol’shoe Otkrovenie [The Great Revelation], the nature of which is not explained to the reader until the Liudeny are revealed. This explanation is delayed because the novella is structured as if addressed to Kammerer’s contemporaries, for whom the Bol’shoe Otkrovenie needs no special explanation.

One of the activities in which the Liudens have been engaging is a deliberate undermining of the institution of the bioblokada. As it turns out, this procedure destroys the potential Liuden concealed within the ordinary human. Strangely enough, every Liuden is “revealed” by means of another procedure: potential Liudens possess a particular latent brain wave known as the tret’ia impul’snaia. It is the initialization of this latent attribute that “creates” a Liuden. If we consider the symmetry of the fact that the bioblokada procedure makes the emergence of a Liuden impossible, while a Liuden

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96 This term is explained to Gennadii Komov, one of the leaders of COMCON-1 by Daniil Logovenko, a doctor of psychology and an influential Liuden. Logovenko notes the similarity between liuden and the Russian liudi [people], but also cites the Latin phrase homo ludens [the playing man]. He calls both of these explanations “jokes” [shutki] but also draws attention to the “anti-joke” [antishutka] that liuden is an anagram of neliud’, a word suggesting “not-person” (Strugatskii 8: 670).

97 The bioblokada—a standard medical practice in the Mir Poludnia—is a process, performed at the time of birth, that serves as a kind of universal immunization, providing protection against all known diseases and infections.

98 It seems most likely that these adjectives modify the implied noun volna [wave]. Such an assumption suggests one interpretation of the novella’s title: that these latent brain “waves” serve to still the “wind” of human society as it is known.
can only be made by stimulating a potential trait, then it can be observed that one 
artificial procedure has been exchanged for another. Thus the Liudens are similar to the 
humans from whom they emerged in that neither group is wholly “natural,” and both 
have been modified in some basic way. In fact, it turns out that the latent Liuden trait has 
existed inside ordinary humans for over a hundred years, but the technology that allows 
this trait to be activated has only just been created, making the emergence of the Liudens 
a kind of technologically facilitated punctuated equilibrium. Logovenko indicates as 
much when he says to Komov that “[a]rtificial evolution is a stormy process” 
[Iskusstvennaia evoliutsiia — protsess livnyvyi], a description that is very suggestive of 
the sudden, catastrophic change that the emergence of the Liudens entails (Strugatskii 8: 
673).

The true nature of the Liudens is never revealed, and there is the implication that 
the human writer Kammerer and his human readership could be unable to understand this 
nature anyway. Logovenko all but says so at the very beginning of his recorded 
interview with Komov and Gorbovskii:

КОМОВ. То есть вы фактически ничем не отличаетесь от обыкновенного человека?
ЛОГОВЕНКО. Отличие огромно, но… Сейчас, когда я сижу здесь и разговариваю с вами, я отличался от вас только сознанием, что я не такой, как вы. Это один из моих уровней… довольно утомительный, кстати. Это дается мне не без труда, но я-то как раз привык, а большинство из нас от этого уровня уже отвыкло навсегда… Так вот, на этом уровне отличие можно обнаружить только с помощью специальной аппаратуры.
КОМОВ. Вы хотите сказать, что на других уровнях...
ЛОГОВЕНКО. Да. На других уровнях все другое. Другое сознание, другая физиология… другой облик даже…
КОМОВ. То есть на других уровнях вы уже не люди?
ЛОГОВЕНКО. Мы вообще не люди. Пусть вас не сбивает с толку, что мы рождены людьми и от людей... (Strugatskii 8: 668)
in my consciousness of the fact that I am not the same as you. This is one of my levels… a pretty tiresome one, as it happens. I cannot manage this without special effort, but I happen to be used to it, whereas the majority of us have become permanently de-acclimated to this level… So, on this level the difference can be revealed only with the help of a special apparatus. Komov: So are saying that on different levels… Logovenko: On different levels everything is different. A different consciousness, and different physiology… even a different appearance… Komov: So on different levels you are already no longer humans? Logovenko: On the whole, we are not humans. You should not let it confuse you that we are born of humans and from humans…]

Following this statement, Gorbovskii asks for a demonstration of this essential difference, a demonstration that is given on tape by a few confused exclamations and a long blank section, probably deliberately erased by Logovenko. Thus, while humans are apparently unable to understand the Liudens, there is also a deliberate effort on the Liudens’ part to block human understanding of them. Moreover, the fact that the Liudens are in complete control of the situation is, ultimately, far worse than Glumov’s initial worries about the interference of the Stranniki. As Kammerer says to Glumov:

 Ну, видишь ли, мы для них не авторитет. Нам теперь придется привыкать к совершенно новой ситуации. Не мы теперь определяем время бесед, не мы определяем тему… Мы вообще потеряли контроль над событиями. А ситуация, согласись, небывалая! У нас на Земле, среди нас, действует сила… и даже не сила, а силища! И мы ничего о ней не знаем. Вернее, знаем только то, что нам разрешают знать, а это, согласись, едва ли не хуже, чем полное незнание. Неуютно, а? Нет, я ничего не могу сказать плохого об этих люденах, но ведь и хорошего о них пока ничего не известно!

(Strugatskii 8: 680)

[Well don’t you see that to them we are not an authority? We now have to get used to a completely new situation. We are not the ones naming the time when talks will be held, we are not the ones naming the topic of conversation… On the whole, we have lost control over events. And the situation, I’m sure you agree, is fantastic! Here on Earth, among us, is operating a force… and not just a force, but a Force with a capital F! And we know nothing about it. More accurately, we know only that which we are permitted to know, and that, you have to agree, is almost worse than complete ignorance. It’s uncomfortable, isn’t it? No, I can say nothing bad about these Liudens, but there is also nothing good known about them yet!]

Thus humankind, having given rise to a version of the New (Soviet) Man, seems left to quietly die away, ignorant of all but a few disconnected facts.
A drive to understand the Liudens is at the heart of Kammerer’s effort, since the story that he tells is essentially a personal one. The novella begins with a letter from Maiia Glumova, the mother of Toivo Glumov, requesting some information from Kammerer about the authors of a book entitled *Piat’ biografii veka* [*Five Biographies of the Century*]. The *Bol’shoe Otkrovenie* is of personal relevance for Glumova and Kammerer because, in the final pages of *Volny gasiat veter*, Glumov learns that he himself is a latent Liuden, and, although at first unwilling (he writes to Kammerer in a letter, “I don’t want to look down at you from above” [*Ia ne khochu na Vas smotret’ sverkhnu vниз*]), eventually allows himself to be transformed (Strugatskii 8: 681). It is essential to note, though, that Glumov seems unhappy with this irrevocable decision. As Glumov’s wife, Asia, writes to Kammerer:

Он попросил меня переслать Вам эту записку. Почему он сам не послал ее Вам? Почему просто не позвонил Вам, чтобы назначить свидание? Ничего этого я не понимаю. Последнее время я вообще редко его понимаю, даже когда речь идет о самых, казалось бы, простых вещах. Зато я знаю, что он несчастен. Как и все они. Когда он со мной, он мучается скучой. Когда он там, у себя, он обо мне тоскует, иначе он бы не возвращался. Жить так ему, разумеется, невозможно, и он должен будет выбрать что-то одно. Я знаю, что именно он выбирает. Последнее время он возвращается все реже и реже. Я знаю его собратьев, которые и вовсе перестали возвращаться. Им больше нечего делать на Земле. (Strugatskii 8: 686)
This permanent separation is, in a sense, worse than death, death being a phenomenon of which humans have at least some tacit understanding. Glumov says as much in one of his last letters to Kammerer before becoming a Liuden:

Крайне неприятно ощущать себя дезертиром. Я бы не колебался в выборе ни секунды, но я уверен абсолютно: как только они превратят меня в людена, ничего (НИЧЕГО!) человеческого во мне не останется. Признайтесь, в глубине души и Вы думаете то же самое.

[…]

Превращение в людена — это моя смерть. Это гораздо хуже смерти, потому что для тех, кто меня любит, я останусь живым, но неузнаваемо отвратным. Спесивым, самодовольным, самоуверенным типом. Вдобавок еще и вечным, наверное. (Strugatskii 8: 683)

[It is highly unpleasant to feel like a deserter. I would not hesitate in my decision for even a second, but I am absolutely certain: as soon as they turn me into a Liuden, nothing (NOTHING!) human will remain in me. Admit it, in the depths of your soul, you think the very same thing. […] Turning into a Liuden is my death. It is far worse than death, since for those who love me, I will remain alive, but loathsome beyond recognition. An arrogant, self-satisfied, self-confident weirdo. And, probably eternal, to boot.]

Glumov’s transformation is equivalent to his death, or at least the death of that part of him that was known by the humans in his life. This is of particular interest considering the implicit dialogue between the transformation of Kamill into a permanent non-human and the transformation of humans into Liudens. (Recall that it is in Volny gasiat veter that news of Kamill’s suicide is related.) Glumov’s distasteful description of his probable future self as “probably eternal” adds another wrinkle to Gurevich’s mistaken assumption—discussed in the previous chapter—that human immortality is a positive development.

The book that Kammerer writes is, in a sense, dedicated to this lost Glumov. It turns out that Piat’ biografii veka claims that Glumov was recruited and transformed into a Liuden before the action of the novella begins, and that all of his activities at COMCON-2 were meant to emphasize the Strannik explanation of events and throw the
organization off the trail of the Liudens. Kammerer rejects this interpretation, offering his memoir (the novella) as proof to the contrary. Thus the whole work is intended to push the boundary of Glumov’s *humanity* as far forward as possible, claiming him as human until this claim can no longer reasonably be made.

While all of the judgments made in the novella are the product of inferior human minds, the reader gets the distinct impression that being a Liuden is itself torture, and that becoming a Liuden is a mistake. As can be seen from Asia Glumova’s letter, the unhappiness of being a Liuden is essentially *the same* as Kamill’s unhappiness: both states of being are transitional, with one foot in the human camp, and one foot somewhere “beyond.” While Glumov says, prior to becoming a Liuden, that there will be nothing human left in him, Glumova’s letter to Kammerer reveals that there is some human residue, albeit probably temporary.

But the extent to which the Liudens can be considered as human is not the only question worthy of consideration. Just as important, particularly in terms of the literary and cultural heritage of *Volny gasiat veter*, is the fact that the Liudens are one of the Strugatskiis’ interpretations of the New Soviet Man. That the Strugatskiis intended the Liudens to be understood in this context is conveyed directly in the previously mentioned interview of Logovenko with Gorbovskii and Komov. As the latter two argue about the implications of what will come to be known as the *Bol’shoe Otkrovenie* for humanity as a whole, Komov brings into the conversation Valerii Briusov’s 1905 poem “Griadushchie gunny” [*The Coming Huns*]:

КОМОВ. Вы, Леонид Андреевич, иногда просто поражаете меня своим легкомыслием. Раскол же! Вы понимаете? Раскол! А вы несете, простите меня, какую-то благодушную ахинею!
ГОРБОВСКИЙ. Экий вы, голубчик… горячий. Ну разумеется, раскол. Интересно, где это вы видели прогресс без раскола? Это же прогресс. Во всей своей красе. Где это вы видели прогресс без шока, без горечи, без унижения? Без тех, кто уходит далеко вперед, и тех, кто остается позади?...

КОМОВ. Ну еще бы! «И тех, кто меня уничтожит, встречаю приветственным гимном…»

ГОРБОВСКИЙ. Здесь уж скорее подошло бы что-нибудь вроде… ээ… «И тех, кто меня обгоняет, провожаю приветственным гимном…»

(Strugatskii 8: 673)

While it is clear that Gorbovskii’s version of the poem is his own adaptation, Komov’s referencing of the poem is also inexact. The final stanza of the poem reads:

Бесследно все сгибнет, быть может,
Что ведомо было одним нам,
Но вас, кто меня уничтожит,
Встречаю приветственным гимном. (Briusov 1: 433)

[All will perish without a trace, perhaps./ All that is known only to us./ But you, who will destroy me./ I meet with a hymn of greeting.]

Komov’s substitution of direct address of no vas with the more general and distant i tekh is suggestive of the fact that the Liudens are unknown, practically alien. This doubt before the unknown makes the inclusion of Briusov’s lyric in this conversation particularly appropriate, since this poem arguably occupies an important place in the creation of the myth of the New Soviet Man in Russian culture. The use of the poem here marks the actual arrival of this mythical future being from the Soviet past.

