

Without Nostalgia: Nina Berberova's Short Fiction of the 1930s

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## ABSTRACT

DOMINIQUE HOFFMAN: Without Nostalgia: Nina Berberova's Short Fiction of the 1930s  
(Under the direction of Madeline G. Levine)

In the years following the Russian revolutions and Civil War, millions of Russians fled their homeland. These exiles formed a richly diverse society within exile known as Russia Abroad. They established schools, churches, publishing houses, newspapers and journals. Nina Berberova (1901-1993) was an integral participant of Russia Abroad, working at the largest circulation newspaper, *Poslednie novosti*, and frequently publishing in the most respected thick journal of the emigration, *Sovremennye zapiski*. Berberova, along with Vladimir Nabokov and Gaito Gazdanov, was recognized by émigré critics as among the most promising young writers. My dissertation, "Without Nostalgia: Nina Berberova's Short Fiction of the 1930s," explores her representations of exile during the "Hollow Years" of 1930s France.

Berberova's work was obsessively focused on representations of the exile experience, but she steadfastly rejected the nostalgia which characterized much émigré writing. From 1925, Paris was the center of Russia Abroad. During the 1930s, the decade in which the younger generation reached maturity as writers, conditions steadily deteriorated in France. In this dissertation, I examine three central fictional texts Berberova wrote in the course of the 1930s, which respond to the shifting concerns of Russia Abroad. I begin by looking at her *Billancourt Tales*, published serially in the newspaper *Poslednie novosti* from 1929-1934. In

these works, Berberova depicts an exile community characterized by a persistent sense of unease. Berberova's consistent rejection of nostalgia emerges clearly in this series of story-feuilletons. I then consider *Roquenal: the Chronicle of a Chateau*, written in the middle of the decade, which draws on the tropes of 19<sup>th</sup> century literature to explore a young émigré's search for identity. In this novella, Berberova shows that the conventions of Russian gentry estate literature cannot provide meaning in 20<sup>th</sup> century France. Finally, at the close of the 1930s, on the eve of the war, Berberova published *Astashev in Paris*. In *Astashev*, Berberova depicts the apotheosis of bourgeois banality and triviality, ultimately linking those traits to fascism. Although she published extensive memoirs, there is no published biography of Berberova. I have included an appendix with a brief biographical sketch of Berberova's life.

To Sasha, Sophia and Kai – who make each day more rich than I could ever have imagined

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And Michael. This doctorate would have remained a lost opportunity without your encouragement. Your generosity and insight not only enabled the achievement of this dream, but inspire me each and every day.

### **A Note on Transliteration**

This dissertation utilizes the Library of Congress system for transliteration of Russian without diacritical marks. In the case of familiar Russian names, the common Latin alphabet form is used. (e.g.: Tchaikovsky rather than Chaikovskii) In quotations from English-language translations, the original transliteration system is retained.

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## INTRODUCTION

Я не в изгнание, я -- в послание,

I'm not going into exile... but on a mission.

Nina Berberova, 1924-1926

Nina Berberova (1901-1993) was one of the best-known authors of the younger generation of Russia Abroad. She came of age during the turmoil of the Russian Revolution and Civil War and emigrated from Russia as a young woman in 1922. She lived and worked in Paris, the cultural center of the emigration from 1925 to 1950. Her period of greatest productivity and maturation as a writer coincided with the 1930s – a decade of economic, political and social challenges both in the émigrés' new home and in the Soviet Union.

During the 1930s, Berberova wrote a series of stories and novellas which were deeply rooted in the life of Russia Abroad (*Zarubezhnaia Rossiia*). Her work was noted for its consistent representation of exile and unique in its rejection of the nostalgia which permeated émigré writing at the time.

As one critic noted after the publication of her book of stories and novellas

*Oblegchenie uchasti,*

Берберова же изображает окружающую ее жизнь русской эмиграции с той же простотой, с тем же проникновением, с той же правдивостью, с какими у писателей золотого века русской литературы отражалась российская действительность... Для Берберовой в центре всегда человеческая личность, живущая своей единственной неповторимой жизнью. (ERG, quoted in Yellen 109)

Berberova depicts the world around her – the life of the Russian emigration – with the same simplicity, with the same insight, with the same truthfulness, with which the writers of the Golden Age of Russian literature reflected Russian reality... For Berberova, the human personality is always at the center, living its single unrepeatable life.<sup>1</sup>

Berberova's characteristic emphasis on the psychological experience of emigration can be seen in the earliest works which brought her fame, the *Billancourt Tales*, published serially in the émigré newspaper *Poslednie novosti* (*The Latest News*) from 1929 to 1934. Émigré poet and literary critic Vladislav Khodasevich wrote of the integral nature of the emigration to the development of Berberova's prose:

Революция и эмиграция — отнюдь не случайные даты, к которым приурочены события в писаниях Берберовой. Они и не декорации, на фоне которых эти события разворачиваются. Они суть причины этих событий. Судьбы берберовских героев и героинь связаны с революцией и эмиграцией органически. (1937)

The revolution and emigration are, by no means, chance dates to which the events in Berberova's writing are grafted. Nor are they scenery, on the background of which events unfold. They are the essence of the reason for these events. The fates of Berberova's characters are organically connected to the revolution and emigration.

As Khodasevich noted elsewhere in the same article, "People whose life stories were not tied to the Russian catastrophe held almost no interest for Berberova."<sup>2</sup> Poet and critic Georgy Adamovich, who was locked in literary polemics with Khodasevich throughout the decade, also identified Berberova as "perhaps, the most émigré of all émigré writers."<sup>3</sup>

Berberova's steadfast rejection of nostalgia makes her highly unusual among writers of Russia Abroad. In the lines of poetry quoted above, she rejects nostalgia and claims a

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<sup>1</sup> All translations from the Russian in this chapter are my own.

<sup>2</sup> "liudi, zhiznennaia istoriia kotorykh ne sviazana s russkoi katastrofoi, Berberovu pochni ne interesuiut"

<sup>3</sup> "Ia by skazal, chto iz emigrantskikh pisatelei Berberova, pozhalui, sami emigrantskii" (2)

sense of purpose through the concept of a mission. That sense of purpose was a continuous element of her work.

For the first wave of Russian exiles, both the realities of the present and the uncertainties of the future were often overwhelming. Edward Said's reference to exile as "... the unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home" (49) could find resonance in the works of the émigrés. Writers as diverse as Bunin, Tsvetaeva and Nabokov produced evocative depictions of an idealized Russia. The poet Marina Tsvetaeva wrote remarkable prose memoirs in the effort "... to resurrect that world" (quoted in Figes *Natasha* 535). Ivan Bunin, whose pre-revolutionary work had often excoriated the darkness of peasant life, became the elegiacal chronicler of an idealized Russian countryside in works such as his fictional memoir *Zhizn' Arsenieva* (*The Life of Arseniev*). Of the younger generation, Nabokov's *Mashen'ka* (*Mary*) written in 1926 and Gaito Gazdanov's *Vecher u Kler* (*An Evening with Clare*) from 1930 both depict young émigrés completely immersed in nostalgic recreations of the past.

Nostalgia is an ever-present temptation and risk for the exiled writer. The author who has lost everything may naturally be tempted to relive times before the catastrophe of exile. Berberova would surely have agreed with Joseph Brodsky, who warns against "the repetitiveness of nostalgia, which is, to put it bluntly, simply a failure to deal with the realities of the present or the uncertainties of the future" (6).

Her work provided a stark contrast to the "nostalgia industry" (Tihanov 336) which characterized much of the literary output of the emigration. While many writers (and readers) may have found comfort in nostalgia, Nina Berberova herself expressed a deep distrust of its temptations. In her memoirs, she depicts members of the older generation as poisoned and

artistically silenced by their memories. She describes her lover, Vladislav Khodasevich's declaration that "... he could not exist without writing, that he could write only in Russia, he could not exist without Russia, but he could not live or write in Russia – and he pleaded with me to die with him" (214).<sup>4</sup>

Cultural critic Svetlana Boym proposes that, "for some nostalgia was a taboo: it was the predicament of Lot's wife, a fear that looking back might paralyze you forever, turning you into a pillar of salt, a pitiful monument to your own grief and the futility of departure" (xv). This is the sense one gains from Berberova's writings. Berberova's memoirs are populated by miserable exiles, unable to adapt to their current circumstances and, thus, unable to develop creatively and doomed to early death and decay. She repeatedly declares that she has never been too attached to her own past.

In her story cycle *The Billancourt Tales*, which are the subject/focus of chapter 1 of this dissertation, the characters live only in the present. When a character is drawn into memories of the past, the effects are damaging. As Shchov, a former White Army soldier in one of her stories, notes, he longs "for a better correspondence" between his thoughts and actions. Recollection only serves to further disrupt that correspondence. The few characters in the *Billancourt Tales* who do look to the past are either disillusioned or destroyed in the process.

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<sup>4</sup> "ne mozhet zhit' bez togo, chtoby ne pisat', chto pisat' mozhet on tol'ko v Rossii, chto on ne mozhet byt' bez Rossii, chto nemozhet ne zhit', ni pisat' v Rossii – umoliaet menia umeret' vmeste s nim" (252)

“We are not in exile, we are on a mission.”

Berberova’s line “I am not going into exile; I’m going on a mission” was repeated and transformed by the émigrés into a collective rallying cry: “We are not in exile, we are on a mission.”<sup>5</sup> The belief in their cultural mission provided some antidote to the loneliness and loss of purpose occasioned by life in exile. Boym relates nostalgia to “... the relationship between individual biography and the biography of groups or nations, between personal and collective memory” (xvi).

Between the years 1917 and 1929, in the course of Revolution, Civil War, famine and political repressions, an estimated 3 million Russians left their homeland. In the first decade of the emigration, the 1920s, there was widespread hope of return. In these early years, there was also frequent travel and cultural discourse between the newly formed Soviet Union and Europe.

By 1925, there were over 100,000 Russians living in France and Paris had become the undisputed center of Russia Abroad. It was home to multiple literary journals, literary salons, Russian bookstores and a Russian library. The term “Russia Abroad” expresses the Russians’ sense of forming an alternative society, transforming themselves from a crowd of panicked refugees into a group of émigrés with a mission. That mission was the preservation of Russian culture until such time as the Bolsheviks were removed from power. Or, as the editorial statement for *Sovremennye zapiski* (*Contemporary Annals*), the leading journal of the interwar emigration, declared: the defense of “the free Russian word.”

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<sup>5</sup> “Мы не в изгнании, мы в посланьи!” -- восклицала она (younger generation) устами одного автора» (Khodasevich "Literature"). Недаром ей принадлежит стих, многократно цитированный в писаниях и спорах об этой миссии: “Я не в изгнании, я в посланьи”. (Khodasevich Rev. *Sov. zap.* 1937)

By the start of the 1930s, “the Russian exile community was made increasingly aware of its own deepening twilight” (Johnston 151). The early hopes of return had been thoroughly extinguished, Stalin’s hold on power was producing paroxysms of famine and terror, and Europe was moving inexorably toward war.

In her memoir, Berberova describes the 1930s as the

Эпоха американской депрессии, мирового экономического кризиса, восхождения Гитлера, абиссинской войны, испанской войны, 'культа личности' в Советском Союзе, разоружения одних и вооружения других. Страшное время в Европе, в мире, отчаянное время, подлое время. .. Не теперь, но уже тогда было ясно, что эпоха не только грозная, но и безумная, что люди не только осуждены, но и обречены. .. Мы затурканы, мы забиты, подданства нам не дают, в будущей войне пошлют в окопы. (*KM* 416)<sup>6</sup>

The epoch of depression, world economic crisis, the rise of Hitler, the Ethiopian war, the Spanish war, the 'cult of personality' in the Soviet Union, disarmament of some and armament of others. A frightful time, a desperate time... Not just when I now look back, but even then it was already clear that the present was not only menacing but mad, that people were not just condemned but doomed... We were bewildered, brow-beaten, at the end of our wits; we were not given citizenship, but in the war to come we were to be sent into the trenches. (*IM* 354-355)

By the middle of the decade, Hitler was in power in Germany, Mussolini controlled Italy, and Spain was in the grip of Civil War. Refugees were already flowing out of Nazi Germany with stories of violence and repression. Fascism had adherents throughout Europe and in 1936 the Fascist right in France attempted to overthrow the government. Russian literature was increasingly endangered within Russia itself. The official imposition of Socialist Realism in 1932 signaled to the émigrés that they were, indeed, the sole heirs to continue the great traditions of Russian literature.

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<sup>6</sup> Berberova’s memoirs will be referenced as *KM* (*Kursiv moi*) and *IM* (*The Italics Are Mine*) throughout the dissertation.

In the context of the first wave Russian emigration, the question of personal memory (nostalgia) gets caught up with the question of cultural memory. “We are not in exile, we are on a mission!”<sup>7</sup> expressed the émigré’s sense of cultural responsibility. As Marc Raeff notes “The Russian émigrés firmly believed that one of their primary tasks in exile was to preserve, carry on, and create Russian culture” (*Russia Abroad* 95). The conflict between the task of “preserving” and “creating” Russian culture formed the core of much of the internal conflict which characterized the literary community in the 1930s.

The traditional Russian view of the social responsibility of the writer to his nation took on renewed force in the face of ever-decreasing publishing outlets. This heightened sense of urgency and responsibility resulted in a view of literature as a very high stakes endeavor. The entire future of Russian culture was at risk. The tactics were correspondingly intense and literary scholars have written about the polemics which dominated the atmosphere during this decade.<sup>8</sup>

Meanwhile, an emerging generation gap led to conflict among the literary elite. The younger generation who had begun their careers in exile were coming into their own. Unlike the older generation, those who had begun their literary careers in pre-Revolutionary Russia, the younger generation did not see “... the preservation and amplification of the idealized image of pre-1917 Russia as their principal mission” (333). Arguments about the relevance of French models for Russian writers, the value of Pushkin over Lermontov, a resolute

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<sup>7</sup> The phrase has been variously attributed to Merezhkovsky, Gippius and Berberova. The poem appears in Berberova’s *Collected Poems* and Khodasevich attributes the phrase to her in his 1937 review of *Sovremennye zapiski*.

<sup>8</sup> Relevant works by Hagglund, Tihanov, Livak, and Bethea are included in the bibliography.

optimism or an overwhelming malaise became heated as the very existence of exile literature came into doubt. According to Tihanov, these debates reached a peak in 1936.

Berberova's novella *Rokanval: istoriia odnogo zamka* (*Roquenal: the Chronicle of a Chateau*), published in 1936, which I discuss in chapter 2, depicts a young émigré too young to have extensive memories of Russia. He attempts to substitute images drawn from Russian literature for his own memory, imposing those images onto the backdrop of a French noble chateau. The novella exposes the limitations of a purely retrospective understanding of Russia in offering a way forward for a generation too young to rely on nostalgia.

By the end of the decade, the debates on literature had died down. There was a pervasive sense of impending catastrophe. Berberova's novella *Oblegchenie uchasti* (*Astashev in Paris*) represents the complete loss of cultural memory, as I argue in chapter 3. *Astashev in Paris*, published in 1939 with France on the brink of war, depicts an émigré who exchanges his mother's classic literature for dry textbooks and considers himself more French than Russian. He despises everything about Russia and considers the possibility of having stayed there "absurd." Georgy Adamovich, a leading critic of the emigration, described a feeling of there being "nothing to breathe" in reading this novella, adding that "... I nonetheless read *Oblegchenie uchasti* with unfeigned delight... It is so precisely and firmly 'made', what ability to tell a story, such clarity in all details of the image."<sup>9</sup> In *Astashev*, Berberova effectively conveys a stifling sense of helplessness in the face of evil.

The works I have selected allow us to follow the trajectory of the decade. Berberova writes that Russian literature felt the seeds of its destruction from the moment of its creation.

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<sup>9</sup> "Ia vse zhe chital *Oblegchenie uchasti* s nepoddel'nym voskhishcheniem... Kak tochno, kak krepko 'sdelano', kakoe umenie vesti rasskaz, kakaia otchetlivost' vo vsekh podrobnostiakh risunka!" (PN, August 17, 1939)



One could say the same about émigré literature. It was only towards the beginning of the 1930s that new names, those who had not established careers already in Russia, became common in the prominent periodicals and publishing houses. Thus, they emerged along with the host of social ills which characterized the “Hollow Years” of France – the seeds of their destruction were already present at their birth. The German invasion brought an end to Russia Abroad.

Nina Berberova was a key participant in that troubled, yet vibrant, period of Russian culture. She was a regular contributor to the leading periodicals of the time including the daily *Poslednie novosti* (*The Latest News*) “the most outstanding, respected, and widely read newspaper in Russia Abroad” and the thick journal *Sovremennye zapiski* (*Contemporary Annals*) – “clearly the most significant and respected thick journal of Russia Abroad” (Raeff, *Russia Abroad* 82, 86). She published poetry, fiction, criticism, biographies and journalism. Her autobiography *Kursiv moi* (*The Italics Are Mine*, 1969) is considered an essential, though highly controversial, source of information and is quoted extensively in studies of the period. And yet, the remainder of Berberova’s extensive oeuvre has yet to receive widespread critical attention.

During the 1930s, Berberova’s work was widely praised. Nabokov described her first novel, *Poslednie i pervye*, as “unique, flowing and brilliant... This is literature of a high quality, the work of a true writer” (quoted in Shroyer).<sup>10</sup> A 1934 article in *The Slavonic and East European Review*, singled out Nabokov, Berberova, Gazdanov and Felzen as the

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<sup>10</sup> “svoeobraznoi, ladnoi i blestiashechi... eto literatura vysokogo kachestva, proizvedenie podlinnogo pisatel’ia.” (*Rul’*, 1931.) Shroyer identifies this article as the sole clearly positive evaluation of a woman’s prose in all of Nabokov’s literary criticism.

“young writers of promise” in the emigration (Struve *Current* 436). Ivan Bunin similarly identified Nabokov, Gazdanov and Berberova as the most outstanding of the young prose writers (quoted in Paunkovich). More recently, literary scholars have also recognized her significance including Nabokov biographer Brian Boyd’s description of her as “perhaps the most important novelist other than Nabokov himself to emerge in the emigration” (*The American Years* 49).

Berberova’s work has yet to receive sustained critical attention. In this dissertation, I consider the ways in which her work responded to concerns of cultural continuity in the inhospitable conditions of Europe in the 1930s. Because this dissertation represents the first monograph on Berberova’s work, I have attached a brief biographical sketch as an appendix. The materials in the biographical sketch are gathered from her memoirs, archival materials including correspondence and clippings, references in the writings of contemporaries and personal interviews with those who knew her.

## BILLANCOURT TALES: COMMUNITY OF THE DISPLACED

The *Billancourt Tales* (*Biiankurskie prazdniki*) are among Berberova's earliest published works.<sup>11</sup> This cycle of fictionalized feuilletons was published intermittently in the daily newspaper *Poslednie novosti* (*The Latest News*) from the years 1929-1934 and brought Berberova recognition throughout the emigration. (Savel'ev 452; Berberova *Italics* 327) The critic S. Savel'ev noted years later that the Billancourt stories were a "rare, almost unique, attempt to artistically formulate the daily life of Russians abroad" (453).<sup>12</sup> In these stories, Berberova develops a poetics of exile based on a sense of disjointedness and disorientation, but firmly grounded within a specific community.

From July 1929 to June 1930, Berberova published ten stories at the rate of about one each month which were carried in *Poslednie novosti* under the rubric: "from the cycle 'Billancourt Holidays'."<sup>13</sup> In subsequent years, she wrote occasional stories about Billancourt, which did not carry the heading and did not feature an identified narrator.

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<sup>11</sup> The collection published as the *Billancourt Tales* is a selection of the newspaper stories gathered by Berberova in the years 1977-78 according to a manuscript in her archives at the Hoover Institution (Box 398: Folder 8). The introduction included in the Russian edition and quoted in this chapter was written for that manuscript.

<sup>12</sup> "redkaia, pochtii edinstvennaia popytka khudozhestvenno oformit' vremennyi byt russkikh zagranitsej"

<sup>13</sup> "iz tsikla 'Biiankurskie prazdniki'"

In the introduction to the collection, Berberova describes how she came to write the Billancourt stories:

Я начала писать прозу в 1925 году и в течение двух лет искала почву, или основу, или фон, на котором могли бы жить и действовать мои герои. *Старой России я не успела узнать, и писать о ней, даже если бы я ее знала, меня не интересовало: в эмиграции, и в ее центре, Париже, было достаточно “старых” писателей, которые могли увлечь воспоминаниями о царской России только тех, которые жили в прошлом.* Писать о Франции и французских “героях” (как делали некоторые из моих сверстников, начинающих прозаиков) мне не приходило на ум...мне необходимо было найти, хотя бы в малой степени, установившуюся бытовую обстановку, людей, если не прочно, то хотя бы на некоторое время, осевших в одном месте и создавших подобие быта, вне зависимости от того, нравится ли мне обстановка, ими созданная, и нравятся ли мне они сами. (1)<sup>14</sup>

I began writing prose in 1925, and for two years I was looking for the soil, or grounds, or background, on which my characters could live and act. I never managed to know Old Russia, and I was not interested in writing about it, even if I had known it: in the emigration, and in its center, Paris, there were enough “old” writers who could employ their memoirs of tsarist Russia to entertain only those who lived in the past. The idea of writing about France and French characters (as did some of my peers, beginning prose writers) never occurred to me...it was essential for me to find, if even in the slightest measure, an appropriate daily environment, people, who... had settled at least for a time, in one place and created a semblance of daily life, regardless of whether or not I liked the environment they had created and whether or not I liked them. (trans. mine)

In the passage above, I have italicized Berberova’s statement of her reasons for not writing about “Old Russia.” This passage emphasizes her adamant rejection of the nostalgic obsession with Russia which characterized much of the émigré ethos.

Berberova writes that she learned in 1927 of the Russian community in Billancourt, and that therein she found the setting which she sought. The Paris suburb of Billancourt was home to a large Renault factory, which employed 10,000 Russian exiles, many of them

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<sup>14</sup> All Russian language quotes from Berberova’s fiction come from the 1997 edition of *Billankurskie prazdniki; Rasskazy v izgnanii*. English language quotes come from the volumes *Billancourt Tales* and *The Tattered Cloak*. The introduction to *Billancourt Tales* has not been published in English; all translations from the introduction are my own.

former White Army soldiers (including for a time novelist Gaito Gazdanov). An entire Russian culture developed around the plant. In the early years after the Revolution and the evacuation of the White Army in 1920, many if not most of the exiles expected to return to Russia. By 1929, it had become clear that there would be no further military action and that the Bolshevik state was unlikely to collapse.

In this chapter, I consider the paradigm of exile which Berberova created through this series of stories and the narrative style she used to achieve it. I argue that for Berberova the defining characteristic of exile life for the émigrés she portrays in these tales is a profound sense of displacement. I begin with an overview of general themes and narration, followed by analyses of selected stories with reference to those themes.

## **I. The Poetics of Exile**

While many writers of exile tend to focus on the loneliness of exile, much less has been written on the community of exile. Berberova's creation of an exile community in these stories is a notable contribution to exile poetics. Her vision of exile differs significantly from that of earlier Russian writers in its defining features. For many exile writers of her time, depictions of life in exile were dominated by representations of alienation and memory. In contrast, in the Billancourt stories, Berberova's characters rarely refer to the past and Russia exists primarily as a listing of Civil War battles. The meaning of exile lies not in nostalgia, but in a pervasive sense of displacement.

After identifying some of Berberova's techniques of narration and elements of her poetics of exile, I will consider them closely in relation to several of the stories. The first five stories feature Grisha as a highly visible narrator and share a poetics of displacement. Four of

these five also exhibit a circular story structure emphasizing the futility of human agency. After this initial grouping, Berberova experimented with other types of narrative voice including an unidentified skaz narrator. I will examine each of these initial stories in some detail and then make reference to later stories as appropriate.

Skaz plays a significant role in Berberova's depiction of Billancourt. In her introduction to the stories, Berberova cites Zoshchenko and Gogol, two of the greatest Russian practitioners of skaz narration, as significant influences on the stories (5). The use of skaz was widespread in Soviet Russia of the 1920s, featured in the works of writers such as Zoshchenko, Bulgakov and Babel.

According to the *Kratkaia literaturnaia entsiklopediia*, skaz is "a special type of narrative structured as emanating from a person distanced from the author (whether concretely named or presumed), and one who possesses a distinct manner of discourse" (quoted in *Terras* 420). Berberova's contemporary, Formalist critic Boris Eikhenbaum emphasized the "oral" nature of skaz, characterizing the use of skaz as a return to "the living word" (233). He also emphasized the illusion of improvisation as desirable for the creative artist.

The *Billancourt Tales* are narrated by Grisha, a worker in the Renault factory. He is a resident of Billancourt and assumes that his readers are as well. Berberova emphasizes the distance between herself and her characters throughout the introduction through such phrases as "my heroes – provincials, uneducated people of a generation which grew up in the 1910s and 20s" (5), saying that in 1927 she learned that one could see "the Russian masses" on Sundays in the Russian church.<sup>15</sup> Grisha is a member of the community of Billancourt, who

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<sup>15</sup> "Moi geroi – provintsialy, polu-intelligenty pokoleniia vyrosshego v desiatiakh i

shares the values of that community and whose field of reference does not extend far beyond it.

Grisha as narrator closely fits Bakhtin's insistence that "in most cases skaz is introduced precisely for the sake of someone else's voice, a voice socially distinct, carrying with it precisely those points of view and evaluations necessary to the author" (192). This contrast between author's and narrator's voices often results in irony. Berberova directly aligned Grisha's role with the irony which characterizes the stories: "The author's irony needed to appear in the very style of the prose, and therefore between me and the characters a narrator appeared (5)."<sup>16</sup> This echoes Shklovsky's sense that in skaz "The narrator is there to supply irony" (letter, 62). At the end of this chapter, I will examine more closely Berberova's relation to Grisha.

While skaz is the mode of narration for these stories, the genre is the story feuilleton.<sup>17</sup> Each of the stories in the *Billancourt Tales* originally appeared as a feuilleton in the newspaper *Poslednie novosti*. The feuilleton is an established genre of Russian journalism dating back to 1820, which exists on the borderline between journalism and literature. Many of the most familiar names of Russian literature of the 1920s and early

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dvadtsatykh godakh"

<sup>16</sup> "ironiia avtora dolzhna byla proiavit'sia v samom stile ego prozy, i potomu mezhdu mnoiu i deistvuiushchimi litsami poiavilsia rasskazchik"

<sup>17</sup> The feuilleton is thought to have originated in Paris in 1800, when the editor of the *Journal des Débats* happened to insert a *feuilleton* (extra sheet) into the edition as it went to press. Initially the term feuilleton referred simply to the physical attributes of publication: deriving from the French word for leaf it was an additional insert to the newspaper.

1930s wrote feuilletons, including Olesha, Bulgakov, and Zoshchenko.<sup>18</sup> In addition to these story feuilletons, Berberova also wrote more conventional feuilletons describing life in Paris and a travelogue about Ulster.<sup>19</sup> These feuilletons adopted the intimate and informative tone common to many feuilletons in the late nineteenth century.

Like the newspaper format which confines them, feuilletons are generally urban and contemporary. Viktor Shklovsky defined the modern feuilleton as “something in-between an article of practical character, which recounts facts, and what one conventionally would call a work of imaginative literature” (quoted in Dianina 193). The position of the feuilleton within the daily newspaper and its status as a boundary genre provides an opportunity for its writer to make particular claims to truth.<sup>20</sup> While Shklovsky here is not referring to the fictional feuilleton, writers such as Zoshchenko and Berberova exploited that “in-between” character. Their feuilletons exploit their “contemporaneous” nature clearly commenting on current happenings within the community: for Berberova Billancourt, for Zoshchenko a country in the process of self-creation. Grisha emphasizes the accuracy of his depictions and their direct connection to reality throughout the series.

Berberova unites the potentials of skaz narration and the genre of the story feuilleton to form a powerful evocation of community.<sup>21</sup> The stories are bound together through the

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<sup>18</sup> Dedkov. n.pag.

<sup>19</sup> Hoover archives. Boxes 395-396.

<sup>20</sup> In *Gamburgskii schet*, Shklovsky celebrates the highly contextual nature of the feuilleton, noting that he had encouraged the feuilletonist Zorich to have his book of reprinted feuilletons bound in a newspaper-imprinted cover to emphasize their connection with their initial publication in the newspaper (360).

<sup>21</sup> Skaz narration and the feuilleton have frequently been linked. Buckler describes a travel feuilleton “filtered through a skaz narrator” (101). Bulgakov and Zoshchenko wrote skaz



setting of Billancourt and Grisha's narration. Ways in which these stories develop community are loss of delineation between narrated and existing worlds, coterie semantics and creation of a distinct geographic/ social entity through recurrent locations and characters of Billancourt.

Skaz is peculiarly suited to the effacement of boundary between word and world. As Linda Park-Fuller notes in her article on Bakhtin and skaz, "direct acknowledgement of the addressee's presence as an active participant in the narrative discourse gives the narration an oral quality that tends to decompose the boundaries between art and life, between oratory and literary narration" (n. pag.). Fludernik notes that "skaz narration, as a fictional technique that pretends to reinstitute a specious orality, recuperates the original communal character of oral storytelling, with the effect of subverting the by now established separation of narration and narrated in terms of fictional worlds" (232). There are a number of devices in these stories, which blur the boundaries of narrated world and existing world, drawing the reader into the world of Billancourt.

Grisha develops what may be termed a "coterie semantics."<sup>22</sup> The narrator's personality and implied relationship with us, the readers, creates an illusion of intimacy as he draws us into the circle of the fictional world. This coterie semantics offers a form which is addressed to a shared community, is contemporary, and assumes a shared experience and knowledge base. Grisha continually considers the interests of his readers and at times directly addresses the reader. As a resident of Billancourt, he depicts the lives of his neighbors and

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feuilletons in the 1920s.

<sup>22</sup> Fyodor Grits describes "coterie semantics" thus: "The constant sensation of the author's personality, as well as the abundance of 'homely' allusions, actuates... a 'coterie' semantics, an everyday conversational intonation and an attention to incidental details" (118).

addresses them directly in his narration. The stories are frequently self-referential, referring to their status as newspaper stories and Grisha himself as the author.

Utilization of a continuous skaz narrator in the context of the newspaper feuilleton leads to the creation of an implied community which continues over time – the narrator becomes a familiar friend. The *Billancourt Tales* appeared over the course of years in *Poslednie novosti*, creating a sense of continuity for their fictional world. Recurrent characters names and specific locales in Billancourt enhanced the perception of a fictional world which continued to exist between readings of individual stories.

Berberova's poetics of exile presented in *Billancourt Tales* differs from other depictions of exile in a number of ways. One of the most significant is in the outright rejection of nostalgia. It would be possible to view her Billancourt citizens simply as unfortunate working poor, if not for the repeated insistence within the texts that they are victims of history. The signs of their victimization do not lie in recollections of a lost homeland, but in a persistent sense of "lack of fit," of displacement. Their exile is defined by a persistent sense of unease related to the deeply ingrained habits of culture and identity. The refugees live resolutely in the present moment, yet they are plagued by a persistent sense of incongruence. Often, this lack of ease appears unrelated to the specificity of exile, yet the narrator and characters consistently relate it back to their status as refugees. Exile is not the backdrop to their existence, but the defining reality.

Berberova shows us a population of disoriented people, refugees without fluency in the local language or customs, of uncertain social status – people who had lost everything. And yet, daily life continues with its festivals, search for love, the need for employment and a sense of belonging. These are individuals entirely caught up in the small events of daily

life, with no explicit reference to events in the greater world, though the greater world continues to impact their fates in a variety of ways. These tales posit the individual's powerlessness in the face of history and the ultimate unknowability of the human being.

## II. The Stories

On Sunday, July 28, 1929, "The Argentine: from the cycle 'Billancourt Holidays'" opened the Billancourt series. The series opens with a direct address to the readers:

Милостивые государыни и милостивые государи, извиняюсь! Особенно -- государыни, оттого что не все в моем рассказе будет одинаково возвышенно и благопристойно. С Иваном Павловичем случился истинный конфуз. Он так и сказал мне, уезжая: "Со мною, друг мой Гриша, у вас в Париже конфуз произошел." (13)

Kind sirs, gentle ladies, my apologies! Particularly to the ladies, for not everything in my tale will be equally high-minded and decent. Ivan Pavlovich has suffered a real fiasco. That is exactly what he said as he was leaving: "Grisha, my friend, this has been a real fiasco with you in Paris." (29)<sup>23</sup>

These opening lines introduce us to Grisha as narrator. His direct address to the reading audience, sudden shifts in register and conversational tone immediately place us in the realm of *skaz*. "Milostivye gosudaryni i milostivye gosudari" represents an elevated form which would normally be used only in oral discourse addressing a formal gathering. He then singles out the ladies, who he presumes will be most vulnerable to offense from the fact that not all of his story will be equally elevated and proper. Berberova identified the tendency to address women with particular concern as part of the *skaz* narration she employed in these stories (5). Following this highly formal introduction he shifts into an intimate address: "Ivan Pavlovich has suffered a real fiasco." The name "Ivan Pavlovich" enters the text without transition or identification. The word "konfuz" is a colloquial, borrowed word. This mix of

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<sup>23</sup> "and decent" is omitted in the published translation.

communicative registers is one of the common hallmarks of skaz narration (Vinogradov 17) and will be seen in several of the stories. His repetition of the subliterate “konfuz” twice in the paragraph, once quoting Ivan, also emphasizes his apparent lack of skill as writer. These opening lines immediately alert us to Grisha's limitations as narrator and invite the reader into complicity with the author hiding behind Grisha's address. One frequent result of the “double-voicedness” of skaz is the introduction of elements of irony. Hicks, in contrast to Bakhtin and other critics, argues that this irony can be sympathetic, rather than simply parodic (2). Berberova's treatment illustrates this empathetic irony.

Grisha goes on to describe the pleading letters he received from his uncle Ivan, who lives in the country and is in need of a wife. Grisha places his own voice in dialogue with Uncle Ivan by including quotes from Ivan Pavlovich's letters. Ivan writes of his misery without a wife in the provinces and pleads for Grisha's help in finding a wife. Ivan writes, “you're living in the capital of the arts, you have charming ladies at your beck and call” (28).<sup>24</sup> Grisha assures us that “Ivan Pavlovich had erred in many points on my happy account: I don't live in a world center, I live next door in Billancourt; I kill myself in the factory from morning til night” (29).<sup>25</sup> This distinction, indeed dichotomy, between Paris and Billancourt will be developed throughout the series. Although Paris and Billancourt were geographically contiguous, they are depicted as entirely different places. Paris is the primary “other” to which Billancourt is contrasted. The factory Grisha refers to is the Renault factory.

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<sup>24</sup> “ty zhivesh' ...v stolitse vsekh iskusstv, k uslugam tvoim...prelestnye damy” (13)

<sup>25</sup> “Ivan Pavlovich zabluzhdalsia vo mnogikh punktakh na moi schastlivyi schet: zhivu ia ne v mirovom tsentre, a riadom, v Biiankure: s utra do nochi gubliu zhizn' na zavode” (13-14)

The plot of “The Argentine” revolves around Grisha’s attempts to help Ivan Pavlovich find a wife. When a likely candidate is located, Ivan comes to the city, only to have his hopes crushed when it turns out that the entire trip was based on a misunderstanding – the young woman thought this was a job offer rather than an offer of marriage and is already three months pregnant.

Berberova creates an image of community which encompasses the reader as she continuously blurs the line between the real and fictional worlds. She uses the story's contextual position within the daily newspaper to draw the actual reader and the characters into a common space and efface the lines between the fictional and actual worlds. Rather than the reader of a book or monthly journal, who may be reading at any time, the reader of the newspaper is assumed to be reading on (or near) the date of the paper's publication. At the start of the story, Grisha places the timing of Ivan's visit quite precisely: “Ivan Pavlovich arrived from the provinces the Friday before last” (28).<sup>26</sup> Later, he notes “the even July weather” (31).<sup>27</sup> This story was published in July. Thus, the reader finds himself existing and reading in the same temporal plane as both the narrator and the depicted fictional world. Through techniques such as his direct address to the reader and these precise temporal markers, Grisha creates an implied community encompassing the narrator (himself), the implied reader, and the depicted characters (usually inhabitants of Billancourt).

As he draws the reader into his depicted world, he also constructs a powerful image of Billancourt as a community of exiles. Two techniques of the short story cycle which make it particularly conducive to the depiction of community are the presentation of recurring

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<sup>26</sup> “Ivan Pavlovich pribyl iz provintsii v pozaproshliu piatnitsu” (13)

<sup>27</sup> “po rovnoi iul’skoi pogode” (15)

locations and characters, who create the illusion of a constantly existing reality. As the reader returns to read the next installment a month later, they may well wonder what Grisha or Madame Klava or Boris Gavrilovich are up to this month, as their weaving in and out of diverse stories creates the illusion of a fictional world with an independent existence beyond the frames of the individual story. In this first story, Grisha introduces in passing two characters who will appear (also briefly) in future stories. He confides his uncle's troubles to Madame Klava, a seamstress who lives in the Hotel Caprice. Boris Gavrilovich, the hairdresser, cuts Ivan Pavlovich's hair on Saturday night and appears in other stories as well. He is never a central character, but simply a part of the dense background which creates the community of Billancourt.

Missed connections exemplify existence in Billancourt from the beginning. After several days of mulling the situation over, Ivan Pavlovich returns. His mind has been filled with compassion for the unfortunate girl – her clothes were ill-fitting and worn, he feared for her prospects in exile with a child on her own, she wept when confronted with the misunderstanding and her shame at her own situation. He declares that he will adopt the child, let Antonina move in. When they arrive at the barracks, they learn that the entire family “through the attentions of our committees” has been sent to Argentina. Thus, Ivan is twice disappointed and returns to his rural rabbit farm alone.

Displacement is pervasive in this story. Clearly, Antonina's family has been displaced. Ivan Pavlovich's complete lack of companionship in the countryside is related to his situation as a Russian exile. The story closes with a non-sequitur: “Isn't it in Argentina that everyone dances the tango?” There is a bittersweet irony in this ending. The idea of dancing the tango is very distant from any of the characters in this story, who live at the

margins of survival. It also emphasizes Grisha's limited knowledge of the world: his only association with “Argentina” is the tango. Later endings will also often be epigrammatic, but more explicitly linked to the exile situation.

The story “Billancourt Fiesta” (“Zdes' plachut”) more extensively explores the recurrent theme of displacement. In this chapter, Berberova, through the narrator Grisha, develops both the image of the suburb of Billancourt as a Russian community and more explicitly explores the sense of missed connections which appeared already in “The Argentine” and is a definitive aspect of the exile condition in Berberova.

The story is again set quite specifically in the time and space of Billancourt: “It was the national holiday on the Place Nationale. The evening of July 14th./ A stage had been set up where our people usually sit at sunset twiddling their thumbs...” (1).<sup>28</sup>

Grisha's close identification with this community is apparent throughout the opening paragraph. “The local lion danced (I never did find out how this lion earned his living)” (1).<sup>29</sup> His parenthetical remark here serves to emphasize his membership within the community – this “local lion” is clearly known to Grisha. In describing the celebrants' festive wear, he notes “you couldn't help but feel a certain pride for the vest's wearer” (2). Further in the same paragraph, “The most priceless faces, as always, were rather pale and puffy from their cares and God only knows what nutrition. Even on a holiday you saw no happy satiety in them; what mostly showed through were their nerves.” “[T]he most priceless faces” expresses value and affection, but they are unattractive – pale and puffy from their cares. “God only knows” injects an element of orality into the primarily literary tone of the description of the

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<sup>28</sup> Bastille Day

<sup>29</sup> “Tantseval mestnyi lev – ne udalos' mne uznat', chem etot lev sebe na zhizn' zarabatyvaet” (30).

festival square. The phrase “what mostly showed through were their nerves” undercuts the festive tone with a note of anxiety or exhaustion. This technique of using situational irony to undercut the overt tone of the narration will be seen in other works as well.

The characters in “Billancourt Fiesta” persistently express their sense of “lack of fit” through variations of the words *sootvetstvie/ nesootvetstvie*. Early in the story, Grisha is sitting with his friends, Petrusha and Shchov, at a table outside the “Kabaret” watching the festivities and reminiscing about the Civil War. Petrusha declares that he should be chasing after the vision of beauty who just walked by, rather than sitting and disputing with his buddies where their general was on the evening of December 23, 1919. Yet, he doesn’t move from the table. “What I’d like is a better fit between my emotional behavior and the circumstances of my life” (4).<sup>30</sup> This lack of fit is the pervasive theme of the *Billancourt Tales*.

Semyon Nikolaevich Kozlobabin, the local grocer and businessman, approaches to ask for a ride to the train station to get his brother, whom he hasn't seen in nine years. When he has gone, the two remaining friends note that he didn't seem especially overjoyed at the arrival of his brother, that again someone's behavior ”doesn't fit the moment” (5).<sup>31</sup> At this point, Shchov is struck by a memory of when his behavior didn't fit the moment. He swears Grisha to secrecy. Grisha's innocent response is to say, ”And just where am I supposed to go telling anyone? What am I, a writer or something?” (6) This layering of realities is an aspect of Grisha's narratorial voice as he self-consciously presents himself as a writer in several of

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<sup>30</sup> “Khotelos’ by bol’shego sootvetstviia dushevnogo povedeniia s obstoiatel’stvami zhizni” (31).

<sup>31</sup> “delaet ne to... chto momentu sootvetstvuet” (33).



these early stories, here denies it to Shchov and then proceeds to share Shchov's "private" story with the entire newspaper reading community.

Shchov describes a moment years before on the day of his beloved father-in-law's funeral. As he and his wife were dressing upstairs for the bearing out of the body, a drunken musician passed by the window with a crowd of boys dancing around him and laughing. Within moments, Shchov and his wife were swept up in the music dancing a polka around the room.

Внезапно музыка оборвалась... Не удержавшись, упала Мария Федоровна мне на руки, я испугался, голова моя пошла кругом; я распахнул дверь и вытащил жену то есть в зал, на первое место, впереди всех тетушек. Начиналась лития. (35-36)

Suddenly the music broke off... Stricken, Maria Fyodorovna collapsed in my arms, which scared me, and my head began spinning. I opened the door wide and dragged my wife out, into the hall – to the seat of honor, ahead of all the aunts. The prayers were starting. (9)

Shchov suddenly breaks off his story to run after the beautiful girl. Grisha is left pondering the ramifications of displacement.

И стал я потихоньку припоминать свое собственное несоответственное поведение, когда вот так, или почти так, пускался я в пляс не вовремя, сколько раз ходил с шестерки, когда надо было ходить с туза. Сколько раз смеялся не вовремя и был пьян среди трезвых. Или хотел домой к маме, когда надо было в поход идти. Кто только не испытывал подобной дряни! Конечно, я не говорю об иностранно подданных -- те, разумеется, всегда все вовремя делают. (36)

Little by little I started recalling the times my own behavior hadn't fit, when I'd started to dance just like that, or nearly like that, at the wrong time, all the times I'd led with a six when I should have led with an ace. All the times I'd laughed at the wrong moment and been drunk in front of people who weren't. Or felt like going home to mama when I had my marching orders. Who hasn't had rotten experiences like that! Of course, I'm not talking about foreign citizens, who always do everything at the proper time, naturally. (10)

The examples Grisha mentions, and certainly Shchov's story, appear entirely unrelated to the condition of exile. Yet Grisha ends his meditation with the assurance that

“foreign citizens” (“foreign nationals” might be a more precise translation) “always do everything at the proper time.” Grisha explicitly links his sense of the wrong fit with his condition as an exile. He assumes that “foreign nationals” (which apparently refers to the French themselves) don't experience that sense of displacement. The very word “inostrannyi”/ “of other land” implies a sense of displacement – thus, the irony of referring to the French as “foreign nationals” is only reinforced by the word choice. The bureaucratic word choice, “inostranno poddanykh”/ “foreign nationals” rather than simply “inostrantsy”/ foreigners represents one of the lexical peculiarities of the exile population, who had ample experiences with governmental bureaucracies to renew their visas and “Nansen passports” at regular intervals and often had unclear legal status in the countries of settlement.

The story climaxes with the arrival of Kozlobabin's brother from Russia, who experiences a crisis of poor fit. The Kozlobabin brothers have not seen each other for nine years.<sup>32</sup> Semyon Kozlobabin has a grocery store in Billancourt. His brother, weak-chested Kolya Kozlobabin, has apparently been living in Soviet Russia. Kolya's appearance on his arrival sharply contrasts with that of the festive revellers. He arrives straight from the train station “wearing a dark shirt without any tie, a cap that had gone out of style a long time ago,” and pulls out a dirty handkerchief with hands and nails which were none too clean. The brother appears weary, wary and intimidated – in short, not appropriate for a festival. The discordance increases as a second band begins to play on the square and Grisha notes – “As far as I could tell, the two orchestras were playing completely different pieces simultaneously” (12). The 50-year-old Kolya hunches over in his seat and begins to cry. His

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<sup>32</sup> The story was written and published in 1929, which dates the Kozlobabin's last meeting in the year of the evacuation of the White Army from Sebastopol.

apology, “Forgive me, comrades... I'm sorry,” evokes a sharp retort from Petrusha: “Skip the 'comrades' if you please. Our extremist elements might hear and raise a scandal” (13).<sup>33</sup> This exchange further indicates that the newcomer is out-of-step with his new surroundings. The use of the term “comrade” is unacceptable among the Russian emigration.

Grisha declares in incomprehension,

Невозможно было понять причину этого полного несоответствия... Был он человек приезжий, а у нас был праздник на нашей площади, где одни гуляли под ручку с девушками... И вот соответствия между его настроением и настроением танцующих вальс как-то совсем не было заметно. (38)

We could not fathom the reason for this lack of fit between his state of mind and his surroundings... He was a guest, and we were having a holiday on our square, where some were strolling arm in arm with girls... And it was somehow impossible to identify any fit between his mood and the mood of the waltzers (translation mine).

This story offers a cascade of noncorresponding moments. In addition to the five distinct instances in which variations of the word “nesootvetsvie” is used, there are the circumstances of the discordant bands and Petrusha and Shchov's initial dispute concerned where the two of them had been (clearly they were soldiers together at that time) on December 23, 1919. The story ends:

И хорошо, пожалуй, что слабогрудого брата Козлобабина увели до всякого фейерверка, фейерверк мог довести его черт знает до чего, если одни фонарики заставили мужчину, да еще закаленного в житейских боях, плакать. А какой такой мужчина в наше время не закален в житейских боях? Нет, по-нашему, такого мужчины. (39)

It was probably a good thing that Kozlobabin's weak-chested brother had been taken away before any fireworks. If streetlamps could make a man cry, a man tempered in life's battles, then fireworks might have had the devil knows what effect on him. And what man in our day hasn't been tempered in life's battles? For us, there is no such man. (15)

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<sup>33</sup> “Prostitute tovarishchi... Izviniaius.”; “Pokorno proshu tovarishchei v pokoe ostavit’, krainye elementy nashi uslyshat’ mogut i skandal ustroit’.” I’ve changed the English to match my understanding of the original Russian. The published translation reads: “I humbly beg the comrades to leave him in peace” rather than “skip the ‘comrades’.”

The ending reminds us that these men are all survivors of war – Grisha cannot even imagine a man who has not been tempered by life's battles. Although there are many “battles” in life, the fact that the story opened with discussion of a very specific battle in 1919 links these battles to the Civil War.

Grisha includes frequent references to Billancourt as “ours”: “nash prazdnik,” “nasha ploshchad’,” “odin iz nashikh zatren'kal na balalaika.” This reference to “our people” places Grisha firmly within the community he depicts. In describing skaz narration, Monika Fludernik remarks that,

...the crucial position of the narrator is mirrored linguistically in his reference to the community as 'ours,' and in the self-referential inclusion of himself as a member of the narrated community. Unlike mere face to face conversation, the skaz model therefore reflects significantly on the homocommunicative nature of the narration: both the narrator and the audience share a fictional past, if only existentially, in the ‘realm of existence,’ and not agentially as ‘characters’ of the ‘plot’. (232)

The irony of this sense of “ours” is particularly acute here. The French holiday, Bastille Day, is a celebration of the French Revolution. Grisha mentions that his boss, who is at the festival wearing blue suspenders (presumably in honor of Bastille Day), is a member of the French Communist Party. The exiles are escapees of their own revolution – there must be some sense of irony in celebrating the French one. Grisha's French boss is a Communist, yet use of the word “tovarishch” is unacceptable within the emigration/ among “nashi.” In the final lines, Grisha affirms the universality of the war trauma and the shared community of the emigres: “For us, there is no such man.” The Russian “po-nashemu” emphasizes the shared fictional past of Grisha's characters and implied readers.

The third story I consider is “Photogénique.” In this story, the sense of dislocation of the exile and of Billancourt as a cohesive community is further developed. In “Billancourt

Fiesta,” Grisha noted that a stage had been set up “where our people usually sit at sunset twiddling their thumbs” (1). “Photogénique” opens:

Герасим Гаврилович, брат всем известного Бориса Гавриловича, отец семейства, пехотинец и маневр, сидел на скамье посреди площади и крутил пальцами. Домой идти не хотелось -- там у него тесно и обед на лишнюю персону не рассчитан. (22)

Gerasim Gavrilovich, brother to the Boris Gavrilovich we all know, father of a family, infantryman and worker, was sitting on a bench in the middle of the square, twiddling his thumbs. He didn't feel like going home – it was crowded there and they weren't counting on an extra place for supper. (16)

Grisha describes Gerasim Gavrilovich by reference to his brother, Boris Gavrilovich, whom everyone knows. We, as readers, are immediately subsumed into his community of the residents of Billancourt. Gerasim is described as an infantryman – thus another veteran of the war. The image of him twiddling his thumbs links directly to the image in “Billancourt Fiesta,” in which Grisha describes the square, where people usually “sit twiddling their thumbs.” This repetition enhances the sense of a fully existent fictional universe. In this opening paragraph, the narration, for the first time, slips the strict bounds of Grisha’s direct knowledge. Grisha's voice is immediately recognizable – particularly as he references the Boris Gavrilovich “we all know” and the twiddling thumbs – but then appears the first apparent instance in the series of narratorial omniscience. “He didn't feel like going home.” In the two previous stories, we have been limited to what Grisha himself has directly witnessed or been told. In this story, he becomes more a narrator of the community, with access to more knowledge than he had in the previous stories. He does not appear to be personally observing the scenes described here.

This is a move away from direct participant narration and towards a narration based on the collective. “The smell of pickles, fruit drops, and fish was coming from the grocer's,

where they were lighting the lamp. Kvass was being sold on the corner and an impecunious photographer was lounging on the other. The usual scene.” In this quick sketch of the evening scene, the narrator demonstrates a deep knowledge of the square without needing to proclaim this knowledge explicitly. The combination of “pickles” and “fruit drops” emphasizes the sense of specificity of the locale. “Impecunious” photographer sounds neutral – yet how would one have that information without knowing the photographer? The final line: “The usual scene” confirms the narrator's deep familiarity with this environment.

In this story, narrative “slippage” occurs. By “slippage,” I suggest that multiple unidentified narrative voices interact within the frame of apparently simple narration. In the early passages of this story, the narration also takes on shades of Gerasim's consciousness through limited free indirect style but never fully identifies with him.

И видит вдруг Герасим Гаврилович вечернюю французскую газету под скамейкой, и поднимает ее, и, пока еще светло читать, пропускает он китайские события и прения депутатов, а также интересные лаун-теннисные состязания и прямо переходит к объявлениям. Надо заметить, что Герасим Гаврилович за семь лет французской жизни наловчился читать объявления различных предложений труда и даже полюбил это чтение. Часто ему их читать приходилось, но все почему-то с незаметными для простого глаза результатами. (22)

Gerasim Gavrilovich noticed a copy of the French evening paper under his bench. He picked it up and read it while there was sufficient light. He skipped events in China and the rivalries among deputies, as well as some interesting lawn tennis competitions, and turned straight to the classifieds. In the seven years of his French life, Gerasim Gavrilovich had caught on to reading the employment notices and had even taken a liking to this. He had often had occasion to peruse them, but always somehow with results imperceptible to the unaided eye. (17)

There are moments in this passage which clearly emanate from Gerasim's consciousness: only he would know that he chose to read the paper “while there was sufficient light”, and that he “skipped events in China.” And whose voice does “interesting” belong to? Are the tennis competitions interesting to Gerasim? Or to Grisha? It would seem

to be Gerasim. And then the final line leads us out of Gerasim's consciousness: "He had often had occasion to peruse them, but always somehow with results imperceptible to the unaided eye." This single phrase ironically conveys to us that Gerasim Gavrilovich is often unemployed. No further information is provided. We don't know if he applies for the jobs in the employment notices and is not hired, if he gets the jobs but can't keep them or if he only reads them without ever getting so far as actually applying for the job. "Gerasim Gavrilovich's person had been seen in a number of places: he'd worked on a Greek steamer, in a mine in Belgium, and at a factory in Creusot. How and why he ever ended up here we didn't know" (17).<sup>34</sup> Here Grisha explicitly aligns himself with a shared community of knowledge. The list of places where Gerasim's "person" had been seen gives the impression of having been collected from various viewpoints. The lack of knowledge of how and why he ended up "k nam" expresses a communal lack of knowledge.

According to Jeremy Hicks, one of the key elements of skaz is that skaz "is narrated in the popular language rather than the language of the literary norm" (55). In "Problema skaza v stilistike," Viktor Vinogradov notes that skaz is characteristic of the epochs when the forms of literary and artistic speech undergo a revolution (248). This is offered as a reason for the popularity of skaz in the post-Revolutionary period and is equally relevant with reference to the life of the emigration. Many commentators have recognized the tendency of skaz to include elements of dialect and language forms outside the literary norm. One of the ways Berberova does this in *Billancourt Tales* is through the introduction of lexical variations.

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<sup>34</sup> "Mnogo gde videli figuru Gerasima Gavrilovicha: sluzhil on na grecheskom parokhode, rabotal v shakhte v Bel'gii i na zavode v Krezo. Pochemu i kak popal on k nam, my ne znali" (23).

The refugees' language incorporated French words, sometimes transformed into Russian form. She identifies a number of particularities of this language, writing that it was not the language of "Bunin, Rachmaninov, Diaghilev and Remizov," but the "language of Southern Russia, of people who had only four years of formal education, the accelerated degree of the military academy." She recalls that this emigrant lexicon incorporated French words, Soviet neologisms, and maintained Soviet words which had quickly gone out of use in the Soviet Union (5-6). Shared ways of using language help to identify community membership. The use of this distinct exile vocabulary reinforces the identification of Billancourt as a cohesive community.

There are several instances of word play in "Photogénique," beginning with the title. The title in Russian is "Fotozhenikh," a portmanteau word which combines the French "photogénique" (photogenic) with the Russian "zhenikh" (fiancé, boy friend). They merge to form a new word which enhances the power of "photogenic" to the point of making him into a "bridegroom." Grisha refers to Gerasim as a "manevr." This is a direct borrowing of a French term for unskilled laborer "manoeuvre." The Russian word, "manevr" is a military term which would have been familiar to the remnants of the White Army. Gerasim goes to the office of an "anonimnogo kinematograficheskogo obshchestva" (23). "The fact that the company was anonyme bothered him a little, but he decided to shrug it off" (18). In French, "société anonyme" refers to an LLC (limited liability company). It appears that Gerasim (and perhaps Grisha, who has maintained the calque in his Russian description) mistook the "anonyme" as a calque for the Russian "anonymnyi" (anonymous). While offering humor to the reader, this confusion also is an emblem of Gerasim's disorientation and consequent suspiciousness within French society. The humor arises from the contrast between the



narrator's consciousness and that of the author and, presumably, better informed reader. In addition to the humor they provide, these references further ground the stories in the actual daily life of the emigration.

In "Photogénique," Gerasim Gavrilovich forcibly and plaintively expresses his deep sense of disorientation in exile. "They pulled the ground right out from under me... Your spaces, your seasons, your climates – none of them suit me" (18).<sup>35</sup> When he is invited to be filmed at a local studio he begins to fantasize, "was it possible that his life path had led him to a real profession... Was it possible that the time, and space, and climate would suit him at last?" (20-21)<sup>36</sup> Thus, Gerasim Gavrilovich associates his discomfort in exile with his lack of "a real profession." He has struggled with his livelihood in exile. Grisha quoted the list of places he had been before he came to Billancourt. Since he arrived here, "[h]e had often had occasion to peruse" the classifieds. His wife calls him "Baron Lazybones" and his brother Boris Gavrilovich is unsuccessful in his attempts to teach him the hairdressing trade.

Gerasim goes to the film company and is selected for a screen test. While he is waiting for the results of his screen test, he imagines how wonderful it will be to be rich and thinks about his life up to now. "He thought about himself, about his nasty and messy life, about the hard times, the foreign climate, and the law of geographical space by the grace of which he had had his rightful soil taken away" (23).<sup>37</sup> For many of the exiles, the question of

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<sup>35</sup> "Pochvu iz-pod menia vynuli, -- govoril togda Gerasim Gavrilovich, -- ni prostranstva vashi, ne vremena, ni klimaty mne ne podkhodiat" (23).

<sup>36</sup> "Neuzheli pravda zhiznennyi put' privel ego k nastoiashchei deiatel'nosti?... Neuzheli i vremia, i prostranstvo, i klimat podoidut emu nakonets?" (25)

<sup>37</sup> "On dumal o sebe, o zhizni svoei, vrednoi i bezalabernoi, o tiazhelom vremeni, chuzhom klimate i o zakone geograficheskogo prostranstva, po milosti kotorogo lishilsia on, sobstvenno, svoei zakonnoi pochvy" (27).

profession is a defining characteristic of their sense of “noncorrespondence.” Indeed, the resulting incongruence was a staple in depictions of the Russian emigration. The image of the nobleman tending bar and the intellectual driving a taxi captured the popular imagination. In these stories, Berberova explores the impact of this sense of incongruence on the working class exiles. Gerasim does not think about the Bolsheviks and the Civil War, but rather the “law of geographical space.” There is a sense of the overwhelming power of fate and cosmic laws which govern the realities of men's lives.

When Gerasim Gavrilovich is actually selected for a role in the film, it seems his luck has changed. His friend Konotoshenko, a painter on the movie set, tells him twice, “You've lucked out.” And yet, Gerasim Gavrilovich is unable to match himself to the demands of the moment. He can't bring himself to walk across the set and pretend to steal a dropped purse. He is angrily dismissed from the set. “So he quit those parts and went home, having failed to fall in step with the times. He left sanguinely and bought the French evening paper on his way – to read the classifieds again” (26).<sup>38</sup> Gerasim's failure at the movie set is linked to his general failure “to fall in step with the times.” In Gerasim's case, this failure is rather humorous since the fault lay directly with him. At the moment when he was expected to take the purse, he was filled with doubt, shyness and embarrassment. He could not fulfill what seemed to be a very simple demand. Gerasim Gavrilovich ends the story as he began it – with the classifieds in hand.

At the very end of the story, Gerasim Gavrilovich runs into Grisha. He tells Grisha the whole story and asks, “Grisha, have you heard anything like it? Or maybe read it in the

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<sup>38</sup> “Tak i otpravilsia on, ne popav v nogu s vekom, ot tekh mest domoi. Khladnokrovno poshel on, vecherniuiu frantsuzskuiu gazetu kupil po doroge – opiat' ob'iavleniia chitat” (28).

papers?" (26)<sup>39</sup> In the final lines of the story, Grisha tells him that no one will want to read about his story:

В газетах теперь все больше, наоборот, про выдающиеся подбородки пишут, про то, как люди жизнь достигают. А про вас, боюсь, никто, пожалуй, и читать не станет.

И никакой жалости не почувствовал я в тот момент. Жалость мы вместе с багажом тогда в Севастополе оставили. (29)

"Nowadays the papers prefer to write about the opposite, about jutting chins and people getting ahead. I'm afraid no one's going to want to read about you."

I felt no regret whatsoever at that moment. We left our regret and our baggage back in Sevastopol. (27)

In a self-referential moment similar to the one in which Grisha queried Shchov as to where he could possibly share his story, Grisha assures Gerasim Gavrilovich that no one will want to read about him -- *within* the very story we are reading about him. This both disrupts and reinforces our sense of verisimilitude of the story. It enhances the sense of verisimilitude by the simple fact of the characters discussing the possibility of a story. This moves the characters from the fictional plane to the plane of daily reality. And yet, this baring of the device inevitably draws our attention to the "literariness" of the portrayal, reminding us that we are reading a story in the newspaper. Thus, this story is converted to a frame story at the end of the story, justifying the entire preceding narrative through the claim that Gerasim had told Grisha the entire story – and even asked him whether he'd ever read or heard anything like it.

The final lines draw Gerasim Gavrilovich's story firmly back into the narrative of exile. Gerasim Gavrilovich's lack of success in life and his persistent unemployment are not laughing matters. He cannot afford to buy dinner and his family is perpetually short of

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<sup>39</sup> "-- Kak, -- govorit, -- Grisha, slyshal ty nechto podobnoe? Ili, mozhет, v gazetakh chital?" (29)

money. The narration does not derive any pathos from these realities and Gerasim's misfortunes and perceptions are presented with a light irony which does not preclude compassion. He is conveyed more as hapless than foolish. Those final lines place Gerasim Gavrilovich into a historical background of genuine tragedy. We recognize what is never emphasized: Gerasim Gavrilovich is a destitute refugee who has been persistently unemployed since his evacuation from Civil War Russia.<sup>40</sup> Grisha's laconic – “we left our regret and our baggage” -- leaves unexpressed, yet hints at, the immense human tragedy involved. The juxtaposition of regret and baggage provides the ironic overtone of the epigram.

The next story in the series, “About the Hooks” (“O zakoriuchkakh”), confirms Grisha's assurance that “no one wants to read” about people like Gerasim Gavrilovich. The story opens with Madame Klava (familiar from “Billancourt Fiesta” complaining about Grisha's stories:

-- Что это вы, Гришенька, все о каких-то своих знакомых пишете, о людях довольно обыкновенных и, прямо сказать, скучных? Одному не удалось кинематографическую карьеру сделать, другой невесту проворонил, уж не помню, что третий сделал, все какие-то безцветные личности, право! Что бы вам написать два с половиной слова о человеке царе природы, об американской складке какой-нибудь, да так, чтобы сердце забилося и захотелось бы все бросить и к нему бежать, ловить с ним миг безумного счастья, переселиться к такому человеку в номер и сотворить с ним дивную сказку? (49-50)

“Why is it, Grishenka, you're always writing about people you know, about such ordinary and, to be perfectly frank, boring people? One fails at a career in the cinema, another loses out on a bride, and I can't even remember what the third one did. They're all such colorless characters, really! Write us a few words about a king of nature, some American type who sets your heart to pounding so hard you want to drop everything and run after him to snatch a moment of insane happiness, move in with the man and spin a beautiful fairy tale together.” (41)

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<sup>40</sup> Sevastopol was one of the main evacuation points during the White Army's defeat in the Crimea. Approximately 150,000 refugees and White Army forces were evacuated in the course of six days in November of 1920 (Figs 719).

Madame Klava's conveyed request mocks the previous three stories in the cycle as “boring” and at the same time serves the function of reminding the reader what has come before in the cycle. It also cements Grisha's relationship with his readers who are not only encouraged to remember the previous episodes Klava references, but also connects directly to the discussion in which Grisha assured Gerasim that no one would be interested in his story. Berberova's stories appeared in the literary section of the paper. *Poslednie novosti* also regularly carried translations of American detective stories (detektivy) in the literary section. While these stories did not necessarily end with a “beautiful fairy tale,” they did provide those “American types” in a predictable, formulaic genre. Grisha's response to Madame Klava's request signals the assumed “truthfulness” of his stories. He implies that his stories are not invented, but taken directly from the life of Billancourt. Thus, he says “Where am I going to get an American type?” When she suggests “If it didn't work out for him, you can invent an ending to make it more intriguing,” Grisha protests. “My name would be mud. Everyone figured out a long time ago there weren't any American types on my horizon” (41).<sup>41</sup> Thus, Grisha emphasizes the truth and accuracy of his stories. He also emphasizes his relationship to his readers and his need to meet our expectations. In the narrative style typical of these stories, this is not a direct appeal in which he tells us that his story is true – it is simply understood through his protestation that his readers would be offended if he invented a character. This framing device both justifies his story and indicates an additional move away from his direct participation in the events depicted. Grisha tells us:

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<sup>41</sup> “amerikanskoi skladke otkuda byt’?” “Koli ne vyshlo u nego, prisochinite emu konets, chtoby bylo zamanchivee.” “Oshel’muiut. Vse dogadalis’ davno, chto nikakikh amerikanskikh skladok na moem gorizonte ne imeetsia” (50)

Хорошо. Пришел я к себе домой, сел за стол и написал рассказ про Алесандра Евграфовича Барабанова. Есть такой человек, одно время нам его часто видеть приходилось.

Начал я свой рассказ с описания погоды, многие наши писатели погодой не брезгают, собственно, некоторые только этим и прославились...

Стояла осенняя, дождливая, холодная, ветреная, сырая и скучная погода, -- так начал я. Неба на сей раз вовсе не было... Много было туч, больше чем надо. А на душе было бог знает как одиноко. (50)

I got home, sat down at my desk, and wrote a story about Alexander Evgrafovich Barabanov. There is such a person, and there was a time when he and I had occasion to see quite a lot of one another.

I began my story with a description of the weather. Lots of Russian writers don't sneer at the weather. In fact, for some that's their only claim to fame...

It was a cold, rainy, windy, raw, tedious autumn day -- that's how I began. There wasn't any sky at all this time... We had lots of clouds, more than we needed. And God only knows how forlorn it felt. (42)

Through this frame, Grisha turns this into a story about telling a story. He explicitly draws our attention to the borderlines of his feuilleton/ short story genre by emphasizing the “literariness” of his presentation. He self-consciously combines the “journalistic” approach of the feuilleton, insisting that he can write only about real people he has known and events that actually happened, with the “belletristic” devices typical of fictional representation -- such as descriptions of the weather. Grisha justifies his weather depictions with the observation that “Lots of Russian writers don't sneer at the weather.” “That's how I began” alerts us to the fact that the story is beginning, while simultaneously stepping out of the frame. His “high literary” depiction of the weather immediately slips back into a more oral tone: “and God only knows how forlorn it felt.”

This transitional story expands Grisha's role from a teller of small tales of the emigration to the creator of the myth and community of Billancourt. Here certain tropes appear which will become characteristic of the remaining stories of the series. These include

more “literary” depictions of weather and surroundings and frequent contrasts of the wonders of Paris with the “irreparable” character of Billancourt.

With our first glimpse of Barabanov, we again experience that “slippage” of narrative voice in which we are not entirely certain whether the narrative perspective belongs to Grisha or represents the free indirect style of Barabanov himself. As Barabanov arrived from the provinces and exited the train station,

ему пришла в голову совершенно бесполезная, бессовестно глупая мысль: а что, думал он, как с этого самого парижского вокзала осенним, и сырым, и вредным для ревматиков ветром втянет меня обратно через вокзальный порог, да в поезд, да пойдет носить по всем моим прежним дорогам, по городу Тионвиллю (оттуда он приехал), по Льежу, Ужгороду, Бельграду, Александрии, Принцевым островам, по кораблям, поездам, дорогам и рекам? А что если окажусь я сам вдруг с вошью на нижней палубе английского парохода, да как пришвартуемся мы, в качестве последнего этапа странствия, к одесским берегам? (Оттуда все и началось.)... И Александр Евграфович двинулся не в обратном направлении, а все опять-таки вперед. (51)

He had a perfectly useless, unconscionably stupid idea: What if this raw autumn wind... were to pull me from this very Parisian train station, right back across the threshold, and onto a train, and it took me down all my old roads, through Thionville (where he had just come from), through Liege, Uzhgorod, Belgrade, Alexandria, the Princes Islands, on ships, trains, roads, and rivers? And what if I were to wind up with fleas on the lower deck of an English steamer and we were to dock, the last stage in our journeying, on Odessa's shores (which is where it all began)?... And Alexander Evgrafovich moved off not in the reverse direction but forward. (43)

It is unclear where the editorializing comment comes from: “a perfectly useless, unconscionably stupid idea.” It seems unlikely to be Grisha's – his direct narration does not have that sharp tone – so it appears to belong to Barabanov who is struggling to move forward and make a change in his life. The past always threatens to pull the emigres back, and forward movement is almost impossible. The list of Barabanov's stops represents a typical itinerary of a White Army soldier.

Barabanov has arrived in the city to work out a deal with the businessman Pavel Petrovich to extract metals from spent munitions and to sponsor Barabanov's patent. Billancourt does not actually appear in this story about an “American hero.” The action takes place in Paris. This is Grisha's first representation of the myth of Paris. Grisha expresses the exile's deep ambivalence toward the city of Paris. He calls it the “capital of the world,” yet notes its indifference to newcomers.

Что за город Париж! Никакого он участия не примет в приезде человека! Будь ты семи пядей во лбу, несутся мимо тебя люди, не один не оглянется. Может, тебе весь мир обнять хочется, никому до этого дела нет, может тебе, как одному известному мальчику, лиса все внутренности выела, так с лисой и сиди, никто не поинтересуется. Не то что, говорю я, в Орле или Казани. И приезжие наши без остатка в таких случаях на две категории разделяются: одни говорят себе (помню я был таким): и не надо, коли не хотите, я не стану глазеть на вас, ну вас к лешему, хоть вы и красивы, и знамениты, и черт знает как величественны... Другие же, привыкнув за свои путешествия ко всяческим унижениям, так и пялят на него глаза -- ничего, что Париж тебя невниманием в грязь втоптывает. Наше дело маленькое, наше дело столицей мира любоваться, если довелось нам ее, вот подите же, посетить проездом. (51-52)

What a city Paris is! A new arrival is the least of its concerns! You could be a Solomon and people would still rush past and not one of them would look round. You might feel like embracing the whole world, but no one cares in the least. You might, like a certain famous boy, have your vitals gnawed upon by a fox. Well, you can have your fox because no one cares. It's not, as I say, like in Orel or Kazan. And in this regard, our new arrivals divide up into two neat categories; some tell themselves... That's fine, if you don't want to then I won't look at you either, to hell with you, even if you are handsome and famous and damn magnificent... Others, accustomed from their travels to every kind of humiliation, sear it with their gaze. We don't care if Paris grinds us in the mud by ignoring us, what we're doing is small, what we're doing is admiring the capital of the world if ever we have the chance—just wait – to visit it while passing through... (44)

Grisha expresses the deep-seated ambivalence of the exiles toward Paris. Paris is handsome, famous and magnificent – yet there is a clear resentment towards her indifference to the exiles. Violence, in the form of “vitals gnawed upon by a fox,” erupts unexpectedly into the narrative, adding a touch of repressed anguish to Grisha's prose. The appearance of



Orel and Kazan in comparison to Paris may elicit a smile of irony on the part of the reader – one could hardly expect that Paris could be in any way “like in Orel or Kazan.” This theme of the magnificence of Paris and its indifference to the exiles appears in several of the Billancourt stories and features elsewhere in Berberova's prose as well. This contrasts to the pervasive references to “our” Billancourt. The refugees have clearly accepted the less desirable location and strive to make it their own.

When Barabanov arrives at Pavel Petrovich Gutshtam's home, he discovers a “large and prosperous apartment building” (44).<sup>42</sup>

В комнату вошел барин. Это был деловик, деляга, по всему видать -- высокого полета птица, с чистыми-чистыми, очень чистыми руками, бритый, аккуратный, такой, словно никуда никогда из великолепного города не выезжал да тут и родился. (52)

A fine gentleman walked in. He was a businessman, a man who had seen to his own best interests, a high-flying bird from the looks of him, with very very clean hands, clean-shaven, impeccable, who looked as if he were part of this magnificent city, as if he'd been born here and had never left. (45)

In this passage, we see an early example of the sort of “underhanded narrative” which becomes a trademark feature of Berberova's narration. While the narrative voice appears to be praising the individual depicted, aspects of situational irony and tone lead us to a rather different opinion. The word “deliaga” suggests someone who has prospered through questionable means, perhaps become successful only by pursuing short-term gains. Following upon the narrator's ambivalent comments about Paris, the idea that he “looked as if he were a part of this magnificent city, as if he'd been born here and had never left” should not be taken as an unshaded compliment. Grisha describes the exiles as responding to Paris either with feigned indifference or humiliated wonder. It is impossible to imagine them

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<sup>42</sup> “bol'shoi bogatyi dom”

looking as if they “were part of the magnificent city” as if they'd “been born here and had never left.” Clearly, this businessman is of a different type altogether.

Barabanov is an inventor. He has sent Pavel Petrovich a business proposal regarding melting down the metal from hooks. Pavel Petrovich can keep the profits from that and in return Barabanov would like help patenting an invention of his own. Pavel Petrovich, who is so well-established in Paris, knows “the ins and outs” of doing business. Barabanov, the immigrant, is dependent on Pavel Petrovich's competence in French business. Pavel Petrovich appears excited about the project and asks Barabanov to return on the following day after Pavel Petrovich makes some inquiries. Barabanov has brought a gift for Gutenshtam's daughter, a puppy he carries in his pocket, but is unable to interject himself into the purely business conversation. Barabanov walks the city for the rest of the day and the night. He has new ideas and engineering questions about the sights he sees. He imagines his future as an entrepreneur: “Ahead lay independence. Go where you like, my soul, come and go, make new discoveries” (52).<sup>43</sup> In the course of the night, the puppy dies. When Barabanov returns after walking the city most of the night and attempting to sleep on benches, he is greeted by Pavel Petrovich's wife in tears. The businessman has also died during the night. Barabanov's dreams will come to naught – not due to his own competence or incompetence, but due to his lack of knowledge of French society and how to get things done. This lack of cultural capital leaves him entirely dependent on an intermediary to bring his ideas to fruition. Without Pavel Petrovich's support, Barabanov's initiative has no outlet.

Grisha reappears only at the end of the story:

Впрочем, обратный билет был у него в кармане.

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<sup>43</sup> “Vperedí byla nezavisimost’. Guliai, dusha, uezzhai, priezhai, o novom otkrytii dumai!” (58)

И тут кончил я свой рассказ. И то боюсь, что длинно: ведь не биянкурец Барабанов, и значит нечего читателей занимать его личностью. Боюсь тоже, что скажут: тут до американской складки очень далеко, сто верст скакать! Тут до американской складка, как, например, до Орла или Казани! Но ближе нам ничего встречать не приходилось (60).

His return ticket was in his pocket, by the way.<sup>44</sup>  
And here I ended my story.<sup>45</sup> I'm afraid it was a little long, especially since Barabanov wasn't from Billancourt, so there's nothing inherently interesting about him for my readers. I'm also afraid people will say that finding the American angle in this story is quite a stretch, like night and day! About as American an angle as Orel or Kazan!

But we've never come across anything closer. (55)

At the start of this tale, Grisha describes to us: "That's how I began." At the end, he tells us "And here I ended my story." Grisha himself is developing into a more self-aware narrator with ideas of literary device (descriptions of the weather) and structure (here I began my story, here I ended my story). Within that frame, lies the entire story of Barabanov. Grisha's narratorial voice is discernible within the framed story, though he is not present for the depicted events. At times he observes Barabanov from the outside, at times the narration slips into free indirect style as in the moments noted above with his "stupid and unconscionable idea" and self-addressed "Go where you like, my soul." Beyond the frame, lie Grisha, Klava and the readers, whose interest Grisha doubts. This implied narrowness of vision exemplifies the concerns of the residents of Billancourt. This is the only story which does not actually take place within Billancourt. The ending has an understated pathos: it is unrealistic to expect a "heroic" story to come out of Billancourt or even out of the emigration. The closest they

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<sup>44</sup> This sentence does not appear in the English translation.

<sup>45</sup> I changed this sentence to more closely reflect the Russian original. The published translation reads: "And that's the end of my story," which loses some of the effect of the framing device.

can come is the story of a failed inventor in which a businessman and a puppy both die and no business is actually transacted.

The following story, “An Incident with Music” (“Sluchai s muzykoi”) is the last remaining story dated from 1929, and represents the apogee of the representation of the character of Billancourt and the pervasive sense of incongruence as the inescapable fate of the exile.

“An Incident with Music” relates the tale of Ivan Ivanovich Kondurin, a musician turned bookkeeper in Billancourt. For Kondurin, the agony of Billancourt lies in his loss of proper profession. Grisha's depiction of the “high” culture of the Kondurin family is permeated with authorial irony.

The story opens: “Ivan Ivanovich Kondurin was coming home at the usual time. At a quarter of eight, if you must know.”<sup>46</sup> Grisha's name does not appear anywhere within this story, but his direct address to his readers in the form of “if you must know” reasserts his personality and his relationship with his readers. Just as in “About the Hooks” we saw him attempting to create a story to satisfy Madame Klava's demands, in the opening lines of “An Incident with Music” he anticipates his reader's demands through the direct address of “if you must know.” This sort of direct anticipation of readerly demands emphasizes Grisha's close relationship with his readers, whose responses he can anticipate and which he incorporates into his storytelling.

Ivan Ivanovich Kondurin was a piano player in Russia, playing waltzes in tsarist times and marches after the Revolution. In Billancourt, he works as a bookkeeper for a

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<sup>46</sup> “Ivan Ivanovich Kondurin vozvratilsia domoi v obychnoe vremia. Esli khotite znat', v vosem' chasov bez chetverti” (39)

furniture business. He assures his wife that it is a “tragedy” that he cannot pursue his passion for music.

-- А ведь это трагедия, Шурочка, -- говорил он иногда по воскресеньям, -- трагедия, малютка, что я в мебельном деле служу, не свое дело делаю. Дан мне богом талант, всю жизнь был я причастен к искусству, и вот силой вещей, попав в экономический плен истории, стал я служить по счетной части.  
-- Несомненно трагедия, -- отвечала на это Алесандра Павловна обыкновенно из кухни. -- Игра рока с твоей беженской личностью. (40)

“It really is a tragedy, Shurochka,” he used to say sometimes on Sundays, a tragedy, darling, that I work in a furniture business instead of doing my own work. I have a God-given talent, I've been a part of the arts all my life, but now history has flung me into economic servitude, and I've had to take a job in the bookkeeping department.

“A tragedy, no doubt about it,” Alexandra Pavlovna usually replied from the kitchen. “Fate is playing games with you, a refugee.” (56)

The tragedy of exile lies not simply in the loss of homeland, familiar landmarks, people and language, but in “economic captivity.” Kondurin feels misplaced in the bookkeeping business and his wife attributes it directly to his status as a refugee. There is a powerful sense of loss of control: he has “fallen into captivity” and “fate” is playing games with him. Kondurin believes that this is the common lot of the residents of Billancourt. As he explains to his wife:

Вот... выясняется, что трагедия-то происходит не со мной одним, и такой-то, и такой-то, и такой-то житель Биянкура, оказывается, тоже попал не на свою должность, тоже талант свой в землю зарывает. Трагедия, выходит, общая. И с Петром Ивановичем, и с Герасимом Гаврилычем, и с Григорием Андреичем у меня одинаковая игра рока. (41)

“Look... I see now I'm not the only one this tragedy is happening to. This, that, and the other Billancourt resident has wound up where he shouldn't and is burying his talent. It turns out we share a common tragedy. Fate has played the exact same game with Peter Ivanovich, Gerasim Gavrilovich, and Grigory Andreevich.” (58)<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> The three people he mentions are all characters we have met in the previous three stories: Peter Ivanovich is Grisha's friend Petrusha, who was with him on Bastille day disputing about the war, Gerasim Gavrilovich was the central character in “Photogénique,” and Grigory Andreevich is Grisha himself.

Thus, Kondurin's lack of "fit" as a bookkeeper, is directly linked to the tragedy of Russia itself, the Civil War and the emigration.<sup>48</sup> Billancourt is a community of the dispossessed and Ivan Ivanovich explicitly links his fate with that of his community. Kondurin's reference to these familiar characters reinforces our sense of Billancourt as a genuine place with residents who can be viewed from a variety of reference points. In many ways, Kondurin here is echoing Gerasim Gavrilovich's plight of being unable to find his "real profession." Although Kondurin, unlike Gerasim Gavrilovich, successfully manages to hold down a good job, he nonetheless struggles with a persistent sense of displacement. The lack of match between his skills and his livelihood is a source of deep discomfort which he views as a tragedy. Like Ivan Ivanovich, his wife links this directly to his status as a refugee, holding fate responsible for his discomfort. He does not dream of the past, but wants to occupy what he views as his proper place in the world now.

When he sees a piano at a furniture auction with his boss, his longing for music becomes even more powerful. He dreams of overcoming his loss and even dreams of overcoming the losses of the exile community of Billancourt.

Он думал, что с него именно и должна была начаться в Биянкуре всеобщая перемена: бросит он мебельное предприятие, устроится по музыкальной части, и начнет с этого случая заканчиваться всеобщее неустройство, каждый за каждым свою настоящую жизнь найдет. (42)

He thought the general change in Billancourt ought to start with him: he would give up the furniture business, find a job in music, and this incident would put an end to the general unsettledness, everyone would find his own real life for himself. (60)

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<sup>48</sup> This thought is echoed very closely in Berberova's memoirs. In *Italics*, Berberova describes a conversation she had with the poet Anton Ladinsky after World War II, as Ladinsky prepared to return to the USSR after many years in France. Ladinsky declared "'I have been trampled here. You have too.' I tried to argue my point that this was not because of our accidental personal failure. It was the result of a national catastrophe we shared" (276).

In the Russian, his ability to find work and disorder are connected by the word “ustroit” – to arrange, with a root in “stroit” -- to build. The exiles are generally characterized as not having the ability to build their own lives, rather their lives are at the whims of fate. Barabanov of “About the Hooks” dreamed of arranging his patent and changing his life. Fate dealt otherwise with him and the death of Petr Petrovich put an end to his plans. Ivan Ivanovich also dreams of changing his fate – of actually controlling his fate. He imagines that if he can “ustroit'sia” (find work) in his chosen profession, that will somehow end the general “neustroistvo” (unsettledness) of Billancourt. Just as Kondurin links his own malaise to the losses of his community, he believes that his success will empower his community.