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The perspective of Briusov’s poetic persona is of one whose society and culture is being wiped out by the coming hordes, making the poem’s tone of celebration pointedly ironic. The poetic persona sees himself as a wise preserver of culture, and the “Huns” of the title as childlike destroyers:

Сложите книги кострами,
Пляшите в их радостном свете,
Творите мерзость во храме, —
Вы во всем неповинны, как дети!

А мы, мудрецы и поэты,
Хранители тайны и веры,
Унесем зажженные светы
В катакомбы, в пустыни, в пещеры. (Briusov 1: 433)

[Build bonfires out of books,/ Dance in their joyful light,/ Make abominations in the temple:/ In all you are innocent, like children!/ But we, the wise men and poets,/ The keepers of the secret and the faith,/ will carry away the burning lights/ into the catacombs, the deserts, the caves.]

Briusov’s lyric is an early, apocalyptic vision of the Revolution that was building in 1905 and would finally come to pass in 1917. That Briusov sees the Revolution as destruction is in line with the Symbolists’ apocalyptic tendencies, but the poem can also be said to have a literary significance, referring to the next generation of poets that would sweep the Symbolists aside. This is the sense in which Maiakovskii responds to Briusov in the concluding lines of his early poem “Nate!” [Take That!, 1913], using “Hun” almost as an honorific.99

А если сегодня мне, грубому гунну,
кривляться перед вами не захочется — и вот
я захохочу и радостно плюну,
плюну в лицо вам
я — бесценных слов транжир и мот. (Maiakovskii 1: 86)

[But if today, I, a rude Hun,/ don’t feel like making faces for your amusement: then/ I will laugh and joyfully spit,/ I will spit in your face/ I: the spender and waster of priceless words.]

99 That Maiakovskii meant this poem as a direct reference to Briusov’s lyric is supported by the notes to “Nate!” in Maiakovskii’s collected works (Maiakovskii 1: 410).
While Maiakovskii continues to build on Briusov’s axiom that the “coming Huns” would be violent and destructive, we have seen that the poet who had declared himself to be a Hun would become a full participant in the making of the myth of the New Soviet Man. In the Soviet formulation, the New Soviet Man is not a destroyer, but a builder of the new society, an ideal and perfect citizen. In his evolution, then, the New Soviet Man can be said to follow what Katerina Clark calls, in *The Soviet Novel*, the “spontaneity to consciousness” dialectic, moving from a joyful destroyer to a devoted builder.

The Strugatskiis manage to use aspects of both sides of this myth: the Liudens, while embodying the “next step” in human development envisioned by the dreamers of early Soviet society, are the catalyst for the unmaking of the communist society of the future. Thus the inclusion of this poem is an elegant return to Briusov’s perspective: the arrival of the New Soviet Man will be a disruptive, if not outright destructive event for those who belong to the group that is being swept aside. This being the final work of the Strugatskiis to take place in the *Mir Poludnia*, it is not possible to predict the extent to which humanity will be destroyed by the emergence of the Liudens, but Logovenko’s reminder that the *tret’ia impul’snaja* is only the first of many such “potentials” hiding in the human mind—and that the present *raskol* is only one of many to come—would seem to indicate that humanity will soon cease to exist in its present form.

But what of those who lack the *tret’ia impul’snaja*? Or, more importantly, what is the attitude of the Liuden “children” towards their human “parents?” It is clear that this will not be a relationship of equals, as the Liudens contradictorily see ordinary humans as a parent might see a child. When Logovenko is attempting to convince Glumov to allow himself to become a Liuden, he suggests that “the main task of Liudens
with regard to humanity [...] is to stand guard” [glavnaia zadacha liudenov v otnoshenii chelovechestva [...] stoiat’ na strazhe], a phrase that contains both a promise of protection and a threat of confinement (Strugatskii 8: 683). Glumov uses as a framing metaphor for this situation the phrase nad propast’iu vo rzhi [above the abyss in the rye], the Russian translation for J. D. Salinger’s 1951 novel The Catcher in the Rye. Holden Caulfield’s mishearing of Robert Burns’s 1796 song “Comin thro’ the rye” is well preserved in the Russian version of the title, and is elegantly used to show that the Liudens feel a kind of parental responsibility for the humanity that gave birth to them. But the phrase stoiat’ na strazhe conveys an additional need to supercede and control humanity. That there can be no question of equality between the two groups is conveyed both harshly and elegantly by Logovenko in the interview. When Komov proposes some sort of cooperation between humans and Liudens, the former replies:

Медведя можно научить ездить на велосипеде, но будет ли медведю от этого польза и удовольствие? (Strugatskii 8: 672)

[A bear can be trained to ride a bicycle, but will the bear get any use or enjoyment out of it?]

Ultimately, then, the emergence of the Liudens is destructive, and it seems that the only role that the New Soviet Man can play regarding the Old Soviet Man is a permutation of Prisypkin’s benevolent jailers. The bear-on-a-bicycle metaphor is of particular interest in the context of Klop, since Maiakovskii’s play predicts, in a sense, that the Old Soviet Man will have no place in the New Soviet Order, save as a display relic of the past.

The Strugatskiis’ other key exploration of the emergence of the New Soviet Man is their novella Gadkie lebedi, a work with an interesting publishing history. This novella was originally written to be included in a volume with the 1966 novella Vtoroe nashestvie marsian [The Second Martian Invasion] to be published by Molodaia gvardiia. For
reasons that will soon become clear, the publisher decided that *Gadkie lebedi* could not
be published, and the book was issued with the older novella *Stazhery* as a replacement.
In 1980, the Strugatskiis began work on a novel that would be called *Khromaia sud’ba [A
Lame Fate]*, detailing a few days in the life of Feliks Sorokin, an aging Soviet writer who
has made his career writing “military-patriotic literature” [*voenno-patrioticheskaia
literatura*] “acceptable to the prevailing interpretation of what comprises the official
genre of Socialist Realism” (Howell 85). Early in the novel, Sorokin’s struggle to craft
yet another scene from the Great Patriotic War flows into a confession to the reader that
the writing on which his life has been based has ceased to have meaning:

Я уже чувствовал, что застрял, застрял надолго и без всякого просвета. И не
в том было дело, что я не представлял себе, как события будут развиваться
dальше: все события я продумал на двадцать пять страниц вперед. Нет, дело
было гораздо хуже: я испытывал что-то вроде мозговой тошноты. Да, я отчетливо видел перед собой и лицо комиссара, и полуобрушенный
окоп, и горящий «тигр». Но все это было словно бы из папье-маше. Из
картона и из раскрашенной фанеры. Как на сцене захудалого дома
культуры. (Strugatskii 8: 257)

[I already felt stuck, had felt stuck for a long time, with no light at the end of the tunnel. It wasn’t
that I couldn’t imagine how the story would develop: I had the next twenty-five pages already
planned out. No, it was much worse than that: I was experiencing something resembling cerebral
nausea. Of course I already visualized the face of the Commissar, the half-collapsed trench, the
burning Tiger. But everything seemed like papier-mâché. Made of cardboard and painted
plywood. Like something on the stage of a run-down community center.]  

But the reader is at this point already aware of the work into which Sorokin has been
pouring his heart and soul, a novella written *v stol*, which he calls simply the *Siniaia
Papka [The Blue Folder]*. When the Strugatskiis were originally composing *Khromaia
sud’ba*, they had intended for the even chapters of the novel to consist of the contents of
the *Siniaia Papka*, a deliberate nod to the chapters of Bulgakov’s *Master i Margarita* that
make up the Master’s novel about Pontius Pilate. At the early stages of writing, the
Strugatskiis were not sure just what the content of these interspersed chapters would be.
They had dismissed as too long, and not thematically justifiable, their long novel Gradobrechennyi [The Doomed City, 1974], when it occurred to them that Gadkie lebedi would be a perfect fit. Thus the two works came to be joined, and, while Gadkie lebedi is now sometimes published without the superstructure of Khromaia sud’ba, the latter does not itself exist without the former.

Gadkie lebedi is, in many ways, a preview of the problems that are considered in Volny gasiat veter. The justification for having considered the newer work first is that the entire discussion of the Strugatskiis’ works thus far has been confined to the Mir Poludnia, and it is reasonable to deal with that universe as completely as possible before turning to the problems that the Strugatskiis explore outside of the confines of this “Secondary World.”

Gadkie lebedi takes place in an unnamed town in an unnamed country with a peculiar characteristic: the town has been subject to years of steady rainfall. The protagonist is a writer named Viktor Banev, who has returned to his native town as a result of some vaguely described disgrace that has resulted in a kind of internal exile. Banev’s ex-wife Lola and teenage daughter Irma live in town, but Banev spends most of his time at the hotel or with his girlfriend Diana, a nurse at the local sanatorium. This sanatorium—the “Teplye kliuchi” [warm springs]—is of crucial importance for the novella, since it houses the sufferers of a genetic disease, known collectively as mokretsya. The implications of this term for the novella are significant, since the Russian adjective

100 The term “Secondary World” was suggested by J. R. R. Tolkien in his 1947 essay “On Fairy-Stories” during a discussion of the state of “suspension of disbelief.” He writes:

But this does not seem to me to be a good description of what happens. What really happens is that the story-maker proves a successful ‘sub-creator.’ He makes a Secondary World which your mind can enter. Inside it, what he relates is “true”: it accords with the laws of that world. You therefore believe it, while you are, as it were, inside. The moment of disbelief arises, the spell is broken; the magic, or rather art, has failed. You are then out in the Primary World again, looking at the little abortive Secondary World from outside. (Tolkien 60)

“Secondary World” is now sometimes used to describe any well-developed fictional universe, such as Tolkien’s own Middle Earth, or, in this case, the Strugatskiis’ Mir Poludnia.
mokryi—meaning “wet”—has a whole host of negative meanings not conveyed by the English equivalent. Mokryi conveys not only wetness, but also dampness, moldiness, even sliminess, phlem, and snot. The associations that speakers of Russian have with this word are well conveyed by the example of the woodlouse, a crustacean known as mokritsa in Russian. While English terms for some of the members of this suborder (Oniscidea) have positive, playful connotations (pill bug, roly-poly), the Russian mokritsa has a decidedly negative tone, verging on disgust. Yvonne Howell’s English term for the mokretsy—the slimies—is probably the best possible English approximation.101

The mokretsy are characterized by yellowish skin and dark rings around the eyes, the latter trait having given rise to the other local name for them: ochkariki. This term, from ochki [glasses], a common Russian equivalent for “four-eyes” or “Poindexter,” is also a reference to the need the mokretsy have for intellectual stimulation, since they will purportedly die without books. (The disease from which they suffer is also known as the ochkovaia bolez’ [the glasses disease].) They seem also to have a need for a dark, extremely moist environment, which is provided by the constant rainfall. The plot of Gadkie lebedi follows the gradual understanding on Banev’s part that the mokretsy are more than chronically ill patients: they are an emerging raskol within humanity. Solving the puzzle of the novella based on the text alone is difficult; a deeper understanding of the relationship of the mokretsy to the human race is facilitated by Boris Strugatskii’s description, again in the “off-line” interview, of these beings as “the people of the future,

101 It is probably no accident that the last name of the protagonist is also connected with wetness or dampness: Banev comes from the Russian bania, the bath or steam house. Of course, the word bania, as opposed to mokryi, is likely to summon positive associations in the Russian reader’s mind.
disfigured by your and my present” [liudi budushchego, izurodovannye nashi s vami nastoiashchim] (Strugatskii 2009, 196). He goes into greater detail later in the interview:

По замыслу авторов, мокрецы — это люди нашего будущего. Мы изуродовали свое будущее, и оно оказалось (в результате наших экологических и прочих «подвигов») населено талантливыми, высоконравственными, но безнадежно больными людьми. И эти люди вторглись в наше время, имея целью изменить наше настоящее с тем, чтобы изменилось ИХ настоящее (наше будущее).

[According to the authors' plan, the mokretsy are the people of our future. We have disfigured our future, and it has turned out (as a result of our “great deeds,” environmental and otherwise) to be populated by talented, highly moral, but hopelessly ill people. And these people have invaded our time with the goal of changing our present, thereby changing their present (our future).]

Of course, the average reader cannot be expected to have read Boris Strugatskii’s clarifying statements and elucidations of the novella, and must rely on Banev’s often uninformed perspective for any and all information. Nonetheless, Strugatskii’s assertions introduce an interesting symmetry between Gadkie lebedi and Klop: where Prisypkin had traveled to the future, the mokretsy venture into the past, both finding, upon arrival, alien versions of the species to which they supposedly belong. The mutual alienness between the two “humanities” in Gadkie lebedi is particularly interesting when one recalls the Russian equivalent of the term “ugly duckling”: gadkii utenok. In the Strugatskiis’ version of the legend, the end product—the swan—is still repulsive. But the “ducklings”—the humanity of the present—are no less so.

This repulsiveness is a key contribution of Gadkie lebedi to the problem of the New Man in general and the New Soviet Man in particular. That the old humans of the town find the new humans repellant is shown by a number of superstitions, one of which being that touching a mokrets will cause warts. The general consensus is neatly summed up by Banev towards the very end of the novella, when he thinks to himself—even after he has gained a better, but still limited, understanding of them—that they are “pests,
scum, whoever you like, just not people” [zarazy, gady, kto ugodno, tol’ko ne liudi] (Strugatskii 8: 446).

Ultimately, though, the attitude of the mokretsy towards the rest of humanity is of far greater importance than the prejudices of the humans, and it is on this point that Gadkie lebedi is closely linked to Volny gasiat veter. The fact that the mokretsy have some investment—however far from altruistic—in the rest of humanity is an essential difference between them and the Liudens, who, as we have seen, see humans as little more than bears trying to ride bicycles. The interest of the mokretsy in humanity is depicted in the relationship that they have with the children of the town. Banev is witness to this relationship both through his interactions with his daughter Irma, and in the second chapter of the novella (the fourth chapter of Khromaia sud’ba), when he goes to speak to a group of schoolchildren. The chapter is entitled “Vunderkindy” [The Wunderkinds], a title which prepares the reader only partially for what Banev experiences. Behaving at first like the famous writer that he is, Banev quickly realizes that the children are not there to ask respectful questions about his writing process, but mean almost to interrogate him as a representative of the Old Order. One question that they pose to Banev early on is “what would you like to see us become in the future?” [Kakimi by vy khoteli videt’ nas v budushchem?] (Strugatskii 8: 297). This question leads to a line of discussion in which it becomes clear that Viktor and the children have very distinct, almost opposed, visions of what the future should be. When Banev, clearly somewhat disconcerted by the children’s directness, uses the phrase “well-earned rest” [zasluzhennyi pokoi], an unnamed boy with pimples stands and makes a long speech that is seemingly representative of the opinions of all of the children:
Не в том дело, понимаем мы реальную жизнь или нет, а в том дело, что для вас и ваших героев такое будущее вполне приемлемо, а для нас — это могильник. Конец надежд. Конец человечества. Тупик. Вот потому-то мы и говорим, что не хочется тратить силы, чтобы работать на благо ваших жаждущих покоя и по уши перепачканных типов. Вдыхнуть в них энергию для настоящей жизни уже невозможно. И как вы там хотите, господин Банев, но вы показали нам в своих книгах — в интересных книгах, я полностью «за», — показали нам не объект приложения сил, а показали нам, что объектов для приложения сил в человечестве нет, по крайней мере — в вашем поколении… Вы сжрали себя, простите пожалуйста, вы себя растратили на междоусобную драку, на вранье и на борьбу с враньем, которую вы ведете, придумывая новое вранье… Как это у вас поется: «Правда и ложь вы не так уж несхожи, вчерашняя правда становится ложью, вчерашняя ложь превращается завтра в чистейшую правду, в привычную правду…» Вот так вы и мотаетесь от вранья к вранью. Вы никак не можете поверить, что вы уже мертвецы, что вы своими руками создали мир, который стал для вас надгробным памятником. Вы гнили в окопах, вы взрывались под танками, а кому от этого стало лучше? Вы ругали правительство и порядки, как будто вы не знаете, что лучшего правительства и лучших порядков ваше поколение… да просто не достойно. Вас били по физиономии, простите пожалуйста, а вы упорно добрели, что человек по природе добр… Или того хуже, что человек — это звучит гордо. И кого вы только не называли человеком!.. (Strugatskii 8: 302-03)

[The heart of the matter is not whether we understand real life or not, but is that for you and your characters such a future is completely acceptable, whereas for us it is a tomb. The end of hopes. The end of humanity. A dead end. So this is why we say that we do not want to waste energy working for the good of these weirdos of yours who thirst for peace and are filthy up to their ears. To breathe into them the energy for true life is already impossible. Say what you like, Mister Banev, but you have shown us in your books—they are interesting books, I am completely in favor of them—you have shown us not where our energy should be directed, but that there is nowhere in humanity to which our energy should be directed, at least in your generation… You have consumed yourselves, please forgive me, you have wasted yourselves away on fighting amongst yourselves, on lies and the warring against lies, which you conduct, thinking up new lies… As it is sung in your book: “Truth and lies, you are not as dissimilar as you might seem, yesterday’s truth becomes a lie, and yesterday’s lie tomorrow turns into a perfect truth, a familiar truth…” In this way you rush from lie to lie. You simply cannot believe that you are already dead men, that with your own hands you have created a world that for us has become a gravestone. You rotted in trenches, you blew yourselves up under tanks, and whose life improved as a result? You cursed the governments and the established order as if you did not know that your generation is simply not deserving of better governments and better orders. You were beaten in the face, please forgive me, but you stubbornly repeated over and over that man is by nature good…, or, still worse, “man: that has a proud ring to it.” And who did you not call a man!..]
The boy’s ironic quotation of Satin’s famous line from Gor’kii’s play *Na dne* [The Lower Depths, 1902] is nothing short of a direct reference to the origins of the New Soviet Man, a mythology that, while it was more explicitly formulated in the years after 1917, slowly emerged from the radical movements and literature of the late nineteenth century. The New Soviet Man’s literary ancestry can be traced back to the heroes of Chernyshevskii, among others. By rejecting these hallowed “ancestors,” this representative of the New Soviet Man implies that this ideal citizen will not conform to the predictions of Gor’kii or Trotsky, or of anyone else. In the formulation of this pockmarked teenager, the New Soviet Man appears to be a rejection of humanity.

Banev is just short of horrified by the boy’s speech, and sees, as he looks across the auditorium, a concrete representation of a metaphor he had formulated earlier in the novella (8: 234), that of the “tentacle of the future” that reaches into the past:

Неужели все-таки настали новые времена? Он глядел в зал почти со страхом. Кажется, будущему удалось все-таки запустить щупальца в самое сердце настоящего, и это будущее было холодным, безжалостным, ему было наплевать на все заслуги прошлого — истинные или мнимые. (Strugatskii 8: 304)

[Had the new times really begun? He looked at the auditorium almost with fear. It seemed that the future had actually succeeded in thrusting its tentacle into the very heart of the present, and that future was cold and pitiless, and could not care less about the contributions of the past, true or imaginary.]

He accuses the children of cruelty, albeit cruelty motivated by good intentions, seeing in their ideas for the world a permutation of the old Nihilist contention that the old order

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102 The nickname of Rakhmetov—the minor/central character of *Chto delat’?* [What Is to Be Done?, 1863]—(Nikitushka Lomov) connects him to the Russian *bylina* tradition at the same time that his asceticism and mortification of the flesh connects him to the hagiographic tradition. Though a detailed consideration of the implications of these connections would take the discussion in a completely different direction, it should suffice to observe that the cultural and literary trends that gave rise to the New Soviet Man are very old indeed.
must be destroyed before a new one can be built. But the boy Bol-Kunats assures him
that they have no intention of destroying:

Боюсь, Вы не так нас поняли, господин Банев. [...] Мы совсем не
жестоки, а если и жестоки с вашей точки зрения, то только теоретически.
Ведь мы вовсе не собираемся разрушать ваш старый мир. Мы собираемся
построить новый. Вот вы жестоки: вы не представляете себе строительства
нового без разрушения старого. А мы представляем себе это очень хорошо.
Мы даже поможем вашему поколению создать этот ваш рай, выпивайте и
закусывайте, на здоровье. Строить, господин Банев, только строить.
Ничего не разушать, только строить. (Strugatskii 8: 305)

[I fear that you have misunderstood us, Mister Banev. [...] We are not at all cruel, and if we are
cruel from your point of view, then we are so only theoretically. After all, we have no plans to
destroy your old world. We plan to build a new one. It is you who is cruel: you cannot conceive
of the building of the new without the destruction of the old. But we conceive of this very well.
We will even help your generation to create this heaven of yours, eat and drink to your heart’s
content. To build, Mister Banev, only to build. To destroy nothing, only to build.]

Through the children’s almost paternal attitude towards their elders, one can easily
imagine that the future that the children will build will include a place where the relics of
the past are confined in comfort. This attitude looks forward to the Liudens’ perception
of humanity as needing protection, like an endangered species that must be controlled for
study. In this way, both Gadkie lebedi and Volny gasiat veter are reminiscent of the
treatment that Prisypkin suffers—made into a zoological curiosity—at the hands of the
people of the future. In all three works, the Old Soviet Man is presented as an object for
study and preservation, but no longer a participant in the running of the world.

Thus it is not at all surprising when, despite Bol-Kunats’s assurances, after the
talk is over, Banev feels something like an experimental animal:

Самым трудным было то, что он так и не понял, как следует относиться к
этим детям. Они были ирреальные, они были невозможны, их высказывания,
их отношение к тому, что он думал, и к тому, что он говорил, не имело
никаких точек соприкосновения с торчащими косичками, взлохмаченными
вихрами, с плохо отмытыми шеями, с цыпками на худых руках, писклявым
шумом, который стоял вокруг. Словно какая-то сила, забавляясь,
совместила в пространстве детский сад и диспут в научной лаборатории.

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[The most difficult thing was that he simply could not understand how to treat these children. They were unreal, they were impossible, their opinions, their attitude towards that which he thought and that which he said had no tangent point with the sticking-out pigtails, disheveled hair, with the poorly washed necks, with the reddish splotches on thin arms, the squeaking din that surrounded him. It was as if some kind of power, in an attempt to amuse itself, had combined in one space a kindergarten and dispute in a research laboratory. The uncombinable had been combined. Probably, it was just this way that that experimental cat felt when it was given a piece of fish, scratched behind the ear, and at that same moment was shocked with electrical current, had a gunpowder cartridge explode under its nose and was blinded by a searchlight… Yes, said Viktor sympathetically to the cat, whose situation he understood very well. Your and my psyches are not accustomed to such shocks, we could even die from such shocks…]

As was stated earlier, the key explanation for the children’s precociousness is the influence of the mokretsy, further evidence for which is given during Banev’s talk: during the discussion, a mokrets comes into the auditorium, causing all of the children to suddenly rise in their seats. The unnamed individual excuses himself and sits down next to Irma, and Banev cannot help but notice the joy that shows on his daughter’s face.

Overall, it is clear that the children of the town are firmly under the influence of the mokretsy, but the novella is constructed in such a way as to make the reader unable to conclude whether this influence is beneficial or malign.103

It is not uncommon in the Strugatskiis’ works for children to be depicted as mysteriously intelligent, even prescient. Yvonne Howell addresses this trend in Apocalyptic Realism:

103 The relationship of the mokretsy to the children in Gadkie lebedi could be fruitfully compared with an incident in Zhuk v muraveinike. In that novella, Kammerer reads Lev Abalkin’s report of his participation in Operation “Mertvyi mir” [dead world] on a planet called Nadezhda [Hope]. On that planet, almost the entire populace disappeared into a seemingly bottomless hole in the planet’s surface. Remaining children are attracted by toys and filthy jesters that lure them away from safety. Both works depict the need of a possibly alien force for a relationship with children.
There are few child characters in the Strugatskys’ science fiction, and they are never depicted as normal or “realistic” children. The most striking traits shared by all the Strugatskys’ child characters are their sexual androgyny, and their otherworldly intellectual precociousness. (Howell 138)

In the present work, the children are more than merely intelligent, and seem to be in some ways superhuman. For instance, later in the same chapter in which Banev meets with the schoolchildren, he is driving Golem\textsuperscript{104}—the head doctor dealing with the mokretsy—to the sanatorium, when he sees a mokrets and two young people standing in the rain by the side of the road. The two young people turn out to be Bol-Kunats and Irma. Though Banev demands that Irma get in the car, she complies only after what seems to be a psychic consultation with the mokrets. Once in the car, when Viktor asks what they were doing by the side of the road, she answers: my dumali tuman [we were thinking fog] (Strugatskii 8: 322). Viktor, having stubbornly failed to learn from his previous experience with the children, assumes at first that Irma has made a grammatical mistake, and corrects her, saying that one can think “about fog” [pro tuman or o tumane], but that, in general, dumat’ is an intransitive verb that requires a preposition. Given the context of the novella, it is most likely that Irma has made no mistake in language, and the logical conclusion must be that it is somehow possible for the mokretsy, and, by extension, the children, to create weather by thought alone: dumat’ tuman. The powers that are manifested by the mokretsy directly as well as through the children of the town are consistent with the idea that these two groups together represent a future that is not necessarily malevolent, but is certainly indifferent to the humans represented by Banev.