As he gazes out the window that night: “there was the familiar black smokestack rising between the stars. He felt like taking a big swallow of air – my God, what air this was of theirs at night... A pedestrian was passing, weaving, singing a Russian song...” (60)<sup>49</sup> These are familiar traits of Billancourt. The smokestack is the recurrent image of Billancourt: dominating the skyline and emphasizing the working class nature of the district. Drunkenness is also closely associated with Billancourt. Ivan Ivanovich has a sense that even the air does not belong to him: it is Parisian air, “their” air.

When Semyon Kozlobabin<sup>50</sup> offers Kondurin a job at a new cabaret, which will feature Russian porter, Russian tea, music and gypsy singing “to summon up memories of

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<sup>49</sup> “Znakomaia truba mezhdz zvezd cherneet. Zakhotelos' emu vozdukhz glotnut' – chert ego znaet, kakov noch'iu etot ikhnii vozdukh... Peshekhod proshel, shataetsia, 'Vo luziakh' napevaet” (42-43)

<sup>50</sup> Familiar from “Billancourt Fiesta.”

their beautiful past” (62),<sup>51</sup> Kondurin sees his opportunity. “This was the direct route to victory over Kondurin's many years of tragedy.”<sup>52</sup> Playing the piano allows Ivan Ivanovich to overcome his sense of displacement. “Of course, Ivan Ivanovich's pay dropped during this time, but only a memory remained of his tragedy” (63).<sup>53</sup> The tragedy of exile is ameliorated through the sense of “fit” gained through practicing his craft. He and his wife, Alexandra, readily accept less financial stability for the opportunity for him to exercise his creative desires.

Soon Kondurin leaves the cabaret to become a pianist leading a cinema orchestra. While Ivan Ivanovich is leading the theater orchestra at the piano, all is well:

“And when the orchestra played the march-overture, it played as one man” (66).<sup>54</sup>

This sense of harmony is contrasted to the situation outside on the Billancourt streets. This is the first extended description of the character of Billancourt in these stories.

А на дворе дождик идет, и, может быть, кто-то из неимущих мокнет, может, заветные мечты у кого-нибудь не исполняются, может, кому-нибудь немножко денег в долг взять хочется или так просто, без отдачи. Или в чью-нибудь голову вопросы лезут: хорошо бы своим прямым делом заняться, хорошо, если бы, например, всякой трагедии в Биянкуре пришел конец. Хорошо, если бы вдруг оказалось, что не было ни Перекопа, ни эвакуации, что по болотам не отступали и в Ростове тифом не болели... А на дворе, говорю, в это время, может быть, туман, ветер, может, там кто сильно завидует Ивану Ивановичу, хочет во что бы то ни стало его в благополучии превзойти, из кожи лежит. Может, там на дворе, туберкулез какой-нибудь или отчаяние, может, еще что-нибудь похуже. Может, простите меня, читатели и покупатели, украсть там кто-нибудь что-

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<sup>51</sup> “izvestnyi kommersant Semen Nikolaevich Kozlobabin”, “chtoby кое-komu napominalo o prezhej krasivoj zhizni” (43)

<sup>52</sup> “Eto byl priamoi put’ k pobede nad mnogoletnei tragediei Kondurina” (44)

<sup>53</sup> “Konechno, zarabotok Ivana Ivanovicha v eto vremia sokratilsia, no zato ot tragedii ostalos’ odno vospominanie” (44-45).

<sup>54</sup> “I togda igraet orkestr marsh-uvertiur, kak odin chelovek igraet” (47).



нибудь собирается. Биянкур -- это вам не дачная местность, всякое здесь бывает. (47)

Outside a light rain was falling and maybe some down-and-outer was getting wet, maybe someone's fondest dreams were not coming true, maybe someone felt like borrowing a little money, or simply taking it without giving it back. Or maybe questions were starting to occur to someone: it would be good just to be doing what you were supposed to do, it would be good if, for example, there was an end to all the tragedy in Billancourt. It would be good if it suddenly turned out that there had been no Perekop, no evacuation, that they hadn't retreated through the swamps or contracted typhus in Rostov... Outside, I'm telling you, there could have been fog at this time of year, or a wind, someone could have been terribly jealous of Ivan Ivanovich and wanted to outdo him in well-being. No matter what, he would do his utmost. Maybe outside there was tuberculosis or despair, maybe something far worse. Maybe – forgive me for saying so, readers and customers – someone was planning to steal something. Billancourt was not exactly your dacha community; all sorts of things happened here. (66-67)<sup>55</sup>

The general sense of dis-ease and displacement is again directly related to the experiences of the Civil War and their exile. The stories are never “about” exile, and yet the experience of the lost Civil War and the disorientation of exile not only influence, but appear to determine, people's lives. Billancourt is presented in this passage as a place filled with menace. The weather is poor – the weather is always poor in Billancourt. Ivan Ivanovich's optimistic assessment that his move to doing his proper work would result in everyone's tragedy ending has clearly not come to pass. And, in fact, someone may wish him ill because of it. While he is playing the piano, all is well. Outside, the same Billancourt of accumulated tragedies awaits.

When the theater orchestra is fired and replaced by recorded music, Kondurin tells his wife, “Shurochka... we've been caught by history once again. And this time we're not alone

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<sup>55</sup> Perekop was the decisive battle resulting in the defeat of the White Army in the south of Russia.

either...Our tragedy affects other people, too, it turns out. We and our dear friends apparently are not alone, we're part of something bigger” (69).<sup>56</sup>

The orchestra has fallen victim to the forces of history on a smaller scale this time – the mechanization of cinema music results in all of the members of the orchestra losing their jobs. Kondurin finds comfort in this connection with his community – it allows him to make sense of his dispossession because it is shared.

The reasons for Ivan Ivanovich's loss of his calling for a second time are, in truth, due to forces beyond his control. Ivan goes back to his job in the furniture business, except with even less hope than before:

Иван Иванович места этого уже не покинет. Потеряет он раз-другой терпение в часы досуга, но действий никаких не предпримет. Потому что оказалось-то, что трагедия была не только его, моя и ваша, а прямо-таки общая, или даже всеобщая.

Вот именно -- всеобщая. Простите за неутешительное слово. (49)

Ivan Ivanovich won't quit his job again. He loses his patience occasionally in his free time, but won't take any action. Because as it turned out, the tragedy wasn't just his, mine and yours, but truly general, or even universal.

Yes, exactly – universal. Forgive me for the discouraging word (trans. mine).

In this concluding passage, Grisha unites narrator, characters and readers into a single shared community and a shared tragedy.

This story exhibits the circular structure common to several of these early Billancourt stories. In these stories, the relevance of time and individual action collapse in the face of an intractable reality. In “The Argentine,” Uncle Ivan leaves Paris exactly as he arrives – with no bride. In “Photogénique,” Gerasim Gavrilovich finished the story exactly as he began: reading the job notices. “About the Hooks” ends with the comment: “His return ticket was in

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<sup>56</sup> “Мы, Shurochka, opiat’ popali v istoriiu. I na sei raz opiat’ ne odni... Vykhodit, chto tragediia nasha i drugim liudiam prinaldlezhit kraem. Vykhodit, chto my s dorogimi druž’iami nashimi kak budto ne odni, a k bol’shomu delu prichastnyi” (48-49).

his pocket.” Barabanov will return to the provinces with nothing to show for his time and no closer to his dreams of seeing his inventions patented. In “An Incident with Music,” Kondurin has returned to his original job in the furniture shop and has given up his dreams of change. In each story, the characters may initially make headway toward changing their lives, but by the end everything has reverted to its initial state. In these stories, the individual's struggle against the exigencies of fate are ultimately futile and any attempts at individually motivated change are doomed to failure. The exile has been driven from his home by the forces of history and individual agency remains insignificant thereafter.

“An Incident with Music” is the last story of 1929 and marks the end of the early portion of the cycle. Grisha’s role as narrator is most prominent in the early stories in the cycle and Berberova most fully develops her poetics of exile in these early stories. As the cycle continues, the focus becomes more diffuse as Grisha recedes into the background and Berberova depicts a wider array of characters. After two stories which offer little insight into the exile experience and do not feature Grisha as a clear narrator (“A Gypsy Romance” [Tsyganskii romans] and “The Little Stranger” [Chuzhaia devochka]), the last stories in the initial cycle bring Grisha back into sight as a fully present narrator and further develop the ideas of exile. These later stories develop the varying images of Russia, Paris and Billancourt.

### **III. Mapping Exile**

If we could draw a mental map of the exile topoi as represented in the *Billancourt Tales*, Billancourt would occupy the same central space that 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> Avenue do in Saul Steinberg’s famous “View of the World from 9<sup>th</sup> Avenue.” This map, which was the cover of

*The New Yorker* on May 29, 1976, depicts a world in which four city blocks of Manhattan teeming with buildings, pedestrians and vehicles occupy approximately half of the image of the world. We are looking west across the city. Beyond those blocks lies a thin strip labeled “Hudson River.” Beyond that, a brown (earth-covered rather than concrete) square of land with rocks and a bush with very approximately placed labels for a total of seven US cities and the state of Texas. To the right of the square (i.e. north) “Canada,” to the left (i.e. south) “Mexico.” Beyond the square lies an equally wide expanse of blank space (apparently the Pacific Ocean), with three land masses beyond it labeled Japan, China, Russia. This map has been reproduced many times. Its immense popularity may be due to the sense that it provides, with an ironic slant, what is perceived as a reasonably accurate view of the New Yorker’s mental map of the world.

We could title our map “View of the World from the Place Nationale.” In this map, Billancourt would occupy the center of the map. The Place Nationale, the “Kabaret,” the Hotel “Caprice,” and Kozlobabin’s grocery store would occupy all of the lower portion of the map, with all of its poverty and mix of Russian and French signs executed in loving detail. We would be able to see the workers crowding the square, twiddling their thumbs. Just beyond this detailed portion of the map, would be the four giant smokestacks of the Renault factory, separating Billancourt from the rest of the world. Beyond the smokestacks and gates of the factory, the glittering majesty of Paris. Perhaps a landmark or two, streetlamps, some signs with misspelled French (as if written by the émigré). Paris would give the impression of towering over the smaller, yet closer and more detailed, image of Billancourt. The colors would be more saturated. Beyond Paris, an undifferentiated green expanse with the labels: “provinces,” “Creusot,” “Serbia” and “Princes Islands.” And then, a smallish, unlabeled body

of water representing the fact that most of them left Russia by ship. And then, at the very edge, a final landmass. Sevastopol and Odessa would be marked along the coast of that landmass. A bit further in, Orel and Kazan. These would be in entirely washed-out colors – almost transparent. The image of those cities would include nothing more than a couple of collapsed buildings and a dilapidated railroad yard. This “View of the World from the Place Nationale” is very similar to the “View of the World from 9<sup>th</sup> Avenue” with the adjustment of a few landmarks and place names. In each, the viewer’s everyday, close-at-hand reality appears to dominate his consciousness with everything else relegated to lesser status. Russia is utterly remote, Paris seductive, and Billancourt is central in the exile’s map of the world.

A third map could help to visualize what is particularly unique about Berberova’s perspective on exile. Nabokov’s novel *Mary*, published in 1926, repeatedly emphasizes the present as only a “ghostly” reality, whereas the scenes of memory of Russia are far more “real” to the protagonist Ganin. The lower part of our Nabokovian map might show the six doors of Ganin’s boarding house – each door with its number consisting of a page torn from an April calendar. The doors would have to be transparent. Beyond them, a few grey tree-lined Berlin streets leading directly to the splendid Russia of the imagination. “It seemed as though his past, in that perfect form it had reached, ran now like a regular pattern through his everyday life in Berlin... It was not simply reminiscence but a life that was much more real, much more intense than the life lived by his shadow in Berlin” (55-56). That Russia would show several distinct images: a pavilion, a river, a white mansion on a green hill. Only Russia is in full color.

Edward Said wrote that “For an exile, habits of life, expression, or activity in the new environment inevitably occur against the memory of these things in another environment.

Thus both the new and the old environments are vivid, actual, occurring together contrapuntally” (55). These early works of Berberova and Nabokov each privilege a different side of the equation. The *Billancourt Tales* emphasize the present day with little reference to the past. Nabokov’s *Mary* emphasizes the past with the present relegated to spectral status.

Community and exile share an emphasis on geographic space. Although Berberova, through Grisha, depicts exile through a persistent sense of dis-ease, the reality of exile is nonetheless grounded in the “laws of geographical space.” Exile is defined by loss of a geographical homeland, in this case Russia; the community of Billancourt is located in a specific geographic location outside Paris. The relationships between Russia, Billancourt and Paris resonate throughout the cycle, but come to the fore more persistently in the later stories. The topoi of Russia, Billancourt and Paris form the spaces of exile, permeated by a sense of transience. Throughout these stories, Billancourt is considered in juxtaposition with Russia and with Paris.

### **Transience**

In “Versts and Sleeping Cars” (“Versty-shpaly”), Grisha describes his own journeys to arrive in Billancourt. It is the only story in which he focuses on his own experiences rather than describing someone else. His story begins in wartime Russia.

Transience is a recurrent theme in exile writing. These stories are filled with arrivals and departures – family members, acquaintances and new refugees brought in by “Monsieur Renault” arrive from Russia (Kolya Kozlobabin in “Billancourt Fiesta”), Serbia (Kryatov in “Ring of Love” [Kol’tso liubvi]), Paris (Liusenka in “Kolka and Liusenka”), Estonia (Antonina Selindrina in “The Argentine”), Armenia (refugees depicted in “The Little

Stranger”) and the French provinces (Grisha's uncle Ivan in “The Argentine,” Barabanov in “About the Hooks,” Basistov in “The Billancourt Phantom” [Biiankurskii prizrak]).

Many of the exiles have travelled circuitous paths to arrive in Billancourt. Gerasim Gavrilovich had been seen on a Greek steamer, in Creusot and Belgium before arriving in Billancourt. Barabanov recalls Thionville, Lieges, Uzhgorod, Belgrad, Alexandria, the Princes Islands (Turkey) and travel by ship, trains roads and rivers.

In “Versts and Sleeping Cars,” Grisha mentions the Bosphorus, Turkey, the Balkans, the Saros Gulf, Turnov, Rudnik, Prague, then Billancourt. This story offers Grisha's vision of Russia, Paris and Billancourt. The story begins with an extended meditation:

Дороги мои были не простые, дороги мои были по большей части железные. По железным дорогам и тарахтела моя молодая жизнь, и я по ним трясся, а значение мое -- не более канарейки... От тяги этой долго у меня под коленками зудило и уносилась в просторы душа... А еще бывает: нападёт после таких пикников что-то вроде болезненного состояния: станет тебе казаться, будто нихоть и на месте сидишь, будто опять под тобой колеса ходят, в глазах столбы бегут, будто несет тебя, только повороты считай. Так было со мной, продолжалось довольно долго, но теперь кончилось. Станция. (78-79)

My roads have not been easy roads, my roads have been largely rails. My young life jolted along the train tracks, but a canary is more important than I am...As a result of this locomotion, for a long time my feet itched and my soul tended to drift off... Occasionally, too, an unhealthy condition besets us after all those journeys: you start thinking the journeys will never end, that you're still moving even when you're sitting in place, that the wheels are turning underneath you again, the telegraph poles are racing past, that it's carrying you.. That's how it was with me, and it went on for a long time, but now it's over. Here's the station. (100-101)

This passage is reminiscent of Barabanov's image as he exited the train station: “What if this raw autumn wind... were to pull me from this very Parisian train station, right back across the threshold, and onto a train, and it took me down all my old roads” (43).<sup>57</sup> Movement and

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<sup>57</sup> “a chto... kak s etogo samogo parizhskovo vokzala osennim, i syrym, i vrednym dlia revmatikov vetrom vtianet menia obratno cherez vokzal-nyi porog, da v poezd, da poidet nosit' po vsem moim prezhnim dorogam” (51).

dislocation are an underlying aspect of Billancourt reality. “Here's the station.” Billancourt is the end of the line.

After addressing potential debates as to the preferability of larger or smaller women, Grisha concedes that there are really very few of either to be seen: “Actually, in Billancourt we have neither small nor large women” (103).

В Биянкуре женщина не живет, в Париж бежит.  
В Париже и маленьким и большим женщинам лафа. В Париже кругом красивые должности. Живут там по большей части иностранцы, вечером улицы освещаются, все кабаре полны веселым трезвым народом, а у нас бывает, что на Национальной площади и сесть некуда -- все скамейки заняты. И тогда люди стоят на углах, делая вид, что и без того им весело. А в рукава ветер задувает. (80)

A woman doesn't live in Billancourt, she flees to Paris.

In Paris both small and large women are in clover. In Paris there are handsome positions galore. For the most part, it's foreigners living there, in the evening the streets are lit up, and all the cabarets are full of cheerful, sober people, whereas here sometimes there's not even anywhere to sit on the Place Nationale – all the benches are taken. And then the men stand on the corners, pretending they're having a good time anyway. But the wind blows up their sleeves. (103)

In this passage, the contrasts between Paris and Billancourt are as much implied as spelled out. In all of these stories, Grisha tends to refer to the French (in France) as “foreign.” So Paris, in contrast to Billancourt, is primarily French people. The people in the cabarets are sober and cheerful. We are left to understand that this is a contrast to the people of Billancourt, who presumably are morose and drunk. In Paris, the cabarets are full, whereas in Billancourt, people often do not have enough money to go to cabarets and are forced to socialize outside – taking up all of the benches and standing around when the benches are filled.

This story has the most extended description of life before emigration. Grisha reports that his journeys began at Zet junction. He notes that, “In those days, trains did not run on



schedules” (103).<sup>58</sup> This one slight statement conveys the unpredictability of the warime years. The scene is a small town in autumn of 1919.

Пора была осенняя, печальная, в небо стремились поздние грачи -- была такая птица. Дома по большей части имели вид нежилой: сами по себе закрытые окна, сами по себе обдрипанные акации перед ними. Большинство лавок было разбито и заколочено, да и какие же это были лавки! Таких лавок не то что в Париже, в Биянкур не найдешь. (81)

It was a mournful autumn, and late rooks soared in the sky – there was such a bird. The buildings for the most part looked uninhabited: the closed windows and flayed acacias seemed always to have been that way. Most of the shops were wrecked and nailed shut – not much in the way of shops to begin with. You would never find shops like that in Billancourt, let alone Paris. (105)

In this passage, Grisha depicts a town devastated by war. There are no memories of Russia before the war offered here: the memory he has is of a country in which the trains don't run on schedules, they kill the station master's chicken to feed themselves, the buildings look uninhabited, and even the shops there are do not compare favorably even with Billancourt – much less Paris. This is not a longed-for homeland, but a semi-abandoned mess. He and a friend wander this abandoned village and come upon a young woman sewing in a window. She offers them something to drink – along with her thimble for good luck. When Grisha returns a month later to return the thimble, after his friend has died, the town is in even worse condition. The building that the girl was in, and five blocks around it, had burned to the ground. After this first meeting in Zet, Grisha spots her again in Prague. Her name is Tania. They go to a movie and then she tells him she is leaving for Paris. He follows her to Paris and arrives in Billancourt:

Над Парижем небо разрывается, из облаков голубь летит, солнце над Парижем белое. А если идет легкий дождик, на улицах ну прямо танцы начинаются: мужчины (заметили ли вы?) на носках по лужам ходят, а женщины, перебежав через улицу, сейчас ножку поднимают: смотрят не забрызган ли чулок?...

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<sup>58</sup> “Poezda v te vremena khodili bez raspisanii” (80)

Это -- Париж. А Биянкур -- рядом. (84)

Over Paris, the sky splits open and a dove flies from the clouds; the sun over Paris is a white sun. And if it's raining lightly, it's as if people had begun dancing in the streets: the men (have you noticed?) walk through the puddles on tiptoe, and the women dash across the street and immediately lift a foot to see whether their stocking was splashed...

This is Paris, and Billancourt is next door. (108)

Grisha used an almost identical contrast in "The Argentine": "I don't live in a world center; I live next door in Billancourt." Paris and Billancourt are contiguous, but entirely incommensurate. And, of course, the contrast between Paris and Russia could hardly be more stark. In most of the Billancourt stories, the weather in Billancourt (and, by extension, Paris) is terrible. But here, in the story which contrasts Russia and Paris, even a rainy day is depicted as beautiful. Over the sad, autumnal Russian sky fly rooks – an animal which may have appeared particularly ominous during the war as they will feed on dead bodies. Over Paris, a dove flies from the clouds – the symbol of peace. The houses in Grisha's description of Russia appear abandoned. The Parisians appear to dance even in the rain.

When Grisha finds Tania in Billancourt, she is on her way to visit her father in America and bring back money to get married – she doesn't say to whom. Grisha contemplates following her again – to America, -- but he does not. Grisha's America sounds strikingly Russian:

О, Америка, океан! Страна моя родная!  
Ходил я вечерами по биянкурским улицам (не смейтесь: над Биянкуром ночью парижские звезды горят!) и думал о том, что в Америке, верно, белый день сейчас. Я видел зеленые ее степи, и куликов, и вишневые рощи, и все ее природные прелести: широкие реки, вроде наших, густые леса, безымянные дороги. (85)

Oh, America, the ocean! My native land!  
In the evenings I would walk the Billancourt streets (don't laugh: the Paris stars burn over Billancourt at night!) and think about the fact that it was probably broad daylight

in America now. I saw its green steppes, its sandpipers, its cherry orchards, and all its natural charms: broad rivers like ours, thick forests, nameless roads. (109-110)

He refers to America as “native.” Elsewhere he refers to Billancourt as “native.” He never refers to Russia as “native.” Grisha’s image of Russia is of war and the American landscape masquerades as Russian in his imagery. “Cherry orchards” are certainly more often associated with Russia than America. The choice of the word “stepi” rather than words more distinctively associated with the American landscape such as “preri” (prairie) or “velikie ravniny” (Great Plains) binds the image more closely to Russia than to America. Broad rivers are described “like ours” – though “ours” are not depicted anywhere in this prose. Perhaps no longer able to imagine a peaceful and beautiful Russian landscape after his experiences in the war, Grisha displaces his images of Russia onto an imagined America.

In this same passage, Grisha repeats the defensiveness of Billancourt vis-à-vis the rest of the world: he anticipates mockery at the idea of walking the Billancourt streets in the evenings and emphasizes that the “Paris stars” burn over Billancourt at night. Just as Kondurin (“An Incident with Music”) breathed “their” air at night, Billancourt must rely on “Parisian” stars at night.

## **Russia**

The image of Russia was a central part of the exile ethos for many émigré writers. As historian Orlando Figes suggests, “Retreating into a legendary past is perhaps a natural response of the artist who is dislocated from his native land” (540). In contrast, Berberova wrote that she had no interest in writing about “Old Russia” (1). In stories which repeatedly depict exiles and clearly attribute various aspects of their existence to their status as refugees, Russia itself is rarely mentioned. In “Versts and Sleeping Cars,” Grisha’s Russia is a desolate

space of death and destruction. The last two stories of the initial cycle, “Ring of Love” and “Billancourt Manuscript,” explore the futility, and even the dangers, of remembering Russia.

In “Ring of Love,” the main character, identified throughout as née-Bychkova, learns that the lover of her youth is a relative of her new acquaintances in Billancourt. She opens the locket she wears on her chest and they “looked at it as if they were looking into née-Bychkova's very soul. There in the locket was the man himself, Vladimir Kryatov” (129).<sup>59</sup> In her soul, née-Bychkova carries the image of Kryatov and, by extension, her life in Russia before the Revolution. She also shows them her “sapphire ring, his last gift...It had been in the pawn shop three times in the last few years, but thank God she had managed to hold onto it, and now she would hold onto it forever because, also thank God, the dark days were over for her and Roman Germanovich, and their son would soon be a Frenchman and an engineer” (129).<sup>60</sup> This is the literal “Ring of Love” of the title.

She is referred to as ‘née-Bychkova’ throughout the story, emphasizing her inner determination to maintain a connection with her glamorous, pre-emigration life. “Née-Bychkova had her own memories from before her marriage, memories of flowers so vivid they would not leave her in peace, and the more they wouldn’t the more certain she became that her life could not end this way, that some final trumpet had yet to blow one final note” (128). Despite “the fact that she loved her husband well,” née-Bychkova longs for something

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<sup>59</sup> “zaglianuli v nego, tochno v samuiu dushu urozhdennoi Bychkovoi. V medal’one sidel on samyi, Vladimir Kriatov” (97).

<sup>60</sup> “kol’tso s safirom, poslednii ego podarok, kotoryi tri raza v poslednie gody byl v zaklade, no kotoryi, slava bogu, ona vse-taki sokhranila, a teper’ i sokhranit naveki, potomu chto, opiat’-taki slava bogu, chernye dni dlia nikh s Romanom Germanovichem proshli, i syn ikh skoro budet frantsuzom i inzhenerom” (97-98).

more. When she learns that Kryatov is alive and that she may see him again, she begins to fantasize about this possible meeting.

На сердце у нее стало так, будто и впрямь заиграла возле нее последняя труба. Жизнь ее и в самом деле оказывалась жизнью, а не так себе. Воспоминания ярких цветов, надежда, страшным и милым секретом таившаяся в душе, -- все соединилось вдруг вместе и стало одной растущей счастливой силой... Днем она, несмотря на то что отлично любила мужа, только о Крятове и думала. Вся ее жизнь в Биянкуре вдруг стало какой-то прозрачной, и сквозь нее виделась встреча. (98)

In her heart it felt as if that final trumpet had started playing right by her side. Her life had in fact turned out to be not just any life but a real life. The memories of the vivid flowers, the hope, the terrible and sweet secrets in her soul, everything had combined into a single mounting happy force... During the day, despite the fact that she loved her husband well, all she could think about was Kryatov. Her entire life in Billancourt became transparent, and through it she could see their meeting. (130)

Bychkova is overwhelmed with memories of the past to the extent that the present becomes “transparent.” (This echoes Ivan Kondurin’s search for “real life” in “An Incident with Music.”) Kryatov does eventually arrive in Billancourt. He is an extremely poor, embittered old man who initially fails to recognize née-Bychkova.

He does not compare favorably to née-Bychkova’s husband, Roman Germanovich. When the two of them go to meet Kryatov (we are never told what Roman Germanovich thinks of this meeting) née-Bychkova points out to Roman Germanovich that his suit is twisted and he rearranges it with “a look of gratitude.” In contrast, Kryatov is wearing “a green, single-breasted jacket and a shirt without a collar, and he looked like a retired land captain who had galloped forty versts without changing horses or setting foot out of his carriage” (131). While Roman Germanovich makes polite conversation about the weather, Kryatov “looked at the guests with the hostile eyes of an old man who could no longer see anything up close and had a tiresome way of looking into the distance at details no one cared about” (132). Even his smell compares unfavorably to her husband’s: “She smelled old

fabric, camphor, and tobacco. This was not the pleasant smell of old age that Roman Germanovich, her spouse, had about him” (132).<sup>61</sup>

When the two of them are alone for a moment, he finally recognizes her by her ring, but cannot recall her name. This is not the fantasy reunion she had imagined. She gives him the precious ring she has worn throughout her time in emigration. Around her finger “was a light band of white that would probably not last long” (136).<sup>62</sup> That band will fade, just as she will finally allow those intense memories to fade. The ring is a symbol of her connection to pre-Revolutionary Russia – she has kept it and her memories for all of these years. When she gives it to Kryatov, he rudely storms out of the house – happy to no longer be dependent on his nephew’s family and expressing no gratitude to them. Née-Bychkova was no longer interested in him: “a circle had closed for her, a wide, noisy, difficult and happy circle” (138).<sup>63</sup> In relinquishing her connection to the past, embodied in the ring, she closes the circle and embraces the life she does have in Billancourt. She steps out into the streets of Billancourt: “She walked in step with him, her spouse. All these years she had been matching her step to his, like a frame to a doorpost” (138).<sup>64</sup> And this is the other meaning of “Ring of

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<sup>61</sup> “zelenaiia odnobotnaia kurtka, byl on bez vorotnichka, vid imel zemskogo nachal’nika v otstavke, proskakavshego verst sorok, ne meniaia loshadei i ne vysazhivaia’s’ iz tarantasa;” “vzglialul na gostei svoimi starcheskimi, nepriiazennymi glazami, vblizi uzhe ne vidiashchimi nichego i s dokukoi smotriashchimi vdal’ na kakie-to nikomu ne nuzhnye melochi;” Ona chuvstvovala zapakh starogo sukna, naftalina, tabaka. Eto ne byl priiatnyi zapakh starosti, kotoryi rasprostranial Roman Germanovich, ee suprug” (99-100).

<sup>62</sup> “shla legkaia belaia poloska, kotoroi, verno, ostalos’ sovsem nedolgo sushchestvovat” (102)

<sup>63</sup> “Zavershilsia dlia nee kakoi-to krug, shirokii i shumnyi, i trudnyi, i schastlivyi” (103).

<sup>64</sup> Ona shla v nogu s nim, so svoim suprugom, prinorovilas’ ona za stol’ko let k ego shagu, kak k kosiaku – rama” (104).

Love” in the story –the “happy circle” which includes her husband, the son who will soon be a Frenchman and their life in Billancourt where her real life is.

The story “Billancourt Manuscript” warns even more insistently of the dangers of excessive focus on Russia. The Russia of the *Billancourt Tales* is frequently depicted in the disarray which defined the Revolutionary and Civil War years. The cities of southern Russia (Sebastopol, Orel, Odessa, Rostov) where the White Army was concentrated are frequently referenced, but rarely desired. By its very title the story claims affiliation with the mythos of Billancourt – it is not titled “A Manuscript” or “Vania's Dream,” but specifically “Billancourt Manuscript.” Thus, we may expect that it will in some way depict what is “irreparable” and a sense of being “out of place.”

The story opens as Grisha's friend Shchov arrives to tell Grisha that their friend Vania Lyokhin has died. As in many of the stories, specific contemporary time markers imply a shared temporal reality: “Vania Lyokhin died on Tuesday night, the 7th” (113).<sup>65</sup> The two go to the Hotel Caprice, where they find Vania lying dead in his bed. In his will, Vania left a manuscript to Grisha. The manuscript describes a dream-like return to Russia. Grisha immediately attributes Vania's death to imagination. In apparent compensation, Grisha even more insistently inscribes both the reader and Vania firmly into the environs of Billancourt.

Grisha describes Vania's funeral: “Vania Lyokhin was carried through his own Billancourt streets” (114).<sup>66</sup> The Russian word “rodimyi” refers to one's native land and, according to Ushakov's dictionary, is both “folk-poetical” and “conversational”<sup>67</sup> in tone.

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<sup>65</sup> “Vania Lekhin umer vo vtornik vecherom, sed'mogo chisla” (87).

<sup>66</sup> “povezli Vaniu Lekhina po rodimym biiankurskim ulitsam” (88).

<sup>67</sup> “narodno-poeticheskoe; razgovornoe”

While “rodimyi”’s basic meaning is simply “native,” the choice of the poetic form invokes a sense of tenderness which is usually reserved for evocations of one’s birthplace. Throughout this story, Grisha emphasizes Billancourt as the “homeland” of the exiles. Grisha describes the funeral procession:

Повезли его одной знакомой улицей, мимо скучных домов и заборов мистера Сальмсона, где было и будет хожено всеми нами немало. Повезли Ваню Лехина мимо того фонаря, где не так давно одноклассник наш в пьяном виде на машине разбился, мимо тех ворот, на которых вот уже год одно русское слово углем нарисовано – все его знают. Повезли Ваню Лехина на новое наше кладбище, где цветов сколько не проси, никто не возложит, где погода зимой сырая, а летом пыльная, и где – хотите вы или нет – придется и вам, и мне недалеко от Вани Лехина зарыться. (88)

They carried him down a familiar street past Mr. Salmson’s tedious buildings and fences, where all of us have done and will do our share of walking. They carried Vania Lopakhin past the very streetlamp where not that long ago our army-mate cracked up in a car while in a drunken stupor, past those gates where for a year a single Russian word had been written in coal – everyone knows it. They brought Vania Lyokhin to our new cemetery, where no matter how many flowers you ask for no one puts any, where the weather in winter is raw and in summer dusty and where – like it or not – you and I, too, will be buried not far from Vania Lyokhin. (115)

In this passage, Grisha inscribes us firmly within the confines of Billancourt. His assumptions confirm that his readers belong not only to the same social milieu through a shared knowledge of Billancourt, but to the same economic class. Grisha refers to landmarks as if they will be familiar: “everyone knows” the word written on the gates. Vania’s poverty is emphasized even in death. He is not buried in the part of the cemetery with “promenades, statues, and flowers” (115).<sup>68</sup> He is buried where there are only short crosses with names and dates. From the cemetery, “you could see a smokestack very close by, our smokestack, a famous smokestack, actually” (115).<sup>69</sup> The landmark Renault smokestacks which define

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<sup>68</sup> “alleiki, pamiatniki, tsvety” (88).

<sup>69</sup> “truba vidna, fabrichnaia, nasha, obshcheizvestnaia” (88).



Billancourt are ever-present – even in the cemetery. Grisha's reminder to the reader that “you” will be buried there too inscribes the reader firmly within the bounds of Billancourt – all the way unto death.

Vania Lopakhin bequeathed Grisha the manuscript of a story he was writing. Immediately Grisha suspects that the manuscript could have caused his death: “How come we never guessed the agony his imagination was causing him? This could be happening to some other friend, too, without us ever knowing! But none of us would ever admit it. Myself first of all” (117).<sup>70</sup>

The absence of Russia in these stories is revealed as not simply an elision, but as a form of necessary repression. Giving oneself over to imagining what has been lost could be fatal.

Within the frame story describing Vania's death and funeral, Grisha inserts a portion of Vania's own manuscript. Vania's manuscript represents the fantasy of return. This manuscript describes his return to Russia in the dark of the night. He makes his way in the dark by memory to his family home, where he meets his sister's husband and his nephews for the first time, and sees his sister and mother. The dream-like imagery emphasizes the spectral nature of Russia for those who are living in France. Vania's narrator makes his way through the dark and gloomy streets where “From time to time a gate would burst open and from the depths of the yard a dog would hurl itself at me in silence and then immediately stand back” (118).<sup>71</sup> As his brother-in-law leads him through the house, “A door opened without a sound,

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<sup>70</sup> “Kak eto ne dogadalis’ my, chto v nem voobrazhenie stradaet? Mozhet byt’ i eshche v kakom-nibud’ priiatele to zhe proiskhodit, a my i ne znaem! No nikotoryi iz priiatelei ne priznaetsia. Ni ia sam pervyi” (90).

<sup>71</sup> “Poroiu zabor obryvalsia, i iz glubiny dvora molcha brosalas’ za mnoi sobaka i seichas zhe

and we moved silently, as if we were sailing” (120).<sup>72</sup> When he at last sees his mother, she “seemed to detach herself from the floor and float toward me...” (126)<sup>73</sup> All of these images of silence and flowing movement emphasize the dream-like quality of Vania's vision.

When he arrives in his mother's room, the objects within it are saturated with personal connection – all of those connections which were lost with emigration.

Лампочка зажглась в потолке. И я узнал комнату, где я родился. ..собственный мой портрет призыва шестнадцатого года, а на столе, как теплый домашний зверь, лежало вязанье...все, от того ковра, что стлался мне под ноги, до круглого зеркала (которое в детстве казалось таким высоким), все стало вдруг опять моим. Душа моя встретила в этих старых запыленных и, может быть, изъеденных червями вещах с душами людей, живших здесь. (93)

With the ceiling light on, I recognized the room I'd been born in... my own portrait from the '16 draft, and on the table, like a warm house pet, lay her knitting...everything, from the rug that yielded under my feet to the round mirror (which had seemed so high when I was a child), everything suddenly became mine again. And in these old, dusty, and perhaps even worm-eaten things, my soul met the souls of the people who lived here. (122)

Vania's imagined return to Russia, to the room in which he was born, is saturated in personal detail and emotion. His own portrait has maintained his presence in his mother's home in Russia while he himself was in exile in Paris. Even her knitting is like a “house pet” – a “domashnii zver.” His sense that his “soul met the souls of the people who lived here” carries a sentimental weight that is completely counter to Grisha's own manner of depiction.

Grisha explicitly states again at the end “Vania Lyokhin had died of imagination” (126).<sup>74</sup> No other cause of death is suggested. Thus, Grisha's persistent efforts to inscribe

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otstavala” (91).

<sup>72</sup> “Bezzvuchno otvorilas' kakaia-to dver', my dvigalis' tikho, slovno plyli” (92).

<sup>73</sup> “slovno otdelivshis' ot pola, poneslas' na menia” (95).

<sup>74</sup> “Vania Lekhin umer ot voobrazheniia” (95).

both Vania and the reader more fully into the community of Billancourt is a compensatory gesture which offers our only chance for survival. Dreaming and writing of Russia will lead to individual decline: we must accept our new identity within “rodimyi Billancourt.” This resonates with the message in “Ring of Love” that any personal happiness is to be found only within present-day Billancourt, not chasing after dreams of lost glory.

## Paris

Just as Billancourt and Russia exist in an uneasy counterbalance, so also Billancourt exists in counterbalance with neighboring Paris. The myths of Paris and Billancourt are reinforced further in later stories. Paris is the exact inverse of Billancourt. While Billancourt is characterized by transience, poverty and irreparability, Paris is filled with handsome positions and happy smells.

Ветер поднимался из-за реки, неся с собой запахи большого ночного счастливого города. Не дай нам парижский ветер в Биянкуре -- нечем дышать тогда нам всем. Дует он хитро, тонко дует, то удушьем, то заманчивой, но вредной свежестью, которая расслабляет, от которой идут все сны, мечты и дурманы. Запретить бы вовсе ему оттуда на нас дуть. Но как обойтись без Парижа? Немыслимо. Ведь душа к этому навстречу рвется. (68)

The wind rose from across the river, carrying with it the smell of the happy nighttime city. If it weren't for the Paris wind we'd have nothing to breathe in Billancourt. It blows cunningly, it blows subtly, sometimes suffocating you, sometimes with an intriguing but unwholesome freshness that relaxes you, that brings dreams, fantasies and intoxication. They should ban it from blowing on us. But how would we ever get along without Paris? It's inconceivable. Your soul aches to meet that wind head on. (83)<sup>75</sup>

Paris is unimaginable, yet essential. The women of Billancourt dream of Paris, Parisians dance when it rains. Exotic gifts of sausages and preserves come from “somewhere

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<sup>75</sup> I have adjusted the translation from “that chases away dreams” to “that brings dreams” to accord with my understanding of the original.

very far away, in another world where none of us has ever strayed” (158).<sup>76</sup> Sonia “lived in Paris and had a million illusions, whereas he lived in Billancourt and had a million agonies” (169).<sup>77</sup> The physical distance from Paris is no less apparent than the psychic distance. In many ways, Billancourt is defined by its contrast with Paris. Billancourt is Russian and Paris is French.

Paris is the heavenly realm from which the inhabitants of Billancourt are excluded. The journey between the two requires several transfers. Paris is the home of dreams and of wealth, whereas Russianness is defined by poverty. In “The Argentine,” Grisha and his uncle Ivan visit the barracks of Russian refugees who will be sent abroad for work. Grisha writes, “It goes without saying that we found squalor and poverty and a lack of French here in abundance” (33).<sup>78</sup> This association of squalor and poverty with “a lack of French,” i.e. with Russianness, pervades the Billancourt stories. Pavel Petrovich is described from the point of view of Aleksandr Evgrafovich in “About the Hooks,” as having “cleaner than clean, extremely clean” hands. In fact, he looked as if “he had never left this glorious city and in fact had been born here” (45).<sup>79</sup> Actually, he and Aleksandr Evgrafovich were together in Rostov and in Alexandria. His success confers on him the status of an honorary Frenchman in the eyes of Barabanov. Sonia, in “The Violin of Billancourt” (“Biiankurskaia skripka”),

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<sup>76</sup> “gde to daleko-daleko, v inom mire, kuda nikto iz nas ne zabredyval” (117).

<sup>77</sup> “zhila v Parizhe, u nee byl million illiuzii, a on zhil v Biiankure, i u nego byl million terzanii” (124).

<sup>78</sup> “Nechego i govorit’, chto ubogost’, i bednost’, i neponimanie frantsuzskogo iazyka nashli my tut v ogromnykh razmerakh” (16).

<sup>79</sup> “s chistymi-chistymi, ochen’ chistymi rukami”; “nikuda nikogda iz velikolepnogo goroda ne vyezhal da tut i rodilsia” (52)

worked in Paris “dressing a young lady (the lady turned out to have been Russian once).”<sup>80</sup> It seems that one ceases to be Russian the moment one can afford to live in Paris and hire a maid. The inhabitants of Billancourt are defined by their poverty, which is connected to their “Russianness.”

In “Billancourt Phantom,” aspects of Billancourt are similar to images of the afterlife. Basistov arrives at the Paris train station with all of his belongings in a cardboard box. Berberova’s concise and precise use of detail allows her to draw a picture of Paris and then of Billancourt in only a few words. The journey from Paris to Billancourt is represented as a journey from France to Russia. “It was quite far to Billancourt and the Place Nationale, and even Basistov had no idea how much time he spent underground. ... When Basistov finally came up for air... He walked down the poorly lit Russian streets” (144).<sup>81</sup> At the train station in Paris, there is a line of cabs waiting under a line of streetlights. In “poorly lit” Billancourt, the only visible vehicles are an ambulance and a tram which doesn't pick up passengers.