\textsuperscript{104}It is not clear what the Strugatskiis mean to convey by giving this doctor the name of the legendary being created by the Rabbi of Prague out of the clay of the Vltava river. In his use of his learning to treat and support the “New Men” of the mokretsy, he is more akin to the Rabbi of the legend than to the created being itself. Boris Strugatskii has stated that the doctor has nothing in common with that “clay robot” [glinianyi robot], but that the brothers simply thought that the name sounded “weighty and very respectable” [vesko i ochen’ solidno] (Strugatskii 2009, 197).
and the other adults. Howell writes as much in her above-mentioned discussion of children in the Strugatskiis’ works:

Children invariably represent the future in the Strugatskys’ science fiction. They are part of another, alien reality—one that awaits the present. The future they represent may be a more perfect, more logical future, but it is never a human future. (Howell 141)

Banev observes on multiple occasions that the children have a much closer relationship with the mokretsy than with their parents. Such is certainly the case as concerns the writer and his daughter Irma, and this is not due to the fact that he has been absent for most of her life: Irma’s relationship with her mother is just as strained. The fact that the mokretsy represent the New Soviet Man is consistent with Howell’s observation that the children represent a non-human future. It is crucial to note, however, that the Strugatskiis do not make the disconnection of the children from their parents permanent and absolute. Here it must be remembered that the sanatorium has stood in the town for more than one generation, as Banev remembers associating with the mokretsy during his own childhood, when they were known for making ingenious toys.

In a conversation with Banev and Diana, Pavel Zurzmansor, a prominent philosopher and sufferer of the ochkovaia bolez’n, refers in passing to their “climate experiments” [opyty nad klimatom], a tacit acknowledgment that the mokretsy are able to control the weather. An extreme example of this ability is given in the final chapter of the novella, entitled “Exodus” (the title is given in English), in which the ordinary humans are compelled to leave the town that is to be inhabited by the mokretsy, this following the fleeing of all of the children from the town to join the mokretsy. For the first time since anyone can remember, the rain has ceased, and Banev can see the full Moon, albeit in a fantastic frame:
Виктор подбежал к окну и выглянул. Это была луна — ледяная, маленькая, ослепительно яркая. В ней было что-то невыносимо страшное, Виктор не сразу понял — что. Небо было по-прежнему затянуто тучами, но в этих тучах кто-то вырезал ровный аккуратный квадрат, и в центре квадрата была луна. (Strugatskii 8: 524)

[Viktor ran to the window and looked out. It was the Moon: icy, small, and blindingly bright. There was something unbearably terrible about it, and Viktor did not understand right away what it was. The sky was covered in clouds as before, but in those clouds someone had cut an even, exact square, and in the center of this square was the Moon.]

A few paragraphs later, Banev begins to comfort himself with the thought that an automatic rifle that he had taken from a deserting soldier is still in its place, but then laughs, “comparing that sad little piece of metal with the powers that smashed a square shaft through the clouds” [sopostaviv etu neschastnuiu zheleziaku s silami, kotorye prodelali kvadratnyi kolodets v tuchakh] (Strugatskii 8: 524). Recall that, looking across the auditorium at the strangely adult children, among whom is his daughter, Banev imagines that they were made this way by “some sort of power” [kakaia-to sila]. The putative sila is the mokretsy, and it is no accident that the same noun is used in this present context. The children and the circle of the Moon inscribed in a square of cloud are only the most visible and obvious manifestations of the power of the mokretsy, and the reader is left to speculate as to their other abilities. Like the Liudens, the essence of the mokretsy is hidden both from the reader and the regular humans who inhabit the novella. Boris Strugatskii’s contention that the mokretsy are visitors from the future does not really reveal anything, but only raises additional questions.

There are strong hints, however, that the mokretsy are wholly alien, but as is typical of their devotion to the otkaz ot ob’iasnenii, the Strugatskis offer almost no explanation of what these hints might mean. The most significant, and at the same time most inexplicable, such moment comes during the aforementioned conversation between
Banev, Diana, and the mokrets Zurzmansor. Banev requests to be allowed to visit the sanatorium, which is strictly closed to all save patients and personnel. Zurzmansor, seemingly in an effort to convey that there is nothing special to see, describes the layout, including ten houses, and a “medical building” [lechebnyi korpus]. Banev asks in jest who is treated there, and Zurzmansor’s answer precedes a profoundly strange event:

— Людей, — сказал Зурзмансор со странной интонацией. Он усмехнулся и вдруг что-то страшное произошло с его лицом. Правый глаз опустился к подбородку, рот стал треугольником, а левая щека с ухом отделилась от черепа и повисла. Это длилось одно мгновение. Диана уронила тарелку, Виктор машинально оглянулся, а когда снова уставился на Зурзмансора, тот уже был прежний — желтый и вежливый. Тьфу, тьфу, тьфу — мысленно сказал Виктор. Изыди нечистый дух. Или показалось? Он торопливо вытащил пачку сигарет, закурил и стал смотреть в стакан.

(Steglatskii 8: 453)

[“People,” said Zurzmansor with a strange intonation. He grinned and, suddenly, something horrible happened to his face. His right eye fell out and slid down to his chin, his mouth became triangular, and his left cheek, along with his ear, separated from the skull and hung there. This lasted for one moment. Diana dropped her plate, Viktor mechanically looked around, and when he again fixed his gaze on Zurzmansor, he was as before: yellow and polite. “Tfu, tfu, tfu,” said Viktor in his mind. “Come out, unclean spirit. Or did I imagine it?” He hurriedly took out his pack of cigarettes, lit one, and began to look in his glass.]

No explicit mention of Zurzmansor’s “facial malfunction” is made in the remainder of the novella, but there is one important implicit reference to this event. Later in the same chapter, Banev falls into a drunken sleep in his hotel room while talking to Golem and imagining singing to Diana about a submarine.105 He has a brief but striking dream, the first part of which is Golem’s monologue, still reaching Banev’s ears as he falls asleep:

105 A few pages before (8: 465), Viktor had sung to Golem Vladimir Vysotskii’s song “Lech’ na dno” [To Lie Down on the Sea Floor, 1965], the lyrics of which describe a desire to lie on the sea floor like a submarine that cannot be tracked (Vysotskii 1: 48). There is an included footnote in the Stalker edition that the text of the song is used with Vysotskii’s permission, but other editions of Khromaia sud’ba include a more detailed note that reads:

Когда мы писали «Гадких лебедей», нам представилось необходимым включить в повесть именно эту песню Владимира Высоцкого. Мы обратились к Владимиру Семеновичу — поэт дал согласие. (Strugatskii 1998, 247)
… they are very young, and they have everything ahead of them, but all we have ahead of us is them. Of course, man will control the universe, but it will not be a red-cheeked bogatyr with muscles; and, of course, man will gain control of himself, only first he will change himself… Nature is not deceiving us, she is fulfilling her promises, but not in the way that we thought, and often not in the way that we wanted… (Strugatskii 8: 472)

Observe first Golem’s use of the present tense in reference to Nature (is not deceiving, is fulfilling), an indication that the process of change in the human form is currently underway in the “persons” of the mokrets, or even the children. Given the explicit connection of the mokrets with the New Soviet Man, it is crucial to note that Golem’s words are a direct rejection of the myth of the New Soviet Man in its traditional conception. His apophatic description of the “man” who will control the universe should be familiar to anyone with even a minimal exposure either to Socialist Realism (both in literature and visual art) or Soviet propaganda posters. It is no accident that the true appearance of the version of humanity that will control the future is present in the boat, in the “person” of Zurzmansor:

Зурзмансор, который сидел на носу лодки, повернул голову, и стало видно, что у него нет лица, лицо он держал в руках, и лицо смотрело на Виктора — хорошее лицо, честное, но от него тошнило, а Голем все не отставал, все гудел… (Strugatskii 8: 472)

[Zurzmansor, who sat on the prow of the boat, turned his head, and it could be seen that he had no face, he held his face in his hands, and the face looked at Viktor: it was a good face, honest, but it made him nauseous, and Golem would not stop, and droned on…]

[While we were writing Gadkie lebedi, it seemed to us absolutely necessary to include in the novella specifically this song of Vladimir Vysotskii. We approached Vladimir Semenovich: the poet gave his consent.]
The juxtaposition of this image with Golem’s words is suggestive of the fact that the mokretsy represent the very change of which the doctor speaks, particularly since the change described is unexpected or unwanted from the point of view of the Old Soviet Man. In short, the New Soviet Man no longer resembles the old humanity, no longer has a human “face.”

This dream image could also be significant in terms of interpreting Zurzmansor’s “facial malfunction,” since that inexplicable event suggests that the face of the mokrets is not his true face. It follows, then, that the mokretsy, like the Liudens to come, maintain some semblance of a human appearance for the sake of the humans with whom they must interact. Boris Strugatskii provides support for this interpretation in the “off-line interview”:

Мокрецы уродливые и отвратительные, а потому выходят на люди с повязками на лице или в специальных масках. Зурзмансор усмехнулся, и плохо приложенная маска у него — отвалилась. Неприятное зрелище и вполне фантастическое — с точки зрения Банева, не понявшего, что именно произошло. (Strugatskii 2009, 197)

[The mokretsy are deformed and repulsive, and thus go out in public with bandages on their faces or in special masks. Zurzmansor grinned, and the mask, poorly fitted to his face, slipped off. An unpleasant spectacle and one more than a little fantastic, at least from the point of view of Banev, who did not comprehend what exactly had taken place.]

There is a crucial symmetry between Gadkie lebedi and Volny gasiat veter in terms of the true face, or true form, of these post-humans. Where in the latter work the sole demonstration of the Liudens’ true nature is obscured by the fact that the unmasking was captured only on a sound recording, in the former, Banev sees in his dream only a lack of a face, not a new or different face. In both cases, then, the Strugatskiis refrain from delving into the specifics of the transformation. There is a multitude of possible explanations for this choice, the most obvious one being the Strugatskiis’ beloved otkaz
ot ob”iasnenii [a rejection of explanations]. Given the circumstances under which this writing principle arose, this most obvious explanation might be the best. After all, their first refusal to explain came when they themselves could not come up with a logical, convincing explanation for the scenario they had constructed. In describing the physical form of the New Soviet Man, it is reasonable to suppose that any detailed description would be lacking, given that the description would come from human minds and human hands. A related, and here instructive, problem is that of the depiction of the truly alien in science fiction. In his Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions [2005], Fredrick Jameson addresses the possibility that “genuine difference, genuine alienness or otherness, is impossible and unachievable, and that even there where it seems to have been successfully represented, in reality we find the mere structural play of purely human themes and topics” (Jameson 124). This is the very problem that the Strugatskiis confront, one that they address by elegantly sidestepping a direct depiction. Ultimately, this is probably the only satisfying solution. In fact, the alienness of the Liudens and mokretsy is amplified by their seeming humanness. Like the sterile, robot-like future humans of Maiakovskii’s plays, there is an emotional justification in making these non-humans look human. Were the reader to see them as resembling humanity in no way, then the loss of having been human would not be apparent.

On a side note, the amplification that is made possible by a seemingly human non-human could serve to explain—artistically, not biologically—why the majority of the aliens in the Strugatskiis’ works are physically indistinguishable from humans. In inventing largely humanoid aliens, they are able to concentrate on the more subtle
differences, being freed from the comparisons that would be necessitated by gross physiological differences. For the discerning reader of science fiction, who would certainly be aware of the miniscule evolutionary probability of such closely convergent evolution, there are two answers. The first would simply be an evocation of the otkaz ot ob’iasnenii. The second is the hint provided in Zhuk v muraveinike: if the Stranniki conducted one experiment on human embryos, it is probable that all intelligent life in the “known space” of the Mir Poludnia is part of the same experiment. Other writers of science fiction have explicitly justified the common physical form of peoples on different planets in such a fashion.\(^\text{106}\)

In any case, the “humanness” of both the Liudens and the mokretsy has been shown to be, to some degree, a lie. It would seem that the Strugatskiis wish to show that the loss of an inner humanity must be accompanied by a loss of the outer appearance of being human, and appearing human becomes an act of mimicry. Finally, given that, as has been shown, becoming a Liuden involves a significant loss in exchange for the nebulous gain, it is necessary to consider just what, besides a seeming loss of their human physical form, the mokretsy have shed permanently in becoming an ugly New Soviet Man.

Firstly, the mokretsy are, at least according to “human” medicine, chronically ill. As Golem says to Viktor at one point: “[m]y patients never get well” [moi patsienty

\(^{106}\) Probably the best example of a logically consistent explanation for a common human form throughout the galaxy can be found in Ursula K. Le Guin’s Hainish cycle. In these books—two of which are her famous The Left Hand of Darkness [1969] and The Dispossessed: An Ambiguous Utopia [1974]—the human form was deliberately spread among a multitude of planets by a race known as the Hain. Though their motivation for such an endeavor is lost in time, the results of their effort live on in the various humans on mutually distant planets, all of whom share the same basic bodily form. In a more recent example, the television series Star Trek: The Next Generation explains the similarity of all of the intelligent life forms in the galaxy via an ancient alien race that influenced the evolution of life on various planets so that the result would be a basic humanoid form. This episode was entitled “The Chase,” and was episode 20, season 6, first airing on 26 April 1993.
nikogda ne vyzdoravlivaïut] (Strugatskii 8: 318). Medically, this is a true statement, since the ochkovaia bolezn’ is a genetic disease. More importantly, though, the sufferers of this disease have no desire to become well, and the labeling of their disease as chronic is a matter of perception. Golem says a few paragraphs later:

Мои больные […] никогда не выздоравливают по двум причинам. Во-первых, я, как и всякий порядочный врач, не умею лечить генетические болезни. А во-вторых, они не хотят выздоравливать.107 (Strugatskii 8: 319)

[My patients never get well for two reasons. Firstly, I, like any respectable doctor, cannot cure genetic diseases. Secondly, they do not want to get well.] This lack of desire to get well is probably the most important loss experienced by the mokretsy, if only from the human point of view: they are no longer human, and have no wish to be so. They are cold and distant from the humanity from which they have sprung. The connections between this genetic disease and the emergence of a new kind of human are implied throughout the novella, and are made explicit by Banev during an internal monologue:

И генетическая болезнь… А что же, вполне возможно. Когда-нибудь это должно произойти. Может быть, давно происходило. Внутри вида зарождается новый вид, а мы это называем генетической болезнью. Старый вид — для одних условий, новый вид — для других. Раньше нужны были мощные мышцы, плодовитость, морозоустойчивость, агрессивность и, так сказать, практическая сметка… Сейчас, положим, это нужно, но скорее по инерции. Можно укокошить миллион с практической сметкой, и ничего существенного не произойдет. Это уж точно, много раз испробовано. Кто это сказал, что если из истории вынуть несколько десятков… ну пусть несколько сотен человек, то мы бы моментально оказались в каменном веке. Ну, пусть несколько тысяч… Что это за люди? Это, брат, совсем другие люди. (Strugatskii 8: 473)

[And a genetic disease… Sure, it’s completely possible. At some point it should happen. Maybe it happened a long time ago. Within the species a new species is emerging, and we call it a genetic disease. The old species is for one set of conditions, the new species for another.

107 Note that Boris Strugatskii’s statement about the time-travel mission of the mokretsy complicates Golem’s evaluation without contradicting it outright. The mokretsy do want to get well, but by ceasing to exist.
Previously what was needed were strong muscles, reproductive success, resistance to cold, aggressiveness, and, as they say, common sense… Let’s allow that these traits are necessary now, but probably only through inertia. You could knock off a million people with common sense and nothing substantial would take place. This is certain, and has been tried many times. Who was it that said that, if you were to remove from history a few dozen… well, maybe a few hundred people, that we would instantly find ourselves in the stone age. Well, maybe a few thousand… What kind of people are they? They, brother, are a completely different people.

Being a writer, the next logical step for Banev is to lay the ground rules for a thought experiment (a novel) in which he would explore the emergence of this new species:

А вообще интересно было бы представить, как в наши дни рождается хомо супер. Хороший сюжет… […] Написать бы такую утопию в духе Орвэлла или Бернарда Вольфа.108 Правда, трудно представить себе такого супера: огромный лысый череп, хиленькие ручки-ножки, импотент — банальщина. Но вообще что-то в этом роде и должно быть. Во всяком случае, смещение потребностей. Водки не надо, жратвы какой-нибудь особенно не надо, роскоши никакой, да и женщин в общем-то — так только, для спокойствия и вящей сосредоточенности. Идеальный объект для эксплуатации: отдельный ему кабинет, стол, бумагу, кучу книг… аллейку для перипатетических размышлений, а взамен он выдает идеи. Никакой утопии не получится — загребут его военные, вот и вся утопия. Сделяют секретный институт, всех этих суперов туда свезут, поставят часового, вот и все… (Strugatskii 8: 474)

[But in general it would be interesting to imagine how a homo super would be born in the present day. It’s a good story… […] I could write a utopia like Orwell or Bernard Wolf. It’s true that it’s hard to imagine this super: a huge, bald skull, puny arms and legs, impotent, but this has all been done before. But in general there should be something like it. At any rate, a removal of needs. Vodka would be not needed, no kind of special grub would be needed, no luxury, and on the whole even women would be needed only for calm and greater concentration. An ideal object for exploitation: give him his own office, a desk, paper, a pile of books… give him a little alley for his peripatetic musings, and in exchange he will give ideas… No utopia will result: the military will take him into custody, and there is the whole utopia. They will make a secret institute, take all of the supers there, set up a guard, and that will be it…]

As was seen above in Boris Strugatskii’s commentary to Volny gasiat veter, the confrontation between the old and new versions of humanity is the beating heart of Gadkie lebedi, a problem that the brothers allow Banev to confront as a writer in the section quoted above. In this monologue, Banev addresses nearly all of the points that

108 Bernard Wolfe was an American writer and one-time bodyguard of Trotsky. His 1952 novel Limbo is considered the first work of fiction to explore the logical consequences of cybernetics. The world it depicts is no more of a utopia than that found in 1984.
must be considered in imagining this confrontation, and, in a sense, his interior dialogue is both an analysis of _Gadkie lebedi_ and a preview of _Volny gasiat veter_. This moment is one of the most important intersections between the two texts. Furthermore, the problem of understanding an entity with only spiritual, and not physical, requirements is intimately related not only to Maiakovskii’s future humans in _Klop_, but to the general problem of the lack of flesh that is an assumed attribute of the improved, future human that the poet confronts in numerous works that have been considered thus far.

There are additional, more prosaically physical, differences between the _mokretsy_ and the rest of humanity. While it could be argued that these are thematically less important, they are crucial in establishing the fact that the change the _mokretsy_ have undergone is both mental and physiological. Furthermore, it is these physical changes that give rise to the visceral hatred and distrust the human inhabitants of the town feel towards “the sick.” The _mokretsy_ are sensitive to light, preferring to be abroad only after dark, and require constant rainfall. At one point, Diana becomes angry when Banev brings a _mokrets_ whose leg has been broken in from the rain. She orders him to return the _mokrets_ to his element: “[y]ou’ll kill him, you idiot! Take him outside right away and put him in the rain! [Ty ego ub’esh’, idiot! Nemedlenno yvnesi i polozhi ego pod dozhd’!]” (Strugatskii 8: 251). The next morning, the leg of the _mokrets_ has healed. Thus the “climate experiments” to which Zurzmansor refers are motivated by a physical need.\footnote{The need of the _mokretsy_ for rain could be a reference to the alien Andrei Kazimirovich in Abram Terts’s “Pkhents” [1956], a cactus-like life form who needs only water to live. At one point in the story, the alien relates the pleasure of walking through Moscow during a heavy downpour. The two texts also coincide in the poor disguises that the _mokretsy_ and the alien must respectively wear.}

Banev, then, correctly observes to the _mokrets_ who is “thinking fog” in the rain with Bol-
Kunats and Irma: “[y]ou, apparently, are like a fish in water here” [Vy zdes’, po-vidimomu, chuvstvuete sebia kak ryba v vode] (Strugatskii 8: 321).

Rainwater, however, is not the sole physical need of the mokretsy: it is a crucial detail that a mokrets deprived of books will die. In fact, Golem mentioned one such case in which a mokrets was held by the town authorities without books and died “from starvation” [ot goloda] (Strugatskii 8: 391). This fact sheds new light on the other name of the mokretsy—ochkarik—that refers to the circles around their eyes, but, as has been said, also suggests a “four-eyes,” an intellectual. Paradoxically, this, the strangest of the physical needs of the mokretsy, could be said to be their least alien characteristic in the eyes of the Strugatskiis’ readership. The lengths to which Soviet citizens went to be able to read illegal literature are thoroughly documented. Depending on the period of Soviet history, the possession or distribution of samizdat and tamizdat texts was truly risking one’s life. The physicality of this risk could be said to be connected to the physical need of the mokretsy for books.

The Soviet citizen, of course, could not subsist on a diet of literature alone: books do not, in the end, provide physical nourishment. It is this corruption of the physical needs that are an integral part of human existence that make the mokretsy incomprehensible to Banev. During the internal monologue mentioned above, he formulates for himself the essential problem for a writer attempting to describe the version of the New Soviet Man that he sees before him:

Шимпанзе не может написать роман о людях. Как я могу написать роман о человеке, у которого никаких потребностей, кроме духовных? (Strugatskii 8: 474)

[A chimpanzee would not be able to write a novel about humans. How will I be able to write about a person who has no needs other than spiritual ones?]
As was demonstrated by the example of Kamill, the Strugatskiis are inclined to depict a freedom from the demands of the flesh as negative, or at least as highly ambiguous, as in the case of “Svechi pered pul’tom.” Fleshless beings, like the angels in *Chelovek*, are fundamentally non-human.

Frank McConnell in his 1981 *The Science Fiction of H. G. Wells*, states that: “the Martians are not, after all, aliens. They are ourselves, mutated beyond sympathy, but not beyond recognition” (McConnell 130). The phrase “mutated beyond sympathy, but not beyond recognition” could be of great use in considering the distance between the *mokretsy* and Liudens on the one hand, and the humanity left behind on the other.

Another phrase, this one directly from Wells, is also relevant: the description of the Martians from the opening paragraph of *The War of the Worlds* portrays them as possessing “intellectuals vast and cool and unsympathetic” (Wells 3: 213). In both evaluations of the Martians, the idea of sympathy is central.

In the “persons” of the *mokretsy*, the Strugatskiis seem to have purposefully created a group of beings who are asympathetic: not only are they physically repulsive, but are also arrogant and cold. They seem to be very much in possession of “intellectuals vast and cool and unsympathetic.” Perhaps the best example of a lack of sympathy of the *mokretsy* towards the humans comes when, following the disappearance of the children, the entire town gathers at the gates of the sanatorium to reclaim them. A disembodied voice tells them to disperse, insulting them and—echoing the words of the children during their meeting with Banev—states that the children do not want to grow up in the mold of their parents. It pushes the parents away with a strong wind that slaps them across the face, “like a heavy, wet hand” [*kak tiazhelaia, mokraia ladon’*], the second
adjective a physical reminder of the term \textit{mokrets} (Strugatskii 8: 445). Later, Banev is incensed at the humiliation to which the \textit{mokretsy} subjected the parents—himself among them—who came seeking their children:

…Унижение, думал он. Да, конечно. Надавали пощечин, назвали подонком, прогнали, как надоеевшего попрошайку; но все-таки это были отцы и матери, все-таки они любили своих детеньшей, били их, но готовы были отдать за них жизни, развращали их своим примером, но ведь не специально, по невежеству… матери рожали их в муках, а отцы кормили их и одевали, и они ведь гордились своими детьми, и хвастались друг перед другом, проклиная их зачастую, но не представляли себе жизни без них… И ведь сейчас действительно жизнь их совсем опустела, вообще ничего не осталось. Так разве же можно с ними так жестоко, так презрительно, так холодно, так разумно, и еще надавать на прощанье по морде… (Strugatskii 8: 446)

[“…Humiliation,” he thought. “Yes, of course. They slapped us across the face several times, called us scum, drove us away like a beggar they could not stand the sight of. But just the same these were mothers and fathers, just the same they loved their kids, they beat them but they were ready to give their lives for them, they corrupted them by example, but it was not on purpose, only out of ignorance… the mothers gave birth to them in torture, and the fathers fed and clothed them, and they were proud of their children in the end and bragged to one another, often cursing them, but not imagining life without them… And now their lives have truly become empty, and nothing is left. Was it really right to be so cruel to them, so disdainful, so cold, so reasonable, and to add, in parting, a blow to the face…”]

Logovenko’s comment about the bear on the bicycle could be considered in a similar light: as a refusal to be charitable towards the remainder of the old humanity.