The contrast between Billancourt and Paris is drawn most fully in the 1933 story “Kolka and Liusya.” The two children in the story symbolize the cities of Paris and Billancourt. This story depicts the story of Veslovsky, a profligate old rake down on his luck and his two children from different relationships, Kolka and Liusya.

Liusya is a young Parisian, the daughter of Veslovsky's pre-Revolutionary marriage to her mother. She lives with her mother and stepfather in Paris. She is wealthy and visits him on court-ordered visitation. She brings with her each week a variety of delicatessen

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<sup>80</sup> “odevala baryniu (barynia, okazalos’, byla kogda-to russkoi)” (125).

<sup>81</sup> “Do Biiankura, do Natsional’noi ulitsy, bylo ochen’ daleko, i skol’ko vremeni Basistov provel v poezde pod zemlei, on i sam ne znal... Kogda Basistov nakonets vyshel na vozdukh... On poshel po plokho osveshchennym russkim ulitsam” (107).

treats which are “unimaginable” to the citizen of Billancourt and gives her father twenty-five francs each visit.

Kolka is an irrepressible child of nine, who is entirely native to Billancourt. He steals apples from the corner store, knows all of the local gossip and can rarely sit still. His mother lives in Billancourt with a man known to Kolka as “uncle.” Normally, Liusenka visits each Sunday in the morning and Kolka visits in the afternoon. During Kolka's visit, Veslovsky generally passes on to him a portion of the money that Liusenka has given him. Neither knows of the existence of the other.

One week Veslovsky decides to bring his two worlds into collision. He introduces the two children, neither of whom has ever suspected the existence of the other. Once they have met, both young people become disillusioned and cease to visit Veslovsky at all. This is the consequence of trying to unite the worlds of Billancourt and Paris –the two are entirely incompatible and any attempt to reconcile them will only result in disaster.

### **Billancourt**

Grisha's “coterie semantics” reinforce the sense of Billancourt as a community. As irreparable as it may be, Billancourt has become home to the exiles, has become “rodnoi.” The “homely allusions” Grisha utilizes form the base of a shared knowledge. The repetition of the same characters and landmarks creates the illusion of a community which exists between the temporal spaces created by the stories' occasional appearances in the newspaper. Berberova builds the illusion of Billancourt through cumulative repetitions of character, time and setting in the course of the stories. Characters mentioned briefly in one story will appear in the following story. A central character of one story will play a minor role in another. The

action references a few key landmarks. This sort of cross-referencing enhances our sense of a continuous community existing beyond the bounds of a single narrative.

These characters and places are bound with the newspaper reader into a single temporal community as well. Most of the stories reference the season and the weather. “The even July weather” is described in “The Argentine,” which was published in July. Bastille Day is described in “Billancourt Fiesta” published in August, not long after the actual Bastille Day on July 14. “Kolka and Liusenka” takes place in January. This technique of temporal bonding is more difficult to achieve in the format of book publication, but provides an aura of exceptional reality in the newspaper format. These specific time markers function throughout the stories to cement the bond between writer, narrator and readers within a single, shared temporal community.

### **Layers of Reality**

In the introduction to these stories, Berberova emphasized the distance which separated her from her narrator and characters.

Я не знаю, понимали ли мои читатели иронию моих рассказов, сознавали ли, что “праздники” не бог весть какие в этой их жизни, что между мной самой и моими “героями” лежит пропасть -- образа жизни, происхождении, образования, выбранной профессии, не говоря уже о политических взглядах. (3)

I don't know whether my readers understood the irony of my stories, that God only knows what sort of “holidays” they had in that life of theirs, that between me and my “heroes” lay an abyss – of lifestyle, background, education, chosen profession, not to mention political views.

And yet, Berberova reports that she was highly regarded in Billancourt after the stories started appearing. She writes that her hairdresser would not accept tips and the grocer slipped extra treats into her bag in appreciation of her literary activity. The hairdresser tells her, “We

read your stories, we are very grateful to you, you do not scorn our way of life” (*IM* 327).<sup>82</sup>

As noted above, Berberova was among the first to depict the daily life of the emigration. She portrayed the residents of Billancourt with humor and empathy, but without sentimentalism. She strove for “...a plot with a lyrico-comic side, and human tears that were more like the drop formations on a piece of Edam cheese than the dew of a rose petal” (*IM* 349).

There are a number of parallels between the representation of Billancourt in *The Italics Are Mine* and *Billancourt Tales*. In Berberova’s description of the contrasts between Billancourt and neighboring Boulogne, it is easy to discern overtones of Grisha’s contrasts between Paris and Billancourt.

Слово "Булонь" звучало нарядно: напоминало Булонский лес... В Булони был стадион, в Булони были скачки. В Биянкуре был автомобильный завод Рено, кладбище, река и грязные, бедные, запущенные кварталы. В Булонь люди переходили из Парижа по широкой зеленой аллее, в Биянкур - по пыльной некрасивой торговой улице... В Булони были дорогие рестораны, в Биянкуре - трактиры, русские и французские. (381)

The word Boulogne rang out smartly: it recalled the Bois de Boulogne... In Boulogne there was a stadium, and there were races. In Billancourt there was the Renault automobile plant, a cemetery, a river, and dirty, poor, neglected blocks. People went from Paris to Boulogne along a wide green avenue, to Billancourt along a dusty ugly commercial street... There were expensive restaurants in Boulogne and taverns, Russian and French bars in Billancourt. (*IM* 325)

Kondurin’s lament that his inability to practice his craft appears ironic – Grisha’s presentation of the Kondurins as “artistic” could not be convincing to the artistic elite. Yet, his lament closely parallels Berberova’s assertion to the poet Ladinsky that their situation was a “shared tragedy.”

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<sup>82</sup> “Chitaem vas, premnogo vam blagodarny, ne gnushaetes’ nashim zhit’em-byt’em” (383) ; “s liriko-komicheskoi storonoj zhestokogo romansa, i so slezoi, napominaiushchei ne chelovecheskuiu, no syrnuu slezu. (408)”



Similarly, Grisha's assertion that Vania Lyokhin died of imagination due to his focus on Russia sounds naïve. And yet, this too finds its reflection in *Italics*, in which Berberova invokes the painful nostalgia of other artists and repeatedly invokes her own preference for living in the present. She depicts other writers as overwhelmed by the corrosive power of nostalgia. "Both in Merezhkovsky and Remizov one sensed a tremendous nostalgia for Russia, which they both hid... I asked him [Remizov] how he could live without Russia when Russia meant so much to him? In a muffled voice he answered, making his grimace of long-suffering: 'Russia has been a dream'" (261).<sup>83</sup> Even more significantly, "Khodasevich said he could not exist without writing, that he could write only in Russia, he could not exist without Russia, but he could not live or write in Russia – and he pleaded with me to die with him" (214-215). So, in this "simple" would-be artist, Berberova transposed her daily tragedy and found a kernel of humor within it.

In the *Billancourt Tales*, Berberova shows her characters learning to live in the present moment. Only when she releases the grip of Russia, of the past, does née-Bychkova close the circle and live in the present moment. Similarly, Berberova emphasizes throughout *Italics* that her interest has always been in the present moment. She contrasts Khodasevich's obsession with the lost past with her own interests:

Для меня и свое-то прошлое никогда не стоит настоящего... я уже тогда не любила носиться со своим прошлым... Я не умею любить прошлое ради его 'погибшей прелести'... всякое настоящее, уже тем только, что оно живо, лучше всякого прошлого... Нет, единственная непогибшая и непогибающая прелесть есть 'сверепая имманенция' данного мгновения, состоящего из прошлого, настоящего и будущего. (243)

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<sup>83</sup> "I v Merezhkovskom, i v Remizove chuvstvovalas' skryvaemaia imi strashnoi sily toka po Rossii... Odnazhdy... ia sprosila kak on mozhet zhit' bez Rossii, kogda Rossia tak mnogo dlia neiu znachit? On tikho skazal, sdelaiv svoiu stradal'cheskuiu grimasu: -- Rossiia – eto byl son." (306)

For me even my own past is not worth the present... I didn't like to make much of my own past... I don't know how to love the past for its 'lost charm'... Every living minute is better than the eternity of the dead... No, the only imperishable and imperishing charm is the 'most ferocious immanence' of the given moment which consists of past, present and future... (206).

Berberova noted in her introduction to the stories that she gradually developed her own literary voice and moved away from the narrator, but that this ended the "Billancourt Tales": "they could not exist without skaz" (6).<sup>84</sup>

In these stories, Berberova depicted a disparate group of disoriented refugees as the creators of a community. She created a poetics of exile which, though grounded in geographical sites of belonging, escapes those limitations to become defined by a persistent sense of dis-ease.

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<sup>84</sup> "oni bez skaza sushchestvovat' ne mogli."

## ROQUENVAL: THE SEARCH FOR MEMORY

... восемь томиков, не больше,  
И в них вся родина моя.  
(Ходасевич, 1923)

... eight little volumes, not more,  
And in them all my homeland.  
(Khodasevich, 1923)

During the 1930s, questions of identity became increasingly important as hopes of return dissipated and, simultaneously, conditions deteriorated in the exiles' new home. Ongoing debates in the émigré press about the role, and even the possibility, of Russian literature in exile intensified. At stake was the future of Russian culture. Young writers were seeking a way forward, yet it was far from clear what the path should look like. Berberova explores the intersections of personal and cultural memory in her novella, *Roquenal: the Chronicle of a Chateau* (*Rokanval': Xronika odnogo zamka*)<sup>85</sup> published serially in 1936 in *Poslednie novosti*.

One element of this discussion was the question of what constituted "Russianness." Was it necessary to set works in Russia? Did young writers need to have a knowledge of Russian literature? What should or could the role of French literature be for the development of Russian literature abroad? In his 1933 essay "Literature in Exile," Vladislav Khodasevich

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<sup>85</sup> All translations from *Roquenal* are my own.

argued that one of the problems which had endangered the development of a true “émigré literature” was that it was not “émigré” enough. He believed that the older generation had failed to create a literature that was relevant to their current circumstances:

Их произведения, помеченные Берлином или Парижем, могли быть написаны в Москве или в Петербурге. Казалось, писатели перенесли свои столы с Арбата в Отей, чудесным образом не сдвинув с места ни одной чернильницы и ни одного карандаша, и уселись писать как ни в чем не бывало.<sup>86</sup>

Their works, marked Berlin or Paris, could have been written in Moscow or Petersburg. It seemed that the writers brought their desks from the Arbat to Auteuil, miraculously without disturbing a single ink pot or pencil, and sat down to write as if nothing had happened. (trans. mine)

Such works could offer no literary models to the younger generation who knew only life in exile. Berberova actually effectively uses tropes of the gentry estate familiar from Russian literary culture to exhibit their inadequacy for the needs of the younger exiles. In *Roquenal*, her young hero must overcome his reliance on literary images of Russia in order to define his own identity in France.

In his book *Mif dvorianskogo gnezda: geokul'turologicheskoe issledovanie po russkoi klassicheskoi literature* (*The Myth of the Gentry Nest: a Geocultural Study of Classic Russian Literature*, 1997), contemporary cultural critic Vasilii Shchukin explores a generalized image of the gentry estate which permeated Russian literary culture. While the “estate as a defined literary locus appears in Russian literature from the end of the eighteenth century” (Dmitrieva *n.pag.*),<sup>87</sup> Shchukin focuses on its depiction in the latter half of the nineteenth century. According to Shchukin, towards the end of the 1850s, when it became clear that the emancipation of serfs and land reform were imminent, “the minds of the

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<sup>86</sup> All translations from Khodasevich are my own.

<sup>87</sup> “usad’ba kak opredelennyi literaturnyi lokus poiavliaetsia v russkoi literature s kontsa XVIII veka.”

creative intelligentsia became increasingly concerned with the image of the ancient, overgrown, ruined estate” (168).<sup>88</sup> The estate came to represent an entire complex of cultural values associated with Russian gentry life. Historian Orlando Figes writes of the significance of the rural estate in Russian culture that “...[t]he simple recreations of the country house or dacha... were more than the retrieval of a rural idyll: they were an expression of one’s Russianness” (*Natasha’s Dance* xxxii).

The cultural image of the estate was particularly important in late nineteenth century and early twentieth century memoirs (Shchukin 141). These memoirs tended to represent the estate in the context of family memory, and thus presented a characteristic layering of time periods and generations within the estate itself, as history was represented through particular material artifacts.

Никакой другой жанр человеческого жилища не был, по крайней мере в России, в такой степени хранилищем культурной памяти о былом, каким являлась усадьба с ее старинной библиотекой, портретами предков, прадедовским садом, 'темной лип аллеей' и прочими известными атрибутами дворянского гнезда. (Shchukin 89)

No other type of human dwelling, in any case in Russia, was to such a degree the storehouse of cultural memory of the past, as the gentry estate with its ancient library, portraits of ancestors, great-grandfather gardens, “dark linden avenue” and all the other attributes of the gentry nest.

The essential traits of the estate text include:

... психологический анализ, меланхолическое настроение, передаваемое 'капризным' лирическим повествованием, замкнутый хронотоп, скромная и наивная девушка как объект любви. Самое, однако, важное качество этой повести, которое позволяет безусловно отнести ее к усадебному тексту, заключается в том, что автору удается передать катастрофическое состояние обреченности не только героя, который в конце концов умирает от тоски и страданий, но и прекрасного и все же тесного, ограниченного уголка мира, в котором он пребывает. (Shchukin 165)

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<sup>88</sup> “umy tvorcheskogo intelligentsii vse bolee stal zanimat' obraz starinnoi, 'zaglokhshei', razorivsheisia usad'by.”

... psychological analysis, a melancholy mood, conveyed by “capricious” lyrical storytelling, an isolated chronotope, a modest and naive girl as a love object. The most significant trait of a novella, which allows us to uncategorically identify it as an estate text, is whether the author successfully conveys a catastrophic state of being doomed – not only of the hero, who in the end is dying of longing and suffering, but also of the beautiful, though narrow, limited corner of the world, in which he exists.

This state of being doomed links the estate text to familiar tropes of paradise lost or a “Golden Age.” Throughout the latter part of the nineteenth century and into the early twentieth century, such tropes had particular resonance for the Russian gentry. As Berberova writes of her own childhood in the early twentieth century, “I grew up in Russia at the time when there was no doubt that the old world would in one way or another be destroyed” (*IM* 7). This sense of imminent loss was often expressed through images of the gentry estate.

The estate text, and its overtones of paradise lost, remained a powerful image for Russia Abroad. For many Russians in exile, the estate text came to represent everything they had lost. In describing exile memoirs, which utilized many of the cultural tropes established in the estate text, Andrew Wachtel writes that “after the Revolution, émigré writers tried to prove that theirs had been the only true Russian childhood and that, therefore, they were the legitimate heirs to the Russian cultural and social traditions” (85). Bunin’s fictional memoir *Zhizn’ Arsenieva* (*The Life of Arseniev*), notable for its intensely nostalgic representation of the Russian gentry estate, was widely read and admired.

In *Roquenal*, Berberova provides a lyrical-polemical response to the accursed question of the proper role of Russian literature and memory in the development of a literature in exile. Years later Berberova referenced this trend in writing her own memoirs, characterizing them thus: “the émigrés wrote of how they had lived on a Russian estate

among lime trees and portraits of ancestors in a hall with two tiers of windows...” (*IM* 374)<sup>89</sup>

In *Roquenal*, Berberova demonstrates that such definitions of Russianness are not enough to sustain development in exile.

Berberova’s *Roquenal* is also presented as a fictional memoir. Boris, a young exile and budding writer, reflects back on a summer spent on his friend’s estate in the French countryside. In this novella, Berberova addresses the anxieties of émigré literature through her depiction of Boris’s search within a French chateau for the Russia he never knew. The story was published in 1936 and is set a decade earlier in 1926. Boris left Russia with his family as a child and has grown up in France. Now a young adult, he has friends who are French, he writes poems in both French and Russian, and is headed to university in the fall. He appears to be an example of smooth assimilation, yet he demonstrates that same persistent sense of “displacement” which we saw in the *Billancourt Tales*. He is in search of meaningful models to help him understand his émigré reality.

Boris longs for a homeland he knows only through literature. Through Boris, Berberova explores the émigré longing for Russia as a misrecognized longing for the past. The exile longs for the past and conflates that longing with his former home. This fundamentally backward-looking and nostalgic orientation dominates Boris’s relationship to the chateau and the family. Boris is nostalgic for a world he has never known.

In *Roquenal*, Berberova exploits the familiarity of the estate text to explore questions of national literature and memory through her depiction of Boris’s search. The model Boris attempts to impose on his world is based on the complex of cultural references

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<sup>89</sup> “Emigranty pisali, kak zhili v russkom imenii s lipovoi alleei i portretami predkov v dvukhsvetnom zale” (441)

encoded in the “estate text” as described above. Unaware that he is doing this, he attempts to impose this Russian literary myth onto the French reality around him. From the moment of his arrival at Roquenval, Boris (mis)recognizes the familiar attributes of the Russian country estate and embarks on an ultimately unsuccessful quest to comprehend contemporary reality through tropes familiar to him exclusively through Russian literature. This novella records Boris’s unsuccessful attempts to unite his literary homeland with his French reality.

In order to move forward with his life in exile, Boris must recognize that Roquenval is not a fairytale and that his vision of Russia is a fantasy. At the start of the novella, Boris can see the estates of nineteenth century Russian literature through every crevice in the walls of Roquenval. The French estate becomes a perfect *mise-en-scène* onto which Boris projects a “Russian” imaginary constructed of fragments of the literary tradition. In addition to the situational references which closely align Berberova’s text with the estate text of the nineteenth century, there are also a number of direct literary references which reinforce the degree to which this novella is an exploration of the relationship between literature and life, memory and the passage of time. The extent to which Berberova relied on the familiar tropes of the estate text will be shown in the course of the textual explication that follows.

There is a constant tension in the text between Boris’s quixotic determination to experience a traditional Russian estate and the realities of this noble family in 1920s France. This story is the quest of the young Russian émigré for identity in a Russia of the past – a Russia defined primarily by the images of nineteenth century Russian literature.

The story begins as Boris describes his arrival at his friend Jean-Paul’s family estate for the summer after high school graduation.

Десять лет тому назад, в июле 1926 года, я впервые перешел тяжелый, каменный мостик между двух ржавых цепей, который соединяет замок



Роканваль с остальным миром. Под мостиком, по которому я тогда шел, -- а мне навстречу открывалась тяжелая полукруглая дверь, и сквозило что-то зелено-голубое, похожее на сад, -- в сырости и тьме растет тучный бурьян, цветет бледная крапива, а на крутых стенах средневекового рва сидят жирные красные улитки. Какие-то цепкие кусты, названий которых я не знаю, колючие, всегда зеленые, ползут по старым стенам, закидывают жесткие усики с камня на камень, с мха на мох. (181)

Ten years ago, in July 1926, for the first time I crossed the small stone bridge between two rusty chains which unites the chateau of Roquenval with the remaining world. Below the bridge, along which I was walking -- and a heavy half-round door was opening and something bluish green, resembling a garden, was visible -- in the damp and dark grow dense weeds, pale nettle blooms, and on the steep walls of the medieval moat sit fat red snails. Some sort of sticky bushes, whose names I don't know, prickly and evergreen, throw out sharp tendrils from stone to stone, from moss to moss.

These opening lines immediately activate familiar tropes of estate literature including the narrator's retrospective gaze, the isolated nature of the chateau, the extended description of nature, and even the avenue of linden trees. The very name of the chateau conveys the sense of doom which Shchukin identified as the essential characteristic of the estate text (165). The name combines the Russian word for fate, “rok,” with the French place name ending, “en val” (in the valley).

Another integral aspect of the estate text presented here is the extended nature description. Andrew Wachtel has noted the interplay of nostalgia and nature description in an earlier depiction of the Russian estate: Tolstoy’s pseudo-autobiography *Childhood*. He notes the “intense nostalgia evoked by memories of nature on the estate” and suggests that it “is the combination of personal and collective loss that lends the nature scenes such a powerful resonance” (54). For the émigrés, the sense of nostalgia is intensified by their collective loss. Berberova's earlier texts were primarily urban and rarely included extensive nature descriptions – this novella is a very conscious evocation of the nostalgic texts. Within the description there are intimations of the sense of decay which is emphasized further in the

early pages: rust, weeds, nettle, and prickly bushes growing along the moss of the chateau walls.

Isolation or “zamknutost” is another essential aspect of the self-sufficient world of the estate text (Shchukin 90). The bridge connects Roquenal “with the rest of the world” (“s ostal'nym mirom”); the avenue of linden trees leads here “from the rest of the world” (“iz ostal'nogo mira”). They do not simply connect the estate with the road or the town – the “rest of the world” is represented as a singularity in contrast to the inner world of the chateau. The inhabitants of the chateau do not travel back and forth; once they leave the chateau grounds in the course of this novella, they rarely return.

Трехсотлетние, в три обхвате, деревья даже в знойную погоду томительно и серебристо шелестят высокими своими верхушками: аллея чудовищных, древних лип, посаженных в четыре ряда, ведет сюда из остального мира. (181)

Three hundred year old trees that would take three sets of arms to encompass, their high silvery crowns shimmering languidly in the hot, humid weather: an avenue of monstrous, ancient lindens, planted in four rows, leads here from the rest of the world.

The linden avenue itself is a symbol of the gentry estate. As Ekaterina Dmitrieva notes:

...мы не находим практически ни одного усадебного текста, где бы аллея не играла особой роли. Свидания происходят в аллеях. Аллеи, в неменьшей степени, чем господский дом, хранят память о том, что когда-то на них происходило. (n. pag.)

It is hard to find even a single estate text in which an avenue of trees does not play a particular role. Meetings take place in avenues. Avenues, to no less a degree than the gentry house, store the memory of what has taken place there.

Turgenev described the significance of the linden avenue in his *Zapiski oxotnika* (*Sketches from a Hunter's Album*):

Прадеды наши, при выборе места для жительства, непременно отбивали десятины две хорошей земли под фруктовый сад с липовыми аллеями. Лет через пятьдесят, много семьдесят, эти усадьбы, “дворянские гнезда”, понемногу исчезали с лица земли, дома гнивали или продавались на своз, каменные

службы превращались в груды развалин, яблони вымирали и шли на дрова, заборы и плетни истреблялись. Одни липы по-прежнему росли себе на славу и теперь, окруженные распаханными полями, гласят нашему ветреному племени о прежде почивших отцах и братиях. (35)

Our forefathers, when they selected a place for habitation, invariably marked out two acres of good ground for a fruit-garden, with avenues of lime-trees.<sup>90</sup> Within the last fifty, or seventy years at most, these mansions—'noblemen's nests,' as they call them—have gradually disappeared off the face of the earth; the houses are falling to pieces, or have been sold for the building materials; the stone outhouses have become piles of rubbish; the apple-trees are dead and turned into firewood, the hedges and fences are pulled up. Only the lime-trees grow in all their glory as before, and with ploughed fields all round them, tell a tale to this light-hearted generation of 'our fathers and brothers who have lived before us'. (62)

Each of these quotes emphasizes the significance of the tree avenue as a repository of memory. As Boris approaches the castle, he identifies his connection to this avenue of trees and Russia:

И пока я шел по ней к каменному мостику, я успел и разволноваться и подготовиться: подготовиться к тому старинному и торжественному, что ожидало меня впереди, и разволноваться тем, что эта аллея прадедовских деревьев напоминала мне мое единственное русское впечатление, увезенное нечаянно, как увозят чужую вещь, обнаруженное внезапно, как наследственная болезнь, -- к огромной моей радости, когда я уже начал свыкаться с тем, что настоящей России не знаю, не видел, а помню только то мучительное и случайное, что так или иначе двигалось со мною вместе во время нашего путешествия. (181)

And while I walked along it (the avenue of linden trees) to the small stone bridge I managed both to become excited and prepare myself: prepare myself for the ancient and triumphant world which awaited me, and to become excited by the fact that this avenue of great grandfather trees reminded me of my sole Russian impression, carted away unconsciously, as you might take something belonging to someone else, discovered suddenly, like an inherited disease, to my great joy, when I had already begun to accept the fact that I don't know the real Russia, and did not see it, but remember only torturous and random impressions, that somehow or other had moved along with me during our journey.

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<sup>90</sup> The tree genus *Tilia*, "lipa" in Russian, is generally translated into British English as "lime" and American English as "linden." Another variant in American English is "basswood."

Boris here utilizes two terms typical of the estate text: “starinnyi” (ancient) and “alleia pradedovskikh lip” (avenue of great-grandfather trees). Boris’s own conscious memories are only “torturous” and “random”. Even the memory he joyously discovers is described as “someone else’s” (chuzhaia) and like “an inherited disease.” In this reading, cultural memory becomes an inherited illness, and one which is hardly even the young émigré’s own. This sense of alienation from his own “native” spaces and memory is the source of his quest in this novella.

Boris then describes his childhood, which is characterized primarily by wandering. He never explicitly references war or revolution, only recording that the family’s wanderings began when he was eight years old, continued for four years within Russia, and then for two more years “about the seas and Europe.” His parents would ask if he remembered cities in Russia “... But I only confused some apartments and train cars...” (181)<sup>91</sup>

Но вот однажды, читая не то Толстого, не то Тургенева, не то, может быть, даже Чехова... читая описание какого-то вполне сказочного помещичьего дома, я внезапно представил себе – сперва очень обще – дорогу, ведущую к этому дому, к ампиру его балкону, к низким жасминным кустом. Я увидел старую липовую аллею, вечно темную, вечно живую, с пронзительным, ярким, полдневным просветом в конце; старые, почти страшные деревья стояли надо мною. Я различал с полной отчетливостью узор солнечных пятен на заросшей дорожке, белый камень, большой темно-зеленый гриб подле него. И вдруг я заметил, что в книге уже давно ни о чем таком нет ни слова...(181-182)

But then one day, reading maybe Tolstoy, maybe Turgenev, maybe even Chekhov... reading the description of some utterly fantastic country home, I suddenly imagined – at first very generally – the road, leading to that house, to its Empire balcony, to the low jasmine bushes. I saw an old linden avenue, forever dark, forever alive, with penetrating, bright, noonday opening at the end; old, almost frightening trees stood before me. I distinguished with full clarity the pattern of sunspots on the overgrown path, a white stone, the large dark green mushroom next to it. And suddenly I noticed that there hadn’t been a word about this in the book for some time...

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<sup>91</sup> “No ia tol’ko putal kakie-to kvartiry i vagony...”

His mother confirmed for him that the avenue he remembered was the approach to his grandfather's home. In arriving at Roquenval, Boris finds himself transported into the Russia he has imagined through his imbibing of the classics of Russian literature. Boris's "memory" of Russia is mediated entirely through classical Russian literature. The merging here of "Tolstoy, Turgenev and Chekhov" indicates the formation of a generalized image of "Russia" – this generalized image is, in fact, that of the "estate text." Tolstoy, Turgenev and Chekhov all extensively chronicled life on the Russian gentry estate.<sup>92</sup> Boris does not refer to specific plots, ideas, or characters, but carries a vague and generalized image of Russia composed of the novels he has read. Without any clear memories of Russia itself, he has extracted from the literary works a clear vision of the estate text, which he mistakes for an image of Russia itself. These "old, almost frightening" lindens echo the "monstrous, ancient lindens" of his approach.

Волнение, охватившее меня при въезде в Роканваль, было неожиданно и сильно. Аллея моего детства, моего рождения, моего досуществования торжественно и чудно стояла передо мной... Мне не нужно было воображать, не нужно было вызывать в уме милую, таинственную картину -- она была передо мной. Но впереди все шире открывалась скрипучая, медленная дверь, и, подхватив чемодан, я заспешил к замку. (182-83)

The agitation which seized me on my arrival at Roquenval was unexpected and powerful. The avenue of my childhood, my birth, my preexistence majestically and miraculously stood before me... I didn't need to imagine, didn't need to call forth in my mind that dear, intimate image [of the linden trees] – it was in front of me. But ahead of me the squeaking, slow door was opening wider and wider and, grasping my suitcase, I hurried to the chateau.

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<sup>92</sup> This attempt to reconstruct the lost homeland through literature relies on another, unacknowledged author – Ivan Bunin. In particular, Bunin's pseudo-autobiography *The Life of Arseniev*, draws on the images of estate literature to form a long lament for his lost homeland. *Roquenval* can be interpreted as a polemical response to what Berberova viewed as an excessively retrospective view of Russia.

This image of the avenue of the past in front of his eyes, while the door to the future opens before him, is a powerful exile trope. While the exile gazes at chimeras of the past, the present inexorably opens before him. Boris immediately collapses multiple layers into a single image: memory -- the actual linden avenue of trees leading to his grandfather's home; literary -- the text which triggered the memory of his grandfather's estate; and actual -- Roquenal's linden avenue. If we consider that this is a retrospective narrative, we add an additional level of memory. Boris makes no attempt to recognize and isolate these levels, but collapses all into a single united vision: "it was in front of me." Boris's total identification of the linden trees of Roquenal with those of his childhood in Russia signal his approaching attempt to recover his imagined "paradise lost" -- a literary construct he attempts to create within the confines of his friend's French estate. This is the technique of the palimpsest, one of the most pervasive of exile tropes, in which the present is superimposed upon a background of the past, so that the two become a form of double exposed image.<sup>93</sup>

In Boris's consciousness, there is an additional element beyond the simple image of the past and the current image of reality: there is the mediator of literature. While the memory of the linden trees is claimed as Boris's own, it was accessed through his reading of classical Russian literature. Thus, for Boris, the way to the past is through literature. The declaration that the present not only resembles the past, but actually is the past, represents the conjurer's gesture in which the collapse of present and past eliminates the sense of disjuncture offering the relinquished possibility of primordial wholeness which the emigre thought lost forever.

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<sup>93</sup> This idea of the double-exposed photographic image is the dominant device in Khodasevich's "Sorrento Photographs".

In this story, Boris persistently searches for traces of the past. His unsuccessful attempts to impart meaning to the present through the lens of the past form the core of the story.

Boris's description of his entry to the Roquenal chateau itself (as opposed to the grounds) presents us with a powerful image of the decay of time and lost fortunes. "Monsieur Maurice" greets Boris and leads him through the chateau. Boris observes

По широкому, камнем мощенному, внутреннему двору, мимо настежь открытых пустых конюшен, с выбитыми оконцами и сорванными с петель дверьми. Сухой мраморный фонтан, зелено-ржавая ваза на стройном цоколе, безголовый лев, изъеденный временем у протоптанных плит входа, тихо сторожили полуподвальную низкую залу, где когда-то, должно быть, у гигантского камина грелся графский караул, и за ней -- розовую каменную лестницу... и я увидел спускавшийся когда-то правильными террасами, а теперь сбежавшийся лениво и неряшливо к зацветшему тиной озеру парк. (184-185)

along the stone-paved inner courtyard, past the wide-open empty stables with knocked out windows and doors torn from their hinges. A dry, marble fountain, a rusty green vase on a large base, and a headless lion, eaten away by time at the well-worn tiles of the entrance, quietly guarded the half-submerged lower hall, where once, perhaps, a royal guard warmed by a giant fire -- and beyond the hall, a pink stone stair... And I saw the park, which had once descended by precise terraces, but now lazily and carelessly ran down to the algae-covered lake.

Images of decay predominate in this introduction to the chateau. Earlier, the bridge chains were rusty, the approach covered in weeds, the walls covered in moss. Within the courtyard, the relics of past grandeur -- the stables, the fountain, the gardens -- are all in various stages of rot and decay. Boris discovers a homeland, discovers the lost Russia of his childhood, only to find it in irrevocable decay.

The twice repeated "kogda-to" in these phrases emphasize the ways in which the past infiltrates the present. The chateau presents an intense layering of time through these survivals of the past. The buildings and the walls themselves carry reminders of past epochs.

The rooms are filled with furniture “from every imaginable period.” The young people are forced to share rooms not because there are not enough rooms, as Boris tells us, but because the other rooms are piled high with things, and there is no one to clear them out. The rooms are filled with priceless antiques, but there are not enough wash basins to manage multiple guests. This sort of detail provides information obliquely. The entire estate is characterized by a sense of disarray and even slovenliness (the paths run “carelessly and lazily,” the cook's apron is dirty), the door doesn't open properly and there are spider webs in the wash basin.

Throughout his discussion of the “estate text,” Shchukin emphasizes the importance of Bakhtin’s concept of chronotope in understanding the nature of time in the estate text.<sup>94</sup> In fact, elements of two Bakhtinian chronotopes -- that of the castle and the idyll, both of which are characterized by a particular emphasis on a singular locus of action and the ways in which time permeates that locus—can be discerned in Boris’s depiction of Roquenal:

...the special relationship that time has to space in the idyll: an organic fastening-down, a grafting of life and its events to a place, to a familiar territory with all its nooks and crannies...Idyllic life and its events are inseparable from this concrete, spatial corner of the world where the fathers and grandfathers lived and where one’s children and their children will live. This little spatial world is limited and sufficient unto itself, not linked in any intrinsic way with other places, with the rest of the world. But in this little spatially limited world a sequence of generations is localized... blurring of all the temporal boundaries made possible by a unity of place. (Bakhtin 225)

Shchukin emphasizes this sense of isolation, or “zamknutost” as a significant aspect of the estate text, and it is clearly present in *Roquenal*. Roquenal is a world apart. Boris repeatedly emphasizes its isolation from anything beyond its grounds. The avenue of trees

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<sup>94</sup> Shchukin references Bakhtin regularly in his book and in his discussion of poetics introduces Bakhtin’s quote on chronotope: “Any entry into the sphere of meanings is achieved only through the gates of chronotope” (Shchukin 29).



which plays such a vital role for the narrator “leads here from the rest of the world” (181). Later he refers to “the overgrown poplar moving away from me along the slope where the rest of the world begins” (193). And still later, when he is exploring the grounds of the chateau, he unexpectedly hears “the quiet engine of a car along the lower road. Yes, here, twenty feet away from me, ended Roquenal with the old stone wall.” Boris imagines the owner “maybe a farmer, maybe the owner of that huge, new, white dacha, about which we'd heard wonders: hot water to all the bedrooms and lunch delivered to the dining room by an elevator! (197-198)”<sup>95</sup>

Boris lives with his mother in Paris, yet he does not mention any contact with her or anyone else beyond the environs of Roquenal during this summer. Members of Jean-Paul's family come and go, but there is no contact with anyone beyond the family circle. Roquenal gives the illusion of being a hermetic and timeless entity separated from the greater world by walls and tradition. In reality, the modern world of cars and modern dachas is quite nearby.

The castle is saturated through and through with a time that is historical...the traces of centuries and generations are arranged in it in visible form as various parts of its architecture, in furnishings, weapons, the ancestral portrait gallery, the family archives and in the particular human relationships...legends and traditions animate every corner of the castle and its environs through their constant reminders of past events. (Bakhtin 245-246)

Within the enclosed world of the estate, the unity of space is combined with an intense layering of time. The life of multiple generations is thus embodied not only in the actual inhabitants of the chateau, but through its material culture, as well. This layering is sometimes confusing to Boris as he tries to decide whether the chateau belonged more to his

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<sup>95</sup> “mozhet byt' zelenshchik, mozhet byt', vladelets toi novoi beloï gromadnoi dachi, o kotoroi u nas rasskazyvali chudesa: goriachaia voda provedena tam vo vse spal'ni, i obed iz kukhni v stolovuiu podnimaetsia liftom!”

generation or that of Praskovia Dimitrevna's generation. He is sensitive to the fact that throughout the chateau, periods of time are piled one upon another. Praskovia Dimitrevna's<sup>96</sup> own bedroom was once one of the reception rooms of the chateau. Medieval tapestries remain in her room from that time. Furniture and family photos from various periods are juxtaposed together.

At the end of the chapter, Monsieur Maurice, the household servant, informs Boris that he must go to greet the "old countess." When Boris asks Maurice if he should address her as "Madame la comtesse," Maurice replies that she must be called by her first name and that of her father. He follows this somewhat bewildering requirement with her name: "Praskovia Dimitrevna." Thus, Boris learns that the countess, his friend's grandmother, is Russian.

The next chapter is devoted to Boris's relationship with Praskovia Dimitrevna, Jean-Paul's Russian grandmother. At the start of the chapter, Boris discusses the confusion he always felt about "the last century." Here again, literary impressions have formed his sense of reality. That he read primarily nineteenth century novels was the apparent cause of his confusion in utilizing the term "the last century" in reference to the eighteenth century; he had not developed a realistic view of historical time.

Тогда, воображая себя Николаем Ростовым или Германном, я еще слишком близко чувствовал воображением закат екатерининской эпохи, эпохи grosфатера, который в детстве застал молодой Ростов, эпохи пудренного парика, который старая графиня сняла в своей спальне, в то время как Германн стоял за ширмами. Нет, нет! Время наших дедов -- это первый автомобиль и парижские выставки, франко-прусская война и смерть Скобелева, это 'Пиковая дама' Чайковского и романы Боборыкина, это что-то совсем близкое, не вчерашний, но третьеводняшний день. И этот век, как Ростову -- grosфатер, как Германну --

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<sup>96</sup> Praskovia Dimitrevna's name is rendered here as it appears in Latin letters when she is first introduced in the text.

пудренный парик, случилось мне увидеть в замке Роқанваль. Это была бабушка Прасковья Дмитриевна. (186)

Then, imagining myself as Nikolai Rostov or Hermann, I felt too closely in my imagination the decline of the epoch of Catherine the Great, the epoch of the “grossvater” dance, which

Nikolai Rostov knew in his childhood, the epoch of the powdered wig, which the old countess took off in her bedroom while Hermann stood behind the screen. No, no! The time of our grandfathers – is the first automobile and the Parisian exhibitions, the Franco-Prussian war and the death of Skobelev, it’s Tchaikovsky’s “Queen of Spades” and Boborykin’s novels, it is something completely close, not yesterday, but the day before yesterday. And that period, as Rostov saw in his grandfather, as Hermann saw in the powdered wig, I saw in the chateau Roquenal. And that was grandmother Praskovia Dimitrevna.

Praskovia Dimitrevna came to France as a bride while still in her youth; she clearly belongs to the nineteenth century, not the eighteenth, although that is where he appears to place her. Just as Boris’s impression of the linden trees, and memory of Russia, is entirely mediated by literary impressions, his understanding of the past is filtered through its literary representations. In this passage, he assumes that his readers will share his literary frame of reference. Both of the characters Boris references belong to the early part of the nineteenth century: Nikolai Rostov was 20 years old at the start of *War and Peace* set in 1805, thus his grandfather was very much a man of the eighteenth century. Hermann is a character in Pushkin’s story “The Queen of Spades” written in 1833. The elderly countess in that story clearly belongs to the epoch of Catherine the Great. (Catherine the Great died in 1796.) By emphasizing his own lack of clarity about historical epochs and relying on literary models for understanding character, Boris alerts us to his fluid understanding of history. In the first chapter of the novella, one vision of space was superimposed onto another through the image of the linden avenue. In the opening of this second chapter, we learn that Boris has a similarly fluid understanding of time: that his understanding of historical events was initially dictated by literature written or set a hundred years before his birth. In this passage, he

suggests that individuals may represent entire epochs of history to those who are born later, and seamlessly blends literary and historical reality as he equates Praskovia Dimitrevna's ability to embody an entire era with that of literary characters.

Praskovia Dimitrevna is eighty years old and spends most of her time in her room. She and Boris speak Russian together, though her Russian, like the chateau itself, has a strongly French flavor. As Boris tells us, only her memories of what life was like forty, fifty, or sixty years ago hold any value for her, just as the "spirit of old France, captivating in its liveliness" (187)<sup>97</sup> was retained in Roquenal itself. Yet, all that remains from that period are the tapestries, one of which has been "roughly cut out with a knife." Thus, history is embodied not only by presence, but also by absence. The bare spot on the wall embodies the sense of loss and decline which permeates the chateau. Boris later learns that Jean-Paul's Uncle Robert cut out and sold the missing tapestry, leaving a bare space on the wall. There are no attempts to cover the traces of the past.

Yet, Boris is primed to seek out his lost Russia here in Roquenal. The irony is that Roquenal itself is in a state of complete decay. Images of decay predominate and only intensify as the story progresses even as Boris attempts to impose his own vision of Russian reality onto this chateau to make it conform more closely to his vision of how it "should" be. He laments, for instance, that "There was no iconostasis and for some reason I wanted there to be an iconostasis" (188).<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>97</sup> "plenitel'nyi v svoei zhivuchesti dukh staroi Frantsii"

<sup>98</sup> "Kiota v komnate ne bylo, a mne pochemu-to khotelos', chtoby byl kiot."

His acquaintance with Praskovia Dimitrevna, following immediately upon his perception of the linden avenue as his ancestral home, leads to an intensive search for the past. Boris gazes into Praskovia Dimitrevna's mirror:

Я смотрел в его прозелень и все чего-то не мог увидеть, не мог вспомнить, словно оно отражало уже когда-то, где-то, далеко отсюда, ту, а не эту мебель, те, а не эти канделябры; так же стояли вокруг него тогда всевозможные мелкие вещицы, подушки, этажерки, вазы, шкатулки, и ходила какая-то женщина, и качались бархатные кисти дивана. Я вглядывался в мутное стекло, и мне казалось, что я уже смотрел в него совсем маленьким. Я вглядывался и ждал, что сейчас в нем откроется мне Россия, та Россия, которая шумела в роқанвальской липовой аллее, которая блеснула в имени Прасковьи Дмитриевны. (187)

I gazed into its green sheen, and couldn't quite see something, couldn't recall, as if it reflected a time long ago, somewhere, far from here, that and not this furniture, those and not these candle holders; around it then also stood all these various little items, pillows, shelves, vases, boxes and some woman was walking and the velvet tassels of the divan were dangling. I gazed into the dull glass and it seemed to me that I already looked completely small in it. I gazed and waited for Russia to open to me at any moment, that Russia which hummed in Roquenal's linden avenue, which sparkled in the name of Praskovia Dimitrevna.

"To see" and "to remember" become synonyms in Boris's exile consciousness. Praskovia Dimitrevna's mirror serves as a crystal ball into the past rather than the future – but the images are unclear.

Praskovia Dimitrevna's room, her pictures, even her voice, serve as a reflection of the lost homeland for Boris: "Even the Russian language from her lips seemed to me similar to her mirror, attempting to reflect for me the Russia I had forgotten" (188).<sup>99</sup> Praskovia Dimitrevna's disorientation in time mirrors Boris's own. She lives a life only tenuously connected to the present. Her inability to comprehend the functioning of the ancient radio exemplifies her disengagement from the present day. As she walks in the garden with Boris,

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<sup>99</sup> "I etot russkii iazyk iz ee ust kazalsia mne chem-to skhozhim s ee triumom, pytavshimsia otrazit' dlia menia zabytuiu mnoiu Rossiyu."

she relives the moment of her brother's arrival at the chateau some sixty years earlier. The gate through which he arrived is now collapsed and rotted, but she appears unaware of that fact, living in a perpetual reminiscence rather than the present.

As the chapter closes, Praskovia Dimitrevna recalls a time when the composer Camille Saint-Saëns played the piano at Roquenal and she

стала рыться, рыться, забыв и про меня, и про все на свете, словно отделившись в какой-то своей обособленной жизни, все удаляясь, все отчуждаясь и душевно и телесно становясь почти что призраком себя. (191)

began to rummage and rummage, forgetting about myself, and about everything in the world, as if going off into some sort of solitary life, all the time moving away, separating herself more and more both spiritually and physically, becoming almost a shadow of herself.

By the end of the chapter, Boris is trying to comprehend to whom all of this belongs: to the young or to the older generation. The old stones, the old trees, and the old person – perhaps he and the other young people do not entirely belong here or elsewhere. Despite his desires, Boris is unable to construct an understanding of Roquenal, and thus of life, which integrates the past and the present into a unified whole. He has a constant sense of disjuncture. Because he has never known Russia, and because he identifies it with the past, this disjuncture is situated in the temporal plane as much as in the physical plane. He has a sense that none of the young people actually belong there.

The first two chapters introduced the ancient chateau of Roquenal and the elderly grandmother, both of whom represent simultaneously Russia and the past for Boris. Chapter Three turns to the present. As the chapter opens, we learn that Boris has fallen in love with 15-year-old Kira, Jean-Paul's younger cousin – and the only member of the family with a Russian name. Through this name, Kira is identified with Russia itself, with the “Russian trace” Praskovia Dimitrevna had left in Roquenal. Perhaps it is inevitable that Boris will fall

in love with her. According to Dmitrieva, love for an innocent young girl is an essential element of the estate text.

He describes himself on his first day there as “stunned by Roquenal's avenue, stunned by his acquaintance with Countess Praskovia Dimitrevna, stunned by the chateau and the garden, by the quiet, and the poverty, and the splendor of this old nest” (192).<sup>100</sup> With the choice of the word “nest,” Boris links this gentry family and their home directly to the Russian tradition of gentry estates, sometimes called “nests” of gentry.<sup>101</sup>

In Boris's relationship with Kira, Berberova introduces a direct situational quote from Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard*.<sup>102</sup> The gentry family in *The Cherry Orchard* no longer has the money to keep their estate. The peasant-turned-merchant Lopakhin offers a plan to avoid foreclosure:

Вот мой проект. Прошу внимания! Ваше имение находится только в двадцати верстах от города, возле прошла железная дорога, и если вишневый сад и землю по реке разбить на дачные участки и отдавать потом в аренду под дачи, то вы будете иметь самое малое двадцать пять тысяч в год дохода. (623)

Here's my plan. Attention please! Your estate is only thirteen miles from the town, the railway runs by, and if you break up the cherry orchard and the land by the river into building lots and rent them out for villas you'll get at least twenty-five thousand rubles a year profit. (trans. mine)

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<sup>100</sup> “oshelomlennyi rokanval'skoi alleei, oshelomlennyi znakomstvom s grafinei Praskov'ei Dmitrievnoi, oshelomlennyi zamkom i sadom, i tishinoi, i bednost'iu, i pyshnost'iu etogo starogo gnezda.”

<sup>101</sup> The use of the term “nest of the gentry” is most closely associated with Turgenev (due to the eponymous novel *Dvorianskoe gnezdo* and his use of the term elsewhere, including the above referenced quote from *Sportsman's Sketches*).

<sup>102</sup> I.S. Ganzha explores parallels between these two texts in her article, “After *The Cherry Orchard*: N. Berberova's *Roquenal*.”

Kira tells Boris that the family has no money and predicts the sale of Roquenal upon her grandmother's death. Kira's vision of the future does not offer a chance at redemption, but simply an inevitability:

-- Продадут! -- вскричала она с восторгом и растопырила пальцы. -- Сперва продадут деревья, -- с этого начнут. Липы, тополя, осины, -- знаменитые, которых никакой червяк не ест, из которых строят все самое лучшее в Франции. Потом -- дом с кусочком сада -- под богадельню или санаторию. Потом разрушится сама собой каменная ограда, и землю разобьют на маленькие участки и продадут их в рассрочку. И люди начнут строить такие маленькие, гаденькие домики, все одинаковые, а какие останутся кусты, -- обведут проволочным забором. И вот поставят там граммофоны, и развешат сушить белье, и посадят кругом цветочки...(193-194)

"They... will... sell... Roquenal. ... Sell. It!" she cried out with delight and spread her fingers. -- "First they'll sell the trees, -- they'll start with that. The lindens, the poplars, the aspens -- the best ones, the ones that no woodworms will eat, from which the finest buildings of France are built. Then -- the house with a bit of the garden -- for a monastery or sanatorium. Then the stone wall will fall down by itself, and they'll break the land into little plots and sell them on time plans. And people will begin to build nasty little houses, all identical, and whatever bushes are left will be put behind a barbed-wire fence. And they'll put gramophones there, and hang laundry out to dry, and plant little flowers."

Like Lopakhin, Kira envisions that the land will be broken up to build little houses or dachas. She paints this as an image of complete degradation with "nasty little houses," bushes behind barbed-wire fences, and laundry hanging out to dry. And yet, she speaks with delight. This image represents the complete annihilation of the gentry nest. The estate text loses its meaning when its connection to the life of generations and its self-sufficiency and isolation from the greater world are violated. Lopakhin's dachas and Kira's villas are the antithesis of the proud, isolated, family estate which precedes them. Kira's suggestion that the stone wall will "fall down by itself" emphasizes the incommensurability of these two images of rural life. The stone wall symbolizes the actual and psychological distance between Roquenal and "the rest of the world." When Roquenal becomes a part of that world, the



stone wall will no longer function as an enclosing barrier and, in her fancy, simply cease to exist. Kira and Lopakhin's visions represent the end of the old gentry culture.

This referencing of *The Cherry Orchard* emphasizes parallels between Jean-Paul's family and the decay of the gentry in pre-Revolutionary Russia. There is not enough money to carry the family beyond this last generation. The family nest, upon which Boris is so diligently striving to construct his own Russian reality, is on the verge of collapse.

Immediately after Kira's prediction, worms can be heard eating away the walls of Roquenal, just as the very foundations of the gentry way of life are being inexorably eaten away. The young have no interest in memory; Praskovia Dimitrevna, like many emigres, has little connection to the present and lives almost exclusively in her memories. This tendency to live in the past precluded any possibility of adapting to life in exile. Boris is caught between these two world views. When Boris exclaims to Kira, "If they sell it – there won't be anything,"<sup>103</sup> her response is "Let there be nothing... I don't regret anything."<sup>104</sup> Boris feels entirely displaced: he begins to wish he had been born in Praskovia Dimitrevna's time, or not to be born yet, but to be born sometime later "when all this is sorted out" (194).<sup>105</sup> Boris is disturbed by similar traits shared by Jean-Paul, Kira and Madeleine: "those insurmountable and fatal traits... chief among which [were] indifference to the ruin of their family, some sort of hidden indifference to the rest of the world, and a wicked joy, and no desire to fix or change anything even for themselves" (195).<sup>106</sup> Through this direct parallel

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<sup>103</sup> "Esli ego prodadut – ne budet nichego"

<sup>104</sup> "Pust' ne budet nichego... Mne nichego ne zhalko."

<sup>105</sup> "kogda vse eto uliazhetsia"

<sup>106</sup> "te zhe nepreodolimye i ubiistvennye cherty... i glavnoi iz nikh bylo ravnodushie k

with *The Cherry Orchard*, Berberova also references the fact that the Russia that so many emigres longed for in exile was actually in decline well before the events of 1917.

When Boris asks Kira if she would like to go to Russia, she says that she is interested only if it is with him: “Isn’t it all the same where one lives?” (195)<sup>107</sup> Thus, Kira expresses the absolute antithesis of exile nostalgia in which “where one lives” becomes the single most significant, and obsessive, concern of life. The true heiress of Boris’s fantasy of lost Russia finds no particular value in it.

Again, the sound of the worms in the ceiling is heard, “– as if something in the old box was rustling silk paper, rustling and not finding what he needed, rustling and seeking, and not finding, but time goes on and on...” (195)<sup>108</sup> Like those worms, like Praskovia Dimitrevna, Boris is rustling and seeking, not finding what he needs in the traces of the past visible throughout this French/Russian chateau. And time goes on. Kira is sent away for the rest of the summer. Boris assumes this is because of his clandestine relationship with her. When he says good-bye to her, “she moved away from me, like a cloud moves away, and, most likely, would have become transparent in that moment if only she could” (196).<sup>109</sup> We already witnessed Praskovia Dimitrevna moving away into her memories and becoming a phantom of herself; now Kira moves away “like a cloud.”

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semeinomu ikh krusheniiu, i kakaia-to tainaia cherstvost’ ko vsemu ostal’nomu miru, i zlaia radost’, i nezhelanie nichego popravit’ i izmenit’ dazhe dlia samikh sebia.”

<sup>107</sup> “Ne vse li ravno, gde zhit’?”

<sup>108</sup> “budto kto-to v staroi kertonke shurshit shelkovoï bumagoi, shurshit i ne nakhodit togo, chto emu nuzhno, shurshit i ishchet, i ne mozhet naiti, a vremia vse idet i idet”

<sup>109</sup> “I ona otoshla ot menia, kak otkhodit oblako, i, navernoë, esli by tol’ko mogla, sdelalas’ by prozrachnoi v tu minute”

Kira will not provide Boris with an appropriated past. A relationship with her would have cemented his relationship with Roquenal and its Russian/ French history. In a sense, he too would become an heir of Roquenal and through acquiring that gentry space and history, would gain his own history and stable sense of self. It is not to be.

As the summer continues, Boris's nostalgic fantasies come into direct conflict with French reality. The fourth chapter opens on an August morning. Boris wakes early and wanders alone into the overgrown park. Everything is in a state of neglect: the ponds are covered with motionless, thick slime, a row of stumps leads away from the house, dense thickets block the paths. The thick stumps are all that remains of the trees, clearly relics of the past, that had to be cut down a year earlier because they were falling onto and covering the house, threatening its current state. Boris travels deep into the park, pushing through prickly bushes, jumping the occasional brook. As he charges onward, on both sides "something occasionally ran away, scurried away, flew up from the thickness of the trees."<sup>110</sup> There are stones scattered about "as if someone wanted to build a small bridge and changed their mind... in a minute I saw not quite a kiosk, not quite a booth with a door, ripped open by time, and a window, knocked out by human hand."<sup>111</sup> The park echoes the entire decay and neglect of Roquenal. Carved into the door is the Russian inscription: "Robert. Olga. 1897." The same word is used to describe this carving as was used to describe the removal of the tapestry: "vyrezan" – "cut out". And Robert was responsible for both. This romantic trace is a reminder from the last century. When Boris reads this inscription aloud "something ran

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<sup>110</sup> "chto-to inogda ubegalo, ushurkhivalo, vzletyvalo iz gustoty derev'ev"

<sup>111</sup> "slovno kto-to khotel slozhit' iz nikh mostik i razdumal... i cherez minutu ia uvidel ne to kiosk, ne to budku s dver'iu, sorvannoi vremenem, i s oknom, vybitym chelovecheskoi rukoi"

away from me in the grass, something groaned in the branches of the gigantic elm. Once again I had come across the Russian trace in this French chateau, the trace which Praskovia Dimitrevna had left, right up to Kira” (197).<sup>112</sup>

When Boris arrives back at the chateau, he is surprised to confront Robert himself. Robert is the youngest son of Praskovia Dimitrevna. His boorish appearance does not correlate well with the romanticism of names in Cyrillic carved on a door at the back of the wild park. He is alone in the dining room at nine in the morning, one sleeve of his priest’s cassock flung over his back, elbows widespread, knife in fist, vigorously cutting a steak, drinking red wine and devouring runny Camembert, rind and all. Robert notes Boris’s accent and after ascertaining that Boris is Russian, declares that his wife was Russian, her lover was also not French, his friend whom he was rumored to have killed was Russian and, of course, his mother (Praskovia Dimitrevna) is Russian. On departing to see Praskovia Dimitrevna, he wishes Boris a “rapid return to Russia.” Considering the circumstances of exile, the benevolence of this wish is dubious.

That evening, Boris learns from Jean-Paul that Robert “was the only person in the whole family who spoke Russian, who had been to Russia, but I learned about that only in the evening, when he was already gone” (200).<sup>113</sup> So, once again, Boris misses the opportunity for connection with Russia. Just as Kira will not provide him with a direct connection to this Russian-French nest, he will not have the opportunity to connect with Robert, who has the direct experience of Russia which Boris lacks.

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<sup>112</sup> “chto-to pobezhalo ot menia po trave, chto-to prostonalo v vetviakh ogromnogo viaza. Eshche raz napadal ia na russkii sled v etom frantsuzskom zamke, na sled, kotoryi ostavliaia – vplot’ do Kira – babushka Praskov’ia Dmitrievna”

<sup>113</sup> “Eto byl edinstvennyi chelovek vo vsei sem’e, govorivshii po-russki, byvavshii v Rossii, no ob etom ia uznal lish’ vecherom, kogda ego uzhe ne bylo”

Jean-Paul shows no more attachment to Roquenal than Kira did. Whereas she suggested that all places were the same, Jean-Paul dreams of disappearing into exotic distances “to start life over.” While the actual émigré, Boris, whose family was forced to start over, longs for the solidity and the sense of history and roots embodied in Roquenal, the heirs of Roquenal long only to be elsewhere.

While Jean-Paul describes his uncle, Boris gazes out the window, “into the garden, as if I were waiting, as if I was absolutely certain that some sort of white female shadow would appear – as was once to be expected, in the moonlight” (200); “I look down again – no, there's no one there, although there should be, although there used to be on just such evenings as this” (201).<sup>114</sup> With these phrases, Boris again demonstrates his assimilation of the tropes of the estate text.

The critic Dmitrieva emphasizes the extent to which this is a literary trope with this quote from Chekhov's story “U znakomykh” (“At Friends”): “It was obvious that this poetry was worn out for him, just like that crude prose. Worn out also were meetings on moonlit nights, and white figures with slim waists, and mysterious shadows, and towers, and estates...” (n. pag.)<sup>115</sup> According to Shchukin, numerous imitators of Turgenev invariably depicted “an open window, a girl in a white dress and a garden in the moonlight” (168).<sup>116</sup>

Boris seeks out a literary projection of what “should be” according to his reading of

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<sup>114</sup>“v sad, tochno zhdal', chto tam nepremenno iavitsia kakaia-nibud' belaia zhenskaia ten' – tak pologalos' kogda-to, pri lune”; “Ia opiat' smotriu vniz' – net, nikogo tam net, khot' i dolzhno by byt', khot' i byvalo v takie imenno vechera kogda-to.”

<sup>115</sup> “ochevidno, chto eta poeziia otzhila dlia nego tak zhe, kak ta grubaia proza. Ozhili i svidaniia v lunnye noch'i, i belye figury s tonkimi taliiami, i tainstvennye teni, i bashni, i usad'by...”

<sup>116</sup> “izobrazit' raskrytoe okno, devushku v belom plat'e i park pri lune”

nineteenth century literature. With his urban and peripatetic personal history, Boris's expectations of life at the family estate are entirely drawn from imagination and literature.

Jean-Paul is not pleased with all this gazing into the moonlight and tells Boris to get down, because he looks all too "...poetic. That moon is unbearably repugnant!"<sup>117</sup> Boris immediately converts even this comment, intended to puncture the poetic image of the open window, into a situation from Russian literature, responding "'Onegin thought so, too' – I mumble" (201).<sup>118</sup> Boris makes reference here to Onegin's comparison of Olga to "that silly moon up in that silly sky"<sup>119</sup> in Pushkin's novel in verse, *Evgeny Onegin*.<sup>120</sup> With this phrase, Onegin expresses his disdain for the stereotyped desires of the crowd and establishes his independence of thought and taste. Like Onegin, Jean-Paul is resistant to over sentimentalizing and overly-poetic versions of reality. He claims a sort of world-weariness and cynicism toward life. Boris, like Tatiana, views the world through a series of literary tropes, distorting reality into pre-existing "literary" forms. This distortion around literary images inevitably results in a degree of stereotyping as all situations must be placed into the mold of preconceived literary ideas. Thus, Boris's expectation that there must be a female figure in white on "just such a night," stands in sharp contrast to the quarreling female voices next door which he and Jean-Paul hope only to avoid. This distortion of reality carries clear danger to the perceiver, who may fail to discern relevant information and patterns through his

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<sup>117</sup> "poetichno. Nesterpimo protivna eta luna!"

<sup>118</sup> "--Onegin tozhe nakhodil, -- bormochu ia"

<sup>119</sup> "kak eta glupaia luna// na etom glupom nebosklone"

<sup>120</sup> Wachtel notes that, "It was not uncommon for gentry autobiographers to define the world through the prism of Pushkin's poetry." (142)

determination to fit reality into forms which are not necessarily appropriate to present-day situations.

Jean-Paul then asks Boris to recite for him a poem that “somehow reconciles [him]... toward everyone.”<sup>121</sup> Boris obliges, reciting a poem by Aleksei Tolstoy first in Russian and then translating it into French for Jean-Paul.

Ты помнишь ли, Мария,  
Один старинный дом  
И липы вековые  
Над дремлющим прудом?

...  
И рощу, где впервые  
Бродили мы одни...

Do you remember, Maria,  
One ancient house  
And age-old lindens  
Above the slumbering pond?

And the thicket, where we first  
Wandered alone? (trans. mine)<sup>122</sup>

This poem by Aleksei Tolstoy, written in the early 1840s, evokes the poeticized decay of the elegiac tradition. Elements of the estate text include the ancient house, ancient lindens, the slumbering pond, the call to memory and the overall mood of melancholy nostalgia. The opening of the poem cuts to the core of the exile quest: “Do you remember?” Boris does not remember – he is too young to remember. He is searching for memories. He finds in Roquenal the full embodiment of this Russian elegiacal poem. Besides the ancient

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<sup>121</sup> “menia kak-to primiriaiut... so vseimi voobshche” (201).

<sup>122</sup> This poem has had continuing popularity in Russian culture. As a student, Sergei Diaghilev composed a ballad based on the poem which appears on the album “Tolstoy’s Waltz.” According to Ekaterina Dmitrieva, it was included in early drafts of Bunin’s short story “Mitya’s Love.”

lindens and slumbering ponds, aspects of the second stanza also find their echo in

Roquenal:

Безмолвные аллеи,  
Заглохший, старый сад,  
В высокой галерее  
Портретов длинный ряд?

The silent avenues,  
The overgrown old garden  
The high gallery  
The long row of portraits

It is not essential to establish whether Berberova modeled the Roquenal estate directly on this poem, but it is significant that she chose to include it in the novella. Clearly, both draw on the literary tradition of the estate text and the parallels between the two reinforce Roquenal's significance as a mirror of the old Russian estate. Every trait in the poem is echoed in the building and environs of this text. This list of traits develops the trope of the abandoned gentry estate, associated with a sense of melancholy affection. The poem's narrator asks if Maria remembers wandering through the thicket together, just as Boris and Kira wandered alone through the overgrown thickets of Roquenal. Jean-Paul also recognizes the identity of the two estates. He has Boris recite the poem twice, then repeats the (to him) incomprehensible Russian sounds and declares, "I swear to you, for some reason this poem reconciles me to Roquenal!" For a moment, Jean-Paul too partakes of the joys of romanticization and nostalgia, the poeticized image of Roquenal in this poem serving to reconcile him with the world. Unfortunately, its effects are temporary. Jean-Paul momentarily enters the mindset which Boris expresses throughout the story, a mindset which views the present through a prism of the past, a prism which valorizes the layers of the past.



It is this romanticizing element, which Boris has imbibed through his reading of Russian literature, which lends value to the decaying estate.

Chapter 5 opens with Boris's sense of unease: the disconnect between the present and his dreams of the past is increasingly acute.

Я был недоволен, я был почти несчастлив, все было не так, как мне казалось, должно быть. Роқанваль, со своей русской аллеей, прошлым бабушки Прасковьи Дмитриевны, с трюмо, сохранившим в своей сырой глубине какие-то русские отражения, уходил от всех нас в сторону. И невозможно было следовать за ним на его старом, романтическом и гибельном пути. (202)

I was dissatisfied, almost unhappy. Nothing was as I felt it should be. Roquenval -- with its Russian avenue, with grandmother Praskovia Dimitrevna's past, with its mirror retaining some sort of Russian reflections in its damp depths -- was moving away from all of us to the side. And it was impossible to follow it on its Romantic, old, and fatal path.

This image of things moving away has been repeated throughout the novella. Initially, Praskovia Dimitrevna appeared to be moving away into her own reality. Kira moves away like a cloud. Unidentified animals scurry away in the undergrowth. Regardless of his pursuit, a Russian history to call his own eternally eludes Boris. Roquenval itself is moving away. This sense of distance is innately part of the estate text, and inevitably of exile representation as well.

Boris has been at Roquenval through July, August and September and fall is coming. He heads out in the morning after the first night storms of autumn.

Лето кончалось. Был конец сентября, то время, когда неистовые ветреные ночи сменяются ясными, еще жаркими днями; и выходишь утром, и ищешь следов той бури, которую слышал за ставнями, просыпаясь, когда носилось и выло что-то в трубе, и скрипело и хлопало в саду, и мело в окна дождем и ветром. Но все спокойно, все чисто, кто-то нашумел и притаился. Голубое небо высоко; молчат и сверкают высокие деревья, смочен гравий дворца. Зелено-ржавая ваза у входа роняет последнюю каплю, словно полна до краев, а безголовый каменный лев уже высох на солнце. И не желая быть обманутым, я спускаюсь деловито в сад, в самую его гущу; мне нужны доказательства бывшего ночью первого осеннего налета; я иду удостовериться. И вот на меня ливнем падает

вода с задетой ветки, нога увязает в гнили и страшной уликой ложится на дорожку, на выползших красных червей, оборванная, тяжелая яблоневая ветвь, изменившая своим падением милый, привычный профиль знакомого дерева. (202)

Summer was ending. It was the end of September, that time when violent windy nights are followed by clear, still hot days. You head out in the morning to search for traces of that storm, which you heard beyond the shutters, waking up. When something flew about and wailed in the chimney, there was creaking and banging in the garden, and rain and wind beat upon the windows. But all is quiet, and clean – someone made a ruckus and hid. The blue sky is high; the high trees are glistening, silent in the sun, the courtyard gravel is wet. The rusty green vase at the entrance lets fall a last drop, as if full to the brim, while the headless stone lion has already dried in the sun. And unwilling to be deceived, I go purposefully down to the garden, into the thick of it. I need proof of last night's first intrusion of fall – I go seeking confirmation. And here water falls on me in a shower from a bent branch, my foot gets stuck in mud, and the horrible evidence lies across the path, on the red worms which have crawled out: the heavy torn-off apple branch, forever having changed with its fall the customary profile of the dear, familiar tree.

This passage exemplifies the close connection typical of the estate text between the lyrical hero and nature (Shchukin 171). Just as the violent weather disrupts his nights, Boris himself becomes more unsettled. The apple tree, like the avenue of lindens, is a symbol of the Russian estate.<sup>123</sup> Boris can no longer ignore the disjuncture between his fantasies of “return” and the realities which surround him. Summer is ending and with it his fantasy of Russia lost and found. He is beginning to realize that his fantasy of the past will not be realized, that he will not “find” the Russia he dreams of at Roquenal. The narration expresses past events in the imperfective – suggesting repetition. The fall of the apple branch, which has “forever” changed the profile of the tree, marks the first decisive singular moment in the passage. Similarly, the branches of the Roquenal family tree – its heirs – are also “falling off” or departing. Kira has already gone. Soon the others will go as well.

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<sup>123</sup> Apple trees hold particular significance within depictions of the estate world. Turgenev referenced the apple trees in the quote above from *Sketches* and Dmitrieva explores their significance in relation to Bunin's short story “Antonovskie iabloki.”

“As before reviving, no – giving birth to a memory of my vanished past, the linden avenue stood at the entrance” (202).<sup>124</sup> Here Boris tacitly acknowledges the constructed nature of his “memory” of Russia: how can something in the present “give birth” to a memory? Boris continues to nurture a fantasy of Roquenal, corresponding to his fantasy Russia. The real people who surround him do not correspond to that fantasy. When Jean-Paul’s father arrives with his wife and Una’s father they do not match his desires. “Of course, the guests could not arrive as I may have wished, on troikas with bells and a fat coachman with a feather in his hat... these guests didn’t go with the quiet, proud, old house” (203).<sup>125</sup> In Boris’s mind, the inhabitants should correspond to his image of the house, rather than the house existing for the sake of the people.

Jean-Paul unexpectedly disappears overnight. In the morning, Boris discovers that Jean-Paul has taken the second of four 300-year-old tapestries from Praskovia Dimitrevna’s wall. Boris describes its loss as unlawful, irreparable. The tapestry has been taken to feed Jean-Paul’s desire to explore the greater world; the physical representation of the pastoral, the ancient family tapestry, will be sold for cash to finance Jean-Paul’s very modern quest for adventure. While the rightful owners of the chateau may be unconcerned about such losses, Boris declares it “unlawful.” These intrusions of the present disrupt his attempts to form a coherent vision based on literary images from the past.

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<sup>124</sup> “Da, po-prezhnemu voskreshaia, net – rozhdaia v pamiati ischeznuvshee moe proshloe, stoiala pered vkhodom lipovaia alleia.”

<sup>125</sup> “Konechno, gosti ne mogli priekhat’ siuda, kak mne, mozhet byt’, khotelos’, na troikakh s bubentsami, s tolstym kucherom s peryshkom v shapke...eti gosti sovsem ne shli staromu, gordomu, tikhomu domu.”

During the night, Praskovia Dimitrevna has fallen ill. When he approaches her room in the morning she tells him: “Leave me, Boris... And in general I ask that no one enter here, it’s not allowed to come in here ... It is forbidden now to look into this room!” (207)<sup>126</sup>

Praskovia Dimitrevna’s room represents all of Russia to Boris – banishment from her room represents a second exile: this time from his fantasy reconstruction of old Russia. Boris will not find what he needs in visions of the past. The collapse of the apple branch prefigures Jean-Paul’s departure with the tapestry, and Praskovia Dimitrevna’s death.

The final portion of the novella finds Boris alone in the chateau. Boris, the guest, the outsider, remains while everyone else has departed. The doorbell rings in the middle of the night. With some trepidation, Boris answers and gradually recognizes Kira’s elder sister in the bedraggled, clearly exhausted, pregnant woman at the door. Up to now, Boris has been the only one to see any value in Roquenal. Only he has sought the traces of the past and considered that they may be relevant to the present. This sister, who is not even named in the text, has already been exiled from the chateau for unnamed reasons. And yet, she is the only one of the younger generation who sees and values the history which reverberates through it: “Everyone wanted everything to be good for me, happy, and most importantly respectable, and here it’s turned out not happy, not good and not at all decent, and only grandmother, only she...” (210-211)<sup>127</sup> This unnamed sister embodies the decline of the family of Roquenal.

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<sup>126</sup> “Ostav’te menia, Boris... I voobshche ia proshu nikogo ne vkhodit’ siuda, siuda nel’zia... V etu komnatu zapreshchaetsia teper’ smotret’!”

<sup>127</sup> “I kak vseгда vsem khotelos’, chtoby vse u menia bylo khorosho, schastlivo, a glavnoe – prilichno, a vot vyshlo ne schastlivo, ne khorosho i sovsem ne prilichno, i tol’ko babushka odna...”

She arrives on the bus – though it was not considered acceptable for heiresses of Roquenal to ride the bus (196).<sup>128</sup>

Boris finds the sister some food and offers her his room for sleep. He lies down in the corridor to rest.

И тогда со мной случилось что-то странное, я потерял чувство времени. Сначала мне показалось, что это рассвет, потом представилось, что это не коридор вовсе, а узкая больничная палата, где я лежу, но не сейчас, а бог знает сколько лет тому назад... От белых стен исходили призраки. (210)

And then something strange happened to me, *I lost my sense of time*. At first it seemed to me it was dawn, and then I imagined that there was no corridor at all, but a narrow hospital ward, in which I was lying – not now, but God knows how many years ago... From the white walls phantoms came down.

Boris lost his sense of time long before this moment. He lost his sense of time when he gazed into Praskovia Dimitrevna's mirror imagining he could see images of the past, when he looked into the garden expecting to see a female figure clothed in white. Boris has been out of sync with his surroundings for the entire novella. The arrival of Kira's sister, and her bedraggled and disgraced state, force him to confront the realities of Roquenal. His entire summer has been an attempt to lose his sense of time, to be transported to another time. In this passage, he relinquishes his sense of the present as the final step in accepting it. In the morning, he escorts the sister back to the village – by bus.

As Boris is seeing the eldest grandchild to the bus, they pass an estate sale in which all of the household goods of a "Monsieur Dupont" are being sold at auction to cover unpaid debts.

Сперва робко, смущаясь происходящим, потом все смелей, потом нагло подходили люди рассматривать, ворошить чужое добро; они садились в кресло,

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<sup>128</sup> "ezdit' v avtobuse naslednitsam Rokanvalia vse eshche schitalos' nepozvolitel'ny'm"

скрипели дверцами буфета, крутили кофейную мельницу. Два маленьких мальчика стояли тут же и без слез провожали то, в чем до сих пор жили. (210)

At first shyly, embarrassed by the situation, and then more boldly and finally completely shamelessly people approached to look over and rifle through someone else's belongings; they sat in the chair, squeaked the doors of the sideboard, turned the coffee grinder. Two young boys stood right there and, without tears, saw off that in which they had lived up to now.

This scene is a more literal embodiment of the status of Roquenval. In Roquenval, Boris himself is like one of those bystanders rifling through someone else's belongings and the two young boys the tearless scions of Roquenval. At the opening of the story, Boris describes departing with “his singular Russian impression, carried away unwittingly, like someone else's object (“chuzhaia veshch’).” Now, he depicts people in this French village rifling through “someone else's belongings” (chuzhoe dobro) and he relates it to the situation of Roquenval:

Я вернулся в замок.

Нет, отсюда ничего еще пока не было вынесено, и роканвальский знаменитый и гордый скарб не был еще выброшен на посмеяние прохожим...И дом этот не пал еще, как Дом Эшера. (211-212)<sup>129</sup>

I returned to the chateau.

No, nothing had been removed yet, and Roquenval's renowned and proud household goods had not been thrown out to the mockery of passersby...And the house had not yet fallen, like the House of Usher.

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<sup>129</sup> There are a number of hidden textual references to Poe's 1836 novella *The House of Usher*. Both novellas open with the first-person narrator approaching the estate, both include an embedded poem describing the estate itself, both are titled after the estate. Jean-Paul's cousin Madeleine has the same name as Roderick Usher's sister, Madeline. So, *The Fall of the House of Usher* constitutes a secondary literary subtext, made manifest only at the end of the story and separate from that of the Russian “estate text.” The spirit of the Gothic is distinct from that of the estate text and, as Boris notes, not particularly appropriate to represent the decline of the family estate. Despite a number of Gothic elements: the chateau complete with stone walls and moat, phantoms coming from the walls, the mood remains that of melancholic nostalgia of the estate text, entirely lacking the sense of the uncanny and terror typical of a Gothic text.

The exile's story is a story of loss. Loss of memory, homeland, connection. Boris lost his homeland before he was even old enough to remember it. He has no grandparents in France and during the years of wandering his father died. All of the inhabitants of Roquenal are preparing for its loss, too. In the course of this story, Boris falls in love with 15-year old Kira – who is sent away. He finds a connection to old Russia through the elderly Praskovia Dimitrevna, who becomes a synecdoche for him of his homeland. She dies. His friend, Jean-Paul, departs unexpectedly one night for parts unknown. And the old chateau itself, with all that it stands for, is moving away and will not be regained.

Boris has sought the traces of the Russia he has never known throughout his visit, but finally comes to realize that this appropriated past will never be his own. He remains an exile from his homeland and a guest in this chateau. From here on, Boris's thoughts turn toward the future.

This summer marks the end of many things for Boris. He has finished school and will be going to college in the fall. His mother is moving to a new apartment. And his cherished dream of old Russia escapes into the irretrievable past. Boris began the summer searching for a fairytale estate in Roquenal. He ends the summer not having found it and turning away from the chimeras of the past, from the temptations of exile fantasy. He comes to accept that the Russia of his fantasies is simply that – a fantasy:

Никакой вообще сказки не было за этими, мхом заросшими, высокими стенами. Это просто наступала осень, и я возвращался в Париж, рушилось лето и отлетал призрачный, одному мне еще дорогой дух этого старого, чужого праха. Испарялись какие-то впечатления, какие-то образы принимали неверный оттенок. Все явственнее вставали впереди: университет, мама, новая квартира... (212)

There wasn't any fairytale behind these high, moss-covered walls. Fall was just approaching and I was returning to Paris; the summer was collapsing and the phantom spirit of this old, strange dust, dear only to me, floated away. Some sort of

impressions floated away, some sort of images took on unclear outlines. And ever more clearly ahead of me awaited: university, mama, the new apartment...

Boris departs the chateau “and above me my avenue grew silent, seeming that morning like a monument to something which has not existed for a long time, not here, not in my country, not anywhere in the world” (212).<sup>130</sup> With that passage, Boris acknowledges that the linden avenue is not the living embodiment of Russia, but “a monument.” As Svetlana Boym has emphasized, nostalgia can only thrive at a distance. After a summer spent trying to reconstruct a fantasy Russia, Boris concludes that the estate culture he has imagined, the estate culture which came to serve as the embodiment of Russian culture itself, has vanished not only from Russia, but from “the world.”

Just as the Russia of the *Billancourt Tales* was a country of warfare and ruins, the Russia of *Roquenal* is an entirely literary construct. Berberova explicitly integrates the predominant émigré pastoral depiction of Russia as a paradise lost, exploring its relevance to a student and writer of the younger generation. Eventually, Boris, Berberova's narrator here, turns away from that inadequate vision to face his current reality in France, preparing for the start of university and a new home. While he has been at Roquenal, his mother has moved to a new apartment. Their exile existence is essentially rootless. While the heirs of Roquenal reject the significance of their family's roots, Boris, who has no roots of his own, attempts to find them in the antiquated halls of Roquenal.

And so, Berberova supplies a rather equivocal response to the debates surrounding the role of literature, and specifically Russian literature, in the further development of Russian culture in exile. Boris is not successful in his attempt to reframe his life in France in

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<sup>130</sup> “I smolkla nado mnoi moia alleia, pokhozhaia v eto utro na pamiatnik chemu-to, chego davno uzhe net, ni zdes', ni v moei strane, nigde na svete.”



terms familiar from nineteenth century literature. At the end of the story, he is facing resolutely toward the future. And yet, the tropes and models of Russian literature have given him a world view which appears richer and more nuanced than the empty world-weariness evinced by his French peers, who are only too willing to embrace the decline of their family's estate and culture. Further, Berberova's own willingness to continue the traditions of Russian literature in conversation with the nineteenth century classics confirms their relevance for at least one member of the younger generation.

Ultimately, Boris's attempts to replace a personal memory with cultural memory are unsuccessful. Nonetheless, he faces the future with hope and his cultural values allow him a greater sense of hope and purpose than his French peers can achieve.

## ASTASHEV in PARIS: the Triumph of Vulgarly

The character of Astashev<sup>131</sup> in *Oblegchenie uchasti* (*Astashev in Paris*) represents the culmination of a decade of disorientation among the emigration and in all corners of Europe. Published just two months before France's declaration of war, *Astashev in Paris* forges a link between bourgeois materialist philistinism and the rise of fascism. While Boris's search for the Russian past was unsuccessful, Aleksei Grigorievich Astashev embodies the dangers inherent in the rejection of cultural memory.

*Astashev in Paris* is a key text in the story of the Russian emigration. It was published in the penultimate issue of *Sovremennye zapiski* before it was shut down at the time of the German invasion of 1940. At the time of *Astashev's* publication in 1939, conditions in Europe were precarious and war appeared inevitable. The novella encapsulates the sense of suffocation and fear which pervaded the exile community. Emigrés who had lost one home found themselves in newly treacherous circumstances for reasons both economic and political. France was too riddled with internal conflicts to make a coherent response to any of the significant threats of the period. The economic collapse was often seen to signal the bankruptcy of the entire capitalist system, yet bourgeois France appeared to thrive at the expense of the working class and immigrants. It was the age of dictators in Europe and it was

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<sup>131</sup> Astashev is not a Russian name and does not have any clear associations in Russian. It could be related to the Greek “astasia” related to unsteadiness and movement. (Thank you to Lawrence E. Feinberg for this suggestion.)

by no means clear at this point that France would continue as a democracy. Among the émigrés, there was widespread disillusionment with Western liberal democracy (Johnston 93; Raeff, *Russia Abroad* 282).

The novella is Berberova's literary comment on European reality at the end of the 1930s. Her title character, Aleksei Georgievich Astashev, is the apotheosis of bourgeois banality. Critic Georgy Adamovich described him as “a triumphant vulgarian”<sup>132</sup> (1939). Through her depiction of Astashev, Berberova directly links the bourgeois quest for comfort and security to a natural attraction to fascism.<sup>133</sup>

Unfortunately, this depiction does not reach the artistic level of some of Berberova's earlier works. At moments, Berberova's depiction of Astashev skews toward caricature. In a 1938 review article, written before he could have read *Astashev in Paris*, the critic S. Savel'ev noted that “Berberova is drawn to write to a thesis, to prove rather than to depict, and this distorts her undeniable talent (453).”<sup>134</sup> Astashev never becomes a fully developed character, often appearing to exist solely as an exemplar of a despicable “type.” Astashev's interactions with the other characters, which constitute the plot of the story, serve as a series of exemplary vignettes without individual character and without cohering into a single story.

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<sup>132</sup> “torzhestvuiushchii kham” This epithet links Astashev back to Merezhkovsky's prediction of the coming kingdom of “Griadushchii kham” (1905-1906) which would be dominated by a level of philistinism and vulgarity which would overshadow all previous tyrannies.

<sup>133</sup> In *The Italics Are Mine*, Berberova repeatedly emphasizes her lack of connection to bourgeois reality and constant search for intensity and the sense of being fully alive. In contrast, Astashev advocates an approach to life which eschews all “philosophy” in favor of material comfort and sober calculation.

<sup>134</sup> “Berberovu tianet pisat' na tezu, dokazyvat', a ne rasskazyvat' i eto iskazhaet ee nesomnennoe darovanie.” In the same article, he identifies the Billancourt stories and Roquenal as positive exceptions to this tendency.

Berberova coolly depicts a sense of quietly menacing horror without developing a fully compelling fictional world.

Astashev despises his homeland and considers himself practically a Frenchman – though he has no interest in actually accepting the responsibilities of citizenship. In times of extreme anxiety throughout Europe, Astashev embodies a “soulless Europe” which has lost even the desire for meaning. Unlike Berberova's earlier characters who find that their own desires leave them out of joint with external circumstances, in Astashev we glimpse a character who is perfectly adapted to life in “the hollow years” of France.