Despite the arrogant cruelty displayed by the \textit{mokretsy}, the affection that the children feel towards these beings—provided it is not somehow coerced—forces the reader, at least briefly, to consider these individuals in a sympathetic light, since they are still able to make a connection with a subset of the human race. The Liudens could be described in similar terms, due to the sadness that is clearly experienced by both the humans and the Liudens who have relationships that reach across the \textit{raskol}, as in the case of Glumov and his wife. Recall that the adjective \textit{neschastnyi} is used numerous
times in connection with the Liudens; it seems clear that the Strugatskii mean to imply that, for each who is present when the human race splits, the process will be painful.

Some degree of compassion for these post-humans can be allowed: they are not mutated beyond all sympathy. But considering the other half of McConnell’s formulation, we run into another problem: as has been discussed, both the mokretsy and the Liudens maintain a human form seemingly only for the benefit of the humans with whom they must associate. So their physical form as presented to humans is familiar, but must be understood as a disguise, as a lie. Thus the mokretsy have mutated not beyond sympathy, but have in fact mutated beyond recognition. In fact, McConnell’s observation might be better applied to the future humans of Maiakovskii’s plays, who appear perfectly human, but are too sterile to evoke the viewer’s sympathy.

Immediately following his consideration of the humiliation to which the mokretsy subject the parents of the town, Banev considers a question that is relevant to all of the works examined in this chapter, and even to the discussion as a whole: “[i]s it really the case, dammit, that everything that is from the animal in humans is filth?” [Neuzheli zhe, chert voz’mi, gadko vse, chto v cheloveke ot zhivotnogo?] (Strugatskii 8: 446). This is the question to which Maiakovskii never seems to have a definite answer, and his entire body of work could be understood as a vacillation between two mutually opposed answers. This question can be extended to the entire twentieth-century problem of the New Soviet Man. The idea of the New Soviet Man is founded on the axiom that the traits that exist in humans linking them to animals can and should be removed, and that humans will be better for it. But the question that is central in the majority of the works that have been considered in the course of this discussion is: after subtracting the animal, the fleshy, the
organic, the emotional from the human form and mind, will the remainder be
recognizably human? Considering all of the works of prose and poetry discussed here,
the aggregate answer can only be negative.

If we allow that the ideal of the New Soviet Man was regarded as at least
“secularly” sacred, then the works that have been considered here can only be regarded as
blasphemous. So it is interesting that Maiakovskii was touted as a poet who does battle
with God—and there is no doubt that he does—given that he also battled the Soviet gods,
albeit in much more subtle ways. It was stated in the second chapter that there is nothing
to admire or envy in the “person” of Kamill in Dalekaia Raduga. Yet, in the various
mechanized and transformed characters that have been considered here, can there be said
to be even one that the putative reader might like to emulate or become? The first chapter
would seem to suggest that the example of the machine for the human form is most
meaningful when the two remain completely and unambiguously separate. It is when the
human and machine become intermixed, either literally (the hybrids of the second
chapter) or metaphorically (the cold intellects of the present chapter) that the
shortcomings of both become the dominant features of the resulting being.
Chapter 5

Conclusion

Когда себе я надоем,
Я брошусь в солнце золотое,
Крыло шумящее одем,
Порок смешаю и святое.
Я умер, я умер, и хлынула кровь
По латам широким потоком.
Очнулся я иначе, вновь
Окинув вас воина оком.

When I become sick of myself,
I will throw myself into the golden sun,
I will don a rustling wing,
I will mix what is flawed with what is holy.
I have died, I have died, and blood has splashed
On my armour in a wide stream.
I have awoken different, again
Glancing at you with a warrior's eye.

V. Khlebnikov, “Mrachnoe” [Something Gloomy, 1914]

The Contribution of H. G. Wells

In the study of science fiction, all roads eventually lead back to H. G. Wells, rightly considered to be the founder of the genre in its modern form. All writers of science fiction necessarily acknowledge their creative debt to Wells. Referring to one of the greatest mathematicians in human history, the French mathematician Pierre-Simon Laplace is known to have urged his students, “Read Euler, read Euler, he is the master of us all!” (Fellmann 136). In the context of science fiction, the same title could be applied
to Wells: modern science fiction still draws from the foundation that his works provide. Wells’s influence is by no means limited to English-speaking countries. In Russia, for instance, Wells’s works were translated and widely read within a few years of their appearance in England. Many of Russia’s leading writers of the early twentieth century were great readers of Wells. Bulgakov’s connections to the Englishman were mentioned in the previous chapter. Zamiatin was involved in the publishing of several editions of Wells’s works, serving as an editor and providing the introductions for many of them. His essay “Herbert Wells” [1922] is one of the most insightful, nuanced considerations of Wells’s works to date.

Given Wells’s place of prominence within the Russian culture of the early twentieth century, it follows that his works would influence the development of ideas surrounding the first years of Soviet power. For instance, Trotsky’s sketch of the evolutionary development of the New Soviet Man is very much in line with what has become the science fiction trope of the post-human. As was seen in the last chapter, the post-humans in Maiakovskii’s and the Strugatskii’s works are genealogically related to post-humans outlined by Wells, particularly the Martians in The War of the Worlds, which McConnell casts as perversions of humanity. McConnell’s insight is essentially a

110 Consider the following list of some of Wells’s most famous works, with their original dates of publication, followed by the translator of the first Russian edition and the date of publication: The Time Machine [1895]: M. Cherniavskai, 1901; The Island of Doctor Moreau [1896]: V. Shtein, 1901; The Invisible Man [1897]: V. Lachinov, 1901; The War of the Worlds [1898]: Z. Zhuravskai, 1898; The First Men in the Moon [1901]: V. Lachinov, 1901. A complete history of the Russian translations of Wells’s works is given in Levidova and Parchevskai.

111 Zamiatin served as the editor for an eleven-volume collected works of Wells published by Mysl’ in 1924-1926, providing the introduction for the collection in the first volume. The following is a selected list of his other contributions to Russian publications of Wells’s works in the 1920s: Voina v vozdukh [The War in the Air, Vsemirnaia literatura, 1919], editor and introduction; Spiashchii probuzhaetsia [When the Sleeper Awakes, Vsemirnaia literatura, 1919], editor; Mashina vremeni [The Time Machine, Vsemirnaia literatura, 1920], editor and introduction; Nevidimka [The Invisible Man, Gosizdat, 1922] editor and introduction; Rasskazy o vremeni i prostranstvye [Stories of Time and Space, Vsemirnaia literatura, 1923], editor. For a complete list, see Levidova and Parchevskai.
paraphrasing of the observations of Wells’s narrator as he peers out at the Martians from the kitchen of the ruined house in which he has taken refuge in the opening chapters of the second part of the novel:

It is worthy of remark that a certain speculative writer of quasi-scientific repute, writing long before the Martian invasion, did forecast for man a final structure not unlike the Martian condition. His prophecy, I remember, appeared in November or December, 1893, in a long defunct publication, the Pall Mall Budget, and I recall a caricature of it in a pre-Martian periodical called Punch. He pointed out—writing in a foolish, facetious tone—that the perfection of mechanical appliances must ultimately supercede limbs; the perfection of chemical devices, digestion; that such organs as hair, external nose, teeth, ears and chin were no longer essential parts of the human being, and that the tendency of natural selection would lie in the direction of their steady diminution through the coming ages. The brain alone remained a cardinal necessity. Only one other part of the body had a strong case for survival, and that was the hand, “teacher and agent of the brain.” While the rest of the body dwindled, the hands would grow larger.

There is many a true word written in jest, and here in the Martians we have beyond dispute the actual accomplishment of such a suppression of the animal side of the organism by the intelligence. To me it is quite credible that the Martians may be descended from beings not unlike ourselves, by a gradual development of brain and hands (the latter giving rise to the two bunches of delicate tentacles at last) at the expense of the rest of the body. Without a body the brain would, of course, become a mere selfish intelligence, without any of the emotional substratum of the human being. (Wells 3: 380-81)

As McConnell points out, this “certain speculative writer” is Wells himself. The work being referenced—which first appeared in the 6 November 1893 edition of the Pall Mall Gazette—is a work entitled “The Man of the Year Million: A Scientific Forecast.” It is a short sketch of the future of the human form.

In “The Man of the Year Million” a book of the future is beheld as a vision. A certain “contemplative man,” sitting at home by the fire, sees before him a book, “large in size, heavy in lettering, seemingly by one Professor Holzkopf, presumably Professor at Wiessnichtwo. ‘The Necessary Characters of the Man of the Remote Future Deduced
from the Existing Stream of Tendency,’ is the title” (Wells 1893, 3). This professor writes that

[…] man, unless the order of the universe has come to an end, will undergo further modification in the future, and at least cease to be a man, giving rise to some other type of animated being. At once the fascinating question arises, What will this being be? Let us consider for a little the plastic influences at work upon our species. (Wells 1893, 3)

Holzkopf’s general thesis is that “man is the creature of the brain” who will “live by intelligence, and not by physical strength, if he lives at all.” He states that “[m]an now does by wit and machinery and verbal agreement what he once did by toil” (Wells 1893, 3). Within such a set of circumstances, evolution will favor a reduction of the human body and an enlargement of the brain. Thus one of the professor’s most detailed descriptions of this future human is of the face that lies before this enlarged brain:

Eyes large, lustrous, beautiful, soulful; above them, no longer separated by rugged brow ridges, is the top of the head, a glistening, hairless dome, terete and beautiful; no craggy nose rises to disturb by its unmeaning shadows the symmetry of that calm face, no vestigial ears project; the mouth is a small, perfectly round aperture, toothless and gumless, jawless, unanimal, no futile emotions disturbing its roundness as it lies, like a harvest moon or the evening star, in the wide firmament of face. (Wells 1893, 3)

The professor predicts that the humans of the future will do away with the digestive system altogether, living in vats of “nutritive fluid.” In fact, by his logic, the whole of the human body will whither away: “Their whole muscular system, their legs, their abdomens, are shriveled to nothing, a dangling degraded pendant to their minds” (Wells 1893, 3). Note in the quotation above that the professor describes the mouth of the human of the future as without “futile emotions,” an attribute that will be echoed in the Martians’ having done away with the “emotional substratum” to which the human being is still subject. Wells’s summarizer of the professor’s thesis draws attention to this
attribute, describing “great unemotional intelligences, and little hearts.” While the future humans are described in unflattering terms (“hopping heads,” “human tadpoles”) by Wells’s summarizer, he concedes that “the Professor is reasonable enough, his facts are current science, his methods orderly” (Wells 1893, 3).