In the course of the novella, Astashev encounters two individuals of the “old order,” individuals who hold entirely different values. His interactions with the artist Engel form the philosophical core of the novel and his relationship with the innocent young woman Zhenya exhibits the moral bankruptcy of his utilitarian approach to life.

The main action of the story takes place over the course of five days in 1937 during the Paris World Exposition. The World Expo presented a very tangible embodiment of the political tensions threatening Europe in the late 1930s. The Soviet and Nazi pavilions provoked considerable controversy at the time. Each featured monumental architecture with Vera Mukhina’s “Rabochii i kolkhoznitsa” and Albert Speer’s Nazi eagle in a direct face-off hundreds of feet above the Paris streets. Berberova would have been very aware of the cultural currents surrounding the World Expo at that time.

*Astashev in Paris* features third person narration. The narratorial voice is often closely aligned with Astashev’s own consciousness and frequently slips into free indirect style. At a later point in the story, the narrator notes that Astashev “had no wish to link his fate, his warm, precious, secure, unique life with an entire country, with a state that was not

always peaceful and that, at times, went through upheaval” (117).<sup>135</sup> It is only when the narrator relates events or other characters' emotions that this “Astashevism” is relieved by a more neutral narratorial voice. There are many points at which Astashev's own viewpoint appears to contaminate the narration. This style of narration is in some ways similar to that which we experienced in the *Billancourt Tales*, in the vacillation between omniscient and individual “voiced” narration. However, the first-person narrator Grisha, leader in some way of the village chorus, is replaced here with an unidentified narrator. The narration slides smoothly between omniscient narrator and free indirect style so that we unwittingly come to accept Astashev's internal representations as possessing a verisimilitude they do not warrant. Berberova's irony is most frequently present in the contrast between Astashev's perceptions and those of the other characters. This gap appears fully in the opening lines of the story as we recognize the incommensurability of his mother's fear of dying if she leaves her apartment and his assurances that her life is defined by “comfort.”

The novella opens: “Mommy, maman, mama lived on the seventh floor of an enormous old building” (trans. mine)<sup>136</sup>. The narrative assumes an immediate intimacy with the use of these multiple diminutive forms for mother which mix Russian and French (in the Russian “Mamasha, maman, mamen'ka”) (120). For the entire first paragraph, as the building is described in third person, but from “mama's” point of view, we don't know whose mama she is. We learn of the rubbish taken out to a shared corridor, the elevator and stairwell lights constantly broken, the old iron door which is too heavy for her to open. In fact, we learn that

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<sup>135</sup> “on ne zhelal sviazyvat' svoiu sud'bu, svoiu miluiu, tepluiu, krepkuiu, edinstvennuui zhizn' s tseloi stranoi, s gosudarstvom, gde ne vseгда byvalo spokoia, v kotorom inogda tozhe tvorilis' bezobraziia” (137).

<sup>136</sup> “Mamasha, maman, mamen'ka zhila na sed'mom etazhe gromadnogo starogo doma” (120)

she is afraid to leave her apartment: she cannot manage the heavy door and she becomes entirely out of breath from climbing the stairs; when a friend invites her to visit, Klavdia Ivanovna just tells herself to stay at home: “Otherwise you'll go out one day and won't come back. You'll get stranded between floors or choke to death on the pavement” (92).<sup>137</sup>

In the next paragraph, we learn that “Alyosha found his mother's apartment quite agreeably situated, as the higher up you were the fresher the air” (92).<sup>138</sup> As he often tells his mother: “You have electricity, a heated bathroom, sun.... your central heating works, and your papers are in perfect order. All that is what's known as comfort” (92).<sup>139</sup> The two have entirely different perceptions and Astashev is entirely insensitive to her actual experience “... he didn't much listen to what she said. He either talked or read” (93).<sup>140</sup> These opening paragraphs set up Astashev's basic character. The lack of congruence between Astashev's perception and that of other characters frequently signals his lack of genuine connection with those around him. The omniscient third person narrator does not explicitly judge Astashev, and in fact often seems to share Astashev's own judgments, but allows the situation to indict him.

The novella opens with Astashev visiting his mother and reviews his youth in pre-Revolutionary Russia. This retrospective introduces the two poles which defined his

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<sup>137</sup> “lift portilsia cherez den'... chugunnaia dver' na ulitsu byla slishkom tiazhela”; “a to eshche uidesh' – ne vernesh'sia, zastrianesh' mezhdu etazhami, ili zadokhnesh'sia peshkom” (249).

<sup>138</sup> Aliosha zhe nakhodil, chto kvartirka u maman ochen' udachnaia, chto chem vyshe zhit', tem chishche vozdukh” (249).

<sup>139</sup> “Vy imeete elektricheskoe osveshchenie, teplyi klozet, solntse... u vas funktsioniruet tsentral'noe otoplenie, i dokument vash v polnom poriadke. Vse eto.... Nazывaetsia komfortom” (249-250).

<sup>140</sup> “No on malo slushal ee; on govoril sam, libo molchal, chital” (121).

childhood: his mother and stepmother. Astashev's time as a child was spent between weekdays with his mother and weekends at his father's home with his father and stepmother, Xenia Andreevna.

These two homes provide a complete contrast to each other: the one respectable and stifling, the other glamorous and not particularly respectable. At his mother's home, Astashev's room was "full of trunks and cupboards, where the window vent stayed closed for weeks on end (97)."<sup>141</sup> He spends his days studying in that closed-up room. Astashev was an excellent student and always at the top of his class.

Голубоглазый, тихий, сочетавший, когда нужно, поспешность (подать, принести) и положительность, с белым, серьезным лицом, он был поведения отличного, ни с кем особенно не сближался, не играл ни в перья, ни в карты и денег займа не давал. (255)

He was blue-eyed, quiet, and combined when necessary both speed (serving and fetching) and dependability. His face was pale and serious, and his disposition excellent. He never got particularly close to anyone, never played darts or cards, and never lent money. (101)

This description, without overt negative reference, offers an image of Astashev as fundamentally lacking in some way. His refusal to play darts and cards or to lend money suggest a calculating character and lack of human connection. He appears to have no friendships. Similarly the fact that he combined speed at fetching and serving, again ostensibly positive terms, suggests servility. Indeed, the depiction of Astashev's childhood shows that his extreme conventionalism and lack of spiritual values appeared early in life.

Although Astashev is a good student, there is no indication of a desire for learning or knowledge; rather, he always reads a day ahead to maintain his standing in class. He steals his mother's classics, Pushkin, Lermontov and others, and exchanges them for additional

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<sup>141</sup> "zastavlennoi shkapami i korzinami... gde nedeliami ne otkryvalas' fortka" (124).

textbooks, which presumably tell him what and how to think, indicating his rejection of genuine culture for calculated personal gain. In the later context of exile, where the émigrés emphasized the role of literature as a form of alternate homeland, this is a significant symbolic act and a betrayal of his own culture.

His mother's library provides another point of contrast between her home and that of his father and Xenia Andreevna. His mother has the classics of Russian literature on her shelf, which is the basic sign of a cultured Russian household. There is no mention of books in his father's household. The only “culture” mentioned in connection with his father is their attendance at operettas and farces at the Suvorin. According to Leach and Borovsky, the Suvorin theater had an extremely negative reputation among the Russian intelligentsia and was flooded with pot-boilers (248). Thus, his father's home offers the lowest forms of entertainment, while his mother's offers the literary classics.

Astashev aligns more closely with Xenia Andreevna than with his mother. In Paris, Astashev, now an adult, travels directly from the “shabby and soulless present” (93) of Klavdia Ivanovna's apartment to Xenia Andreevna's, where he “bloomed... like a rare and special flower” (96).<sup>142</sup> Klavdia Ivanovna does not even know that Astashev has renewed his relationship with Xenia Ivanovna – or even that she is in Paris. In contrast to the dark staircase and shared rubbish bins of Klavdia Ivanovna's flat, Xenia Ivanovna's entry is characterized by “a broad polished door where the stairs were carpeted and palms flanked the downstairs mirror” (95).<sup>143</sup> The two women are complete contrasts to each other and their

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<sup>142</sup> “etogo nitchtozhnogo, nichem ni sogretogo nastoiashchego” (250); “on rastsvetal zdes’ kakim-to ocobennym, redkim tsvetom” (252)

<sup>143</sup> “shirokoi polirovannoi dveri, gde lestnitsa byla v kovrakh, a vnizu u zerkala stoiali pal’mi” (252)



situations in Paris precisely recreate their material circumstances in Moscow. Klavdia sits and knits; Xenia sits and smokes. Klavdia Ivanovna addresses Astashev like a child: “my clever boy,” “my consolation”; Xenia Andreevna greets him boldly as “vulture” and “gangster.”<sup>144</sup> She was Alyosha's father's second wife, his stepmother, a woman “who called herself an actress” (97) and for whom his father left his wife and children.<sup>145</sup> Xenia Andreevna’s marriage to Alyosha's father is described by the narrator—perhaps voicing Astashev’s own opinion—as “a great victory over Klavdia Ivanovna” (96).<sup>146</sup> In Paris, Astashev’s father having died, Xenia Andreevna lives on the money acquired from her relationship with a married Frenchman.

Astashev’s virtues are those of conventionality: reliability, success, punctuality, tidiness. He himself recognizes them as he tearfully confesses to Xenia: “I don't have a bad disposition, I'm clean, polite, and if I don't recite poetry or go to concerts, that's no crime after all” (108).<sup>147</sup> While Astashev declares his positive traits, he is clearly aware of some lack. When he completed his education, “... it was gradually becoming clear that he hadn't read anything apart from his textbooks. On the other hand, he knew what he needed to know by heart” (101).<sup>148</sup> His positive traits are primarily an absence of negative traits – and a good disposition. The traditional high value placed on literature in Russian culture was amplified

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<sup>144</sup> “umnitsa”, “uteshenie”, “khishchnik”, “bandit”

<sup>145</sup> “kotoraiia nazyvala sebia aktriskoi” (252); Alyosha had a sister who died shortly after their father’s departure.

<sup>146</sup> “oderzhavshaia kogda-to nad Klavdiei Ivanovnoi bol’shuiu zhiznennuiu pobedu” (252)

<sup>147</sup> “Kharakter u menia ne plokhoi, ia chistoploten, vezhliv, a esli ia ne chitaiu tam stikhov kakikh-nibud’, ili v kontserty ne khozhu – tak ved’ eto zhe ne prestuplenie” (260).

<sup>148</sup> “postепенно vyiasnialos’, chto krome svoikh uchebnikov on ne chital nichego, no zato znal, chto trebovalos’ naizust’” (255)

in the conditions of emigration as the émigrés sought to preserve their culture in the face of the Bolshevik attack on many literary classics. Astashev's lack of interest in literature is emblematic of his lack of identity with his homeland and reflects his overall superficial and trivial values.

The following chapter depicts a single day of Astashev's life in Paris. He is a successful life insurance salesman, depicted with his constant accoutrements of bowler, umbrella and briefcase. These props serve as the markers of his entirely conventional character. Astashev embraces a self-awareness defined by his roles within the bureaucracy. A narrative passage in free indirect style emphasizes Astashev's comfort in his life as "citizen, taxpayer... but not a soldier!" (117)<sup>149</sup> These roles are repeated in the closing paragraph of the story (161) and suggest a self-awareness entirely bound by socially-defined roles. This complete identification with public roles expresses the subjugation of individual responsibility and morality to a utilitarian conception. Astashev is entirely conventional, demanding that one live as everyone else does."

At least part of his strength as a life insurance salesman lies in his conventionalism. The narrator describes him as he sets out in the morning to meet or solicit clients: "His face, which he had just washed, glowed, and there was a clarity and a blueness in his eyes. In fact, there was something about his entire appearance... something healthy, vigorous, intense, and restless" (110).<sup>150</sup> The narrator informs us that "His blue eyes spoke with purity and lucidity

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<sup>149</sup> "grazhdanin, nalogoplatel'shchik... no ne soldat!" (268)

<sup>150</sup> "Litso ego blestelo, tol'ko chto vymytoe, v glazakh byla iasnost' i sineva – vo vsei ego vneshnosti bylo chto-to... zdorovoe, krepkoe, napriazhennoe i bespokoinoe" (261).

of his integrity, his straightforwardness, his Orthodox christening” (112).<sup>151</sup> He is: “attractive,” “guileless,” “open-hearted” and has “clear blue eyes.” He is also competent, obsessively clean, transparent and punctilious.<sup>152</sup> His life is organized exclusively on clichés and socially-derived principles. His respect is reserved for the successful and he has only scorn for those who are prey to emotions or irrational beliefs.

Astashev’s lunch break introduces us to another crucial aspect of his personality--an element of stereotypicality and obsessiveness in his conventionalism. Every day he eats in the same restaurant at the same table

... и исключений не давал даже по воскресеньям. Он ел медленно, читал газету, подсчитывал на газете какие-то цифры, записывал что-то в книжку, соображал, иногда требовал адрес-календарь и мягко листал его среди тарелок. Вина он никогда не пил; ему подавалась бутылка минеральной воды. Два слова о погоде гарсону, бросок в сторону большеносой женщины (не похорошела ли со вчерашнего дня?), полупоклон соседям. Вареная рыба и жаркое, или жаркое и сладкое, кофе, торт. Три куска сахара в маленькую, белую чашку с трещиной. После завтрака он шел мыть руки, чистить ногти, гребешком чесал волосы и плоской щеткой, которую носил с собой, стряхивал с плеч и груди перхоть и крошки. Потом он выходил – в руках зонтик и портфель, в мыслях – новый путь, новый адрес. В этом городском конвейере, по трансмиссии, не имеющей ни начала, ни конца, не перерыва, он едет, передвигается, движется, как спица, как гайка, и ему это так же естественно делать, как дереву расти на одном месте.

--- Перметте.

Но его не пустили. (269)

... He made no exceptions, even on Sundays. He ate slowly, read the newspaper, did some calculations in its margins, made notes in his little book, worked things out in his head, occasionally asked to see the phone directory, and carefully turned its pages between the plates. He never drank wine; he was served a bottle of mineral water. A few words about the weather to the garçon, a nod in the direction of the big-nosed

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<sup>151</sup> “golubye glaza chistotoi i prozrachnost'iu govorili o chestnosti, o neposredstvennosti, o pravoslavnom kreshchenii” (262-263)

<sup>152</sup> This emphasis on health, vigor and purity, along with those clear blue eyes, is reminiscent of representations of Nazi youth. Orderliness, punctuality and cleanliness were also emphasized in Nazi propaganda. They were not significant aspects of Berberova’s other works; her emphasis on them here is specific to the persona of Astashev.

woman (hadn't she grown prettier since yesterday?), a half bow to his neighbors. Poached fish and roast meat, or roast meat and dessert, coffee, cake. Three lumps of sugar in a small white cup with a crack. After lunch he went to wash his hands, clean his nails, tidy his hair with a comb and, with the thick brush he carried, brush the dandruff and crumbs off his shoulders and chest. Then he left – with his umbrella and briefcase in his hands and a new route, a new address, in his head. He moved along this urban conveyor belt that knew no beginning, no end, and no pause. He was conveyed, moved along, like a spoke or a screw, and to do so came to him as naturally as it does to a tree to grow in the same place.

“Permettez.”

But they wouldn't let him in.<sup>153</sup> (121-122)

In this passage, the narration illustrates the repetitive and mechanical nature of Astashev's existence. The very form of the narration itself embodies the content: the repetitive nature of his existence is not only told to us, but enacted in the selection of verb forms. The fluid oscillation between time signatures in this passage cannot be fully conveyed in English translation as Berberova utilizes the intricacies of Russian verbal aspect to oscillate smoothly between an iterative past, simple past, and present tense. The passage begins with the information that Astashev follows the same routine every day of the week and includes a series of repeated events. It seems that at each meal he eats slowly, takes notes, considers, exchanges a few words about the weather with the waiter, nods to the big-nosed woman... but then the parenthetical query brings us up short. “Hasn't she grown prettier since yesterday?” Immediately we leap from the neutral, iterative narrative past to a single, perfective past form which must represent Astashev's rhetorical, internal exclamation at a given moment. “A half bow to his neighbors.” No clue there as to whether this is a singular event for today's meal or the cumulation of all of his previous meals. “Poached fish

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<sup>153</sup> To accord with my understanding of the original, I've made a minor change to the published translation of this passage, which reads: “After lunch he went to wash his hands, clean his nails, tidy his hair with the comb and thick brush he carried with him, and brush the dandruff and crumbs off his shoulders.”

and roast meat, or roast meat and dessert...” The opening of the sentence offers no verb, and thus no clue as to whether this is a single or repeated event, but the addition of “roast meat and dessert” clues us in that this is a representation of the “variety” in his diet. And then, “three lumps of sugar,” certainly a habitual amount, “in a small white cup with a crack.” That crack forces us back into the specific and immediate meal today: surely there can't be a crack in the cup every day? And yet, the next words, “After lunch he went to wash his hands,” utilizes the past imperfective: a repeated event. Every day, he washes his hands and brushes the dandruff and crumbs off. Every day he goes out, with his umbrella and briefcase.

The image of the conveyor belt with which this precisely itemized description of Astashev's lunch habits ends clarifies the author's motivations for her narrative play. The repetitive, mechanical nature of Astashev's behavior is the relevant aspect. The minor daily deviations such as a crack in his cup, or a particularly attractive day for his table neighbor, underline the overall *lack* of variability. The final lines transition to a present tense form: he goes, he is moved along, he moves. Astashev is entirely content as a cog in a machine whose actions are entirely routine and ritualized. This jolt both forces us into the present moment and prepares us to understand Astashev's righteous indignation when his next client fails to fulfill his role as an obedient cog in the machine, prepared to sign his life insurance policy and thereby support the continued well-being of Aleksei Georgievich Astashev.

His clients do not always play the role he has assigned to them. Immediately after lunch a man pleads with Astashev to leave him in peace and finally closes the door on Astashev as Astashev attempts to force his way into the apartment. Not only does the client refuse to admit Astashev, but he demands (through the door) to know whether Astashev can

insure against life. Astashev ends by spitting on the man's closed door, enraged by his failure to conform to Astashev's expectations.

Astashev's final visit of the day is to the artist Engel. The two men are a study in contrasts. Physically, Astashev is plump, youthful and glowing. Engel is small and dry, with greenish lips and a protruding jaw. Whereas Astashev's appearance is "virile," Engel is "weak" and "fragile." Astashev lives in a neatly kept bachelor apartment. Engel lives in artistic chaos, surrounded by massive clay body parts scattered around his chilly, high-ceilinged studio. Whereas Astashev repeatedly urges his clients not to think of what they are doing, Engel insists on probing the reality behind Astashev's euphemisms and platitudes.

"Don't think" is Astashev's *cri de guerre*. Astashev advises his first client of the day: "Of all things, do not think, or think about it as little as possible" (115).<sup>154</sup> Some of his clients are happy to comply with this advice, as his second client readily signs up for insurance but with the proviso: "I refuse to talk about that... we're going to handle the whole thing discreetly. We're not going to think about the meaning of what we're doing" (118-119).<sup>155</sup> Astashev introduces the prospect of existential dread and then offers to ease that dread through the simple purchase of life insurance.

Engel has met Astashev before and greets him warmly when he appears at his studio.

Ждал вас, очень ждал, -- говорил он... -- Вы так удивительно объясняли в прошлый раз, зачем пришли, что мне захотелось опять вас послушать. Вы так странно говорили, будто вас прислали с того света, для напоминания... Я много думал обо всем этом потом, в первый раз пришлось мне так думать об этом. И я понял, что если остаться с моей уверенностью, что *там* ничего нет, то жить невозможно. Вы курите? (271)

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<sup>154</sup> "Ni v koem sluchae ne dumaite, ili dumaite ob etom kak mozhno men'she" (265).

<sup>155</sup> "Ja ne mogu govorit' ob etom... No budem vse eto obdelyvat' nezametno, tikho, ne budem dumat' o smysle nashikh aktov" (267).

“I’ve been expecting you. Eagerly,” he said... “You did such an astounding job last time explaining about why you’d come. I’ve been hoping I’d get to listen to you some more. It was so odd, what you were saying. As if you’d been sent from the next world as a reminder... I’ve thought a lot about all that since then. It was the first time I’d ever had to think about it. And I realized that my conviction that there isn’t anything *there* makes living impossible. Do you smoke? (125)

Astashev replies, “I don’t smoke and I don’t philosophize” (125).<sup>156</sup> Smoking and philosophizing are placed on an equal plane as vices to be avoided by any right-thinking person. At this point Astashev moves “from the shaky stool he had sat down on for some reason to the soft upholstered sofa in the corner of the studio” (125). As he becomes uncomfortable with the metaphysical turn in the conversation, he changes both the subject and his location to make himself more comfortable.

Engel will not endorse Astashev’s philosophy of not thinking. Their interaction embodies the clash between the individual, existential approach to life and Astashev’s corporatist rejection of thought or reflection.<sup>157</sup> Astashev has no words of his own. He is a walking glossary of received ideas. For Astashev, there is nothing beyond the physical comforts he espouses to Engel. Rather than seeking escape from Astashev’s invocation of dread through the purchase of a life insurance policy, Engel embraces the challenge presented by Astashev’s visit. Instead of signing a paper without thinking, he chooses to directly face the reality behind Astashev’s words. Astashev talks about death all day without thinking about it, but his words and presence precipitate a personal crisis for the artist Engel.

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<sup>156</sup> “I ne kuriu, i ne filosofstvuiu” (271); “perebiraiias’ s neustoichivogo tabureta, na kotoryi pochemu-to sel, na miagkii sherstianoi divan” (271)

<sup>157</sup> While Astashev’s conventionality and love of material comfort are not unique traits, in life or literature, they would inevitably have taken on a particular significance within the overall political context. This significance only becomes overt in the final chapter with the references to shiny black boots.

Throughout *The Italics Are Mine*, Berberova emphasizes the demands of freedom and responsibility, insisting on individual human choice and a need to live life at full intensity. Astashev espouses an absolutely opposed philosophy of doing “what everyone else does” and the pursuit of material comfort.

Astashev exhibits his inner void through language: he speaks in an endless string of clichés. In his work, he relies on a set pattern of stereotyped euphemisms to simultaneously frighten and insulate his prospective clients from death. As Engel tells him: “You came to see me with your talk about the fifth act, the final curtain, the finale, saying that everything has an end. All those metaphors which were hardly in the best taste” (125-126).<sup>158</sup> When Engel actually wants to discuss the reality of death, Astashev is repelled and leaves angry.

Astashev fully expresses his philosophy of life in his conversation with Engel. Engel repeatedly attempts to press beyond Astashev's bland assurances, to force him to confront the reality of his business, the reality of death. To all of Engel's attempts to reach a metaphysical core, Astashev responds with the concrete and pragmatic. He insists that there is no more to life than “[g]ood food, young women, the beauty of nature, comfort, security” (126).

Astashev depicts a post-Romantic world in which the old ideas of loyalty, love, art and philosophy are dead. Astashev believes only in sensory pleasure. He takes pride in his philistinism: “Art? Literature? There was all that. People read until daybreak, got swept up in politics (though I never did). They've understood a bit more about that now. They've learned.

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<sup>158</sup> “vy prishli ko mne s etimi vashimi razgovorami o piatom akte, zanavese, finale, o tom, chto vse imeet konets, so vsemi etimi sravneniiami ne bog vest' kakogo vkusa” (272)



What's left?" (127)<sup>159</sup> This cynicism reflects Astashev's rejection of some of the traditional values of Western civilization. Art, literature and politics are readily dismissed.

When Engel asks how someone is to live who can't accept those values, Astashev offers a string of slogans: "Try to make things as logical as possible. Watch his health, work, live like everyone else does. Take out insurance. The state rests on people like you and me, not on dreamers and failures" (127).<sup>160</sup> This appeal to the "state" provides the first clue to Astashev's political position. His vision of responsibility reverberates with the tenets of fascism as it developed in Italy and Germany, which emphasized the subjugation of individual interests and desires to the needs of the collective state. Astashev's state has no use for "dreamers and failures."

Astashev refuses to consider the possibility of his own death; that would require an act of imagination beyond his means. When Engel asks him how he thinks it (death) will come, "It will come as it does for a hare in a hunt or a fly in a glass," he said angrily. 'I'm a self-made man, and those trivialities don't concern me'" (129).<sup>161</sup>

After Engel, Astashev stops to visit his mother and Xenia Andreevna. In the course of the evening, he pulls Xenia Andreevna aside to tell her about his evening with two cancan dancers in the course of which he treated them to champagne and caviar and then he asks her

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<sup>159</sup> "Iskusstvo? Literatura? Bylo i eto. Chitali do zari, uvlekalis' politikoi (ia, v prochem, -- nikogda). I v etom koe-chto teper' urazumeli. Nauchilis'. Chto zhe ostaetsia?" (272)

<sup>160</sup> "Starat'sia ustroit'sia naibolee tselesoobrazno. Priniat' mery. Lechit'sia, rabotat', zhit', kak vse zhivut. Zastrakhovat'sia. Gosudarstvo zizhdetsia na takikh, kak ia i kak vy, a ne na mechtateliakh i neudachnikakh" (273)

<sup>161</sup> "kak eto budet"; "—Kak s zaitsem na okhote, kak s mukhoi v stakane, -- skazal on serdito. — Ia — sel'f med men, i menia eti podrobnosti ne kasaiutsia" (274). Astashev's use of the English phrase "self-made man" emphasizes his stereotyped phrasing, dropping foreign phrases into his Russian to emphasize his distance from Russia itself.

for a doctor's address. The implication is clear that one or both of the dancers had sex with him in exchange for champagne and caviar, and now he feels a need to be checked for venereal disease. Xenia Andreevna nods her head “with unconcealed satisfaction” (130).<sup>162</sup> Far from being concerned with his behavior, she is actually satisfied. In fact, Xenia Andreevna gave him his start as a life insurance salesman so that he could insure her elderly French lover, thus securing her future. She has trained him well in predatory behavior.

The following portion of the novella displays the impact of that predatory behavior on Zhenya, a fellow émigré. Just as Astashev's interactions with Engel form the philosophical heart of the novella, his encounter with the young woman Zhenya exposes his moral/ethical void. His sexual narcissism destroys her. The chapter opens with a retrospective account of his initial acquaintance with Zhenya two years before the narrative events unfold.

Up to this point in the narrative, there have been a number of references to Astashev's sexual life. All are characterized by a lack of human connection. His discovery of sexuality takes place at the home of his stepmother: “a real woman, the first woman he'd had a chance to study at close hand – dressed, half-dressed, undressed... Here was a real woman, who bore some inexplicable relationship to his father's wallet” (97).<sup>163</sup> This mention of “his father's wallet” in relation to his sexual awakening presages his future relations with women. There is no evidence of any genuine human, reciprocal relations with women, but rather a string of casual encounters, most of which have a financial component.

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<sup>162</sup> “s neskryvaemym udovol'stviiem” (275)

<sup>163</sup> “nastoiashchaia zhenshchina, pervaiia zhenshchina, kotoruiu udalos' emu videt' blizko – odetuiu, poluodetuiu, razdetuiu... nastoiashchaia zhenshchina, imevshaia kakoe-to neob"iasnimoe otnoshenie k ottsovskomu bumazhniku” (254).

His relationship with Xenia Andreevna has persistent sexual overtones. Not only was she the first “real woman” he had known (were his mother and nurse not “real women”?), but she comes to the table half-dressed. The phrase “called herself an actress” suggests doubts about her moral character. In Paris, her sexuality is repeatedly emphasized in the narration.

When he turned sixteen he overheard a conversation about women. “The conversation was eminently pragmatic and dry, more as if it were a matter of choosing a subject to study at the university or an obligatory Lenten fast.” That night, he got out of bed “when everyone was asleep, he pulled his trousers on and went barefoot to the cook...and within half an hour he was back in his room. In that half hour he had not opened his mouth or uttered a word” (101-102).<sup>164</sup> This first sexual encounter is presented as lacking in any feeling or even attraction. Astashev makes no pretense of personal connection – not even speaking to the cook when he arrives at her bed. There is certainly no hint of reciprocity in this encounter.

Astashev frequently changes apartments. The narrator suggests that he is creating: “‘a clean break,’ ‘not striking the last chord’ – as he referred to the liquidation of his relationships with women. Recently he found himself thinking more in French than Russian, and he already knew all kinds of appropriate expressions for this in French” (110).<sup>165</sup> We are led to believe that Astashev ends relationships by disappearing and making sure that the

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<sup>164</sup> “kogda emu sdelaos’ shestnadtsat’ let, on uslyshal vokrug razgovor o zhenshchinakh – razgovor byl ochen’ delovoi i sukhoi, budto delo shlo o vybore fakul’teta ili obiazatel’nom govenii velikim postom”; “natiianul shtany i bosoi poshel k kukharke... a cherez polchasa uzhe byl u sebia – za eto vremia ne razzhav rta, ne proiznesia ni odnogo slova” (256-257) As Radislav Lapushin has pointed out to me, the use of the verb “sdelaos” suggests something artificial or mechanical about Astashev.

<sup>165</sup> “krasivo oborvat’”, “ne vziat’ poslednego akkorda”, -- tak nazyval on likvidatsiiu svoikh otnoshenii s zhenshchinami. Dumaia v poslednee vremia chashche po-frantsuzski, nezheli po-russki, on i po-frantsuzski uzhe znal vsevozmozhnye podkhodiashchie etomu vyrazheniia” (260)

women cannot find him afterwards. His reliance on stereotyped phrases is reminiscent of his use of a series of platitudes to remind his clients of the inevitability of death and reflects both the lack of depth in his relationships with women and his inability to experience genuine emotion.

In Paris, Astashev frequently visits a “certain house” where he is well known. Just as his routine at the restaurant is entirely ritualized, his visits to this expensive house open only during the daytime are governed by specific rules as well. The house has a door to the left and a door to the right. “Behind the left door there were women; behind the right, an armchair and a screen. He alternated” (149).<sup>166</sup> Clearly this is an exclusively commercial transaction.

These episodes are not described with any explicit moral judgment, but in conjunction they amount to a pattern of utilitarian relationships with women without any personal dimension. Just as he relies on rote phrases in his insurance sales, he relies on clichés and financial “exchanges” in his sexual interactions. When he has a break in his work day he visits the brothel.

As he told Engel, “...as for women: there was a time when people blushed, perspired, sighed (perhaps not me personally), but by now everyone realizes perfectly well what love consists of. Even the women. And if they don't – so much the worse for them” (126-127).<sup>167</sup> In his conversation with Engel, Astashev identifies happiness as “a male dog... having it off

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<sup>166</sup> “Za levoi dver'iu byli zhenshchiny, za pravoi – kreslo i ekran. On khodil cherez raz” (287).

<sup>167</sup> “A o zhenshchinakh: bylo vremia – krasneli, poteli, vzdykhali (mozhet byt', ne lichno ia), no seichas-to uzhe kazhdomu iasno, chto takoe est' eta liubov'. I sami zhenshchiny poniali. A esli net – tem khuzhe dlia nikh” (272).

with a bitch on the pavement” (127).<sup>168</sup> Those who don't share his view of life are simply not worthy of attention. This “so much the worse for them” is the full extent of Astashev's moral universe. While he will not murder or rob, he has no concern for the weak – for those who may crave human connection or may not “realize” what love consists of for him.

Astashev meets the beautiful Zhenya when she is delivering a message from her aunt to Xenia Andreevna. When Xenia Andreevna assures him that Zhenya is a virgin he is intrigued and begins a flirtation with her. In their first conversation, he asks her whether she had been to “see the popular play that featured the actress with the magnificent bosom” (131).<sup>169</sup> This is yet another indication of his cultural tastes: dance halls and plays with magnificent bosoms.

Astashev makes no attempt to hide the nature of his sexual relationships. When Zhenya suggests that he may not have a girlfriend, he answers with absolute candor.

Флирта нет, но есть одна знакомая дама, у нее корсетная мастерская, она, конечно, француженка. К ней можно прийти и к двенадцати ночи, раньше даже нечего делать. Но она мне, кажется, скоро надоест. Вы мужчин не знаете, мы -- страшные свиньи. Впрочем, за то нас и любят. (277)

No flirting, but there is a lady I know. She has a corset shop. She's French, of course. One can go and see her as late as twelve at night. Before that there's not much to do there. But I have a feeling she's going to start boring me pretty soon. You don't know men. We're awful swine. Of course, that's just what women love us for. (133)

This coarse response to her query is startling. Astashev is entirely open in his disregard for women.

When Zhenya moves to another part of the city, Astashev promptly forgets her, but she dreams about him and imagines writing him a letter. "In fact, she had already composed

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<sup>168</sup> “Kobelek za suchkoi na trotuare ukhazhival” (272).

<sup>169</sup> “modnoi p’ese, v kotoroi igraet aktrisa s izumitel’nym biustom”

the first sentence: 'Not I should be called Evgenia, but you should be called Evgeny, dear Aleksei Georgievich, because I am writing you this letter just like Tania Larina.'"<sup>170</sup> (Zhenya is playing here off the ambiguity of her name, which can refer to males or females. It is the nickname for both Evgenii – the male variant of the name, and Evgeniia – the female variant.) This single phrase connects Zhenya to Russian literature. Zhenya is referring to characters in Pushkin's novel in verse *Eugene Onegin*, which was turned into an opera by Tchaikovsky.<sup>171</sup> Zhenya, like Boris in *Roquenal*, distorts reality through the prism of literature, imagining Astashev as someone quite different from who he is. Her reliance on literary forms stands in sharp contrast to Astashev's own cultural tastes.

Ironically, Tatiana Larina herself represents an early example in Russian literature of the dangers of interpreting reality through the prism of literature. Tatiana, influenced by her frequent reading of sentimental French novels, falls in love with Evgenii without recognizing his true character. In *Italics*, Berberova expresses her childhood dismay at Tatiana's irresponsible capriciousness in falling in love with a man she doesn't even know.

Berberova's description of Evgenii as "foppish, listless, sated and empty"<sup>172</sup> could also apply to the punctilious, comfort-loving Astashev. While the real Onegin refuses to take advantage

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<sup>170</sup> Translation mine: the published translation does not accurately capture Zhenya's reference to Evgeny Onegin. "Prichem pervaiia fraza byla uzhe pridumana: 'Ne ia – Evgeniei, no vy dolzhny byli by nazyvat'sia Evgeniem, milyi Aleksei Georgievich, potomu chto ia, sovsem kak Tania Larina, pishu vam eto pis'mo'" (278).

<sup>171</sup> In her article "Pis'mo Tatiany," Deotto explores Berberova's use of Tatiana's letter in her 1938 biography of Tchaikovsky. During his courtship with his wife, Tchaikovsky was working on his opera based on Pushkin's novel in verse. In the biography, Berberova suggested that Tchaikovsky and his future wife had used Tatiana's letter to (mis)understand their own relationship, leading to unfortunate consequences for both.

<sup>172</sup> "fatovaty, skuchaiushchii, presyshchennyi, pustoi"

of Tatyana's naiveté, Zhenya is not so fortunate. Astashev is dreadfully miscast in the role of Onegin and Zhenya will pay dearly for the error.

After a year and a half of fantasizing, Zhenya musters the courage to visit Xenia Andreevna's home in the same buttoned dress which caught Astashev's attention initially. As they sit at Xenia Andreevna's, Zhenya's head is full of fantasies as Astashev further exhibits his vulgarity. In fact, she realizes: "I don't know him at all... I love him for all of it, for his crudeness, for his obvious meanness, for his bandit's laugh, for the boorish way he moves" (138).<sup>173</sup> In contrast to the sinister undertone introduced through the use of dramatic irony, the overt narrative tone through most of the novella has been complimentary of Astashev, emphasizing his firm and forthright manner. This is the first overtly negative description of him and it is introduced in Zhenya's own thoughts.

The dramatic irony which was present to a minor degree in his visits to Klavdia Ivanovna is intensified. In his early encounters, he and Klavdia Ivanovna appear to be talking and thinking completely across each other: he declares she is lucky to live so high with the fresher air – she is afraid she will suffocate in the stairwell. He declares it would be idiotic for him to live in Russia; she longs to see it just once more. When Zhenya admits to never having kissed a man he admits to never having had time for kisses: "I've always been in a dreadful rush"<sup>174</sup> and calls her a little fool for not having more experience. Astashev begins to tell a story, "And although it had something to do with a woman, Zhenya was too

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<sup>173</sup> "Ja ego sovsem ne znaiu... Ia liubliu ego za vse, za etu grubost', za kazhushchuiusia ego podlost', za razboinyi smekh, za khamstvo nekotorykh dvizhenii..." (280)

<sup>174</sup> "vse kak-to ne uspeval" (280)

preoccupied with what was going on inside her to make sense of what he was telling her” (138).<sup>175</sup> Zhenya’s failure to pay attention is a key to her self-deception.

Zhenya imagines that they will “live a life unafraid, like lovebirds,” and she dreams “about how she could stand by and help him do something, unnoticed and brave.”<sup>176</sup> These trite romantic phrases emphasize Zhenya’s refusal to acknowledge what she seems to know about Astashev when she thinks of his “meanness.” The idea of “helping” him to do something “unnoticed and brave” has no relevance whatsoever to their Parisian reality or Astashev’s career as a life insurance salesman.

И Жене...казалось, что все это, весь этот задуманный кем-то праздник, на самом деле низринут в этот город, в этот вечер, таким, каким он должен был бы быть где-то, где нет ни печали, ни вздыханий, ни жаркой человеческой тесноты, ни обмана, ни разлуки, ни убожества картонной декорации пивного павильона, а есть только хорей собственного сердца, как моторная лодка несущегося по озеру счастливых слез. (281)

It seemed to Zhenya that all this, this madness of a holiday, had been hurled down onto this city, into this evening, turning it into a place where there was no sorrow or sighs, no human wickedness, no deceit, no separation, no shabby dance-hall decorations... but only the chorus of her own heart, like a motorboat tearing across a lake of happy tears. (140)

While Zhenya is hearing only the chorus of her own heart, Astashev recounts why he prefers French women (“Russian women are terrible teases”), why he prefers brunettes (a blonde “messed me about”), and comments on every passing woman. He warns her again that “We men are awful swine” (141).<sup>177</sup> Both Astashev and Zhenya utilize clichéd phrases to

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<sup>175</sup> “I khotia delo kasalos’ zhenshchiny, Zhenia slishkom byla zaniata tem, chto delalos’ v nei samoi, chtoby poniat’, chto ei govorit” (280)

<sup>176</sup> “prozhit’ nestrashnuiu, golubiniuiu zhizn’... v chem-nibud’ ona da pomozhet emu... nezametno i khrabro” (282)

<sup>177</sup> “russkie zhenshchiny voobshche uzhasnye lomaki”; “kak ona mordovala menia”; “My, muzhchiny, strashnye svin’i” (282).



describe critical aspects of reality. Just as he refers to death as “the final curtain,” Zhenya pictures them as “love birds” living a “life unafraid.” Neither of them expresses fundamental feelings in direct or convincing language. This reliance on stereotyped language suggests a lack of genuine connection with reality. Astashev is too self-absorbed in his quest for material comfort to bother himself with reality. Zhenya is too caught up in her own fantasies to actually listen, to observe and to act independently and responsibly.

Four days later, Astashev picks her up from work in a taxi. As he leads her into the taxi, he rebuffs her queries as to their destination with an annoyed “Zhenechka, Zhenechka... You ask an awful lot of questions.” She responds, “All my life has been a pledge,” adding “That’s from *Onegin*” (143).<sup>178</sup> Zhenya does not take responsibility for her own choices, but relies on phrases taken from early nineteenth century literature to abdicate responsibility for her own life. The full stanza to which she refers, and which Berberova must assume her readers will recall, if only because one of the most beautiful arias in Tchaikovsky’s *Onegin* begins with this line, is:

Вся жизнь моя была залогом  
Свиданья верного с тобой;  
Я знаю, ты мне послан богом,  
До гроба ты хранитель мой...

All my life has been a pledge  
Of certain encounter with you  
I know you’re sent to me by God  
Until the grave, you are my guardian.  
(*trans. mine*)

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<sup>178</sup> “Zhenechka, Zhenechka... vy uzhasno mnogo zadaete voprosov”; “Vsia zhizn’ moia byla zalogom”; “Eto – iz ‘Onegina’” (283). The line is the same in the verse novel and in the opera.

Of course, he is her destroyer, not her guardian. When they arrive at his apartment, he pushes her to the door and drags her to the stairs. She begs him to let her go and promises to be quiet. Instead, “[h]e twisted her arms painfully behind her with surprising skill” (144).<sup>179</sup> The “surprising skill” he shows in holding her and groping her breast suggests that she is not the first woman he has pushed into his apartment. She struggles not to fall and, holding his arm to avoid falling, follows him inside his apartment. Apparently, she is unable to reconcile her sentimental literary interpretation of reality with the reality of whatever happened inside that apartment. (We do learn later that he offered her money – which she refused.)<sup>180</sup> Later that night she leaves his apartment alone, walks home, and turns on the gas.

The final chapter opens abruptly with Astashev celebrating after closing an insurance deal. In this final segment of the novella, we gain a fuller impression of the violence and cynicism which underlie Astashev's “guileless” character and place those into the context of contemporary events.

While waiting for Xenia Andreevna to come home, he lies down to read the paper, but finds nothing in it that catches his interest. He reads the paper daily, generally with a sense of superiority to see what stupidity the world is up to. But

...когда ему приходилось смотреть фотографии, где кто-нибудь один, в отличной паре военных сапог, приветствовал тысячи в таких же сапогах, что-то в нем тайно и счастливо трепетало. Только такой должна была быть власть в его представлении, только такой: единоличной, все объясняющей, разрешающей и запрещающей. (287)

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<sup>179</sup> “On bol’no i kak-to uzh ochen’ umelo skrutil ei ruki nazad” (284).

<sup>180</sup> This is reminiscent of Liza’s refusal of money in Dostoevsky’s *Zapiski iz pod’polia* (*Notes from Underground*), which Berberova considered one of the greatest works of Russian literature. (IM 314) Just as the Underground Man was profoundly affected by Liza’s nobility, Zhenya’s behavior prompts Astashev to question his assumptions – an uncomfortable activity for him. Unaccustomed as he is to reflection, he experiences this as an unidentified sense of dissatisfaction.

... when he came upon photographs in which one man wearing a first-rate pair of army boots greeted thousands wearing the same boots, something inside him shivered secretly and happily. That was exactly how he imagined power should be, and like that only: the personal and ultimate source of knowledge and authority. (149)

And then Astashev, who is drowsy, begins to dream:

Он мечтал о порядке -- о человеке, могущем держать в руках всю Европу, а следовательно и весь мир. И тогда он, Асташев, закажет себе вот такие же блестящие, ловкие сапоги, как орденский знак людей, принадлежащих великой дисциплине. Он окажется необходимым, гораздо более необходимым миру, чем сейчас, потому что сейчас -- все равны: здоровые и больные, ловкачи и неудачники, а тогда будут одни Асташевы, Асташевы, Асташевы ... (288)

He dreamed of order – of a man who could hold in his hands all of Europe, and thus the whole world as well. And then he, Astashev, would get himself a pair of those smart shiny boots, which would stand as a mark of distinction for people adhering to a great discipline. He would prove indispensable to the world, much more indispensable than now, because now everyone was equal: healthy and sick, scramblers and losers alike. But then there would be just Astashevs. Astashevs, Astashevs, and more Astashevs. (150)

Here the story moves beyond the personal tragedy of Zhenya or the personal story of opportunistic success of one Russian immigrant. Astashevism is revealed in its deep relationship with fascism. Astashev's political beliefs are entirely totalitarian: all power and knowledge residing in one person who permits or forbids everything. There is no need for individual responsibility or moral judgment: the one person in power decides these things. There are no political considerations beyond the subjugation of the individual to the mass and to the state, embodied in the vision of thousands of shiny black boots. Astashev embraces this aesthetic of fascism which reinforces his own empty and facile relations with the society in which he lives. His attraction to fascism is mediated entirely by images: he expresses no particular political beliefs, beyond a sense of what “power should be.” By 1938, the shiny military boots admired by Astashev were all too common a sight in the newspapers. The

“shiny, smart boots” and men marching in lines were in control in Russia, Italy and Germany. Paramilitary right-wing Fascist groups in France frequently paraded through the streets (Weber 120). Astashev identifies those armies as marching armies of Astashevs.

As he continues to scan the paper Astashev comes across articles concerning a dog show, the cost of electricity, a ministerial crisis in Belgium and “the suicide of one Mademoiselle du Pont: her neighbors' attention was drawn by the strong smell of gas, and when they broke down the door.... In a note she asked them to forgive her for the inconvenience and wrote that she was dying out of unrequited love” (150).<sup>181</sup>

When he awakes from his newspaper reveries, Xenia Andreevna still has not returned so he goes to visit his mother, Klavdia Ivanovna. When he arrives she is sick in bed with a fever and the room is untidied. He realizes that his good mood has slipped away. “Why on earth have I started feeling so terrible? I was in such a great mood before. It's you that's had this effect on me...” (151)<sup>182</sup> His mother assures him that his dark mood is because he is still single.

Astashev, with his absolute rejection of introspection and inner states, cannot even fully recognize what he seems to know at some level: that the Mademoiselle du Pont of the newspaper is Zhenya and she is dead. He responds to his mother:

«Жениться мне, что ли?» -- спросил он с усмешкой, но в голосе была серьезность... «На какой-нибудь эдакой молоденькой, скромной, влюбленной

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<sup>181</sup> “samoubiistvo nekoei mademuazel' Diupon: sosedi byli privlecheny sil'nym zapakhom gaza. Kogda oni vzlomali dver'... V zapiske ona prosila prostit' ee za bespokoistvo i pisala, chto umiraet ot nerazdelennoi liubvi” (288).

<sup>182</sup> “Otchego eto u menia nastroyenie vdrug isportilos'? Bylo takoe zdorevennoe nastroyenie. Eto vy na menia podeistvovali...” (288)

по уши. Скажут: русская, нищая... Да, конечно, но зато чистенькая, умыта добродетелью. Два года в одном платье ходит. Служит.» (288)<sup>183</sup>

“What, get married?” he asked with derision, but there was a serious note in his voice... “Marry some modest young thing in love up to her ears? A Russian girl, they’ll tell me. Yes, of course, but pure, nevertheless, awash with virtue. Goes around in the same dress for two years. Has a job.” (151)

And then he actually begins to imagine marrying Zhenya, building “a little nest... If not now, then when? I deserve it. Mama, you’ll laugh, but we would have the most freckle-faced children – both of us so fair” (152).<sup>184</sup> The idea of “a little nest” echoes Zhenya’s reference to “lovebirds.” This is completely different from any of Astashev’s previous references to women.<sup>185</sup> There is a bizarre incongruence in Astashev’s reference to building a nest with the woman he has driven to suicide.

When his mother asks if he is “in love,” Astashev abruptly ends the conversation. And then, in an unaccustomed moment of introspection, Astashev experiences a sense of discontent with his life. Here he reviews his life in free indirect style:

Мамаша Клавдия Ивановна. Мамаша Ксения Андреевна. Удачно обделанное дельце, сытный завтрак, экран в известном ему доме, отложенные в банк

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<sup>183</sup> Astashev’s phrase echoes that of another of Pushkin’s Evgeniis: Evgenii in *Mednyi Vsadnik*, in which the poor clerk Evgenii thinks: “Zhenit’sia? Mne? zachem zhe net?” (Get married? Me? Well, why not?) This echo, familiar to an educated Russian reader, reflects unfavorably on Astashev. Evgenii, honorable and poor, believes that he can marry his love, Parasha. The boorish Astashev considers marriage, but convenience and finances, not love, are the determining factors.

<sup>184</sup> “gnezdyshe... Ne seichas, tak kogda zhe? Mogu sebe pozvolit’. Deti u nas byli by, mamen’ka, ia vam skazhu dlia smekha, takie ryzhevaten’kie – chto ia, chto ona, oba svetlye” (289)

<sup>185</sup> In *The Italics are Mine*, Berberova utterly rejects the concept of “the nest,” declaring that she always preferred the human anthill to the concept of the family nest. Astashev and Zhenya’s references to lovebirds and nest may represent for the author a particular dystopian view of marriage and family.

деньги, две-три мысли о судьбе Европы... Вот и жизнь его... А если иногда все слегка надоедает, то ведь это бывает не чаще, чем раз в пять лет. Правда, в совершенном механизме, у тех существ, что носят эти изумительные твердые и гладкие сапоги, перебоев не бывает всю жизнь, и, значит, он, Асташев, индивид переходного периода, что делать! Утешимся тем, что все относительно, и индивид переходного времени есть существо передовое по сравнению с мадемуазель Дюпон, умирающей от неразделенной любви, по сравнению со скульптором Энгелем, питающимся морковью. И если в минуты какой-то беспричинной тоски не можешь бежать к людям будущего... и нет еще, не выдумали, марширующих, хором поющих объединений для таких, как он, переходных ("а нас много, нас очень много, нас гораздо больше, чем вы думаете!"), то уйдем к людям прошлого, которые чем-то в эти минуты беспокойны для нас, и раздражающи, и необходимы. (290)

Mama Klavdia Ivanovna. Mamenka Xenia Andreevna. A successfully transacted bit of business, a hearty lunch, the films in that house he knew, money tucked away in the bank, a few thoughts about the fate of Europe... That was his life... Once in a while it all wore a little thin, but then that didn't happen more than once in five years, after all. True, the perfected mechanism, those creatures that wore those exquisite stiff sleek boots, knew no inner conflict their entire lives, and that meant that he, Astashev, was a representative of a period of change. What could he do? We have to console ourselves with the fact that everything is relative and the individual of the transitional period is an advanced creature in comparison with Mademoiselle du Pont, who died of unrequited love, or with the sculptor Engel, who eats nothing but rabbit food. If in moments of groundless melancholy we can't turn to the people of the future... and if there still aren't, if they haven't thought up yet, associations for people like him, transitional people ('and there are lots of us, lots and lots of us, lots more than you think!') to march and sing in chorus, then we can turn to people from the past, who in those moments are somehow so troubling, and irritating, and essential. (153-154)

Engel's and Zhenya's failures to understand the demands of "conventional" existence, their insistence on having emotions or unconventional ideas, means they are not "advanced" creatures. Here we see not only Astashev's attraction to fascism, but his self-identification with fascism even though he is unwilling to take on the aspects of fascism which might demand something from him: he remains acutely un-nationalistic, preferring his temporary passport, and has no interest in becoming a soldier. Astashev's goal is an entirely smoothly functioning life devoid of inner conflict. His interactions with Zhenya have shaken his complacency. He finds himself imagining married life and children.

And he finds those “people from the past” essential. Despite having left in a burst of anger on his last sales visit, Astashev decides to visit Engel. Engel greets him warmly – Astashev's visit has led him to a new understanding of life. He has faced the inevitability of death and found joy in “being.” Engel finds the crux of human wisdom is in the sense of death and declares that “the main thing is being, being, carrying on in some way” (157). His declaration that he has understood that “...death is like passion. You can't explain it; you have to feel it” (155) exposes the void in Astashev's life: Astashev has only a hollow and superficial understanding of both.

Astashev is uncomfortable listening to Engel's effusive spiritual/ existential transformation. During his previous visit, Astashev relocated to the sofa from an uncomfortable stool. This time the sofa is occupied and Astashev awkwardly sits on the stool where he “rested his puffy hands on his knees because he had nowhere else to put them” (155).<sup>186</sup> His spiritual discomfort has a physical correlate.

As Astashev prepares to go, he admires a ceramic platter, which Engel offers him “to remember me by. As a reminder” (trans.mine).<sup>187</sup> The word “napominanie” is the same one used by Engel earlier to describe Astashev's visit as a “reminder” of death. The ceramic platter can serve as a concrete reminder of Engel's spiritual transformation and interaction with Astashev, and also a reminder of the reality of death. Astashev accepts the platter, but then immediately gives it away. He rejects this reminder of his own human nature and mortality.

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<sup>186</sup> “slozhil svoi pukhlye ruki na koleniakh, potomu chto devat' ikh bylo nekuda” (291)

<sup>187</sup> “na pamiat'. Za napominanie” (292)

When he returns to the street, he realizes that he has felt a sense of suffocation all day. He begins to evaluate his life. “One definitely had to arrange some kind of retreat for oneself in life. He'd been at it ten years already, and now it was time: either cards with Vyazminin, or fishing, or conjugal bliss, or something else to fill up his spare time” (157).<sup>188</sup> Only Astashev could contemplate marriage and a game of cards as essential equals in his quest for perfect equilibrium.

В сорок лет пришла ко мне эта естественная мысль. Нельзя же в самом деле всю жизнь как выючное животное; случайные женщины; конторские шуточки; бойкая дама маман с кавалерами. Довольно. Захотелось чего-то, вдруг засосало еще третьего дня, от ночи с Женечкой. Денег не взяла. Милая девочка. Была так напугана! (293)

...at forty this natural thought has occurred to me. One can't just go through life like a beast of burden: occasional women; office gossip; my lady mamenka and her cavaliers. Enough. I've been missing something, and it's been eating away at me for two days now, ever since that night with Zhenechka. She wouldn't take any money. A sweet girl. She was so frightened. (158)

Astashev's disconnect is complete. We now learn that after forcing Zhenya into his apartment, he offered her money. Now he is contemplating marriage.

When he arrives back at Xenia Andreevna's, she tells him of Zhenya's suicide. Astashev immediately feels a sense of relief: “He felt liberated from a two-day nightmare: brooding, his conscience, dreams, sadness. Once again he was utterly free, absolutely tranquil, light of body and firm of soul” (159). He has already expressed his opinion about suicide in an earlier interaction in which his client questioned whether suicide was covered under his insurance plan: “Astashev made an ugly face. 'With one foolhardy act a man cancels out his entire life. Why reward him? That just makes him someone who never

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<sup>188</sup> “Nado nepremenno ugotovit' sebe v zhizni kakoe-to otstuplenie -- desiat' let vovsiu, a teper' pora: piket s Viazmininym, ili rybniuiu lovliu, ili semeinoe schast'e, ili eshche chto-nibud', dlia zapolneniia svobodnogo vremeni” (293).



existed, a chimera... we can only pay for people who were, who existed, not suicides” (119).<sup>189</sup> Thus, according to his theory, Zhenya never existed and his precious sense of equilibrium is restored with the news of her death. He feels no sense of remorse or responsibility for her death. As he told Engel earlier, if people don't understand reality, “the worse for them.” He now tells Xenia Andreevna:

Они всегда сами виноваты во всем, они заслуживают той участи, которую имеют. Я мог бы многое объяснить Толстым и Достоевским, но в наше время их нет, а есть только какие-то Черные, Белые, Горькие и Сладкие, с которыми мारаться не стоит... Самоубийство, по-моему, есть самый непростительный факт, какой только имеется в природе... (295)

Everything is always their fault. They deserve what they get. I could talk about it to a Tolstoy or a Dostoyevsky, but we don't have anyone to compare with them these days. It's not worth dirtying your hands with the ones we do have... In my opinion, suicide is the most unforgivable act there is...” (160-161)

The English translation eliminates the phrase “All we have is some sort of Blacks, Whites, Bitters and Sweets.” Three of those names, Black (Chernyi), White (Bely), and Bitter (Gorky) reference actual twentieth century authors whose names would be familiar to an educated Russian reader in the 1930s, but probably meaningless to someone reading the work in English translation.<sup>190</sup> Astashev apparently invents the name “Sweet” to round out the collection by mocking these names. Astashev will draw on the names of literary greats to

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<sup>189</sup> “On chuvstvoval osvobozhdenie ot dvukh dnevnogo koshmara: razdumii, sovesti, mechty i grusti. On opiat’ byl sovershenno svoboden, sovershenno spokoen, legok telom i krepok dushoi” (294); “Za chto zhe? – i Astashev sdelał nepriiatnoe, obizhennoe litso. – Odnim nevozderzhannym dvizheniem chelovek zacherkivaet nazad vsiu svoiu zhizn’, za chto zhe ego nagrazhdai’? On ot etogo poluchaetsia chelovek nebyvshii, khimera... my mozhem platit’ tol’ko byvshim, sushchestvovavshim, no konchivshimsia” (267-268).

<sup>190</sup> Sasha Chernyi (1880-1932) –satirical poet and author of children’s books; Andrei Bely (1880-1934) – one of the foremost writers of Russian Symbolism; Maxim Gorky (1868-1936) –A widely known Russian realist writer and revolutionary.

bolster his position, but has no use for contemporary literature. (And, as we already know, sold his classics for textbooks.)

Astashev departs Xenia Andreevna's apartment, carrying his constant appurtenances of umbrella and briefcase.

В темноту улиц, в мрак города, на крепкий асташевский сон, чтобы утром опять -- к летчику, за город, -- по солнцу, по ветру, в вычищенном котелке, дальше, дальше, шагом прочным, резиновым, как подошвы -- гражданин, налогоплательщик, потребитель (но не солдат!) -- мимо людей, границ, с мимолетным паспортом в кармане, самопишущей ручкой в другом, в туман, в зной, в серый дождик, раз-два, левой, левой, тенью проползая по всему, что встретилось, угощая папиросами, намекая, напоминая, низко кланяясь, оставляя свой след, дальше, дальше, без конца дальше, уже немножко дряблый, уже лысеющий, с золотом в самой распашистой улыбке, уже чуть-чуть тяжелее дышащий, качающий на ходу бледный жир младенческих щек, по лестницам, по переулкам, по шоссе-ным дорогам, где мчится автомобиль, по рельсам, где ходит поезд, еще, еще, мимо кладбищ, женщин, памятников, закатов. (295-296)

Into the darkness of the streets, the gloom of the city, to his sound Astashevan sleep, so that in the morning, again – to the pilot, outside the city – in the sun, in the wind, in a clean-brushed bowler, further, further, with a firm step, springy, like rubber shoe-soles – citizen, taxpayer, consumer (but not a soldier!) – past people, borders, temporary passport in one pocket, fountain pen in the other, into fog, heat, grey drizzle, one-two, left, left, crawling like a shadow past everything in his path, treating to cigarettes, hinting, bowing low, leaving his trace, further, further, without end further, already a bit flabby, already balding, with gold in his widest smile, already breathing a little more heavily, the pale fat of his youthful cheeks quivering as he walks, along stairways, along alleys, along highways, where cars rush by, along rails, where the train passes, and on, and on, past cemeteries, women, monuments, sunsets. (*my translation*)<sup>191</sup>

Movement has characterized Astashev throughout the story: he prefers door-to-door sales work, his movement is compared to a conveyor belt, he never stops. In this passage, the sense of mindless incessant movement takes on the relentless force of history. The paragraph is composed of a single sentence with multiple repetitions of terms (further, further... on, and

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<sup>191</sup> I've substituted my own translation here in an attempt to capture the relentless energy and momentum of the original.

on) and accusative cases of the nouns denoting his goals as he moves. He is crawling and marching, across borders and past sunsets. The “left, left” adds a military overtone. Only here at the end does the narrator abandon all identification with Astashev. This is the first time that the narrator’s physical depiction of Astashev has been less than flattering. Previously, his blue eyes, youthful appearance and open smile have been emphasized. He passes women, cemeteries, monuments. Women he uses for his own purposes and cemeteries provide his employment – a fact which he tries to elide entirely. Sex and death, two of the fundamental bases of human existence, are completely debased by Astashev, who converts both into a financial transaction.

This vision of the petty bourgeois Astashev, crawling and marching across the face of Europe without concern for borders, perfectly parallels the vision of the thousands dressed in shiny army boots, the one the essential complement to the other. Astashev loses his singularity in this final passage to become the embodiment of the crudeness and triviality engulfing Europe, whose culmination lay in the triumphant march of fascism.

## CONCLUSION

### Предсмертный Диалог

-- Когда-то ты билет вернуть  
С поклоном собирался Богу,  
Но мы возьмем его в дорогу:  
Он может сократить нам путь.

-- Но если правда Аушвиц был,  
И был Гулаг и Хиросима,  
Не говори: пройдемте мимо!  
Не говори: я все забыл!  
Не притворяйся: *ты там был!*

-- И вот проходим мы незримо  
Мимо окошка, мимо, мимо  
Той кассы где лежит секрет.  
-- Там некому вернуть билет.

### Deathbed Dialogue

-- You once were ready to return  
Your ticket, with a bow, to God,  
But we'll take it along for the trip;  
It could shorten our journey.

--But if Auschwitz is true,  
And the Gulag and Hiroshima,  
Don't say: let's pass by!  
Don't say: I've forgotten it all!  
Don't pretend: *you were there!*

-- And now we go by unseen  
Past the window, past, past,  
That ticket window where the secret lies.  
-- There's no one to take the ticket back.

*Stikhi*, 1983

(translation mine)

Nina Berberova, that most “émigré of émigré writers,” journalist, poet and fiction writer, expressed the anxieties of exile during the 1930s through images of displacement, disorientation and the search for meaning. The term Russia Abroad provides a clear sense of a “society” in exile, rather than simply a collection of individual refugees. While the idea of a mission in the preservation of Russian culture attracted many members of that society, powerful disagreements about how to achieve that mission created a strained and tendentious atmosphere. By the end of the decade, Berberova showed us a culture which had lost its bearings so thoroughly that it no longer even sought the compass.

In an age of competing ideologies, Berberova's writings did not offer any certainties. Indeterminacy is an integral feature of her poetics. The attempts of her characters to gain or maintain a sense of equilibrium are rarely successful. In the *Billancourt Tales* this clash was characterized by “nesovpadenie.” The immigrant was always out of step with the surrounding culture. Individual existence was characterized by a sense of constantly doing things at the wrong time. In *Roquenal*, Boris’s passionate desire to preserve the chateau puts him out of harmony with the younger French generation, who long only to leave it behind. He is eventually exiled from his dreams of the past and forced to confront the uncertain future and its myriad possibilities. By the end of the decade, any sense of opportunity was overshadowed by the impending war. Only the predatory Astashev in *Astashev in Paris* manages to succeed under these conditions of exile. He destroys the woman who puts her trust in him. To the Astashevs of the world, the Astashevs who would take over the world, conformity, material comfort and power constitute the highest values.

## Wartime Writing

“We had a shabby, unhappy, provincial emigration... but nothing has remained.”  
(letter from Berberova in 1942, quoted in *IM* 385)<sup>192</sup>

The Nazi invasion brought an end to Russia Abroad as a cohesive community. The major newspapers and journals were closed down. Many exiles fled to the South of France and others joined the Army. Berberova spent most of the war on her farm outside Paris. At the end of 1939, Berberova published a feuilleton titled “September Diary.” In it she describes the days immediately following France’s declaration of war in September of 1939.<sup>193</sup> In this sketch, there is no mention of politics. She depicts a shepherd with his sheep and describes the wife of the only town official attempting to cope with his official duties alone (he immediately joined the army). This sketch introduces two prominent themes of her wartime writing: the eternal return of war, and culture as a source of comfort and meaning. In the “September Diary,” Berberova expressed her dismay and helplessness at current events in her usual sparse and ironic style:

Что такое история?

-- Это как бы огромная картина, в сто, в тысячу раз большая чем Тинторетто во Дворце Дожей. Мы все любовались ею, и общим видом ее, и деталями. Мы поражались ей, ужасались ей. А сейчас такое чувство, будто нас самих вписали туда же -- не выскочишь! Приглядитесь, пожалуйста, внимательнее: вон там -- это мы, в том углу. И какие же мы страшные, какие несчастные!

What is history?

-- It's like an enormous painting, a hundred, a thousand times bigger than the Tintoretto in the Doges Palace. We all admired it, both its general appearance and details. We were struck by it, horrified by it. And now, there's this feeling, as though we ourselves are painted in there -- there's no hopping out! Look closely, please,

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<sup>192</sup> Byla u nas parshivaia, neschastnaia, uezdnaia emigratsiia... nichego ne ostalos’ (453)

<sup>193</sup> This is often referred to as “the Phony War” or the “Sitzkrieg” as no military action was undertaken for another year – until the German invasion of France in May of 1940.

carefully: look there – it's us, in that corner. And how frightening we are, how unfortunate! (trans. mine)

This is not an image of agency and decision-making; she emphasizes the insignificance of the exiles “in that corner” – never at the center of history. In the eternal return of violence and warfare, individuals are swept along in the forces of history.

Berberova wrote little during the war and published nothing in the fascist-controlled press. Although her works of the 1930s focused on the dangers of nostalgia, they relied exclusively on Russian cultural markers. With the collapse of Russia Abroad as a cultural entity, Berberova's cultural references move beyond the enclosed space of Russian literature. In her works from this period (published only after the war), she abandons the “provincialism” of émigré life and the names of Tintoretto, Shakespeare, Mozart and Cervantes appear in her work for the first time. Her only extant writing from this period includes the “Black Notebook” (quoted in *The Italics Are Mine*), a poem to Shakespeare (“Shekspiru”), the story “Voskreshenie Motsarta” (“The Resurrection of Mozart”), and the novella *Plach* (lit. *Lament*, translated as *The Tattered Cloak*).

What she did write, reads like a spiritual protest against the cold Astashevism of war. In “The Resurrection of Mozart,” when the main protagonist Maria Leonidova hears about the bombing of Paris she recalls an earlier wish that Mozart be resurrected:

...Ты, Моцарт, бог, и сам того не знаешь. Вместо всего этого страшного, убийственного и ложного пожелать то, что в себе одном сочетает все прекрасное, чистое и вечное, как эти облака. Прежде чем оглохнуть окончательно, услышать, как звезда с звездой говорит. (302-303)

“You are God, Mozart, and of that fact yourself innocent.” One ought to aspire to something that combines everything beautiful, pure and eternal, like those clouds, not all these terrible things, all these murders and lies. Before the ultimate silence closes in on you, shouldn't you listen to what the stars are saying to each other? (12)

This passage directly counterpoises poetry to violence. She begins by quoting Salieri from Pushkin's Little Tragedy "Mozart and Salieri" with the phrase addressed to Mozart. Poetry is connected with the beautiful, pure and eternal, the bombing is connected with murders and lies. This is the alternate vision to Astashev's underlying violence. Maria Leonidova concludes her thought with lines from a well-known poem by Lermontov.<sup>194</sup> During the 1930s, Pushkin and Lermontov were presented as representing two conflicting poles of Russian literature (Tihanov 336-344). Berberova's inclusion of both appears as a confirmation of the universal values of literature. In the Russian, neither reference is separated from the main text by quotes: the Russian reader would simply recognize these cultural references without requiring external indicators. In this way, the treasures of literature are presented as an integral part of Maria Leonidova's internal dialogue, in no way separate from her own thoughts. This vision of the value of literature rises above the polemics surrounding the cultural mission of preserving Russian culture, to the value of culture in general as a counterpoise to the violence of war. Mozart himself also appears as a character, wandering through the exodus from northern France after the Nazi invasion. He is a mysterious presence, resurrected through Maria Leonidova's longing.

In her works written during the war, Berberova presents world culture (of which Russian culture is a part) as the only source of warmth and comfort. As she writes in her memoirs, "civilization is warmth" (*IM* 73). This idea of warmth is literally embodied in the symbol of the cloak in *The Tattered Cloak*, which represents all of Western culture:

Много лет тому назад наши отцы..., завернули тебя и меня в этот плащ... не тот ли это плащ, которым Иосиф укрывал Марию с младенцем на пути в Египет? Или это, может быть, плащ Дон Кихота? Или наконец, самого бога нашего, Сервантеса?... Или это плащ Лиры, бегущего сквозь знакомую и нам бурю?... Ты

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<sup>194</sup> The poem is "Vykhozhu odin ia na dorogu..."



же возьмешь другую половину этой двухтысячелетней одежды нашей. (328-329)

Many years ago our fathers... wrapped you and me up in this cloak... wasn't this the cloak Joseph wrapped round Mary and the infant on their journey into Egypt? Or maybe it's Don Quixote's cloak? Or perhaps it belongs to the god himself, Cervantes? ... Or is this the cloak of Lear struggling through the storm we've known so well for so long?... You take the other half of this two-thousand-year-old garment of ours. (180)

The two thousand years of Western history serves as the source of warmth. For Sasha, the protagonist of this story, the image of the cloak and that of the poet who created the image provide the only spark towards something beyond her dreary life of exile poverty.

After the war, Berberova wrote very little fiction. Russia Abroad was never fully reconstituted after the war and her body of work, widely admired in the 1930s, was virtually forgotten. Only in the 1980s and 1990s were her stories written during the years 1925-1942 republished. These fiction pieces provide a window onto the exile experience of Russia Abroad.

This dissertation brings into focus the work of one writer of the emigration and her place within the greater context of the emigration. In his *Literatura v izgnanii* (*Literature in Exile*), Gleb Struve suggested that "... émigré Russian literature is a stream of Russian literature which has been temporarily diverted from the general, but which, when the time comes, will pour into the general course of that literature" (22).<sup>195</sup> That process is still underway and there are still significant gaps in our understanding of this second branch of Russian literature. Nina Berberova was an active participant in that branch and her work belongs in any thorough evaluation of the period.

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<sup>195</sup> "...zarubezhnaia literatura est' vremennno otvedennyi v storonu potok obshcherusskoi literatury, kotoryi – pridet vremia – vol'etsia v obshchee ruslo etoi literatury" (trans. mine)

## APPENDIX: Biographical Sketch<sup>196</sup>

[Ходасевич] -- А у меня всегда есть выход: можно возвратить билет.

[Берберова] -- Ни в коем случае. Я хочу его использовать до конца а даже попробовать один перегон проехать зайцем. (КМ 275)

[Khodasevich] -- As far as I'm concerned, I always have a way out: I can *return my ticket*.

[Berberova] -- Not for anything. I want to use it up to the very end and even try to travel some miles free of charge. (IM 236)<sup>197</sup>

On June 22, 1922, a month before her 21<sup>st</sup> birthday, Nina Nikolaevna Berberova boarded a train from St. Petersburg to Riga. She traveled with her lover, Vladislav Khodasevich, fifteen years her senior and one of Russia's most respected poets and, later, literary critics. They were leaving behind the Revolutionary and Civil War years of "golod i kholod" (hunger and cold). They were leaving behind a war-shattered St. Petersburg which was a shadow of its former self. Buildings were unrepaired and the streets were virtually empty. The war years and the famine of 1921-1922 had devastated the population of St. Petersburg: at one point more than 75% of the population had abandoned the city. Repressions against the intelligentsia were increasing. The Cheka terror continued in full force and arrests were common. Poet Nikolai Gumilev had been arrested and executed the previous fall, novelist Fyodor Sologub's wife had committed suicide, Khodasevich's friend Maksim Gorky left Russia the same year. Berberova and Khodasevich expected to return

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<sup>196</sup> I am providing this biographical sketch because there is no extant published biography of Berberova. Much of the information included is brought together here for the first time and represents the initial stages of a more comprehensive biographical portrait.

<sup>197</sup> Quotes in this chapter are from *Kursiv moi/ The Italics Are Mine* unless otherwise noted.

when things had settled down. Khodasevich never saw Russia again. Berberova would return for only one visit -- 67 years later.

Berberova was born in 1901 in St. Petersburg on the same street as (Bol'shaia morskaiia) as her contemporary, Vladimir Nabokov, who had been born two years earlier. She was destined to see her share of the upheavals of the twentieth century, living through World War I, the Russian Revolution, the early Soviet years of cold, hunger and violence only to find herself, after years of struggle for survival, in occupied France throughout World War II. She was a woman of intelligence, charm, drive and immense curiosity. She guarded her memories closely, sharing only what she wished in her voluminous memoirs, burning some records of the past and bequeathing others to her archives at the Hoover Institution and Yale University's Beinecke Library. The materials in those archives remain largely unexplored and unpublished.

She came from a prosperous family in pre-Revolutionary Russia. Her mother was a classic aristocratic beauty and her father was of Armenian heritage. There were servants and a family estate. Yet, the young Berberova dreamed of a profession: at the age of ten she made a list of forty possibilities. Somewhere alongside fireman and postman, appeared the word poet. She selected "poet" and dedicated herself to that path.

Despite the material prosperity of her family, she claims that there was never bourgeois comfort as it is known in the West. Those around her knew that their society was doomed. She never offers the romanticized view of an idyllic Russian countryside that dominates many émigré memoirs. She recalls that the peasants of her mother's family estate:

Одеты были в лохмотьях и лица их были потерявшие всякое человеческое выражение...у них детей было мал-мала-меньше, баба на сносях или в чахотке, а малыши в коросте, и дома у них (где я тоже бывала не редко) разбитые окна были заткнуты тряпкой, и теленок с курами находился тут же, и пахло кислым.

(19)

...were dressed in rags ...and had faces that had lost all human expression... Their children did not grow because they were underfed. Their consumptive wives seemed always to be in the final month of pregnancy, the infants were covered with weeping eczema, and in their homes, which I also visited, broken windows were stopped up with rags, and calves and hens were kept in the corners. There was a sour stench. (13)

She was closer to her merchant father than her mother. Her father studied math and physics at Moscow University and in 1917 was working in the tsar's Ministry of Finance of the tsar. He initially continued in this position under the Bolsheviks. In 1918, the Bolsheviks moved the capital from St. Petersburg to Moscow. Berberova's family followed. Some months later, her father was dismissed from his post. In the midst of the chaos of Civil War, Berberova and her family made their way to Nakhichevan<sup>198</sup>, located in the south of Russia where, she writes, "the 'grateful Armenians' still ate white bread" (98).<sup>199</sup> While there may have been more food available than in the North, they were not to be sheltered from the war for long. Rostov-na-Donu, the city neighboring Nakhichevan, changed hands between the White and Red armies six times in the years 1917-1920. They watched the fighting from the roof and hid shivering when the shells came too near.

When possible, Berberova attended courses at the new University of Rostov, which was actually the former Russian University of Warsaw which had been evacuated to Rostov at the beginning of World War I. She reports that she had trouble paying attention in her classes. It is hard to imagine the conditions under which her professors were attempting to

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<sup>198</sup> This city was also known as Nakhichevan-na-Donu, perhaps to differentiate it from the region of Nakhichevan bordering Armenia. Under the Soviets, the city of Nakhichevan-na-Donu was annexed to the city of Rostov and no longer exists on maps as a distinct administrative unit.

<sup>199</sup> "‘blagodarnye armiane' vse eshche eli belyi khleb" (113)

teach. She also describes her first love affairs here: with the delicate young woman named Virginia and men identified only by initials.

In July of 1921, she arrived back in Petersburg with her parents and enrolled at the Zubovsky Institute of Art History. After a few months, she found her way to the Union of Poets, headed by Acmeist poet Nikolai Gumilev. She applied for membership, submitted her poems and was accepted into the Petersburg Union of Poets. Through this link she became acquainted with the Dom Iskusstv (House of the Arts) which was like an extravagant dormitory (their premises were the old Eliseev mansion, complete with the original servants) for prerevolutionary artists and writers.

Gumilev took a strong interest in the young poet and his last attested poem was dedicated to her. On August 2, she attended Gumilev's poetry workshop at the Dom Iskusstv (known to its residents as DISK). After the workshop, he invited her out for pastries and then walked her home. At dawn of the following morning, Gumilev was arrested on charges of conspiracy in the "Tagantsev Affair." A large number of intellectuals, including Gumilev and Berberova's uncle, the sculptor Prince Sergei Ukhtomsky,<sup>200</sup> were arrested on trumped up charges and were executed without trial on August 24. Four days after Gumilev's arrest, Berberova went to the House of Writers hoping to learn something more about those who had been arrested. Posted inside was the announcement of Alexander Blok's death earlier that day. In *Kursiv moi*, Berberova describes that moment: "I was seized by a feeling, which I never again experienced, that I was suddenly and sharply orphaned. The end is near... We

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<sup>200</sup> Berberova refers to Ukhtomsky as "uncle" in *Kursiv moi*. As the son of Berberova's great aunt, Ukhtomsky's actual relationship to Berberova would be first cousin once removed.

will remain alone... The end is coming. We are lost... Tears spurted out of my eyes”  
(123).<sup>201</sup>

Although the Tagantsev affair caused foreboding among the intelligentsia, they continued to work and to write poetry. Berberova attended poetry readings, workshops and gatherings in and around the DISK all that fall.<sup>202</sup> Residents at various times included Vladislav Khodasevich, Viktor Shklovsky, Osip Mandelstam and Lev Lunts. In November, she met Khodasevich, with whom she would spend the next ten years of her life. By New Year’s Day, the two were inseparable. That June, in secrecy, they boarded a train for Riga, then traveled on to Berlin.

## EXILE – 1920s

Я говорю: я не в изгнание,  
Я не ищу земных путей,  
Я не в изгнание, я -- в послание,  
Легко мне жить среди людей.  
И жизнь моя -- почти простая --  
Двойная жизнь, и умирая  
В каком-то городе большом,  
Я возвращусь в мой древний Дом,  
К дверям которого порою  
Я приникаю, может быть,  
Как к ветке лист перед грозой,  
чтоб уцелеть, чтоб пережить.

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<sup>201</sup> “Чувство внезапного и острого сиротства, которое я никогда бол’ше не испытывала в жизни, окхватило меня. Кончаetsia... Odni...eto idet konets. My propali... Slezy bryznuli iz glaz.” (140) By an odd twist of fate, Khodasevich visited Gumilev after the latter had returned from walking Berberova home. The two sat up talking until 2am that morning. At dawn, Gumilev was arrested. Khodasevich and Berberova were not yet acquainted. (*Nekropol’* 93-94)

<sup>202</sup> Martha Hickey’s *The Writer in Petrograd and the House of Arts* is an exhaustive survey of the inhabitants and activities at the House of Arts from its inception in 1919 to its demise in 1922.

I say: I'm not going into exile,  
I don't seek out earthly paths,  
Not into exile, but on a mission,  
It's easy for me to live among people.  
And my life – it's almost simple –  
A double life, and when I'm dying  
In some great city  
I will return to my ancient home,  
To whose doors at times  
I cling, perhaps like  
The leaf to the branch before the storm,  
in order to remain whole, in order to survive.

Nina Berberova, 1924-1926

The Russian emigration was a massive event on the world stage. It was the largest emigration ever experienced to that point. Up to three million people were displaced in the process of the Russian Revolution and Civil War. Bolshevik policies ensured that a sizeable proportion of the country's creative and intellectual elite fled its borders. Berlin and Prague were the first cultural centers of the emigration.

When they arrived in Berlin, Khodasevich and Berberova discovered a vibrant Russian community. The writers Andrei Bely, Viktor Shklovsky, Boris Pasternak, Marina Tsvetaeva, Roman Jakobson, and the young Vladimir Nabokov were all in Berlin around that time. There was still considerable travel back and forth between Europe and Soviet Russia and Berlin was the lively crossroads. Berlin was filled with committed émigrés, traveling Soviet citizens and a whole raft of poets and thinkers. The German economy was still in tatters after World War I and the émigrés were able to live there cheaply and even publish books – something which would become increasingly difficult in the coming years. For Berberova and Khodasevich, there were frequent visits with Bely and midnight walks with

the writer and art historian Pavel Muratov. Khodasevich's journals of those years show daily visits with literary friends (*Kamer-fur'erskii zhurnal*).

Berberova and Khodasevich spent the next several years traveling between different European towns and cities. For their first three years in Europe, they did not have a permanent home. Khodasevich recorded their travels thus: July 1922 – November 1923 – Germany (Berlin, Saarow, various seaside spots, Freiburg); November 1923 – Prague, December 1923 – March 1924 – Marienbad; March – April Italy, April – July – Paris; August – September – Ireland; and then travel through Paris and Rome to Sorrento (“Pis’mo”). There are 42 reported addresses for the two of them in those three years.

They were fortunate to spend a considerable period of that time as members of Gorky's expansive household. Berberova describes their arrival at Gorky's house in Heringsdorf, Germany on August 27, 1922, two months after their departure from Russia. At the time, Gorky was one of the most famous and successful writers in the world. Gorky was an old Bolshevik with personal ties to Lenin. Struggling to reconcile his humanist ideals with the realities of the Bolshevik revolution, he left Russia in 1921 for health reasons -- two months after his unsuccessful attempt to save Gumilev from execution.

Gorky and Khodasevich were working together to edit a journal, *Beseda* [*Conversation*], which was intended as a vehicle for cultural exchange between Russians abroad and those within the Soviet Union. In September of 1922, Gorky persuaded Khodasevich and Berberova to leave Berlin for the lakeside resort town of Saarow, where they rented rooms in the hotel next to the station and spent time with Gorky daily. They went on to share housing with him at a variety of off-season resorts and eventually joined him at the villa he rented in Sorrento, Italy. As a young woman in her twenties, full of life,



Berberova brought a youthful energy to the house. While Gorky and Khodasevich struggled with the demands of creating a literary journal which would publish some of the contemporary classics of world literature for a Russian audience, Berberova and Gorky's son Maksim created their own humor journal, published in print runs of one, demanding fresh material from Gorky and other members of the household for each issue. She also borrowed books from Gorky's large library, assisted occasionally with correspondence and soaked up the atmosphere which included at various times visits from many of the great names of Russian literature. Despite repeated assurances to the contrary, the Soviet officials never permitted the sale of *Beseda* within the borders of the Soviet Union, guaranteeing its demise.<sup>203</sup>

These years were critical for Berberova's intellectual development. If she was an uncommitted student in wartime Rostov, she had ample opportunity now for making up intellectual deficits. She lived for a good part of these years with an accomplished poet and critic (Khodasevich) and intermittently shared the home of a world-renowned writer (Gorky). She toured Rome under the tutelage of Pavel Muratov, described by one critic as "the most learned, original and stylistically gifted Russian art historian of his time" (James 524). By her own account, she avidly drank in all she could, though never fully accepting the role of disciple despite her relative youth. She described Muratov in her memoirs as "a whole and

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<sup>203</sup> According to Khodasevich, the financial stability of *Beseda* was predicated on a readership within the Soviet Union, assurances of which Gorky had received from the Soviet authorities. When sale of the journal was not permitted within the Soviet Union, its publisher Solomon Kaplun-Sumskii was financially ruined. He moved to Paris and worked at *Poslednie novosti* until his death during World War II. ("Literatura i vlast'" 199)

accomplished European,” stating that for “the first time I heard from him the names of Gide, Proust, Valery, Virginia Woolf, Spengler, Joyce, and many others” (165).<sup>204</sup>

Before emigration, her poetry appeared in the February 1922 miscellany *Ushkuiniki* (*River Pirates*). She now began publishing poems in *Beseda*. During those early peripatetic years she also published translations into Russian, including de Laclos’ *Les liaisons dangereuses* in 1923 and Romain Rolland’s *Mahatma Gandhi* in 1924.