It is not difficult to see some affinity between Wells’s projections of the humans of the future and the conception of the New Soviet Man that was developing at the same time that the Englishman’s works were being read in Russia. The key difference is that Wells is more interested in the physiology of the future human body, whereas the New Soviet Man, while a physically superior being, is primarily defined by his “spiritual life.” While there are examples in the Russian literature of the early twentieth century of future humans with larger-than-average heads (D-503’s neighbor in Zamiatin’s My, whose forehead is “a huge, bald parabola” [ogromnaia, lysaia parabola], the “great-browed” [bol’shelobyi] future chemist in Pro Eto),\(^\text{112}\) the primary relation of the inhabitants of the future in Maiakovskii’s works concerns the human “emotional substratum” of which Wells’s narrator speaks. The poems discussed in the second chapter (particularly “Protestuiu!” and “Domoi!”) show that there is a fundamental conflict in Maiakovskii’s poetry between a celebration of emotion (particularly that of love) and an elimination of all emotions. Of all of Maiakovskii’s works, Klop most closely follows the prescription (mental, not physiological) of Wells’s professor Holzkopf for the humans of the future: as is demonstrated numerous times over the course of the play, the humans of the Moscow of 1979 possess only a small remnant of the emotional substratum that is so integral to

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\(^{112}\) An example of a literary portrayal of this evolutionary tendency from post-war Russian literature can be found in Banin’s contemplation, in Gadkie lebedi, of the new human as having “huge, bald skull” [ogromnyi lysyi cherep] (Strugatskii 8: 474).
human existence. These and other affinities\textsuperscript{113} between Wells’s and Maiakovskii’s works are in no way sufficient to label the poet as a direct successor of the English writer, but they more than adequately demonstrate that the two are part of the same tradition.

There is one additional work of Wells that can be fruitfully connected not only to Maiakovskii, but to the formation of the New Soviet Man. The vivisection by which the titular doctor in \textit{The Island of Dr. Moreau} [1896] transforms animals into humanoids prefigures the idea that the New Soviet Man can be \textit{made} without waiting for evolution to take its course. Moreau’s quest to cut animals into the shapes of humans is at least obliquely relevant to Trotsky’s ideas as to how the New Soviet Man would be created, particularly when considered through the prism of \textit{Sobach’e serdtse}, in which Bulgakov’s Professor Preobrazhenskii performs an experiment that is only a slight modernization of Moreau’s butchering of innocent beasts. Moreau’s ideas, coupled with some of the additional observations made by the narrator of \textit{The War of the Worlds}, reflect much of the architecture of the New Soviet Man. As has been seen over the course of this discussion, it is an axiom that intimacy with machines leads to the perfection both of machines and their compatibility with the human body, which, in turn, leads to a combination of the two, resulting in an end to the human as this being is presently understood. Wells’s narrator, reflecting on his experience watching the Martians at the controls of war- and handling-machines, elegantly describes this progression:

\begin{quote}
Yet though they wore no clothing, it was in the other artificial additions to their bodily resources, that their great superiority over man lay. We men, with our bicycles and road-skates, our Lilienthal soaring machines, our guns and sticks and
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{113} Both of Maiakovskii’s “time travel” plays employ methods of time travel pioneered (or at least updated) by Wells. \textit{Bania} uses the time travel device, one that Chudakov, the inventor of the time machine, describes as containing the “firework fantasies of Wells” [\textit{feierverochnye fantazii Uellsa}] (Maiakovskii 10: 68). Recall that \textit{Klop} employs the “Rip Van Winkle” technique of having Prisypkin “sleep” for an extended period, a plot device Wells used in \textit{When the Sleeper Awakes} [1910].
so forth, are just in the beginning of the evolution that the Martians have worked out. They have become practically mere brains, wearing different bodies according to their needs just as men wear suits of clothes or an umbrella in the wet. (Wells 3: 383)

We can see this progression in action at numerous points in the works considered in the previous chapters. In Letaiushchii proletarii, for instance, in all the descriptions of free flight among the humans of the future, there is little mention of the flying machines themselves, giving the impression that people can simply fly by force of will. Similarly, the co-creation of the SKIBR system by roboticists and the robot itself indicate a tool that has become part of the human mind. In the same way, when Wells’s narrator first notices the Martian handling-machine, his misperception blurs the boundary between the organic and the mechanical:

At first, I say, the handling-machine did not impress me as a machine, but as a crab-like creature with a glittering integument, the controlling Martian whose delicate tentacles actuated its movements seeming to be simply the equivalent of the crab’s cerebral portion. But then I perceived the resemblance of its grey-brown, shiny, leathery integument to that of the other, sprawling bodies beyond, and the true nature of this dexterous workman dawned upon me. (Wells 3: 376)

It is just such a blurring that has been seen in poems such as “Razve u vas ne cheshutsia obe lopatki?” and other of Maiakovskii’s celebrations of Soviet aviation. In these the pairing of the human and the airplane results—like the Martian in its handling machine—in a new being that has aspects of both. Thus, not only is Maiakovskii connected to the set of assumptions under which Wells operates, but Wells is connected to the tradition of ideas that resulted in the myth of the New Soviet Man.
The New Soviet Man and the Positive Hero

A corollary of the discussion thus far is that the concept of the New Soviet Man is one that never ceases to evolve, dependent on the ideas that were current in Soviet society. The form that the New Soviet Man took in the Stalinist period is closely connected with the history of Socialist Realism. Socialist Realism is often seen as the “natural habitat” of the New Soviet Man, a literature designed specifically for this being. But the Positive Hero [polozhit’nyi geroi] of Socialist Realism cannot be completely equated with the New Soviet Man. Rather, the traits of the Positive Hero are a small subset of those of the New Soviet Man. The designation “Positive Hero” confines the New Soviet Man both temporally and evolutionarily.

The temporal confinement of the New Soviet Man comes from the fact that the Positive Hero is always an inhabitant of the Soviet present, never the Soviet future. While it is true that the Positive Hero is intended as a projection of the ideal human of the future onto the present, the temporal locality that the Positive Hero inhabits is never “the future.” This temporal fixing of the Positive Hero is a consequence of one of the central tenets of Socialist Realism, stated in the much-quoted114 Ustav Soiuza sovetskich pistratelei SSSR [Statute of the Union of Socialist Writers of the USSR] in 1934:

Социалистический реализм, являясь основным методом советской художественной литературы и литературной критики, требует от художника правдивого, исторически-конкретного изображения действительности в ее революционном развитии. При этом правдивость и историческая конкретность художественного изображения действительности должны сочетаться с задачей идеальной переделки и воспитания трудящихся в духе социализма. (Luppol 712)

[Socialist Realism, being the basic method of the Soviet literature and literary criticism, requires from the artist a true-to-life, historically concrete depiction of reality in its revolutionary

114 Terts, for instance, quotes this section in the opening pages of Chto takoe sotsialisticheskii realizm (Terts 4).
development. Moreover, the truthfulness and historical concreteness of the artistic representation of reality must be combined with the task of ideological recasting and the education of the workers in the spirit of socialism.

The demand for a “true-to-life, historically concrete depiction of reality” makes a literary journey to any future impossible. That being said, there is an interesting interplay between this definition and Gaiman’s observation about the nature of science fiction quoted in the introduction. Where science fiction, in depicting a future, describes the present, Socialist Realism, in depicting the present, is tasked with looking forward to the future. The present, therefore, is a subtext of the future in science fiction; in Socialist Realism, the future is a subtext of the present. Abram Terts writes as much—albeit with heavy irony—in Chto takoe sotsialisticheskii realizm. He observes that Socialist Realism, “in portraying the present, […] hears the progress of history, looks into the future” [izobrazhaia nastoiashechee, […] slyshit khod istorii, zagliadyvaet v budushchee] (Terts 5).115 The Positive Hero, then, while obliged to look always to the future, is forever confined to the present. As has been shown, the fantastika blizhnego pritsela, with its mild lifting of the temporal strictures of Socialist Realism, is an artificial, pseudo-science-fiction habitat for the Positive Hero. The New Soviet Man, being ever an inhabitant of a future, cannot exist in this synthetic environment.

The New Soviet Man is limited evolutionarily by the Positive Hero because the latter exhibits no changes in bodily form that could be described as evolution into a super-human or post-human. Whereas the physical changes generally associated with the New Soviet Man are true transformations (such as mechanization), the Positive Hero’s

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115 It seems likely that Terts’s formulation is a playful rephrasing of Zhdanov’s injunction, from his speech given to the first session of the Pervyi vsesoiuznyi s’ezd sovetskikh pisatelei, that Soviet literature “should be able to portray our heroes, should be able to look into our tomorrow” [dolzhna utem’ pokazat’ nashikh geroev, dolzhna utem’ zagliamut v nashe budushchee] (Luppol 5).
body is transformed only metaphorically, as in the numerous “flesh to metal” metaphors cataloged by Hellebust. When the Positive Hero does undergo a true physical transformation, it most often takes the form of mutilation and disfigurement. This is the central thesis of Lilya Kaganovsky’s *How the Soviet Man Was Unmade* [2008]. She shows that the exemplars of the Positive Hero in Socialist Realism such as Gleb Chumalov (covered in scars from his time in the Civil War) in Gladkov’s *Tsement* [*Cement*, 1925] and Aleksei Meres’ev (the pilot with both legs amputated) in Polevoi’s *Povest’ o nastroiashchem cheloveke* [*The Story of a Real Man*, 1946] are illustrative of the fact that “the world of the Stalinist novel and Stalinist film is filled with damaged male bodies” (Kaganovsky 3).

The trope of the physical mutilation of the poetic persona is prominent in Maiakovskii’s early poetry, particularly in his early long poems. The poetic persona of *Fleita-pozvonochnik*, for instance, rips off his own head, raising his skull in a toast to his past loves. Many of the poems that have been examined over the course of this discussion continue to use this trope, albeit with one crucial difference: these poems see the mutilation of the body as a means towards an end. This *teleological mutilation* is key, for instance, to “Protestuiu!,” where the violent transformation of the human form leads to the creation of a new being. In this way, Maiakovskii is connected to the socialist-realist trend identified by Kaganovsky, where the mutilation of the Positive Hero is a necessary step towards the ideal of consciousness. However, in Maiakovskii’s poetry, the mutilation of the human body in order to perfect it is connected with the irresolvable conflict between a desire to be improved and a celebration of the flesh in its “natural

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116 The mutilation that Kaganovsky identifies was seen also in the discussion, in chapter one, of the Strugatskiis’ earliest works, particularly *Strana bagrovykh tuch.*
state.” In Socialist Realism, this fundamental contradiction is not present: for it, in moving forward to a goal, there is no nostalgia for the starting point. The Positive Hero, then, is a faded copy of the New Soviet Man who inhabits Maiakovskii’s poetry and plays, one who is essentially stripped of nuance and conflict.

As has been seen over the course of this discussion, both Maiakovskii and the Strugatskii brothers are ultimately critical of the New Soviet Man as a positive goal for humanity and human evolution. While Maiakovskii was one of the builders of the idea of the New Soviet Man, the Strugatskiis inherited this being more fully formed, and, moreover, encased inside the less interesting Positive Hero. A perusal of their earliest works will reveal that their initial dialogue was with the Positive Hero and Socialist Realism. Works such as *Strana bagrovykh tuch*, *Put’ na Amal’teiu* and *Stazhery* contain many of the tropes of Socialist Realism, and many of their *mezplametniki* are clearly genetically related to the Positive Hero. This is due, in part, to the fact that the Thaw was not a movement that ignored the literature and art of the Stalinist period, but one that used this cultural content according to personal choice, rather than official prescription. The Soviet science fiction of the Thaw, then, does not wholly reject Socialist Realism, but uses some of its elements in new (or at least long unused) permutations.

Even in these early works, the Strugatskiis engage Socialist Realism in a critical fashion. For instance, recall the classic socialist-realist man-machine bond between Zhilin and the engine of the *Takhmasib* in *Stazhery*, a bond that Zhilin, in defiance of the role of the Positive Hero, yearns to break. In this same work, Bykov, the production-novel Positive Hero of *Strana bagrovykh tuch*, is the main voice speaking against heroism in the name of science and discovery, heroism that leads to the mutilated bodies
of Positive Heroes cataloged by Kaganovsky. There are numerous conflicts over the course of *Stazhery* between Bykov and his colleague and friend, the planetary scientist Iurkovskii, all revolved around the latter’s desire to make an excursion into Saturn’s rings with the goal of proving his hypothesis of their artificial origin. In one of their final confrontations, Bykov, in response to Iurkovskii’s underhanded suggestion that he is a coward, argues “there is foolish bravery, … and then there is rational bravery”! [*Est’ khrabrost’ duratskaia, … i est’ khrabrost’ razumnaia!*] (Strugatskii 2: 460). Iurkovskii responds that “rational bravery” is a catachresis, quoting a line from Kipling’s *The Jungle Books*: “The stillness of a mountain stream! The cool of the summer sun!” (Kipling 25). He then enlists Gorky to his cause, quoting from the *Pesnia o sokole*: “We sing a song to the madness of daring!” [*Bezumstvu khrabrykh poem my pesniu!*] (Gorky 183). Bykov’s dismissive response is

Попели, и хватит. В наше время надо работать, а не петь. Я не знаю, что такое катакреза, но разумная храбрость — это единственный вид храбрости, признанный в наше время. Без всяких там этих… покойников. (Strugatskii 2: 461).