Berberova and Khodasevich spent time in the summer of 1923 on the Baltic Sea in the German town of Prerow with the Zaitsev, Berdiaev and Muratov families. Zaitsev was a well-known prose writer in pre-Revolutionary Russia as well as in the emigration. He and his wife Vera would become Berberova’s steadfast friends in emigration. Berdiaev’s emphasis on personal freedom in his existential outlook finds echoes in the philosophy Berberova expresses in *Kursiv moi*.

A formal photograph taken in Berlin shortly before Bely’s 1923 return to the Soviet Union shows Berberova seated among eight writers including Khodasevich, Muratov, Zaitsev and Bely.<sup>205</sup> She is the only woman – and by far the youngest of the group. This is the picture to which Brodsky referred when he said that a whole generation fell in love with her.<sup>206</sup> Towards the end of her life she told an interviewer, “Half of them were in love with me” (Fraser 36). Certainly Khodasevich was. And Pavel Muratov had a well-known flirtation with her which lives on in his dedication of the story “Shekherazada” to her in Volume XX

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<sup>204</sup> “On byl tselnyi, zakonchennyi zapadnik... v pervye ot nego ia uslyshala imena Zhida, Valeri, Prusta, Strechi, Virdzhinii Vul’f, Papini, Spenglera, Manna i mnogikh drugikh” (192). The published translation omits the additional names of Strachey, Papini and Mann.

<sup>205</sup> *Kursiv moi*, third page photography insert.

<sup>206</sup> Cover notes, *The Book of Happiness*.

of *Sovremennye zapiski* in 1924. Gorky makes joking references to Muratov's infatuation in his letters to Khodasevich in 1924.<sup>207</sup>

In 1925, their money having run out, Berberova and Khodasevich moved to Paris in the hopes of finding a way to survive through writing after the collapse of *Beseda*. She recalls their initial view of the city as less than promising: "The wind was blowing, it was raining, clouds were gathering above the huge city. All was grey: the sky, streets, people... All was alien, comfortless, cold, cruel-seeming, threatening" (210).<sup>208</sup> In this description, we can catch a glimpse of the Paris represented in her *Billancourt Tales*. Khodasevich had learned that he was on the list of those exiled from Soviet Russia as an assumed security threat, and was tormented by the dual impossibilities of writing outside Russia and of living within Russia. By spring of 1925, the collapse of *Beseda* was imminent.

## Paris

Berberova published in virtually every major prewar periodical of the emigration including *Beseda* (*Conversation*), *Volia Rossii* (*The Will of Russia*), *Dni* (*Days*), *Novyi dom* (*The New House*), *Novyi korabl'* (*The New Ship*), *Zveno* (*The Link*), *Segodnia* (*Today*), *Vozrozhdenie* (*Renaissance*), *Poslednie novosti* (*The Latest News*) and *Sovremennye zapiski* (*Contemporary Annals*). She began with poetry, then added short fiction, moving on to arts criticism, biography, novels and plays. While much of this finds its way into *Kursiv moi*, much also passes unremarked. The rich correspondence she carried on during these years

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<sup>207</sup> Primochkina. It is hard not to sense a bit of poetic justice in this relationship, since Khodasevich had carried on an intense affair with Muratov's wife in Italy a decade earlier.

<sup>208</sup> "Dul veter, shel dozhd', tumany sobiralis' nad ogromnym gorodom. Vse bylo seroe: nebo, ulitsy, liudi... Vse bylo chuzhdoe, neuiutnoe, kholodnoe, kazalos' zhestokim, ugrozhaiushchim" (248).

reveal a young woman growing in confidence, concerned both with the craft and business of writing. Her personal life enters into the memoirs in a very selected fashion. For instance, we discover in the letters that Berberova maintained a close and supportive friendship with her cousin Asa Berberova in Paris. Asa appears only very tangentially in the memoirs. We also see Berberova regularly and willingly completing small commissions for friends such as Gippius, Bunin and others when they were away from Paris. Berberova, with her wide circle of acquaintances from both the older and her own generation, was in a unique position to unify the values of a portion of the prewar Russian intelligentsia with the creative energies of Europe of the 1920s and 1930s. She reports discussions of Proust with Bunin and presented a paper on Russian Symbolism to the Studio Franco-Russe.<sup>209</sup> The existential themes of freedom, choice, responsibility and authenticity increasingly permeated her work through the interwar period. In *Kursiv moi*, she expresses a philosophy which emphasizes striving for full consciousness and self-exploration. She states that her parents gave her only her name – the rest she created herself. In *Kursiv moi*, she draws a sharp line between the older generation and herself. She witnessed the deterioration of those just fifteen or twenty years older than her. She depicts them as having sunk into their memories of the past and unable to move forward in the emigration. She emphasizes intensity over happiness, and the “ferocious immanence” (206) of the present moment over any moment of the past or even intention to write.

In Paris, the economic realities of their household were overwhelming. It seems that up to that time, Berberova and Khodasevich had been able to live reasonably comfortably. Setting up permanent domicile provided new challenges. They lived in immense poverty

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<sup>209</sup> For discussion of the Studio franco-russe see *Le studio franco-russe, 1929-31*, ed. Leonid Livak.

with neither a change of sheets nor full meals. Berberova describes the intense longing she experienced gazing into the window of the meat shop. This image of exile makes its way into one of the Billancourt tales and into the post-war novel, *Mys' bur* (*Cape of Storms*).

And yet, even in abject poverty, there was still an active literary life. She describes evenings spent in Montmartre with Boris Poplavsky, Georgy Adamovich, Georgy Fedotov, Vladimir Weidle, Boris Zaitsev and others. There was work for Khodasevich for a while on the newspaper *Dni* as a literary editor. She also participated in meetings of “The Green Lantern” (*Zelenaia lampa*), the literary salon hosted by Dmitri Merezhkovsky and Zinaida Gippius. Eventually, she was able to get steady work at *Poslednie novosti* “where [she] worked for sixteen years: published stories and even poetry, movie reviews, a chronicle of Soviet literature, and sometimes, straight reporting, and in the summer I filled in when the typist went on vacation.”<sup>210</sup>

For a time, she shared a passionate friendship with Gippius. She stayed with the Merezhkovskys at their summer home in 1926 and states that Gippius’ poem “*Vechnaia zhenstvennost'*” [“The Eternal Feminine”] was initially dedicated to her. Their relationship soon cooled and the dedication was removed for publication.

During the 1920s, she published a number of stories in the periodical press. These early stories are primarily concerned with daily life during the Revolutionary and early emigration periods. Her characters are, as she calls them in *Kursiv moi*, “the Akaky Akakieviches” of life, those without firm ideological commitments who were swept up in the chaos of Revolution and Civil War. Some of these works have been republished in Russian

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<sup>210</sup> “gde ia 16 let rabotala: pechatala rasskazy i dazhe stikhi, kinokritiku, khroniku sovetskoi literatury, inogda – reportazh, a letom zameniala uekhavshuiu v otpusk mashinistku.” (*Liudi i lozhi* ii).

editions of her work, but many have never been reprinted. Her archive at the Hoover Institution holds an extensive collection of clippings of stories and articles carefully organized by Berberova herself.

In 1926, she co-edited the short-lived journal *Novyi dom*, with three other younger writers of the emigration: Dovid Knut, Yuri Terapiano, and Vsevolod Fokht. Her first novel, *Poslednie i pervye: roman iz emigrantskoi zhizni* [*The First and the Last: a novel from émigré life*] was published in 1930. In sharp contrast to the lyrical and understated tone of her earlier stories, the plot of the novel was driven by ideological concerns. She depicts a small group of Russians determined to avoid assimilation, working the land in rural France in order to be prepared to take up useful roles in a liberated Russia. Her depiction of the déclassé Nyura in Paris prefigures later depictions of urban émigré daily reality.

Berberova refers to a sense of liberty and a feeling of constraint during those years.

Первое было в тесной зависимости от моей жизни в западном мире и моей собственной молодости, от книг, которые я читала, от людей, с которыми встречались и сближались, со всем моим внутренним ростом и с тем, что я писала тогда. Чувство связанности (или не-свободы) было соединено со всем что касалось моей судьбы вне России, Ходасевича, нашего 'дома', времени и места моих дней и лет. (258-259)

The first was closely bound up with my life in the Western world and with my being young, with the books I read, the people I saw and among whom I chose friends, with all my inward maturing and what I then wrote. The feeling of constraint (or non-liberty) was bound up with my predicament of living out of Russia, with Khodasevich, with our home, the time and locales of my days and years. (221)

This ambivalence would seem almost inevitable for a talented and ambitious young writer living with an accomplished writer of Khodasevich's stature. She denies in *Kursiv moi* that there was ever any sense of competition between them, because both knew that Khodasevich was first as a writer. At one point in their correspondence, Gippius chides her, saying that she

should not always agree with Khodasevich.<sup>211</sup> His views on literature were passionate and he willingly took on the role of mentor to young poets. He also guided her early career and introduced her to all of the literary elite of the emigration. All of this provided immense benefits but also, as suggested above, led to a sense of constraint. Many years later, Berberova admitted to close friends that Khodasevich was often verbally abusive.<sup>212</sup> While they were together, she lived with the constant fear that the chronically depressed Khodasevich would commit suicide. She describes the two of them as torturously dependent on each other.

Berberova reports an overwhelming sense of isolation in Paris, a sense that “there was not one single [Western] writer of renown who would have been for us, who would have lifted up his voice against the persecution of the intelligentsia in the USSR, against... the physical destruction of Russian writers”<sup>213</sup> (226). Throughout *Kursiv moi*, Berberova makes reference to the fate of various writers she had known: some shot, some who died in the camps (both Soviet and German), some forced into silence. Berberova followed literature and the plight of Soviet writers closely. She wrote reviews of Soviet literature for several papers including *Vozrozhdenie* and *Poslednie novosti*.<sup>214</sup> Berberova’s commitment to the writer’s life included a sense of responsibility to the profession as a whole. She published a number of feuilletons which described the lives of the classical writers of the nineteenth century:

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<sup>211</sup> Gippius *Pis'ma*, 11 February 1928.

<sup>212</sup> Personal conversation with Murl Barker.

<sup>213</sup> “Vo vsem zapadnom mire ne bylo ne odnogo vidnogo pisatel'ia, kotoryi byl by ‘za nas’, to est’ kotoryi podnial by golos protiv... fizicheskoe unichtozhenie russkikh pisatelei” (265).

<sup>214</sup> The articles for *Vozrozhdenie* were under Khodasevich’s pen name, Gulliver, and represented a joint effort.

Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, Lermontov<sup>215</sup> and others as well as a book-length biography of Russian poet Aleksandr Blok. She also wrote articles in the 1930s about the treatment of Soviet writers. When she and Zaitsev gave public readings in Brussels in 1947, she used the occasion to publicize the ongoing persecution of writers within the Soviet Union.<sup>216</sup>

### EXILE – 1930s

Berberova gained fame throughout the emigration for her *Billancourt Tales* published in *Poslednie novosti*. The original series, later augmented by related stories of Billancourt, was published from 1929 to 1930 and depicted the daily life of the emigration in the Parisian suburb of Billancourt. In them, she depicted life in emigration with compassion and humor in a crisp, well-paced prose utterly devoid of sentimentality.

Berberova's literary output in the 1930s was prodigious. Besides the *Biiankurskie prazdniki*, she continued to publish short stories throughout the decade. She was a regular contributor to *Sovremennye zapiski* as well as to other émigré publications throughout this period. She published three novels during the 1930s: *Poslednie i pervye* (1930) [*The First and the Last*], *Povelitel'nitsa* (1932) [*Her Sovereignty*], and *Kniga schast'ia* (1938) [*The Book of Happiness*]. All three focus on working class members of the emigration and their individual attempts to cope with the onslaught of history in their personal lives. She also published biographies of Tchaikovsky (1936) and Borodin (1938). Her play *Madam* was performed at the Russian Theater in 1938.

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<sup>215</sup> Hoover Institution, Nicolaevsky collection. 398:10, 399:1.

<sup>216</sup> Hoover Institution, Nicolaevsky collection 399:4.



At the end of April 1932, Berberova left Khodasevich and moved to a small apartment. She writes that she immersed herself in all of the great writers of the West, whom she had not explored up to that point. Her finest work was written in the short years between when she left Khodasevich in 1932 and the end of World War II. Her writing after 1932 becomes more subtle and more confident. The two remained close until his death in 1939.

In 1933, Berberova married Nikolai Vladimirovich Makeev, one of the original members of Russia's Provisional Government of 1917.<sup>217</sup> Her marriage to Makeev provided the first bit of financial stability Berberova had experienced since the Revolution, which may have stimulated her literary production by easing the need for writing on demand. In her descriptions of her relationship with Makeev and their life together are the points in *Kursiv moi* which come closest to pure descriptions of happiness – and closest to expressions of regret. She describes him thus:

Со мной живет человек крепкий духом, здоровый телом и душой, ровный, ясный, добрый. Трудолюбивый и нежный. За что ни возьмется -- все спорится в руках. Ко всем расположен. Никогда не злобствует, не завидует, не клеветает. Молится каждый вечер и видит детские сны. Может починить электричество, нарисовать пейзаж и сыграть на рояле кусок из 'Карнавала' Шумана. (475)

With me lives a man strong in spirit, healthy in body and soul, smooth, clear, kind. Industrious and tender. Whatever he undertakes turns out well in his hands. Well-disposed toward all. Never bears malice, does not envy, nor casts aspersions. Prays every evening and sees childish dreams. Can repair electricity, draw a landscape, and play on the piano a passage from Schumann's Carnival. (401-402)

From the period 1934 to 1940, she published a number of novellas and stories in *Sovremennye zapiski* and *Poslednie novosti* which mark the high point of her literary development. In these stories, she displays a subtle mastery of prose style and symbolism as she explores the individual experience and ethics of the pre-war period in France. She writes

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<sup>217</sup> In emigration, Makeev was a contributor to Kerensky's paper *Dni* and in 1925 had published a history of Russia with Irish writer Valentin O'Hara titled *Russia*.

in *Kursiv moi* that in the 1930s, she realized that the novella (povest') was her best form. In 1936, her well-received biography of Tchaikovsky was published. The biography was particularly exceptional in that it frankly addressed the composer's homosexuality.

In 1937, Makeev bought an old farm outside Paris with insurance money he received after an injury. After a year of working on the farm, which they called Longchêne, he and Berberova were able to move there. This was the first stable home that Berberova had had since childhood, and she describes their life there with obvious appreciation. There were gardens and fruit trees, beehives and a study for Makeev next to the main house. They had frequent visitors from the city. Her descriptions and photos from that period suggest a sense of joy and security which sharply contrasts with the poverty of her earlier years in Paris.<sup>218</sup>

### The War Years

... Нить из темноты во тьму  
Бежит, и век двадцатый нам невнятен:  
Трагедия сердец не потрясает,  
Поэзия, как мертвая орлица,  
Лежит во прахе, музыка молчит,  
Любовь не жжет, и мысль оскудевает.  
Лишь кровь течет. Есть кровь. Мы все в крови.  
Вода в крови, земля в крови, и воздух  
В крови. И тот, убоины не евший  
Всю жизнь, как мы, стоит по грудь в крови.  
О гений Стратфордский, о дух могучий,  
Ты кровь любил, приди же, помоги  
Скорей закончить этот путь кровавый!

The thread runs from darkness to murk  
And the twentieth century is unclear to us:  
Tragedy does not stir the heart,  
Poetry, like a dead eaglet,  
Lies in the dust, music is silent,

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<sup>218</sup> These family snapshots can be seen in Berberova's archives at the Hoover Institution (Nicolaevsky collection, 400:2). Subjects in the photos include many unidentified people as well as Olga and Vladislav Khodasevich, Ivan Bunin, and Alexander and Nell Kerensky. One photo shows the Kerenskys posed atop a bale of hay with tools recreating the famous Vera Mukhina sculpture "Worker and Kolkhoznitsa" exhibited at the 1937 World Expo in Paris.

Love doesn't burn and thought grows thin.  
Only blood flows. There *is* blood. We're covered in blood.  
Water in blood, the earth in blood and the air  
In blood. And he, who hasn't eaten entrails  
All his life, like us, stands up to his chest in blood.  
O, Genius of Stratford, O mighty spirit,  
You loved blood, come on, help  
End this bloody journey quickly.]

From poem "Shekspiru" [To Shakespeare]  
Paris, 1942 (trans. mine)

At the end of 1939, Berberova published an impressionistic literary sketch titled "September diary" in the paper *Bodrost' (Vigor)*. In the sketch, she depicts a small French village in the days following France's declaration of war on September 3, 1939. The sketch is utterly devoid of ideological content, focusing only on the human impact. She describes sheep wandering on the town square and the magistrate's wife in her apron left to run town hall alone after the magistrate himself enlists in the army.

On May 10, 1940, Germany invaded France. The Nazis were in Paris a month later. The mass exodus from Northern French cities, including Paris, resulted in widespread chaos and panic. Alexander and Nell Kerensky stayed briefly with Berberova and Makeev at Longchêne in their flight from the invasion. Olga Margolina Khodasevich, Khodasevich's widow, was also at Longchêne at that time. Berberova's story "Voskreshenie Motsarta" [The Resurrection of Mozart], dated 1940, draws on that experience as it depicts the flight of Russian émigrés across the French countryside ahead of the advancing German army.

Berberova and Makeev spent the war at Longchêne. The farm provided Berberova and Makeev with a security which many of the literary émigrés did not have. They were protected from the bombing and the worst of the Nazi repressions. They were able to grow

food to supplement what was available through wartime rationing. From 1942, Makeev worked at the Louvre, which provided a steady income.

After Khodasevich's death, Olga became a member of their extended household. She was a frequent visitor at Longchêne. Her letters to Berberova from 1939-1941 are filled with love and affection.<sup>219</sup> She repeatedly expresses her appreciation for Berberova and Makeev and deplores the fact that she feels she must remain in Paris much of the time rather than remaining with them in the country. Postcards from their friend and editor of *Sovremennye zapiski* Vadim Rudnev send greetings to Nina, Nikolai, Olga and the pets.<sup>220</sup> Olga was a converted Jew. She was deported in the mass round ups in Paris in 1942. In *Kursiv moi*, Berberova describes her desperate attempts to prevent Olga's deportation, but was unsuccessful and was temporarily deafened in one ear after a blow received from a German officer on that day. She and Makeev hired a lawyer and did all they could to have Olga returned home – with no success. Berberova describes a meeting with a childhood friend who was now working for the Nazis. This friend told her of those who had been detained, "They will never come back." Berberova did not believe him. Olga Khodasevich perished in the Nazi camps.

Berberova wrote very little during the war and did not publish at all. From the war years (1940-45), only a couple of poems, one story and a novella are extant. Both the poem "To Shakespeare" and the story "The Resurrection of Mozart" envision a form of incantation, returning Shakespeare and Mozart to the dark days of the present. In *The Italics Are Mine*, Berberova describes a reading of "Mozart" in Paris in 1942, saying that many of those

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<sup>219</sup> These letters were published in the collection *Unpublished Letters to Nina Berberova*, with Valentina Khodasevich as first author.

<sup>220</sup> Hoover, 402:13.

present were weeping. In the poem to Shakespeare, she depicts the witches performing an incantation to bring Shakespeare back to life. The narrative voice of the poem pleads with him to “end this bloody path.” The novella *Plach* [*The Tattered Cloak*, 1942] also draws on images of world culture as the source of meaning in dark days.

Berberova’s tale becomes fragmentary at this point in her memoirs. The flow of narrative is replaced by entries from the “black notebook” she kept during the period. The archives also provide very little documentary evidence. We have very little information about her existence during this period.

### **Accusations of Collaboration**

Berberova worked for 16 years for *Poslednie novosti*, known for its liberal, democratic tone and its “uncompromising rejection of all forms of dictatorship” (Raeff, Russia 83). *Astashev in Paris*, published on the brink of war, presents a damning portrait of a fascist bourgeois. It is hard to imagine this fiercely independent writer as a Nazi supporter, yet Berberova faced just such accusations after the war.

At the end of World War II, the remnants of the emigration were wracked by a period of greater internal conflict than they had experienced in all the previous rancor-filled years. David Bethea has called the immediate post-war period the “Time of Troubles” for the emigration (“Ivan Bunin”). The tensions of the war and occupation spilled over into a period of intense infighting and mutual accusations. Sharp lines were drawn between those who had worked with the Nazis and those who had supported the Resistance, who were frequently pro-Soviet. There was little room for middle ground.

In January of 1945, Jakob Polonsky included Berberova and Makeev's names on a list of "Sotrudniki gitlera" (Hitler's supporters) published in the New York-based newspaper *Novoe russkoe slovo* (*New Russian Word*). On September 30, 1945, Berberova directly addressed the accusations in a letter to Mark Aldanov, who was both co-editor of *Novyi zhurnal* (the New York successor to *Sovremennye zapiski*), and Polonsky's brother-in-law. She sent copies of the letter to several influential members of the emigration both in America and Paris.<sup>221</sup>

In her letter to Aldanov, Berberova emphasizes that her views in 1940 were congruent with widely-held views in France. She writes that, "Yes, in 1940, right up until fall, that is three months before the destruction of libraries and the first arrests, I (like 9/10 of the French intelligentsia) considered cooperation with Germany possible in the not too distant future."<sup>222</sup> She notes that the Resistance did not become active until later in the fall. This depiction of the situation is supported in Eugen Weber's account of the early days of the Occupation, as well as by other historians of France during World War II. Weber notes that there was strong pacifist feeling in France throughout this period—many French feared war more than they feared the Germans.

In 1939, Berberova had already published her article about the declaration of war in *Bodrost'*. In that article, there is no hint of celebration of Germany, but there is a strong sense of aimlessness and fear within the French countryside and populace. During the German invasion, Berberova and Makeev were joined in the countryside by Khodasevich's widow

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<sup>221</sup> Berberova, Vishniak Papers.

<sup>222</sup> "Da, v 40-m godu, vplot' do oseni, to est' mesiatsa tri do razgroma bibliotek i pervykh arestov, ia (kak i deviat' desiatykh frantsuzskoi intelligentsiia) schitala vozmozhnym v ne slishkom blizkom budushchem kooperatsiiu s Germaniei."

Olga and by Alexander and Nell Kerensky as they fled the country. All three were close friends of Berberova and Makeev and frequent guests at Longchêne. It hardly seems likely that they would have been unaware of Berberova's political views or that the Kerensky's would have stopped during their flight from the Nazis at the home of a Nazi-sympathizer. In a letter dated 20 July 1940, Olga wrote to Berberova "Thank you to both of you – in the difficult days I was with you."<sup>223</sup>

Further in her letter, Berberova states that the Hitler-Stalin pact "promised something new." Contemporary historian Oleg Budnitskii takes this statement as indicating support for the Nazis and he also takes Berberova to task for failing to recognize the magnitude of the Nazi threat. In fact, her views align closely with those of Kerensky, who was never accused of collaboration. Budnitskii also references her statement that she saw some promise in the union between the Soviets and Hitler and that she did not respond sharply enough to the attacks on Jews which were taking place in Germany before the war. According to Kerensky's biographer, "Kerensky's outspoken opposition to anti-Semitism failed to arrest the erosion of his friendship with Jewish friends, who considered Stalin a lesser evil than Hitler." Kerensky's former lover Flora Solomon broke off relations with Kerensky because he appeared relatively unmoved by Kristallnacht: "Such things are happening all the time to the Russian people," he explained (quoted in Abraham 367). Kerensky also welcomed the Hitler-Stalin pact – believing that it would end the concept of cooperation between the democracies and Soviet Russia. He argued not just for "the overthrow of the Hitler regime and the restoration of Poland and Czechoslovakia but also for the liberation of the Russian people from bolshevism" (Abraham 369).

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<sup>223</sup> "Spasibo Vam – v tiazhelye dni ia byla s vami." (Sylvester, Letter 12)

Jakob Polonsky, who wrote the denunciatory list in *Novoe russkoe slovo*, wrote Bunin in the same year: “Indifference to politics is no longer possible... there is a certain line separating people, and everyone is very, very sensitive to it. Everything is defined by one’s previous relation to Russia and Germany” (quoted in Bethea, “Troubles” 12). In addition to a lack of firm commitment against Hitler, Berberova remained staunchly anti-Soviet. During and after the war, the Comintern waged a largely successful propaganda war to paint anyone who was anti-Soviet as a fascist.

In response to these letters and his own investigation, Aldanov concluded that there was no evidence of collaboration on her part. He wrote to Vishniak that three fourths of what was in Polonsky’s *Novoe russkoe slovo* article should not have been included and that Polonsky “should not have written about Berberova: she didn’t publish anything under the Occupation” (letter 26 November 1945). He had information from Kerensky and Boris Zaitsev that she had never sympathized with the Nazis. Nonetheless, her acknowledgement of having placed any hopes at all on the Nazis (combined with her sharp insults to his brother-in-law) led him to eschew close relations with her.<sup>224</sup>

The reality is that Berberova refused to publish in the Russian-language Nazi-supported press during the war. There is no suggestion that she was anti-Semitic or ever espoused Nazi ideals. Her closest friends, including Kerensky and Boris Zaitsev, categorically declared that she had not supported the Nazis. Émigré author Roman Gul’, who spent time in a Nazi camp in 1933, wrote in a formal letter in 1951 that he had “every reason to suppose that the accusations were false and were the result of someone settling personal

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<sup>224</sup> He confirms in letters to Polonsky and Zaitsev that he wants no social interaction with anyone who placed any hopes at all on the Nazis.



accounts” with her.<sup>225</sup> Before the brutality of the Nazi state became clear, Berberova may have favored Hitler over Stalin as the lesser of two immense evils. If this makes her a Nazi, then all of those who took an openly pro-Soviet stance after the war, must also be labeled Stalinists.

David Bethea provides the most balanced account of this period in his article “Ivan Bunin and the Time of Troubles.” He describes the series of events whereby the Union of Soviet Patriots was formed in euphoric, post-liberation France and the pro-Soviet journals *Sovetskii patriot* (*Soviet Patriot*) and *Russkie novosti* (*The Russian News*) were established. In his 1947 memoir, émigré critic Adamovich declared “I not only acknowledge the inevitability of Communism, I greet and invite it” (quoted in Bethea, “Ivan Bunin” 7). Adamovich would change his mind later. A group of prominent émigrés, led by the pre-revolutionary Russian Ambassador Vasilii Maklakov, paid a controversial visit to the Soviet Embassy where they drank to Stalin’s health. This news hit many in the emigration like a bombshell.

In this charged atmosphere, Berberova maintained a staunchly anti-Soviet stance. In 1947, a group of pro-Soviet journalists were expelled from the émigré Paris Writers’ and Journalists’ Union, chaired by Boris Zaitsev. The expulsion led to the departure of many prominent writers including Bunin, Adamovich and others. Berberova was directly involved in the expulsion process.

Berberova did not publish in *Sovetskii patriot* and *Russkie novosti*. She refused to publish in the Nazi-Russian press during the Occupation and she did not publish in the Soviet-Russian press afterwards. In 1947, the journal *Russkaia mysl'* [*Russian Thought*] was

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<sup>225</sup> Quoted in Peterson, 495. From Nina Berberova Papers, Series I, *Correspondence*. General Collection, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.

founded in Paris and Berberova became its literary editor. The literary outlets were extremely tendentious at that time and many articles have a severely polemical tone.

She actively worked to publicize the truth about the Soviet Union. In 1949, she translated the first publication in any language of Jules Margolin's *La condition inhumaine: Cinq ans dans les camps de concentration soviétiques* (*The Inhuman Condition: Five Years in Soviet Concentration Camps*). Margolin was a resident of Palestine who was caught in Poland at the start of World War II and was subsequently captured and placed in Soviet camps for the duration of the war. His description is one of the earliest first-hand accounts of the Soviet camp system.

That same year, her collected articles describing the Kravchenko trial were published. In 1948, Viktor Kravchenko, a former Soviet functionary and one of the first “defectors,” instituted a suit for libel against the French Communist newspaper *Les lettres françaises*. His 1949 trial was one of the watershed events in the development of the Cold War. The trial featured hundreds of witnesses and was transformed into a trial of the Soviet system.

Berberova covered the trial on a daily basis, filing her reports with *Russkaia mysl'*. She writes that the paper went from publishing once a week to twice a week on the basis of those reports. Professor John Fleming writes,

There is one, if only one, contemporaneous account that does justice to the drama. Among the journalists present in the Salle de Justice was Nina Berberova...She was covering the trial for a recently established émigré journal, *Russian Thought*... So great was the intellectually coercive power of French Communism in the immediate postwar period that no such publication could obtain the necessary bureaucratic license to publish so long as Communist ministers served in the coalition government. The foundation of a journal devoted to Russian thoughts other than those authorized by the Soviet Embassy became possible in 1947, however, when the Communists were in effect expelled from the government...Berberova was unique in her capacity to grasp the immediate drama of every moment. (217-218)

Shortly after the war, Berberova and Makeev separated and eventually divorced. Longchêne was sold in 1947. The marriage did not end well and Makeev is almost entirely effaced from her memoirs, identified only by the initial “N.” In *Kursiv moi*, she says that a third person came between them and that she won the battle for that person – with whom she remained for “a few years.” (377). It seems most probable that this person was Mina Journot, about whom I have been unable to locate any information. According to Nadya Peterson, Berberova's French publisher Hubert Nyssen refers to love letters from Mina Journot to Berberova in his *Carnets*. Between 1945 and 1950, Berberova and Journot translated three books from Russian into French together: Dostoevsky's *L'éternel mari* (*The Eternal Husband*) (1947), Jules Margolin's *La condition inhumaine: Cinq ans dans les camps de concentration soviétiques* (*The Inhuman Condition: Five Years in Soviet Concentration Camps*) (1949) and Berberova's biography *Tchaikovsky* (tr. 1948). Berberova dedicated *Alexandre Blok et son temps* (1947), the only book she wrote in French, to Journot.

### **The United States**

By 1950, it was clear that the center of the cultural emigration had shifted from Paris to the United States. *Novyi zhurnal* had begun publication in New York City in 1942 under the editorship of Mark Aldanov and Mark Vishniak, as a continuation of the legacy of *Sovremennye zapiski*, which had ceased publication with the Nazi invasion. They intended the new journal to continue *Sovremennye zapiski*'s work of providing a cultural center and publishing outlet for the creative forces of the emigration. In early issues they published Bunin, Nabokov, and Osorgin.

Berberova arrived in New York on November 10, 1950, on a visitor visa. She worked at various odd jobs and studied English. From February 1951 until December 1952, she worked for the Tolstoy Foundation as an editor and later worked for Voice of America as an announcer. She managed to extend her visa twice, but she eventually ran out of extensions and deportation proceedings were initiated in 1952. The bill for her relief intended to grant her the status of permanent resident, introduced by New York Representative Frederic Coudert, was tabled on the first round, but was passed by the US House of Representatives as H.R. 692 on July 19, 1954. The report which accompanied the bill in committee included letters of support from influential members of the emigration in the United States including Alexandra Tolstoy (Leo Tolstoy's daughter, head of The Tolstoy Foundation in New York), Alexander Kerensky and Michael Karpovich (Harvard professor and editor of *Novyi zhurnal*) among others.<sup>226</sup> In the report, Tolstoy's letter stated that, "her true democratic ideas are well known to us: her writing and activities were always directed against totalitarianism, Nazi or Communist" (3). Kerensky's letter emphasized the value of her postwar journalistic work: "I should like to bring your special attention on [sic] the fact of her courageous anti-Communist propaganda in France during the years 1945-50, at the time when the French Communists were members of the French Government and after, during the famous Kravchenko trial. Her activities proved that she is somebody in whom we can have entire trust" (4). President Eisenhower vetoed the bill via pocket veto.<sup>227</sup> A memorandum from the office of the president notes that Berberova should leave the country on the same terms as she entered it (Eisenhower 1).

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<sup>226</sup> See United States. Senate. Report # 1847. (None of this is directly referenced in *Kursiv moi*.)

<sup>227</sup> See United States. *Presidential Vetoes*.

Despite two deportation orders, Berberova was determined to remain in the United States. Later that year, she married musician George Kochevitsky, in order to avoid deportation. Kochevitsky was one year younger than Berberova and had remained in Soviet Russia through the 1920s and 30s. At the end of World War II, he was in a refugee detention camp in Germany and emigrated to the United States in 1949. He taught music and published works on piano theory while in emigration (Squillace).

During her first few years in America, Berberova continued to write fiction intermittently. Her novel *Mys bur'* [*Cape of Storms*] was serialized in *Novyi zhurnal* in 1950-51 and examines the lives of three young émigré sisters in Paris. The short story “Bol’shoi gorod” [“Big City”] is a rather phantasmagorical tale of an unnamed, but identifiable, New York City through the eyes of an immigrant. The novella *Mysliashchii trostnik* [*The Thinking Reed*] and story “Pamiati Schliemann” [In Memory of Schliemann] were both published in 1958. In 1959, her last published novella, *Chernaia bolezni* [*The Black Spot*] appeared.

After several years in New York City, Berberova moved to New Haven in 1958 to accept a position teaching Russian at Yale and remained on the faculty for the next five years. She began by teaching Russian language, but soon progressed to teaching literature as well. A key event in those years was her acquaintance with graduate student Murl Barker at Yale. Barker was one of only three students in her first graduate course, a seminar on Symbolism. He recalls that for someone who had no experience with the American education system and scant exposure to higher education in Russia, one would suppose that she would be nervous about teaching at this level. If she was, she did not show it. However, in these early courses, she tended to polarize students: there were those who were mesmerized by her readings of poetry, her recollections of the Russian intelligentsia and there were those who

found her presentations self-absorbed and lacking in substance. Barker reports that she brought the same determination to her teaching that she brought to everything else in life, as she set about educating herself in literary criticism in order to master her new role. Her teaching positions offered her a sense of ease and security such as she had only known in those few short years with Makeev before the war arrived in France. She took pride in her students, she met with visiting scholars, and she continued to write. By 1963, when she moved to Princeton, she was fully confident in her teaching abilities and only agreed to teach literature, not language courses. Barker, who went on to teach Russian at Rutgers University for many years, remained close to Berberova and provided emotional and personal support during her final years.<sup>228</sup>

After 1959, Berberova turned her literary attentions to non-fiction writing. She worked to secure the memory of Khodasevich and the Silver Age for the American public. She prepared volumes of Khodasevich's poetry and his prose for publication. As David Bethea wrote in 1983, it would have been "impossible to keep Khodasevich's memory alive without the ongoing efforts of [Berberova]... who took pains to preserve Khodasevich's papers in her archives and who published what were until recently the only editions of his poetry and prose to appear either in the Soviet Union or in the West since the 1930s" (*Khodasevich*, xxi). She wrote the notes to a new translation of Bely's *The First Encounter* (*Pervoe svidanie*) and wrote the introduction for the publication of Gippius' *Peterburgskie dnevniki* (*Petersburg Diaries*). She also published several articles on Nabokov's work.

Her non-fiction work that was not directly related to literary criticism tended to be tendentious. The publication of her memoirs in 1969 caused an uproar in the émigré

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<sup>228</sup> personal communication

community. They appeared first in English as *The Italics are Mine* in the United States followed by a Russian edition, *Kursiv moi*, published in Munich in 1971. They were met with a series of outraged reviews disputing their truthfulness by a number of émigrés. Scenes such as the one which depicted the literary master Bunin as a petty man leaving a brimming chamber pot in the entryway aroused vituperous attacks from other living émigrés. Although it was reviewed in the *New York Times*, the original edition sold fewer than a thousand copies, receiving very little attention after the initial spate of negative publicity.

After her retirement from Princeton in 1971, she continued to research and write non-fiction. In 1981, she published *Zheleznaia zhenshchina: Rasskaz o zhizni M. Zakrevskoi-Benkendorf-Budberg, o nei samoi i ee druž'iakh* [*The Iron Woman: the story of the life of M. Zakrevskoi-Benkendorf-Budberg, about her personally and her friends* published in English as *Moura: the Dangerous Life of the Baroness Budberg* (1981)]. Budberg and Berberova were members of Gorky's household during the same years of 1922-25 in Germany and Italy, and Berberova writes that she "always knew" that she would write a book about Budberg. The phrase "Iron Woman" has since been frequently applied to Berberova herself. This was followed by another nonfiction work, *Liudi i lozhi: Russkie masony XX stoletia* [*People and lodges: Russian Freemasons of the twentieth century*, untranslated. 1986]. Both of these books also incited intense controversy and drew sharp critiques from interested parties.

In her later years, a range of Slavic scholars visited her to learn more about the times and authors she had known well. She remained one of the few living links to a living non-Soviet Russian past.

Then, in 1985, her life took another unexpected turn. French editor/ publisher Hubert Nyssen, founder of the publishing house Actes sud had come across her novella *The Accompanist*. He wanted to republish it with a new translation. Over the next few years Actes Sud brought out a whole series of individual editions of her novellas, which went up the bestseller lists in France. Entire bookstore windows were filled with her image. In the 1980s, translations of her books were published throughout the world, including translations into French, English, Japanese, Dutch, Russian, and Slovak. She became very close to Hubert Nyssen and his wife Christine.

She made only one visit to Russia after her departure with Khodasevich in 1922. In 1989, she took a triumphant tour of Moscow and St. Petersburg, in the company of Nyssen. Russia was in the midst of rediscovering her lost classics and there was a rage for all things émigré. Her lectures drew full halls in both cities. True to form, she did not hesitate to speak her mind – whether the crowd was friendly or not. At one of her public presentations, she was asked how she felt about the Revolution being created by “zhidomasonry” (a racial insult combining a derogatory term for Jews and the word for Freemasons into a single compound slur). Her reply was forthright: “Well, that’s absurd! There’s no point in talking about it. That’s an old tune and completely obvious where it’s come from. In tsarist Russia there was an organization called the “Black Hundreds” that spread all sorts of lies about Jews. No cultured person would pay the least bit of attention to that sort of thing... it’s not worth a second’s thought.”<sup>229</sup> Apparently there was quite an outcry in the hall. Voznesensky, who

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<sup>229</sup> Startseva. “Nu, eto absurd! Ob etom net smysla govorit’! Eta staraia pesnia i sovershenno poniatno, otkuda ona vzialas’. V tsarskoi Rossii byla takaia organizatsiia ‘chernaia sotnia’, kotoraiia rasprostraniala vsiakiie domysli o evreiakh. Chtob ne obrashchat’ vnimanie na takuii informatzii, dostatochno byt’ prosto kul’turnym chelovekom... Vse eto vyedennogo iaitsa ne stoit.”



was on stage with Berberova, described the scene later to writer Kennedy Fraser. He described “how fearlessly and vigorously (‘not at all like an old woman’) Nina had stood up to hostile heckling from the anti-Semitic, right-wing nationalist movement Pamyat” (Fraser 35).

*Kursiv moi* was published in French as *C'est moi qui souligne* in 1989. In 1991 and 1992, a revised translation of *The Italics Are Mine* was published in England and France. This time, the book garnered a number of favorable reviews and sold well. Her American translator, Marian Schwartz, recalls her as feeling the pressure of time – she simply did not have time for conversations which were not interesting. Of course, Barker describes her as having been much the same thirty years earlier. Her fame led to various interviews for print and television. By all reports, she enjoyed this late arriving recognition. She received honorary degrees from Yale, Middlebury College and Glassboro College and in 1989, she became a Chevalier of the Order of Arts and Letters of France.

At the age of eighty-nine, in 1990, Berberova moved to Philadelphia. Murl Barker felt that she should be close by for health reasons. She enjoyed owning her own property and continued to receive guests from around the world. On the walls of her bedroom hung the images of four Russian poets: Blok, Bely, Bryusov and Khodasevich. She knew three of these men personally as a young woman. She had outlived everyone. She lived to a “healthy, lighthearted, and thoughtful old age” (Fraser 53).

Richard Avedon photographed her when she was already 90. The photo is dated December 9, 1992. Her hair is a pure white (when she toured Europe in the late 1980s, it was still dyed a rich chestnut color.) She appears physically smaller, but her head is slightly

forward as if eager to catch her interlocutor's next phrase. There is a calm liveliness of her bearing. Resting on her open hands, like an offering, is a photo of her younger self. Both photos are in black and white. The “young Nina” photo is a formal portrait taken when she was in her 20s. In that photo, she wears a light colored dress against a dark background, her hair appears black, her eyes are shadowed and gazing to the side. The “old Nina” wears a dark dress, against a light background and her hair is entirely white. The two are inverse images. In the first photo, she gazes away mysteriously. In the Avedon photo, she gazes directly at someone just to the left of the lens – perhaps the photographer. She writes of her younger self in *Kursiv* that her face was “expressionless” then and she did not yet know herself. The photo of a 90-year-old writer depicts a woman who certainly knows herself, who treasures the past, but lives fully in the “most ferocious immanence” of the given moment.

Nina Berberova died on September 26, 1993.

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