[You’ve had your singing, and that’s enough. Today there should be more working, and less singing. I don’t know what a catachresis is, but rational bravery is the only kind of bravery that is acceptable in our times. Without all of these… casualties]

Bykov’s argument is reinforced at the end of this chapter, where, rephrasing Ivan Karamazov’s contention that no knowledge is worth the suffering of a child, Zhilin says to Iura that “no discoveries are worth even a single human life” [*nikakie otkrytiia ne stoiat odnoi edinstvennoi chelovecheskoi zhizni*] (Strugatskii 2: 477). These examples show that the Strugatskii’s, even in their earliest works, were working at unraveling the moral code of Socialist Realism, and along with it the infallibility of the Positive Hero.
However, the Strugatskiis engage not only with the literature of their immediate past: as has been seen, their works are connected with a variety of literary periods and predecessors. Their debt to Wells is specifically acknowledged, for instance, by Boris Strugatskii, when writing of the state of mind in which he and his brother wrote *Strana bagrovykh tuch*. He describes a work that, while in many ways deficient, is not lacking

[...] занимательности, выдумки, подлинной искренности и наивного желания немедленно, сейчас, создать что-то, достойное пера Уэллса или хотя бы Беляева.117 (Strugatskii 1993, 5)

[(…) engagement, inventiveness, genuine sincerity, and a naïve desire to right away, right now, create something worthy of the pen of Wells, or at least Beliaev.]

Not only do the Strugatskiis continue in the Wellsian traditional of crafting science fiction of high literary value, they also deepen and expand the themes that Wells founded. That they engage in dialogue with Wells explicitly is without doubt, as shown not only by their own statements, but by such works as *Vtoroe nashestvie marsian* [The Second Martian Invasion, 1966]. This novella is a sequel to *The War of the Worlds* that envisions a second invasion of Earth by Wellsian Martians who conquer humanity not by military force, but simply by providing them with food, money, and entertainment: the comforts of *byt* that Maiakovskii long railed against. Recent scholarship has explored the Strugatskiis’ relationship to Wells: George Slusser, in his 2003 article “Doing Science in the Spirit World: Order, Chaos and H. G. Wells in *A Billion Years till the End of the

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117 A. Beliaev (1926-1942) was probably the Soviet Union’s first professional writer of science fiction, admired now more for the quantity of his production, rather than for quality (Geller 72). He is best known for the novels *Chelovek-amfibiia* [The Amphibian Man, 1928] and *Ariel* [1941], the latter being a novel about a man who can fly by force of will alone. Here Boris Strugatskii, of course, acknowledges Beliaev as a formative influence on his and his brother’s childhood love of science fiction.
"World," gives an analysis of the Wellsian subtexts not only of the 1974 novella Zamiilliard let do kontsa sveta, but of many other works by the Strugatskiis.

Given their extensive engagement with Wells, the post-humans in the Strugatskiis works owe their existence as much to the Englishman’s influence as they do the ever-evolving concept of the New Soviet Man. Within the concept of early Soviet literature, a connection can be drawn from the Strugatskiis’ works not only to Maiakovskii, but to Bulgakov and Platonov, to name only two. The third chapter of Howell’s Apocalyptic Realism is devoted in part to examining the connections of the Strugatskiis with these two crucial writers. What emerges, then, is that the Strugatskiis’ works represent a continuation of the dialogue with various futures and various versions of the New Soviet Man that Socialist Realism had muted without completely interrupting.

Writers of science fiction are fortunate to be blessed with the luxury of being able to begin and end any dialogue with any future at a time of their choosing. The option to make such a choice is key, since most of the futures that Maiakovskii and the Strugatskiis describe fall into the category of what Ursula Le Guin calls in the subtitle to her novel The Dispossessed the “ambiguous utopia.” These futures have all the trappings of utopia, but are undermined by a few key deficiencies. In the case of the works considered over the course of this discussion, these deficiencies are mostly associated with the “improvement” of the human body.

Recall Banev’s question from Gadkie lebedi, touched upon at the end of chapter three: Neuzheli zhe, chert voz’mi, gadko vse, chto v cheloveke ot zhivotnogo? This question represents a more critical angle on the gradual improvement of the human form given by Wells, whose narrator of The War of the Worlds sees in the Martians “a
suppression of the animal side of the organism by the intelligence” (Wells 3: 381),
echoing the sentiment of Wells’s Professor Holzkopf in “The Man of the Year Million,”
who says of this Future Man:

[s]o much that is purely ‘animal’ about him is being, and must be, beyond all question, suppressed in his ultimate development. Evolution is no mechanical tendency for perfecting according to the ideas current in the year of grace 1892; it is simply the continued adaptation of plastic life for good or evil, to the circumstances that surround it… (Wells 1893, 3)

This question of “animal” versus “mind” is essentially isomorphic with Clark’s spontaneity/consciousness dialectic: that which humans have in common with animals can logically be placed under the heading of spontaneity, while the mind and the intellect can be placed under consciousness. Pairing these concepts allows us to draw more general conclusions about the place of the works in this discussion within the broader context of twentieth-century Soviet literature. Maiakovskii’s mechanized poetic personae, Kamill, the future humans of Klop, the Liudens, the mokretsy, all represent steps toward unadulterated consciousness, the stated goal of the socialist-realist Positive Hero. As the works considered here make clear, a human being stripped of the animal, of flesh, of spontaneity, is an inert being. Thus, in all of the dialogues with the New Soviet Men of varying futures, that being serves not as a guiding light, but as a negative example. Getting to know the New Soviet Man intimately over decades of Socialist Realism has shown him to be a threadbare concept, flawed at the core. Perhaps Wells’s exhilaration at the prospect of the Man of the Year Million results partially from the author’s not having had the luxury of getting to know this Man through decades of forced feeding. That Maiakovskii had reached similar conclusions while the New Soviet Man
was still in its conceptual infancy suggests that long familiarity is not necessary to breed contempt.

This progression from a bright utopia to something that falls between a dull dystopia and bland mundanity can be likened to the state of a polished, gleaming disc of silver: the more it is handled, the more tarnished it will become. The literature of Maiakovskii and the Strugatskiis can be placed within the context of the larger trend in Soviet society away from a blind faith in the teleological motion towards a future that is better than the past, filled with humans who are superior to their ancestors.

Directions for Further Research

The authors and works hovering on the edges and hidden in the footnotes of this study provide a map of how this discussion could be continued. In order to provide a fuller transcript of the dialogue of which this work gives only part, more Soviet authors who engage in dialogue with the future must be considered. For instance, while Platonov, Bulgakov, Zamiatin and Gastev have been mentioned in a few key moments over the course of this discussion, a broader consideration of this topic would need to consider them in much greater depth. Platonov is of particular interest as a prolific combiner of human and machine elements via numerous strange metaphors, as well as his fixation on an intimate, almost mystical bond between humans and machines. Furthermore, his numerous depictions (most notably in Chevengur [1928], Kotlovan [The Foundation Pit, 1930] and Vprok [For Future Use, 1931] of the New Soviet Man as a naïve being, capable of childlike brutality, has relevance for the Strugatskiis’ depictions of the parent-child dynamic between the Old and New Soviet Men. The explorations of
Maiakovskii’s fellow Futurists of the man-machine relationship and the nature of immortality is also relevant. Velimir Khlebnikov, in particular, wrote poems exploring the potential horrors of physical resurrection and immortality, such as his 1921 “Iranskaia pesnia” [Iranian Song].

It would also be germane to examine the works of Mikhail Slonimskii, whose 1924 story “Mashina Emeri” [The Emery Machine] portrays the ideas of stripping the human mind of emotions and the mechanization of the flesh in a way that is both positive and ambiguous. The story strikes a tone very similar to Maiakovskii’s “Protestuiu!,” also written in 1924. Also relevant is Aleksandr Beliaev, who, by publishing actively from 1926 to 1942, bridged much of the gap between the advent of Socialist Realism and the Thaw. The protagonist of Beliaev’s Chelovek-amfibiia is a result of a strange surgical experiment, and can thus be connected not only to the vivisected animal-people of Wells’s The Island of Dr. Moreau, but to the transformed human bodies that have been one of the foci of this discussion. As was seen above, the Strugatskiis have acknowledged their debt to Beliaev, suggesting that a careful examination of his writings could aid in mapping clearer routes from Maiakovskii’s time to that of the Strugatskiis.

Among the Strugatskiis’ contemporaries, it would be necessary to more closely examine Gurevich and his obsession with human immortality, since his optimism on this issue provides a key counterpoint to the Strugatskiis’ skepticism. Also relevant are the stories of Anatolii Dneprov, whose fascination with cybernetics inspired many depictions of what would now be called cyborgs, beings who are on the same “evolutionary” branch as the Strugatskiis’ Kamill. While Dneprov is more positive than the Strugatskiis in his evaluation of the mixing of human and mechanical elements, the prolific short-story
writer Il’ia Varshavskii is, at times, even more grim than the Strugatskiis in his assessment of such unions. In stories such as “Operatsiia ‘Rok-n-roll’” [Operation ‘Rock ’n’ Roll,’ c. 1963] (depicting a dead astronaut’s head contained in a jar and attached to a mechanical body) and “Lentiai” [The Lazy Bastard, c. 1966] (in which a human-robot interface leads to deep alienation and depression), Varshavskii consistently shows that humans are poorer for having been improved by machines.

Probably the key contemporary of the Strugatskiis in terms of the questions explored in this study is Vladimir Savchenko, who made cybernetics and the interactions between humans and machines—as well as the moral and physical questions entailed by these interactions—intricate to his work. His 1967 novel Otkrytie sebia is rightly considered the central reaction to cybernetics in Soviet science fiction. Savchenko's interest in the popular new science was deeply informed by a personal interest in the possibilities of changing or improving biology through technology, making his characters more practical successors of Platonov’s dreamer-engineers. Most of his novels and stories concern a human—nearly always an engineer—who is mentally and physically transformed by his own invention or discovery. Where Platonov considers the spiritual fruit of human-machine interactions, Savchenko is interested in the plausible, real-world consequences of these relationships. Savchenko’s particular innovation is to bring Platonov’s communion with machines into a post-war, hard-science-fiction mode, having retained Maiakovskii’s obsession with remolding the human form.

Attempting to include all of these writers in this study would more than double its length. In the end, such an undertaking would amount to a history and analysis of the whole of the Soviet science fiction of the twentieth century. Therefore, while there are
still avenues of exploration left in transcribing the dialogue whereby writers of Soviet science fiction engage the future, what has been transcribed here is an essential first step. What I have endeavored to do here is present what I contend is the central, essential portion of this dialogue. In the introduction, and throughout the discussion, I have been careful to account for the multiplicity of futures represented by the scope of science fiction. This multiplicity points to another key conflict between Socialist Realism and science fiction: whereas the latter allows for infinite futures, the former insists on only one future. The Marxist laws of history cannot concede that the future cannot be any other way than as logic dictates. Lagin, in his article “Bez skidok na zhanr!” [1961] first mentioned in the introduction, states as much:

Еще сравнительно недавно можно было писать романы о будущем, не затрагивая проблемы коммунизма, писать только научную фантастику. Сейчас, когда коммунизм стал фактом исторически близкого будущего, писать только научно-фантастические произведения о будущем невозможно: будущее — это коммунизм. (Lagin 2).

[Still relatively recently, it was possible to write novels about the future without touching on the problems of communism, to simply write science fiction. Now that communism has become a fact of the historically near future, to simply write science fiction works about the future is impossible: the future is communism.]

It should be pointed out that Lagin, as a writer of science fiction, is closely associated with the *fantastika blizhnego pritsela*. No true science fiction writer would allow him- or herself to be blinkered by this narrow view of the future: the set of possible futures is necessarily an infinite set. The study of science fiction, though, is not just a study of infinite futures, but the infinite possibilities of human (and non-human) existence. An expanded version of this work—one considering the writers and works listed above—could help develop a more complete understanding of this inner infinity.
Bibliography


